In light of the current assaults on Black girls and misaligned instructional practices in and outside of schools across the nation, English educators need to understand a more complete vision of the identities girls create for themselves, and the literacies and practices needed to best teach them. This article provides a review of literature of Black girl literacies by examining historical, theoretical, and empirical research conducted across the past several decades. These literatures are organized into themes and threads that help to illustrate the pedagogies for English educators of Black girls. The authors provide implications for literacy practice, policy, and research that center Black girls’ ways of knowing and suggest a Black girls’ literacies framework as an impetus for English teaching and teacher education.

Introduction

“I speak for the colored women of the South, because it is there that the millions of blacks in this country have watered the soil with blood and tears, and it is there too that the colored woman of America has made her characteristic history and there her destiny is evolving.”

—Anna Julia Cooper, Women’s Cause Is One and Universal

On May 18, 1893, Dr. Anna Julia Cooper, a teacher, school leader, social justice activist, scholar, public intellectual, and leader for the human rights of African American people, delivered a public address at the World’s Congress of Representative Women meeting in Chicago on the progress of African American women since formalized enslavement. In this speech, Cooper eloquently called for the educational and social advancement of Black women and girls by speaking to the unique oppressions thrust upon Black women in the United States. She called attention to the idiosyncratic histories of Black women in comparison to other populations. Being what
she named “doubly enslaved” left Black women in a space of suffering, struggle, and silence, and consequently their stories had been unwritten or incomplete. In response, she made an appeal, speaking for the “colored woman” in the South who arguably had received the most detrimental assaults without receiving the much deserved triumphs or liberation, for the full liberation of Black women—all women—and, thus, all of humanity. In other words, she invoked, if we respond to the needs of Black women, all of humanity benefits. If we focus on excellent educational pedagogies for Black women and girls, given their distinct oppressive histories, then Black women lay the foundation for advancing education for all. She contended that it is through Black women that larger social, economic, and civic progress can be measured and advanced (Moody-Turner, 2009).

Cooper made a similar assertion in her touchstone text, *A Voice from the South* (1988), published just a year earlier. In this important theoretical and political work, she centered the racialized, politicized, and gendered voice of Black women and called for advocacy and change for all through Black women who have the positionality of being both Black and female—two groups in the complex social dynamics of the United States who have been historically neglected, marginalized, and underserved in educative settings (May, 2007). Like in her public address, here she also advocated for the more complete vision of Black women and girls to have a more complete vision of humanity. Cooper posited that when Black women and girls are positioned as less than, the social upward progress of society remains stagnant and moribund. She metaphorically explains this by describing a body (or humanity) with one eye bandaged (neglect of the Black woman). When the bandage is removed, the body is “filled with light” and is more complete and “every member rejoices in it” or benefits (Cooper, 1988, p. 122).

Cooper’s historical description of humanity and the neglect of Black women also apply in the context of seeing the wider identities and literacies of Black girls in educative settings today. There is a strong need to not only widen the pedagogical approaches we use to teach and learn alongside of them but to also use the ways they enact literacies as the impetus to respond to the literacy development of other groups of youth. Cooper’s focus on racism and sexism, juxtaposed with what is now occurring in the world with Black girls in and outside of schools, offers space for a critical analysis on how to advance progress within instruction. Multiple injustices and misrepresentations continue to be projected on Black girls despite the passage of more
than 100 years since Cooper’s time. These injustices and misrepresentations signify an urgent need for educators to understand intersections of Black girls’ histories, identities, and literacies.

**Purpose of Literature Review**

In light of the current and ongoing assaults on Black girls and the damaging instructional practices in and outside of schools across the nation, literacy educators must understand a more complete vision of the identities girls create for themselves, and the literacies and practices needed to best teach them. These assaults have been in the form of physical violence on the bodies of Black girls and academic wrongs that have positioned them as less than or have focused on pathologies rather than the intellectual promise they carry (see Sealey-Ruiz’s discussion of these assaults in the introduction for this special issue). In either case, Black girls’ narratives have been falsified or incompletely told (Muhammad, 2015a). Scholars have called for the need to center Black girls in literacy research by speaking to the invisibility of girls in schools, classrooms, and research literature (Evans-Winters, 2005; Henry, 1998a), the ways in which they are misrepresented and dehumanized in the public media (Muhammad & McArthur, 2015), and the disconnect between their lives and interests with sanctioned curriculum (Jeffries & Jeffries, 2013). While writing among these problems, researchers have pointed to the intricacies of Black girlhood and how their literacies are deeply complex and the need to center their ways of knowing and being in the world (Haddix, 2015; Womack, 2013).

This literature review responds to these issues by providing a synthesis of research and scholarship involving Black girls’ literacies in the areas of reading, writing, language, and cultural studies. However, as a starting point, we move beyond traditional notions of literacy to intentionally frame Black girls’ epistemologies as plural and multiple. In this work, we take a multiliteracies approach to underscore an understanding of Black girls’ literacies as multidimensional, layered, nuanced, and complex. In addition, we draw from the ways in which Black women have historically conceptualized and engaged in literacies. We examine historical, theoretical, and empirical scholarship written across the past several decades. Specifically, we emphasize the purposes of literacies connected to aims of reclaiming the authority to represent the self and toward societal transformation and community enrichment (Sule, 2015). For Black girls and women, literacy enactments not only enable learning how to read print but also how to read the social context and environments.
The purpose of this literature review is to provide the field of English and literacy education with direct implications for literacy practice, policy, and research that center Black girls’ ways of knowing. What follows is first a theoretical grounding of Black girls’ literacies in Black womanist epistemologies and Black feminist thought. Then we discuss our methodology for identifying literature for this review. What we undertake is the first occasion of a synthesis of research literature about the literacy teaching and practices of Black girls and women in English and literacy research. We organize the scholarship reviewed into focal areas of literacies to illustrate the pedagogies and curricular choices for English educators of Black girl youth in and outside of classrooms. We end this review by offering a Black girls’ literacies framework as an impetus for research, teaching, and teacher education. This framework responds to aspects of criticality, history, theory, and practice within educative spaces to build language and literacy for all students. As Black women scholars and teacher educators who engage Black girls in ongoing literacy collectives, we found it vital to engage in this synthesis not only to provide more insight into the literate lives of Black girls but to also inform scholars, teachers, and teacher educators about ways to engage Black girls in schools and classrooms. Thus, our exhaustive review of literacy and language scholarship is a productive starting point for beginning to document Black girls’ literacies to present a broad look into the field of literacy and English education.

For Colored Girls: Black Womanist Epistemologies of the Past and toward the Future

“If he ever listened to poor colored women the world would be a different place, I can tell you.”

—Alice Walker, The Color Purple, pp. 199–200

In Alice Walker’s The Color Purple (1992), she tells a story of the intimate and sisterly relationships between the female characters, Celie, Nettie, Sofia, Squeak, and Shug Avery. The “mules of the world,” as writer Zora Neale Hurston (1990) defined the plight of Black women, the women of The Color Purple cared for and loved on one another within and beyond the crevices and crawlspace of their lives—the spaces and moments where they rendered themselves and each other visible, worthy, and human. We are inspired by the musings of writers such as Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston because in their narratives of Black girls and women’s lives we witness an intentional naming and claiming of the multiplicity and complexities of Black girlhood and womanhood. Their writings demand the seeing and knowing of Black
Muhammad and Haddix  > Centering Black Girls’ Literacies

girls and women’s lives in varied and heterogeneous ways while at the same
time calling for a collective vision and aspiration for their humanity.

