

“Change the Subject”:
Resilience, Resistance and Representation of Black Adolescent Females

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ABSTRACT

Billye N. Rhodes. "Change the Subject":
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(Under the direction of Lynda Stone)

The consequence of community silence (Lorde, 2007) begs the question, if Black women, Black girls in particular are unheard, who then speaks for them? How are they invited into, or ignored in these discourses? How is language employed and manipulated to represent them, specifically through image and voice?

This is an initial investigation of the specific images of Black adolescent females, aged 13-19, constructed in two representational discourses: government data sources and emergent Black girl literature. The commonalities and differences between these representations are examined and how they position Black adolescent females within our society. If school, as an institution, is a tool for socialization and citizenship, focusing solely on the statistics creates a deficit model for research, which informs teaching practice, curriculum and policy. The aim of this study is use interpretive inquiries of Black girls' stories in validating their role within academic discourse. To facilitate this thesis, the narratives are situated according to larger, more political themes of resistance, resilience and representation.

DEDICATION

To my first teacher, Mary Rhodes
and to my students who offer the lessons of their lives.

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who began this journey with me August 5, 2007.*

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INTRODUCTION

For we have been socialized to respect fear more than our own needs for language and definition, and while we wait in silence for that final luxury of fearlessness, the weight of that silence will choke us. – Audre Lorde (2007)

Daley Elementary was my first school assignment in the 10,000 Tutors Program. I was an undergraduate, excited about \$10 an hour and following in the work of my mother which often went beyond reading and math lessons. Tucked in the midst of the Ida B. Wells Housing Project¹, in the “historic jazz district” of the city, I remember walking my third graders, *my girls*, home at times to get ready for a sleepover at my house or just to be sure of their safety. In the sixties, you would’ve been in the midst of Buddy Guy or Mavis Staples singing through any one of the Black owned businesses that lined those streets. In the nineties, you would’ve played basketball with milk crates in any one of burned out lots on which those businesses used to stand.² This is where my girls double dutched, learned dance routines, braided hair and were warned by the tragedy of Girl X³, only months earlier, to stay clear of abandoned buildings. Our summer eventually drifted to colder seasons, the school was closed based on low performance scores and the city began to demolish the homes of

¹ Ida B. Wells-Barnett (1862-1931), sociologist, journalist, suffragist, anti-lynching activist and namesake of the low-rise development built in 1941 exclusively for Blacks.

² LeAlan Jones and Lloyd Newman write about the gang activity that infested their childhood within those same blocks, taking lives of friends in *Our America* (1997), with author and NPR contributor, David Isay.

³ Nine year-old “Girl X” was found January 9, 1997, raped, beaten, poisoned and left for dead in the seventh-floor stairwell of the Cabrini Green housing project on Chicago’s near North Side. Her brutal attack was overshadowed by the disappearing death of Jon Benet Ramsey exactly two weeks prior.

that community. While I give this account from Chicago, I have heard the same told from large cities⁴ of the Great Migration⁵: St. Louis, Detroit, and Cleveland to name a few (Ladner, 1995).

Nearly 10 years later, I returned to Daley as an afterschool director. In the midst of the “luxurious and affordable” condominiums, coffee shops and boutiques⁶, the school was reopened as one of the city’s revitalization projects; a charter school campus of a local Ivy League university. The school’s administrators had been intentional in enrolling students of families who still lived in the area as well as those who had been displaced so that they may benefit from the new programs, curriculum and prestige of its’ parent sponsor. While the exterior of the school reflected the desires of a gentrified urban center, the needs of the students were the same as when I first arrived in 1997.

There were cliques in every grade with a hierarchy decided pretty early on. Many of the girls arranged themselves in the cafeteria, on the playground, in the auditorium, according to which boys liked them, Girl Scout troops, what schools they came from before and who appeared to be the smartest. These girls were a mixed bag of concerns, some with college, some with making the cheer squad and there were still others who cared for neither. The environment often created a tension steeped in self-identity, hormones and academic ambition.

⁴ This distinction is marked by populations over 100,000.

⁵ Racism and murderous violence of the South mobilized Blacks toward pursuit of a “better life” in the North through the industrial job market and educational opportunities. An estimated 1.3 million Blacks migrated from 1916 to 1930.

⁶ There are still few Black businesses in the now-landmarked Bronzeville area.

Our time together gave me the opportunity to engage them in ways limited during formal class time. My main focus was their voices: how they were constructed and how they were constructed for them. We journaled to build on what happened throughout the school day or home, negative or positive. The intent was not to discredit any of their experiences but bring them into the full range of possibilities for change. Their stories enabled them to develop relationships that helped them teach and mentor one another. There was always an outlier or two, but I too had been socially awkward at times and believed it would wear away. Away from the classroom, our homes were open to one another and not only did they become “little sisters” and “nieces” but my teachers as well. They kept me buried in ways to challenge us as a group, to continually feed their hunger and build upon their resiliency.

They made me go to graduate school.

On February 19, 2009, a friend from Daley called me early in the afternoon. I listened as she explained through a hoarse throat that a former student, aged 11, killed herself the night before. This young girl, Alissa, had been in the midst of completing a homework assignment when she wrote that she didn’t want to be a burden anymore and used a jump rope to strangle herself in her bedroom closet. Alissa had been one of our “outliers.” She didn’t fit seamlessly with the Girl Scouts, cheerleaders or nerds; she sang her own songs. Literally. Coming from a two-parent home, none of us would’ve readily marked her “at-risk,” and just that week, she was excited about attending an upcoming school dance. She was an “outlier⁷” yet not “at-risk.” She seemed to reveal nothing different than typical adolescent angst. My colleague and I recalled when we got frustrated or upset as children,

⁷ I acknowledge the term “outlier” as perhaps problematic noting Evans-Winters’ work regarding the use of deficit language when speaking to the experiences of Black girls. However I chose this word to create a visceral response. In my mind, I physically saw Alissa *outside* of the “circle.” This image speaks to my urgency of wanting to pull her “in.”

we would threaten to run away. On one occasion, I actually remember packing my Care Bears suitcase, with Barbies and a pair of underwear, but got no further than our front gate. Yet, I am pained to think about what can make a child go through the act of suicide, a deliberate act of finality. With all of the workshops, circles and resources we used to build bridges for the girls to communicate, it is lamentably the one who never says anything that leaves you staggered.

Prior to postgraduate studies, I'd worked in public and charter schools for 10 years. In my last position I participated in girls' peer groups and recognized some of the same questions, arguments and identity concerns I had 15 years prior. When I began doing university research, I was steadfastly focused on methods to build theory with my previous practice and I noticed a gap in the literature. Whereas there was recognition of typical adolescent issues, the complexity of Black girls' lives were collapsed into gender studies or race studies and rarely placed at the center of research; thereby their needs have been ignored or regarded as deviant from the "norm."

Through my experiences as a Black⁸ woman, student and teacher, I have an urgent sense of obligation to examine how Black women, across generations, have used tools, to write away the silences that have historically bound us to oppression. In the face of a terminal diagnosis, Audre Lorde (2007) recalls,

“...what I most regretted were my silences. To question or to speak as I believed could have meant pain, or death. But we all hurt in so many different ways, all the time, and pain will either change or end. Death, on the other hand, is the final silence” (p. 41).

