

ABSTRACT

Title of Document: CRITICAL READINGS: ADOLESCENT
AFRICAN AMERICAN GIRLS AND URBAN
FICTION.

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Although one of the ultimate goals of teaching English is to instill a love of reading, motivating students' engagement in texts poses a problem for many teachers. Despite research which suggest that adolescents, generally, do not read voluntarily (Strommen, 2004), adolescents, indeed, are often engaged with texts during their leisure time that are very different from those found in traditional classrooms that emphasize classical literature (Schultz & Hull, 2002). Creating bridges between their leisure reading interests and those presented in schools is one way of ideally bolstering more traditional forms of reading achievement within schools. Urban fiction is a form of text that is capturing the leisure reading interests of growing numbers of adolescent African American girls.

Within this exploratory investigation, six adolescent African American females engaged with an urban fiction text to unveil their complex engagement with the genre. Through the use of a literature circle format that took place over two months, participants' relayed insights about why they engage with the texts from the

urban fiction genre and how they process those images found within the texts.

Participants responses reveal several findings that help inform current understandings about adolescent African American girls' engagement with urban fiction. Extending beyond a culture of reading texts from the genre at participants' school, each participant suggested varying reasons for engaging with texts from the genre that extend beyond the hyper sexualized and violent content. Next, participants demonstrated that they used engagement with the text to explore their conceptions of beauty and gender roles for Black women, relationships, and sex. Finally, participants suggested that exposure to content from the texts serve as a demotivator for engaging in similar behaviors as the protagonists. Implications, based on students responses, are presented for in-service and preservice teachers, teacher educators, curriculum writers, and policy makers.

CRITICAL ENGAGEMENTS:
ADOLESCENT AFRICAN AMERICAN GIRLS & URBAN FICTION.

By

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Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
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Dedication

To Mayme Lou Garrett Quick, the matriarch of my family who continues to exude strength, determination, and intelligence and to my mom, Dr. Tinina Cade, who raised me to uphold take my place amongst never let me forget that I come from a long tradition of strong, intelligent, and capable women.

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broaden my perspectives about inequities within American society and social justice. Although I'm unsure if she is aware of her influence, exposures I gained from Dr. Turner served as the motivation and foundation for this current research. Through Dr. Turner, I gained my first exposures to research that emphasized literacy acquisition. Prior to my interactions with Dr. Turner, I was unsure where I belonged within my department as far as my research interests were concerned. Dr. Turner "showed me the light", so to speak, and provided dedicated and constant feedback that helped to shape my conception of literacy. Dr. Hughes is one of the kindest and most knowledgeable professors that I've interacted with at College Park. His kind words and creativity always made frustrating writing days seem more feasible. Further, regardless of other commitments, Dr. Hughes always made time to help me. I will always be so grateful. Although I'd just met Dr. Milkie about six months prior to defending my dissertation, she was always willing to hear my crazy rants and meltdowns and willing to offer kind words of inspiration. Although not on my dissertation committee, I would be remiss not to acknowledge Dr. Stephen Koziol. He has always been such a wonderful support of my efforts and interests and has served as a fantastic mentor to me throughout my entire time here at UMCP.

While here at College Park, I have made some awesome friends. We have survived and triumphed together throughout the past few years and I'm not sure if I could have sustained without their support. Thurman Bridges and Janet Awokoya, you both create my mod squad here at school, always willing to help me, regardless of the sacrifice. I'm not sure how to thank you both for your tireless commitment to me, even on my bad days. Further Regina Young, I continue to learn from you daily.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Brooklyn-born I don't have no sob stories for you about rats and roaches and pissy-pew hallways. I came busting out of my momma's big coochie on January 28, 1977, during one of New York's worst snowstorms. So my mother named me Winter. My father, Ricky Santiago, was so proud of his new baby girl that he had a limo waiting to pick my moms up from the hospital. The same night I got home my pops gave me a diamond ring set in 24-karat gold. My moms said that my fingers were too small and soft to even hold a ring in place, but he insisted that he had a guy who would have it adjusted just right. It was important for me to know I deserved the best, no slum jewelry, cheap shoes, or knock-off designer stuff, only the real thing (Souljah, 1999, p. 1)

Problem

In equal parts uncompromising and stereotypic, Souljah's work introduces the reader to Winter Santiago, her adolescent protagonist in the *The Coldest Winter Ever*. This graphic introduction, imbued with images of nontraditional homes and the elevated importance of material possessions as signposts of success, provides a disturbing precursor for the reoccurring images and themes of the urban fiction. Harsh language, superficiality and materialism are themes that arise within this first paragraph alone. The book builds on these themes by embracing most stereotypes that surround African American women and families (Stovall, 2005b). Stereotypes include the portrayal of African American females as hypersexual, materialistic, superficial, vindictive, obsessed with appearance, teenage mothers, and drug users, among others. As a result of the content and the depictions of the African American female, many adults are neither comfortable with nor choose to expose children to Souljah's text and that of others from the genre (Worthy, Moorman, & Turner, 1999). Notwithstanding the shortcomings of *The Coldest Winter Ever* and similar urban fiction texts which fail to render fully-realized images of African American

youth/protagonists, these books are engaging “forgotten” populations of disenfranchised adolescents, particularly African American female readers (Meloni, 2007).

Nestled within the intersections of Reader Response (Rosenblatt, 1995; Wilhelm, 1997), Critical Literacy (Freire, 1979; Van Sluys, Lewison, & Flint, 2006) and New Literacy Theories (Gee, 1999; Street, 1993) this research builds upon underexplored understandings about the leisure reading habits and literacy strengths of adolescent African American females. In doing so, this study explored the appeal of urban fiction texts and how adolescent African American readers understood and processed the images contained within the controversial texts. This study promotes understandings of how the reading culture of urban fiction for adolescent African American girls informs their school based literacy acquisition.

Growing populations of adolescent African American girls who have been traditionally disengaged from school texts and, in many cases, labeled remedial learners, are engaging and reading urban fiction (Morris, Hughes-Hassell, & Cottman, 2006; Stovall, 2005, 2005). The financial successes of the genre and the fascination of young readers with the sexually charged and violent themes presented within the texts provide a concrete examples of the disconnect between the readings promoted in-school and the texts that engage adolescent African American girls in the out-of-school context. This gap between what students read by choice and what is read in classrooms contributes, in part, to students’ struggles to demonstrate literacy strengths within traditional English instruction (Mahiri, 2004; Schultz & Hull, 2002). Despite poor reading achievement, as evidenced by nationally standardized reading tests

(Campbell, Voelkl, & Donahue, 1997; NAEP, 2007), a growing body of research suggests that adolescent African American girls possess strong out-of-school literacy skills (Collins, 2006; Mahiri, 2004; Morris, Hughes-Hassell & Cottman, 2006; Wilson, July 2006). Notwithstanding these findings, literacy educators often consider the out-of-school or leisure reading activities, which include engagement with "trash" literature to be supplementary at best and, as a matter of course, undervalued as pedagogical devices in the classroom (Mahiri, 2004; E. Moje & Young, 2000; Schultz & Hull, 2002). It is important to note that many groups of readers from a variety of racial and socioeconomic classes face similar challenges as their leisure literacy choices are neither validated nor welcomed within their classrooms (Bean & Moni, 2003).

Adolescent African American female students' struggle to demonstrate traditional literacy achievement is brought about, in part, due to a lack of commonality between their interests and cultures and school-sanctioned literacy texts (Richardson, 2002; Sutherland, 2005). This disconnect is reflected within the popularized yet deficit oriented research that tends to emphasize weaknesses as opposed to strengths of individuals from this readership. For instance, less than one-fifth of African American seventeen-year-old females can read, understand, or critique "complicated" texts as they lack essential literacy skills that lend to success in educational settings and increasingly competitive workplaces (NIL, 2007). Statistically, African American adolescent females consistently perform slightly above African American males and Latino students on national reading assessments (NAEP, 2007). However, their comprehension levels still lag considerably behind

their Asian and White counterparts; this gap largely exists regardless of the social class of African American girls (Campbell et al., 1997; Hilliard, 2002). On average, only one of one hundred African American seventeen year old females can read and gain information from specialized text such as the science section in local newspaper (NAEP, 2007; NIL, 2007). These statistics underscore an alarming trend of African American female readers who are disconnected from traditional literacy practices and underperforming on standardized reading assessments within schools. Again, these studies emphasize weaknesses as opposed to strengths. This current study, *Critical Engagements*, was built upon the premise that strong dominant and traditional literacy skills are needed to successfully navigate through and excel within schools (Delpit, 1988).

Contentions with the Field

Urban fiction promotes an independent reading experience for adolescent African American females, which not only connects to their own lives (Fordham, 1993; Rosenblatt, 1995) but more importantly, engages them in ways not accomplished by more traditional texts used in schools (Gallo, 2003). Teachers and parents alike consistently rally around adolescents to promote reading as a positive and enjoyable experience. Yet, conceptions of “reading” are strictly confined and often exclude texts such as urban fiction, texts which are selected by girls on their own. Seeking to support and expand the notion that leisure reading experiences promote stronger formal literacy skills, this study capitalized on this leisure reading interest and investigated the appeal of the genre as a means of developing connections

between their leisure texts and more dominant forms of literature that are promoted within schools.

Overview of Conceptual Framework

This study is grounded within the intersections of New Literacy studies, Reader Response, and Critical Literacy. The cultural and social contexts of readers and their chosen texts are key components to the study of reading (Gee, 1996). Emphasis is not placed upon the manner in which individuals process words, letters, and New Literacy (Gee, 1999; Purcell Gates, 2002) motivated me to acknowledge and explore the culture of reading urban fiction because the field of New Literacy seeks to transform views of text from supplementary text or irresponsible, underdeveloped pulp reading, as it is widely perceived (Venable, McQuillar, & Mingo, 2004), into an instrument that is representative of some aspect of the cultures of the readers. Reader Response, within this study, highlights the significance of readers' understanding engagement and interactions with urban fiction while considering how individuals process the under explored and controversial social issues raised within the texts. Critical literacy theorists motivate inquiries into controversial texts to help transition readers from passive consumers into social critics of materials that could otherwise be damaging.

New Literacy, Reader Response, and Critical Literacy theories substantiate urban fiction as a form of literature that significantly impacts adolescent African American girls in motivating their literacy achievement. Because scholarship has overlooked the appeal and importance of this genre, knowledge is in need of expansion in order to capture the significance of these texts within the lives of

readers. Further, these lenses promote an understanding of greater significances for these books as tools for empowering traditionally disenfranchised populations of readers.

Overview of Related Literature

In light of declining rates of reading for all populations of readers nationally (NIL, 2007), educational researchers are developing an awareness of the relationship between engagement and comprehension as a means for understanding why students are not reading traditional forms of text (Alvermann, et al.,1998; Rosenblatt, 1995). As more than two-thirds of all American eighth graders read below their grade level (Education, 2006), scholars are expanding narrow perspectives on what it means to be "engaged", "literate", and "reading". Defined as the process where motivation and thoughtfulness converge when interacting with a text (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Staples, 2005), the term engagement represents the reader's desire to connect with a text. Researchers are exploring the significance of interactions with engaging texts as they have been deemed necessary for motivating and improving stronger traditional literacy skills (Rosenblatt, 1995; Staples, 2005).

Texts considered engaging for many historically marginalized readers, or students from non White and non middle class backgrounds, are often missing from school curricula and libraries (Hughes, 1991; Skilton-Sylvester, 2002). This is partly attributable to the failure of teachers and parents to recognize the value of alternative texts which deviate from "acceptable" stories presented in canonical works and similar texts. Schools inequitably promote literature that is reflective of White middle class interests and values, rarely exploring or encouraging the reading

interests and exposures of students from non dominant cultures. This incongruence results in academic dislocation and disconnections from traditional forms of reading (Skilton-Sylvester, 2002). In order for schools to engage students of diverse heritages, curriculum should be reassessed to incorporate the out-of-school or leisure literacy practices of historically marginalized readers, which include multicultural young adult literature in order to increase levels of comprehension and reading development. Urban fiction represents one of many forms of literature that appeal to adolescent African American girls.

Overview of Urban Fiction

Urban fiction is a burgeoning genre of fiction that features young African American female protagonists from major urban cities, who encounter and overcome devastating hardships (Morris, Hughes-Hassell, & Cottman, 2006). Urban fiction stories are cautionary tales where readers are intended to learn from the mistakes of the protagonist (Morris, Hughes-Hassell, & Cottman, 2006). The female lead overcomes barriers by relying on her sexuality as well as her innate ability to negotiate dangerous situations. These novels contain storylines that capitalize on and pay homage to stereotypic and popularized aspects of hip hop culture, an subculture in the U.S. (Meloni, 2007).

Engagement with Urban Fiction

Although little research exists that considers the specific appeal of urban fiction, this genre engages the reading interests of growing number of adolescent African American females while, in comparison, canonical and other widely celebrated forms of literature are disengaging to this population. A number of factors

contribute to the appeal of the genre, according to existing bodies of research, including curiosity about “forbidden” issues (Bell Kaplan & Cole, 2003; Kaplan, 1997), personal connections to text (DeBlase, 2003; Morris et al., 2006; Sutherland, 2005), treating the text as an escape from reality (Alvermann et al., 1998; Christian Smith, 1990), and the blunt, uncomplicated writing style (Morrell, 2002; Rosen, 2004; Stovall, 2005).

Purpose & Significance of Study

This study is an exploratory investigation that considers which elements of urban fiction were motivating desires to read and engage with text and how readers interacted with those elements. The significance of this research is multilayered. First, this study is important in that it emphasizes some literacy experiences of an understudied population of readers: adolescent African American females. Notwithstanding poor reading outcomes on nationally standardized tests (NAEP, 2007) and vastly limited knowledge about their reading habits and interests, very little research exists that probes the literacy experiences of members of this population (Buckley & Carter, 2005; Holcomb McCoy, 2005; Stevens, 1997; Sutherland, 2005).

Next, this study reveals some potential benefits of engaging adolescent African American girls in conversations about their interpretations of urban fiction texts. Despite containing hyper sexualized and violent content and non standard writing style, urban fiction texts are engaging many disengaged readers while more traditional forms of texts are failing to promote reading . Many adults have formed intransigent outlooks of the controversial content within urban fiction without reading or understanding the potential benefits of the texts. Based on the appeal of these

texts, this study sought to understand which elements of urban fiction were motivating participants' desires to read and engage with text and how they interacted with those elements.

Guiding Questions

This study was designed to explore the reading experiences of adolescent African American females as they engaged with an urban fiction text of their choice. In addition, the study was designed to explore how participants interpreted messages from the text. The following questions guided this study:

1. How do adolescent African American girls engage with, respond to, and make meaning from urban fiction texts?
 - What are their motivations for reading urban fiction?
 - What are the interpretations of adolescent African American females of urban fiction texts?
 - How, if at all, do participants relate the texts to their own lives?
 - What elements of texts do adolescent African American girls select and discuss and what is their significance?
 - How, if at all, do conversations about urban fiction texts with peers and an adult facilitator influence how participants make meaning of the texts?
2. How can an understanding about the engagement, response, and meaning making of adolescent African American girls to urban fiction texts inform school based literacy practices?

Definition of Terms

Adolescence is a term, according to Moje and Young (2000) and Finders (1997), that references a period of transition from childhood to adulthood. This time is marked by identity formation, turbulence, and imbalanced hormones and often conjures images of uncertainty for groups of students searching for identities. While adolescents were categorized as individuals typically ranging in age from about 12 to 17 (Erikson, 1968), adolescents focused upon within this study were tenth graders, ranging in age from 14 to 15 years of age.

Literacy is an interface with various forms of text that can result in exposure for readers as it extends beyond the acts of reading and writing (specific forms of text). Within this view, literacy interactions can range from conversations with peers to drawings in notebooks yet still encompass traditional conceptions of interactions with canonical books. The definition is expansive because it accounts for the various literacy exchanges valued and promoted within all communities, not just those reflective of dominant normalities. Literacy practices are viewed as social practices that are active and ongoing (Street, 2003), instead of a formalized set of learned skills revolving around reading and writing.

Urban fiction, also referred to as street literature, hip-hop literature (Meloni, 2007; Osborne, 2001), black pulp fiction (Osborne, 2001), ghetto lit (Stovall, 2005), urban street fiction, (Marshall, Staples, Gibson, 2009) and gangsta lit (Venable et al., 2004), these stories present a cautionary tale where readers are intended to learn from the experiences of the adolescent female protagonist (Osborne, 2001). The novels are typically written using slang and non standard English and feature graphic scenes that

involve sexual intercourse, drug trafficking and addiction, mental and physical abuse, and violent encounters, amongst other provocative and titillating themes and images. Urban fiction is also referenced within this research as text and literature. Despite its many unconventional elements, New Literacy theory validates urban fiction as a significant form of text that engages the reading interests of populations of adolescent African American females. This validation repositions this “trash”, into a form of acceptable “literature”. Literature is a term used to reference respected and valued pieces of writing (Wilhelm, 1997). Due to its overwhelming significance to some adolescent African American girls, this supplementary text is recognized within this research as a form of literature albeit a non dominant or untraditional genre of writing (Wilhelm, 1997),

Overview of Dissertation

This study was designed to contribute to understandings about the reading behaviors of adolescent African American girls by exploring their interactions with urban fiction texts. Chapter two reviews the bodies of research that contributed to my appreciation of the importance of further considering urban fiction with respect to adolescent African American females. Chapter three explains my methods for obtaining the research data and the plan of analysis. Chapter four provides an overview of the text selected by participants, *Supreme Clientele*, an introduction to the authors, and a critical analysis of the text. Within chapter five, the participants, as well as a description of our interactions within our discussions is presented to create a picture, or sorts, about our interactions from my perspective. These descriptions provide context for comments that are later analyzed. Chapters six and seven provide

the major themes and comments that were derived from students' responses to the text. This writing concludes within chapter eight as the discussion of findings and the implications from this study are addressed.

Chapter 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

“When by these gentle ways begins to be able to read, some pleasant book, suited to his capacity, should be put into this hands, wherein the entertainment that he finds, might draw him on, and reward his pains in reading” (Locke, 2008).

Introduction

As the primary the purposes of this study are to understand why adolescent African American girls engaged with urban fiction, how they interpreted meanings from urban fiction novels, and how understandings about these reading habits contributed towards increasing more traditional literacy acquisition promoted within schools, this literature review is organized to provide an overview of how this study is positioned within current conceptions of the literacy strengths of adolescent African American girls. To begin, the conceptual framework provides an overview of the bodies of knowledge that formed the foundation of this research. Those bodies are New Literacy Studies, Reader Response, and Critical Literacy. The next section of this review includes a brief synopsis of the various forms of literature that are currently engaging adolescents. Within this, I examine connections between young adult literature and urban fiction, a specific subset of multicultural young adult literature. I then explore how urban fiction may be used as a means of instilling the skills often emphasized through the study of traditional forms of literature within classroom settings. Following this, I consider what contemporary understandings of reading engagement look like for adolescents and how this engagement might be capitalized within classrooms. This chapter concludes by emphasizing gaps within

current bodies of literature and how this current study seeks to enhance existing bodies of knowledge.

Conceptual Framework

This research was guided by New Literacy theories posited within the writings of James Gee (2002) and Brian Street (2003), each of whom contributed greatly to this framework through their research related to the significance of understanding non dominant literacy practices as a means of broadening popularized conceptions of mainstream literacies. Next, Critical Literacy provides a lens for understanding how controversial texts can serve to empower historically marginalized adolescents. Finally, the findings of Louise Rosenblatt (1999) and Lawrence Sipe (2004) help to guide considerations about how interactions with text vary based on an individual's personal exposure and influences.

New Literacy Studies

New Literacy theories critically assess reading habits and cultures of historically marginalized groups as a means of uplifting and endorsing those practices to expand mainstream conceptions of literacy (Gee, 1996; Hamilton, 2000). Through this lens, literacy is broadened to be more inclusive of social and cultural practices, and not viewed simply as a measure of the cognitive abilities of readers (Street, 1993). This philosophy motivates my study of the often undervalued and overlooked leisure literacy cultures of adolescent African American girls to better understand the context under which they exist (Brooks, et al, 2008; Lee, 2007)

According to Carter (2005), "what is knowledgeable and valuable in one social setting is not necessarily what signifies cultural competence in another. Educators

can overlook this when they dismiss these students' own cultural competences and capitals" (p. 10). In other words, different groups of people value different forms of text based on their exposures and influences. Rather than assign judgment, New Literacy theorists categorize literacy practices as either marginalized or dominant (Street, 2003); urban fiction qualifies as a form of nonmainstream and marginalized literacy. Urban fiction, which is reflective of hip hop and adolescent culture, is relevant within the lives of many youth including adolescent African American females, as it reflects the varied social influences that impact the lives of disenfranchised populations within the US. As such, the reading of urban fiction can be interpreted as a unique social practice.

As non members of various communities (especially historically marginalized communities), researchers and educators often neglect to consider the various cultures and corresponding rules of literacy membership (Carter, 2005; Street, 2003). Preoccupied with the content and writing style of the stories, adults often disqualify urban fiction novels as inappropriate texts, these often relegated books are viewed as supplementary materials which are ineffective in elevating academic progress (Venable et al., 2004; Wilson, July 2006). However, New Literacy proponents emphasize the importance of understanding the literacy habits of all groups as a means of recognizing literacy diversity and learning development. Although non standard in content and form, urban fiction novels, they argue, are valued forms of literacy in need of exploration because of their appeal and ability to motivate reading. Not only does a New Literacy perspective legitimize the use of non standard texts,

such as urban fiction, it also provides a framework to understand how these texts are used as identifies of cultural membership (Street, 1993).

Critical Literacy

Urban fiction is viewed as a powerful mechanism for enabling adolescent African American females to critique sensationalized and stereotypic representations of African American life; the goal of this critique is to foster more positive self images of African American females (Collins, 2007). Critical literacy theorists advocate for the use of controversial and sensationalized media induced texts to help students analyze, as opposed to passively consume derogatory images that engender one-dimensional, stereotypic characters such as the mammy, the sapphire, the jezebel, and the angry African American woman (Richardson, 2002). As schools are important forums for socialization, often teachers and administrators unconsciously support and promote demeaning stereotypes that foster the negative self image of adolescent African American females (Carter, 2005; Sutherland, 2005); a lack of critical inquiry about these images contributes, in part, to the perpetuation and influence of these portrayals (Collins, 2007). Deeper investigations of these images ideally lend to a greater understanding of the situated identity of historically marginalized youth within society and, further, how self identity is predicated upon that placement (hooks, 1996).