In preparing for the review that follows, we returned to the intel-
lectual strivings and complex nature of Black intellectual thought and the
specific scholarly contributions of Black women thinkers and theorists both
historically and contemporaneously. The theories embodied by Dr. Anna Ju-
lia Cooper provided an early model for Black feminist thought (Giles, 2006;  
May, 2007) and this theoretical tradition has been expanded and translated
for different generations of Black woman thinkers. In her exploration of the
theoretical and political contributions of Cooper, May (2007) shows how
across six decades of work, Cooper traced historical silences of Black feminist
thought and delineated the workings of power and inequality in an array of
contexts, from science to literature, economics to popular culture, religion
to the law, education to social work, and from the political to the personal.
Cooper envisioned a radical methodology for Black women to declare when
and where they enter in a society that marginalized their existence. Cooper
is often critiqued for having a defiant philosophy and posture of dissent, but
May (2007) and Giles (2006) offer new ways of interpreting Cooper’s vision-
ary politics and her intellectual standpoint. When Black women exhibit a
critical consciousness and voice their politics, a dominant positioning of
their identities is antagonistic, defiant, and even dangerous. A Black femi-
nist stance requires an active counternarrating of Black girls and women’s
intellectual activities.

Cooper’s work underscores the importance of Black women’s self-
definition. Informed by this declaration and underlining the concept of a
standpoint epistemology, Collins (2000) argues that Black women have a
self-defined standpoint that is situated within a “both/and” conceptual ori-
entation. The idea of “both/and” represents the experience of Black women
who stand simultaneously as members of the Black race and members of
a gender group; this orientation of standing with and yet apart from both
groups forms the core of Black women’s consciousness. This epistemology
acknowledges that Black women have access, or dual allegiances, to both Af-
rocentric and feminist traditions. A standpoint epistemology, then, becomes
a critical stance taken by Black women who have particular ways of knowing
and seeing reality from multiple locations. Black womanist epistemologies
can at times stand between oppositional ideas of Black intellectual thought
and Black feminist thought.¹ Further, prevailing ideas position research
about Black girls and women to be situated among cohorts of the opposite
gender or members of other races, perpetuating a narrow and monolithic
treatment of Black girlhood. In response to challenges toward her preroga-
tive to conduct research exploring the educational experiences of Black girls and women, Henry (1995) writes,

I am beleaguered with the following questions: Why only Black women? (not an issue when a privileged group does research on Black people). Why are there no White women in your research cohort? Why not also Black men? Are you implying that only Black women can teach Black children? Why are you concerned solely with the education of Black children in a multicultural society? . . . How can Black women be a research cohort? How can one possibly collect valid data without a “control” group like Black men or White women? (p. 210)

A standpoint epistemology answers such questions and places the responsibility of interrogation and self-representation within the hands of Black women. Collins (2000) defines Black feminist thought as the kinds of knowledge and experiences that Black girls and women bring to their lived experiences, and in the case of the work we’ve reviewed, their literacy practices. Black women define their standpoint based on the intersection of their consciousness and lived experiences. The dimensions of this epistemology, defined by Collins, include (a) concrete experience as a criterion of meaning, (b) the use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims, (c) the ethic of caring, and (d) the ethic of personal accountability. In elaborating on these dimensions as the basis of a culturally relevant pedagogy, Ladson-Billings (1995) reiterates that only Black women can truly know what it means to be Black women; talking with and for each other, Black women construct meaning from experiences of self-discovery and self-definition; the ethic of caring is central to Black women’s lives and scholarship; and knowledge claims must be grounded in individuality.

Several key assumptions underlie this review of the literature. First, underpinning this review is the assumption that Black girls can know; simply stated, they have a voice. Black girls are generators and producers of knowledge, but this knowledge has been historically silenced by a dominant, White patriarchal discourse. Second, this review assumes that Black girls exhibit philosophies and practices that are distinguished from those of other groups. Third, Black girls represent two marginalized groups based on race and gender; however, this location cannot be simplified or generalized. The study of and with Black girls is complex. Though this review acknowledges that race matters, we emphasize the position of being both Black and female; thus, an intersectional lens is required to understand the literacy experiences of Black girls.

We also take particular care to acknowledge the fluidity and multiplicity of Black girls’ experiences and identities while at the same time we rely on
these differences and intricacies to define Black girls’ literacies. The current literature review is largely informed by the voices of Black girls today who are negotiating existing and new identities. We draw on twenty-first-century Black feminist/womanist traditions that encapsulate hip-hop feminisms, crunk feminisms, and Afro-futurism (see Durham, Cooper, & Morris, 2013; Love, 2012; Morgan, 1999; Morris, 2013; Pough, 2002). We also turn to new media platforms for Black girls and women in which they enact and document self-defined identities, including social media, blogs and websites, web series and YouTube channels, Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter. In an example of articulating an intersectional feminism through social media, 17-year-old actress Amandla Stenberg represents a generation of Black feminists who defy categorization and definition and interrupt the persistent assaults on Black girls’ lives and identities. In a Snapchat video, the actress recently came out as a Black, bisexual woman and discussed how she knows how deeply bruising it is to try to fight against one’s identity, indicting society for the wage against Black girls’ self-definition and visibility. Her feminism harkens back to the “defiant” and “oppositional” standpoint epistemology of Anna Julia Cooper; from the nineteenth century to today, Black women are refusing others’ claims on what it means to be Black girls and women. Extending Cooper’s stance, Black girls and Black women determine when and where they enter.

**Literature Review Methodology**

To collect literatures for this review, we sought empirical studies on the multiple literacies of Black girls that lend themselves to practice in English education classrooms. Multiple literacies include the diverse modes of communication and ways of knowing and sense-making that youth practice in and outside of school, which include broad categories of reading, writing, language, embodied literacies, and literature. Often, we found that researchers engaged youth in multilayered literacies while examining a specific literacy practice. Our goal was to understand the literacy practices that are both informed by intellectual traditions and privilege Black girls’ literacies. We relied on several electronic databases such as ERIC, JSTOR, Psyc Info, CSA Illumina Social Sciences, Sage Premier, Web of Science, and Wiley Interscience journals to gather articles for review. The terms “African American,” “Black,” “girl,” and “literacy” were central search terms used to explore studies. In addition, we searched terms that were synonymous to these and sought articles on a variety of literacies (i.e., reading, writing, performing, thinking, etc.). We included empirical articles from fields of
education, sociology, psychology, and anthropology and depended on key, peer-reviewed literacy journals in our search. Additionally, we reviewed conceptual and theoretical articles written by scholars to further highlight and illustrate the synthesis. The broader questions that were central to informing this inquiry included the following:

1. What types of Black girls’ literacies have been researched?
2. How were Black girls’ literacies defined and practiced?
3. How does the literacy development of Black women historically compare to the contemporary literacies of Black girls?

In addition to the central questions, we were interested in reviewing each article to understand the wider terrain, so we also read each article and asked ourselves the following:

› What types of methodological studies have been conducted?
› What types of literacies were studied?
› What age categories were included in populations studied?
› Did the researchers foreground the voices and ways of knowing of Black girls?
› What type of models and theories were used to frame research literatures?
› Were literatures written in deficit (i.e., focus on social pathologies, race based comparisons) or resource frames?
› Did researchers focus on in or outside of school literacies?

Other inclusionary factors for articles included empirical pieces comprised of Black or African American girls from grades K–12 from the last 25 years (1991–2016). We widened the search to studies conducted in the United States and other countries. We read work that did not appear in peer-reviewed journals but published in other platforms such as book manuscripts, policy reports, and dissertations. We included the work of scholars and educators who are doing this particular kind of work to acknowledge the fuller work that is being done. Outside of print publications, there are a number of ongoing conferences and special programs for Black girls’ literacies. For example, in the last year, the University of Pennsylvania held a summit on Black girls and women in education. Literacy scholar Elaine Richardson organizes an annual conference on hip-hop literacies, and the 2016 conference is focused
on Black women and girls. Another example comes from Columbia University Teachers College and their And Still We Rise Conference on Black women and girls in education. In our participation in these spaces we have connected with and learned about current and rising scholars who are doing this work. Honoring this range of scholarship speaks to the need for ongoing efforts toward networking, collaboration, connecting, and creating these spaces. We excluded articles that, although centered on Black girls, focused on disciplinary literacies such as science literacy or mathematical literacy because our aim was to highlight studies that have concrete affordances for advancing English education. However, it is important to note that work is being done in these areas.

