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Daughters Making Sense of African American Literature in Out-of-School Zones

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· This article considers the value of young adult literature in the
· literacy development of adolescents. Her account of an out-of-school
· reading group for adolescent African American girls illustrates the
· capacity such spaces have to provide young African American women
· with opportunities for self-reflection, critical inquiry, and personal
· development, opportunities that may not exist within the traditional
· classroom setting. Melvin-Davis contends that reading groups, such
· as these, function as “homeplaces,” spaces where diverse, relevant,
· and realistic African American experiences are shared, validated, and
· explored for the insights they might reveal for negotiating the world.

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Bria: Some people get out at two o'clock; parents don't get home til' five. Dat's a long amount of time when they're sittin' home by themselves, and homework don't take dat long, and some people don't even do it. So, you got kids, but no time. They need to get their kids involved in stuff.

Nakia: And get her some books. Like, if I wasn't here, I'd probably be layin' down on the phone with some boy or somethin'."

Melvette: Okay.

Nakia: I'm just tellin' the truth!



Adolescence is a time when male and female youth begin to mature physically and also explore and define their cultural, gendered, and otherwise social selves. For African American girls, in particular, adolescence can also be a time of learning to cope with racial and gender oppressions (Ladner; Wade-Gayles; Collins, “The Meeting of Motherhood”; Crew; Groves; Paul). Elaine Kaplan describes coming of age for African American girls as “a time when Black girls, striving for maturity, lose the support of others in three significant ways. First, they are abandoned by the educational system; second, they become mere sexual accompanists for boys and men; third, these problems create a split between the girls and their families and significant others” (10). Additionally, the sexist and racist practices that female adolescents of color encounter in urban and predominately white classrooms undermine and often silence their voices (Fordham *Blacked Out*). Much attention has been given to ways young people’s social, cultural, and educational needs, such as those mentioned by Kaplan, can be addressed in the classroom, but lacking are studies and discussions that explore ways after-school or out-of-school programs might help address these vital needs (Mahiri and Sablo; Alvermann, Young, and Green; Mahiri). These types of discussions are critical because not only do out-of-school time programs supplement academic learning, connect young people with caring adults, support young people’s development, and add productive time to a young person’s day (The American Youth Policy Forum), but in a time when school reform highly prioritizes standardized assessment, these types of programs also offer an opportunity for youth to develop their academic, cultural, social, and personal literacies without the threat of failing to pass a test or be promoted to the next grade level. These types of programs, no doubt, help keep young people from being overcome by self-destructive activities well known to youth just needing “something to do.”



In light of the coming-of-age research that characterizes adolescence for African American girls as a time when they must grapple with racial, gender, and sometimes, economic biases that may frustrate their adolescent experiences, I organized and facilitated a book club during the 2005-2006 school year with a group of ninth and tenth grade girls participating in the Umoja Youth Empowerment Program in an effort to address the young women's need for a) positive role models and b) Black female-centered spaces where discussions of issues such as Black female identity, voice, relationships, cultural awareness, and educational development can take place in order to help African American girls navigate adolescence (Sullivan; Cauce et al.; Pastor; Leadbeater and Way; Gilligan, Lyons, and Hanmer). This book club provided an opportunity for teen girls to read and discuss with peers and adult mentors young adult texts written by African American female authors. In this article, I discuss the issues in the African American young adult (AAYA) texts we read that stimulated discussion, the ways readers responded to these issues, and the ways readers made use of the opportunity to discuss AAYA literature in an out-of-school context.

AAYA Literature Writers: Black-Educationist-Activist Authors

African American youth's engagement with literature that portrays diverse African American experiences has the potential to inspire their imaginations, affirm their literacy, gender, and cultural identities, and challenge them to think critically about the world around them (Bishop; Johnson; Groves). Pamela Groves argues that strong, young adult, Black female protagonists allow youth to see people like themselves resisting defeat and resolving issues. She declares, "One of the goals of young adult novels written with African American female protagonists is to resolve the rage and restore the selves of these girls by offering strategies of resistance as they work toward liberation" (64). She asserts that African American coming-of-age stories offer readers a chance to



“identify with individual characters as well as the larger group in these stories and [offer them] new ways of defining themselves. They can view themselves and their lives in a safe, nurturing place, before having to confront an oppressive world” (64).

