Searching for Full Vision: Writing Representations of African American Adolescent Girls

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Currently, African American girls are being depicted as overly sexual, violent, or confrontational, are judged by physical features, or are invisible across mainstream media and within school classrooms. Few investigations have explored how they respond to and interpret such imposed representations. Nor, for the most part, have studies examined how girls represent themselves among a society of others pathologizing and defining who they are. This inquiry investigated self-representations in the writings of eight African American adolescent girls ages 12–17 who participated in a historically grounded literacy collaborative. Coupling sociohistorical and critical sociocultural theories, I organized and analyzed their writings through open, axial, and selective coding. Findings show that the girls wrote across platforms similar to those African American women have addressed historically, which included writing to represent self, writing to resist or counter ascribed representations, and writing toward social change. The girls wrote multiple and complex representations, which included ethnic, gender, intellectual, kinship, sexual, individual, and community representations. These findings suggest their writings served as hybrid spaces for the girls to explore, make sense of, resist, and express different manifestations of self. The representations the girls created in their writings did not fall into static notions of culture or identity. Instead, their self-representations were socially constructed and were responsive to their lives. This study extends the extant research by offering wider views of representations from the girls’ voices, as well as a broadened historical lens to view their reading and writing with implications for how English language arts educators can reconceptualize the roles of writing in classrooms.

The making of a literary history in which black women are fully represented is a search for full vision to create a circle where now we have but a segment (Washington, 1987, p. xxvii).

In this line from her introduction to collected narratives by African American women from 1860 to 1960, Mary Helen Washington references African American women writers and how they were silenced and underrepresented within literary traditions. Although they have contributed substantially to the intellectual com-
munity, Washington argues that their writings have been portrayed in literary traditions as “singular and anomalous.” Washington is also alluding to the argument made by Anna Julia Cooper (1988) in her book *A Voice from the South*, in which she compares a world in which women were made to be “subordinate” to a metaphoric body with one eye covered with a bandage. When the bandage is removed, Cooper writes, “the whole body is filled with light. It sees a circle where before it saw a segment. The darkened eye restored, every member rejoices with it” (p. 122). Washington (1988) writes, “The myopic sight of the darkened eye can only be restored when the full range of the black women’s voice, with its own special timbres and shadings, remains mute no longer” (p. xiv). The silencing or muting of African American women’s lives provides the grounds for Washington’s call for a reconstruction of a literary tradition. She suggests that a full vision is restored when their voices, lives, and stories are represented and not blurred or bound by false views.

Currently, there exists a strong need to seek a similar “full vision” of African American adolescent girls. While there is a rich literary history of African American women writing about their lives among dominant discourses that have attempted to silence or falsely represent their identities, there is a limited amount of research into how and if Black adolescent girls write in similar ways as they, too, are faced with public misrepresentations of self. Representation, as I define it in this study, is the description, depiction, portrayal, or characterization of the self or someone else in a particular way and is an enactment of identity. Without a clear view of how Black adolescent girls define who they are, educators are left to piece together “broken and sporadic” segments of their identities (Washington, 1987) and may subsequently engage them in writing exercises that do not advance their negotiation of selfhood. The bounded projections of African American girls are further illustrated within historical images and the contemporary manifestations of these, the persistent focus on pathologies in social science research, and the narrowed attention given to beauty, colorism, and sexual characterizations in literacy research. Taken together, these literatures often focus on the ways others have portrayed Black girlhood and how these portrayals are perceived as negative, false, or incomplete and are discordant with girls’ literary history. Ideally, English language arts educators would be able to not only distinguish between others’ imposed identities and the self definitions of Black girls, but also reconnect their students with their literary histories by creating spaces for them to challenge false views. If educators can understand girls’ identities and ways to engage them in writing, this knowledge can help support them in crafting writing experiences in classrooms that not only build their skills but also help youth to make sense of who they are. This study presents wider views of Black girlhood from girls’ individual voices and helps educators reconceptualize the roles and purposes of writing accentuated in the histories, identities, and literacies of youth. Without wider views, other voices continue to become the dominant or the outwardly solitary narrative.
Purpose and Significance of Study

To get closer to a “full vision” in understanding how African American adolescent girls represent themselves, research is needed that foregrounds their voices and places them at the center. Beyond this, educators need wider theoretical views and instructional frames to inform the literacy practices of Black girls and the ways in which writing pursuits can include goals of identity sense-making. Without research on the ways girls represent themselves, both literacy scholars and educators are left with limited insight into who they are, which offers fewer affordances to inform culturally responsive English language arts instruction. Moreover, the focus on writing, representation, and African American girls is timely because they are currently being depicted as overly sexual, violent, or confrontational, are judged based on their hair, or are simply invisible across mainstream media (Richardson, 2007; Stephens & Phillips, 2003; West, 2008) and school classrooms (Carter, 2007; Fordham, 1993; Morris, 2007). This focus is especially important when comparing recent media conversations across the world on Black girls who are victims of human trafficking, judged by their physical beauty, murdered, or going missing. The current study builds upon Ruth Nicole Brown’s (2009) call for “power, not programs” among Black girls and her assertion that “we [as Black women and girls] are more than what others have defined us to be” (p. 19). This study reveals the complexity of Black girlhood and the ways girls define themselves among this dissonance.