In the following section, we present a synthesis of the reviewed literature organized by type of literacy practice. These included scholarship on digital literacies, language practices, literacy collaboratives, performative literacies, reading and reading development, representations in texts, response to literature, and writing (see Table 1). It is important to note that these categories often overlapped, but we reviewed the literatures to understand which category was the focal point of each piece. Organizing the information this way allows for a comprehensive overview of the research landscape (through empirical and theoretical literatures) of Black girls’ literacies for researchers to understand the type of studies researchers have engaged in over the last decades. This synthesis leads us to a conceptual framework that is productive for English educators and scholars who work with Black girls in elementary, middle, and secondary levels. This framework is imperative for centering Black girls in educative spaces because when learning is framed in this way, it has the potential to advance their sociocultural, critical, and cognitive literacies. Thus, centering Black girls’ literacies has the potential to elevate all students’ engagement with multiple literacies.

**Research on Black Girls’ Literacies**

**Digital Literacies**

Studies on digital literacies included inquiries related to the “multiple and interactive practices mediated by technology tools” (Lewis, 2013, p. 1). Yet, when looking at the wider landscape of Black girl literacy studies, this area was one of the areas least researched. Within these studies youth engaged in the reading and creation of texts across multiple modes. Scholars examining this particular type of literacy view it as a means for developing critical thinking skills and to expand ways of learning to cultivate agency for youth to
Table 1. Categories of Reviewed Scholarship on Black Girls’ Literacies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Literacy Practice</th>
<th>Literature Reviewed</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Digital Literacies</td>
<td>Hall, 2011</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Kendrick, Early, &amp; Chemjor, 2013</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Muhammad &amp; Womack, 2016</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Price-Dennis, 2016</td>
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<tr>
<td>Language Practices</td>
<td>Boutte &amp; Johnson, 2013</td>
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<td>Fordham, 1993</td>
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<td>Ives, 2012</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Lanehart, 2002</td>
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<td>Richardson, 2002, 2003</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Turner, Hayes, &amp; Way, 2013</td>
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<tr>
<td>Literacy Collaboratives</td>
<td>Edwards, 2005</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Henry, 1998b, 2001</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Muhammad, 2015b</td>
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<td>Polleck, 2010</td>
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<td>Wissman, 2007</td>
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<td>Performative Literacies</td>
<td>Covington-Ward, 2006</td>
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<td>Jeffries &amp; Jeffries, 2013</td>
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<td>Winn, 2012</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Winn &amp; Jackson, 2011</td>
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<td>Reading and Reading Development</td>
<td>Morton &amp; Araujo, 2014</td>
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<td>Representations in Texts</td>
<td>Brooks et al., 2010</td>
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<td>Brooks &amp; McNair, 2014</td>
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<td>Emerson, 2002</td>
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<td>Gaunt, 2015</td>
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<td>Gibson, 2010</td>
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<td>Harris, Irving, &amp; Kruger, 2015</td>
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<td>Hinton-Johnson, 2005</td>
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<td>Kaplan &amp; Cole, 2003</td>
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<td>Lindsey, 2013</td>
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<td>Marshall, Staples, &amp; Gibson, 2009</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Muhammad &amp; McArthur, 2015</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Richardson, 2007</td>
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<tr>
<td>Response to Literature</td>
<td>Baxley &amp; Boston, 2010</td>
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<td>Boston &amp; Baxley, 2007</td>
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<td>Brooks, Browne, &amp; Hampton, 2008</td>
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<td>Carter, 2007</td>
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<td>Davis, 2000</td>
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<td>DeBlase, 2003</td>
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<td>Sutherland, 2005</td>
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<td>Writing</td>
<td>Dyson, 1995</td>
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<td>Mahiri &amp; Sablo, 1996</td>
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<td>Muhammad, 2012, 2015d</td>
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<td>Winn, 2012, 2013</td>
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<td>Wissman, 2009, 2011</td>
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be consumers and producers of knowledge (Price-Dennis, Holmes, & Smith, 2015). In addition, engaging in digital literacies has the potential to enable collaboration, relationship building, participation in sociopolitical thought, and the vehicle to assert multiple literacies against hegemonic discourses (Ellison & Kirkland, 2014; Kirkland, 2010; Kynard, 2010; Lewis, 2013; Pandya & Pagdilao, 2015).

Muhammad and Womack (2016) examined writing through digital tools and compared traditional literacies with digital literacies when examining representations among Black girls’ writings. Participants used digital and traditional text (e.g., photographs, written commentary, a YouTube clip) to consider their identities. The girls in the study collectively used digital and multiple modalities—print, sound, and image together to rewrite falsehood and public perceptions of young Black women and girls. Similarly, through a yearlong case study of a rural secondary school in Kenya, Kendrick, Early, and Chemjor (2013) examined how 32 Black girls (ages 14–18) used digital tools to write while participating in an after-school collaborative. The researchers found that when girls are engaged socially with literacy, there were not just opportunities to advance their use of digital literacies but there were also affordances to use writing to make sense of their lives. They wrote in journalistic ways toward the goals of social change and activism. Literacy became a sociopolitical act where they were called to use literacy to read and write their cultural worlds.

Hall (2011) investigated three African American girls (middle school aged) as digital storytellers and how they represent their multiple identities and ways of knowing through the creation of digital texts as they participated in a summer program grounded in intellectualism and culturally responsive curriculum. Taking both historical and Black feminist lenses, Hall asked, “What happens when we bring together what we know about African American women as knowledge producers with what we know about writing, technology and critical literacy?” (p. 8). The girls researched and read African American literature that offered rich storytelling, folklore, and other narratives that embodied the linguistic stylings of Black people. They followed their writings by composing digital responses. The author found that young Black women engaged in historical practices of resistance and kinship writing to represent the multidimensionality of their lives. Through coauthoring digital texts related to community-based issues, the participants wrote to provide a safe space for African American girls who experience pain and drew from their own narratives and of others to express their subjectivities among dominant discourses that were embedded with false paradigms related to their lives.
Although few in number, what is key about these collective studies is that Black girls’ digital production was interlaced with making sense of the girls’ identities. The participants in these studies used technology to engage in advancing multiple literacies of reading, writing, speaking, and thinking. We particularly felt that these researchers created spaces for imagination and creativity as they were engaging youth in intellectualism. Imagination and intellectualism are seemingly made to be in contradiction to each other in school-sanctioned practices, yet together they make for legitimate self-expression (Gutiérrez, 2008). In this issue of *English Education*, Price-Dennis (2016) presents her scholarship on ways that curriculum and pedagogy can bolster the digital practices, creativity, and intellectualism of Black girls.

**Language Practices**

Through both theoretical and empirical research, scholars have explored Black girls’ language practices (Fordham, 1995; Lanehart, 2002; Richardson, 2002, 2003). Richardson (2003) defines the concept of African American female literacies as “ways of knowing and acting and the development of skills, vernacular expressive arts and crafts that help females to advance and protect themselves and their loved ones in society” (p. 77). These African American literacies then are communicated through an African American female discourse, or way of representing a Black female identity, through linguistic practices that include storytellin’, steppin’/rhymin’, singin’, dancin’, preachin’, and stylin’ (Smitherman, 2006). In the theatrical performance “BLACK GIRL: Linguistic Play,” playwright and choreographer Camille A. Brown weaved together the rhythmic play of Black dance vernacular, including social dancing, double dutch, steppin’, tap, Juba, ring shout, and gesture to represent a nuanced spectrum of Black girl/womanhood in a racially and politically charged world. Black girls’ language practices explore topics of conversation that evoke self-discovery and identity politics and are all understood from their social location as Black girls. Ways of interacting include conscious manipulation and performance of silence, strategic use of polite and assertive language, and indirectness among other verbal and nonverbal practices. Black girls’ language practices include code and/or style shifting, code meshing and blending, the intentional use of African American Language (AAL), affect, and givin’ “attitude” with neck rollin’, hand gesturin’, and talkin’ loud (Richardson, 2005; Smitherman, 2006). Black girls’ language practices “reflect their socialization in a racialized, genderized, sexualized, and classed world in which they employ their language [and literacy] practices to advance and protect themselves” (Richardson, 2005, p. 77).
The research on Black girls’ language practices reflects the importance of cross-generational relationships and linguistic apprenticeships, specifically in how to navigate linguistically in spaces that valorize a “proper” English. Lanehart (2002) explored how dominant ideologies around language use affected the language, literacy, educational achievements, and self-image across three generations of African American women, examining the life stories of her grandmother, mother, aunt, sister, and herself. She identified comparisons and contrasts across their stories and their attitudes toward and use of language that resulted in widely different abilities and comfort in using language to navigate daily life. These distinctions in their linguistic autobiographies were predicated on their metacognitive awareness around their language use and their repertoire for engaging multiple codes across different contexts and for different purposes. They were also largely informed by generational differences, given the political and societal issues surrounding each woman’s self-identification and social development. However, at varying levels, the women’s linguistic decisions involved a vacillation between their affiliation to AAL and the expectation of mastery of a “standard” form of English.

