Extending the Conversation

“Inducing Colored Sisters of Other Places to Imitate Their Example”: Connecting Historic Literary Societies to a Contemporary Writing Group

Gholnecsar E. Muhammad

It may not be generally known, that a society of colored females has been organized in this city, bearing the title of the Female Literary Association of Philadelphia. The advantages resulting from such combinations are immense, and the extension of the knowledge of their existence beneficial, with a hope that it may interest their friends and induce our colored sisters in other places to imitate their example, I have thought proper to send this information.

In the “Miscellaneous” section of the December 3, 1831, newspaper, *The Liberator*, a writer, Azile, wrote the proclamation above to express the progress of the Female Literary Association of Philadelphia, an African American female literary society developed in 1831. The goal of the message too was to *induce* or persuade other women of color to develop their own literary societies—to benefit their intellectual and literacy development. More than 180 years later, a group of young women of color gathered in a literacy collaborative toward the same ends. During four weeks in the summer, I developed a literacy collaborative for eight African American adolescent girls ages 12–17 at a large, urban, Midwestern university. This was the second writing group I led for girls with an environment reflective of African American literary societies of the mid- to late nineteenth century. We called each other “Sister Author” because historically African American writers referred to each other as “Brother” or “Sister.” The name “Sister Author” also reminded us of our purpose to write during the literacy collaborative. We came together for four weeks, three days per week, three hours per day to read texts and write across representations of our lives. The girls stated
that they wanted to participate because they desired to write, but they also wanted to know if the stories of other Black girls were similar to their own.

I examined the instructional conditions of the summer literacy collaborative that led to the writings from the girls. These contextual components of the writing group can be useful in thinking about and designing instruction to prepare and support English education teachers. The instructional conditions can also affect pedagogy in English education spaces, informing the process of writing as well as learning ways to improve and advance products of writing.

African American Adolescent Girls’ Writings

Before exploring why the study of historical texts was critical to this project, I found it necessary to review research on the tensions that Black girls have to negotiate and mediate their identities and public perceptions through acts of writing. From studying research related to the histories, identities, and literacies of young girls, my goal was to construct a space where they would be able to openly write about their lives to draw meaning of their identities. The focus on identity was grounded in research that speaks to the need for legitimate spaces for girls to negotiate and mediate who they are and public perceptions of Black girlhood (Boston & Baxley, 2007; Brooks, Browne, & Hampton, 2008; Brooks, Sekayi, Savage, Waller, & Picot, 2010; Gibson, 2010; Henry, 1998, 2001; Muhammad, 2012; Richardson, 2002; Sutherland, 2005; Winn, 2010; Wissman, 2009).

A few of the studies focusing on the literacies and identities of African American girls examined the contextual variables supporting the writing event. Wissman’s (2008) work with an elective class of teenage girls of color suggests that writing is supported when there is a reading-writing relationship. The class was centered on reading the works of African American women writers along with the girls’ strong desire to write about critical issues in their lives. To support the writing environment for the class, Wissman used poetry as authorial mentors or mentor texts. The participants read diverse literature from mentor writers such as Margaret Walker, Maya Angelou, June Jordan, Nikki Giovanni, Sonia Sanchez, and Ruth Forman. These texts supported the young writers as they wrote to self-express their identities. Introducing their appeal to write within this space, two of the teenage girls in the study 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 girls wrote about and resisted the “scarcity of opportunities” for expression in schools and the problem of “trying to make a way” or represent themselves among dominant discourses.

Stone (2005) also used mentor texts (children’s literature) with an African American adolescent girl, who wanted to reappropriate a Cinderella text through her retelling of the story. The girl in the study kept a similar plot of the traditional children’s tale, yet infused the story with representations of her life. 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 called “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.

A similar recontextualization occurred in Winn’s (2011, 2013) literacy collaborative involving Black teenage girls who engaged in the pursuits of discussion, playwriting, and performance during various stages of the writing process. The student artists, as the girls are referred to in the study, drew from experiences from being incarcerated and in foster care systems to write and perform their identities. They recontextualized “living texts” or their worlds as text as they used personal experiences to write out literary works.