Few investigations have explored how African American adolescent girls respond to and interpret how they are represented publically. Nor have many studies explored how girls represent themselves among a society of others pathologizing and defining their identities (Emerson, 2002). Therefore, I examined the writings of African American girls ages 12–17 who participated in a historically grounded literacy collaborative to understand how they represent themselves. A literacy collaborative is defined as a socially constructed space to improve and advance literacy development among a group of learners with varying identities, experiences, and literacy abilities (Tatum, 2009). The central research question grounding the current study was, How do African American adolescent girls represent themselves through writing while participating in a literacy collaborative? I considered the literary history of African American women to construct the writing environment.

Review of Literature

From the seventeenth century onward, African American women and girls have been portrayed as the “Jezebel,” “Mammy,” “Sapphire,” or “money-hungry heartless bitch,” as well as loud, aggressive, and not beautiful (Collins, 2000; Townsend, Thomas, Neilands, & Jackson, 2010; West, 1995). Across time, these representations have been deemed assaults, and such pervasive perceptions have the potential to marginalize these women and girls’ lives (Brice, 2007). Moreover, in spite of advances in civil rights, these images have endured and are often manifested in contemporary outlets that African American girls view. The most common of these are the
images of Black girls as hypersexual (similar to the Jezebel image), not beautiful (falsely depicting the Mammy image), and violent (similar to the Sapphire image).

These misrepresentations are largely connected to the topics in research involving girls today. Researchers who study African American adolescent girls in the fields of psychology and sociology have overwhelmingly focused on pathological issues such as obesity, sexually transmitted diseases, teen pregnancy, delinquency, and violence. The persistent focus on these topics pertaining to girls’ perceived vulnerabilities, social behavior, sexuality, or associated representations in research is not problematic in itself. However, these types of research should be coupled with qualitative literacy studies that center on girls’ voices describing the ways they perceive their lives and represent who they are. If research continues to represent an imbalanced view, it has the potential to pathologize these girls’ lives, and these images may begin to seep into the thoughts of those who instruct them (Thomas & Jackson, 2007). Furthermore, Richardson (2002) argues that when African American girls continue to see negative representations of themselves, do not see projections of themselves, or are ignored altogether, this becomes a barrier that stifles their quest for self-definition and self-determination. The quest of understanding the self is essential to their overall development as young adults.

When studying the writings of African American women throughout history, it becomes clear that they wrote to counter false and incomplete depictions that have been long been prevalent in society. Using their pens to fight back, writing became a vehicle to define their lives. From colonial and antebellum periods to the twenty-first century, Black women expressed themselves across several themes involving beauty, gender, race, education, intellect, artistic sensibility, identity, religion, family, relationships, and intergenerational representations of health and life (Lee, 2006). These diverse categories represent the dynamic complexity of their identities. As they represented themselves, they also wrote about critical issues affecting their lives. This purpose signified that their writings were intended to create awareness, advocacy, and social change (Peterson, 1995). Their writing practices therefore were not just driven by goals of learning and advancing writing skills, but were marked by a greater purpose in their lives related to self-definition, which consequently created spaces for future generations of Black women writers (Collins, 2000). This literary history led me to the questions of how African American girls are expressing their identities through writing in educative spaces today and if they write toward ideals of democracy and social change—particularly in English language arts classrooms. Brooks, Sekayi, Savage, Waller, & Picot (2010) asked a similar question as they examined themes found in young adult fiction written by Black women and featuring Black female protagonists. They found that Black women wrote across multiple conceptualizations of Black girlhood for young adult audiences. The current study serves to extend their work by aiming to understand which identities young girls now draw upon when crafting their own literary and informational pieces.

Literacy research concentrating on girls, representation, identity, and the heterogeneity of Black girlhood has also been enmeshed in their literate practices. As
researchers have studied the literacies of Black girls, representation and identity construction have undergirded their findings. Researchers have explored literary texts frequently read by girls (Gibson, 2010; Hinton-Johnson, 2005; Marshall, Staples, & Gibson, 2009) and their responses to these texts (Boston & Baxley, 2007; Brooks, Browne, & Hampton, 2008; Carter, 2007; Kaplan & Cole, 2003; Richardson, 2007; Sutherland, 2005). In the texts examined, several representations have emerged in the literature evoking physical characterizations, sexuality, intelligence, and kinship. Physical and sexual representations are the most prevalent. For example, in Sutherland’s (2005) research on six Black girls reading Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, the girls began to self-reflect on their own social positioning and how others associate beauty with European physical features. The text was a medium to discuss this theme and the ways ascribed representations of beauty served as boundaries. Similarly, participants in Richardson’s (2007) study analyzed sexual representations of Black girlhood through the examination of music videos. The focus on physical and sexual identity through print and nonprint media could be a consequence of Black women's writings and their focus on such topics, and these topics are still in the forefront in girls’ minds (Washington, 1990). While these topics are important for girls to examine and contest, a focus on these topics more broadly presents a limited view of their identities. For this reason, ongoing research on girls’ self-constructed viewpoints and narratives continues to be needed so that Black girls and those who educate them do not begin to take these ascribed identities as truth. Fewer studies have examined the writings of girls. Researchers conducting these studies have found writing to be a vehicle to explore diverse perspectives of self-identity as it has been for Black women over time (Winn, 2010; Wissman, 2008). My work aligns with this central finding but also extends it by examining the identities found in girls’ writing while participating in a collaborative designed to highlight their histories and identities.