Considering the [images] and challenges help girls learn how to develop critical consciousness...this critical consciousness allows urban girls of color to know that there is much that is wrong with the world and that they cannot

hide or 'go underground' within white- dominated class-based institutions as white middle-class girls can do. (Pastor, 1996, p. 16).

Through developing a greater appreciation of the unique placement of African American females within society, instructors can assume an integral role in helping them develop this role in helping them developing a consciousness that transforms readers from passive consumers into critics of those images that are influencing their self perceptions. I am assuming that urban fiction can be used to serve this purpose, especially with the mentorship of an exposed adult.

Critical literacy, according to Paolo Freire (1979), especially serves to uplift the voices of disenfranchised populations whose cultures and perspectives are often ignored in favor of the more dominant and wealthier populations. The primary agenda then becomes avoidance "banking", where teachers and adults simply deposit repositories of information into the knowledge bases of students (Elkins & Luke, 1999). Van Sluys, Lewison, and Flint (2006) explore the agenda of critical literacy through their cataloguing of four dimensions that serve as a framework for understandings the concept. These dimensions are: acknowledgment and deconstruction of popularized perspectives, consideration of exposure to differentiated viewpoints, consideration of interlinked social and political issues and utilization of knowledge to promote social justice for marginalized groups. Social justice, according to Freire (1979), promotes individuals to "learn to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions and to take actions against the oppressive elements of reality" (p. 17). Urban fiction, notwithstanding the genre's limited development, features characters and storylines that enable these critical connections.

Luke and Elkins (1999) write that society categorizes and values certain forms of discourse; this hierarchy is unequal and often privileges middle class White discourses over those of less privileged and colored populations. Critical literacy is a means of acknowledging, critiquing, and changing conceptions of acceptable discourses (Elkins & Luke, 1999; Freire, 1998; Moje, Dillon, & O'Brien, 2000). Facilitators and adolescents, alike, use various forms of popular culture to locate oppression and power around constructs such as race and gender (Gee, 2000; Lee, 2007). Critical literacy, according to Freire (1979), is a means of uplifting the voices of disenfranchised populations whose cultures and perspectives are often ignored in favor of the more dominant and wealthier populations. Citing the words of Michel Foucault, Bean cites “the need to rebel against those ways in which we are already defined, categorized, and classified” (Bean & Harper, 2006, p. 98). The goal within critical literacy is to avoid “banking” where teachers and adults simply deposit repositories of information into the knowledge bases of students.

Paolo Freire (1979) writes about the importance of individuals developing a critical consciousness, or conscientizacao, as a means of actively considering positionality; individuals “learn to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (p. 17). Urban fiction, notwithstanding the genre’s limited development, features characters and storylines that enable these critical connections.

Understandings that are critical of generic and popularized images are often difficult to elicit according to Bean and Harper (2006, p. 96), but enable exposure to prevalent issues within the lives of adolescents. “We believe that literature study

continues to be an important site for the discussion of complex and sensitive issues, and it has the potential to provoke richer, more sophisticated thought and action”(Bean & Harper, 2006, p. 96). Issues typically addressed within urban fiction texts are just as prevalent within the lives of adolescent African Americans females (Morris et al., 2006).

Reader Response

Reader response contributes to my framework for understanding the significance of exploring urban fiction novels within the lives of adolescent African American females because it focuses upon the crucial interface of the young reader and these texts. Louise Rosenblatt (1978), often credited with the development of Readership Response established that reading is a transaction between the text and the reader, as meaning is created when the reader relates what is read to their own exposures, life, and general understandings about the world (Rosenblatt, 1995), instead of the many focal points of traditional literary analysis such as the author’s intention (Beck, et. al., 1997), content (Sipe, 1994), conceptions of appropriate exposures to text (Hirsch, 2003), or suggestions of reading engagement based on cognitive maturity and capabilities (Squire, 1969). Because all readers create their own reading experience, all interpretations of text are unique.

Rosenblatt (1995) identifies two types of reading experiences within her conception of reading. Efferent reading involves reading to obtain information. Aesthetic reading allows the reader to “live the experience of the text” through association to their own experiences. My research seeks to further develop the notion that urban fiction provides the aesthetic reading experience for adolescent African

American female readerships. Even though non dominant and often viewed as trash, Jeffrey Wilhelm (1997) finds that any text can be a “literary text” if it is deeply engaging. As such Reader Response promotes an investigation of why readers find urban fiction to be engaging and which aspects of the text motivate the aesthetic response.

In addition to evaluating the merits of a particular form of text, Reader Response theorists also investigate individual engagement with text as a means of gleaning insight about the lives of readers. Galda (1998) writes that reading experiences serve as windows for some readers and their selected texts may provide an insider’s view about an unknown experience or phenomena, while also serving as a mirror for other readers who share commonalities with the cultures and experiences illuminated within the text. An understanding of engagement with urban fiction serves the purpose of providing a window for the teaching and research community to gain a better understanding of the lives of adolescent African American females. The experiences of the readership are highlighted through their responses as readers reveal their comprehension of interaction with the storyline and characters (Sipe, 1999). In this respect, urban fiction may serve as a mirror for adolescent African American girls in many ways while also motivating reading.

Finally, Reader Response theorists stress the importance of developing connections between the private lives of students and their public school literate lives as a means of enhancing the aesthetic reading experience for adolescents (Wilhelm, 1997). Rosenblatt notes that students are in need of instruction about how to experience aesthetic modes within reading encounters. This process may assist

educators in teaching students how to engage aesthetically with texts. Rosenblatt views teachers as aids for students to learn how to shift from efferent to aesthetic readers (Rosenblatt, 1978). As such Reader Response theories promote the use of texts, such as urban fiction, as a means of helping to motivate greater forms of engagement with more traditional and in-school texts.

Literature for Adolescents

Literature that appeals to adolescents is often viewed as substandard to more traditional forms of text, often as a result of its content, the writing style, and lack of originality (Gallo, 1996). However, the young adult genre, a sub form further discussed below, has been used by teachers to help inspire students to make similar investment within in-school texts as with those devalued literatures found outside of school. Despite skepticism, adults are using young adult fiction to help motivate more traditional forms of reading engagement (Beach, 1998). Engagement with a text is integral to student reading development because reading skills are reinforced through repetition, continued, and avid reading. Without engagement, students are prone to detachment from both the literature and the resulting skill development associated with reading and critically analyzing text (Bean & Rigoni, 2001; Christenbury, 2000; Gallo, 1996; Moje et al., 2000). Through the use of texts that are relevant within the lives of students, teachers can help create learning pathways connecting basic understandings of text to more complicated classical literature promoted within English classrooms (Salvner, 2000). The following section links research about young adult literature to urban fiction, a subcategory of the genre that is engaging adolescent readers. By drawing parallels between urban fiction and

young adult fiction, one of my goals is to enhance the argument for the use of urban fiction texts as another method through which teachers can reach adolescent African American females.

Young Adult Literature

Young adult novels are texts written for and marketed to adolescent readers. Herz (1996) writes that young adult novels are so appealing because they present themes more simplistically and employ language that students understand. Donald Gallo (1996) finds that young adult literature appeals to most students, including those who are reluctant and poor readers. Often referenced as coming of age novels, the stories typically feature an adolescent character, between the ages of twelve and twenty (Donelson & Nilsen, 1997), as the protagonist who confronts issues compatible with the age and exposure of that character. Storylines and dilemmas vary, however, as the category of young adult encompasses a variety of fictional genres. Yet, the stories are similar to most other types of literature in that they feature characters, writing styles, themes, plots, and settings. Although books that appeal to adolescent readers, such as *Oliver Twist* and *Little Women*, have existed since the early 1800's, publishing houses did not begin categorizing literature as young adult fiction until the mid 1950's with the success of *The Outsiders*. This book was written by S.E. Hinton, a young adult, and emphasized life about those experiences often forgotten by adults but considered by children (Cart, 2001).

Unlike classical literature, which is largely selected for and identified by educated White readerships (Gallo, 1996), young adult literature appeals to a more diverse population of readers because they feature characters who struggle with their

identities and various cultural affiliations (Bean, Readence, & Mallette, 1996; Carter, 1997). Identity exploration is one of the hallmarks of the young adult novel genre and a chief motivating factor for many adolescents who read (Athanases, 1998; Neilson, 2001; Schultz & Hull, 2002; Sutherland, 2005).

Multicultural Young Adult Fiction

In contrast to the identity conflict within the young adult fiction pervasive across racial and cultural lines, multicultural young adult novels feature characters who also struggle with identity but do so by specifically confronting social constructs, cultural norms and expectations affiliated with various community memberships. Multicultural forms of young adult literature, such as urban fiction, engage adolescent readers through the vivid presentation of everyday protagonists and storylines that, unlike young adult novels, represent a range of cultures, races, religion, age, gender, physical abilities, and ethnicities. Teachers, such as Chris Crowe (1998), use multicultural young adult literature to build upon the exposures of his "egocentric" adolescent readers in place of real world experiences that may never materialize. According to Mitchell (2006), multicultural young adult literature "not only allow students to see themselves in novels but also to get a much more complete view of who lives in this world" (p. 166). To this end, literature from this genre may not always reflect the lives of adolescent readers, but is written in ways that "provide authentic insights into cultures and people we knew little about" (Crowe, p, 124).

The greatest problem that many adults cite, in critique of these texts is the quality of writing for the genre as well as an associated stigma. While Glenn (2008) challenges the low level of craft many authors demonstrate when creating

multicultural young adult novels, Crowe (1998) emphasizes the arguments often used to invalidate the stories when he states:

...any label that precedes the word 'literature' signals a demotion to a subgenre-books that we study for their novelty but that aren't worthy of inclusion in the curricular cannon. Young adult literature in general has been exiled to the realms of subliterature, and thus the double-labeled 'multicultural young adult literature' is doubly damned (p. 124).

Although the text are engaging and exposing adolescent readerships, the texts are often disqualified as being valuable resources within classrooms due to the general perspective that the texts lack the complexity to elevate them beyond the overly simplistic themes and crudely sketched characters which paradoxically serve to prompt reader engagement in the first place. Although the cited authors' commentary is helpful in providing insight about multicultural young adult literature, empirical research is needed to further legitimate claims about the effectiveness of the genre.

Urban Fiction

Urban fiction is a form of multicultural young adult literature which appeals to African American adolescent females, a group whose reading interests are largely overlooked within classrooms and reading research (Sutherland, 2005). Urban fiction specifically qualifies as multicultural young adult literature as it emphasizes cultures and ways of life that are created by, written for, and focused on the lives of various historically marginalized groups that are largely invisible within more dominant forms of literature (Cai, 1998). This section provides an overview about urban fiction, a genre of literature that qualifies as a form of young adult literature (Ford,

Tyson, Howard, & Harris, 2000) that is engaging growing numbers of African American adolescent females. Although little research exists about the genre or the reading habits of adolescent African American females, this review considers why adolescent African American adolescent females are potentially engaging with this genre by relying on a variety of bodies of knowledge which provide greater insight.

Context & Historical Perspective

Although receiving a great amount of controversial attention from the late 1990's based on the graphic topics raised and crude language used to express voice, the genre of urban fiction was birthed from the biographic writings of Iceberg Slim and Donald Goines from the late 1960's throughout the 1970's.

Iceberg Slim was a drug dealer and pimp who proselytized the rugged nature of his experiences within his profession in Chicago. Although fifteen of his books were published, his most reputable work was *Pimp: The Story of My Life* which have sold over six million copies and is featured as one of the top ten best selling paperbacks on the United Press International List and is noted as selling as competitively as titles such as *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Fahrenheit 451*, and *The Hobbit* (Osborne, 2001). In line with Slim's writings, Donald Goines wrote about his life as a heroin addict in Detroit as well as his experiences in penitentiary in the book, *Dopefiend: The Story of a Black Junkie* (1971). He focused primarily on the violence associated with illegal drug trafficking; his story sold over five million copies (Morris et al., 2006). Slim and Goines' styles of writing were heralded as "street" and "gritty" and emphasized non standard English, non standard grammar, and slang. Also their accounts, which focused on harsh realities associated with drugs, graphic

sex, and murder, were considered explicit and stereotypic of African Americans. Despite their success, the appeal of these urban stories began to decline with the onset of the Black Power Movement of the mid to late 1970's. This movement promoted and uplifted more positive representation of African American life within the media. Eventually, however, the themes of urban fiction were enveloped within hip hop music. Urban fiction, as a genre, lost appeal.

The interest in this genre, however, was re-invigorated with the publishing of Omar Tyree's *Flyy Girl* (2001). Interestingly enough, Tyree rejected connections between his writing and urban fiction based on his displeasure and lack of respect for the writing and storylines common to the genre (Tyree, 2008). Nonetheless, building off of concepts now emphasized within Tyree's book as well as the hip hop music genre, more authors began to capture the gritty descriptions and disturbing imagery, once again, through books. Despite the success and acclaim of Tyree's works, Sista Souljah's, *The Coldest Winter Ever* (1999) received the attention and sales that is credited with motivating the reinvigoration of interest of urban fiction on a grander scale (Morris, 2006). Like Iceburg Slim and Donald Goines, Souljah, writes about life within an urban housing project in New York, emphasizing experiences with drugs, sex, and murder. Unlike Slim and Goines, however, Souljah's writing is fictional. The main character, however, is very similar to those of Slim and Goines, as she overcomes obstacles that are based on her surroundings. In most urban fiction texts, the main characters learn from their experiences at the conclusion of the writings, passing along advice that results in the formation of a cautionary tale.

Characteristics of the Urban Fiction Novel

Beyond the style of writing that is employed, the content within urban fiction is problematic for many. Sutherland (1985) writes that authors' purposes for writing fit within one of three categories that draw attention to social norms in various ways. These categories include: the politics of assent, the politics of advocacy, and the politics of attack. While assent reinforces normalities within society without consciously bringing attention to problems with these images, both advocacy and attack deliberately uplift or condemn various representations or behaviors. Pundits critique urban fiction for its politics of assent as it reinforces the negative stereotypes that envelope representations of African American life within dominant forms of media. Critics further chastise the authors of urban fiction texts as many of the creators of urban fiction novels are African American authors who hail from many of the same neighborhoods that are featured within their texts and feature references to real cities and neighborhoods. Rather than uplift positive images of African American life, the authors are criticized for capitalizing on the stereotypic and sensationalized images popularized within the media (Stovall, 2005). Based on the connections between the imagery and the behaviors for African American adolescents, many condemn the images and content within the texts.

Beyond the characters and storylines, urban fiction is reflective of hip-hop culture, a subculture of adolescent youth culture in America. The narration of urban fiction texts are generally written in first person, from the perspective of the protagonist. The texts are often written in non standard and sometimes grammatically incorrect manners. Also, the use of slang and profanity is prevalent. Yet, writing

within the genre are similar to many other genres in that they feature traditional storylines that feature plots and basic and generic elements of most stories. Despite critiques about the “low brow” styles of writing characteristic of this genre, authors demonstrate exposure to more traditional forms of stories as they feature setting, conflict, point of view, plot, characters, and themes. This is important to note because critics tend to reference the genre as though it is abnormal compared to standard or “normal” young adult literature.

Based on these elements common to the genre, urban fiction is appealing to greater populations than those who pay attention to poetry or rap lyrics (Weeks, 2004). Allusions to hip hop are prevalent within urban fiction writings as the music, dancing, clothing and language are referenced throughout the works. Although magazines such as *Vibe*, *XXL*, and *The Source* magazines exist that also appeal to hip hop culture, urban fiction novels contain storylines that pay homage to those stereotypic and popularized aspects of hip hop cultures and African American life.

Following the model of Sista Souljah, most contemporary urban fiction novels feature a young African American female protagonist, between the ages of sixteen and twenty-three, who overcomes difficulties which involved drugs, murder, and physical or mental abuse (Morris et al., 2006). Subjects featured in urban fiction novels include incarceration, abortion, crime, drugs, teen parenthood, pregnancy, premarital sex, death, violence, and abuse (Morris, et. al., 2006). The female lead surmounts barriers by relying on her sensuality as well as her ability to manipulate her way through dangerous situations. The few male leads often use their strength and “street smarts” as well as their sensuality (when interacting with a woman) to

overcome obstacles. Often a dramatic event takes place within the first two chapters, which motivates the rest of the storyline. While conflicts exist between the main character and society at large, internal conflicts often exist within the protagonist that are resolved by the end of the text. Money and sex are used as vices of manipulation and power for characters within the texts.

Allure

Urban fiction appeals to “a virtually unknown readership” (Wilson, July 2006). Media sensationalized and historically ignored reading populations include prison inmates as well as children who hailed from inner cities (Wilson, 2006). Research additionally reveals that readers include African American women and girls as well as adolescent boys who ranged in age from twelve to fifty-five (Black Issues Book Review, 2005; Chateline, 2006; YALS, 2006; Publisher’s Weekly, 2004) While Vanessa Morris et. al., (2005) write that the readership of urban fiction most often live in urban settings and are largely working class, Wilson (2006) finds that readers of urban fiction text hail from a range of socioeconomic and regional backgrounds.

Research identifies a number of factors that contribute towards the popularity of urban fiction. Interpretive lenses for framing engagement with the urban fiction genre imply that reading serves a specific purpose that results in a form of gratification for the reader (Ruggiero, 2000). Gratification, however, is contingent upon individual needs and interpretations of the text. For many adolescents, reading texts, such as urban fiction, satisfies a curiosity about taboo issues, enhances the development of self perception. Further, based on the writing style, engagement

enables the reader to live out a fantasy as well as gain exposure to characters and storylines with which they share personal connections. Engagement with urban fiction, according to existing bodies of research suggest that engagement satisfies various adolescent readers in a variety of ways.

Urban fiction as a guide to considering "forbidden issues" & gender roles.

Adolescence is time of confusion and mystification for most girls who struggle to understand their roles within their various cultural affinity groups. Embracing Lesko's (2001) conception of the term as an arbitrary and broad category intended to reference age, individuals qualifying as adolescents are viewed as possessing agency and purpose and not observed as simply "not yet adults" (Schultz, & Hull, 2002). With this said, this period of development is often associated with the conflict between how adolescents view themselves and how they would have ultimately like to be viewed (Erikson, 1968). Adolescence, however, varies based on the exposures, values, and affiliations of individuals' and is dynamic in that it manifests itself differently and varies for individuals. As such, girls rely on various forms of text to help develop their conceptions of self by modeling their appearances and behaviors after those images within popularized texts that they deem to be important within their lives (Athanasos, 1998; Orellana, 1995; Schultz, & Hull, 2002). Relevancy of texts varies and is contingent upon the various influences of adolescents, especially peer groups and community values. Within their explorations, adolescent girls have been found to read in order to explore curiosities associated with their transition from girlhood to womanhood and the expectations around beauty and behavior that accompany their development.

The exploration of gender roles, femininity, and sexuality, amongst other often overlooked and undiscussed topics, motivates the leisure reading interests of adolescent girls. Kaplan and Cole's (2003) findings, based on comparisons of four racially mixed adolescent female focus group interviews, suggests that girls, regardless of race, use teen magazines as a way of exploring conceptions of sex, sensuality, and female gender roles as conversations on these topics are not largely taking place with adults. As such, the participants are left with little knowledge other than that which is obtained through their interactions with text and unknowledgeable friends. Based on their in depth interviews with ten adolescent girls, Duke and Kreshel (1998) find that girls read to gain exposure to standards of beauty to emulate themselves after as the magazines presented representations of how to attain the attention of males. Duke and Kreshel, however, neglect to consider how the role of race inspires various types of engagements with texts. Through a mixed method approach, which involved in-depth interviews with White and African American adolescent girls, Milkie (1999) found that White adolescent female readers who engaged with teen magazines read to be familiar with those images that their peers, especially boys, used as a measure of judgment as it related to beauty. She found, however, that her African American participants were less impacted and more critical of those limited representations of women within those mainstream texts based on the lack of value those images held within their perspective communities. This study is limited in that it did not present images within texts that were highly regarded within African American communities. Within her ethnographic study about White middle

class adolescent girls' engagement with fictional texts, Cherla (1994) finds that girls often pleasure read to explore their conceptions of love and romantic relationships.

Finder's study (1997) reveals that the pleasure reading materials within the homes of her participants serve as an indulgence that enables an exploration of how beauty and sexuality motivates social memberships within various adolescent cultures at their school. Reading choices often involve fictional texts that present sexualized images of womanhood within various types of relationships as these behaviors often resulted in attention from males; the texts read are used as a "guide for life" of sorts as they provide adolescent girls with models of behaviors and choices that result in attention from boys.

Beyond curiosity about sensuality, considerations about gender roles often motivate questions for adolescents. Through interviews and classroom observations of adolescent 6th and 7th grade girls and boys, Millard (1997) found that adolescents viewed traditional conceptions of reading as being inherently more effeminate and associated formal reading engagement with females. As such, female participants viewed reading engagement as an expectation associated with womanhood. This finding suggests that gender based roles are often supported by stereotypes and generalizations about the interests and abilities of girls and boys (Millard, 1997). Community based expectations of gendered related behaviors directly influence the leisure reading habits of adolescents (Finders, 1997). Hartman (2001), referenced herein, provides insight into the glaring contrast about the community based expectations of behaviors and appearances based on gender and self perceptions for girls as she contrasts outlooks prior to and after the onset of adolescence. Many of

her adolescent female participants emphasized a tension about how to obtain idealic appearances and behaviors that aligned with popularized community behaviors and appearances. Hartman finds that her participants seek out tools, such as various types of texts, to help them acquire new knowledge that enables them to adapt to societal expectations of woman's behaviors and outlooks.