Annette Henry’s (1998) inquiry with a reading/writing program involving African Caribbean girls is the most closely related to the present study. Henry designed a program for youth to write to make sense of and represent their voices. A safe space was created for the girls to address pressing issues of concern in their lives. The researcher created forums for discussion, engaged the girls in culturally responsive curricula, and included reading texts to support thinking and writing. Henry allowed the histories, identities, and discussions from the girls to direct the next piece of text selected to read. Her research continued the work set forth early by literary society members to open up discursive spaces for young women to self-express who they are through literacy.

These studies suggest that writing texts gives African American adolescent girls the tools to support, disrupt, and transform fixed discourses and may help conceptualize self-representations. In addition, instructional supports
in the environment such as student choice in writing, use of multiple literacies, and writing to define self are crafted in the environment to enable their writing. This line of work aligns with the wider pool of studies examining how adolescents (of various ethnicities and gender) write to represent their lives with the “mentorship” of literature (Bean, Valerio, Senior, & White, 1997; Gomes & Carter, 2010; Jocson, 2006; Tatum & Gue, 2010).

Preparing for the Literacy Collaborative

Social science research within the fields of psychology and sociology has strongly centered on physical or pathological characterizations of African American girls such as beauty, body, skin color, and pathologies related to violence, aggression, sexual diseases, or mental health issues. Such descriptions alone have the potential to offer single or incomplete stories of their lives, failing to tell the much wider and complex stories of girls (Muhammad, 2015).

Writing to represent a wide variety of self-manifestations has been observed in the literary works of African American woman writers across time, including young Black women in literary societies of the nineteenth century (Foster, 1993; McHenry, 2002; Royster, 2000; Wall, 2005; Washington, 1987, 1990). That is, African American women also expressed multiple identities and often wrote to counter false narratives of Black womanhood that had been written about them. They sought to know themselves and crafted “writing identities” that then supported the means for them to write themselves into a literary presence (Foster, 1993; Muhammad, 2012; Royster, 2000; Stover, 2005). Writing was a sociopolitical tool. It was a form of claiming authority or power over narratives told about one’s identity from politics and engaging in resistance (de Hernandez, Dongala, Jolaosho, & Serafin, 2010). Royster (2000) writes about writing as a sociopolitical tool by stating, “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).

With this perspective, the literacy collaborative in the study embodies the framework of African American literary societies of the 1800s. These societies emerged as gender-specific spaces in the early 1800s for African American males and then young women created spaces of their own (McHenry, 2002). The girls’ writing group started in a similar fashion. Three years prior, the same university campus hosted an African American writing institute for teenage boys. The local community inquired about a similar program for Black girls and it was subsequently developed.
To understand historical Black women’s writing groups of the past prior to the current inquiry, I conducted ethno-historical research (Muhammad, under review) using cultural anthropological (Bernard, 2000; Brettell, 2000) and grounded theory approaches (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) examining historical artifacts written during the 1800s to understand, What did literary societies look like? How did literary society members define literacy? What types of literacy experiences did they engage in? To what ends did they write? To gain a greater understanding of these questions, I studied writings published in historic newspapers such as Freedom’s Journal, Colored American, Genius of Universal Emancipation, and the Weekly Anglo-African. Other data sources examined included minutes from their formal meetings, announcements, constitutions and preambles, public addresses, and various literary writings produced by members as a result of their participation. I also studied the writings of key researchers, Dorothy Porter (1936, 1995) and Elizabeth McHenry (2002) who were instrumental in unraveling documents from these historic spaces.

I discovered that African American literary societies embodied greater goals than just developing independent reading and writing skills. They met regularly in educative spaces (i.e., churches, auditoriums, classrooms) to engage in multiple acts of literacy (i.e., reading, writing, debating, lecturing, publication, critique) in efforts to make sense of their identities, improve their intellectual development to incite new thought, and gain print authority or the ability to use language as a tool to exert their voices and ideals (Muhammad, 2014). Young women of these societies met regularly and engaged in reading and writing text across the disciplines to excite their interests and stimulate their minds to think about, interpret, and evaluate significant issues. Writing and publication were critical components of their literacy development and a larger goal in these spaces.