**Theoretical Framework**

This study is grounded in both sociohistorical and critical sociocultural theories. Sociohistorical theory bridges affordances of the past to reconceptualize current and potential understandings of literacy enactments. Explaining the importance of historical lenses, Gutierrez (2008) argues that “a historicizing literacy . . . promotes expansive learning through an understanding of one’s own history in ways that reframe and remediate the past so it can become a resource for the present and future” (2008, p. 179). Other researchers have also promoted such views of embedding research in history (Fisher, 2009; Harris, 1992; McHenry & Heath, 1994; Willis, 1997). Critical sociocultural theory considers issues of power, equity, and social justice in learning (Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007). Lewis et al. (2007) use three frames in their conceptualization of the theory: identity, power, and agency. This study focuses on examining representation embedded in the dominant discourses shaping how girls view themselves and the agency they have to self-define. Creating a space for the girls to write openly and without prompts afforded the potential for agency in the literacy collaborative. Power is defined here as anything
related to perceived strength, control, authority, or dominance used to construct representations. Moje and Lewis (2007) define agency as the “strategic making and remaking of selves, identities, activities, relationships, cultural tools, resources, and histories as they are embedded within relations of power” (2007, p. 18). Agency pushes toward the capacity, independence, and authority for youth to assert their own voices, ideals, perspectives, and truths.

These theoretical frameworks, and particularly the three frames of critical sociocultural theory, are related to the three platforms of African American women’s writings across history. Writing platforms are conceptualized as the foundation on which writings rest (Tatum, 2009), including purposes and intentions for literary compositions. The writing platforms of African American women, as part of a broader literary tradition, serve as my conceptual lens for the study. These women have written to represent self (identity), to counter hegemony or dominance (power), and to advocate for change among themselves and others (agency) (Royster, 2000). These three frames, together with the three aspects of critical sociocultural theory, were used to analyze the writings in the study. These theories, combined, helped to strengthen my examination of the girls’ writings as I investigated what they wrote about and how their writings related to or shaped their identities.

Methodology
A qualitative case study was conducted to describe how eight African American adolescent girls represented themselves in their writings while participating in a four-week summer literacy collaborative. A qualitative case study affords opportunities to provide thick descriptions of the multiple written representations of participants in a uniquely designed context. In addition, this methodology offers tools to investigate writing outside the school context to inform pedagogy in other learning contexts, such as classrooms (Schultz, 2006).

Framing the Context of the Study
The literacy collaborative in the study embodies the framework of African American female literary societies of the nineteenth century. African American literary societies date back to the 1800s and yielded some of the earliest records of writing in a collective (McHenry, 2002; Porter, 1936). Members met regularly and engaged in reading literature that offered a variety of subjects to excite their interest and stimulate their minds to think about, evaluate, write, and debate significant issues. They engaged in literacy practices with the purpose of advancing social conditions as they embodied four goals for conceptualizing and enacting literacy: (1) to advance proficiencies in literacy; (2) to make sense of their identities; (3) to build and nurture intellectual development; and (4) to gain print authority. Print authority meant not waiting or seeking permission from others to use language in ways that infused one’s own voice and truths confidently.

A closer examination of literary societies helped me to frame the literacy collaborative in the study. Specifically, I used ten aspects that I thought would be significant in shaping the girls’ writings:
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.
3. Participants would be called Sister Authors.
4. Instruction would be responsive to the lives of the participants.
5. Enabling texts (Tatum, 2009) would be central to all instructional support.
6. Participants would read and write different types of texts.
7. Participants would be encouraged to think about text in critical ways.
8. Writing would be collaborative.
9. Participants would learn how to claim authority in language.
10. Text selection was purposeful for critical discussion about identity and representation.

**Research Site and Recruitment**

The research study took place at a large, urban Midwestern university from July 3 to July 26, 2012. The location for the research was the university’s reading clinic. Based on my goals for the study, I planned to recruit 7–12 girls between the ages of 12 and 17 years old who self-identified as Black or African American. The planned number of prospective participants for the study was selected because 7 represented the mean number of participants in literacy collaboratives (e.g., book clubs, writing/reading discussion groups) from studies with other Black adolescent girls. The maximum number of 12 represented the average number of adolescents that have engaged in literacy collaboratives with me in the past. The current study was planned as an intensive writing experience. A student-teacher ratio larger than 12:1 would not have been manageable.

I sent out an email communication inviting parents, educators, and community members to recruit participants. The email contained an overview of the research study and included a one-page application for interested girls to complete. This application requested demographic information and asked candidates to submit a writing sample about a topic that was important and/or unique to African American girls. Interested girls had three weeks to submit an application. I received a total of 10 applications and invited all the girls to participate; only 8 were able to commit to the dates of the study. The most frequent reason the girls gave for deciding to participate was because they wanted to write.

**The Sister Authors**

The eight girls (see Table 1) and I met 3 days per week, 3 hours per day, for 4 weeks in the summer from 1:30 p.m. to 4:30 p.m.