⁸ I maintain the use of Black as an inclusive term for those of African descent who have traveled through the African Diaspora, including but not limited to various regions of Africa, South America, the West Indies and America. Black, African American and “girls of color” are used interchangeably as may be specifically identified within an article or narrative.

The consequences of these silences, brings me to question, if Black women, Black girls in particular are unheard, who then speaks for them? How are they invited into, or ignored in these discourses? How is language employed and manipulated to represent them, specifically through image and voice?

This is an initial investigation of the specific images of adolescent Black females, aged 13-19, constructed in two representational discourses. I intend to examine the commonalities and differences between these representations and how they position Black adolescent females within our society. The second chapter of this thesis, entitled “Dominant narratives,” includes statistics and reports from various government data sources. This will be followed with a chapter entitled, “Counternarratives” which is an examination of the voices and images of Black females historically and within the personal narratives of emergent Black girl literature. The narratives are organized in the chapter, “You Are You But I Am Black,” according to three themes: resistance, resiliency and an enveloping theme of representation. The conclusion will provide a brief survey of advocacy work of foundations and implications for research in education.

I share the complexities of every Black girl represented within these data sources. Often I use the first-person-plural perspective to identify the “I” within “we” affirming my solidarity and position with/in the Black community. I define “we” through the lens of Sofia Villenas (1996) who writes from the perspective of the colonized and the colonizer and challenges researchers of color to control their multiplicity of identity, history of complicity and mark their own points of marginalization (p. 91). I identify as both a Black feminist and

an academic researcher; as a Hiphop generation BGirl⁹ and a public ivy scholar; a “citizen-scholar-activist rooted in the community” (Villenas, p. 91, 1996). I agree with my colleague Kristal Moore who has stated, “You can’t be a Black woman in the academy if you don’t know what’s happening in the streets” (K. Moore, doctoral defense, March 6, 2009).

The dominant narratives give a fixed, two-dimensional view of Black girls, wielding the power to create victims through a sense of helplessness or what is misperceived as normalcy. What is normal for dominant society is a child produced from a middle-class, two-parent home bound for college and entrepreneurship. Facts and reports that construct Black teenage welfare queens, unmotivated girls who are able to articulate the King’s English and health care burdens through drug addictions and sexually transmitted diseases, feed racist propaganda that serves to destruct the psyche of Black girls and perpetuate a myth of an American norm.

If school, as an institution, is a tool for socialization and citizenship, focusing solely on the statistics creates a deficit model for instructors who service these students. Attention is directed from the successes of Black girls that could lay groundwork to “fix” the “problem.” The data undergirds and perpetuates representations and images in media and academic research as well. While these communities have different and distinct methods of discourse, I intend to use the narratives of adolescent Black girls to problematize the dominant narratives and build a bridge for conversation. As Patricia Hill-Collins¹⁰ (1989,

⁹ BGirl is the feminine of BBoy. Initially, BBoy was regarded as a breaker (dancer) and has evolved as a title for one heavily involved in the elements/culture/lifestyle of Hiphop. My style from the ages of 13-19 reflected the artistry of A Tribe Called Quest, SaltNPepe, Common Sense, 2Pac, The Fugees and The Roots, respectively.

¹⁰ Patricia Hill-Collins (1948-), sociologist, educator and writer came into prominence with the 1990 publication of, *Black Feminist Thought*, which examines the work of Black women

1990/2009) writes, it is important to use dialogue as a means of assessing knowledge claims¹¹. This medium allows further understanding of how society claims to know Black girls and the ways in which they come to know themselves. I believe these representations have two major effects: First, they limit the construction of how Black girls identify themselves and second, they profoundly impact the expectations of teachers and school staff. In sum, this data can either be used to justify or change the lives of Black girls.

expressed in music, fiction, poetry, and oral history. Collins identifies three themes: sexism, class oppression, and racism are inextricably bound; Black women create alternative worldviews for self-definition and self-determination; and Black women have often internalized imposed restricting definitions of who they are.

¹¹ The tenets of Black Feminist Thought are (1) lived experience as criterion for meaning (2) the use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims (3) the ethic of caring and (4) the ethic of personal responsibility.

DOMINANT NARRATIVES

The Black female adolescent has been underrepresented in education, psychological, and career literature. Consequently, much of what we know about young Black females consists of bits and pieces of fragmented knowledge. – Elsie J. Smith (1982)

Data gathered from various government and foundation sources provide one way of viewing the urgent needs of this particular community. Through the dominant narratives, Black girls are portrayed as a simple measure of census representation that define deficiency or are asked to enjoy prominent visibility as the “first”, “one of the few,” or the “only” (Hill-Collins, 1990/2009). These statistics raise into view their struggles for life and death.

Hard Facts

According to the Law and Policy Group’s¹² 2008 Report on the Status of Black Women and Girls states, Blacks represent over 12% of the overall US population or 36 million people. Nearly 40% of adult Black women have never been married and the majority of Black children live in single female-headed households. Black households have the highest percentage of households maintained by women without husbands at 30%. Nearly 600,000 Black women between the ages of 15 and 50 became mothers in 2005, only 35% of them married. Black children are 15% of the US child population and 32% of approximately 510,000 children in foster care. Over 24% of Blacks live in poverty. Nearly 76% of Black children living in large metropolitan areas, live in neighborhoods that have higher poverty rates than those found in the urban neighborhoods of the poorest White children. Poverty

¹² The Law and Policy Group, Inc., directed by Gloria J. Browne-Marshall, is a policy institute based in New York City that analyzes laws and policies that primarily affect the lives of children, women, and people of color.

and health conditions are often linked together. Major causes of death among Black women are various forms of cancer, HIV/AIDS, stroke and diabetes. While HIV/AIDS is the leading cause of death for Black women between the ages of 25-34, 69% of HIV/AIDS cases diagnosed in 2005 were among Black 13-19 year-olds, although only 17% of youth in the 33 reporting states were Black (CDC). Data reported for the year 2008 states, one in four girls between the ages of 14-19, or 3.2 million teenage girls, were infected with at least one sexually transmitted infection (STI); nearly 50% were Black teen girls, indicating the prevalence of unprotected sexual relations. Ranging from 40% to 70% of respondents in various surveys, adolescent females jailed for crimes, compared with their male counterparts, are much more likely to report previous sexual or physical abuse (Project Butterfly).

In 1619, one year prior to the landing of the Mayflower, twenty Africans, including two women, arrived in the Jamestown Colony in Virginia. Today, Black females number nearly 20 million and are active in every aspect of American life (Browne-Marshall, 2008). While it is perhaps easy to lose faces in the numbers, Black women and girls have seen growth in the area of Education according to the US Census Bureau. Black women and girls have experienced growth in the area of Education according to the US Census Bureau. In 1966, 30% of Black women, 25-years-old and over completed four years of high school or more and less than 4% of Black women received a 4-year college degree or more. By 2007, the percentage of Black women who have completed four years of high school or more has more than doubled to 83%; the number of Black women who have acquired a 4-year degree or more, has more than tripled during the same time period to 19%. These increases are seen as no small feat. While the impact of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, or the African Holocaust, has been widely acknowledged and evident through society, there are subtle

measures that serve to maintain the subjectivity of the minority class (often using the impact of slavery to do so.)