Like Groves, I believe it is vital for young readers to read about realistic situations and to be able to see other young adults work through not-so-perfect lives. With this in mind, I chose works by contemporary YA literature authors for the young women to read in the book club. A preliminary investigation of select works by authors Sharon Flake (*Who Am I Without Him?*), Rita Williams-Garcia (*Blue Tights; Like Sisters on the Homefront*), and Connie Porter (*Imani All Mine*) revealed that these authors featured contemporary, relatable stories about African American adolescent girls and that they wrote from an insider’s perspective¹. Additionally, my analysis of book reviews, interview responses, and biographical texts about these women revealed powerful information about not only the value they place on the work they do as authors, but also the commitment they have to tell stories, stimulate conversations, and provoke action concerning real issues affecting African American youth and families.

I also gleaned from this examination that these authors function as activists, or advocates, for youth. They use literature as a medium to explore critical social and cultural issues relevant to African American girls. Their use of literature to highlight African American girls’ experiences demonstrates an interest in and commitment to providing young adult readers with relevant and realistic stories about African American girls and their experiences. Sharon Flake explains the importance of speaking back to negative images and giving families and communities hope through stories:

I feel so strongly about telling the experiences of African-Americans because I think some people still see us in stereotypical ways. They equate the inner city with crime, violence, unwed mothers,



and uncontrollable black boys. They don't see that inner city mothers also cook and care for their kids and take pride in their neighborhoods. They don't seem to see the many young black kids who, although under enormous social disadvantages, still choose the right path. (Hyperion)

Similarly, Rita Williams-Garcia conveys a calling to promote literacy and tell stories that young people want to read. She explains, "Writing stories for young people is my passion and my mission. Teens will read. They hunger for stories that engage them and reflect their images and experiences" (Williams-Garcia *Homepage*). In *Imani All Mine*, author Connie Porter courageously undertook writing the story of an inner-city, African American girl who was determined to survive through academic, familial, and personal struggles including rape, pregnancy, stereotypes, and prejudices. Both Flake's *Who Am I Without Him?* and Williams-Garcia's *Like Sisters on the Homefront* have won Coretta Scott King Honors, and Porter's 1999 novel *Imani All Mine* is a Black Caucus of the American Library Association (BCALA) Honor Book.

I argue that these authors also function as educators as they employ strategies that coincide with those used by exceptional teachers of African American children. Through their stories, these authors demonstrate an ethic of caring; promote a communally-centered atmosphere; make learning entertaining, interesting, engaging, and relevant; and validate and extend students' literacy and cultural identities (Ladson-Billings; Howard; Irvine; Ware). Also, because of the socially and culturally relevant themes these women address, I argue that they function as the "socially responsible othermothers" that they depict in some of their stories (Collins "The Meaning of Motherhood"). In viewing these authors' writings as "community work" ("The Meaning of Motherhood"), we are challenged to move beyond accepting these texts as simply didactic in nature to receiving them as the life-informing and life-transforming tools that they are (Coles; McGinley and Kambrelis; Meier).



Background & Theoretical Framework

Participants in the book club were in the ninth or tenth grade, or age 14 or 15, and they were recruited from a youth empowerment program called Umoja². Umoja is a non-profit, community-based, youth empowerment program in Maryland. The program promotes racial harmony and uses history to empower and encourage youth to abstain from pre-marital sex, drugs and alcohol, and violence. All ninth and tenth grade girls in Umoja did not participate, only those who volunteered and had parental consent for the project. This yielded a group of seven young women. The combination of the girls' educational interests, diverse personalities, perspectives, and familial experiences, as well as their willingness to share, listen, and ask questions, helped shape the unique space in which the girls, and we mentors, responded to issues in African American women's YA literature. This space became known as The Umoja Book Club.