The participants did not receive any incentives for participation other than lunch and copies of the texts read during the collaborative. The participants in the study, the authors of the texts we read, and I were referred to as “Sister Authors.” Already at this initial stage of the study, I was purposely constructing a space where the girls and I could develop a collective identity as a collaborative, as well as our individual identities through our writings.
My Positionality
Growing up, I attended schools in urban and suburban environments. As a result, I have had diverse learning experiences. I self-identify as a Black woman and a writer. Yet growing up, I struggled deeply with knowing and understanding my identity. In addition, I did not see many positive representations of myself in my immediate and broader environments, which stifled my efforts to understand who I was. It was not until my mid-college years that I began to make sense of my identities, and reflective writing helped me toward this end.

My interest in African American girls stems from my community-engaged work as a middle school teacher. For five years, I led a girls’ organization focused on academic, physical, and overall wellness for adolescent girls. I soon discovered that the girls who participated had many hardships related to social injuries, pathologies, and identity—many of which I experienced as a teen. I wanted to discover if literacy practices could help girls mediate, resist, or negotiate self for protection and refuge. Since then, I have engaged girls in various collaboratives focused on literacy development.

Pedagogical Routine
As the researcher and facilitator, I wrote and taught daily lesson plans developed to support the girls’ writings. African American women’s literature served as literary mentors. Each lesson began with participants collectively reciting a preamble that they co-constructed during the first day of the literacy collaborative. After the preamble, the group read a brief biography of the featured mentor author; read, interpreted, and discussed literature; and then wrote. Sharing, critiquing, and revising writings were all ongoing pursuits in the collaborative. On average, we wrote for two uninterrupted hours each session.

Table 1. Demographics of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Interest in Writing (Self-Reported)</th>
<th>School Setting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Camille</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Public/suburban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dahlia</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Public/urban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heather</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Public/urban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ivy</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Charter/urban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jasmine</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Public/urban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lily</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Private/suburban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violet</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Private/urban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zinnia</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Charter/urban</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
During instruction, the girls were encouraged to write openly. To help them develop their own writing styles, I modeled how to read texts like a writer, which enabled them to pay greater attention to authors’ use of sentence structure, language complexity, voice, conventions, dialogue, and other literary features. I also shared with them my process of writing. As we moved closer to our polished drafts during the second and third session of the week, we exchanged writings to offer critiques related to organization, interest level, authenticity, details, word choice, style, voice, and factual and aesthetic elements. This practice of publically sharing and offering feedback was taken directly from an examination of historic artifacts of Black female literary societies. Each session was concluded with the girls standing and reciting their creed:

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.

Their preamble marked the power and purpose of their pens.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

There were multiple data sources for this study. They included 16 pre- and post-collaborative audiotaped interviews. Forty-eight writing artifacts were collected that included eight personal narratives, eight poems, eight broadside poems, eight short stories, eight informational pieces, and eight open letters. Other data sources included daily participant–researcher memos and 33 hours of video observations. Three phases were implemented for analyzing, interpreting, and triangulating data in the study.

**Phase 1: Coding Writing Artifacts and Interview Data**

I employed a line-by-line thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) of each writing artifact to investigate participant self-representations. Through thematic analysis, I identified language related to the three categories of critical sociocultural theory and the three platforms of African American women’s writing discussed earlier, aiming to illustrate my coding methods focusing on the category of representation. Lines signifying the broad idea of representation were extracted and then sorted into themes during open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Through open coding, I identified 136 themes related to representation. Some of these codes included beauty, family, college/higher education, hair, individuality, writing, and bonding. Considering these codes, I conducted a second review of the writing artifacts and engaged in axial coding to find connections among these codes. During axial coding, I collapsed the initial 136 themes into 8 codes related to representation. These codes
included representations related to community, ethnicity, gender, intellect, kinship, personality, physical/external self, and sexuality. Finally, a third pass through the data allowed me to refine and confirm the final categories. I developed a coding scheme with the final codes for representation and conducted a final review of all the data collectively to confirm selective codes. I followed this by reviewing the data to understand if and how the girls wrote about power and toward agency.

Phase 2: Member Checks
I was able to engage in member checks during the post-collaborative interviews with each participant. During the interviews, I asked the girls to discuss representations from their writing artifacts. Such questions helped them talk about who they were in each writing piece and why they chose to write about that particular form of self. Because I had analyzed each writing and engaged in axial coding by this time, I asked each participant if she represented herself in the ways I had interpreted in my coding. I followed this by asking each participant to talk about what the writing artifact said about representations related to her or other girls.

Phase 3: Triangulation and Inter-rater Agreement
In the third phase, I compared the writing artifacts and interviews with the observations and reflective notes to triangulate my findings and strengthen interpretation. The participants’ representations were then checked against how they talked about representation in each writing artifact during the post-collaborative interviews. I added this triangulation of the interviews to my original coding scheme, which was then used by another researcher to code a representative sample of the data. A comparison of coding found that the outside coder and I agreed on 71 of 78 representations, an inter-rater agreement rate of 91% (Tinsley & Weiss, 2000).