Government Data Sources

D. Patrick Moynihan, sociologist and US Assistant Secretary of Labor, played a key role in the Johnson administration. In his 1965 report, *The Negro Family: The Case For National Action*, he narrows the problem of American society to the Negro family, particularly the mother. Citing the “Black Matriarch” as a byproduct of slavery which “in all its forms sharply lowered the need for achievement in slaves,” he states, “the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is out of line with the rest of the American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole.” Whereas “Mammy” had been a myth and stereotyped character relegated to pancake boxes, early ‘talking films’ and *Tom and Jerry* cartoons, the Moynihan Report positioned her as a target for the “War on Poverty.” The report goes on to discuss the role of the decaying family structure, in great part due to the success of the Black woman, and its effects on the Black child:

The common run of young people in a group facing serious obstacles to success do not succeed. A prime index of the disadvantage of Negro youth in the United States is their consistently poor performance on the mental tests that are a standard means of measuring ability and performance in the present generation. There are indications that the situation may have been arrested in the past few years, but the general post-war trend is unmistakable. So long as this situation persists, the cycle of poverty and disadvantage will continue to repeat itself.

From the Black Matriarch comes a developed sense of an “at-risk” community, ripe for reform.

A March 2006 report of the National Center for Educational Statistics defines “at-risk for school failure” in terms of demographic or historical characteristics associated with an

increased likelihood of adverse outcomes. The report delineates three categories: “status risk factors,” “behavioral risk factors” and “academic risk factors.” These “status risk factors” include being a minority student, coming from a low-income home (recall that nearly 76% of Black children living in large metropolitan areas, live in neighborhoods that have higher poverty rates than those found in the urban neighborhoods of the poorest White children) or coming from a home in which English is not the primary language. “Behavioral risk factors” may include skipping classes or school, failing to pay attention to the teacher or to complete required coursework, and failing to develop a sense that schooling is important to future life success. Recall the Moynihan report which states:

The common run of young people in a group facing serious obstacles to success do not succeed. A prime index of the disadvantage of Negro youth in the United States is their consistently poor performance on the mental tests that are a standard means of measuring ability and performance in the present generation.

The “academic risk factors” considered are accruing a history of poor grades, low test scores, and leaving high school without graduating.

COUNTERNARRATIVES

If Black women do not say who they are, other people will say it badly, for them.
– Barbara Christian (1985)

The work of Black women has frequently been sapped to produce an essential black female subject for its own consumption, a black female subject that represents a single dimension – Hazel Carby (1992)

The dominant narratives are previously discussed which implicitly call for the *counternarrative* of how this community constructs themselves. Within this thesis I posit that image and voice have a cyclical relationship. In order to understand the role of Black girls' voices in today's society, research must look historically at how their images have been constructed. This exploration reveals that the MTV and Hot97's¹³ models of Black womanhood and femininity did not arrive with a newfound expressive freedom but began from 'othering' an 'exotic' culture. Both terms used as a means to phenotypically identify members of a non-white society.

Othermothers

Because Black women have traditionally not been the researchers but the *researched*, the aim and function of the work is problematic. "While an oppressed group's experiences may put them in a position to see things differently, their lack of control over the apparatuses of society that sustain ideological hegemony makes the articulation of their self-defined standpoint difficult." (Hill-Collins, 1989, p. 340) The cultural mores of mutuality,

¹³ Both MTV (Music Television) and Hot97 (an archetype of the urban radio station and its subsequent programming/marketing styles) serve as a point of references for how popular culture informs and reforms adolescent images.

reciprocity, spirituality, deference, responsibility and language interactions (King & Mitchell, 1990) are suppressed so that scientific explanations of body and behavior are valued.

Science emerged after the Civil War as the knowledge base of modern America not because it was naturally better than theology or magic but because of its relevance to generations of state and industrial elites interested in redesigning the society to make it more conducive to capitalism. European colonial administrators used science, especially anthropology and sociology, to justify their rule in nonwhite societies (Stanfield, 1985).

Sarah Bartman/Venus Hottentot¹⁴ and nameless others have been scientific research subjects, which have further marginalized Black women, substantiated false claims and perpetuated myths. These images are called by Mammy, Jezebel, Sapphire and revisited as “Oprah”, the video vixen, and a tongue-clicking, head-popping, eye-rolling girl with an adverse attitude, whether she’s in the ‘hood or a corporate office, “Shaniqua.” While these are not the total sum of cancerous representations of Black women, they stand in as markers for the matriarch, whore and bitch as to which Moynihan states, “the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is to out of line with the rest of the American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole.” Hill-Collins (2004) argues that these “controlling images” persist still and have undergirded studies that critique the HIV/AIDS pandemic, welfare reform, reproductive legislation and education policies. One of the most persistent images, the Bad Black Mother (BBM), characterized by the 1965 Moynihan Report and shaped by the media, sets the agenda for the deficit identity of Black girls. In *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (2004), BBM are defined as women

¹⁴ Venus Hottentot/Saartjie Baartman (1789-1815), Khoi/South African woman exhibited throughout Europe because of her large buttocks and elongated labia. Her remains were examined, placed on display in Musée de l'Homme (Paris) until 1974 and were not returned to home birthhome for proper burial until May 6, 2002.

who are abusive (extremely bitchy) and/or who neglect their children either in utero or afterward. Ironically, these Bad Black Mothers are stigmatized as being inappropriately feminine because they reject the gender ideology associated with the American family idea. They are often single mothers, they live in poverty, they are often young, and they rely on the state to support their children. Moreover, they allegedly pass on their bad values to their children who in turn are more likely to become criminals and unwed teenaged mothers. These images of bitches and bad Black mothers came at a time when African American children and youth became expendable. Simply put, in the post-civil rights era, poor Black children became superfluous as workers (pp. 131, 132).

Because these ancestral mothers have bared the brunt of chattel slavery, church bombings, classrooms made of back porches and the shade of trees¹⁵, “high-tech” rapings (Bell, 2004) and brick walls (as opposed to glass ceilings), their work testifies to a struggle for social justice that is actively relevant to the present generation of Black adolescent females. It is important to understand the historical implications of these images to provide a sense of connectedness and action. “Denying [a marginalized] group’s history denies its humanity. At their best, such dominant group assumptions justify paternalism; at their worst, genocide” (Stanfield, 1985).

Traditional social science research normally points to the personal and cultural characteristics of racial minorities, while failing to acknowledge racism as something embedded in or central to U.S. society. Consequently, the research paradigms that educational researchers and reformers have had to depend on regularly target the victim and ignore the role of social structures in our society (Payne, 1994). In this sense, the narrative form of telling their stories, has been a powerful tool for Black women.

¹⁵ Even through the adverse circumstances of slavery, emancipation and Jim Crow segregation, Blacks made substantial sacrifices that above all else, their children, as well as themselves, would be educated. These educational institutions, small and large, are widely documented and their work substantiated by scholars such as James Anderson, Heather Williams and Carol D. Lee.

Educator and sociologist John Stanfield (1985) writes, “since institutions and social inequality systems are human constructs, they are delegitimated when actors stop acting out predefined roles” and for this reason, I chose to use narrative forms in representing the girls’ voices. Precisely because [narrative] is a form of discourse that is known and used in everyday interaction, the story is an obvious way for social actors, in talking to strangers (e.g., the researcher) to retell key experiences and events (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). Narratives are often used to carry oral traditions, tell moral lessons, and are coping tools for traumatic events; they serve to maintain or counter a collective cultural heritage. They are the best way to handle complexity and for people to understand tacitly and explicitly (G. Noblit, class lecture, February 19, 2009).