I collected data for this project using participant observation, field notes, book club session recordings, one-on-one interview recordings, and collection and analysis of participants' written responses to book club readings. For organizing and coding, I drew on practices that promoted a recursive analysis of data. This approach involved a cycle of collection, preliminary analysis, organizing and coding, checking for evidence, interpreting, categorizing, recognizing subjectivities, and writing results (Purcell-Gates; Bryman; Creswell; Moss). I interpreted data using a culturally-relevant (Lee; Ladson-Billings; Hale; Manley and O'Neill; Smitherman and Cunningham; Davis; Meier), Black feminist (Foss and Foss; Fordham *Blacked Out*; Collins *Black Feminist Thought*; Beuboeuf-Lafontant) and reader-response (Rosenblatt; Wilhelm) framework. Interpreting data through these lines of thinking allowed me to view and write about the girls' literacy experiences in a way that valued their knowledge, their experiences, their literacies, and their identities.



Cheryl, the director of the Umoja program, co-facilitated the book club with me. Cheryl's assistance was invaluable as she already had a rapport with the students and was actively mentoring the girls, so she was familiar with the needs and issues I hoped to address by creating a space and opportunity for the girls and mentors to connect through literature. Acting as a facilitator provided a chance for me to be a part of the discussions, learn from the girls participating, and adopt identities outside of researcher such as that of a book club co-participant, facilitator, and mentor. Also, I was interested in the significance of a certain type of approach to book club facilitation and implementation, a culturally relevant approach, and I, as the researcher and facilitator, was most familiar with this type of approach.

My idea of a culturally relevant approach to an out-of-school book club included several unique context and content elements related to adolescent development principles discussed by Signithia Fordham (*Blacked Out*); Elaine Kaplan; and Patricia Hill Collins (*Black Feminist Thought*) and principles of culturally relevant theory as related by Gloria Ladson-Billings; Tyrone Howard; Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant ("A Womanist Experience"); Jacqueline Irvine; and Franita Ware. The four content elements consisted of: 1) a community and communally-centered book club. The book club meetings were held outside of school, located in homes of mentors or parents who had volunteered to host the book club, and the group interactions took place in cozy, homelike settings; there were three book club meetings, and they each occurred at someone's home. For the first session, the parent coordinator for Umoja volunteered her home. The second session was hosted in the home of one of the participants, Danielle. Danielle's mother volunteered their home after the first session. The third session was held in the home of the assistant director for Umoja; 2) books read for and discussed in book club were African American young adult texts, particularly those that featured African American female protagonists and were authored by African American women; 3) the book club offered a space that valued African American young adult girls' ways of reading and being—their



thoughts, feelings, ideas, interests, issues, and talk; and 4) the book club included discussion with and facilitation by African American adult, female mentors.

I did not approach this project from an outsider's standpoint. I grew up in the same communities as many of the girls that I worked with in the book club, so I had a personal connection and history with the community in which I conducted this research. Additionally, I had, and still have, a personal history with the youth empowerment program that I recruited participants from, as I was a participant when I was in high school. This made my researcher/observer/participant/facilitator/mentor role often difficult to navigate. The opportunity to research in a community that I was familiar with came with many difficulties especially because, like Gretchen Generett and Rhonda Jeffries, I was constantly faced with the dilemma of how to "understand the 'other' when [I was] the 'other' and few have been able to articulate a definition of 'other' that is acceptable to [me] and from which [I] can begin the understanding process" (3). However, scholars like Karen Foss and Sonja Foss; Fordham ("Dissin' 'the Standard'"); Collins (*Black Feminist Thought*), and Beauboeuf-Lafontant ("A Womanist Experience") showed me that there is a community of scholars who value women's knowledge, experiences, and scholarship and helped me to conscientiously write as an African American woman who had the privilege, and challenge, of interacting with and learning from a group of girls about their experiences as readers and as young, African American daughters trying to navigate adolescence. I hope this work helps to give voice to the young, gifted, and Black girls of the Umoja Book Club and demonstrates to community and academic circles the value in connecting with and cultivating young people's literacies in out-of-school spaces.