Hartman (2001) analyzes the reading experiences of White working class girls through a critical ethnography. She learns that her participants create different identities in order to succeed in different environments; their reading interests reflect those identities. "Girls often find that they must put aside their own wishes and desires in order to fulfill the feminine role that they see as the only viable" (Hartman, 2001, p.13). Those identities directly impact the literature these girls chose to read and the chosen text furthered understandings about how to enhance those created identities. As an example, in English class, Hartman's participants "worked hard, set goals, participated, and remained silent" to be successful students. They subconsciously embraced tamer identities in school that were hushed and timid. Participants in Margaret Finders' study (1997) demonstrate similar behaviors as they hide their genuine reading interests at school, reading books that are "school sanctioned" during independent reading time to portray a certain type of image. At home, however, the identities of the girls shift from meek to more assertive. Finders discovers that the "hidden" literacy habits of adolescent girls are directly linked to their conceptions of self. Finders finds that girls used literature and the internet "zine" sites as a means of creating and maintaining social group memberships that focus on empowering other adolescent girls by critically challenging conceptions of

gender and femininity presented within text. Zine articles also enable the adolescent female authors to observe their own maturity and growth, fostering their identity development as they document their writings over time (Finders, 1996; Guzzetti, 2004). Identity exploration is one of the hallmarks of the young adult novel genre and a central element to the stories and a chief motivating factor for many adolescents who read (Athanases, 1998; Neilson, 2001; Schultz & Hull, 2002; Sutherland, 2005). Beyond novels, “touchstone texts” such as song lyrics, movies, and internet sites are examples of texts that allow adolescents to explore their burgeoning identities that are often based within adolescent culture (Sandford, 2006).

Adolescent African American females read texts such as urban fiction as a means of developing their self perceptions that are grounded within the ethnic and racial identities as well as social group affiliations (Waters, 1996). Often adolescents’ perceptions of self are grounded in more than one cultural affiliation as “youth tend to develop new (sub) cultures, as they appropriate, borrow, or adapt established practices to create new styles that distinguish their particular social groups from others” (Carter, 2005); these affiliations directly impact how children perceive themselves. For adolescents, modeling and social learning provides a basis for self perceptions (Vera, 1996). Characters within leisure reading materials, such as urban fiction, provide models of behavior to be replicated or rebuffed by readers.

Based on their underprivileged positions within society as African American and female, Sutherland (2006) writes that African American girls are bombarded with negative images of themselves. Within her case study, Sutherland finds that African American adolescent girls use reading and writing as a means of exploring

popularized myths about the sexuality of African American women as well as other stereotypic roles. A lack of positive images within various reading and media outlets, according to Sutherland, further solidifies the stereotypes that exist. Although largely criticized for portraying negative representations of Black life (Venable et al., 2004), adolescent African American girls may read urban fiction to further understand how other African American females deal with issues such as sexuality and physical appearance. Despite contention over the representations of Black womanhood and African American life, characters within the novels still share commonalities with the adolescent African American female readerships as patrons from this population are also African American and young. Further elaborating on the identity conflict within the stories, multicultural young adult novels, such as urban fiction, feature characters who also struggle with self perception but do so by specifically confronting racial, ethnic, and gender constructs, the cultural norms and expectations affiliated with various community memberships, and conceptions of assimilation.

Personal connections to text. Elaine Richardson (2002) writes about the connection that most African American females share with stereotypic images of African American characters and settings popularized and encompassing African American life. Within her critique about the popularized depictions of African American women within various media outlets, Richardson (2002) states that “though many African American females were not born into literal American ghettos, most, nevertheless, struggle for self determination and self definition against the world’s ghettoized images of them”. Emphasizing the experiences of adolescents, specifically, Sutherland (2005), referenced herein, writes that African American

adolescent females, especially, crave images of themselves within text as they are presented with limited opportunities to interact with images of their likeness.

Adolescent African American girls read to learn about characters with whom they share commonalities; a commonality may be sharing the same race. Like White females, African American girls are interested in exploring conceptions of love and relationships and engage with various texts to explore their curiosities. However, they are also searching for representations of themselves, irrespective of the positive or negative attributes of those characters (Sutherland, 2005). While the images within urban fiction stories include depictions of African American life that are often critiqued for being stereotypic in that they feature Black characters as highly sexualized, violent, and affiliated with drug activity, the consideration arises whether or not engagement with this genre outweighs the potential impact of the images upon adolescent female readers or if readers might engage with the images in more critical ways than assumed by many adults.

Research suggests that female readers of color struggle to find texts that appropriately depict racial and gender constructions reflective of their home cultures (DeBlase, 2005; Fordham, 1992; Richardson, 2005; Sutherland, 2005). When considering the leisure reading choices of African American girls in particular, Fordham (1993) encourages a contextual understanding about the social placement of African American females within American society. She juxtaposes the normalized White womanhood to that of African American female existence when she writes, “Black womanhood is often presented as the antithesis of white women’s lives” (Fordham, 1993). Within her ethnographic research of thirty three high school

African American girls, Fordham found that her participants used their voices to rebel against *normalized* conceptions of femininity and femaleness, which are often compatible with representations of White womanhood. Popularized images, centering on sexual, angry, apathetic, or sacrificial mothering characters, are often the most popular depictions of African American women presented in texts (Richardson, 2002). As such, literature serves as a form of indoctrination into a society that views historically marginalized members through distorted lenses (DeBlase, 2003, Richardson, 2002; Sutherland, 2003). The assumption within this view, however, is that viewers, or adolescents in this case, possess no agency and are totally submissive of these images. DeBlase (2003) and Fordham (1993) contend that African American girls become passive consumers of texts and these derogatory images as they are neither trained nor afforded the opportunity to either acknowledge or explore their thoughts around presentations of race and gender or renegotiate the commonly held perceptions largely perpetuated in texts. This suggests that some adolescent African American girls may not be cognizant of the oppressive quality of the negative images found in literature as they become acculturated and tacitly accept the stereotypic images presented. As a consequence, popularized and degraded images presented in literature are applied to the self perceptions of adolescent African American girls (DeBlase, 2003). Due to the dearth of multidimensional African American female characters in texts, African American adolescent females are not afforded the luxury to discriminate against readings that contained negative and stereotypic portrayals.

Through his study working with African American womens' responses to various advertisements featuring women, Frisby (2004) found that African American

women are more likely to self evaluate and compare themselves based on beauty ideals when interacting with images of women who share similar ethnicities and race. It is important to note that Frisby's findings focused upon the responses of women and not adolescents. His research is important to note, however, because it speaks to the potential impact of images within urban fiction texts within the lives of adolescent readers. Unlike their engagement with other forms of text which may emphasize women from races other than Black, emphasis of Black women's images seem to resonate the African Americans conceptions of beauty. Although emphasizing the responses of Hawaiian "local girls" to the Baby-Sitters Club series, instead of African American adolescent girls, Grace and Lum (2001) found that respondents were not influenced by images of White femininity and popularized conceptions of beauty but relied upon cultural and social influences to resist and critique those portrayals. We learn from Frisby and Grace and Lum that women and adolescents of color may be more impacted by images of women with whom they share similar races or ethnicities. Further, from Grace and Lum, we see that adolescents may be critical of images of women who do not share their likeness. These studies, however, do not address how adolescent African American females will interact with and process images of their likeness.

Images found within popularized yet traditional forms of literature that are often promoted within schools present an even starker picture for middle class adolescent African American as those images often presented neglect to consider African Americans as achieving more than a socio economically feeble existence

(Patillo-McCoy, 1999); it is as though middle class African American girls are either abnormalities or virtually nonexistent.

Reading as an escape. Within her focus groups with adolescent female girls, Blackford (2004) discovers that girls often read for images and storylines that are contrary to their realities. She writes that girls rely on literature as a means of escaping from their realities metaphorically. Participants did not read for accurate and positive representations of themselves or similar characters. Instead, they read for enjoyment, as a means of escaping the daily occurrences of their own lives. Hicks (2005) conducts a four year ethnographic study of adolescent girls who share ties with rural Appalachia and, like Blackford (2004), finds that adolescent girls use fiction as a form of escapism when they read horror fictions during their leisure time; participants did not experience escapism through engagement with regular school texts. She writes that there is “power in lowbrow fictions as it provide[s] an opportunity for girls to escape the pressures of the girls juggling home lives and middle class school cultures” (p. 213). In accordance with the findings of Blackford and Hicks, Carl Taylore focuses on how urban fiction serves as an escape for African American middle class adolescents when he comments, “black middle class are drawn to the [urban fiction] stories because they present a side of life that others have tried to hide from them. Street culture has always appealed to these kids” (Osborne, 2001). Urban fiction provides exposure to a different life for some readers. Engagement with urban fiction may provide the opportunity for readers to escape their own realities in exchange for a lifestyle different from their own experiences. This is also significant in that, contrary to popular assumptions (Wilson, July 2006),

urban fiction appeals to a variety of readers who come from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds and not just the poor and working class communities reflected within the storylines.

Connections to Traditional Literature

Young adult literature, and variations of this form of fiction, serves as a bridge between classical literature and the engagement of adolescents (Gallo, 1996) as it provides alternative means of helping students understand the various literary devices and themes, while engaging students about issues that are relevant and presented in more accessible ways. Classics can be incorporated after an understanding of these dense narrative devices are understood. Young adult literature, like the classics, contain satirical diction, poignant themes, wit, and imagery. John Bennion (2002) writes that his daughter began to value and understand canonical texts only after she began enjoying reading; young adult literature sparked her interest and passion as she became exposed to text that connected with her interests and her realities. Based on her exposure to young adult literature, she was ultimately able to build connections for herself with various classical texts in school.

Sarah Herz (1996) finds that her English classroom has become a more welcoming environment for her students when she began incorporating young adult works into her curriculum. Herz is still able to teach the lessons about the same literary devices found in the classics such as character and characterization, setting, conflict, theme, point of view, plot, style, crisis, climax, foreshadowing, flashback, figurative language and as well as others. Although the classics do address the concerns of adolescents, they typically are written to appeal to well-educated adults

who have the leisure time to invest in the stories. Gallo (1996) believes classics remove the joy of reading because they are disconnected from the lives of adolescents but forced on students. Teenagers read for entertainment but are not exposed to those forms of text that elicit joy and serve as entertainment. Carlsen and Sherill (1996) also find that most students do not enjoy reading classical literature because the themes seemingly do not relate to their lives and the language is confusing. Forcing students to read classical texts that are disengaging repels students from reading (Gallo, 1996). The goal, again, according to Santoli and Wagner (2004) is to promote reading, and not to disenchant students with text. The educational component is lost on the students because they are unable to deconstruct dense and arcane language and contextualize the classical stories to see application to their lives. Although these studies emphasize young adult literature, urban fiction, a form of multicultural young adult literature, may share the same potential within the classroom based on its shared similarity to young adult literature. Current understandings about the benefits of using urban fiction within the classroom are missing from research. Connections have been created based on urban fiction qualifying as a form of young adult literature, a form which has been investigated (Herz, 1996; Nippold, Duthie, & Larsen, 2005; Salvner, 2000).

Engagement

An awareness of the relationship between engagement and comprehension is a means of understanding why students are not excelling within the domain of reading (Alvermann, et.al., 1998; Rosenblatt, 1995). Scholars refer to engagement as the process where motivation and thoughtfulness converge when interacting with a text

(Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Staples, 2005). Engaged readers, according to (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000), “seek to understand; they enjoy learning and they believe in their reading abilities. They are intrinsically motivated and have self efficacy (p.3)”.

Reading development, which advances based on engagement with texts, ensures the strategic, conceptual, and lexical maturity of individuals (Nippold & Duthis, 2005).

As reading comprehension advances, word knowledge increases which ultimately results in greater reading comprehension. Hence, engagement is directly attributable to comprehension and word acquisition.

The benefits of engagement with text seem essential towards motivating those skills that are needed in order to succeed in school. Within their assessment of research on reading instruction, authors Campbell, Voelkl, and Donahue (1997) write that engagement with a text motivate greater and more complicated forms of comprehension. Further, Keene and Zimmerman (1997) find that engaged readers not only desire to read but demonstrate specific skills that include identifying the purpose for reading, recognizing aspects of the story that are confusing and unclear and taking steps to gain clarity, built on prior knowledge before, during and after the reading, understood the main themes from the text, asked question internally or externally, created sensory images, made inferences, and synthesized the text. These findings are significant to note because they speak to the power of establishing connections from adolescent readers to text as a means of promoting reading development and abilities to comprehend. While background knowledge and vocabulary exposure stimulate student interests (Nippold & Duthie, 2005), curiosity and a motivation to understand and relate those discoveries to their lives inspired

desires to engage with text (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). Personal, or out-of-school, texts are especially important to consider for adolescents because, in contrast to school-required materials, these readings elicit the highest rates of engagement for adolescents (Worthy et al., 1999); choice and topic play a role in the decision for adolescent readerships to engage with various types of text.

Text is defined more traditionally by Wade and Moje (2000) as being “organized networks of meaning the people generate to use to make meaning either for themselves or others (p.610)”. According to this perspective, text is presented as extending beyond the traditional conceptions that are often promoted in schools; more traditional forms of text often include novels and short stories that qualify as classical or canonical literature. Researchers are finding, however, that most adolescents do not subscribe to these forms of text in their leisure time. More contemporary views of text surfaced as a means of acknowledging the reading interests of adolescents.

Alvermann (1998) updates more traditional definitions of text writing that “conception of ‘text’ must include...popular music, magazines, and newspapers and adolescents’ own cultural understandings” (p. 2). Alvermann’s conception of text acknowledges and validated the significance of the out-of-school reading habits of a diverse body of adolescent readers.

Using Literature in the Classroom: The Influence of Social Class Upon Literature Found in Classrooms

Most reading and literacy research neglects to consider the impact of either race or social class upon the reading engagements and interests of adolescents; more of an emphasis is, however, placed upon gender as it relates to reading interests and

outcomes for adolescents. The framework guiding this investigation, however, is motivated by recognition of the impact of various social constructs, beyond gender, upon learning outcomes for various groups of readers. This section of the review considers existing bodies of knowledge that help support understandings of how class influences reading engagement for adolescent readers.

Engaging texts for students from non mainstream cultures are often neglected and excluded from school curricula (Schultz & Hull, 2002). Despite recognition of the power of leisure reading in engaging adolescents and stimulating stronger reading skills (Rosenblatt, 1995; Staples, 2005), often, texts relevant to the lives of historically marginalized learners are missing from school curricula and libraries (Wanda Brooks, 2006; DeBlase, 2003; Hughes, 1991; Skilton-Sylvester, 2002).

According to Pierre Bourdieu (1973), the education system, and the literature that is promoted within this system, exists to benefit middle class populations of learners. Hence, students from lower class backgrounds have fewer resources to contribute towards the exposures that are valued within schools issues of text exposure are predicated upon social class more than any other social construct (Valdata, 2005). Text exposure is a form of capital as middle class literacy exposures are valued over those of lower class populations (Street, 2003). Exposure to urban fiction and other non dominant forms of text also serves as a form of capital, possibly within the communities and social networks of readers. This exposure and form of reading capital is not valued within society at large. Teachers devalue the capital of non dominant cultural groups while White middle class learners are advantaged because of exposure to the classical texts by virtue of middle class privilege. The

ultimate result is a disparity in levels of literacy achievement gauged between the mainstream learners and the non mainstream learners (Lareau, 2003). Membership in higher socio economic classes yields exposure to literature which is closely aligned with school practices. Students within with middle class exposures are rewarded on standardized comprehension examinations which are reflective of their exposures. School practices are established by representatives within this class who maintain and promote their conceptions of acceptable literature which are limiting of and exclusionary of those habits of students who do not come from middle class backgrounds (Jones, 2006). Purcell Gates (1995) argues that middle class parents expose their children to the forms of literacy (such as reading canonical text and writing in response to those texts) that are valued in school. Through conversation, which is based on exposure, middle class parents are able to build connections and spark engagement between the texts and the lives of their children (Lareau, 2003; Purcell-Gates, 1995; Stuckey, 1991). As such, middle class students begin reading more traditional forms of text for enjoyment more so than children from more disadvantaged backgrounds (Lareau, 2003; Stuckey, 1991). A foundational belief of this study is that historically marginalized groups are indeed reading and exist within literate cultures. Their literacy habits, however, are often different from those traditional texts and literacies that are promoted and valued within schools. Further, historically marginalized readers may not understand the significance of attaining mainstream forms of literature exposures. As such, they may become further disenchanting with English curricula.

Skilton Sylvester (2002) found that reading strengths of immigrant students were rarely explored or encouraged, resulting in academic failure and disconnections from school. One of her participants, as an example, valued writing and participating in plays based on her cultural and familial exposures. This form of dramatic reading and the topics covered within the plays of interest to her were not supported in the class curriculum, and failure in her English class is largely attributable to this disconnect. Jabari Mahiri (2004), for instance, found that an adolescent African American lower class female within his study was quite literate, despite her low marks on reading assessments. Notwithstanding her sub par grades on performance assessments, in her leisure time, she pursued literacies that demonstrated an aptitude for reader development but were not embraced within her English classroom; the language used and the violent topics addressed within her readings and writings were considered inappropriate for school, even though these topics engaged this student.

Conceptions of marginalized versus dominant practices are based upon notions of cultural capital. McLaren (1998) writes that cultural capital is the “general cultural background, knowledge, disposition, and skills that are passed from one generation to another. Cultural capital represents ways of talking, acting and socializing, as well as language, practices, values, and styles of dress and behavior.” McLaren believes schools reward certain behaviors, exposures and practices which are typically associated with White middle class groups (i.e. punctuality, diction, posture, way of dress, gestures) while devaluing the capital of non dominant, or non middle class White cultural groups. Seagert, Thompson, and Warren (2001) comment that "the educational system reproduces all the more perfectly the structure of the distribution

of cultural capital among classes in that the culture which it transmits is closer to the dominant culture and that the mode of inculcation to which it has recourse is less removed from the mode of inculcation practiced by the family” (p. 493). Incongruity between diverse cultural norms and inflexible school curricula, consequently, results in schools serving as institutions that not only preserved inequalities, but reproducing them.

How Teachers Perceive & Use “Good” Literature

Rather than emphasize personal connections between the student and the text, some teachers are focused, instead, on their own perspectives and experiences (Christenbury, 2000; Gallo, 1996) as their teaching pedagogies are teacher centered instead of student centered. Leila Christenbury (2000) finds that most teachers present text based on their own exposures as young adults and as students. As such, many teachers neglect to consider how their values impact their literary interests. Beach (1998) and Webster (1990) find that teachers promote behaviorist views where they see themselves as the conduit for interpreting and applying text to the lives of students. Further, Beach (1998) writes that students are deterred by teachers from considering links between their interests and exposures and texts presented in the classroom. These studies suggest that teachers create meaning from texts as opposed to allowing their students to create meaning for themselves.

While many teachers view “good literature” as text to which they could personally relate, researchers are beginning to oppose this view. Good literature, instead, is coming to be defined as text with which students can engage, regardless of the scope and genre of that reading (Christenbury, 2000; Guild & Hughes-Hassell,

2001; Herz, 1996; Moje et al., 2000; Santoli & Wagner, 2004). Contrary to teacher-centered pedagogies, culturally relevant pedagogy is often synonymous with conceptions of student-centered instruction (Ladson Billings, 1997).

Defined as using the "cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning more relevant to and effective...it teachers to and through strengths of ... students" (Gay, 2000, 29), Culturally Responsive Pedagogy uses the cultures of students as a springboard for teaching. It promotes three primary tenets: students experiencing academic success (Gay, 2000), students developing and or maintaining bicultural competence (Heath, 1983; Irvine, 1989), students developing a consciousness where they critique and challenge the current social order and their placement within that hierarchy (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Especially as applied to the cultures of historically marginalized populations of learners, traditionally a disconnect exists between the home and school reading cultures of students. This disconnect contributes to the lower learning outcomes for adolescents.

Within this context, students are regarded as experts who are charged with a responsibility of playing a role in their educational experiences. The teacher's role is essential in motivating this involvement, however. Teachers make connections between the cultures, interests, and communities of students, as a means of ensuring that the curriculum is relevant , meaningful, and engaging (Gay, 2000). Further, teachers' encourage multiple and diverse perspectives about interpretation and ways of viewing content. Regardless of one's personal view of the leisure literacy interests of adolescents, Cultural Responsive Pedagogy motivates instruction that is hinged

upon those interests of students as opposed to that of the instructor. The study is hinged upon the importance of centering students' interest as a means of bolstering achievement.

Through Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, urban fiction and other non traditional texts can be viewed as a literacy strength that adolescent African American girls and others who engaged in the reading of these texts possess; this directly contradicts the deficit oriented approach to viewing the habits of adolescent African Americans (Howard, 2003). Rather than judging and dismissing what the experiences and exposures of students that are grounded within their homes and communities, especially during their leisure time. Culturally Responsive Pedagogy serves as a premise for understanding engagement with various forms of text in order to create connections between the secular reading cultures outside of school and those dominant reading cultures promoted within schools. Culturally Responsive Pedagogy is the understanding and adoption of the practices that reflect an acknowledgement of the cultures and interests of learners. It is helpful in recognizing, examining, and analyzing personal perspectives about issues, specifically, around diversity and equity. As "it is essential to recognize that responses and reactions to students' cultural identities have a profound influence on what students learn and how they learn it" (Lindsey, Roberts, & Campbell Jones, 2005, p. 53), an exploration of and connection with the cultures of students may promotes stronger academic outcomes.

Rather than devalue urban fiction as unworthy of attention, Culturally Responsive Pedagogy motivates exploration of various forms of text, based on students engagement, and further motivates abilities to complicate the representations

race, class, and gender based on the need to explicate and challenge the portrayals of historically marginalized groups within various forms of text (Richardson, 2002). An understanding about urban fiction may serve to assist teachers as they seek to better understand how to create learning bridges between texts within this genre and those promoted within schools.