Emergent Black Girl Literature

The history of silence amongst the Black female community, whether through subjugation or rejection, has made the stories of its’ women difficult to obtain; however, this does not mean they do not exist. In 1994 Barbara Omolade wrote, “I am a product of an intellectual tradition which until twenty-five years ago did not exist within the academy. Like a patchwork in a quilt, it is a tradition gathered from meaningful bits and pieces.” The bits and pieces of Black girls’ stories have been published and housed (but not limited to) the social sciences of Sociology, Psychology and Anthropology, in the margins of Critical Pedagogy, Women Studies, Social Work or Young Adult/Adolescent Literature and Fiction (see Ladner, 1995; Carroll, 1997; Stevens, 2002; Evans-Winters, 2005). In Bonnie Leadbeater and Niobe Way’s collection, *Urban Girls* (1996), leading educators and sociologists write to the issues of Black and Latino girls who resist stereotypes and (re)create identities.

In the *Urban Education* article, “Living the Literature: Race, Gender Construction, and Black Female Adolescents,” (2007) Professors Genyne Henry Boston and Traci Baxley write,

Early adolescent literature, being didactic and symbolic in nature, was originally intended to represent the culture being reflected at the time, and later it was used as a catalyst for change and control. During the early 1800’s... Girls were socially groomed by literature that emphasized domestic roles and virtue, thus providing an appropriated guide for womanhood and motherhood. Traditional American texts such as Lousia May Alcott’s (1869/2004) *Little Women* and Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* (1847/1997) capture the pains and joys of being a woman in tales of love and life. On the other hand, literature depicted young male character examples who poignantly triumphed adversity and gained status and wealth through perseverance and hard work.

Over one hundred years later, on the south side of Chicago, the first chapter book I read was Judy Blume’s *Are You There God? It’s me, Margaret*. Through the years, I moved from Judy Blume to “Stoneybrook, Connecticut” with Ann M. Martin’s *Babysitter’s Club* series. After a good run, I eventually lost interest in young adult literature. While many of the characters had a Black friend or sometimes a consistent Black character, I saw or heard no reflections of self. The Black characters served to “color” the novels without any cultural context, let alone critique. In 1967 Virginia Hamilton’s groundbreaking work, *Zeely*, addressed issues of racial identity, freedom and inequality and highlighted the strength and history of Black people (Boston & Baxley, 2007), yet I did not have access to such work.

This current move of fiction and personal narratives has been instrumental vehicle for the image and voice of Black girls. It opens the door to imagine within the familiar rather than the abstract. The characters of these stories provide mirrors and a platform for the true experiences of Black girls. Jacqueline Woodson’s *Hush* (2002) and *The Dear One* (1991),

Nikki Grime's (1998) *Jazmin's Notebook* and Sharon Flake's (1998) *The Skin I'm In*, provide social context and gender identity for Black female adolescents. These works have been incorporated into classroom curriculum as a means to improve academic achievement through connectedness and critical thinking. It is said that art imitates life and so moving from the fictional accounts told through the lenses of Black girls, it is imperative to transition to the girls themselves.

My Sisters' Voices

*My Sisters' Voices: Teenage Girls of Color Speak Out*¹⁶ (2002) is one of the few publications I found that was edited and narrated by a teenaged girl. At the age of eighteen, Iris Jacob collected her schooling experiences as a "young girl of color" with others in her peer group from across the country. Here is a patchwork of stories that incorporate social and cultural constructions of identity, social justice and responsibility and what it means to be 'at-risk.'

Some of us are just out of childhood; some of us are very nearly adults. Some of us come from the poorest locales in the nation; some of us from very privileged backgrounds... We are mothers, some of us. We are beauties, inner and outer. We are heroines. We are winners, every one of us. We are poets. We are the present. And, make no mistake, we are the future. – Introduction of *My Sisters' Voices*

After reading Mary Pipher's *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* (1995) and Sara Shandler's *Ophelia Speaks: Adolescent Girls Write About Their Search for Self* (1999), Jacob felt her "struggle had not been truly identified. I felt as though girls of color had a unique and rarely validated struggle. In addition to bearing the weight of being teenagers and female, we also carry the enormous issues of race and ethnicity" (p. xv). In the Introduction of the book, Jacob discusses how she thought of creating a collection but

¹⁶ This book is (surprisingly) catalogued as a "Self-Help" book.

dismissed it as a passing thought. “The idea stayed with me though... Every time I tried to bring about change and was told to back off, wait, or pick my battles, I thought about giving girls of color an opportunity to give their opinion, for once, instead of listening to everyone else’s” (p. xvi) While Jacob discusses her urgency and methods in the introduction of *MSV*, she also shares her narrative which frames the work of this collection.

In my sixth-grade year I made friends with a Latina girl named Rosa. Our friendship stemmed from our similar treatment by the whites at our school; we both dealt with the issues of identity, power, and culture. By eighth grade Rosa had been suspended four times and then switched schools. Her method of coping had been retaliating, telling the white people how she really felt. One day in the hall she told me she wanted to hit “this stupid lil’ white girl.” I told her to do what she wanted (I’ll admit I wanted her to) and then she did. Rosa’s anger was not at this particular white girl. Her anger was within. She was furious that she was forced to be the translator between her parents and the rest of the city. She was angry that she had to continuously deal with the young white girls and their problems, which she felt were petty compared to her own.

Rosa and I took different paths. She let out her anger while I kept mine in. I wrote in my journal, cried, and treated everyone with contempt. I hated everyone and everything, yet I did not know why. I had three best friends; all were white. I was never actually close to them. We would share secrets, yet I never told them my most important one: that I was not like them. When race was brought up, one of us would quickly change the subject¹⁷.

With stellar reviews from the *Chicago Tribune*: “A powerful peek into the lives of teens at a crossroads—girls on the cusp of womanhood grappling with racism, sexism, heritage, poverty, family, and self-image in a world where they are largely unheard,” *Black Issues Book Review*, *Booklist* and *Publishers Weekly*, this collection stands as a crucial tool to fold the margins into a larger discourse. Teaching guides are available via the internet that

¹⁷ I chose this short phrase as the title for the thesis for three reasons: (1) I wanted the title to directly reflect the words of the girls’ narratives, (2) the context in which Jacob uses this phrase illustrates the uncomfortable stress when speaking of race and the need to hide or ignore and (3) the phrase itself suggests a re/presentation of how Black females have been objectified as the “subject.”

place *MSV* at the center of conversations amongst teen girls in classroom settings. A major challenge for this thesis was being careful in how the narratives would be re/positioned and which exactly would I choose. First I looked for themes that would specifically address poverty, violence (sexual, domestic, gang), pregnancy and school retention rates.

I was limited in that there was no guiding prompt or interview protocol. Jacob solicited submissions from girls through friends, English teachers, and organizations such as political groups and boys' and girls' clubs. With each letter, she included a list of possible topics ranging from racism to body image to family to abuse as well as creating a website for the book: www.girlsofcolorwrite.com. These young women were to use this space to vent, cry, and laugh. Jacob expressed disappointment in not having received more submissions on topics such as sexual orientation. She concludes that because the girls under age 18 had to have a parent's signature to submit, many of them may have been discouraged "from opening their hearts" and censored themselves. Jacob admits, as many researchers, that at the onset of this project, she had her own ideas of how to arrange the contents; however, after receiving them, she organized them according to the major reoccurring themes. Therefore there are six sections of the book: sexism and racism; families, cultures and traditions; relationships with family members, friends and lovers; identity and self-esteem; pain and loss; celebration of empowerment. Some submissions fit seamlessly within one category, while others blend and twist through several. The choice of how to place them was totally left to the discretion of Jacob.