Book Club Conversations: Daughters Making Sense of/with YA Literature

Louise Rosenblatt characterizes reading as a transaction, a back and forth, between reader(s) and text(s). In contrast to viewing reading as “receiving meaning in texts,” this transactional view “regard[s] reading as the creation, in concert with texts, of personally significant experiences and meanings” (Wilhelm 24). Rosenblatt asserts that with each experience with a text, new meanings will emerge: “Even if the reader immediately rereads the same text, a new relationship exists, because the reader has changed, now bringing her memory of the first encounter with that text and perhaps new preoccupations” (*Making Meaning* x). In Wilhelm’s *You Gotta Be the Book!*, he draws on Rosenblatt’s transactional theory as well as his years of classroom teaching and research with students concerning their reading practices in order to help him uncover the various ways adolescents read. Wilhelm’s research gleaned ten dimensions of response that adolescent readers drew upon as they transacted with texts, and he describes these dimensions in the context of three categories: *evocative*, *connective*, and *reflective*. The *evocative* dimensions classify transactions that point to an interest in the story and the characters. The *connective* dimensions describe ways that readers connect personally with characters and begin to extend their thinking, talking, writing, and relating beyond the world of the story. Finally, the *reflective* dimensions point to readers’ ways of evaluating the significance of the author and text.

In this section, I combine the Black feminist theoretical lens that undergirds this project with Wilhelm’s reader-response framework to analyze the ways the young ladies of the Umoja book club “changed their own words”³ about literature, life, and themselves. The sections are organized thematically according to the most popular topics in the book club: relationships with mothers, relationships with boys, and support and guidance in the lives of girls.



Bria: “That mother was crazy.”

Group responds: “Yes.”

Melvette: “Which mother was crazy?”

Bria: “The mother who kicked her daughter out. But, see, her problem was, she favored her son too much, and she was like, ‘Okay Imma do everything for my son,’ and she didn’t care nuttin’ about her daughter.”

Cheryl: “What do you think about the fact that she was like, ‘You’re going to get an abortion?’”

Nakia: “You don’t do that [get an abortion]. If you went out and did what you did, then you have to pay for the consequences. Sometimes the consequences may be bad, sometimes it could be a blessing at the same time.”

Bria: “I think, with her mother, I think if you’re gonna make a child do somethin’, you need to tell them a reason. And that’s one thing I’ve been tryin’ to get across to my motha. She needed to tell her ‘why’ because she didn’t even understand what was even happening.”

The experiences of daughters and mothers in-and-out-of-relationship with each other was a topic that resonated deeply with the girls in the book club. In the example above, Bria criticizes the character Ruby from *Homefront* for her approaches to disciplining her daughter Gayle. She describes Ruby as “crazy,” and the other girls agree with this assessment. Although Ruby’s character is not physically present throughout the novel, discussion of her character was dominant throughout this particular book club meeting. Ruby was especially criticized by the girls for her lack of communication with her daughter about serious issues, namely sexuality, abortion, and the risks and possibilities associated with sexual



activity. In the above exchange, Bria not only evaluates Ruby's actions, but she also identifies with a critical issue in Ruby and Gayle's situation that the girls brought to light throughout their conversations, the lack of communication between mothers and daughters.

Analyses, personal connections, and reflections such as these permeated our discussions as the girls sought to better understand their lived experiences as well as the fictionalized mother-daughter relationships. The girls extracted meaning from and constructed meaning with the texts as they drew on their personal, social, and cultural ways of knowing and being and used the stories and their characters as a springboard from which to launch their criticisms, testimonies, and solutions for daughters and mothers.

For book club participant Nakia, asserting her personal beliefs about social and familial issues and relating her personal experiences to the text was essential to making the story come alive for her (Wilhelm). The following is an example of her taking a *connective* stance. She relates her personal experiences to the text, and she shares a story about herself and her cousin to help support her argument about the importance of open communication between mothers and daughters.

Nakia: "Like, I'm not sayin' my motha was encouraging me to have, um, sex, but she said, 'Well, what I can say is, I can tell you not to do it,' she said, 'but you have your own mind-set.' She said, 'I'm just sayin' not to do it.' Like, I know my cousin, wit' her motha, when her motha, my cousin, her motha didn't know whether or not she was havin' sex. She said, 'Well, if you are, just tell me so I can get you on birth control pills and take you through the steps of what to do and what not to do and how to carry it.' She said, 'I can't tell you no and yes, if you have your own mentality.' She said, 'But what I can tell you is what to look out for and what not to do and stuff like dat.' She said, 'Maybe if I tell you the consequences, that you'll listen.' She said, 'But I know if I tell you yes or no, you not goin'



listen.’ And, my cousin, she took the advice.”