Findings
The girls wrote across six representations of self, which included community, cultural, individual, intellectual, kinship, and sexual representations. The cultural representation was divided into ethnic and gender representations. I was not surprised to find kinship representations, because the writing group was developed to nurture collaboration, which is a descriptor of sisterhood; however, I included this finding because kinship manifested itself in different ways in their writings. In addition, the girls were not prompted to write about kinship, family, or friendship. Kinship representations were also observed in their sample writings before participation in the collaborative, so I did not find this type of writing to be solely a result of the collaborative. Furthermore, when teachers engage students as a community of writers, a cooperative environment emerges (Tatum & Gue, 2012; Wissman, 2008). Overall, the girls largely wrote about their cultural selves, with representations of gender being rendered most frequently (see Table 2). Kinship and intellect were the next most frequent representations. The girls often wrote across multiple representations of self in one artifact. However, I found through careful analysis and member checking that each writing piece illuminated one
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Representation Code</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Examples</th>
<th>Frequency of All Representations</th>
<th>Frequency of Central Representations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>COMMUNITY</strong></td>
<td>Writing related to membership in a specific group living together in one place or practicing a common interest</td>
<td>Writing about home, local community, or being an American; writing about identity in an international context</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CULTURAL: ETHNIC</strong></td>
<td>Writing related to national or cultural tradition of a distinct group that denotes a specific origin (by birth) or culture (by environment)</td>
<td>Writing about race or being black</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CULTURAL: GENDER</strong></td>
<td>Writing related to femaleness or femininity</td>
<td>Writing about girlhood or womanhood</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>INDIVIDUAL</strong></td>
<td>Writing related to personality or personal traits</td>
<td>Writing about temperament or personality</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>INTELLECTUAL</strong></td>
<td>Writing related to academics, thinking, learning, or aspirations</td>
<td>Writing about school or goals</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>KINSHIP</strong></td>
<td>Writing related to the relationship with family or fictive kin</td>
<td>Writing about family or sisterhood</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SEXUAL</strong></td>
<td>Writing related to relationships or intimate interest (or lack thereof) in males or females</td>
<td>Writing about sexuality or teen pregnancy</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>176</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
central representation that captured the meaning and significance of the entire piece. Although gender representations emerged the most, ethnicity was a central focus.

In 37 of the 48 artifacts, the girls wrote about or against some enacted form of power. This was followed by writing toward agency or social change, which occurred in 35 of the 48 writings. As I illustrate the six representations through examples from the girls, I will embed my analysis in the other two frames of critical sociocultural theory and discuss the types of power the girls wrote about (if observed) and the analysis of agency. The types of power that the girls wrote about fell within the following seven categories:

1. Physical beauty and health (being portrayed as not beautiful or unhealthy)
2. Education (being portrayed as uneducated)
3. Abuse and violence (being portrayed as violent or abused)
4. Monolithic profile (being portrayed as a homogenous group)
5. Sexualizing and objectification (being portrayed as overly sexual)
6. Racial stereotypes (being portrayed within fixed notions of race)
7. Personal selfhood (personal struggles, such as self-confidence)

The power they wrote about or against related to issues they found important in their lives and the lives of other groups with which they identified (e.g., African Americans, women). Writing toward agency or change meant that they were writing to improve, advance, disrupt, or change the power they were writing about.

**Cultural Representations: Ethnicity**

Cultural representations are related to the description, practices, or beliefs of a particular group. The two dimensions of cultural representations were ethnicity and gender. Representations related to ethnicity expressed a national or cultural tradition. For all of the girls, this was writing about being African American or Black. Jasmine wrote about an ethnic representation in the following broadside poem.

1 Other people's ignorance can afflict the world
2 One person steps out of line, makes a fool of themselves,
3 And we come tumbling downhill with them,
4 Practically
5 Forced
6 Into *unnecessary likeliness*
7 Why not?
8 Same skin, same hair, same eyes.
9 Same personality?
10 Same level of intelligence?
We may be this way to people whose words are plagued with
Irrelevance
Ensnared within their thoughts,
Can’t escape the
Insignificance
Trapped, cannot comprehend

Just because we look similar does not mean we are.
We are all people,
All with our own sempiternal personalities,
Lives, dreams and ambitions.
Maybe a person of my ethnicity made a mistake
Did something foolish
Acted with utter
Ignorance
But so what?
And maybe they could use a lesson in life
To be enlightened,
Release the inner intellect trapped inside
But do not think for a second that I, or any of my
other sisters,
Do as well.
We may stand together,
But we are still separate beings.

Jasmine’s use of the word “ethnicity” in Line 21 led me to understand that she was representing her ethnic self. This is supported by language about skin and hair in Line 8. She chose to write about generalizing African American people based on ethnicity, as revealed in her post-collaborative interview and in Line 17 of the poem. She specifically wrote to counter the power of the idea that all African Americans are homogenous, as demonstrated by the language used in Lines 6–10 as she wrote about having the same skin, hair, eyes, personality, and level of intelligence. She expressed that she and other Black people experience the consequences of this type of label. She wrote against a dominant ideology that results in what she named “unnecessary likeliness,” caused by “ignorance and irrelevance” of other people’s thinking. This “unnecessary likeliness” is similar to the notion of representing African American girls in a monolithic profile. Toward the end of the poem, in Lines 26–28, she wrote toward agency by suggesting that “maybe they could use a lesson in life; To be enlightened; Release the inner intellect trapped inside.” In these lines, she pushed for others with such views to learn a lesson that counters such thinking, “release” such minimizing thoughts, and begin to see wider views of Black girls.
When asked in the post-collaborative interview why she wrote this poem and what it said about African American girls, Jasmine said it was about racism and generalizing. She gave the example of television depicting Black girls in one particular way. Also, as seen in Lines 3–5 of the interview transcript below, she compared Black girls to White people, who she described as having common physical characteristics, and questioned why they instead are portrayed as unique and creative:

1 It's this whole thing like with racism. People say oh, they all look alike.
2 They are all black girls so they must be the same because that's how they
3 are portrayed on TV. I don't get that. White people have same color skin.
4 Why do they get to be different, be their own self, and be unique and
5 creative? Why don't we? I mean we are all from the same ethnicity and of
6 the same heritage but that doesn't mean we are the same person.