Today’s generation of AAL speakers are forging new ways for navigating within and around a society that still privileges the use of a “proper” English over the use of other Englishes. One way is the intentional use of AAL in spaces that deem it “less than” or “substandard.” While such acts of linguistic resistance are prominent in youth-sanctioned spaces, such as spoken word performances, creative writing, and online language where Black girls embody power and ownership over their linguistic choices, Black girls are also leveraging their AAL usage in academic spaces. Boutte and Johnson’s (2013) study of the development and experiences of two Black girls who were AAL speakers examines their language virtuosity and their positive perceptions about AAL. Using counterstory methodology as a critical race theoretical analytical tool, the authors show how, contrary to the pervasive deficit perspectives and attitudes shaping understandings about AAL, the girls found that academic uses of “standard” English were at times boring and tedious, and they actively resisted the dominant use of it. They instead embraced AAL when its usage made sense for their intended purposes and audiences. In their examination of their choices, the authors capture aspects of their emergent biliteracy and bilingualism as they navigate between two literacies and languages and argue that the girls demonstrate their transliterate and translingual confidence and proficiency.

Black girls’ language practices represent the imprints of hip-hop culture, popular culture, and twenty-first-century digital modes of communica-
There are, however, costs and risks when Black girls fashion their own languages in spaces that demand singular uses of a mainstream American English. Despite growing awareness and even pedagogical resources for valuing cultural and linguistic diversity in the language arts classroom (Godley, Sweetland, Wheeler, Mininnici, & Carpenter, 2006), including research that calls for culturally relevant teacher training (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Nieto, 2000) and that highlights the need for more racially and linguistic diverse teachers who intimately relate to the histories and experiences of their students (Haddix, 2016), tensions still persist within classroom spaces where the linguistic distance between teachers and students is steadily widening, and this gap has real consequences for the educative outcomes for students of color, including Black girls. This was evidenced in Ives’s (2012) ethnographic case study of a sixth-grade African American girl during an integrated novel study unit in her urban English language arts classroom. In the study, the author examined how Kristina’s student-authored play, “Ghetto Family,” which showcased cultural and linguistic resources, disrupted the planned curriculum and how these tensions were negotiated by the teacher, student, and researcher. Ultimately, the author found that Kristina’s literate interests were marginalized within the dominant hegemonic forces that were at play within and beyond the English language arts classrooms. Ives proposes that English language arts teachers should include and plan for their students’ linguistic dialogism (Bakhtin, 1981) by structuring curricula in ways that make both time and space for students’ literate interest, resources, and abilities. Such a shift requires a critical interrogation of the goals and implementation of learning goals and assessments. English educators must identify the expectations for linguistic proficiency and the ways in which linguistic dexterity can be nurtured in the classroom while valuing the rich cultural and linguistic traditions students represent.

Literacy Collaboratives

Researchers also focused on social collaboration, organized collectives, and literacy development. Researchers in these areas involved groups of girls in reading and writing groups. Literacy groups for African American women emerged in the United States through literary societies and other organized efforts around advancing education (McHenry, 2002). Communal spaces among young Black women create spaces for self-affirmation, growth, and healing (hooks, 1993). In these reviewed studies, researchers created spaces for literacy development when spaces did not exist through the formation of literacy collaboratives, defined as socially constructed spaces to improve
and advance literacy development among a group of learners with varying identities, experiences, and literacy experiences (Tatum, 2009). These spaces also have affordances of benefiting youth personally (i.e., identity and social development) (Polleck, 2010). When Gholdy (first author) began engaging girls in literacy collaboratives, she used early nineteenth-century literary societies and reading rooms with young Black women to shape contemporary spaces with girls. In one summer literacy collaborative, she engaged a group of eight Black adolescent girls ages 12–17 in a four-week institute through a qualitative case study. When framing this space, 10 practices gleaned from historical research of literary societies were used (Muhammad, 2015b). She engaged the girls in reading, discussion, and writing about representations of themselves and particularly examined those contextual variables that engaged the girls to write. Although multiple variables showed benefits, three factors appeared most frequently in the post interviews of the girls that were found to be the strongest influences of their literacy development. These were using mentor texts, writing uncensored, and having uninterrupted writing time. This study showed that there are affordances when connecting girls to their literary histories; when spaces include multiple enactment literacies, Black girls gain opportunities to advance their skills, identity, intellect, and criticality.

Henry (2001) engaged adolescent girls in a similar reading/writing/discussion collective. Using book and film, she sought to understand how eight young girls who emigrated from the Caribbean to the United States made connections to the lives in their two cultures. Along with reading and discussing the texts, each participant kept a journal to write about cultural connections. Even though the girls spoke a language that was devalued in the English classroom, they came to school with the ability to read the world and were able to read themselves in the various texts in the literacy collaborative. These findings were echoed in an earlier study where Henry (1998b) engaged in ethnographic methods with four girls ages 14–15 years old. Drawing from Black female perspectives and critical theories, Henry found that the literacy collaborative centered Black girls’ voices and enabled them to “come to voice” and use the space to self-express and use literacy to voice issues that were most urgent and connected to their lives.

Polleck (2010) and Wissman (2007) engaged adolescent girls in literacy collaboratives within high school spaces. Polleck (2010) examined transformative book clubs and engagement with literature with African American girls as a platform for affective and cognitive development through a qualitative inquiry. She investigated the ways in which educators can strengthen youth literacies while also helping to build their social and emotional intellect, identity development, and relationship building. The participants in
the study selected texts based on the personal struggles they had at the time of the study, and she analyzed their transactions with the literature.

In an after-school reading and writing collaborative, Edwards (2005) unpacked the phrase “doing hair” with 10 girls ages 12–16. “Doing hair” is described as more than just the act of washing, combing, and styling hair, but defined as a cultural signifier and social engagement of Black women and girls as it represents power, identity, and agency. Moreover, others have found the underlying manifestations hair carries include cultural rituals (hooks, 2001), authenticity and pride (Rooks, 1996), and the means of understanding the perspectives of Black women and girls (Banks, 2000). The girls in Edwards’s study took up the practice of “doing hair” in the context of literacy development in a three-month literacy collaborative. The researcher’s goal was to cultivate a space where girls could openly express themselves through a topic that is intellectually grounded and connected to different facets of their being. The girls in the study also engaged in read-alouds (to model reading fluency), independent or partner reading with a selected text, journal writing to respond to and question ideas from previous literary engagements, and then sharing of ideas. They then created a commercial in the context of a beauty shop and taught others about the cultural ways of knowing through learning about hair.