Here, Nakia identifies with Gayle as a daughter whose mother takes the “just don’t do it approach.” Yet, she is careful not to have her mother confused with the “crazy” mother in the text. She tries to share her mother’s direct words, rather than paraphrasing them for the group. Additionally, she contrasts Gayle’s and her own situation with her cousin’s and demonstrates the significance of a mother sharing advice, not just giving directives. This more explanatory and advisory approach, Nakia explains, was well received by her cousin and made a difference in her cousin’s decisions about sex.

Throughout our discussions, Nakia was confident in her beliefs, and she seemed comfortable sharing her thoughts and critiques about the actions of characters and the situations that arose in the text. Although Nakia had not read *Homefront*, her outspoken stance demonstrated her interest in the story and the issues brought to light by it. In the following example, Nakia takes an *evocative* stance and moves from identifying with an issue and sharing a related personal experience to “becoming” a character and taking on the role of Gayle’s mother.

Nakia: “Now, see, if I was a mother of her, I would say, ‘Okay, you decided to do this. I will help you, but later on, you gonna get a job.’”

Cheryl: “You would help her after the first one?”

Nakia: “I would help her.”

Cheryl: “She was thirteen. She came home the first time pregnant, and you helpin’ her wit the first baby . . .”

Bria, Jamilah and Danielle talk simultaneously about adoption as an option.



Jamilah: “Don’t kill the baby.”

Nakia: “She could get child support.”

Bria: “My motha done gone through so much tryin’a get child support. That don’t do nuthin’. She’s . . . it’s been I don’t know how many years. She still don’t get it. My fatha don’t care.”

Nakia: “My father just started paying a few years ago.”

Cheryl: “Okay, so you understand and know that child support is not a definiteor a given . . . and WIC can run out.”

Nakia: “As a child, I’d rather my father spend time with me.”

Cheryl: “Yeah, but time, sweetheart don’t clothe you, nor does it feed you.”

Here, Nakia effortlessly moves from speaking as character Ruby, a mother, to speaking from her personal perspective as a daughter. She connects real-world options and possibilities to the circumstances in the text. Though Nakia begins to role-play, Bria’s and co-facilitator Cheryl’s knowledge and experiences seem to prevent them from believing in the promise of Nakia’s approach to dealing with the situation. However, when Cheryl challenges Nakia, she does not hesitate to use her identity, knowledge, and personal experience as a daughter to support her point-of-view. Although Nakia goes back and forth connecting personally and imagining characters’ life possibilities, her responses consistently speak to the importance of open communication between mothers and daughters.

Nakia was not the only participant who weaved in and out of roles and reading strategies. In the exchange below, Courtney and Danielle use a *reflective* lens as they try to understand the significance of Earlene and Tasha’s relationship in *Imani All Mine*. Danielle goes back and forth



analyzing Earlene and Tasha. Finally, she puts herself in Tasha's shoes and concludes what she would do in the situation.

Courtney: "I wanna know does her mom just talk to her that way just because she feels like it, or does she have a purpose for not tellin' her daughter some things. It seems like she's kinda evil like ever since she had the child. It seem like she's been kinda distressed or somethin' like dat. I wanna know did somethin' happen to her when she was young that makes her like, tough on Tasha."

Danielle: "I wanna know why Tasha didn't tell her mother that she was raped and that she wasn't like fast. That's what her mother was thinking. I was like mad that she didn't say anything."

Melvette: "When somethin' like, you know, that serious and detrimental happens to you, you need to tell."

Courtney: "But like, I think she might have not told her because she probably just felt like it was her fault. 'If you wasn't so fast or whatever you might not have been raped.'

Danielle: "Me, if I was raped, I would not tell my mother. But, if she sittin' there callin' me fast anyway, you might as well tell her because she goin' say the same thang."

Courtney: "I would. I definitely would 'cause my mom, she would probably go crazy, but not because of me, because I was raped."

Melvette to Danielle: "But that wouldn't be your fault, like, why wouldn't you tell her? You feel like, she would be judgmental? You feel like you did somethin', or you would be ashamed?"