She questioned why African American girls could not be recognized for their individuality, arguing that much heterogeneity exists among Black people.

**Cultural Representations: Gender**

The second dimension of cultural representations was gender. Examples included writing about being a girl or woman and writing about physical-gender descriptions of self, such as bodily appearance or hair. In several types of writings, which included a poem, a broadside poem, the informational piece, and the open letter, all participants wrote about gender. Lily devoted equal attention to her race and gender in “A Black Woman’s Crown”:

1 To sit with a crown on your head
2 Is to claim the world
3 With a beautiful face
4 Of brown sugar and rich dark chocolate,
5 With eyes as dark as night with a spark
6 That twinkles like the North Star
7 A crown seems fit

8 Though others in the world
9 Try to conspire
10 Betray and deceive
11 As though time has stopped
12 In the days of overthrowing kings and queens
13 With determination
14 They try to take your
15 Throne
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

She wrote about how Black women need to reclaim the power and influence (the crown) that belongs to them. In this poem, Lily celebrated Black women through her language about external beauty. To illustrate their gendered beauty, she described women with “a beautiful face, of brown sugar and rich dark chocolate, with eyes as dark as night.” The power enacted here is that of those she referred to as “others in the world” (Lines 3–5) who “try” to take Black women’s power. In Lines 18–21, she wrote that the crown, or power, stays with the Black woman although her authority may go unseen. The pursuit of reclaiming her authority or agency is the reason behind the “deceitfulness” in her life. A very similar deceitfulness occurs when others attempt to write the lives and stories of Black girls. Black women have long written to counter such faulty accounts, and Lily has done the same. I asked her what she was seeking to express in this piece. An excerpt from the transcript follows:

You know just to say in general we don’t let people push us. We shouldn’t let people push us around because we’re not here for that. We’re not here to be pushed around just in general. We deserve happiness and a good life and a life worth living.

Her interview reaffirmed her writing about the authority of Black women and not allowing others to determine their fates or “push” them around, as she stated. Writing was a tool for her to push forth this message of the self-worth of Black women.

Intellectual Representations

Intellectual representations referred to writings that were related to academics, thinking, learning, mental creativity, career goals, and aspirations. In one example, Camille wrote,

1 Now is not time to wither away our precious faculties. Many young black
2 women have started the foundation. Now it is time for us to lay the
3 concrete. We must step into the light to be seen, yell from mountaintops of
4 greatness to be heard, just as our fellow seasoned sisters have done before
5 us. We must let our genius show and stop being afraid of being inadequate.
6 For aren’t we just as exceptional as anyone else? The concrete we lay will
7 be the stepping-stone for those to come later. Just as our past sisters led
8 the way for us, we are obligated to do the same for our younger sisters.
9 Our struggles are immeasurable and that is what makes us beautiful strong
10 women.

Key language, like “faculties,” “let our genius show,” and “aren’t we just as exceptional” in Lines 1, 5, and 6, gives evidence that Camille was writing about intellect. As she was writing to express intelligence, she appealed to African American girls to “stop being afraid of being inadequate” (Line 5), which I interpreted as power stemming from within. This feeling of inadequacy and self-doubt is what she believed many Black girls experience. Although she did not express the cause of such feelings, she exercised agency in Line 9, telling them, “Our struggles are immeasurable.” Camille wrote to connect with the past by communicating to girls today that Black women have made extraordinary accomplishments and they can do the same. She confirmed these observations in the post-collaborative interview.

Gholnecsar: Can you talk about who Black women and Black girls are in this piece?
Camille: Yeah I just feel like you don’t have it easy so it’s up to us to prove that we belong where everyone else is and that we deserve it. We can succeed but in order to do that, there are times when you feel like giving up but we should encourage one another to just stay strong and keep going. I just wanted to basically say that I wanted for the younger generation to have it better than I did. I don’t want them to have to feel my struggle.

She explained that she wrote this to improve conditions for the next or younger generation so that they would not be overtaken by self-doubt or low confidence. Camille went on to say that she experienced these kinds of feelings.

**Kinship Representations**

*Kinship representations* referred to language in writing related to the relationship with family or fictive kin. Examples included writing about family, friendship, or sisterhood. Writing about family or fictive kin emerged often in the girls’ short stories and open letters. The girls were asked to write to other African American girls. Jasmine, Lily, and Camille addressed the reader by writing, “To My Sister” and “Dear Sisters.” The label and address using the word *sister* showed a fictive kinship with their readers, and in each of the writings there was language that further implied a familial relationship. Each of the girls also wrote against some enacted power and toward agency or social change. Jasmine wrote:

1 To My Sister:
2 Know I understand. Know that I walked down a road so very similar to
3 yours. Know that I, and all our other Sisters, will be here for you, here
4 to assist you when you grow weary from embracing the hardships in life,
5 the stereotypes and harsh comments, and help you to overcome and let
6 go of them. Eventually, you will outgrow the need to even
acknowledge such troubles, to not give the people throwing them at
you the time of day.