Wissman (2007) examined language and literacy practices among 16 participants (who mostly identified as African American). The in-school context of the study emerged from requests from the girls to have a space to assert themselves and issues that were relevant to their lives. The girls in the study created a space to use literacies toward self-definition where they shared and celebrated ideas, experiences, and knowledge. The girls in this group openly discussed and wrote about pertinent issues in their lives such as politics or sanctioned school practices. Creating spaces for girls to use their uncensored voices promotes collaboration in ways that may improve self-efficacy and encourage Black girls to celebrate their unique ideas and meanings they draw from text. Richardson (2003) names these as “free spaces” from the oppressions and censorship of voice that traditional schooling promotes. All of the researchers of these studies point to the affordances of simultaneously engaging girls in multiple acts of literacy in a socially (and often critically) constructed space.

**Performative Literacies**

Literature reviewed also included examples of how educators created in and outside of school spaces for Black girls to engage in performative literacies—
creative expression through arts, music, dance, and theatrical performance. Performative literacies include embodied ways of knowing, communicating, and meaning making. Medina (2006) contends that when performative literacies are enacted, youth draw upon their multiple worlds and identities to create a new form of text. These enactments take literacy to an elevated level because it calls on youth to read text (print and social context of their worlds), make meaning from text, write scripts to be performed, embody the content in texts, and enact or perform the texts. Their bodies become reimagined text in action. This literacy in action connects to the historical practice of Black women being “doers of the word” (Peterson, 1995). Within this literate context, Kontovourki (2014) posits “bodies are perceived as texts, as sites of inscription, as well as sites of possibility” (p. 154). While this type of literacy has been greatly privileged in out of school contexts, it is also important to ask what embodied literacy looks like in educative spaces with youth. Several of the performative literacies with Black girls took place in out of school spaces. One example is the work of Brown (2013), who in her book *Hear Our Truths: The Creative Potential of Black Girlhood* discusses ways in which girls engage in performative literacies connected to their lives in a program called “Saving Our Lives Hear Our Truths,” or SOLHOT. In this program, girls creatively act out plays that are connected to their lives.

Winn (2012), in the collaborative program “Girl Time,” examined playwriting and performance with Black girls (ages 14–17 years old) who were formerly incarcerated. In this 5-year ethnographic research study, she discussed the “betwixt and between” lives of girls who have been incarcerated and how they feel neither “here nor there” in society as they negotiate who they are and who they desire to be among discourses and media representations that label them negatively. Taking a sociocritical perspective, Winn found that the girls wrote about themes of relationships (familial, romantic, and fictive kin) and of freedom (education and opportunity; crime, punishment, and redemption). Playwriting offered several benefits, including inviting students’ varied language use and voices, rehearsing the possibilities of life, and engaging in spaces of recovery from their past. These literacies too became sites of resistance and problem solving as they (re)imagined and (re)authored themselves. This led to what Ginwright (2010) names as radial healing, which promotes a consciousness that “strengthens individual and collective agency, encourages action that address real community problems, and builds awareness of a common good” (p. 16). As the girls of “Girl Time” redefined their lives, they confronted the multiple oppressions to transform “incarceration discourse” (Winn & Jackson, 2011, p. 620).
Jeffries and Jeffries (2013) combined children’s literature with performance and examined hair as a cultural signifier and marker of identity among elementary school Black girls. The researchers conducted a literary analysis on Sylviane Diouf’s (2001) book *Bintou’s Braids* and examined how the book addressed beauty standards and can be used to engage youth in a performance about hair. The researchers took a historical look at the significance of Black women’s hair and spoke to the need to center Black girl images and literacies due to some book editors and publication companies that disregard the authentic and natural beauty of young Black girls. Instead, they have highlighted Eurocentric hair and beauty. In this study, they engaged in an analysis of the text and the ways it can be used to engage girls in reader’s theater toward the end of understanding the text and coming closer to loving one’s self-identity. The authors provide a script that can be used and performed in learning spaces.

In her essay of the performative connectivity of hip-hop and music play, Covington-Ward (2006) explores the reciprocity of these literacies. Music play or “body musicking,” a term borrowed from Gaunt (1997), is a historical practice of Black cultural and musical tradition that involves “rhythmic hand clapping and body slapping.” This performative literacy act has roots in the African American South, and the tradition has been sustained through historically Black sororities as a means for social engagement and communication.

Covington-Ward (2006) explored “battling cheers” and the literacies and language that are involved. These include call and response, verbal and physical improvisation, mock confrontation, competition, and simulation. These practices invite creativity, imagination, thinking quickly, use of the body for meaning-making, and socialization. Such performances have also influenced hip-hop as evinced through battling, creativity, self-expression, confrontation, and social-ness.

These studies view performance as an embodied form of literacy, which becomes the mechanism for narrative building. The body as text (including hair, expressions, clothing, and movements) and as language affords a different type of meaning-making for young Black girls, which is an embodied communicative site. In each of these performed literacies, we found that they also became critical or embedded in power and marginalized standpoints. These critical performative literacies are also literacies that are implicated and related to the politics of society (Medina, 2006) and engage girls toward creativity, social justice, change, and liberatory acts.
Reading and Reading Development

We found limited research on reading or the reading development of Black girls as evident in this section. This scarcity may be in part due to limited research on elementary and pre-adolescent Black girls. Often, when Black youth are a part of the research population in reading research, their scores on one particular assessment are usually highlighted, rather than their cultural resources. Moreover, reading studies typically use race-based comparisons to problematize their research without a full analysis of the root of the problems related to achievement, which is usually connected to the instruction and learning environment. It can be troublesome to take sociocultural or critical approaches to instruction, yet use only race-based comparisons to problematize the need for research. These studies too can have negative consequences for further marginalizing the lives where their narratives become one of struggle or deficit. For example, if African American youths’ reading achievement scores or percentages are always reported as low or substandard, then the score can subsequently become a part of their academic identity. Even though these youth may receive poor instruction, the focus is typically on youth rather than the instructional context. We found that the majority of reading research and policy is cognitively theorized and does not account for the ethnic, gendered, and cultural differences of youth (National Reading Panel, 2000). Therefore, if studies included African American girls in their populations in the reading research, we did not find that researchers centered their ways of knowing and being. In other words, as researchers studied reading and reading development of youth, the intersections of Black girls’ racialized and gendered identities were not examined. This is an indictment of the literacy research.

In contrast, Morton and Araujo’s (2014) study is one of the few that has taken a critical literacy approach to examine the reading experiences of a nine-year-old African American girl (Shelby) who struggled in reading. The researchers provided out of school tutoring (Shelby’s home and local library) for her when her mom sought support for her daughter. Through a case study, they observed Shelby’s progress. The researchers discussed the areas of reading difficulty Shelby experienced but also described her as someone who loved discussion and engaging in performative literacies. The sessions involved student-selected read-alouds on text connected to Shelby’s life, having discussions about the text where she connected the text to what she noticed in her life, and a writing activity. They found that taking up a critical literacy approach enabled inquiry and interest from the youth. Also,
the collaborative sessions helped to improve her writing and conveying meaning. Her written language, sentences, and spacing were strengthened.

**Representations in Literature and Popular Culture Texts**

There was a larger number of studies that examined the ways Black girlhood is represented in texts. Representations of African American adolescent girls were analyzed in three types of texts: young adult African American fiction novels (commonly found on school book lists), urban street fiction, and the media (i.e., Internet, video, television, music). These studies reveal representation as a strong presence and constant negotiation in the lives of young Black women. This means that Black girls are in a constant battle of defining their lives in the midst of falsehood and dominant narratives that depict their lives in inaccurate or incomplete ways. This is why it is uniquely vital for the self-identity of Black girls to have these opportunities in educative settings and for educators to be prepared to embed this in their instruction. Making sense of the ways Black women and girls are represented across media is necessary in shaping a positive sense of self.