Gaps in Research

Research suggests that adolescent girls rely upon various types of texts within their leisure time to address various curiosities and needs within their lives. According to existing bodies of knowledge within the fields of sociology, literacy, and reading, research suggests that adolescent African American girls engage with texts in order to explore taboo and underdiscussed issues such as beauty, femininity, and sexuality, as a means of exploring images of women that they deem to be idealistic as it relates to appearance and decorum. Those conceptions are heavily influenced by peer groups, especially assumptions of what males deem to be physically appealing, and communities. Further, adolescent African American girls engage with texts during their leisure time based on sharing personal connections with those texts. Finally, research suggests that adolescent girls engage with text to escape from their own realities and live through the experiences of characters totally different from their likeness.

Research, however, is limited in that it neglects to consider how African American girls and other adolescent girls of color interact with and process those images from various forms of literature and forms of text, other than magazines, that captivate their interests. Urban fiction may serve as an opportunity to learn more

about why adolescent African American girls seek out particular texts and which aspects of those texts are captivating their interests. Further, as related to reading research, studies tend to emphasize the experiences of White and often middle class adolescent females. This current study seeks to bolster understandings about the literacy engagements of working class African American adolescent females.

While the field of sociology has made much grander efforts to understand the influence of various social constructs such as race and gender upon interactions with various types of images, very little research has been conducted within the field of reading or literacy which further complicates reading engagement by considering the roles of various social constructs such as race, class, gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. While authors attempt to evaluate engagement based on race (Neilson, 2001; Purcell-Gates, 1995), social class (Purcell-Gates, 1995), and gender (Love & Hamston, 2003), reading research largely neglects to consider how the combination of various constructs influence engagement with various texts as well as how transactions with and interpretations of those texts vary based on the collaboration of the multiple constructs of the reader.

Further, understandings about using popularized young adult literature has been researched extensively throughout the past ten years, and motivate understandings about how to inspire adolescents to read through the promotion of young adult literature (Gallo, 1996; Hale, 2008; Santoli & Wagner, 2004), how to teaching students about efferent engagement with text by relying on the genre (Jacobs, 2006; Van Horn, 2000; Wilhelm, 1997), and creating learning bridges between more traditional forms of text promoted within schools and young adult

literature (Christenbury, 2000; Herz, 1996; Salvner, 2000). These studies also tend to emphasize the experiences of White adolescents. Additional research is needed to understand engagement with young adult literature for adolescents of color. Further, additional research is needed to understand which multicultural young adult novels, specifically, are captivating the interests of adolescents of color, how these children are processing images and messages within those texts and how their specific engagement with the genre can be capitalized upon within classrooms.

Although research exists which consider teachers' perceptions of various forms of young adult literature versus their more traditional forms of literature from the canon, we are provided with relatively few examples of how teachers build upon the multitude of nontraditional literacy interests within their classrooms, especially those of a more controversial nature, such as urban fiction.

Further, a recognition of the diversity of literacy experiences and strengths for non mainstream learners is largely missing from research. Although growing numbers of researchers are advocating for the inclusion of voices from underprivileged communities within research (Collins, 1999; Jones, 2006; Staples, 2005), additional study is needed to consider adolescent literacy culture and how non mainstream adolescents fit within and help define this culture. Finally, additional bodies of knowledge are needed to present models of how teachers incorporate multicultural young adult novels, especially those with more controversial content, within classrooms.

Chapter 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

"So...how do we do, what we do, when we do, what we do?"

-Monet

Overview of Research

This study is an exploratory investigation that considers: a) which elements of urban fiction were motivating desires to read and engage with text and b) how readers interacted with those elements. The significance of this research is important in that it emphasizes some literacy experiences of an understudied population of readers: adolescent African American females. Next, this study reveals some potential benefits of engaging adolescent African American girls in conversations about their interpretations of urban fiction texts.

Based on the appeal of urban fiction texts, this study seeks to understand which elements of urban fiction were motivating desires to read and engage with text and how readers interacted with those elements by being guided by two primary research questions:

1. How do adolescent African American girls engage with, respond to, and make meaning from urban fiction texts?
2. How can an understanding about the engagement, response, and meaning making of adolescent African American girls to urban fiction texts inform school based literacy practices?

Research Methodology

Grounded theory represents a way of creating theory based on the analysis of perspectives from traditionally disenfranchised individuals and groups. Applications of Grounded Theory enabled me to explore the perspectives of participants with great depth through thick descriptions, evolving from interviews, observations, and conversations. It was important to "... aim to see this world as our research participants do - from the inside. Although we cannot claim to replicate their views, we can try to enter their settings and situations to the extent possible". (Charmaz (2006, p. 26)

Grounded theory is built upon the tenet of investigating meanings created through various social relationships for individuals (Charmaz, 2006; Fassinger, 2005). Meanings are interpreted and organized, ultimately "giving voice" to individuals who participate in the study. Findings are grounded, literally, in collected data that emphasized the perspectives and lived experiences of participants. Grounded theory is a research methodology used to address a problem or understand an under researched phenomenon or a process. In this case, grounded theory enables me to understand the responses and appeal of urban fiction texts for adolescent African American girls.

The methodology of grounded theory allows me to evaluate my role within the research as biased and influencing outcomes. While the perspectives of participants were the primary emphasis of the research, grounded theory promotes a recognition of my role as a facilitator and researcher in determining outcomes from my findings through reflexivity. Objectivity, according to grounded theorists, is impossible to

accomplish. When using this methodology, it was essential to consider how my perspectives influenced the context and outcome of my research. As part of the research process, I was able to inform readers about the ways in which my experiences and views shaped how I conducted my research, how my views related to my participants, and how my understandings influenced how I presented the experiences of my participants (Charmaz, 2006, p. 189).

In the process of participating, I was co-constructing meaning with participants and also empowering myself with knowledge that resulted in greater cultural proficiency about adolescent African American girls who engaged with urban fiction. Although all participants within this study were African American females, it was important to further note that individual experiences and exposures varied based on race, class, gender, religion, and age, amongst other factors. As such, beyond our race, gender and interest in urban fiction, the participants and I shared few commonalities and knowledge based on our varied experiences. Grounded theory interpretation promotes an understanding that a joint construction of meaning, generated by the researcher as well as the participant, is reflected within analysis. No predetermined outcome was established.

The Research Site

The research site for this study, The Jones School (pseudonym), is a public charter school that is located in a major city on the East coast. The school opened within the past ten years and serves about three hundred students who largely come from its immediately surrounding community. The school services middle and high school populations. Although no tuition is required, the Jones School is regarded to

be preparation for college and is unique because students live within school dormitories during the weekdays to experience a “comprehensive solution” where students are provided with a safe environment and academic expectations are enforced constantly. The comprehensive model made this site an ideal location for consistent in-depth reading activities that would occur after regular class hours.

The core curriculum at The Jones School involves math, English, science, music, technology, art, Spanish, and physical education courses. Elective courses during the year included constitutional law, youth justice, jewelry making, web design, yearbook, and drama. The teacher/student ration was one to eleven based on a ratio of 30 teachers to 300 students. The majority of the student body, 99 percent, was African American; the remaining one percent was Hispanic. Eleven percent, about 40 students, received special education services. The majority of the student body was from lower socioeconomic backgrounds as 72 percent received free or reduced lunch. Of the 12 seniors that graduated (100 percent), all enrolled in college. The average Verbal SAT score was 430 and the average Math SAT score was 420 six. The majority of its graduates had been accepted by colleges and 85 percent of those accepted graduate from college.

The city, which housed this charter school, enrolled about 60,000 students. About 20 percent of students, however, attended charter schools. Throughout this city, about 20 percent of students had Individualized Education Programs and qualified for exceptional education services. While about 50 percent of all students within this school system qualified for free or reduced lunches, 80 percent of all the schools were Title I. Schools within this city catered, primarily, to African American

students as 80 percent of the population was African American. Racial diversity did exist, however, in limited proportions as five percent were White, 11 percent were Hispanic, one percent were Asian/Pacific Islander. Per-pupil expenditures were \$13,118, one of the highest in the surrounding area. This city housed about 200 public schools and 50 charter schools. On average, the teacher-student ratio throughout the city was about 15 students for every teacher.

Since 1992, reading achievement for students within this city has fallen below the national average. Although the rates of achievement fluctuate annually, most students performed at basic reading levels, as opposed to proficient or advanced levels on standardized tests (NAEP, 2007).

Recruitment & Selection of Participants

Participants were adolescent African American girls who were in the tenth grade and attended the Jones School. Each of the selected participants reported that they had read at least three urban fiction novels independently and indicated interest in participating in this project. Each girl was included within this study based on their own desire to have conversations around an urban fiction text.

I worked closely with the head of the 10th grade house, Mrs. Miles, to arrange a meeting with suggested groups of girls to inquire about their interest in participating in this study. I met Mrs. Miles through the 10th grade administrator with whom I randomly contacted via email. Understanding the bureaucracy associated with conducting researching in public school system, I sought out charter schools by randomly emailing counselors and principals from schools listed in the city directory. The 10th grade administrator expressed interest in my proposed study and requested a

formal meeting. When I met with the administrator and informed her about my research, she immediately put me in contact with Mrs. Miles, who expressed a desire to explore some of the adolescent girls' interest within urban fiction. Based on conversations with Mrs. Miles as well as the tenth grade administrator, sixteen girls were identified as being interested in participating in the study based on a conversation as well as knowledge about after school activities that were quite time consuming, such as basketball. Mrs. Miles informed me that she advertised the study to all of her 10th grade girls but specifically spoke with several with whom she knew were avid readers of urban fiction to encourage their participation. Although I met each of the 16, spoke with them about the study and their role as participants, and provided parental consent forms to each, only six of the original 16 returned signed parental consent forms.

Data Collection

Data collection took place in three phases. Below, details about the activities and the forms of data that were that collected within each phase are documented.

Procedure

Phase i. Phase I was designed to enable me to formally meet the participants in addition to building individual as well as group rapport. This phase began with an individual in-depth interview with each of the participants allowing them to describe their leisure reading habits in general and their thoughts about urban fiction. This informational interview was guided by open ended questions that were designed relying on a flexible interviewing style; this flexible style was directly influenced by

my effort to build rapport with the participants. Participants were asked to consider their relevant experiences with urban fiction texts. Each of the six girls who agreed to participate in the literature circle was interviewed for no more than sixty minutes. Some questions overlapped intentionally to enable me to refer to an earlier comment to gain more clarity about a response. The questions began broadly and concluded with a more specific emphasis on participants' interactions with and conceptions of urban fiction. For instance, I began by asking students about their chosen leisure activities outside of school to begin to understand those non dominant literacy activities that they willingly embrace. I concluded often by asking them to provide specific details about their favorite urban fiction text. Participants were questioned about the role of songs, television programs, and magazine articles, for instance, that were appealing. After the interview questions, I informed participants about my research interests. I concluded each interview by describing, again, the format of our sessions, which involved literature circles and asked students if they were uncomfortable volunteering for any of the roles. I also explained why I would be recording and keeping field notes from our sessions.

The questions were piloted with peers and adolescent girls not participating in the study to ensure that the questions being asked were not confusing and would enable me to not only build rapport but also provide information in helping me to understand their engagement with the genre. Phase I provided me with the opportunity to interact with the participants and build rapport while learning about other forms of text that were engaging their interests during their leisure time. These interviews took place within the office of an administrator as well as a break room

where students often congregate to have meetings. I mention this because participants may have felt more comfortable in the break-out room as opposed to the administrator's office. I did not get the impression that participants possessed a warm and intimate relationship with the administrator. Speaking in her office may have had an effect on their responses, as they may not have felt as comfortable, and may have impacted my intent of build rapport. Each interview was digitally recorded and transcribed. Sample questions are located in Appendix A and a sample of a pre-interview with a participant is located in Appendix B.

Beyond building rapport with individual participants and learning about their leisure literacy habits through their pre-interviews, within phase I, we met as a group and practiced our roles and familiarity with literature circles. I met with the participants for one week (two sessions) prior to the beginning of our official literature circle.

After I thanked students for agreeing to participate within this research project, I reiterated and purpose of this study, which involved me understanding why they read urban fiction. Next, we continued our first preparatory session by creating rules for participating within the literature circle. It was important, in my mind, for the students and I to have a common understanding about participation. My hope was that the establishment of rules would also solidify students' commitment for participating and motivate the understanding that their involvement was to be taken seriously and treated respectfully. Rules included considerations about preparation, attendance, and participation. It was important to me that participants and I co-

created the rules because I wanted participants to feel valued as contributors building of culture within the group.

After co-creating the rules for participating, I provided an overview of the structure of our interactions which would take place through literature circles. I chose to use literature circles as a means of centering participants' responses to an urban fiction novel of their choosing, *Supreme Clientele*. Literature circles, a classroom instructional strategy, provide a framework for temporary small groups of individuals brought together by their interest in the same text. Within these groups, students "practice and develop the skills and strategies of good readers" (DaLie, 2001) as they analyze and critique social issues that impact them from the text under review. Literature circles are quite similar to book clubs for adults but feature additional rules of involvement to ensure students take responsibility and ownership of their involvement; interaction within the literature circle are guided primarily by student insights and questions. Characteristics of literature circles include groups formed by book choice, take place over time, and feature structured as well as unstructured interactions around text that enable student interpretation and response.

During literature circles, readers take on various roles which are: the discussion director, the literary luminary, the connector, the character captain, and the vocabulary enricher. The discussion director writes questions based on the reading for the group to discuss. The literary luminary selects parts of the story that she wants to read aloud after providing reasoning for these choices. The purpose of this role is to motivate students to remember interesting and important sections of the text. The connector finds connections between the text and the outside world. The

character captain reveals specific personality traits of characters. As such, she identifies examples from the text that provide more in-depth insight about each of the characters. Finally, the vocabulary enricher identifies vocabulary that is important within the story. Words can be interesting, repetitive, descriptive, unfamiliar, or used in an unusual way. Please see Appendix D for a log that was established to help organize the roles of different students for each meeting.

Next, I presented students with the various roles of the literature circle and explain the responsibilities of each role. As I learned about student's reading abilities from the pre-interview, I was prepared to encourage students with lower reading abilities to gravitate towards roles that did not require them to read aloud. However, students moderated themselves in appropriate ways that illuminated their strengths and overshadowed their reading weaknesses. For example, students who cited that they did not view themselves as readers did not, especially in the beginning of our interactions, assume the role of director as this role called for students to read aloud several sections of text. Students selected and assumed roles while interacting with a literacy that was emphasized by several during pre-interviews, a song by a popular rhythm and blues recording artist that was an example of a visual literacy that emphasized Black women as highly sexualized objects.

I then provided blank journals and pens to each of the participants to ensure that they possessed the needed supplies to participate within the written component of our meetings. I wanted participants to maintain a journal where they catalogued their responses to the designated reading sections after their independent reading experience, prior to our interactions as a group. Students responses in journals were

intended to help me to understand one of my research questions which prompted understandings about the impact of conversations upon participants' perspectives and their original understandings of the text. These journals were to be brought to our discussion to also help ensure that participants remembered aspects of the text that they desired to speak about and original reactions.

After handing out these supplies, a discussion took place where we considered appropriate responses for those journals. Appropriate, to me, extended beyond written comments in bulleted or a paragraph form. I explained that responses may have included pictures, songs and or lyrics, poems, and short stories, amongst other forms of expression that motivated participants to write in their journals. Also, we discussed that the journals did not have to be written in formal standard English or in the same way that they wrote on a paper for class. They could write in whatever way was natural for them. My only stipulation was that they wrote in a legible way so that I could understand their thoughts.

Participants wrote down their reactions based on their specific roles. I modeled for the director, for the first five minutes, how to lead the session by asking volunteers to share their thoughts based on their role. I also modeled during this time to ask if others had thoughts after an individual presented their thoughts. This discussion lasted about 45 minutes. This session was digitally recorded so I could gain a sense of the group dynamic and compare group interaction in the beginning and the end of this study.

After practicing how to participate within the literature circle, we concluded by participants selecting the novel that we would read. I provided participants with a

choice of five urban fiction texts to choose from. The texts I originally proposed were based on their popularity with adolescents and sales records (see Appendix F). They included: *B-More Careful* by Shannon Holmes, *The Coldest Winter Ever* by Sister Souljah, *Tru to the Game* by Terri Woods, *A Hustler's Wife* by Nikki Turner, and *Flyy Girl* by Omar Tyree. Most of the participants had read all of the books I suggested. Some has read several of the titles more than once. Based on this concern, we generated a list of urban fiction titles that I had not considered that had not been read by many of the participants. One student, Monet, my most proficient reader of urban fiction, suggested a text, *Supreme Clientele*, and made a variety of claims with regards to the merits of the text. None of the other participants had exposure to this book. From her description, I was comfortable with the text as my only requirement for the text was that it featured an adolescent African American female who confronted a variety of issues that were connected to various social pressures common to the genre. As a group, participants then voted unanimously to read *Supreme Clientele* within our literature circle. I concluded this preparatory session by reminding students to bring their journals and pens to our next session.

The first session lasted about 90 minutes total. Although respectful, I noticed that participants seemed to be losing focus after about 60 minutes. I decided, based on this first session, that I would not meet with students for longer than 60 minute sessions.

During our second preparatory session, we continued to practice selecting different roles, writing responses based on those roles, and discussing as a group reactions. I, again, selected texts that several participants referenced within their pre

interviews. I chose a snippet of a popular television program as well as the first four pages of an urban fiction novel, *The Coldest Winter Ever*. I wanted participants to get familiarized with responding to literature as this was the form of literacy that they would be engaging with more formally within our discussions. I wanted to ensure that they would not be intimidated by having to respond to literature as opposed to a visual literacy, especially for my students who did not view themselves as readers. This session lasted about 60 minutes.

These preparatory sessions marked the conclusion of phase one. I collected digital recordings of pre-interviews with my six participants as well as digital recordings of our two preparatory sessions. Each of these recordings was later transcribed and used to help analyze findings. Further, I catalogued interactions with participants through the use of descriptive field notes. Within these notes, I emphasized comments that participants made that I deemed especially important as well as attendance and an overview of our agenda for that session; I began using the descriptive field notes during pre interviews. Further, I began writing within a reflective journal to help me to be aware of my personal feelings with regards to students' comments and reactions. I wanted to be conscientious of how my reactions might cloud my future analysis.

Phase II. This phase of the data collection emphasized participants' responses to *Supreme Clientele*. The forty five to sixty minute discussions took place twice a week between March and May (shy of two days where school activities and a national holiday prevented us from meeting). The reading of the book took place over 2 months.

During our first session, I handed out a personal copy of *Supreme Clientele* to each of the participants and asked them to write their names in their copies. Several students were very seemed excited about receiving the text and somewhat surprised that I was giving them their own copy to keep. I then engaged in several activities to introduce the text. I asked questions where participants would forecast the plot of the story and assumptions about the characters based on the title and the picture on the cover of the book. We then considered how and if those assumptions were aligned with the teaser on the back cover of the text. Finally, we opened the text. I asked students to read along with me as I read the first two paragraphs aloud. I then asked additional probing questions about their assumptions of the text and how their thoughts of the text had changed, if at all, from their original assumptions. Participants then selected roles and read the next page of the text independently and wrote their responses in their journals according to their roles. Led by the discussion director, we then discussed their responses.

Upon finishing this discussion of the first two pages of the text, which lasted about 20 minutes, I prompted students to consider how many chapters they would like to read prior to each of our sessions. I encouraged students to be mindful of their other school obligations and not to obligate themselves to read so much that engagement might interfere with other activities. Participants decided upon reading and responding to three chapters for each of sessions.

The remainder of our sessions were very similar in nature in that students responded to the text based on their selected roles and also contributed to conversation points illuminated by other participants. A primary difference, however,

involved the decision to no longer use journals. Although participants were intended to maintain journals where they wrote down their responses to the text based on their roles, after three sessions within phase ii, participants asked if they could eliminate this aspect of their participation. At the beginning our second session, three of the six participants neglected to bring their journals. Realizing this, I prompted a conversation where I reminded students about the rules of participation. Then, I asked students if they had actually responded in those journals. While three participants had responded, those who neglected to bring their journals revealed that they had not written their responses in their journals. As such, I handed paper to the participants without journals and asked them to take ten minutes and write down their responses. I asked the three participants who had brought their journals to re-familiarize themselves with the reading and their responses in preparation for our discussion. During our third session, participants brought their journals, but five of the six students had not catalogued their responses. As with session two within this phase, I provided ten minutes and asked students to write down their responses. We then began our conversation. At the beginning of our fourth session, participants asked if they could eliminate writing in the journal as a mandatory part of participation. Although I write about my feelings and frustrations associated with this situation in chapter five, please note that as a group, we decided to no longer use journals. Also, please note that within my analysis, I did not rely upon those journals that participants had completed. With the exception of four journal entries, participants wrote their responses after interacting with other participants around the text. I felt that these interactions contaminated the original purpose of the journals

and their writing did not seem to be reliable (based on my purpose for using their journals). As such, I decided to disregard the journal entries that students created.

I, however, continued to maintain descriptive field notes. As noted above, I relied upon the descriptive field notes to catalogue the comments from students that I deemed as being important, attendance, students' roles, and a summary of the portions of the text that participants selected to discuss. I also maintained a reflective journal, after each of our sessions, to reflect upon my observations and thoughts about students' responses to the text. For instance, within my reflective journal, I took note of how Antoniese would originally allow other students to interrupt her thoughts and speak over her and she would simply smile. I further considered why she would allow this to happen and how this, in my mind, was reflective of her low self perception.

Also, during this phase, I wrote three memos. Memos assisted me in identifying emerging themes that surfaced from students comments within our discussions, my field notes, and reflective journal. Miles and Huberman (1994) describe memos as a way to provide an opportunity for the researcher to consider any themes or concepts that stand out within the research. They are "the step between data collection and writing drafts of papers" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 72). These memos enabled me to develop any ideas and observations from data collection.

Each of our sessions was digitally recorded and transcribed immediately. I relied upon students responses from previous sessions to summarize the major points of their conversation and to ask questions to clarify some of their comments. As such, digitally recorded sessions were immediately transcribed and superficially

analyzed so that I could generate these questions for clarification and summaries to begin each of our sessions. Our last literature circle discussion signified the conclusion of phase ii.