The goals and pursuits of African American female literary societies are best captured in an artifact published in the “Ladies Department” column of the Liberator on June 30, 1832. This column is prefaced with a kneeling woman with the captioned words, “Am I not a Woman and a Sister?” (see Figure 1). The image depicts an appeal for social justice and change. It became a part of the heading for this section of the newspaper. Moreover, this image is representative of the history of African American women using their pens to push back on images and print that projected false representations of their lives. Their writings became vehicles for intellectualism, activism, and social advocacy (Waters & Conaway, 2007). This image also connects to the immense desire for social justice and to have their voices heard, and not allowing others to speak for them.
Muhammad > Connecting Historic Literary Societies

Following the captioned image are written details of the literacy enactments described by William Garrison, editor of The Liberator, from a visit to one of the society’s weekly meetings. Garrison described the members of the society as having “moral worth, just refinement, and large intelligence.” He goes on to explain that they met on Tuesday evenings to engage in literary pursuits, which are acts of literacy that included reading, writing, and speaking, toward ends of mental discipline and intellectual development. One of the literary pursuits Garrison described is the process of critiquing and revising written drafts. He explained that the young women would write often and put their writings anonymously in a box to be critiqued by other members. The Female Literary Association of Philadelphia, like similar
groups, also crafted preambles to introduce themselves and their purposes of reading and writing to the world. The preamble stated:

Conscious that among the various pursuits that have engaged the attention of mankind in the different eras of the world, none have ever been considered by persons of judgment and penetration, as superior to the cultivation of the intellectual powers bestowed upon us by the God of nature. It therefore becomes a duty incumbent upon us as women, as daughters of a despised race, to use our utmost endeavors to enlighten the understanding, to cultivate the talents entrusted to our keeping, that by so doing, we may in a great measure, break down the strong behavior of prejudice, and raise ourselves to an equality with those of our fellow beings, who differ from us in complexion, but who are with ourselves, children of one Eternal Parent, and by his immutable law, we are entitled to the same rights and privileges; therefore, we, whose names are hereunto subscribed, do agree to form ourselves into a society for the promotion of this great object, to be called “The Female Literary Association of Philadelphia.”

The language expressed in the preamble further shows their inherent desire to use their pens to advocate for their rights and the rights of other sisters. They knew that to empower their lives during oppressive times they must claim authority over language and put their writings on display for the world to read. The underlying messages in this preamble are similar to the preamble written by the girls in the current study and the preamble written by girls in a previous summer literacy collaborative (Muhammad, 2012).

A close examination of practices within literary societies further helped to frame the literacy collaborative in the study, and I used 10 framings going into the collaborative with the girls (Muhammad, 2015):

1. Literacy would be defined in the cognitive sense, as skills and intellectual exercises and as social and cultural practices.
2. Participants of different literacy abilities and ages would come together to write.
5. Participants would be called Sister Authors.
4. Instruction would be responsive to the lives of the participants.
5. Enabling texts 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.
9. Participants would learn how to claim authority in language.
10. Identity and representation would be enmeshed in the content of texts.

These frames are indicative of best practices in English language arts instruction and adolescent literacy. For example, when comparing this list with two National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) policy and position statements from the past 10 years, there is a stark resemblance to the framings gleaned from literary societies. In the 2004 document “NCTE Beliefs about the Teaching of Writing,” 11 points are made regarding the nature of literacy and writing pedagogy. In Table 1, I compare these points with the historical findings with examples of the contextual variables I examine in this study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NCTE Beliefs about the Teaching of Writing (2007)</th>
<th>Historical Framings of Literacy in 1800s Literary Societies</th>
<th>Contextual Variables Enacted and Examined in the Study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Everyone has the capacity to write, writing can be taught, and teachers can help students become better writers.</td>
<td>Literary societies were developed to nurture African American literacy development.</td>
<td>A summer literacy collaborative (writing group) was established to advance the identities and literacies of girls.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People learn to write by writing.</td>
<td>Literacy was historically defined as an intellectual endeavor.</td>
<td>The researcher, who was the teacher/facilitator, wrote alongside the other Sister Authors.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Writing is a process.</td>
<td>Writing in literary societies occurred within a process of establishing a literary presence, engaging in literary pursuits, and establishing literary character. (Muhammad, 2012)</td>
<td>The collaborative followed a pedagogical routine.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing is a tool for thinking.</td>
<td>Participants would be encouraged to think about text in critical ways.</td>
<td>The Sister Authors had freedom to write openly without censorship.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Writing grows out of many different purposes.</td>
<td>A central purpose for literacy instruction would be to teach the importance of reclaiming authority in language.</td>
<td>Sister Authors were encouraged to write to define and represent self as a purpose for writing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conventions of finished and edited texts are important to readers and therefore to writers.</td>
<td>Writing would be collaborative and a space would be created for participants to share ideas.</td>
<td>Sisters Authors critiqued and offered feedback to each other’s writings.</td>
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Table 1. Comparison of Literacy Enactments to NCTE Beliefs about the Teaching of Writing