In “A Culture of Our Own,” 15-year-old Vannah Shaw writes, “the number one thing that irks me is that... everything that is messed up or not quite right is ‘ghetto’¹⁸,” and then they want to call me ‘ghetto.’ ...are they implying that something is wrong with me? I hope not!” These physical locations where the BBM and Jezebels are presumed to breed do not lend themselves to idea that the residents of these communities will find any success or make a substantial contribution to the larger society. Therefore the structure, as well as the assumed behavior of the people themselves, are labeled “ghetto.”

Although Langston Hughes discusses art in “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” (1926), his argument applies to the “silent treatment” of Black female adolescents and their struggle to move from the margins of invisibility. Hughes suggests that it is perhaps within these “slums” society will find and revel in the value of “the least of these.”¹⁹

¹⁸ Blacks are not the patent residents of “ghettos” and depreciated areas of major cities. This term was first coined in the early/mid 20th century in relation to Jewish communities throughout Europe where they were forced to live before being transported to concentration camps. The term has since been duly applied to Black *people* urban areas, traditionally forced to lived in the “Black Belts” established during the Great Migration, now known as areas of substandard housing projects, which have been deemed weigh stations for prisons and cemeteries.

¹⁹ “The least of these” is a biblical reference that implies God will judge each human according to how s/he has served the hungry, poor, sick, homeless and disenfranchised of society. Matthew 25:40 reads: “And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.”

“YOU ARE YOU BUT I AM BLACK”

and I really hope no white person ever has cause
to write about me
because they never understand
Black love is Black wealth and they'll
probably talk about my hard childhood
and never understand that
all the while I was quite happy

Excerpt of “Nikki-Rosa” – Nikki Giovanni (1968)

The statistics used in this thesis speak to single motherhood and teen pregnancy, poverty, sexually transmitted diseases/infections and briefly reference physical and sexual abuse. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, the girls represented in any of these variables are perfectly defined as “at risk for school failure” having “come from low-income homes”, “failing to develop a sense that schooling is important to future life success” or by simply being “a minority.” The title of this section is the same as a poem written by 12-year-old Jasmin Kolu Zazaboi, which suggests “Black” as a “problem.” While the previous section gives a historical view of how image and voice are constructed for Black girls, this section employs the counternarratives of the girls to dialogue with the erroneous classifications of the dominant narratives. The intent is not to paint rose-colored glasses on the images these data cast, but to allow the girls to address their positions through the larger political themes of resistance, resilience and representation. I define each theme through the lenses of Black women scholars, educators and poets. In the scope of this research, their “audience” is academic researchers. I chose two narratives and one poem of the 105 collected pieces, by girls who identified as African American and Black. What follows is a

presentation of the social world and the social actors many people often observe but do not speak to.

Resistance

Resistance has been defined in different, overlapping terms such as, “opposition to being invaded, occupied, assaulted and destroyed by the system,” (hooks, 1990) or “constructing and reconstructing oppositional knowledge,” (Hill-Collins, 1989). Janie Ward (1996) identifies resistance through two strategies. The first, resistance for survival, is called “tongues of fire” or truth-telling, in which words are bold, unreserved, and “in-your-face” honest. The second strategy, which I focus on, is resistance for liberation. It is truth-telling that promotes positive recognition. This strategy ultimately helps a girl experience constructive, critical affirmation of herself and the collective by encouraging her to think critically about herself and her place in the world.

The theme of resistance is commonly explored throughout the work and lives of Black women and girls. Though not always specifically named, their stories challenge the molds made for them, employing the principles of a liberatory practice. Queen Latifah’s (1994) U-N-I-T-Y²⁰ was a on-time war-cry for Black girls across the country. The opening of the song is hard to ignore. Right before the first beat drops, she exclaims, “Who you callin’ a bitch!” It is not a question as much as it is a statement of critique and self-affirmation which implicitly asserts, ‘I will *not* be objectified’ and she follows up with, “you gotta let ‘em know, you not a bitch or a hoe.” As the images of Mammy, Jezebel and Delilah move through generations, becoming more nuanced and birthing more myths, the following

²⁰ This single of the *Black Reign* (1993) album, addressed sexual harassment, domestic violence and female identity in three verses, each ending with “Who you callin’ a bitch!” The song won the 1994 Grammy for Best Solo Rap Performance.

narrative, “Plan C,” names the stereotype one young mother faces and names her strategy of resistance.

It took Camille Hoosman nearly five months to admit to herself that she was pregnant. At the age of fifteen, her life was moving in a much different direction than she’d planned when she was in Ms. Kahn’s second-grade classroom with her best friend TSION.

We proudly paraded around school in our plaid uniforms and were the first to wear white socks with our dresses instead of the navy or maroon socks that we were supposed to wear. We were two of the smartest girls in our class and spent much of our time telling secrets to each other. TSION and I, only seven years old at the time, had thoroughly planned our futures and were busy writing our story. We were going to Paris for college, after which we would get married to gorgeous men and own million-dollar mansions. We wouldn’t have maids, but butlers instead, and after working and shopping, any leftover time would be spent vacationing at various locations. I would have two children, while she would have three, and that was exactly how it was going to be.

Camille’s story seems to have a much different beginning than the assumed typical teenage mother. In the description of her clothes and hair, she appears as a darling schoolgirl. It is not discussed what type of family life she had, but the details assert she was well cared for. Her plans, detailed in a “shiny red spiral notebook” included international travel and billion dollar corporations, unweighted with personal inhibitions and poor self-image. After the girls moved to different schools, they made new plans in the notebook.

TSION would attend Julliard... I was undecided on which college to attend, but I was certain that I would be in New York when our outstanding talent was finally discovered. That was our new plan, our plan B. *It’s funny how plans change.*

When I was fifteen I met a guy. He was eighteen and very persuasive. With a few smooth words and the softest touch, he had successfully stolen my most valuable treasure. And five months later, I could no longer deny what I had been trying to force out of my mind... I couldn’t ignore it anymore because for the first time, I felt it kick. I never planned to have a baby as a

teenager. I knew that my life would be much more difficult than it had been before. I knew that I would be stereotyped as “a girl with a baby.” But I also knew that I loved her more than anything else in the world, more than myself. I made a new plan... not at all like my selfish second-grade story. My revised plan included the both of us, my daughter and me. And although I have no idea what will happen, I know that I have to stay strong for the both of us. I plan to finish school. I plan to always be there for my daughter. I plan to be successful in the career of my choice. This new plan of mine is just a basic blueprint with room for additional plans. I’d like to think that this is my final plan, but maybe there’s never a final plan. But for now, I’m on plan C.

This narrative tells of Camille’s transformation from child to mother. She lives with the awareness that her identity is reduced to “a girl with a baby,” however, none of her plans conform to the popular idea that she is a ‘system leech.’ It is perhaps better that her audience is not privy to the exact details of her home life or her educational trajectory so that she may not be labeled “an exception to a rule.” Under the scrutiny of stereotypical images, she employs the strategy of constructive, critical affirmation of self and her place in the world (Ward, 1996) making adjustments to move toward success thus breaking the mold of BBM or disgracefully known as the “Baby Mama.” A Google search for “Black teen pregnancy statistics” yields nearly 378,000 pages ranging from journal and magazine articles, end-of-year reports, even blogs, yet there are wide gaps in measurements of how many of these girls complete high school, do not live in poverty and have advantageous careers.