**Children’s and Young Adult Literature**

Through textual analyses, researchers have found that these genres commonly present a Black adolescent female protagonist and are typically read by African American adolescent girls either for leisure or as a part of school curricula. Within their textual analyses, researchers have examined the heterogeneity of Black girlhood representations in the texts (Brooks et al., 2010; Gibson, 2010; Hinton-Johnson, 2005; Marshall, Staples, & Gibson, 2009). Brooks, Sekayi, Savage, Waller, and Picot (2010) conducted a close reading of several young adult novels. These texts included *November Blues* (Draper, 2007), *The Skin I’m In* (Flake, 1998), *Bronx Masquerade* (Grimes, 2002), *Like Sisters on the Homefront* (Williams-Garcia, 1995), and *Maizon at Blue Hill* (Woodson, 1992). They found themes of intellectual, physical, kinship, and sexual identities in the texts. In a similar textual analysis, Hinton-Johnson (2005) found comparable themes and positive representations of African American adolescent girls. She focused on three themes: body image, skin color, and hair, which were portrayed in the young adult novels. Common to Brooks et al. (2010), she found that the characters in the stories countered the hegemony around beauty aesthetics and supported ideas of positive self-representation.

Focusing on physical identity, Brooks and McNair (2014) examined representations of Black girls’ hair in African American children’s literature.
They engaged in a content analysis of six hair picture books. Grounding this analysis in Black feminist thought and cultural studies, the researchers found three central themes about hair in the texts: (1) the perspective that all hair is good, (2) the connection between Black hair and African American history, and (3) the bonding of females while hair is being combed and/or styled.

**Urban Fiction**

Urban fiction, also referred to as street literature, hip-hop literature, Black pulp fiction, ghetto lit, and gangsta lit, is a genre of literature that started to become published in the 1960s and 1970s during the Black Power Movement (Marshall et al., 2009). Similar to the social ills that many African American people countered during these years, common subjects within the plots of urban fiction usually involve crime, sex, abortion, drugs, abuse, teen pregnancy, and incarceration (Morris, Hughes-Hassell, Agosto, & Cottman, 2006). Typically written in first person, these texts usually feature a Black female protagonist between the ages of 16 and 25 who overcomes difficulties in her experiences with some sort of social injury. In the resolution, the protagonist often experiences a sense of empowerment (Gibson, 2010). Representations of African American adolescent girls within urban fiction offer opportunities for them to connect with, negotiate, and challenge portrayals.

Gibson (2010) found that many African American adolescent girls read this genre because the plots and subjects of sex, relationships, and sensuality spark a curiosity; it serves as an escape in their lives; and they can connect with the characters, storylines, and problems. She further argues that this genre is relatable in some form to all Black girls. Marshall, Staples, and Gibson (2009) suggest that urban fiction receives a wide readership among Black adolescent girls because it presents complex representations of African American femininity. They further explain that African American adolescent girls do not always relate directly to the characters in the text but they are “titillated, provoked, and challenged by the characterizations, situations, and language in the books” (p. 29). This bears resemblance to Blackford’s (2004) study in which she found that girls read representations and stories that are contradictory to their lives and as a way to escape their “realities.” If girls refute images found in urban fiction, it may create opportunities to critique representations, which could influence the ways they think about and represent themselves. Gibson (2010) argues that using this type of text in classrooms only becomes an issue when teachers are not open to learn about the worlds of Black girls and engage them in culturally responsive pedagogy.
Popular Culture Texts

In the Kaplan and Cole (2003) magazine study, African American adolescent girls selected a list of teen magazines marketed to gain the interest of this age group of adolescents. Findings from this study highlight the awareness of the shared experience and viewpoints adolescent girls have regardless of race, in this case when offered the opportunity to select texts of interest. However, when it came to the girls making connections to the representations of girls who looked like them in the text, some of the participants pointed out the subtle messages the magazine exposed about the presence of Black women versus White women.

Several researchers focused on the depictions of Black women and girls in music and music videos. Richardson (2007) examines how young Black women negotiate various representations of Black women presented in the media, specifically rap music videos, because mass media has played a significant role in the construction of ideals and cultural misconceptions about Black people. Richardson explores how historical depictions of Black women and girls are rendered and exploited in media and how Black adolescent girls construct meaning from them. She found that providing space for them to use their language to critique their social worlds demonstrated their ability to critically examine how they view the messages by discussing the ways these messages are degrading to African American girls.

In an essay on negotiating Black womanhood in music videos, Emerson (2002) reminds readers of the impact that young Black women have had (and continue to have) on producing, creating, and consuming hip-hop within Black youth culture, despite the saturation of misogynistic representations of Black women in music videos. Although the focus has been on the sexualized representations, Emerson makes visible the narrative of young Black women as cultural producers. When examining a sample of music videos, she found controlling images of Black womanhood, yet there were examples of contestation, resistance, and the assertion of agency as well as sisterhood and collaboration. Similarly, Lindsey (2013) examined two videos that center Black girls and their lived experiences. She pushes to maintain a consciousness about the discourse of media and popular culture along with a history of derogatory representations, while also remaining steadfast on promoting and embedding discourses of empowerment for young Black women and girls. Harris, Irving, and Kruger (2015) interviewed 8 fifth-grade girls as they participated in an after-school program. The girls were aware of the sexualization and identified sexism in media but did not identify with the language used in the music. The researchers also found that the young
participants did not have a desire to emulate the girls in videos; they equated it with adulthood. Still, it becomes important for girls to actively negotiate those dominant images found in media as well as the less visible and less discussed roles that Black women and girls have in popular culture.

Examining representations in wider media outlets such as radio, television, and the Internet, Muhammad and McArthur (2015) discussed distorted images of Black femininity derived from history, which has included the Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire. Some of these images are negatively projected onto Black girlhood, yet when they are appropriated by White women and girls, they do not carry the same stigmas (Gaunt, 2015). In Muhammad and McArthur’s qualitative study, the researchers found that eight Black adolescent girls (ages 12–17) felt that the media portrays Black girls as being judged by their hair; seen as angry, loud, and violent; and sexualized. With this societal backdrop, the girls took to their pens to write against each of these portrayals and to rewrite the characterizations of their lives that were in disagreement with media descriptions.

Subjects of sexuality and physical image, including issues related to Eurocentric forms and definitions of beauty, skin tone, and hair, framed much of the paradigms of the text investigated with Black adolescent girls in the studies. Through simultaneous engagement in reading, talking, and writing, young Black women and girls openly discussed and challenged issues of physical identity and misrepresentations through text. They discussed ways to counter, resist, or speak out against misrepresentations. This is why young Black women and girls must employ critical literacies to interrogate the images used to (mis)represent them in various literatures and media. They must develop ways to use media literacy for self-empowerment and self-determination (Dagbovie-Mullins, 2013).

Response to Literature

Researchers also examined girls’ responses to various types of literature and they focused on the negotiation and construction of selfhood. Each of these studies involved how African American girls interpret representations in textual readings in and outside of school. Within each of the studies, there were examples within the text where the representations of Black girlhood/womanhood aligned with negative historical images. Many times, these negative images served as the conduit for girls to talk against these images just as many of the protagonists have done in the textual analyses. The data from the studies support that African American adolescent girls desire to see representations of themselves in literature read in school.
Boston and Baxley’s (2007) study combines a textual analysis with the voices of African American adolescent girls as they examine multiple perspectives of race, identity, gender construction, and literacy learning in English classes as they engaged in a content analysis of young adult literature. They analyzed four texts with Black female protagonists. These included Jacqueline Woodson’s *Hush* (2002) and *The Dear One* (1991), Sharon Flake’s (1998) *The Skin I’m In*, and Nikki Grimes’s *Jazmin’s Notebook* (1998). In a later study, they examined the textual connections of eight middle level African American adolescent girls (Baxley & Boston, 2010). All participants reported a desire to have choices in literature and text selections in language arts class, and 88 percent of the participants most often chose text with relatable characters or plots that represented some aspect of their lives. This conclusion bears resemblance to Davis’s (2000) finding with the text selections of six middle school girls. The girls sought texts that enabled them to connect the characters in books to the actual experiences in their lives.