continued on next page
Writing and reading are related. | Enabling texts would be central to all instructional support; literary society members read and wrote different types of texts. | Sisters Authors used mentor texts to support writing. 
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Writing has a complex relationship to talk. | Writing would be collaborative and a space would be created for participants to share ideas. | Sisters Authors discussed the literature read and topics we were planning to write about. Sisters Authors shared our writings with other Sister Authors. 
---|---|---
Literate practices are embedded in complicated social relationships. | Literacy would be defined in the cognitive sense, as reading and writing skills and as social and cultural practices. | The collaborative focused on identity and representation. The participants wrote with other Sister Authors of different ages, grades, and experiences. 
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Composing occurs in different modalities and technologies. | Writing would be collaborative and a space would be created for participants to share ideas; literary society members published original writings through newsprint, public addresses, pamphlets, and books. | Sisters Authors used technology to research and write. 
---|---|---
Assessment of writing involves complex, informed, human judgment. | Writing would be collaborative and a space would be created for participants to share ideas; literary society members critiqued each other’s writings. | Sisters Authors critiqued each other’s writings and gave feedback using a rubric. The Sister Authors had a visit from a published writer where they critiqued and discussed the author’s work. 

In addition to the “NCTE Beliefs about the Teaching of Writing” (2004) statement, an NCTE policy brief on adolescent literacy (2007) further supports historical protocols on the teaching and engagement of reading and writing. This report outlines a shift of literacy demands for adolescent literacy, calling for an advanced and more complex degree of text read and writing tasks. In both literary societies and the girls’ writing group, the writers were given complex text, often found on college reading lists. They were asked to write literary and informational genres for writing to define their lives. The second stipulation in the policy brief states, adolescent literacy is social, drawing from various discourse communities in and out of school. Similarly, in history and within the writing group, the writers had to think across their cultural identities incorporating beliefs related to who they are. As I designed the writing group, I had a keen awareness that the identities of African American girls are not held in a single story of who they are. They instead draw upon multiple social discourse communities that they identify
with to make sense of their lives. Their writings became a reflection of this. Stipulation three marks the importance of motivation in reading and writing practices. To engage the girls in the study, I asked the girls to write openly. I did not tell the girls what to write or prompt them toward any type of theme. The freedom of choice was one motivation, as was the unique space of writing with girls from various communities—something the girls have never experienced prior to the summer group. Literary societies were also created as a space where members could express themselves freely. The last stipulation calls for adolescents to see the value of their cultures in literacy learning. This links back to developing a collaborative space for girls to read stories of Black women and to share their own stories with each other. African American girls do not have many opportunities to read and write literature related to their Black female identities in English education classrooms.

Instructional Plans of the Writing Group

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 self-representations. During the collaborative each Sister Author, including myself, wrote a personal narrative, two poems, a short story, a short essay, and an open letter to other girls. Literature acted as mentor texts for our writings.

I used mentor texts from authors Harriet Jacobs (*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*), Gwendolyn Brooks (*To Black Women; To Those of My Sisters Who Kept Their Naturals Never to Look a Hot Comb in the Teeth*), Dorothy West (*For Richer, the Poorer*), Sharon Flake (*Who Am I without Him? Short Stories about Girls and the Boys in Their Lives, “The Ugly One”*), Ebony Wilkins (*Sell Out*), Anna Julia Cooper (*The Status of Women in America*), and Sister Authors from the 2010 summer literacy collaborative. I sought to capture a full range of African American female writers to show that our writings were ongoing and writing may create a larger capacity for future writers (Tatum & Gue, 2012). In addition, the girls also read nonprint sources to support print materials, including Daphne S. Valerius’s documentary clip *The Souls of Black Girls*, various poetry slams on YouTube by Black adolescent girls, and images of African American women and girls represented in media outlets. Mentor texts show strong examples of a particular form, style, structure, or content. They assist writers in crafting their own pieces. I selected 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 identity
3. Was in response to some of the dialogue that occurred during the literacy collaborative