Ariel Kalil, an associate professor in the Harris School and director of the Center for Human Potential and Public Policy, has done extensive research on the success of teenage mothers noting that most studies have compared them with teens who are not mothers. The majority of these studies also use research designs that are unbalanced with regard to family structure and socioeconomic status (Murry, 1996). There are major determining factors of their trajectory that move beyond economic status, considering

mother/daughter relationships and multigenerational support. Reflecting the narrative of Camille, Kalil writes, “most of these young teen mothers have remarkably high educational aspirations, most are engaged in their schoolwork and many will complete high school or obtain a GED. However, when they perceive that their teachers have lower expectations for them (real or imagined), they perform poorly” (Schuler, 2000).

While Kalil’s study focuses on low-income Caucasian and African American families, research asserts adolescent birth rates and STIs are higher among racial and ethnic minority groups and strongly associated with poverty (Santelli, S., Lowry, R., Brener, N. D. & Robin, L., 2000). Velma M. Murry (1996) notes:

researchers’ suggest that black girls become sexually active younger than whites (Newcomer and Udry, 1985; Zelnick, Kantner, & Ford, 1981), with an average age of onset of sexual activity at about 14.4 years (Zabin et al. 1986; Zelnick & Shah, 1983). In addition, compared to white adolescents, black girls are more likely to experience pregnancy during adolescence (Henshaw & Van Vort, 1989; National Center for Health Statistics 1989), are 2.5 times as likely to carry the pregnancy to term, and are 5.5 times as likely to be single mothers (Bumpass & McLanahan, 1987; US Bureau of the Census, 1987).

Because of the fragmented research on this population, it is difficult to specifically chart the progression (or regression) of these figures. However, in a move toward anti-deficient research, Venus Evans-Winters (2005) poses the question, “Why has educational research traditionally focused on the number of out-of-wedlock births and sexual practices (read: promiscuity), and dropout rates among low-income minority adolescent girls?” following with “why does more research not focus on those girls who... are resilient despite the odds stacked up against them?” (p. 6).

Resilience

Resiliency studies are positioned as advocacy vehicles. Throughout much of the work, researchers redefine deficit language claiming the environments to be at-risk rather than the girls themselves (Fine, 1991; BWBG, 2009). Much like resistance, resiliency is recognized through opposition. While resistance sets to reconstruct and critique, resiliency is the ability to recover from or adjust to problems, adversities, and stress (Evans-Winters, 2005) or as Michelle Cliff (1980) writes, it is “claiming an identity they taught me to despise²¹.” In the 2009 report commissioned by the Black Women for Black Girls Giving Circle (BWBG)²², resiliency is drawn through the previous literature, focus groups and personal experiences of Black adolescent females.

Across the economic divide, Black girls negotiate a variety of potentially stressful life events that ultimately require them to function in a number of roles: that of academic achiever, caretaker, and significant contributor to the household—financially or otherwise. Along with these stressors, Black girls must negotiate a daily existence under the challenge of both race and gender social disadvantage. Some scholars suggest that the resulting stressors that come as a result of experiences with sexism and racism eventually accumulate in the lives of Black girls, causing psychological distress that over time result in an increased vulnerability to mental health problems.

Not all researchers, though, assert the potential for a heightened level of distress among Black girls. Some assert that the historical disadvantaged position of Black women in the United States has necessitated the development of resilient capabilities in order to ensure community survival (Stevens, 2001). Others suggest that Black adolescents simply tap into a wider

²¹ This is the title of Cliff’s first book/poetry collection. In a 1992 interview with Opal Palmer Adisa, she says, “this is the first time that I was breaking the silences of my childhood in the book about race, class, sex... and about the secrets in the family and violence. There’s a lot of rough stuff in this book, so I’m claiming there – in a way, demanding – to be a whole person.”

²² BWBG is a giving circle that seeks to amass knowledge and financial resources that will support organizations committed to Black girls in New York City. It specifically calls upon the resources of professional black women in the New York City metropolitan area as leaders to support their younger sisters.

array of support systems than do their white counterparts, such as deep family bonds, strong neighborhood ties, and greater religious involvement (Prelow & Guarnaccia, 1997).

In many neighborhoods populated by Black girls, especially in the summertime, you are guaranteed to find a Double Dutch competition of sorts or hand games and chants such as “Slide” and “Hollywood’s Not Swingin!” On cooler days or when the streetlights come on²³, many retreat inside, to games with our parents and grandparents: Dominos, Bid and Spades. The games played with parents emphasized different skills and strategies while strengthening intergenerational relationships. In the narrative “Spades”, written by 13-year-old, Hilary Evans, she explores the interactions of this card game not only as a rites-of-passage, but also as an endowed tool of resiliency.

I nervously rested my eyes upon the red diamonds and hearts, the black spades and clubs that lay in my sweaty hands. Asking myself if I was up to the challenge that kept on scurrying through my brain like mice. Spades was the name of the game written into my history as the card game of my family. The bright orange and yellow flames crackled and danced in the hearth while my grandma Emma, Aunt Edna, cousin Emma, and I sat around the kitchen table to play.

“See Edna, I bet that’s how she gets her mamma to let her do things,” Grandma Emma said annoyingly.

My cheeks flushed crimson as I lowered my head sheepishly, embarrassed about beggin to get my way.

“Mm-hm,” Aunt Edna replied.

“Well let’s get this game started,” exclaimed my cousin.

Hilary’s narrative style stresses the relationship between these family members through language and the metaphorical description of her responses. The way Grandma Emma and Aunt Edna speak to her throughout this game appears as an unusually rough chastisement for what is normally viewed as a relaxing pastime. Language, coupled with the

²³ There seems to be a shared rule, that if you were outside playing with friends, you had to be home when the street lights came on which signaled the sunset.

game itself, is an element of ‘tough love’ and a recycled sentiment: ‘you learn to deal with me, then you can handle people in the streets (meaning anyone outside of the home.)’

I was partnered with my aunt Edna since Grandma Emma and Cousin Emma were partners. It was going terribly. My family was trying to teach me the basics. Staring blankly at the shapes and colors on the cards was all I could manage to do. Frantically, my eyes traveled to stare into my partner’s. They changed! The warm, brown eyes of my aunt were not there. Instead, there were eyes of evil looking down on me in rage. Obviously, she did not like to lose.

“Hilary, pay attention to what is being played! Hilary, when in doubt, play to win!” Her words were ringing in my ears like the shrill sound of bells. Lost and amazed, I wondered what it was that had taken over my aunt suddenly, in the middle of the game. When my world seemed crashing down by the attack of spades from my aunt, my grandma joined in on the barrage.

“Play right, Hilary,” they hissed together. The smile that spread across my face at the beginning of this journey had vanished. I could no longer take the pressure and head. My eyes blurred with water, and the figures on my cards were unrecognizable. Tears fell slowly down my round, red cheeks.

“See y’all, my aunt Deborah, who had been watching the game the entire time, exclaimed, “you made her cry.”

“Don’t listen to them, Hilary,” my cousin piped in. “They made me cry, too.”

“Yeah, Hilary, they are different people when they play cards, like monsters,” Aunt Deborah joked. A smile reappeared through my tears and my strength was restored.