Colorism (defined as inter- or intraracial discrimination based on skin color stratification) is investigated through Sharon Flake’s novel, *The Skin I’m In* (1998). Brooks, Browne, and Hampton (2008) sought to understand how the novel portrayed colorism from the viewpoints of 10 African American adolescent girls who participated in a middle school after-school book club. The researchers asserted that the focus on colorism is a part of a literary tradition among African American writers who have written about physical appearance such as hair and skin tone within children’s or young adult literature. They found that participants connected with the story, reflected upon the protagonist’s feelings about self-worth and self-image, and encouraged the protagonists through reading responses. Reading the text and making connections to the protagonist served as a medium to explore their own thought processes pertaining to self-representation (i.e., self-worth, self-love, and self-image).

In Sutherland’s (2005) research, six participants read Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* and discussed how beauty is represented in the text. Sutherland explores how girls constructed both gendered and racial representations in experiencing the literature and how certain ascribed representations about African American women and girls can serve as boundaries. Two specific themes were connected to the participants’ talk about the novel: (1) Eurocentric views of beauty act as a boundary or limitation in their lives and (2) others’ assumptions about who they are and how they should behave act as a boundary of how they think about themselves. Sutherland found that the girls in the study experienced racism based on their skin color and negotiated Black girlhood and the various representations that are
ascribed to African American women and girls. The Bluest Eye provided an opportunity for African American adolescent girls in the study to confront their own ideologies and beliefs about selfhood.

Carter (2007) explored gendered and racial representations facing two African American adolescent girls in a British literature classroom. She examined the influence of Eurocentric curriculum on African American adolescent girls as participants read William Shakespeare’s sonnet “My Mistress’ Eyes” and examined representation in images related to beauty. The participants found representations of themselves absent in the text read that was part of the school curriculum. As students read the poem, images of beauty were discussed that did not affirm physical characteristics of African American adolescent girls. One participant expressed that she felt affronted by the messages of the text, since those messages contrasted with how she looked. What was especially problematic was that the teacher did not teach the text in a way that considered African American girls’ feelings of self-worth nor was the discussion critical in ways that taught students how to interpret hegemony and read texts in a reflexive manner.

DeBlase (2003) examined how eighth-grade urban girls, including two African American teenage girls, constructed social identities of gender and race through literacy experiences with text representing images of women in stereotypical ways as well as texts with strong and self-determined depictions of females. DeBlase found that girls merely memorized and identified themes of prejudice, ageism, sexism, and racism within classroom literature rather than had opportunities to think critically about the effects of those themes in their lives and within their communities.

These studies speak to the need for opportunities for Black girls to read and respond to literature in ways that help them to critique, negotiate, or mediate selfhood. This could encourage educators to not only critically examine the curriculum and instructional practices in classrooms for Black adolescent girls but also to listen to how they engage with the curriculum and literature read in class. This means teachers frequently soliciting and hearing their perceptions of the text read while also remaining attentive to how Black girls interpret various texts.

Writing

The final area of our literature review involved research on the writing practices and writing development of Black girls. These studies focused on connections between writing and identity development (Dyson, 1995; Muhammad, 2012, 2015a; Wissman, 2009), youth writing for social change and
transformation (Muhammad, 2015c; Winn, 2012, 2013), and writing in and outside of school spaces (Mahiri & Sablo, 1996; Muhammad, 2012; Wissman, 2011). In research on the writing development of Black girls, writing becomes a key literacy practice for Black adolescent girls to make meaning of their identity(ies). These meaning-making processes are supported, nurtured, and “mentored” by the inclusion of African American women’s writings as mentor texts (Muhammad, 2015c) and through the creation of intentional and ongoing opportunities for the sharing, interrogating, and validating of personal experience as a form of knowledge (Wissman, 2009).

Research on writing and writing development also takes up the issue of space and its effect on Black girls’ self-expression and literary freedom and creativity. In a case study of Iris, a Black adolescent girl in her summer writing institute, Muhammad (2012) juxtaposed the summer writing practices with school writing practices to explore how Iris makes meaning of her identity, concluding that while the summer institute afforded opportunities for self-expression, there were few opportunities for such identity exploration in in-school writing assignments. As discussed earlier, Wissman (2011) draws from spatial perspectives (Leander & Sheehy, 2004) and explored Black girls’ writing in an in-school elective course that she theorizes as an “Other space,” a space created without the constraints of a mandated curriculum or standardized test pressures and as a space informed by an understanding of the connections among literacies, lived experiences, and identities. These studies call for English educators to consider the physical aspects of spaces and the criteria and expectations on text and genre selection within the time of increased standardization and testing.

Among Black girls, writing is also used as a sociopolitical tool and for aims of social change. Muhammad’s (2015d) study of African American Muslim girls’ participation in a literacy collaborative grounded in Islamic principles and writing for social change employed methods of intertextual analysis to examine the social issues girls wrote about in protest poetry and how these self-selected issues relate to their identities. The girls wrote about issues related to (a) war and violence and (b) the abuse, violence, and mistreatment of women and girls, drawing from their religious, ethnic, and gendered identities. Also discussed earlier, Winn’s (2012, 2013) work with formerly incarcerated youth in an urban playwriting program looks at the ways that Black girls used playwriting and playmaking as a tool to navigate their lives influenced by the juvenile justice system and to imagine possibilities for their lives beyond incarceration, using writing as a transformative tool. These studies present the writing and narratives of Black girls to begin
a dialogue about the ways schools and communities can support them to both imagine and plan for their futures.

**A Call to Reconstruct Pedagogical Practices That Place Black Girls at the Center: Toward a Black Girls' Literacies Framework**

“Only the BLACK WOMAN can say ‘when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there, the whole Negro race enters with me.’”

—Anna Julia Cooper

Overall, we found that researchers employed qualitative methods to conduct literacy research with Black girls. This could be due to the inherent sociocultural focus on identity and representation in several of the studies as qualitative, cultural, and Black studies require an interrogation of race, class, and gender—something that is not easily captured in statistics. Additionally, these types of studies may lack funding from large-scale grants. There was also a large focus on adolescent literacies in the areas of literature and writing but a dearth of studies involving girls from early childhood and elementary. In addition, there were limited studies on reading development and digital literacies. Unsurprisingly, the studies were mostly grounded in critical, historical, and Black feminist theories. Through our synthesis of the collective literatures we came to a framework that centers Black girls’ ways of knowing and engagement of literacy practices. In nearly all of the studies, we found that researchers were steadfast (implicitly and explicitly) in framing their studies around six components that served as the conduit for moving the literacies of Black girls forward. We distilled these components out from the collection of studies. These six components make up our Black girls’ literacies framework and are useful and necessary for engaging Black girls in literacy pedagogies—particularly in English education classrooms. In this framework, we conclude that Black girls’ literacies are:

1. Multiple
2. Tied to identities
3. Historical
4. Collaborative
5. Intellectual
6. Political/Critical
Black girls’ literacies are *multiple* in practice and theoretical orientations. Literacy practices were layered upon one another such that girls were never just engaged in one type of literacy. This multiple layering is important for English educators as youth read text and subsequently engage in multiple literacies as they make meaning of it. Black girls’ literacies are *tied to identity*. As researchers engaged participants in the multiple dimensions of literacies, we found that identity was never neglected. As participants were reading, writing, speaking, or performing texts, they were simultaneously coming closer to selfhood. Black girls’ literacies are *historical*. The researchers often used historical frameworks to examine the literacies of Black girls and connected their practices to earlier African American people. We also found that the enactments of literacies of Black girls today connected and were informed by the ways Black women practiced and engaged in acts in literacy historically. Black girls’ literacies are *collaborative*. Literacies were social and involved a co-construction of knowledge with the world and with other Black girls. Literacies were not enacted in isolation. Black girls’ literacies are *intellectual* and grounded in critical thought, discussions, and reflection about society and social problems. Intellectual thought enabled the girls to think deeply around social issues that affected their lives and the lives of others. Black girls’ literacies are *political and critical*. Their literacies were tied to power, misrepresentations, falsehood, and the need for social transformation.