Each lesson began with the girls collectively reciting a preamble that they wrote during the first day. This was intentional, as preambles have served to be a literary incitement of African American literary societies. Without showing the girls the preamble of other literary societies of the past, they collaboratively constructed and organized the thoughts they wanted to stand and recite each day. They were asked to think about their identities and the purpose their writing. Together, they wrote:

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

Depending on the weekday, the recitation was followed by reading a brief biography of the featured mentor author, reading and discussing mentor texts, writing, sharing and critiquing writings, and writing again.

In a sample lesson during week two when writing poetic broadsides, I introduced the girls to several short excerpts of writings by Black women that were embedded with political messages, self-advocacy, or social activism. This was used to teach the genre of broadside poetry as they are commonly referred to as protest or political poetry (Reid, 2002). We read from the 1867 Address to the First Annual Meeting of the American Equal Rights Association by Sojourner Truth, the 1918 poem “The Heart of a Woman” by Georgia Douglas Johnson, the 1928 autobiographical account How It Feels to Be Colored Me by Zora Neale Hurston, “I Am a Black Woman” (1970) by Mari Evans, and Maya Angelou’s “Phenomenal Woman” written in 1995. After this, we engaged in a brief study of the writing life of our central mentor text author, Gwendolyn Brooks. Because I sought to teach the girls why writers write (outside of school-sanctioned writing), I offered quotes and interviews with Brooks talking about writing. We then read two of her
poems. We discussed and interpreted the poetry and began to write our own poems. After we wrote a draft, I put my writing on display for other Sister Authors to critique and offer feedback to help advance my writing, and each girl subsequently did the same. After the Sister Authors gave me feedback, I crafted my final poem. 

Sharing my writing for critique was one way to help the girls feel comfortable with sharing their pieces. In previous studies, I found that students rarely get the opportunity to write with and critique the writings of their teachers (Muhammad, 2012). Sharing and feedback helped the girls to improve writing proficiency.

Benefits of the Literacy Collaborative

For the current inquiry, part of a larger case study, I analyzed the writing environment to understand, *Which contextual factors within a literacy collaborative contributed to the writings of adolescent girls?* While the larger case study allowed me to examine what they wrote about, this inquiry helped me to understand the specific supports they benefited from which led to their writings. To respond to the question, I extracted interview data with the girls where I asked them to discuss aspects of the literacy collaborative that helped them to write.

I asked the girls about 14 specific practices used within the collaborative:

1. the focus on representation;
2. using text as models to our writing;
3. discussing topics in the literature read or topics we were planning to write about;
4. using technology for access to the Internet and word processing;
5. publically sharing writings with other participants;
6. critiquing other participants’ writings and giving feedback;
7. writing different types of texts (personal narratives, poetry, short story/fiction, informational, letter);
8. visit from a published Sister Author;
9. freedom to write openly without censorship;

Sharing and feedback helped the girls to improve writing proficiency.
10. debating;
11. uninterrupted writing time;
12. calling each other Sister Author and learning about Black women writers in the past;
13. having me, as the teacher/facilitator, writing alongside the girls; and
14. learning with participants across ages.

Although literacy research in the field of writing and composition supports several of these variables for advancing writing development, several of these variables (outside of how technology was used) were explicit literary pursuits derived from African American female literary societies of the 1800s. The post-interview questions were framed using these variables, and I analyzed how the Sister Authors addressed each. These variables were also found to advance the writings of adolescents in similar developed literacy collaboratives (Tatum, 2015; Tatum & Gue, 2010).

I compared their interviews, video observations taken each day, and the girls’ writings. I asked the girls to respond to the following questions: (1) *What aspects of the writing group helped you to write in the manner in which you wrote?* (2) *Of the aspects discussed, which did you find most helpful to your writing?* I then asked them to talk about how each of the 14 contextual factors helped them to write and which variables helped them the most in shaping their writings. The girls’ responses to the first question fell within these variables, except three girls also stated that it was helpful to have earplugs, earphones, and girls participating who had come from different environments to write across topics.