Phase iii. Phase III of the research process was designed to bring closure to the reading of the text and the readers' contributions to the study. A post interview was conducted that focused on the significance of conversations on urban fiction texts to the participants as well as their general reflections about the text. Each of these interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. As with phases i, and ii, I continued to maintain descriptive field notes where I catalogued comments that seemed significant. Further, I continued to take note of my personal feelings and thoughts with regards to my observations and interactions with participants. One of my participants, however, was not available for the post interview as she gave birth to her child and was absent from school for the remainder of the year.

The post interview took place through open ended questions which were built around a flexible interviewing style; this flexible style, like with the pre interview, was influenced by the rapport with the participants. Five of the six girls who agree to participate in the literature circle were interviewed for no more than sixty minutes. Some questions overlapped intentionally to enable me to refer to an earlier comment to gain more clarity about a response. As with the pre-interview, the questions began broader but concluded with a more specific emphasis on their interactions within our literature circle discussions and their impressions of the significance of engaging with urban fiction. Like the pre interview questions, the post interview questions were also piloted with peers and adolescent girls not participating in the study to ensure

that the questions being asked were not confusing. Sample questions are located in Appendix A as well as a transcribed sample interview in Appendix C. These interviews took place within the dormitory of the girls in open meeting rooms. See Appendix F for a matrix which emphasized how the collected data helped to answer guiding questions.

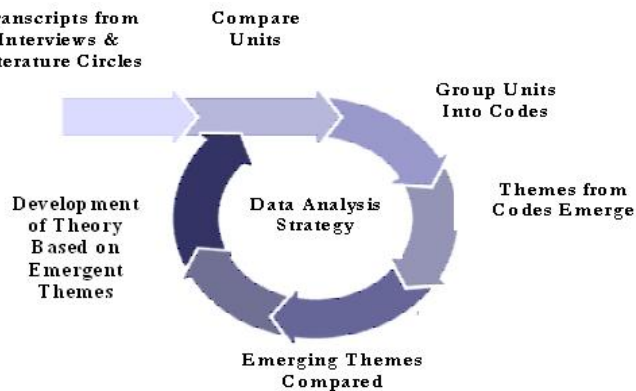
Throughout the three phases of my research, data was collected through digital recording of students pre and post interviews as well as literature discussion sessions, descriptive field notes, and reflective journals; each of these digital recordings was transcribed. Within the descriptive field notes, I cataloged comments that I deemed as significant raised by students, student attendance, and special circumstances that influenced conversation for the day. For instance, students came to a session where they all expressed concern about an upcoming quiz within their English class about a writing that they did not understand. I took note of these circumstances because I felt that these concerns may have influenced participants focus upon our conversations. Within my reflective journal, I consider my own decisions about my interactions with students as well as my choices about my methods and methodology, my engagement and feelings about the text, and my responses to students' conversations. Any frustrations and questions that arose about my research were also catalogued here. I used this journal to unpack my subjectivities as much as possible and reflect upon how I was understanding participants' responses. For instance, on many occasions, students made disturbing comments and frustrating remarks. I relied upon this journal to catalogue my thoughts about those comments and interactions to keep a record of how I felt versus

how the student seemed to feel. In this respect, the journals helped me to be more conscientious about my analysis as I did not want my personal biases to blur my understanding of participants' responses. Please see Appendix F for a chart that highlights the different phases of the data collection and the artifacts that were obtained from each phase.

Data Analysis

“[Grounded Theory does not] claim to offer a fully elaborated methodology from soup to nuts—from project design to data collection to final write-up” (A. Clarke, 2007, p. 436). As such, analysis was based on the recommendations of several grounded theorists. Data analysis was an on-going process. As data was collected, transcriptions were created and coded. Coding involved labeling segments of responses with a short title that summarizes the pieces of data within that category. These codes demonstrated how I selected, separated, and sort the responses as a means of acknowledging and ultimately analyzing them (Charmaz, 2006, p. 43). I relied upon NVivo software to help me code participants' responses. The chart below illustrates the various phases of analysis that are detailed below in chart 3.1.

Chart 3.1: Phases of Analyzing Transcripts



Coding

Transcripts were coded openly. Open coding allowed me to form units of meaning or concepts that are derived from participants' own words (Maxwell, p 97). While I was guided toward potential responses of participants, based on loosely applicable studies, leads emerged from the comments of participants (Charmaz, 2006, p. 17). Units and concepts from the transcript could have been as small as a word or as big as a paragraph. The goal of analyzing data was to ensure that I captured even small incidences of meaning. Coded units of meaning were compared and concepts were then grouped together based on similarities and analyzed further. During this phase, I focused on exploring as many emerging themes and theoretical possibilities

as I could gather from the data. The coding of my data took place over several phases.

I analyzed transcripts by addressing research questions individually. As such, coding began when I selected a guiding research question and began to identify students' responses that seemed to address that particular question. I began by first focusing on pre interviews, then comments within our literature circle discussions, then post interviews.

Codes in this phase were largely descriptive. For instance, in attempting to answer the research question where I sought to understand why participants were engaging with urban fiction, broad and descriptive categories were originally established such as "school and friends", "family and community", "easy to read", and "personal familiarity with concepts in text". I relied upon descriptive field notes to help clarify comments made and ensure that I was interpreting comments appropriately.

After establishing broad and descriptive categories for understanding participants' responses, I then began to focus on the reoccurrences of particular codes and organize students' responses according to their similarities and occurrences. For instance, when understanding participants' engagement with urban fiction, I noticed that four of my six participants referenced that they read because of social pressure at school to engage with the genre.

Next, specific categories which contained these patterns were created. Where coding initially began with broad and descriptive terms, they were now further ciphered into more specific categories. Instead of "school and friends", specific

categories such as “pressure in 7th grade from best friend” and “familiarity with slang words” instead of “easy to read” emerged.

The final step within the process of analyzing findings involved creating theory based on the findings from the coding phase. At this point, I began to rely upon my reflective journal and memos to help understand and analyze these categories. I considered my initial analysis found within my journal and memos in lieu of the newly formulated categories. Existing literature was also compared to the categories that had been established. I provided description about the participants’ beliefs and ultimately made claims about what was being studied.

Validity

The significance of reliability lies in the researchers' ability to describe and detail their procedures as a means of repeating the trials within the study. Detailed procedures and identifying the use of various research tools ideally will result in the ability to further create theories and claims about the generalizability of research and its placement within current bodies of knowledge. Validity involves reflecting the thematized responses of participants in responsible and accurate ways that convey a truthful depiction of the phenomena under study. Within this section, I identify the ways in which I attempted to maintain reliability for my research while also preserving the validity of my work.

As a means of ensuring reliability of the information being collected, I used several methods to triangulate my findings. Within phase I, the methods included pre interviews with students about readings of urban fiction, conversations that took place within this phase during literature circles about leisure literacy interests of participants, and field notes based on observations. Within phase II, conversations

within literature circles, student journals, and field notes provided reliability. Further, I began each session by reminding students of the major comments that they made in the previous meeting and the themes that seemed to be emerging which served as a member check. Students provided their input about my notes. Within phase three, the post interviews along with my field notes enabled further triangulation of my findings.

I also maintained field notes, the self reflective journal, and memos where I maintained a log of the major events of the study or an audit trail. The activities that were denoted throughout the study included: interview transcripts, interview guides, lists of participants, video and audio tapes of interviews and literature discussions, categories and thoughts about the ongoing analysis of data, as well as miscellaneous notes about research procedures. These various forms of collected data were assessed independently and compared to ensure triangulation. Also, I collected data in a systematic way.

As a means of ensuring that my research remained valid, I allowed participants to verify finished transcripts. Further, I had a form of a member check after the last monthly meeting, three times total, where I highlighted the major points from that particular discussion. Further, I had my transcripts reviewed by participants and peer reviewed by fellow candidates within my program of study. I also received feedback about my findings within my journals and memos from colleagues and committee members.

Ethical Considerations

This research was conducted with adolescent African American girls who independently read urban fiction texts. As such, I was not exposing participants to a new form of reading that could be viewed by some as disruptive and controversial; the participants had already been exposed to this genre. Ethical dilemmas could have arisen, however, through comments that participants made within literature circles and through their journaling. As urban fiction contained many references to topics such as physical and emotional abuse, drugs, sex, and violence, student responses could have reveal their knowledge of illegal or harmful situations as a means of connecting with the text. Also, student may have experienced emotions associated with many of these sensitive topics. As I was a virtual stranger and had no connections with the participants' teachers, I reminded students that their participation within this literature circle had no bearing on any grades or credit they received in school. Although students consented to participating, they were reminded that they could choose to stop participating within the research at any time without penalty. If this happened, their responses would not be included in analysis. All of the original participants ended the study at its conclusion. Only 1 participant, Monet, missed the last two meetings based on going into labor and giving birth to her child.

Further, student identities were masked through the use of pseudonyms. Videos and digital audio files will be burned onto disks, stored on my computer, and accessible only by password until the point of their destruction.

Limitations

Despite the promise of this research in filling gaps within the field, several limitations existed. For starters, the size of the participating population was small (N=6). As such, these findings were not generalizable to populations of adolescent African American girls who read urban fiction. Further, participants hailed from largely working class populations. Their experiences may not have been reflective of other adolescent African American girls from other socio economic backgrounds. Further, students were volunteers within the study. However, as they lived together during the week, it may have been that conversations about these texts took place outside of the official group literature discussions. These additional conversations may have impacted dynamics within the literature circle discussion groups. Finally, my presence, as an adult and outside, most likely influenced participants' responses to the text. As such, findings most likely would have differed had I been excluded from the conversations.

CHAPTER 4: THE TEXT

"At school, they try to hide those things. We want to talk to them about the stuff we're seeing. But they're like, 'oh no. You shouldn't be'. They don't want us reading urban fiction in school" (Monet, preinterview)

As cited by Monet above, urban fiction is problematic for many adults. Despite critiques about containing stereotypic representations of African American life, vulgar content, predictable storylines and poor writing styles (Meloni, 2007; Morris et al., 2006; Venable et al., 2004), this genre is attracting the reading interests of growing numbers of adolescent African American females. While I present participants' perspectives about the text in later chapters, writings within this chapter are dedicated towards presenting a critical overview of the text selected by participants, *Supreme Clientele*. Despite my research agenda which, I recognize ways validates engagement with the genre of urban fiction for adolescent African American females in many ways, I still remain very critical of the texts.

I struggled throughout my research to negotiate my feelings about the genre. Urban fiction is motivating adolescents to read; I value this immeasurably. However, I feel conflicted about adolescents' engagement with this genre, in particular. I feel that authors who write within this genre tend to emphasize the sensationalized and often stereotypic representations of Black life as being linked with drugs, violence, and depravity. While I appreciate that these aspects that I am characterizing as stereotypic are reflective of someone's real life, I am concerned about the over saturation of these representations as being the primary ways in which Black life is presented within the media at large. Further, I feel as though my research may further

stimulate the validation of a genre that is problematic for me. Again, my issue is not these images per se, but rather the prevalence of these images within the American consciousness and the assumption that many make that these images are reflective of Black life in general (Collins, 2005). When considering the potential impact of these images of Black life and womanhood, it remains important to me that adolescent readerships be clear that images often featured within urban fiction are few of many that speak to the capabilities and lives of African Americans. I remain concerned that readers, without appropriate mentorship, will attempt to emulate these popularized and sensationalized images of Black life. Throughout this writing, although I have tried to mask my feelings about the images within the text, my personal beliefs about the blatant subjectivity of research motivates me to be as explicit as possible about my feelings associated with the genre.

This chapter provides insight about *Supreme Clientele* which includes an introduction to the authors, an overview of the storyline, and a brief critical analysis of the text. I am including information about the authors because understandings about their purposes for writing and their background help provide context for the story. Further, I provide an overview about *Supreme Clientele* to orient the reader about the story and characters to help ground participants' responses that will be analyzed within the next chapter. Finally, I provide greater detail about some aspects of the text that I consider problematic to further unveil my biases. My analysis also enables an interesting juxtaposition between my critiques of the text and those presented by participants to further cipher between my biases and those presented by participants.

Author's Biographical Sketch

Written by Ashli Snell and JaQuavis Coleman, *Supreme Clientele* is a “hood tale”, or a story that personifies the often sensationalized experiences of characters within disenfranchised urban communities which feature sex, involvement with drugs, violence, mental and or physical abuse, and poverty (Stovall, 2005). This is one of four published books written by the duo; their first and most popular was *Dirty Money*. Although both authors were raised in “the trenches of Flint, Michigan”, they chose to place the setting of *Supreme Clientele* in Harlem, NY. Like many of the authors of the genre (Weeks, 2004), Ashli and JaQuavis hail from an impoverished urban area. Their writings prominently feature experiences which, as they attest, shaped their childhoods.

Ashli and JaQuavis pride themselves on accurately depicting the harshness of their childhood exposures to drugs, violence, and sex. Their goal, they write, is not to transform representations of life in disenfranchised communities but to highlight the portrayals that coincided with their lived experiences. JaQuavis comments,

We want the world to know that we pride ourselves on keeping it real and thorough. What do we look like writing about a forty-year-old person's relationship problems when we haven't crossed that bridge yet? We write about what we see, what we hear, what we live. Anybody that really knows us know that we are not too different from the characters that we write about (<http://www.urban-reviews.com/insideout-ashleyjaquavis.html>).

Recognition of their voices and portrayals as authentic seems important to the authors. JaQuavis states “I write for the hood. I want to be that voice that represents

the streets”. These comments suggest that the authors are writing for individuals who either are fascinated by the portrayals of characters and storylines or have experiences that are mirrored within the text. There was no mention on their official website of their desire to use their writings for the political purposes of critically analyzing or defying popularized portrayals of African American life. In fact, JaQuavis states that he desires to be “that voice” or portray stories that are reflective of his conception of and experiences within “the streets”.

I was struck to learn that the current lives of the authors did not seem to mirror the stories of characters within their texts. At the time of this research, the authors were both college students. College suggests a type of privilege and upward mobility that the characters in *Supreme Clientele* were not presented as having. None of the storylines within any of Ashli JaQuavis’ four published texts take place in college classrooms or environments reminiscent of college experiences. Instead, settings and characters featured within *Supreme Clientele* take place in deprived communities, for instance, and feature characters who have limited formal educations and forms of social capital that are not valued within society at large as these connections and exposures often result in success within illicit and taboo arenas. None of the characters attend school or have the desire to achieve a formal education. In fact, the protagonist within *Supreme Clientele* drops out of school to become a drug runner for her boyfriend.

Representations of “the hood” are somewhat troubling within *Supreme Clientele* considering the variety of exposures of the authors who are both college students. They consciously chose to create a story that takes place within a deprived

community and also chose to present that community as being insatiated with drugs and murder. It is important to note that the “hood” or the “ghetto” most often represents an area characterized by racial and cultural homogeneity and poverty (Allen, 1995). Although it is a reality for some, “hood life” is not necessarily synonymous with drug affiliations (Gilens, 1996). All of the major characters within *Supreme Clientele* were either drug dealers or users.

Ashli JaQuavis considers the creation of urban fiction tales to be a diminishing art where “raw and uncensored” tales are losing their authenticity and edge in exchange for more “politically correct” presentations of life within disenfranchised urban communities. JaQuavis states, “There is a lot of biting going on right now. Every storyline is so diluted. Some authors are killing street fiction.” As such, the authors consider their storylines and characters to be authentic representations of urban areas for some African Americans.

Overview of Story

Supreme Clientele qualifies as urban fiction as it is set within a major urban city, Harlem, and features a young female protagonist who confronts hardships in the forms of physical and mental abuse and also encountered dilemmas associated with drugs, sex, murder and violence. Like other urban fiction texts, *Supreme Clientele* concludes in the form of a cautionary tale, where the protagonist reflects on her experience, emphasizing her regrets and mistakes for the readers. Themes within the text involve friendship, love, honesty, revenge, devotion, retribution, and loyalty. In comparison to other urban fiction novels, *Supreme Clientele* features relatively few typos.

Supreme Clientele

Based in Harlem, NY, *Supreme Clientele* catalogues the story of Zya, an orphaned 17 year old female who learns about selling drugs from her boyfriend Jules, over the course of a decade. After meeting Jules at the age of 15, Zya runs away from her foster home to live with him. As a means of demonstrating her devotion, she often runs errands for Jules that involve exchanging drugs with other users and sellers. Once Jules is sent away to jail, however, for a series of crimes, Zya capitalizes on Jules' drug connections to financially support herself in lieu of his inability to support her. Although Zya's original goal is to sell enough drugs to raise \$100,000 so that she can "get out" of that lifestyle and the disenfranchised neighborhood where she lives, Zya becomes addicted to her success and the financial triumphs.

After selling a remaining drug stash to Jules' original buyers, Zya takes a job as a waitress at an upscale Italian restaurant, swearing to never involve herself in selling drugs again. She, however, maintains a relationship with Jules' drug distributor, Snow. As it turns out, the restaurant where she is employed is a "front" for another drug dealer who sells his product to the patrons of the eatery. The restaurant owner is connected to Supreme Clientele, a secret and powerful but intimate group comprised of the largest drug dealers in the country. This group meets periodically to strategize about ways of increasing productivity and revenue. The leader of this group is Anari, an African American woman from New York who staged her own death to escape prosecution from the government for selling drugs and murdering rivals. Through a series of events that result in Zya alerting the group

about her drug connections, Anari allows Zya to join the Supreme Clientele group in exchange for providing access to her drug connection in Cuba, which is made available through Jules' distributor, Snow.

In the process of establishing herself as a drug kingpin and joining the Supreme Clientele group, Zya experiences a number of hardships. She is almost raped by her best friend's boyfriend, Heavy. Later, Vida, Zya's best friend, helps to stage a robbery of Zya. A twist, however, involves Vida betraying Zya to obtain money and resources to feed her drug addiction.

At the pinnacle of her power, Zya is discovered by a police officer who manipulates his awareness of her drug involvement to catch Anari. Further, Zya transforms into a killer as a means of protecting her money and her reputation as a ruthless drug queen. Vida becomes a full blown "crack fiend" and ultimately contracts HIV. In demonstrating her love and loyalty to Zya, however, Vida is ultimately shot and killed while trying to protect Zya from a vengeful attack by Jules, after he has been set free from jail. Despite her many hardships, Zya becomes a prosperous and powerful drug kingpin, responsible for eleven percent of all cocaine used in America. She also falls in love with her drug distributor, Snow, and later gives birth to their child.

In the end, Zya chooses to double cross the detective, Wade, to avoid becoming "a rat" against Anari. Although Zya is set up by a police officer to expose Anari's involvement in exchange for her freedom, while on trial, Zya chooses to abut Anari's involvement and assumes full responsibility for all of Anari's acts. Zya is placed in jail for perjury as well as for Anari's guilt. While on her way to jail, Anari

helps Zya to escape and provides her with twenty five million dollars to start a new life in Jamaica. Zya begins this new life with Snow and their newly born child.

Critique of Supreme Clientele

I struggled with how I perceived the protagonist. She was not a clearly defined *good* or *bad* character. Although a drug dealer, I recognized that her exposures heavily influenced the decisions that she made to begin and remain in the drug business. I would be remiss to suggest that the choices that Zya made within the text were uncomplicated, even though my critique, at times, may suggest as much. She was raised with limited support within the foster care system and seemingly rescued from a loveless existence by a boyfriend who sold drugs. Her devotion to him motivated her desire to originally sell. Ultimately, however, her devotion transformed into greed. With this said, Zya lacked a formal education, as it is not evident that she graduated from high school, and possessed few tangible skills that could have resulted in a lifestyle to which she had become accustomed with Jules. While I was frustrated by many of her decisions, one of which involved her decision to continue selling drugs after Jules was incarcerated, I understand that those decisions are far more complicated than assigning a judgment without having experienced the type of hardships she encountered within life and how those experiences colored her view of the world and decisions.

Several predominant themes are featured within *Supreme Clientele*. They include African American womanhood, sex- role stereotypes, and stereotypic depictions of life in “the hood”. I recognize that race and womanhood are viewed as concepts that have been socially constructed. As such, my critique of the

aforementioned themes is based on my personal exposures to *appropriate* portrayals of women and African American life. The reader should be aware that these thoughts are my own and not intentionally reflective of my participants, the authors, or others who have read the book.

Beauty

Ashli JaQuavis created links between beauty and skin complexion throughout the text. The primary and most admirable characters within this story are lighter complexioned African American women under the age of 35. The protagonist, Zya, is light complexioned with a voluptuous body and is described as having “honey-colored hair was identical to her skin tone, which gave her a unique look” (Ashley & Jaquavis, 2006, p. 1). Anari, another primary female character, is also “caramel colored” (p. 66). When first meeting Anari, “Zya couldn’t take her eyes off of her. She was gorgeous. She knew that she was somebody important”(Ashley & Jaquavis, 2006, p. 66). These subtle portrayals speak to a faux pas within the African American community that involves skin color. Hunter (2005) writes about the significance of skin color when she states:

...skin color and features associated with Whites, such as light skin, straight noses, and long, straight hair, take on the meanings that they represent: civility, rationality, and beauty. Similarly, skin colors and features associated with Africans or Indians, such as dark skin, broad noses, and kinky hair , represent savagery, irrationality, and ugliness (p. 3).

The leading women within the story both have lighter complexions and are both described as being beautiful and feminine. The antithesis of both of these characters

is presented through Vita, Zya's manipulative and untrustworthy best friend, who coincidentally has a darker complexion. Although she is described "once as a beautiful young lady", the reader is only presented with a limited view of Vida as she embodies many negative characteristics that result in her evolution into "a skinny, fiend-out-looking girls with matted hair and dirty clothes"(p. 216). Although possibly unintentional, the authors uplift popularized and historical beliefs that "lighter is better", especially for women, as the lighter complexioned characters and those who have features associated with "Whiteness" are the heroes of the text.