The reviewed studies all encompassed several of these components as they questioned the literacy development of Black youth. Winn’s (Winn & Jackson, 2011; Winn, 2012, 2013) study on playwriting with Black girls is an example illustrating each of these areas. She took multiple theories to account for and explain girls’ engagement in reading, writing, thinking, speaking, and performing. As the girls engaged in literacy, they were doing so to make sense of their betwixt and between identities as well as intersections of their racial, gendered, economic, and community identities. Also, the work is historical in that Winn looked back historically on the ways in which Black women engaged in literacy and used it to reflect contemporary literacies with girls. As they wrote their plays, they became political texts, permeated with power. Their texts became opportunities to consider questions such as the following: *What is the difference between facts and truths? Whose truths are honored and whose are marginalized? Who gets to speak for and about Black girls?* Finally, Winn’s work is intellectual. She incited new thought in the minds of young girls and encouraged them to think critically about community issues and social change. Together these components make for a productive instructional and research framework and roadmap for design-
ing research studies and lesson plans. These six aspects can be considered and utilized in teaching and teacher education within English education.

**Conclusions and Recommendations for English Educators**

“Let woman’s claim be as broad in the concrete as the abstract. We take our stand on the solidarity of humanity, the oneness of life, and the unnaturalness and injustice of all special favoritism, whether of sex, race, country, or condition. If one link of the chain is broken, the chain is broken.”

—Anna Julia Cooper

As English educators consider developing lesson plans and instructional practices with Black girls’ literacies in mind, these six framings become interlaced with the planning. First, English educators should consider the text used for instruction. Texts and text selection played a vital role in the studies, and it is important for educators to go beyond print-based selections to also include texts in multimodalities. Texts should also be in the form of imagery, sound, video, performance, and essentially anything that can be “read” for the wider goals of literacy development. We suggest that multimodal texts should be selected to adhere to the following criteria (Muhammad, 2015c):

1. Does the text have the potential to advance youths’ skills and proficiencies in multiple literacies?
2. Does the text have the potential to advance youths’ sense making of their multiple identities?
3. Does the text have the potential to advance youths’ intellectual development?
4. Does the text have the potential to advance youths’ criticality?

These questions should be added to lesson plan frameworks as a starting place. Text selection played a critical role in literacy development among African Americans historically and as the impetus to their genius (McHenry, 2002). Conjoining text selection with instructional practice from the Black girls’ literacies framework helps to prepare Black girls for academic success but also for success in a society that has not always honored their lives. They learn solidarity and collaboration while also learning in a space that honors the cultural knowledge they bring to the classroom and varied ways they express themselves through acts of literacy.

Due to the high-stakes assessment environment of schools and education, we also asked ourselves, *How do we situate Black girls’ literacies and literacy development among the test-heavy climate?* We believe there should
be a push for the reconceptualization of learning standards across the nation and our conceptual framework should be the impetus for reimagining these frameworks that govern our schools. If we examine the CCSS, we find that they must be recast or revised to include a Black girls’ literacies standpoint as all youth benefit from this framing. Currently, the CCSS excludes explicit personal experiences of youth. This only makes up a small portion of the larger Black girls’ literacies framework. Due to the current climate of our society and the needs of youth in K–12 settings, learning standards need to go beyond cognitive perspectives and a focus on building knowledge, but they also need instruction framed around multiple literacies and multiple theories, and the multiple ways of learning that youth bring to the classroom. Youth need opportunities to learn about their identities and their positionali- ties in the wider society. This includes the false and incomplete portrayals that others project onto them. Therefore, English educators and researchers should take from the excellence from the past and allow historical literacies to reflect the ways we engage youth in classrooms. In essence, literacy learning becomes collaborative rather than competitive and individualistic. The CCSS must also be transformed to help youth be critical and political respondents to our social times. This calls for interrogating education and learning and seeking the perspectives of those populations who continue to be marginalized across the global context. For this reason, we argue for expanding the studies of young Black women and girls to include more re- search on digital and media literacies in the wake of racial violence and the assaults on Black girls. Reconceptualizing the ways the standards that serve as schools’ framing coupled with complementary instructional practices and assessments holds great promise for an English education responsive to the current needs of all students.

We also asked ourselves, How are teachers being selected and prepared to teach our Black girls? How can teacher education and teacher development be repurposed to center the needs and interests of Black girls? These questions are particularly important to the field of English and literacy education in that our work focuses heavily on shaping the language and literacy achievements of our students. What we believe and think about Black girls’ literacies directly influences how and what we teach. It also has an effect on who becomes teachers—when Black girls’ literacies and knowledge claims are not valued in school spaces by educators, this indirectly suggests that they are not equipped to become teachers and educational leaders. Our findings from our literature review affirm two recommendations for English teaching and teacher education. First, English educators must engage a sociopolitical understanding of the issues that Black girls face in the larger society.
For example, in our teacher preparation classes today, a close reading and discussion of the 2015 African American Policy Forum report “Black Girls Matter: Pushed Out, Overpoliced, and Underprotected”—a report that critically examines the intersections of gender, race, school discipline, and the school-to-prison pipeline—is required (for more discussion of the report, see Sealey-Ruiz in this issue). English educators cannot afford to be unaware of these realities and how they impact the in and outside of school lives of our students. We are arguing that if we reimagine an English education where Black girls matter, all children would benefit from a curricular and pedagogical infrastructure that values humanity. Second, teacher education practices must acknowledge the influence and inspiration of Black womanist epistemologies and pedagogies. Culturally relevant and responsive pedagogies are informed by Black feminist ideologies and practices. Black girls and women need to be able to see themselves in teaching and educational leadership, and this can only happen when they understand the cultural and historical precedent of Black women’s contributions to teaching and teacher education. These suggestions allow educators and teacher educators to return to the early traditions of intellectual thought and educational theory. This is necessary for (re)imagining education for all.

Anna Julia Cooper still remains a strong voice for the entitled brilliance and rights of Black women and girls. We opened this review with a brief insight into the intellectual tradition of Cooper because she embodies a model of excellence in thought and theory in studying the contemporary literacies of Black girls. She examined the intersections of race, socioeconomic class, and gender while adhering to the belief that pedagogy should be grounded in intellectualism and within a global context. Her critical thought laid the foundation for Black feminism discourse around intersectionality and engaged pedagogies (Guy-Sheftall, 2009). In her work, she argued for expanded views and ideologies of Black womanhood through “Black female consciousness and voice” (Giles, 2006, p. 631). These collective studies on Black girls’ literacies are evidence of Cooper’s continued tradition and the need to center and privilege Black girls’ voices.

Often when we speak publically about our work, we are consistently asked to justify why we focus on Black girls. This interrogation of our research becomes problematic when the inherent message is that Black girls are not enough. This review signifies that they are enough and that others can learn from research produced about them. The literacy practices gleaned from
Black girls are excellent for youth across backgrounds and across spaces. Yet, those who study Black girls need to be conscious of the potential dangers of the proliferation of research around Black girls without an intentional praxis toward engaged, sustainable educational practices as there has been an incursion of in the past decade. It is our hope that research in this area is not just a hot topic for the moment or a fad. Instead, Black girls’ literacies inquiries need to be sustained over time and to continue to be researched for improved practice. We also anticipate new spaces will be carved out related to multiple literacies, digital literacies, critical media literacy, and the literacy development of Black girls in the midst of political violence. Essentially we are calling for more (re)humanizing research. Henry (1998b) contends that research could be either a violent or humanizing experience for Black girls. We argue that dichotomy can also be extended in regards to English education practices where classroom spaces can be sites for this resistance, the solidarity of humanity, and for Black girl love because as Dr. Cooper asserted so eloquently, if this link is broken, the chain is broken.

**Endnote**

1. There is a distinction between Black feminism and Black womanism. Black womanist epistemologies represent a commitment to the survival and wholeness of all people, including Black men, whereas Black feminist epistemologies focus on the experiences, needs, and desires of women of color.

**References**


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