Although each of the eight girls found the aspects of the literacy collaborative to be beneficial to their writings, here I present the variables within the literacy collaborative that contributed to the representations written in the girls’ writings that three or more girls felt were most helpful. More than half of the girls commented that the other aspects assisted in the development in their writing. Overall the factors that the girls thought were most helpful for their writings were the following:

- Reading mentor texts
- The freedom to write openly without censorship
- Uninterrupted writing time

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Reading Mentor Texts

Reading mentor texts as models for our writings was reported in the post-activity interviews to be the most beneficial aspect of the literacy collaborative. I was purposeful in text selection because I wanted each text to cultivate their intellect, to help them to think more broadly about selfhood and representations in texts that would help advance their writings. The role of texts as “mentors” to guide and incite thought was instrumental to writing in literary societies. They called these “useful texts” as they were central to helping them write across different topics. In a public address in 1828, William Whipper, one of the founding members of the earliest literary societies, gave details of the text read in literary societies. He suggested that texts were used to “form habits of close and accurate thinking . . . to acquire a facility of classifying and arranging, analyzing, and comparing our ideas on different subjects” (Porter, 1995, p. 110). Texts were used to cultivate both “intellectual competence and artistic sensibility” (McHenry, 2002, p. 105).

The girls reported 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 noted 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 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:

Oh I like the examples 'cause when I see a strong, nice, example that I like, it gets to me and I like to take that and not base my writing on it but think about how they wrote theirs and what made it strong and what about it made me tick. And, I like to put that in my writing. You know, if it made me tick, I mean, I can’t say that everyone else liked it in the same way, but if that piece is beautiful and became famous enough, maybe if I find something great about it in there and try to put it, a little bit of it, in my writing, maybe mine will be awesome.

In the first lines of her piece, 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 experienced, then she could do the same with her writings for others, saying, “maybe mine will be awesome.” This is
evident in the final three lines. 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 a given prompt.

When comparing the interview data to the writing artifacts, I found instances when the girls imitated the writing of the mentor author when they were writing a genre with which they were least familiar. For example, after reading from Maria Stewart’s piece, *Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality, the Sure Foundation on Which We Must Build*, Camille wrote her informational piece (Ode to Our Sisters) with similar content, sharing the use of proclamation, writing about intellect, writing toward an appeal, and rhetorical questioning.

Now is not time to wither away our precious faculties. Many young black women have started the foundation. Now it is time for us to lay the concrete. We must step into the light to be seen, yell from mountaintops of greatness to be heard. Just as our fellow seasoned sisters have done before us. We must let our genius show and stop being afraid of being inadequate. For aren’t we just as exceptional as anyone else? The concrete we lay will be the stepping-stone for those to come later. Just as our past sisters led the way for us, we are obligated to do the same for our younger sisters. Our struggles are immeasurable and that is what makes us beautiful strong women. You are my keeper and I am yours, so be sure that you hold your sisters on the same pedestal you want to be standing on. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder and we are the beholders of not only our future but also of our sisters to come!

Stewart uses language to advocate for other African American women to engage in social responsibility and work toward improving the conditions of their lives and for future generations. Camille similarly positioned her writing to communicate a point that Black girls should advance their intellect. Camille used the mentor text to imitate the writing because she struggled with the writing initially. While both pieces are similar, Camille distinguishes her writing by using strong language to push forth her message.

**Freedom to Write Openly**

The freedom to write openly helped the girls represent themselves in ways they desired, as has been historically true among Black writers. Literary societies were developed with the purpose of being able to read and write without restrictions—to use language in powerful ways to speak their truths. With a history of having their voices silenced, members of literary societies wrote about the pressing issues that were most urgent of their pens. *Freedom’s Journal*, the first African American journal, was created to give
Black people a platform to project their voices openly and without apology (Bacon, 2007). In their inaugural issue, editors of the journal (two literary society members) wrote the following: “We wish to plead our own cause. Too long have others spoken for us. Too long has the public been deceived by misrepresentations, in things which concern us dearly.” The writers were purposeful in establishing the means for them to express literary freedom, especially in a backdrop of countless social problems.