The males in the story are predominantly darker complexioned. Anari's husband, an auxiliary character, Von, is brown skinned; he, however, only emerges briefly two times in the story. Snow, the only protagonist who possesses a "chocolate brown" skin complexion, has grey eyes, a physical trait often linked with White ancestry (Hunter, 2005). The other primary characters within the text, who are also considered to be the antagonists, like Vida, are darker complexioned with "Black features" Zya's ex-boyfriend, Jules who is described as relatively dark, suffers less desirable outcomes and is presented as a despicable character in the story. Unlike the lighter complexioned characters, Jules is jealous, quick-tempered, selfish and bitter and consequently, he is jailed, contracts HIV, and is ultimately murdered (coincidentally by another dark skinned character, Vida). Lonnie Wade, another dark skinned character, is "a hood nigga who happened to be a cop...his thuggish appearance didn't change once he put on his badge"(p. 210). He, like Vida and Jules, experiences undesirable outcomes as he is an alcoholic, unprofessional, and ultimately fired from his job as a police officer while simultaneously being placed

under investigation for suspicion of dealing drugs. The darker complexioned characters in the story are either peripheral or unadmirable characters within the text.

Intelligence and power is also linked to lighter skin complexion. For example, while Zya is suave and intelligent, Jules is rash and dull witted, even though he is more experienced in the drug selling business than Zya. His inability to critically assess potentially dangerous situations results in his trouble with the law and his ultimate death. Zya's wit and intellect enable her to circumvent similar situations throughout the story which include dealing with rival drug dealers, avoiding the police, and seeking revenge. Further, both Zya and Anari are the most powerful members of the Supreme Clientele drug group based on their connections with drug suppliers as well as their abilities to manipulate and avoid law enforcement.

While Zya and Anari are both regarded as beautiful, Zya and Vida are regarded as "sexy" and "desired" by male characters in the book based, on their body shapes; another dimension of appeal within this story is linked with voluptuousness for women. When assessing Zya's appearance, the omniscient narrator notes that King "admired her perfect body as she walked toward him... her plump ass shifted its weight from side to side" (p.6). Further, even though Vida is strung out on drugs, dirty, and virtually unrecognizable, "she still hadn't lost her ass yet...She was a hot commodity in the dope houses she lurked in" (p.170). Large breasts and buttocks for women is eroticized within *Supreme Clientele* and linked with beauty.

In this text, beauty is also connected with materialism within this text for African American women. Although saving money to "get out", Zya still manages to accrue a closet full of expensive name brand clothes by designers like Gucci and

Dolci and Gabanna. Even though she had little money, her identity as a desired and beautiful woman was connected with her ability to adorn herself in fine clothes and jewelry. Anari is also presented within the text as being an impeccable dresser who is adorned with the finest clothes, cars, and houses.

Sex Role Stereotypes

Female characters within the story are consistently reliant on men, despite their own powerful positions. While the authors defied the popular conception that only African American males are drug dealers, through the portrayal of Zya and Anari, Ashli and JaQuavis still maintain sex role stereotypes in many ways. Marshall (2004) defines sex role theory as “a paradigm rooted in humanistic discourses in which social roles are allocated to men and to women on the basis of biological sex” (256). Although powerful, both Anari and Zya are dependent on men to help make decisions about their strategies for sustaining their businesses. Zya, for instance, is powerless without the connections and advice of Snow, her boyfriend and “enforcer”. Prior to her interactions with Snow, Zya is reliant on Jules for guidance with regards to sustaining her lifestyle. Similarly, Anari retires at the end of the book to allow her husband to take over her responsibilities so that she can officially become a stay-at-home mother. Further, although only a peripheral character, Anari’s husband is consistently referenced as “being around” to help support her efforts. The authors perpetuate the myth that women, despite their intellect and ability are still reliant on men to attain and maintain success.

The men within the text are aware of women’s reliance. When considering his plight after being jailed, Jules realized “that she needed him to be with her” (p.

21). Jules is aware of Zya's dependence. Her actions, however, only further solidified his thoughts. For instance, Zya feels incapable of raising a child or surviving "in the streets" without the assistance of Jules. She comments, "There's no way I can take care of a baby by myself" (p. 22). Despite the fact that she had been running drugs for Jules for years, when he was incarcerated and could not provide mentorship, Zya is seemingly incapable of functioning without Jules' direction.

Gender Portrayal & Power

Success is based, within this text, on characteristics often associated with men. Although described as maintaining a feminine appearance, Zya and Anari exhibit behaviors that are most often considered to be masculine. Women are presented in binary terms as being either successful and "manly" or unsuccessful and more female. Zya and Anari are calculated, aggressive, cold, and sharply "street smart," despite popularized conceptions of female drug dealers as "manly looking," the protagonists are effeminate in appearance but their behaviors are more acceptably and stereotypically masculine for Black males (Hill Collins, 2006). For instance, Zya's characteristics were more akin to normalized conceptions of African American maleness (Hill Collins, 2006) as she transforms into a killer within the story. Strength as an African American woman, as reflected within this text, involves being heartless, aggressive, manipulative, selfish, and materialistic.

Zya transforms from a relatively meek woman into an aggressive and calculated street thug. She kills Heavy, a man who robbed and stole from her, attempts to kill Vita after multiple betrayals, becomes one of the largest heroin suppliers in America, manipulates an entire police department, and bears witness to

the death of Jules. Further, Zya has an abortion. The abortion symbolizes freedom for Zya within this text. This idea arises when considering the story of Anari, who becomes a powerful drug dealer after her first born child is murdered. Although she goes on to later marry and birth another child, the freedom of being childless coincidentally marks the emergence of her power. Interestingly, the authors never introduce the relationship between Anari and her daughter. In fact, the reader is only introduced to Anari's daughter at the end of the story when after Anari has been exonerated of the charges against her. So, although she has a daughter, it is as though the child did not exist until Anari decides to abandon her position as drug dealer. Anari's child is introduced after she retires from the drug business. The child emerges from a court case where Zya has exonerated Anari by assuming full responsibility for Anari's drug related activities. At the conclusion of the trial, after Anari vows to leave the drug business, her child finally emerges, seemingly out of nowhere. In that same line of reasoning, the abortion, for Zya, symbolizes how she is able to sever her ties and dependence with Jules and start a more empowered existence. Only after Zya and Anari forfeit their power are they able to be mothers. Or, the authors may struggle to reconcile between the needed skills, resources and focus to be a successful gangster as opposed to what is needed in order to be a good mother. The authors may have unintentionally been sending the message that power and motherhood do not coincide. Again, the authors seemed to make connections between womanhood, power, and motherhood.

Conclusion

The authors, Ashli JaQuavis, seem to make conscientious decisions about the images contained within *Supreme Clientele* as they tell the story as an authentic rendering of life in a disenfranchised community. The representations of Black life, however, are largely one-dimensional and built upon the sensationalized images associated with life in disenfranchised communities. Further, the text upholds traditional conceptions of beauty that are also linked with sexuality as Black women presented as beautiful possess a lighter brown skin complexion and a voluptuous body. Further, womanhood is also connected with reliance upon males. Finally, power is presented within the text as being contrary to motherhood as children only appear after female characters disassociate themselves from their positions of power.

Despite the problems that I found within the text, related to the representations of African American life, my participants read this book with great voracity and were able to provide a context for me for how they understood the images and why they were so eager to engage with the text.

CHAPTER 5: “IT’S PRETTY GOOD TO MEET YOU”, AN INTRODUCTION TO PARTICIPANTS & PARTICIPATION

“How can you know about me if you never even talk to me? Why are they judging me based on a book that I’m reading? There’s nothing wrong with me.”
(Jonelle, Pre Interview, 04.28.09)

In this chapter, I will provide a more personal introduction to the participants and the culture of our interactions. Information presented within this chapter will provide greater context and insight about the data reported, interpreted, and analyzed within later chapters.

Within this chapter, I begin by addressing my impressions about my interactions with students and my role within our literature circle, focusing largely on how I perceived our interactions. Next, a portrait of each participant is presented. I introduce readers to Alexis, Antoniese, Keaira, Jonelle, Monet, and Tamia while providing context about their engagement with urban fiction helps to address the question *What are their motivations for reading urban fiction?*. Pertinent information about their personalities and families is also included within their portraits.

Practitioner as Researcher

Hughes (2008) writes, “...a reflexive lens challenges us to question taken-for-granted knowledge and how the matrix [race, class, and gender] adversely influence pedagogical decision-making” (p. 141) Armed with this belief, I consider how my identity influenced my interactions with this topic and findings.

My personal understandings about the potential significance of urban fiction texts have been motivated by a number of experiences. First, as a former adolescent African American female, I had a speculative view of texts that feature African American characters. As a child, I yearned to see images of myself in the stories I read in school. These depictions often were framed through accounts of slavery or the Civil Rights Movement, neither of which was immediately applicable to my curiosities about boys and relationships as well as other pressures that arose with adolescence. I invested in alternative reading materials like magazines and teenage romance novels by authors like Judy Blume. I found myself largely disconnected from texts in school which seemed far removed from my interests. As an adolescent, I did not see myself even loosely represented in required school readings and simply lost interest.

When I became a classroom teacher, I found myself struggling to build connections between the interests of many of my adolescent African American girls and classroom texts. Yet, they were reading. “They read this garbage and I don’t know what to do with it,” remarked a fellow teacher when casually conversing with me about the urban fiction books that some African American adolescent females chose to read during their sustained silent reading time in English class or even during class lectures. His comments lead me to consider the importance of the reading choices of students in comparison to literature I promoted within my class.

Much like the African American girls to whom my co-worker referenced, I virtually inhaled “trash” literature, despite my usual lack of interest in reading school related texts. Yet, I felt embarrassed to bring these fictional texts to class because of

the quixotic covers and content which raised topics that were often considered taboo. Most teachers, and even my parents, referred to the books as “trash” and considered them unacceptable. Based on my experience reading “trash” as an adolescent, I was not overly concerned by my students’ engagement with the controversial genre, urban fiction. While I was concerned with how readers of urban fiction were processing those images that are typical of the genre, I held that concern as it related to most of the literacy exposures of my students. They did not seem to be afforded many opportunities to interact with my conception of positive images of African Americans in general within their literacy engagements in magazines or various media outlets. My primary apprehension involved parental awareness about the content of the books. Otherwise, I was excited to see that these girls were reading.

My interest was based in the appeal of urban fiction texts to African American adolescent females who were like myself, avid readers of texts commonly referenced as trash but disengaged from in-school texts. My focus as a teacher was originally steeped in motivating a love of classical literature, despite my own background. Over time, my understanding about the importance of interacting with text (in various forms) has broadened my perspective about limiting choices within schools to extend beyond classical literature. I wanted each of my students to experience that unique feeling of becoming engrossed in a text. Beyond the joy that reading has brought me over the years, reading increases word exposure and critical abilities associated with comprehension. My goal was to provide students with skills that would provide opportunity in the future. Urban fiction, despite its controversial content which contains sex, violence, and drugs, amongst other exposures, is a form of text that

provides this aesthetic reading experience for subscribers that can hopefully be linked with aesthetic reading experiences as well as critical inquiry for adolescent African American females.

Introductions

I began interactions with the participants with the understanding that I wanted to center students responses to an urban fiction book of their choice. Although there were a variety of methods I could have chosen to center and solicit the responses of participants, I ultimately decided to engage with participants in a literature circle. Clark and Holwadel (2007) write, “many teachers look to literature circles to assist them in creating a positive learning community as well as to provide a context for engaged student directed, and meaning-making literacy experiences”(p. 21). Please see chapter three for more in-depth descriptions of literature circles. Knowing that I was an outsider and unaware of the classroom and school cultures of my participants, I felt that this technique would create a space for respectfully emphasizing the voices and perspectives of participants. Further, I felt that literature circle formats would help me to create an intimate space where girls felt comfortable honestly dialoguing and expressing themselves about issues presented within the text.

My attempts to establish community within our group began with seemingly simple introductions. Each of the participants told me their name and provided me with one random and often unknown detail about themselves. I learned, for instance, that two participants eat baby powder when hungry and one ran in circles to relieve stress. Innocent yet funny stories accompanied the random details which provided me a bit more insight about the personalities of my participants. Some girls laughed

openly when talking about themselves while others communicated with straight faces suggesting faint annoyance.

For me, however, my introduction was slightly stressful and more complicated than I had originally hoped. I could not think of a funny line or a sweet story to reminisce about with my participants. I was nervous. I had butterflies in my stomach and a silly smile on my face for the duration of our first meeting.

Our conversations took place at 8:00 pm, well after students ended their academic day, every Monday and Wednesday. I understood that students' participation was an unaccredited and unpaid after school activity that encroached upon their personal and leisure time. With this understanding, I wavered about how I wanted to be perceived by students. Hence, I overcomplicated my introduction. Based on their comments from pre-interviews, I did not want to be viewed as one of their teachers. They often referred to their teachers as being either judgmental or aloof about leisure reading interests and practices. I also did not want to be viewed as a peer. Relying on my previous experience as a teacher, I understood the importance of being a figure of respect. I perceived this as meaning that students would listen and speak to and with me in ways that suggested they valued my thoughts, even if they disagreed. I aimed to be a figure that moderated and focused conversations, but not a teacher, as I feared that would deter participation. Further, I was conscious of the fact that I was entering the space as an outsider to the school culture who was unaware of dynamics between students and teachers. This was a positive and a negative. Based on my adult status, students may have linked me with other adults at

the school. With this knowledge, I settled on asking students to call me Mrs. Simone, a combination of the formal and informal ways that I wanted to be viewed.

I believe we created a respectful community amongst ourselves. Although students often spoke over one another when conversing, interrupting each others thoughts and smaller conversations between two students would erupt within larger group conversations, I felt as though our interactions were positive. I quickly understood that these behaviors signaled participants' enthusiasm for responding and engaging with thoughts expressed by other students about the text.

Sessions typically began with me reminding students of the major points from our previous conversation and asking if I overlooked any important talking points. Then I would ask the discussion director to moderate our conversation; I modeled this during our preparation sessions which are further detailed in chapter 3. The discussion director would either begin by presenting her own findings or ask volunteers to share their thoughts. With this said, I was not a silent participant merely taking notes. I would ask questions within our circles, especially around topics that I hoped the participants would further critique or around comments that I was curious to understand. With that said, I was not the leader of our conversations.

I believe that privileging participants responses, instead of my own voice, contributed to the manner in which girls interacted with me. I respected and valued their voices and they, in turn, were respectful of and responsive to my questions and comments. The evidence of this is seen within post interviews where each of the participants suggested that they would like to engage in similar conversations with their current English teacher and asked that I return during the next academic year to

continue our discussion group. This, again, suggests that participants were comfortable and benefited from our interactions in various ways.

The Participants

Each of the six participants demonstrated similarities and differences, alike, with regards to their literacy interests. In this section, portraits of each of the participants are provided to enhance the readers' understandings about the girls' responses. Contrary to popular assumptions about the singular reason why adolescent African American girls engage with urban fiction, participants each demonstrated different reasons for engaging with the genre. Further, conversations with participants revealed how their views of reading influenced their conceptions of themselves as readers and as literate individuals. This is important, however, to introduce the participants here to provide greater context for our interactions which will be described later in the chapter.

Alexis

Alexis loved to read. She prided herself on reading quickly and actually laughed when I ask her how long it took her to read novels. Within a day or two, she commented, she could easily read a 300 page book. "Reading and stuff is just easy to me. I'm supposed to be a good student. My parents expect that I do my best to have more than them. So, I am a good student. It's pretty easy though" (4.29.2008). Although she struggled to identify her favorite book, citing "it's too hard", she referenced the book *And Then There Were None*, by Agatha Christie. Alexis explained that this book was a mystery that involved identifying a killer amongst a group of friends; the text was first published in England in the 1940's. This detail

suggested to me that Alexis also enjoyed texts that did not predominantly feature images of African American life. Also, I assumed from this comment that Alexis was not motivated to read simply based on the fancy colors or interesting pictures that often adorned the covers of young adult novels.

English was her favorite subject at school, largely because she enjoyed the books read. She did not, however, enjoy reading *Macbeth*, the play which they were reading in class at the time of this interview. She explained, "I liked that play but I didn't really understand Shakespeare's words" (4.29.2008). I was somewhat unclear about how Alexis could enjoy the play without understanding the words of the text; it was clear, however, that she understood the content. I resolved this curiosity by considering how my presence may have influenced her response as she may have been uncomfortable stating that she did not enjoy reading the play. I was unclear if she may have felt uncomfortable based on the knowledge that I was previously an English teacher, if she wanted to impress me, or if she did not want to make any statements that may have made her seem like she was less than a prolific reader.

Although she enjoyed a variety of genres, she gravitated primarily towards mysteries and horror books as she cited that she was interested in becoming a detective for her career. The few television shows that she watched were also crime and mystery related programs. She reported to enjoying engaging with a novel more than watching television or listening to the radio. Alexis explicitly stated that she came from a home where she observed her mother read books and her father read the newspaper. Alexis was the third of five children, a self proclaimed "daddy's girl" and straight A student. Her father was a police officer and seemingly prided himself in

sheltering his children from many of the travails that he observed daily in his profession as a police officer. Alexis mentioned that she spent a great deal of time reading and spending time with her family.

Despite her father's reservations, Alexis read urban fiction because "they just interest me. I really don't know much about stuff like that and I don't watch TV that much. So, that's the next best thing is to read" (4.29. 2008). "That stuff" refers to Alexis' conceptions about living in disenfranchised neighborhoods. Although she is from the same neighborhood as many of her classmates, Alexis distinguishes herself from them as she considers herself to be sheltered and more worldly. "I'm not like them. I don't know about getting shot at and drugs and that stuff. I live at home with two parents. Both of my parents work. They like to travel" (6.9.2008). Alexis learned about "life in the hood" by reading urban fiction. So, one of her primary motivations for reading urban fiction was so that she could have more in common with her classmates who she deemed as having lifestyles that were more reflective of those demonstrated within those texts. As such, Alexis read to gain exposure to a reality different from her own. This suggests that Alexis viewed urban fiction as authentically representing life within impoverished communities that house largely African Americans. She reported reading urban fiction, in part, because she considered it to be a valid and accurate accounting of life in the hood.

Further, Alexis stated that she read urban fiction because she learned valuable lessons from it. For instance, she commented, "Like, I don't want to have sex until I'm married but if it does happen, then I know. In relationships and stuff. They

[urban fiction books] teach you lessons about what not to do. Like, their mistakes. You're learning lessons from them" (4.29.2008).

Although a consumer of the genre, Alexis expressed several concerns with the texts. Unlike other participants, Alexis stated that she was somewhat uncomfortable with the explicitly sexual and violent nature of the texts. When asked about her overall impression of urban fiction, she stated, "It's okay sometimes but sometimes I'll be thinking that I'm too young for this kind of book. Like maybe I shouldn't read this" (4.29. 2008). Yet, she had read about ten urban fiction novels. Next, she critiqued the lack editing within many of the texts in the genre. Finally, she was concerned, at times, about how women were portrayed. She commented:

...the way they sometimes portray Black women in these books is sometimes bad and it isn't something that a girl like me would think about. These girls, these women actually doing this stuff in real life. It seems like they don't think about what they're writing before they write it or they're thinking about it but they're not thinking about how it effects people in the real world (04.29.2008).

Alexis was exposed to images of African American females that contradicted her own upbringing and exposures as it related to her conception of *appropriate* behaviors. While she recognized that "that [the portrayals of women] isn't me", she considered the possibility that she might one day share some of the same problems faced by the characters within the texts she reads saying, "I'm a Black woman and could that happen to me? Is that situation going to happen to me or pass my way?"

(06.09.2008). Thus, Alexis used her exposure to characters within the text to draw lessons from their experiences and mistakes.

Antoniese

Antoniese did not consider herself to be a reader and reported to reading books from the urban fiction genre to “fit in.” She explained her motivation for reading when she commented, “Everybody else was reading it [urban fiction]...all of my friends like the books so much. I might as well” (04.28.2008). This comment originally signaled the existence of a culture of reading within her school, and her desire to be accepted. Within our literature circles, Antoniese was often soft spoken, allowing other girls to speak over her. She rarely disagreed with comments by other participants and when others disagree with Antoniese, she rarely responded. Over time Antoniese revealed feelings of insecurity about her physical appearance; she was the heaviest of all of the participants. Also, other participants within the group would refer to Antoniese as “tubby” or “bigguns” when speaking to her. She would smile and look down or look at the assailant and roll her eyes. Although she would not respond verbally to a question or comment prefaced by the terms, she never chastised or condemned her assailants. Antoniese mentioned to me casually, as we walked to our meeting room for our fourth session, that she had a goal of losing ten pounds before the end of the school year. Despite her personal conceptions of self, she seemed to be well liked by the other participants and to enjoy the group. She, for instance, would rub Monet’s back when it was hurting or volunteer to help find books or notebooks for our sessions.

Although Antoniese loved television, Antoniese said that she was easily distracted. “After like 20 minutes, I can’t read anymore. I don’t know. I just start thinking about other stuff. My mind works really fast and I think about a lot of stuff” (4.28.2008). I was curious about her belief that she could not maintain attention while reading for periods longer than twenty minutes. The problem with Antoniese’s logic was that she attested to being able to sit and watch television throughout the duration of her favorite shows. *I Love New York* and *Project Runway* were two of her favorites which runs about one hour each. Although she was able to maintain focus for an hour long television program, she was not able to maintain her attention with traditional forms of text. She cited to being able to read urban fiction for slightly longer periods but having the same problems of not maintaining focus for extended periods of time. This signaled to me that Antoniese may have struggled to experience engagement with text. As mentioned within chapter two, efferent reading defines a form of engagement that involves the reader making personal connections with the text while becoming absorbed with the story. This form of engagement typically results in readers “getting lost” in the text and reading without consciousness of time or surroundings (Wilhelm, 1997). This further seemed to reaffirm her belief that she was not a reader. Although a non-traditional form of text, Antoniese consistently engaged with television programs for extended periods of time. There seemed to be a disconnect between how she and I perceived her abilities. She especially enjoyed watching television programs from which she could garner ideas that motivated her creative thinking about design; Antoniese was interested in pursuing a career as an interior designer. Further, Antoniese read urban fiction books regularly. She read

about one book a month whereas most participants attested to reading novels in a matter of days. I perceived that Antoniese viewed her inability to read quickly as a testimony of her weakness as a reader based on the way that she announced her consistency in reading while comparing it to her peers.