Hilary has painted a picture of stress in a protected environment. She was able to be vulnerable and affirmed. While those playing cards, even her partner, ‘ganged up’ on her, she received encouragement from the sidelines. No one backed down because of her tears, as her Grandma and Aunt stated earlier that she is ‘used to getting her way,’ and they continually pushed her forward. Rather than looking at this game as a single event, Hilary identifies it as a “journey.” From this perspective she is not concerned with the outcome of the cards but what she has gained through this interaction.

We lost, of course, yet I felt like I won personally, not only as a player of Spades, but as a person, too. Tough love was not something I ever really understood, but that day I got a dose of it. I was now able to face and listen to the wrath of family members if I made a mistake in Spades – or in life.

For many adolescents, the family serves as a cocoon of sorts and family can be defined with parents, aunts, siblings or even the best friend of your mother and fourth generation cousins. A 2009 survey of 128 Black female adolescents in New York City, conducted by the Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR), identifies the mother as the most influential person in their lives (48%), followed with their friends (15%) and sisters (11%). Brothers, fathers, grandparents, a higher power, celebrity, program leader, other, boyfriend and teacher all fell below 10%.

According to Henderson & Milstein (1996) there are 12 characteristics (of families, schools communities and peer groups) that researchers and educators have traditionally acknowledged as environmental protective factors that promote resiliency in the lives of students:

- (1) Promotes close bonds
- (2) Values and encourages education
- (3) Uses warmth and low levels of criticism
- (4) Provides access to resources for meeting basic needs
- (5) Sets and enforces clear boundaries such as rules, norms and laws
- (6) Promotes sharing of responsibilities, service to others, and "required helpfulness"
- (7) Provides access to resources for meeting basic needs
- (8) Expresses high and realistic expectations for success
- (9) Encourages prosaic development of values and life skills
- (10) Encourages goal setting and mastery
- (11) Provides leadership, decision-making, and opportunities for participation
- (12) Appreciates the unique talents of each individual

The story of "Spades" stimulates resilience through several of these elements with great attention to promoting close bonds and encouraging goal setting and mastery. First, the role of family, is key, to the overall healthy development of Black girls, particularly since the world beyond its protective embrace may in many ways, reject her very being (BWBG, 2009). Secondly, through this medium, Hilary has come into her own voice and

“provides leadership” when preparing to teach her cousin David to play the game, seven months later: ““Grandma, you make them, I’ll rake them, and we’ll go home with the jingle of their quarters in our pockets.’ My grandma’s smile shone through the entire room.”

Representation

These stories establish the multifaceted roles of family and community in resistance and resiliency. However, detached from these safe spaces are the public representations of Black girls embedded in old wounds and scars. Unlike the previous themes, which emphasize action and individual agency, representation is an enveloping theme that is created *through* these actions. In 1992, Hazel Carby wrote, “because this Black female subject has to carry the burden of representing what is otherwise significantly absent in the curriculum, issues of complexity disappear under the pressure of the demand to give meaning to blackness” (p. 192). Nearly a generation later, the ease and access of technology, provides a wider market for how Black women contribute to and reject image. This section explores how 18-year-old Candice Bingham (re)presents herself in an untitled poem.

I am beautiful
As sensual as the midnight rain nourishing the soul
I am the earth
I am dark, mystical, mysterious
Like the dark side of the moon
Nature conforms to my cycle

Candice manipulates language to emphasize not only beauty of the words, but their rhythmic relationships and as a tool to affirm self. The darker complexions of Black people were long regarded as sinful perhaps as in relation to the biblical character Ham who was ostracized from his people by God or because it was the primary distinguishing factor that held them to oppression. Artist Bert Williams remarked, “it is no disgrace being Black, but it’s terribly inconvenient. Candice opens this poem stating, “I am beautiful” following with

her supportive evidence. She equates “Black” with “midnight rain” that nourishes and “mysterious” as the dark side of the moon. Her words make “Black” essential and timeless.

I am deep, a genius, a seductress
Like the ocean floor
I speak in proverb and verse
My words are filled with the infinite wisdom of old
I am the divine universal life force of the cosmos
I breathe life into all creation
My eyes are the windows to the motherland
My glorious crown of woolly hair

An April 4, 2007, a run-of-the-mill discussion between NBC morning radio show host Donald Imus and his executive producer, Bernard McGuirk, drew national attention when the young women of the conference championship Rutgers basketball team (which during this season was predominately Black) were referred to as “rough... hard-core... nappy headed hoes.” “Nappy,” being associated with “wooly”, unmanageable, wild and ugly. This sent a sharp critique throughout American culture. Within days, every form of media available, from feminist blogs to CNN to street preacher, turned its attention to the racial and sexist commentary of these two men, pointing blame at Hiphop, white supremacist capitalist patriarchy (hooks, 1994) and the media itself. In the living rooms, pews and salons, there was a shared sentiment that, even still, our young Black girls, while basking in their success at a prestigious university, were subjected to the same representations constructed over one hundred years ago. Where the distinction of education and wealth do not provide an escape from debilitating scrutiny, we take shape and refuge in the inherit ways of knowing self.

My voluptuous body
The curves aligned with the silhouette of God
As fertile as the crop circle
As majestic as Mt. Kilimanjaro
As rich as gold
As sweet as a fragrance of a silk rose
I am mother of all mankind

Candice's words speak to the ancestry (windows to the motherland,) body image (curves aligned with the silhouette of God) and even the "nappy" (my glorious crown of wooly hair) representations of which Black women have been taught to deny, reject and/or tame. She is however, unapologetic of her Blackness/color, regarding it as an enigma and aligning it within the universe. The personification of her wholeness provides a richness that follows jazz forms and the spiritual connectedness often expressed in the work of Black writers. It is reclamation of not only image, but also of self. Because Candice decided not to title this poem, it can be identified as "strength," "passion," or maybe even "resistance" and "resilience." It stands to reason that without a title, any young Black girl can see herself through this piece and create her own representation.

It is refreshing to find works such as *Copper Sun* (2006) by Sharon Draper, *Heaven* (2000) by Angela Johnson and *Staying Pure* (2000) by Stephanie Perry Moore in the hands of Black girls and on the shelves of school libraries. These works of fiction provide a reflection that I did not find in *The Babysitters Club* (1986), *Sweet Valley High* (1983) or later in the *American Girl* (1986) series. This emergent Black girl literature builds a community of positive reinforcement from the honest experiences of their peers so that they find identify strength and agency within their own lives. It is here that Camille, Hilary and Candice share their experiences and voices. Their stories do not deny the truth of sexuality, adversity and hurdles of self-image, instead they (re)present their positions within the public discourse.

CONCLUSION

Camille, Hilary and Candice provide only a slice of their lives however I believe that for many readers, this may be the first look at interpretive studies on Black girls. As Annette Henry (1995) writes, “stories of Black girls lives need to be researched and analyzed in the context of and against existing social science research, especially interpretive inquiries” (p. 293). This new move which directs society to an emergent representations of Black girls’ collects ‘exceptions to’ and creates new rules.

Living under fragile economic conditions, Black girls are forced to grow up fast. They tend to accept employment and handle adult-like responsibilities, such as caring for younger siblings, from an early age. Thus their conception of femininity is one that includes both hard work and perseverance; self-reliance and tenacity; care-giving work and wage-earning work; along with egalitarian notions of sexual equality. As a result, Black girls tend to be assertive, confident, independent, and strong (Buckley & Carter, 2005). This work regards these characteristics as attributes to build networks upon.