Censorship in school emerged several times during the interviews with the girls. They 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. The girls pushed back on the censorship of their writings in classrooms. Several girls said they had the opportunity to select and use the language to help push their content to readers within the literacy collaborative. Sometimes they wrote about controversial issues such as rape, abuse, physical beauty, and racism—writing topics that could be considered controversial. Heather said,

That was good because in school writings, I would want to use certain words. If I didn’t put it there, you wouldn’t get the emphasis. Since we were able to write them in here, I got my point across with as much emphasis as I needed.

Heather said freedom in writing gave her the agency to use the words she desired to push her point or message across to the reader. Similarly, Jasmine said she also was able to select the words that best represented her message. When asked about this, her energy level and tone increased, which spoke to her passion around wanting to be open and unapologetic in her writing.

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

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

**MUHAMMAD:** What would be an example of—

**JASMINE:** Like expressions, expressions. I don’t know. I can’t think of it.

**MUHAMMAD:** What wouldn’t be invited in a school setting to write about who you are?
JASMINE: Like writing about who I am. I have certain opinions and if I stress too much, they will be like “Oh Jasmine, you see ‘this’ will make everyone argue about your writing and we can’t really put this on the wall [of the classroom or in the hallway] ’cause people will start to read it and other teachers will be like, ‘Wow, she posted THAT!’” I remember once we got to write about a topic—about food and girls and how they ate and obesity and a lot of kids got in trouble for writing about some people who feel bad and cope with eating when they feel bad and stuff.

In this interview, 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 particular way. Lily said this to the same question:

I really liked that a lot because now in school I got to choose a topic but if our teacher didn’t like the topic you probably had to change or make changes. This time [in the literacy collaborative] if it was what I wanted to write about, I could write about it.

Similar to Jasmine, Lily 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. She expressed that she was able to write both creatively and freely in expressing her identities in her poem, “A Black Woman’s Crown.” In this piece, she explained to me that she wanted to capture the beauty and essence of the Black woman, a topic that she has not been invited to write about in her schooled experiences so far. In the same interview, she told me that her mother inspired the writing of this piece.

To sit with a crown on your head
Is to claim the world
With a beautiful face
Of brown sugar and rich dark chocolate,
With eyes as dark as night with a spark
That twinkles like the North Star
A crown seems fit
Though others in the world
Try to conspire
Betray and deceive
As though time has stopped
In the days of overthrowing kings and queens
With determination
They try to take your
Throne
It is time, that in spite
Of foolish pursuits
The crown stays upon
The Queen's head
It is a jewel unseen
But known
That is the cause
Of such deceitfulness

In response to this condition of writing openly, 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.”

**Uninterrupted Writing Time**

The third factor that the girls named as most beneficial to representing themselves in their writings was uninterrupted writing time. We spent time writing, editing, and revising our writings. The total uninterrupted writing time for the literacy collaborative was 25 hours and 40 minutes from a total of 33 hours. There was a steady increase in writing each week as the girls became more comfortable with the writing exercises and confident in their work, from just over four hours in week one to seven hours in week four. On average, we had slightly more than two hours of uninterrupted writing time each day and the only time we paused was to talk with one other person about our writing. I wrote alongside the girls and conferenced with the girls individually to check on their writing progress. I encouraged the young writers to do the same with each other.

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. 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 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 artifacts.

From the writing samples of their applications to participate, I found many of the girls entered the collaborative writing about their identities and using writing as a form of social action—that is, writing to question, challenge, and change dominant discourses in society. The girls found the context and instructional practices helped them to write and produce more developed pieces. These were similar to variables that framed 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.

As I continue to work with teachers on writing pedagogy, I am often asked what I did when the girls wrote something “inappropriate.” I always push teachers to unpack “inappropriate.” Several of the girls expressed having their voices suppressed in classroom environments and therefore sacrificed their voices for how their teachers wanted them to write. I wrote openly and encouraged the girls to do the same, yet each day I reminded the girls that writing is an intellectual pursuit. In other words, writing is a high form of communication that requires reading, thinking, seeking, and expressing new knowledge. With this in mind, they consistently wrote in powerful, intellectual ways—to audiences consisting of themselves and audiences of the wider society. Their writings became their voices in print for others to learn about their lives and issues important to them.

One limitation from this study as it relates to implications in classroom spaces is the time we had to write. However, if teachers can carve
out instructional writing time each day of the week, roughly 20 minutes of writing, students are pushed to create revised pieces. Writing time is also contingent upon how one defines writing. Writing time may be spent on planning, critiquing, editing, and revising until each piece is in a polished state.