Antoniese had no critiques of the genre during our pre interview but informed me that she was embarrassed to read the texts around teachers and her mother. “People might think that I’m bad or something because the covers are kind of out there” (4.28.2009). Despite this, Antoniese read “because they always keep you guessing.”

Antoniese was the only child of a single mother to whom she referred as being “older.” Outside of school, Antoniese spent a great deal of time in church. She attended Saturday school and choir practice. Unlike other participants, Antoniese did not spend much time with friends during the weekend. She said that her mother, who wanted “to keep her out of trouble”, kept her involved in church activities. In fact, Sundays, she generally attended two church services. Beyond the race of the characters within the book, Antoniese shared a commonality with the text as the disenfranchised neighborhood featured within *Supreme Clientele* was reminiscent of her neighborhood, specifically a project about four blocks from her house.

Keaira

Keaira did not see herself as a reader. In fact, she reported that she read primarily out of necessity; according to Rosenblatt, seems to read for specific purposes which often involve finding answers to questions. Seemingly disinterested in the conversation, Keaira informed me that she viewed school assigned books to be

boring. However, unlike in previous years, she had, however, found some of the novels assigned in her English class in the past year to be interesting. She was particularly attracted to stories that featured individuals who journeyed through troubling times and wrote about their survival. She commented, “Like we had one on the Holocaust during that time cause I didn’t know nothing about that. Then we had one about Africa and society.....I read all types [of stories] where people get out of bad situations” (4.28.2008). Particularly, Keaira enjoyed reading biographies. She cited Frederick Douglas and George Washington Carver as two of her favorites because “They did things for themselves. They didn’t depend on people to help them out” (4.28.2008).

She did not have a favorite book but admitted that she read stories, outside of school, that featured examples of characters who overcame hardship and that these characters experiences provided inspiration her own life. Keaira did not smile much in the interview and looked away as opposed to looking at me when responding to my questions. I was unclear if I made her uncomfortable or if she was simply disinterested in the interview. This was resolved, however, as I got to know Keaira better throughout our interactions within the literature circles. Although it came across as disinterest, I learned that her disposition actually spoke to her reserved nature around strangers. Over time, although never highly energetic, Keaira began to speak more, providing greater depth with her responses, and she would occasionally smile.

When considering why she read urban fiction, in particular, Keaira felt that the “situations seem real” (4.28.2008). Keaira viewed urban fiction stories as

authentic representations of life. The characters, their dilemmas, and their personalities were reminiscent of what Keaira deemed to be real. She specifically connected with the characters and situations that dealt with independence and hardship. Keaira stated:

Like the people in the book that go through hard struggles that people do all the time. But then it's more descriptive and you can imagine how they feel. Like getting kicked out of your house. Like I got kicked out of my house before. But then I was hurt and stuff. I didn't feel like I had no place to go cause I got family and friends. But then the people in the book, that's how they felt because they was separated from their families and they didn't have a lot of friends. And then, they had money problems. So, they felt like they had to sell their bodies. It teach you life lessons and stuff. (6.4.2008).

Keaira was motivated by urban fiction because it provided a guide, of sorts, of how to overcome difficult situations. Some of these situations were reminiscent of her personal experiences. Keaira felt that urban fiction was “entertaining while also teaching something” that was applicable to her life. Keaira hailed from a single family home, lead by her mother, who Keaira described as often being overwhelmed by her responsibilities (6.4.2008). Her mother maintained a job as an administrative assistant while raising two daughters. Keaira spoke of a having a relatively poor relationship with her mother.

Further, Keaira felt that the authors of urban fiction texts were to write their stories in ways that readers could learn from them. She said, “They [urban fiction authors] see their environment and it makes them want to express it and how they see

life and how they feel about it or let people know what's going on" (6.4.2008). She admired the authors for being so willing to expose their stories to benefit readers like her. She believed they wrote these stories so that readers could avoid the mistakes of the characters in the text. She said that "not everyone knows how to stay motivated no matter what happens in their life and not let the bad events just stop them from going on. You see [in urban fiction novels] how you can stay motivated. You see where they make mistakes and you don't want to become like them" (6.4.2008).

There were, however, negative aspects about urban fiction, according to Keaira. She did not always agree with the representation of women within the texts as they typically end up involved in some sort of activity that is degrading or humiliating. She recognized, however, that "some women do do stuff for them to be characterized like that [derogatory ways]" (4.28.2008). Based on these feelings, she typically chose not to read urban fiction books that feature partially clothed women on the front cover. "I don't read books that are really like that. They don't really have naked women on the front" (4.28.2008). Keaira stated, however, that she would remove the cover of a hardback book if it featured a picture of a partially dressed woman on the cover. She commented, "I just don't like looking at that. Women don't have to look like that" (4.28.2008). Further, she cited that urban fiction "can portray people negatively. Like makes all of that race or culture seem like that." She believed that individuals with which this perspective were shortsighted, because she believed that generalizations about an entire race of people were inappropriate and unfounded. She commented, "If it was true, then there wouldn't be no body in school trying to get an education. It wouldn't be no African Americans coming up in the

world. No black person would be running for president. We would just be all. We wouldn't be nothing for ourselves" (4.28.2008). Keaira was my only participant to reference race during the pre-interviews.

Jonelle

At fifteen years old, Jonelle did not consider herself to be a good student or reader. She attributed her B/C average to the fact that she, like Antoniese, "get[s] easily distracted". She did not enjoy reading. She stated that "it's so many things that I need to do so I can just sit down and read just a chapter so I won't get distracted" (4.28.2008). She spoke a great deal about the impact of distractions upon her reading habits. Yet, she selected books for leisure reading that are not often associated with the habits of adolescent African Americans. Jonelle had a curiosity about topics that enhanced her knowledge of history and individuals overcoming hardship. Her favorite in-school readings for the year were *Hiroshima* and *Everlost*. *Hiroshima* tells the story of six survivors of the atomic bomb dropping, an event within World War II and *Everlost* involves the stories of a boy and girl on a quest to understand death. Both were texts she independently chose within her school library; she read both texts entirely.

With magazines, Jonelle preferred to look at pictures instead of reading passages. She referenced *Word Up*, a magazine dedicated to popular African American youth culture, as well as a variety of hair magazines as texts that engaged her leisure reading interests. While she realized the importance of being able to engage with texts in any environment, she struggled to experience efferent engagement, or becoming lost in the storyline and making connections between her

life and those experiences portrayed, with in-school texts especially. When assigned to choose a book from the library for sustained silent reading time in class, Jonelle gravitated towards non fictional genres. “I like a lot of informational texts. I pick up books like abstinence or like real life troubles like really informational books” (4.28.2008). Jonelle was interested in stories and texts where she learned about different aspects of life which informed her personal experience. She could not think of the title of a favorite book or reading.

She preferred in-school book assignments that were read aloud as opposed to those which had individual reading assignments; this helped her to maintain attention to the text. She, complained, however, that some of the in-school texts, like *Macbeth*, featured complicated vocabulary which was an additional distraction for her.

It’s really complicated to read and with the complicated reading, it’s hard to understand what he is saying because every word is different; every word refers to something else or it can refer to two different things. It’s like along with trying to figure out what he’s talking about, you got to be able to pronounce the words that he’s saying. So, all of that just taken into effect just makes me not want to read it. (4.28.2008)

Jonelle spent very little time watching television. Her father, who was legally blind, removed all of the televisions from their house to inspire more family conversation or more interest in reading for Jonelle. She stated that her mother “reads all the time. She read everything.”

When she did read books outside of school, Jonelle often read urban fiction. She did not learn about the genre until she began the school in seventh grade where

“Everybody was reading it.” As such, she borrowed a book from a friend, *Contagious*, and continued to read books from the genre. She characterized the genre as “out of the box, real life, explicit.” She enjoyed urban fiction because “It’s like you don’t have to do a whole lot of soul searching to figure out what they’re trying to say. Like the meaning of the books and the themes come across easy” (4.28.2008)

The language and dialogues included within the text make it easier for her to understand the storylines.

Although she did not see herself as relating to the texts personally, she valued that urban fiction featured topics “that you wouldn’t normally see in any other book.” These topics include sex, violence, and drugs. She recognized, however, that these controversial topics are often present within the texts read at school, however, the language used to describe them are more abstract and less accessible.

They [school texts] say it [taboo topics] in another way so after the fact you go back to your teacher and ask and they’ll be like yeah. But when you read it, it don’t make any sense. So, you never think of it as that way. In Shakespeare they say, no man born of a woman, or something like that. You just wouldn’t think of it. You wouldn’t take it as literal. (4.28.2008)

Based on confusion about the terminology used, Jonelle was deterred and confused by some school texts.

When looking for urban fiction titles to read, Jonelle typically did not pay attention to the covers of the books because “The cover can sometimes throw you off. The book *Contagious*, the man had blue eyes. But the book ain’t talk nothing about no man with no blue eyes. His eyes was dark brown. And he was a car salesman”

(4.28.2008). As such, she focused on the title of the texts. She gravitated towards books that featured titles that indicated that “the story has a point.” For instance, she recently read *Daddy’s Little Girl* assuming that the story was going to be about relationships. Keaira suggested that urban fiction has helped her reading skills because, unlike school texts, she actually reads and finishes the books.

Monet

Monet viewed herself as a prolific reader. Although she loved to read, she was not interested in engaging with school based texts in her leisure time; she was primarily interested in reading urban fiction books. Monet had read more urban fiction titles than any of the other participants. Although she could not remember an exact number, she suggested having read over seventy five titles. Monet did not speak about watching much television or even reading magazines as other participants suggested. Her primary literacy interest was urban fiction. Although her favorite author, Zhane, writes erotica novels, Monet prides herself on primarily reading urban fiction. Monet was the only participant who had no critiques to offer about urban fiction.

Monet cited that she was disinterested in the books read in school and went on to fault her teachers for not allowing more time to read leisure texts in class. Monet openly acknowledged reading urban fiction as a means of learning about sex and relationships. She believed that speaking about sex could be empowering, especially for females. References to sex were part of the appeal of her favorite author. When referencing Zhane’s decision to emphasize sex within her writings, Monet commented, “She writes because she loves it and she feels as though women lack sex

in a certain area in their life and it needs to be talked about. She feels as though every single race and size [person] also should be” (4.29.2008). Monet felt that a lack of acknowledgement about sex was, in fact, harmful. She also confessed that while many adults, especially teachers, were disinterested in acknowledging student curiosities about sex, students still maintained their curiosities.

Monet, who was pregnant during the study, distinguished herself from many of her friends in school and considered herself to be mature and different with regards to how she interacted with boys. She spoke about the importance of women taking control of their lives and not allowing men to be so controlling and dominant. “Some of these girls will do anything for a man. It’s like they’re not worth anything unless there’s a man there to make them feel good about themselves” (4.29.2008). Monet attested that she considered herself to be wise based on the observations of her four older brothers, who also lived with her and her mother, and their interactions with females and based on conversations with her mother. Monet suggested that she had open conversations with her mother about ways of behaving around males. For instance, Monet mentioned the importance of females not “chasing after those boys” and “doing everything for those boys”, a lesson she learned from a conversation with her mother. She also mentioned that she did not have a relationship with her father and rarely interacted with him so he did not serve as a model for her. Further, unlike other participants, she maintained a relationship with the same boyfriend since elementary school.

Tamia

Tamia was a "talker not a reader." She excelled in school, she claimed, by consistently participating in class discussions. In fact, her raspy voice and outspoken nature, according to Tamia, were what most people will remember about her at school. Although she prided herself on excelling in her English class because "it's easy. All you have to really do is participate in class," she insisted that she was not a reader. In fact, she reported that she rarely finished school texts, even those that she enjoyed reading. She commented that she easily "gets lost" when reading and "falls behind," after which she typically stopped reading.

While she liked the stories of *Macbeth* and *Oedipus*, stories assigned this year in school, she still struggled with the texts and did not finish either. She said that the language used was a major barrier for her. "It was so hard to understand the language, even the modern version. It was so hard to understand" (4.29.2008). She preferred to read magazines like *Essence* and *Jet* rather than books in her leisure time outside of school. She says that she most enjoyed learning about "Black people that are making money" (4.29.2008). Tamia mentioned, however, that she used to love to read in elementary school when she commented, "When I was in second grade, I was reading on a fifth grade level. I was reading big books. When I was in elementary school, I liked school a lot and I liked reading and I liked math" (4.28.2008). The few books that she engaged with at the time of the interview were more fiction based texts that "seem real" and somehow related to issues or events in her life. "I like stuff that I can relate to. Like, I can picture in my head like a movie that's interesting.

Like, I don't really like somebody falling in toxic waste and turning into a werewolf and stuff like that" (4.29.2008).

Tamia came from a home and a community where many people around her read urban fiction. Tamia was a self espoused "spoiled girl" who was the only child from a single parent home that was led by her mother. Tamia reported that her mother was comfortable with her reading whatever pleased her, including urban fiction. She said she was originally introduced to the genre by her best friend in elementary school. Despite criticisms about the genre, Tamia commented:

...its entertainment for you. I really think that video games are bad. But, its boys inside playing video games instead of outside on the street doing what's in the video games, which they could do. But, if they're inside playing it, then they not outside. Watching music videos and stuff like that, everybody say that's bad. But then at the same time, watching it and reading it is the less time you spend actually doing it. (4.29.2008)

For Tamia, reading urban fiction served as a distraction from engaging in the behaviors of characters within the text. She is able live through characters experiences as opposed to "getting into trouble". In conjunction with the texts serving as distractions for her, she also said she learned from the books.

Some urban books, like *Zhane*, that's just sex and stuff. Some of them like, *Shiesty* and *Dimepiece*, was like about betrayal and watching who your friends is. Like a lot of them do have lessons to it. Characters go through a journey. They have life changing experiences and stuff like that. (4.29.2008)

Beyond escaping from her own reality and experiencing those adventures of the characters, Tamia learned from the mistakes of characters featured.

Despite enjoying reading urban fiction texts, Tamia took issue with the book covers as well as the portrayal of female characters. As for the book covers, she commented, “You know the hard back cover, I’ll take that off sometime. That’s only sometimes if the cover is just too much. I don’t really like every time I close the book and look at it, I don’t like that” (4.28.2008). She rebuffed the derogatory images of women dressed or presented in demeaning ways on the cover. Tamia further critiqued the representation of the protagonists as always having a lighter complexion, which, coincidentally, was very different from her likeness. She commented,

All the girls in the book, they all got a nice shape. They got big butts and big breasts. They’re all light skinned and long hair. They don’t have a scar. No broken nail. That’s the only thing that makes it hard to relate to sometimes. Now, I try to imagine, put my own flaws to them because I don’t like to imagine the same girl every time. (4.28.2008)

Tamia attempted to and did in some ways, relate to the characters that were prominently featured within the urban fiction tales. However, how these characters were presented pose an obstacle for her in doing so

Discussion

While the participants' responses to their interpretations of the text are examined further in the next chapter, overall, they speak to the power of perception as it related to participants self conceptions as readers. Two of the participants, Alexis

and Keaira, both viewed themselves as readers as they read a multitude of texts that were deemed “acceptable” in schools. The other four participants did not view themselves as readers as they did not particularly enjoy reading in-school texts. Tamia, however, viewed herself as a good student based on her ability to communicate through speech; a good student was not the same as a reader, however. Those who enjoyed in-school texts viewed themselves as readers and those who did not neglected to view themselves as readers. Jonelle, Antoniese, and Monet did not consider themselves readers although they voraciously read urban fiction, much more than the other participants. I also learned from students about how their teachers chastise them for reading urban fiction texts during free time within their classrooms. Finally, I learned that participants have various reasons for engaging with urban fiction. While Alexis reads to understand what she perceives to be “hood life”, Monet reads to learn about sex. Tamia, Keaira, and Jonelle, on the other hand, read as a distraction from their own lives as well as to learn from the mistakes of characters. With the exception of Monet, participants suggested that they are motivated to read urban fiction to engage with aspects of the text beyond the sexual and violent references. Each seemed to read urban fiction to learn about life and how to make good choices.

Another important finding that surfaced from interviews was that a culture of reading exists around the reading of urban fiction in the school where participants attended as well as in several of their communities. In other words, an aspect of social membership at this particular research site involved adolescent African American girls reading urban fiction. In my own middle and high school experience,

a new pair of tennis shoes or wearing a particular brand of jeans typically provided acceptance within the popular crowd at my school. Participants, however, referenced that popularity and acceptance was marked for girls, in part, through the reading of urban fiction texts.

A Portrait of Our Coming Together

The Happening: Facilitation of Our Discussions

Our first meeting lasted 90 minutes and I felt that students' attention wondered drastically after an hour or so. I arranged 8 chairs in a small circle in a room across from the principal's office. This seemed to be a space where meetings with large numbers of participants would gather; it was not a regular classroom where students normally met. As we met late in the evening, no administrators or teachers, for that matter, were present. As such, students were able to speak without being overheard or interrupted by school adults. After we practiced our roles while viewing a music video and a snippet of a reality television show, students chose the novel that we read together within our literature circle. Although students suggested titles which they had all read such as *Bitch*, *The Coldest Winter Ever*, *A Hustler's Wife*, *Bitch II*, and *Be More Careful*, to name a few, students ultimately settled upon the text *Supreme Clientele*, a book that only Monet had read. Monet spoke for several minutes about the merit of the text, promising that others "won't want to put it down. I swear." She referenced the twists and turns in the storyline and how the main character was "so boss." While she made a compelling argument for *Supreme Clientele*, the group decision to read this book provided insight into Monet's position

among her peers; she was outspoken and a leader. We concluded the session by creating rules for participating within the literature circle. This involved:

- 1) making respectful comments to one another
- 2) critiquing ideas and not the individual making the idea
- 3) reading the required sections
- 4) responding in the journals provided
- 5) missing no more than 2 sessions.

These rules were written on the same piece of paper that contained descriptions of various roles. These rules, as well as students' roles, were posted on a wall beside our circle of chairs.

Although the girls seemed more comfortable with me and less hesitant to respond and talk after our first session, I still felt like an outsider. At this point I had interacted with them during an information session, a session where I was available when parents dropped students off, and our pre interview. I began to understand that participants were analyzing me. Yet, I was still a stranger. In a post interview, Alexis commented, "I wanted to learn from you. You're an adult. I figure you've had experience with this stuff and you seemed like you were okay to talk about it." Students may have been just as intrigued with my responses as I was with their thoughts. However, I did not feel like the students understood that my goal was not to condemn their reading of urban fiction until four or so sessions had passed.

During our second meeting, I handed out a personal copy of the text for each student. Before reading the text, students and I forecasted the storyline based on the picture on the cover and the summary of the story featured on the back cover. The

front cover features a topless lighter complexioned man sitting on a couch. A light complexioned woman is lying in his lap looking away; she is dressed in jeans and a bustier. After making predictions, we read the first page of the text together.

Students then selected roles. I read the first paragraph aloud and asked students to make different predictions based on the short reading. I then asked students to read the next page independently. Based on their roles, students responded to the text.

At the conclusion of the second meeting, students decided how many chapters they wanted to read prior to our next meeting and which chapters would be read in the sessions that would follow until the end of the book. They settled on three chapters per session. Considering the limited days left prior to the end of the school year, the students decided to meet twice a week.

Despite our rules, during our second meeting, I noticed that several students neglected to bring their journals, citing that they had either not written in them or that they did not need them because they had remembered their responses to the text based on their role. This trend was repeated in the next two sessions. To address this, I originally asked students to take the first ten minutes of our circle to reflect and write their responses to the reading in their journals. This was followed by uncomfortable moments with students writing briefly and then staring around the meeting room. I found it very difficult to motivate students to write their reflections. As their participation was voluntary, I found myself in an arduous situation. I was curious to understand students' literacies around urban fiction; this included their speech as well as their written thoughts prior to our conversations. The journals were designed to help participants: 1) to prepared contributions and thoughts about the specific

chapters that we had decided to read, 2) to consider their thoughts about the reading section prior to being influenced by the group, and 3) to provide an opportunity for me to compare responses before and after group meetings, to consider the influence of our interactions within the literature circle on their outlooks. During the third session, however, Alexis asked if we could merely discuss and not write responses. Interestingly, in the post interviews, students spoke about the importance of writing down responses to stay focused within discussions. This was strange to me considering that the participants unanimously agreed to eliminate the writing component of our literature circle meetings. Apparently, even though participants did not want to write down their responses, in hindsight, they understood the value in those responses in helping to keep our conversations focused. While I recognized the significance of having students write down their thoughts prior to our meetings, I wanted them to remain engaged in our meetings so I agreed to eliminate the journals. This further illuminates the power dynamics within our interactions and demonstrates the role of the participants' in structuring the work of the group.

I was critical of some of the images in the text and over time, students became less defensive about and seemingly more open minded about critiquing the images presented within the text. At the outset, students seemed to feel the need to defend the images presented within the story. Tamia, in fact, was the only student who spoke critically about the images within our first four sessions. Others attempted to justify the behaviors and responses of characters. For instance, when considering whether or not Zya was an ethnical character, Monet cited, "what does morals have to do with it? She just is who she is. There's nothing wrong with that. She's surviving"

(04.29.2009). During our third week (after about four sessions), participants began to demonstrate more critical analyses when speaking about the text. While their comfort level with me likely contributed, students appeared to begin to understand that I was interested in them analyzing and justifying their thoughts about the text. At the beginning of every meeting, I would review the major discussion points from the previous discussion and ask students to clarify their thoughts based on questions that arose as I transcribed. At several points, the students and I listened to portions of the previous meeting. I wanted to show students that my goal was to understand their perspective while still pushing them to be critical of the text. My original concern was that students would not read. The problem, however, was keeping them from ahead. All participants, except for Jonelle, finished the book within one week. Keaira mentioned that she missed lunch and her recess for a day so that she could finish the text. I struggled sometimes to ensure that students' comments were focused on parts of the text that were assigned for that day and dedicated the first few minutes of our conversation to review the major events within the assigned chapters.

Students typically were required to leave their "free time" to participate within our circles. While students were reminded about our meeting and ushered in by their evening counselor during our first meetings, the course of the study, students organized themselves without the assistance of an adult and greeted me at the door of the building where we met. Student participation varied daily. Antoniese, Alexis, Tamia, Monet and Jonelle attended most sessions. Keaira's attendance was the most inconsistent. Tamia missed the first two sessions as she was ending her

responsibilities as a cheerleader and Monet missed the last two sessions as she began experiencing complications due to pregnancy.