Advocacy Literature

Government and foundation reports of the American Association of University Women (AAUW), the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) the Center for Disease Control (CDC), the US Department of Education and Black Women for Black Girls Giving Circle (BWBG), provide a litany of statistics and correlations with Black girls and pregnancy rates, poverty levels and violence. However the emphasis is placed on developing girls’ through economic giving, volunteerism and legislative change. It takes the baton from

the girls' methods of resistance, resilience and representation, serving as a middle ground for dominant narratives and counternarratives. It is an opening for action.

There has been extensive research on the affects of poverty, crime and inequitable education of Black children and of female children; however, this data often leaves the Black female child unaccounted for. Assumptions can be made by reading between the numbers but they are simply grouped into one category or another; they do not stand alone. Since 1858 and 1881 respectively, the AAUW and YWCA have had an extensive history amongst key groups that advocate for women's and girls' rights. Their work, which also sponsors local groups specific to the community's needs, takes care to look at these gaps through qualitative methods and ethnographic studies.

In the 1998 Executive Summary of *Gender Gaps*, a publication of the AAUW, they cite the need for attention toward Black girls. Girls are not a uniform group, nor are their needs singular. Over the past six years, research on girls has moved from an assumption of homogeneity to a focus on differences among girls. Caucasians should no more be the model against which other ethnicities and races are measured than boys should be the model against which girls are compared. Exploring differences not only between boys and girls, but also among girls by race, ethnicity, or class makes our understanding of equity more complex and produces a more detailed, accurate portrait of students' school identities. When we, as students, educators and the public community, ignore the needs of historically disadvantaged groups, we underserve students we have underserved in the past. And in failing these groups, we continue to foster social injustices.

The YWCA, which has a revitalized mission of "eliminating racism, empowering women," has taken data from government sources and uses them to develop a forum to "help,

act and learn.” The national website (www.ywca.org) frequently issues statements and press releases (*Congressional Briefing on Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Girls* as well as *YWCA Survey Reveals Women’s Priorities for New Obama Administration*.) lists fact sheets on violence against women, poverty and welfare reform and education, gives the information of elected officials and current legislative measures concerning women and race. Within local groups, the organization hosts events such as “She Speaks Volumes,” which is “designed to bring attention to the silent injustices facing women everyday” (YWCA, 2007).
Learning...

The suicide of a former student set the tone for the work and every other day I watched Black girls in roundtable discussions speaking for and against Grammy award winning pop icon, 20-year-old, Rihanna²⁴; a protest march in Charlotte for 18-year-old cheerleader Charney Watt²⁵; memorial services for 16-year-old Northern High School student, Mylin Bullock²⁶, the theme of violence and silence tackled me. My approach to this work is personal *and* political²⁷.

Here I revisit the questions, if Black women, Black girls in particular are unheard, who then speaks for them? How are they invited into, or ignored in these discourses? How

²⁴ Rihanna was alleged attacked by pop icon boyfriend, Chris Brown. As of March 31, 2009, a criminal investigation is underway. Rihanna and Brown were 20 and 19-years-old at the time of the initial report.

²⁵ As of March 12, 2009, the 18-year-old boyfriend of Charney Watt has been charged with her death.

²⁶ As of March 23, 2009, the 32-year-old stepfather of Mylin Bullock has been charged with her death.

²⁷ A widely expressed idea throughout feminism taken from an essay renamed, “The Political is Personal” by Carol Hanisch, 1969.

is language employed and manipulated to represent them, specifically through image and voice?

During the infancy of this project, I had a very focused view of how to present the voices of Black adolescent females. I thought if I simply transcribed them, they would stand on their own, “speak” for themselves, not realizing I was dropping them in a vacuum filled with too many unknowns, myths and assumptions. I could not rest on my position as a Black woman, *formerly a Black girl*, to simply “know” and re/present these stories; I had to provide a context in which their stories could become as urgent to others as they are to me. I remember sitting in the Black Feminist Theory course, less than one year ago wondering, what would my approach to life be like if I’d known earlier of the collected strength of women who looked like me, talked like me and fought *for* me.

I began to work from the fundamental understanding that the traditional approach to addressing the needs of Black adolescent females in research has been grossly deficient. Evans-Winters (2005) claims that most researchers use the basic “who, what, when, why and where?” questions and this approach emphasizes the production of meaning and how the production of everyday life is accomplished. For this thesis, I had to move past the basic questions as well as beyond my own assumptions. I began to understand that it is not just the government sources which are speaking for Black girls, but there have been many long-standing organizations that nurture and highlight their lives and experiences.

I dug deeper to find countless pockets of non-profit foundations, think-tanks, artist communities, anthologies and academic educators who adopted personal projects to advocate for Black girls, mostly from women who came to this work from the same position as I (eg. Henry, 1995; Evans-Winters, 2005; BWBG, 2009). Some projects were parts of larger

foundations while others were self-sustained organizations that have existed for five or more years. I found smaller pockets of when and where this work specifically enters the middle and high school classrooms. I revisit the position that if school is an institution for socialization, including identity and personal agency, advocacy work must take place within its structure as well as without. Most of what I found on the whole was housed in social science, clinical and development studies and cultural studies. This thesis is an investment of their voices in education. It is an invitation for them to enter the dominant discourse.

*Openings*²⁸

Outside of the data that focus on pregnancy, single-family homes and dropout rates, substantial arguments have been made on the behalf of the academic and mental health stability of Black girls. However, they most often serve as a comparative “minority” by either race or gender. Both qualitative and quantitative methods of extracting “stories” should be examined to identify Black girls as a distinct group on their own terms (Henry, 1995). In nearly all of the studies I found, even those dated 2008, the research statistic and correlations did not move past 1989. How can measurement tools and spaces be created by the honest voices of those in society who are traditionally represented by numbers and stereotypes? This answer is transformative not only for the lives of the girls but the expectations of those who interact with them. If the research, which informs teaching practice, curriculum and policy, is clothed in a deficient paradigm (Henry, 1995), how then can student achievement be stimulated? When society operates from these normative models, the power and agency of Black girls is bound to only wring out “exceptions.”

²⁸ Glesne (1997) writes, “conclusions suggests an ending, a linear progression that can be resolved in some neat way. I see no conclusions here, but rather *openings*” (p. 218).

This thesis asserts the language and style of Black girls to tell their own stories. They are in charge of the manipulation and representation. It is important to acknowledge that while the expressive oral traditions of these girls reflect cultural mores of mutuality, reciprocity, spirituality, deference, responsibility and language interactions (King & Mitchell, 1990), Black girls' stories are not just for Black girls. The articulation and interpretation of their circumstances serve as models to be transmitted through society. Sociologist and educator, Gloria Joseph (1995) writes:

In the struggle to ensure that the young be allowed to learn accurate and inclusive history of African Americans, Asian Americans, Chicanos, Native Americans, Puerto Ricans, women of all groups, and the history of menial-jobs-working-class people, we will necessarily be informing ourselves and others of what that history is, how it shaped our present, and how those who came before us have struggled to create necessary change.

This position, as well as the aim of this thesis, aligns itself with the belief that we still need to hear about how inclusion of diverse voices changes the nature of intimacy and how we see the world (hooks, 2003).

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