Importance for Preservice and Inservice English Education

Recently, when teaching an undergraduate teacher preparation course, I was asked by one of the preservice teachers to help her develop a “writing to describe” lesson plan. This became a teachable moment to talk about the writing environment and authentic writing experiences for youth. I answered her request with a simple “no.” But following this, I explained that our knowledge is so vast and cannot be minimized to reductionist lesson plans that fail to advance students’ intellectual writing purposes. We discussed the purposes that authors have when they write, and from my readings about writers and their craft, they write for greater authentic purposes than just describing something. I continued to ask her to think about the last piece she had written (outside of her university coursework) and charged her to think about her identity as a writer. If we want an increased engagement in writing within classrooms, we have to teach preservice teachers to reconceptualize the roles of writing in the lives of adolescent learners. The student and I then worked together to develop a lesson using similar contextual elements from this study. We chose culturally responsive mentor texts and engaged in the same writing we were asking of youth. Rather than English education being subsumed into prompted lesson plans, teachers can see classrooms as literacy collaboratives with a community of writers. Teachers could take the variables discussed in this article, which are related to history and best practices in writing instruction, and use them to frame their own classes.

Although the literacy collaborative in the study took place outside of the classroom, its structural elements can be taken into consideration for classes serving adolescent students. Constructing a preamble helped to establish a community of writers. Rather than writing to meet my standards, the girls thought across their identities and crafted a statement that explains why they write. Students can engage in a similar exercise at the start of the school year and recite it as they begin a new piece of writing. This will connect a community of writers to each other and account for a wider literary history in the country.

The voices of youth are being confined in school yet they would like more independence to find their voices and not write within the confines of prompts, content the teacher expects, or content disconnected from their
real or imagined experiences. When texts and discussion are tied to the writing event, it helps promote a greater sense of thinking, where students can develop uncensored ideas.

Finally, when working with pre- and inservice teachers, I am often asked, *How did you get them to write?* The message underscoring this question is that youth cannot or choose not to write. In my experiences, that is not the case. When an environment is created that has similar components to historical spaces, it creates a space for writing to occur. The uninterrupted writing time offered space for the girls to write, even if it was difficult for them to get started right away. When the girls struggled to write, I used this time to work with them individually. Teachers can also use this time to write their own pieces with the students so they are reminded of the writing process. Although classrooms do not have the schedules that typically permit as much writing time in one sitting, time writing can be spread throughout the weeks of the school year.

"I’m an Author Now"

When I asked Violet how calling each other Sister Author and reading Black women writers of the past affected her writing, she responded with the following:

"The name Sister Author actually made me feel like a true writer so I guess it helped me be more confident in my writing, so like yea “I’m an author now” and learning about the history of African American females in the past helped also. This influenced and gave me an example about how to write and use different techniques."

From the findings of this inquiry and Violet’s words, we learn that there is something worthwhile to be gleaned from history when designing and implementing writing pedagogy in educative spaces today. Designing a writing space grounded in history created opportunities for participants to cultivate writing development. The girls in this study began to think of their identities as writers and connected to a wider and ongoing lineage of authors as surmised in Violet’s interview.

The display of the plurality of their voices also combats narratives of singular portraits of Black girlhood. I found that their writings became mediums for the girls to construct who they are for the benefit of themselves and for others. For an example, one of the Sister Authors, Jasmine, who was 12 years old, wrote the following poem titled “Poet out of Practice, or not” during the first week of the literacy collaborative, asserting expressions of her intellectual identity:

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I don’t prefer poetry
I don’t excel in its practice
But I try
Should I fail, I try again.
I will pry at the closed doors of poetry,
Gain dominance over the gatekeeper that blocks my way
For he defends the room of which I crave access
Cannot let the guard keep me away, let nothing cross my path
I may not be so great now,
But in the end I will prevail
Take the bull by the horns,
Put pen to paper,
And
Write

References


**Gholnecsar E. Muhammad** is an assistant professor at Georgia State University and the 2014 recipient of the National Council of Teachers of English’s Promising Researcher Award. Her research interests are situated in the social and historical foundations of literacy development among African Americans and writing pedagogy.