She expressed solidarity or unity among girls by writing, “Know that I, and all our
other Sisters, will be here for you” in Line 3. This is important because she asserted
that African American girls experience hardships, stereotypes, and harsh comments
directed toward them (in Lines 4–5). These were three examples of the power she
was writing against. She wrote to tell girls to overcome barriers and ignore such
“troubles” in Lines 5–7, pushing toward agency and change. Rather than write within
a frame of hopelessness, she wrote for girls to redefine and reimagine their lives.

**Sexual Representations**

Sexual representations referred to language in writing related to relationships and
intimate interest (or lack thereof) in males or females. This included writing about
sexuality, objectification, and teen pregnancy. This definition comes from the work
of Brooks et al. (2010), who examined the heterogeneity of Black girlhood in young
adult fiction. I found that the older girls (ages 15–17) wrote centrally about sexual
representations and the younger girls did not.

Violet wrote a provocative text about an imagined world of Black women and
girls without the presence of Black males. She was inspired to pen this piece after
researching the loss of Black males in her community due to violence. In “To My
Black Brother,” she invited the reader to imagine a world without Black men. In
this world, she posited, there would be confusion and women would turn to each
other for sex.

1 Picture a world with confusion
2 Created by this allusion of a world of females
3 But no males at all
4 And since there are no males
5 There’s no reproduction
6 But a lot of arousal
7 As women turn to each other for pleasure
8 Lips locking
9 Eyes closed
10 Fingers exploring a body that is familiar to them
11 Entering and Breaking
12 Entering and Breaking
13 But nothing comes out of this
14 No new life is born
15 So the existing ones die one by one
16 First your grandmother, then your mother, next your
17 Daughter
This broadside poem exhibits a sexual representation because Violet introduced the consequence of Black males’ absence from the world. She wrote in Lines 1–14 that women would turn to each other, but “No new life is born.” Consequently, grandmothers, mothers, and granddaughters would die off. She wrote this poem with the purpose of creating awareness of the loss of Black males. Violet talked more about the poem in her post-collaborative interview:

I felt like it’s an issue that’s so relevant now. Like every time you turn on the news, it’s somebody being killed and it’s usually a Black male and I decided to write about it.

She ended the poem in Line 26, stating that the lives of women and girls are in the hands of their brothers. Violet implicitly wrote toward agency or change by using her pen to bring awareness to a critical issue of violence.

**Individual Representations**

*Individual representations* referred to writings about personality, individuality, or personal traits. These representations appeared in short stories, open letters, and personal narratives. In their short stories, most of the girls infused individual representations of themselves written into the characters or plots. For example, in her post-collaborative interview, Dahlia said that the character she created in her short story embodied her own personality traits. In “The Luck I Never Had,” she wrote:

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

She told the story as a first-person narrative by a character named Sophie, who enjoyed playing basketball for the school and hanging out with friends, and had interest in a boy. As Sophie eagerly got ready for the big championship basketball game after school, the character’s love interest, Matthew, asked her out to the school
dance. She now had two events to get excited about. Trying to stay focused, Sophie did a ritual chant to bring her luck before the game.

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

**Community Representations**

Community representations related to membership in a specific group living together in one place or practicing a common interest. The girls wrote about their home, national, and global communities. In her personal narrative entitled, “From a Different Perspective,” Lily wrote about a national community representation in an international context as she also explored her ethnicity. As a young child, she moved with her family to Malaysia and, for the first time, had the experience of viewing herself among different cultures and races. In her personal narrative she wrote,

1. I was a little girl moving to a place I didn’t even know existed. Malaysia, I did not even know where that was on the map . . . . There, my race had no past, no stereotypes. To them I was American not African American. My complexion never mattered. I was just one of the five students from America whose families moved overseas. At times I might have been recognized as one of the Americans who owned the world, but never as African American.

In her pre-collaborative interview, Lily expressed an inability to fully make sense of her ethnicity when living in Malaysia, stating that although she was surrounded by an array of people, she felt very alone and disconnected from other classmates. Lily knew herself to be Black because of her skin color, but in Malaysia, no one referred to her as a Black girl, as indicated in Lines 3–4. Others did not make mention of her race the way she thought they would. In her post-collaborative interview, she explained that she had thought they would focus on her being Black. The ways she made sense of herself in that space were different than how she made sense of who she was now that she was living in the United States. In Malaysia, she was represented as an American before anything else. Because of this, she wrote that she did not have to be judged or measured against past enslavement or stereotypes that existed in America. She wrote about a dominant narrative of others focusing too heavily on race in identity and how she was able to push past this and consider
her other identities. In her post-collaborative interview, she explained that although she had been nervous about moving to Malaysia because she did not know how people would react to her, she left this experience with a greater sense of herself in a global context.