Danielle: "I would be ashamed."



Melvette: “So, you would let that keep you from tellin’ your mother?”

Danielle: “I would be afraid of like, hurtin’ her. Like, this is what I did.”

Melvette: “You mean, if you had sex willingly, or if you were raped?”

Danielle: “If I was raped.”

Cheryl: “Dat’s deep Danielle. I’m tryin’ to process this. Let me process this. Give me a minute.”

By putting herself in Tasha’s world, Danielle realizes the difficulty of having to relate to a mother like Earlene. In the girls’ eyes, Earlene is “judgmental,” “selfish,” “mean and bitter,” didn’t “listen,” and does not “give [Tasha] advice.” In Danielle’s view, these attributes are a hard battle to contend with. She wonders, “How you sit there and cuss at somebody then all of a sudden wanna give them advice. I wouldn’t listen to her either.” Danielle’s declaration that she would not tell her mother if she were raped concerned both co-facilitator Cheryl and me, and we talked seriously with the girls about dealing with a situation like that. Although Danielle had just read the story and saw the potential consequences of a girl her age not telling her mother about a rape, she still empathized and related personally to Tasha enough to believe that she wouldn’t tell her mother either. Danielle’s response underscores the detrimental effects of mother-daughter relationships with strained communication and confirms the need for women and spaces that welcome girls’ concerns (hooks; Leadbeater and Way; Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*).

As the girls made connections with the texts and expressed frustration in dealing with similar experiences, they, in some ways, treated the texts as instruction manuals, not just for girls such as themselves, but for their mothers. They recognized the ability of the texts to convey the



feelings and thoughts they had often tried to express to their mothers and grandmothers. *Homefront*, especially, became recognized by the girls for highlighting the need for communication and sincere engagement between daughters and mothers.

From the first session to the last, the girls' conversations emphasized the communication disconnects that complicate the bonds between daughters and mothers, and they used their texts and their testimonies to demonstrate the seriousness of the social, personal, and familial issues affecting adolescent girls. In addition to making connections between the literature and their lives, they recognized in their analyses the experiences of girls in their families, schools, and communities. They drew on their personal pools of knowledge and experience and poured into the lives of each other as they thought independently and collaboratively about ways to solve the life puzzles affecting adolescent and adult women's fictional and non-fictional lives.

In these book club conversations, the girls interrogated the AAYA texts and contrasted the textual representations with their lived experiences. They used the book club as an opportunity to make and share meaning with peers, and through their recalling of other relevant fictional tales and their retelling of personal stories, they created their own YA texts. They co-constructed a framework for negotiating relationships with male peers and voiced their beliefs about self-esteem and self-assertion in male-female relationships. They also shared their struggles to establish relationships with male peers while negotiating their parents' rules and behaviors. While the YA texts served to initiate discussion, the girls' conversations were dominated by their personal testimonies of efforts to reconcile autonomy and respect for parental rules with their increasing interest in romantic relationships and their need for realistic advice about dealing with these relationships.

In addition to recalling their relationship experiences with boys and emphasizing the need for attention, affection, and conversations from



mothers to daughters about sexuality, self-esteem, and relationships, the girls spent a significant amount of time pointing out the need for a network of caring adults to support girls as they journeyed through adolescence and transitioned into womanhood. In their conversations, they discussed the paths that girls sometimes find themselves walking, and they recounted the difficulties that trouble adolescent waters.

Book Club as Homeplace

The girls used the Umoja Book Club not only as a space to discuss issues that arose in the texts, but especially as a space to speak on behalf of themselves and other teenage daughters about these personal, familial, and social issues. They shared their frustrations and personal testimonies, and they sometimes became the voice of daughters who struggled with issues in the texts. The girls also used the book club as a space to reflect on their principles and beliefs and as a space to problem solve and challenge their peers, parents, and families to learn from past and present experiences, to dialogue about issues, and to consider the implications of one's decisions. The girls read, reflected on, and discussed their connections with, and critiques of, African American YA literature in a space that was outside a context of "questions or requirements" (Rosenblatt, *Making Meaning*) and within a context of safe spaces and relationships (Rosenblatt, *Making Meaning* ; Groves; Pastor).