Summary and Implications
The girls explicated experiences and self-representations in complex ways and wrote across multiple types of text. Writing became a hybrid medium to construct ideals of self amid dominant discourses. With each day of the collaborative, I learned more about the girls through their writings and interactions. I was reminded that researchers and educators must not get trapped in singular profiles of Black girlhood as seen publically in media, in literature, and within society. This was something that the girls resisted and wrote against. As they wrote about themselves, several issues emerged that were important to their lives. They wrote about problems, struggles, and misrepresentations projected upon them—all of which possess domineering qualities of power. They wrote against issues important to their lives, stemming from both internal and societal spaces. These ranged from self-doubt and internal conflicts related to beauty, to the media’s sexualization and objectification of Black girls. This suggests that Black girls must have a space to write about local and global issues affecting their lives. Writing about power or dominant narratives led to writing in agentive ways toward change, underscoring existing writing research with Black adolescent girls and providing insight into the future of English language arts (Winn, 2013) instruction that is responsive to the growing needs of our world. Writing about critical issues also links instruction to history, particularly considering African American women’s writing platforms and their need for agency. In this way, the findings link to and reconceive the use of theory. Coupling sociohistorical and critical sociocultural theories resulted in a useful combined lens through which to understand the intersections of histories, identities, and literacies of African American girls. Both views offered greater affordances for interpreting data and connecting findings to shape current writing spaces. This was achieved by grounding the learning collaborative in historical enactments and relating traditional writing platforms to critical sociocultural theory.

The girls wrote across platforms similar to those adopted by other African American women writers. Writing across platforms affected their writings, thoughts about self, print authority, and intellect. This suggests that writing prompts, which are typically used in classroom instruction, should be replaced with writing platforms to offer more meaningful purposes for writing. Writing prompts often require students to respond about subjects that are unresponsive to their cultural identities or histories. To determine useful platforms for writing, I read literature written by African American women to understand why they wrote. I also engaged in a study of how African American women developed and practiced literacy historically. This helped me discover their histories and realign these histories with current practice. Teachers in school contexts could learn the local and wider histories of their students to inform writing instruction and de-
velop writing platforms. This may call for reconceptualized views of literacy and the roles of writing instruction beyond just writing to build skills and including writing to make sense of self and enact agency. The creation of a space where the girls could write in ways to negotiate who they said they were, who others said they were, and how they wanted to be represented afforded opportunities to write openly and powerfully.

Conclusion
During the writing institute, we read Alice Walker’s poem “The Nature of This Flower Is to Bloom” (Walker, 1973), which uses the metaphor of the flower for African American girls. I purposefully used names of flowers as pseudonyms for the Sister Authors in the study because the flower has traditionally been used to refer to women in literary writings (Rutkowski, 2008), particularly in Black women’s writings. I also saw the image of a flower represented in the writings of the girls. Camille, for example, wrote about African American girls as “flowers” in her open letter:

If you make it, I make it. My soul will rest within the harmonious sounds of your victory. The seeds have been planted, now it is up to us to nourish the flowers so that our future generations will stand tall and beautiful. Never again will they know what it feels like to struggle, to feel inferior and to feel like all hope is gone. We must leave a legacy; a legacy of excellence. We are all Queens and must conduct ourselves accordingly.

Here Camille wrote about “seeds planted” to refer to previous generations of African American women who, through their writings, have paved the way for other young women to be successful. She then stated that now is the time for girls today to do the same and “nourish the flowers” of future generations. Observing such language in the girls’ writings and the writings of Black women historically, I chose names of flowers for each of the girls that captured their respective personalities and physical styles, and the content found in their writings.

The growth and cultivation of African American adolescent girls’ literacies is a timely topic, as an imbalanced view of who they are is prevalent across public spaces. If educators in and out of school contexts are to appropriately teach and respond to the needs of African American adolescent girls, pedagogy must be developed and implemented that incorporates their histories, identities, and literacies and honors instructional frameworks of culture (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1994). To move toward this type of pedagogy in writing instruction, educators must create spaces where African American girls can openly write about who they are, as well as opportunities for them to connect with, negotiate, and challenge dominant narratives about their identities. In order to get a fuller understanding of how girls make sense of their own lives, we need instructional practices and research that make their voices central and do not sacrifice opportunities for intellectual growth or for them to make sense of who they are. This study contributes to research on African American adolescent girls and their literacies so that neither
literacy scholars nor English language arts educators are left with mere segments or limited insight into who they are. When attention is given to the writings of African American adolescent girls, the once blurred and incomplete portrayal becomes a full vision into their lives.

REFERENCES


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**2015 David H. Russell Award Call for Nominations**

NCTE is now accepting nominations for the David H. Russell Award for Distinguished Research in the Teaching of English. This award recognizes published research in language, literature, rhetoric, teaching procedures, or cognitive processes that may sharpen the teaching or the content of English at any level. Any work or works of scholarship or research in language, literature, rhetoric, or pedagogy and learning published during the past five years (i.e., between January 2009 and December 2014) are eligible. Works nominated for the David H. Russell Award should be exemplary instances of the genre, address broad research questions, contain material that is accessibly reported, and reflect a project that stands the test of time. Normally, anthologies are not considered. Reports of doctoral studies, while not precluded from consideration for the Russell Award, are typically considered as part of NCTE’s separate Promising Researcher program. Works nominated for the award must be available in the English language. To nominate a study for consideration, please email the following information to ksearsmith@ncte.org: your name, your phone, your email; author, title, publisher, date of publication, and one paragraph indicating your reasons for nominating the work. If you have the four copies of the publication needed for distribution to the Selection Committee, please send them to the postal address below. (If not, we will request them from the publisher.) **Send nominations and materials by March 1, 2015,** to: David H. Russell Award, NCTE, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801–1010, Attn: Kelly Searsmith. Final selections will be announced in mid-August 2015.