The girls' exposure to the contemporary fiction by authors Porter, Flake, and Williams-Garcia, described previously as Black-educationist-activist authors, stimulated response practices that paralleled the educationist-activist sentiments of the writers. The social, personal, and familial issues highlighted in the texts, relationships with mothers, relationships with boys, and support and guidance for girls, resonated with the girls to the extent that a significant portion of their responses focused on thinking of ways to aid teen girls and families struggling with issues.



Throughout our meetings the girls consistently 1) *analyzed*: critiqued the stories, characters, topics, and sometimes authors, and shared their perspectives, 2) *testified*: drew upon and connected their life experiences to the texts and characters, and 3) *problem solved*: brainstormed ways to help fictional and non-fictional mothers and adolescent girls work through personal and relationship issues.

According to bell hooks, Amy Sullivan, and Patricia Hill Collins (*Black Feminist Thought*), girls' and women's relationships thrive off of opportunities to listen to, speak with, and learn from each other. These opportunities, Richardson and Pough note, are often characterized by the literacies that African American girls and women draw upon as they express themselves in personally, socially, and culturally significant ways. The girls made the Umoja book club a "home," not in a traditional sense, but in the sense of a nurturing place where they were able to, with peers and understanding adults, freely voice and weave together their ideas about literature and life (Pastor).

Culturally Relevant Pedagogies in Out-of-School Zones: Implications for Practice

As evidenced by the participants' responses, the girls found value in the texts, and even in the space of a community-based book club, the girls used a critical reading lens to make sense of the stories. Our group reading experiences seemed to validate the girls' personal knowledge and literacies as revealed by Danielle's impromptu recitation of her favorite piece, "Our Deepest Fear." She wowed the mentors and her peers during our last session when she recited this well-known excerpt in response to an exercise that asked her to brainstorm a relevant book topic that would appeal to her peers. We all listened as she encouraged us with the words, "Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that



most frightens us. We ask ourselves, ‘Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, and fabulous?’ Actually, who are you not to be?...’

This study highlights only a small sample of readers and texts over a short period of time, but the Umoja Book Club gave this group of teenage girls license to reflect on and talk about their life experiences and frustrations, to learn from each other and mentors, and to brainstorm ways to address adolescent girls. From this research, we gain an example of how community-based resources might create spaces for girls that engage them in critical discussions about life with peers and mentors. We are also able to observe how this out-of-school program addressed African American adolescent girls’ coming-of-age needs in a culturally responsive way. By reaching beyond the academic task of analyzing and theorizing about literature and integrating the social and cultural themes explored by AAYA literature authors, the Umoja Book Club was able to give a group of African American girls the opportunity to read, write, and discuss literature that “affirms who they are” (Harris 553) and convey to them the value of literature outside the classroom and within their lives. The sense of social consciousness and activism that was cultivated through our readings and discussions highlights the value in affirming spaces and points to a need for these types of spaces in and out of school.

Elyse Eidman-Aadahl and Glynda Hull and Katherine Schultz challenge literacy theorists not to stop at theorizing but to reach out in conversation and in practice to the myriad of community-based organizations across the nation to capitalize on our passion, experience, knowledge, and understanding and to create the engaging literacy environments that we all strive for. By first acknowledging young people’s multiple literacies, racial, gender, and economic challenges, and their diverse development needs, those of us interested in supporting young people’s literacy development can address their circumstances with better judgment and confidence. We must explore the attributes of spaces that aid positive adult mentorship and nurture adolescent voices. Then we must create and recreate environments that are safe, nurturing, and



fulfilling for young people. By recognizing and implementing effective classroom *and* community-based practices, we can begin to carve out homeplaces in spaces familiar and unfamiliar to young people--living rooms, classrooms, libraries, and even boardrooms. The possibilities are endless.



Endnotes

- 1 African American women writing about experiences of African American girls and women and issues affecting African American girls and women (Boston and Baxley).
- 2 Pseudonyms are used in this article for the organization and for participants.
- 3 This is a reference to Cheryl Wall's text, *Changing Our Own Words: Essays on Criticism, Theory, and Writing by Black Women*.

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