In each session, each student had the opportunity to contribute if they chose. They generated conversation points, although I also had questions based on the previous conversation. Each student, however, spoke at least once during each session as dictated by their assigned role. In my second analytic memo, which was written after meeting with participants for six sessions, I reflected about the feel of our interactions when I wrote, “It felt like a conversation between college students than that which I would have normally had with my students when teaching” (reflective journal, 4.29.2009).

Over time, I think participants viewed me as someone interested in genuinely seeing them succeed and do well in school. Based on our interactions, I felt as though I transformed from a researcher and stranger into a mentor of sorts to whom students felt they could express their views. In the end, students asked if I would and could return and continue to work with only them. I continued to build rapport with students and creating environments where students would feel comfortable by serving food at sessions. Also, I spoke with students about concerns they had in school. There were several instances where I returned to work with students, on days where we did not meet to assist with homework assignments.

Voice

Despite my role as moderator, the students held a great deal of power in our interactions based on that fact that their experiences and understandings were of central focus. Observing how students negotiated this power provided insights into

their literacy strengths. For instance, two students, Keaira and Alexis, had uneven attendance during the first two weeks of the sessions. However, Tamia and Antoniese were consistently present. Understanding the importance of their voices and perspectives within our discussions, Tamia and Antoniese mentioned in post interviews how they spoke with other participants about conversation points from our discussions and how participants' perspectives were privileged. Tamia expressed how she was able to talk about issues that she was unaccustomed to discussing with adults at school when she commented, "You [Simone] didn't like judge us or nothing. We got to talk about what was important to us and not what was just important to you" (6.4.2008). The power that they had to create and direct our conversations motivated their participation. "I'm going to talk about what I want to talk about. There's no test or nothing. I get to think. It's like I'm the teacher" (5.29.2008). commented Monet. So, although they were not obtaining credits towards graduations or monetary compensation, participants had the opportunity to exercise their voices as their exposures and perspectives made them experts and motivated them to contribute to our literature discussions. As students became aware of their power, attendance increased.

Summary

While I describe how we built relationships and a community of sharing and support in our literature circles in this chapter. In doing so, I saw the power of privileging the voices of participants within our interactions. Although a stranger at the beginning of this study, when I centered their choices and reactions, participants privileged me with their voices. Unlike how they describe their classrooms and in-

school reading assignments, participants seemed to positively respond to having the opportunity and responsibility of crafting conversations based on their interactions and interpretations with the text. However, my presence and role within our interactions also influenced participants' responses. Their perceptions of how I viewed their responses as well as their general engagement with the *Supreme Clientele* seemed to result in participants' flexibility and comfort for presenting their perspectives, especially with regards to those taboo conversations dealing with sex, drugs, and violence.

CHAPTER 6: CRITICAL READINGS

In many ways, girls are inconsequential. Due to their youth and gender, girls are... relegated to an inferior place in American society because of the strength of the cultural stereotype that girls and their culture are insipid and insignificant, unworthy of close attention (Inness, 1998, p. 1)

As a means of understanding participants' engagement with urban fiction, this chapter present their thematized responses to *Supreme Clientele*. These responses provided insight into why these adolescent African American girls engaged with urban fiction and how they processed messaged from the text. Brooks, Browne, and Hampton (2008) write that the "documentation of the everyday experiences of contemporary African American girls remains remarkably scant in school libraries, book stores, and the households of youth from all ethnic backgrounds" (p. 661). As such, conversations about *Supreme Clientele* serve as a window, of sorts, for the research community, into the lives of six adolescent African American girls and their interpretations about and applications of an urban fiction text. This chapter addresses the research questions, a) *What elements of texts do adolescent African American girls select and discuss and what is their significance?*, b) *What are the interpretations of adolescent African American females of urban fiction texts?*, c) *How, if at all, do participants relate the texts to their own lives?* and d) *How, if at all, do conversations about urban fiction texts with peers and an adult facilitator influence how participants make meaning of the texts?*

The most salient themes that arose within conversations about *Supreme Clientele* emphasized 1) gender roles and beauty, 2) relationships, and 3) sex. Throughout each section, students' direct responses and summaries of responses were

used to characterize their engagement, response and meaning making while interacting with the text. Their responses were analyzed through grounded theory techniques where themes from individual transcripts were categorized and built upon.

Gender Roles & Beauty

Conversations revealed that participants engaged with the characters in complex ways, especially those related to gender and sexuality. Major themes from conversations were steeped with the participants' curiosities and explorations of behaviors associated with African American womanhood and beauty. I discuss beauty within this findings section about gender roles because participants discussed beauty attainment as though it were a natural part of being female. Thus, discussion about the connections students made between beauty and womanhood fit most appropriately within a larger conversation about gender roles.

Black Beauty & Femininity

Conversations with participants revealed that *Supreme Clientele* presented ideas that resonated with participants' own personal perceptions of beauty; "looking good" was expected for a woman as this was how she attained and maintained the attention of a man. Despite her role as a "ruthless drug kingpin," a profession, according to participants, often associated with males, Zya's behaviors and beliefs about maintaining a feminine appearance were largely aligned with participants' own conceptions of presenting oneself as feminine. Zya heavily emphasized "looking good" and being attractive to her boyfriends. This involved keeping her hair done, wearing expensive and coordinated clothes, having manicures and pedicures, as well

as wearing makeup. Monet commented, "Boys don't have to do anything but put on a white t [t-shirt] and leave out the house. Girls got to go through so much. Boys got it so good. It's so easy for them" (5.5.2008) Beauty according to Monet, but agreed upon by other participants, was a responsibility for women who were interested in attaining and maintaining the attention of males.

The presentation of Zya as effeminate and "well kept" defied most participants' notions of female drug dealers while simultaneously reifying their conceptions of being female, as mentioned above. Participants spoke of female drug dealers as looking "boyish" and "thuggish" which included wearing baggy clothing ("definitely nothing that shows off your body"), donning hair styles that were closely cropped or some form of hair twists like cornrolls or dreadlocks, and having dispositions that were "rough." Contrary to this perception, Zya was presented in ways more closely aligned with participants' "ideal" conceptions of being female. Tamia described the contrast when she smiled and commented, "Dough girls [female drug dealers] be looking like boys. But Zya and Anari are like really on top of it. During the court trial, the newspapers are like comparing who is the best dressed. One is wearing Gucci and one is wearing Dolci Gabana or something like that. They're on top of it always" (5.12.2008). As Tamia cited with what appeared to be admiration, participants also seemed to strive to be "on top of it" and "look good." With the exception of Antoniese and Monet, participants came to our sessions with their nails manicured and painted with intricate designs. All of the participants donned hair styles that involved complex hair braiding or time consuming maintenance, a feature aligned with descriptions of Zya within the text. They, like

Zya, seemed to devote a great deal of attention to distinguishing themselves in their physical appearance, even though the school required students to wear uniforms.

When justifying the work associated with staying “on top” of one’s appearance, Jonelle commented, “What woman doesn’t want to look good? That’s what you supposed to do. If not her, someone else will be ‘looking right’ and get the boys” (5.5.2008). Looking good, for participants, was associated with attaining and maintaining the attention of a male; they did not describe being effeminate and well kept as self motivated but rather as inspired by males. This was significant in that it spoke to potential reasons why participants engaged with urban fiction.

On some level, the protagonist was presented, based on her appearance, in ways that were aligned with the participants’ views of how they would ideally present themselves; participants connected with Zya through mutual views about appearance. They associated femininity and looking good with expensive clothes and expensive self maintenance, as these forms of maintenance achieved attention from males. In this respect, participants’ perceptions of beauty were reinforced by the text. Based on the professions of their parents as well as the high percentage of students receiving free and reduced lunches at the school, I assumed that most of the participants could not afford to wear the name brand items that Zya donned throughout the text. Through this reading, they were able to experience “high living” vicariously through the protagonist. High living included looking good, which appeared to be important and desirable to most of the participants.

I liked that the book presented women as characters with intelligence and power and not just as girlfriends or secondary characters. As participants cited, in my

experience, often men were presented as being drug dealers. With this said, the female protagonists were not the ideal presentation of African American women as successful and contributing members of society. Understanding the negative ways in which African American women had been negatively presented within the media, I hoped that participants would have taken note of this. I wanted participants to demonstrate critical literacy when interacting with the images of the women within this text and question why the authors chose to present the protagonists as drug dealers and murders. Instead, participants emphasized the appearances of the characters and women's responsibility in maintaining their physical appearance (reflective journal 5.12.2008).

I addressed this frustration by asking probing questions of participants such as "why did the authors choose to make Zya a drug dealer instead of a person with another profession?" and "is she believable as a real person?" I also wrote in my journal. I resolved my frustration, in part, by reminding myself that participants' responses were helpful in understanding how to potentially use urban fiction in the future to help readers challenge marginalized representations of African American womanhood.

Black Beauty & Skin Tone

Although we began a dialogue about skin color during our first literature circle, students repeatedly emphasized skin complexion and physique throughout our sessions as it related to their conceptions of beauty. I asked students to consider which famous actors and actresses should play the roles of the characters featured within *Supreme Clientele*. For Zya, students cited lighter complexioned African

American females. When questioned about this, students contrasted their conceptions of Zya's appearance against that which was presented within the text. What surfaced was that participants' conceptions of attractive African American females were those who were able to attain the attention of males. Coincidentally, these women were lighter complexioned and had voluptuous bodies.

When considering the representation of beauty within urban fiction texts, Monet commented that she generally envisioned the characters within urban fiction texts as being lighter complexioned, regardless of how they were described. She commented, "...every time that I read Zhane books, I always picture the women as light skinned. Every book, she's like honey colored or caramel...With the big butt" (5.5.2008). Even when descriptions differed within the text, Monet attested to envisioning lighter complexioned characters with voluptuous bodies as she associated this image with beauty. The protagonists, according to Monet, were always beautiful.

I was quite frustrated by what I perceived to be Monet's perception of lighter complexioned women as being beautiful. Monet looked very different from the descriptions of the "beautiful" protagonists in urban fiction texts as she had a darker brown complexion and hair that was not "fine" or long or blonde, like Zya. I was unsure if Monet saw herself as beautiful in comparison to those images promoted within urban fiction (reflective journal 5.5.2008). This idea, however, lent credence to the idea that Monet engaged with urban fiction to live through the protagonists' experiences of being beautiful. She never explicitly stated to me, however, that she did not view herself as beautiful or that she made a comparison between her complexion and appearance of the characters within the text. Despite my earnest

desire to challenge student comments, I remained conscientious that my research was not an intervention but rather an exploration. As such, I addressed student comments like those related linking lighter complexions with beauty, by asking questions such as "why do you think beauty is connected with having a lighter complexion?" or "why do you feel this way?" Often, students would not have a response and simply redirect conversations.

Explanations, however, surfaced throughout conversations. Participants believed males were attracted to lighter complexioned females as depicted in the following exchange:

Jonelle: Boys only like light skinned women.

Monet: If we were walking down the street with Tyler (a friend not involved in the literature circle), the boys would talk to Tyler first because she's light skinned. She's like real pretty.

Antoniese: She stands out more cause she's light.

Jonelle: I want boys to talk to me but I'm not that. (5.5.2008)

Here, the participants discussed light skin as an asset that garnered the greatest amount of attention from males. Monet commented, "Boys like more lighter girls but they only like darker girls because most of the darker girls have all the butt. If you could just be watching and you see a group of darker girls and a light skinned girl, the boys would talk to the light skinned girl" (5.5.2008). In this comment, Monet revealed her belief that females with darker complexions tended to have more voluptuous bodies, an appeal to males. However, Zya possessed the lighter complexion as well as the voluptuous body. Tamia commented, "She's [Zya] got

everything. She got her hair, her shape. Everything. Then, she was born a hustler, always know how to get money. And always knows how to dress, out dress everybody. Can speak, is bilingual. Can do everything” (5.19.2008). Having the perfect life, as presented within the text, was aligned with participants’ conceptions of being beautiful. As such, our conversations revealed that participants may have read based on commonalities between their outlooks about beauty and those promoted within the book or as mentioned earlier, they may have engaged in order to vicariously experience their conception of the “perfect” life; their realities, which included their appearance as well as what I assumed to be their material possessions, were far different from that of Zya.

I was saddened by participants’ ideas that females with lighter complexions were inherently more attractive than females with darker complexions. Skin complexion within the African American community has served as a divisive tool historically to separate the community at large. Armed with this understanding, I was very conscientious of how skin complexion had been used to marginalize many, especially those who complexions and characteristics were dissimilar to those most often associated with White. I wondered how my appearance as a lighter complexioned woman with curly hair influenced their remarks, be it in positive or negative ways (reflective journal, 5.12.2008). I addressed this concern by asking questions which challenged participants to further examine their responses. For instance, I would ask questions such as “what makes you say this?”, “why do you think people believe this?”, or “is there another way of viewing this situation?” I also wrote about my frustrations within my reflective journal.

Over the duration of the study, however, participants expressed a more critical eye with regards to the portrayal of beauty. They began to critique the presentation of complexion and beauty within the text and began make connections between the appearance of characters within *Supreme Clientele* and in the media at large.

Participants dialogued about this representation.

Monet: That's how it [depiction of beauty based on light complexions] is in videos. In life. In everything.

Keaira: Except for the one dark girl who be in the Gym Class Heroes [music group] video.

Jonelle: I just seen this new video that came out and the boys were sitting beside Keisha Cole [a rhythm and blues singer] and they was walking around and all the girls they talked to was like mixed. Light skinned long hair.

(5.5.2008)

The participants began to analyze their idea of beauty as they explored the representation of African American beauty within the media at large. For instance, Alexis began making connections between the representation of lighter complexions as the only standard of beauty when she commented:

To me, that is the standard of beauty, at least within the hip hop culture. Even within American culture, like long hair is in. A lot of your American women are getting butt implants. All those types of things. And so, to keep it pretty, it makes it more enjoyable and more of a fantasy. You're like, oh my gosh. This really happens. Cause its like, okay, I'm not experiencing anything like

this. Maybe there are women living through her. She's beautiful and she has power. She does have it all; she's so perfect. (5.14.2008)

Despite the fact that Zya had been mentally abused, was a drug dealer, and a murderer, amongst other negative descriptors, Alexis stated that Zya was "beautiful" and "perfect" as she compared the images popularized within rap videos and those uplifted within *Supreme Clientele*. This statement was surprising in lieu of her criticism of the representation of lighter complexions as singularly representing beauty. Further, Alexis made connections between standards of beauty and those perpetuated and uplifted within the media, more specifically hip hop culture. She seemed to attribute beauty and material possessions to having an admirable lifestyle, despite Zya's other travails. Alexis also considered how reading about Zya provided an opportunity to vicariously experience her "perfect" life, full of attention from males and full of material possessions.

As they aspired to achieve their conception of beauty, participants were able to use urban fiction, in the meantime, as a way of vicariously experiencing beauty and "high living". Consequently, participants were able to gain more exposure to young women's interactions with males, albeit fictional, as they vicariously lived through Zya. While they recognized the power of the media in shaping theirs and other views about beauty, participants did not challenge those presentations thoroughly. Their conceptions were reified through engagement with the text.

Although saddened by their lack of criticism, I learned that participants' engagement with urban fiction provided opportunity for addressing that ways in which readers were viewing the representation of beauty for African American

women, especially as it related to skin color. My greatest concern was that participants did not view themselves in the likeness of the “beautiful” and “perfect” protagonists and, hence, did not view themselves as attractive (reflective journal, 5.14.2008). I resolved this frustration, as cited earlier, by asking probing questions about their responses, and writing my frustrations within my journal.

Behaviors Based on Gender

As they discussed the story, participants described gender based roles within their own lives as they focused specifically on differences between how males and females reacted within the text in comparison to their own experiences. The participants discussed contrasting views about “normal” behaviors with regards to feelings of jealousy for both males and females within the context of being in a relationship.

In the text, Jules murders another male character who is attracted to Zya. Participants consistently challenged whether or not Jules' reactions and jealous behaviors were truly reflective of their own experiences with African American boys and men. Although all of the participants cited Jules' behavior as extreme, two of the participants believed it was *normal* for boys to be jealous of the attention that their girlfriends received from other boys. While Antoniese stated, “that’s how he lets you know that he’s into you...by showing that he doesn’t like for other guys to look at you or for you to talk to other guys” (5.7.2008), Monet commented,

Girls look at boys and then they [girls] like ‘why you looking at him?’ When another boy look at the girl, the boyfriend gets mad. But when a boy looks at

another girl, that's okay. They just laugh and be like whatever. Let me look at another boy though. Somebody's going to be fighting. (5.7.2008)

Antoniese and Monet considered jealousy to be a normal expression of affection from males. Jealousy was, in their perspectives, normal and appropriate. Monet further unveiled her conception of African American maleness as being associated with violent tendencies when she spoke and validated fighting "over a girl" as a means of acting on these feelings of jealousy. For Monet and Antoniese, urban fiction reflected their associations between African American maleness and aggression.

Conversely, both Monet and Antoniese agreed that it was abnormal for females to behave in such an uncontrolled manner. Monet stated, "I see girls doing all types of crazy things so that other girls won't take their place. I ain't fighting over a boy. All they do [boys] is laugh or whatever. They don't really care about all of that. It's not like if you fight, they'll want to stay with you or something" (5.7.2008). Contrary to her opinions about the jealous tendencies of males, Monet personally opposed physically fighting over a male based on feelings of jealousy. She acknowledged, however, that Zya's reaction was not one that was aligned with the experiences of many females with whom she was acquainted. Although jealous and suspecting that Jules was cheating with another woman, Zya neither confronted nor physically assaulted the suspected mistress. Instead, Zya abandoned her relationship with Jules. Although Zya's response was uncommon in Monet's experience, Monet appreciated this representation of Zya as being composed and strategic when demonstrating her feelings of jealousy. Zya's response may have served as a learning experience for Monet. "I'd like to think that I would do like that. She really kept it

together" (5.7.2008) Monet said. In this instance, Zya's behaviors were viewed by several participants as admirable and smart. Beyond what students viewed as her beauty and physical maintenance, some participants appreciated her disposition and way of confronting disappointment within her relationship.

Unlike Monet and Antoniese, however, Alexis, Jonelle, Keaira, and Tamia commented that jealous behavior exhibited by a male was both "embarrassing" and "unnecessary." In fact, the portrayal of Jules killing another man or even fighting another man over jealous feelings seemed unrealistic to most of the participants. Tamia, for instance, believed boys did not behave in jealous ways and that Jules' erratic behavior was not the norm for African American males. In fact, "a boy who's ready to fight other boys over looking at her, that's not attractive. And that's not realistic because I don't know too many boys that's going to fight over girls especially off of a look over anything" (5.7.2008). Jules' reaction, according to Tamia, was unrealistic. In my personal experience, boys often fought over the attention that their girlfriends received from other males as this attention was viewed as disrespectful (reflective journals, 5.7.2008). However, I appreciated and agreed with Tamia's perspective that fighting was unnecessary.

To the contrary, Tamia believed that having an attractive girlfriend was the goal of most males. They sought out attractive females and, in her experience, that would garner them positive attention. "A banging girlfriend don't do anything but make you [the boy] look better. They know this. They like that their girlfriends get lots of stares and stuff cause then they can be like 'oh, she's with me'" (5.7.2008). Tamia believed most males desired to be with attractive females who garnered

attention from other males. She believed this attention was a compliment to the ego of the actual boyfriend and not meriting the boyfriend to get upset. Keaira corroborated stating, “You’re with her because she’s pretty. Why would he get mad because other guys think she’s pretty? Isn’t that one of the reasons he wants to be with her?” (5.7.2008). As highlighted earlier, the emphasis in Keaira's comment was placed on the male's desire. It was almost as though females were not expected to possess qualities beyond their physical appearance. With this in mind, most students viewed jealousy as natural and normal for boys, but viewed Jules’ jealous reaction as a negative attribute and critiqued his behaviors.

Further, Keaira actually critiqued Zya’s response to Jules’ jealous and irrational behavior. Once Zya realized that Jules killed out of jealousy, she neither chastised his actions nor judged his behaviors as negative but viewed his actions as evidence of his love for her. Keaira commented, “He is clearly crazy. Killing because another man is into you is just way over the top. If she didn’t see it before then, she should know now that something ain’t right with him. Because she still stays with him, it seems like something ain’t right with her” (5.7.2008). More, Keaira critiqued both Jules and Zya. While she believed Jules overreacted, she critiqued Zya for not responding in a way that she deemed as appropriate. Keaira did not view Zya as helpless or as a victim of circumstance. She faulted Zya remaining with Jules, despite knowing that “something ain’t right with him” (5.7.2008). Keaira felt as though Jules’ action provided insight into his character that was a warning about future responses. This comment was significant because it demonstrated Keaira did not simply accept, admire, or mimic the behaviors of the characters in the story.

Although intrigued with the plot, Keaira critiqued those images that she did not agree with. In that respect, the book's portrayal of African American maleness, through Jules, was not consistent with either Tamia or Keaira's exposure. These comments were significant because they defied popular assumptions that participants read the texts because they can identify with the representation of characters and the predicaments presented within the plotline (DeBlase, 2003). Although they can identify with some aspects of the characterizations, neither Tamia, Monet, nor Keaira accepted aspects of the representation of gender portrayals of African American characters within the text as it related to jealousy within a relationship.

Further demonstrating their conceptions of relationships, the participants contrasted the jealous relationship between Jules and Zya to that of Snow and Zya. Snow, they cited, appreciated that Zya was attractive and did not try to control her actions. Instead of killing men for looking at Zya, Alexis pointed out, he smiled; this reaction was more aligned with Tamia's, Alexis' and Keaira's own experiences. Participants, overall, felt that Snow "is a keeper" largely because he was monogamous and trusting of Zya. Keaira stated,

He is the opposite of Jules. Who wants to deal with all that that Jules gets into? Snow is down for Zya. He looks out for her before he does himself. He likes that she looks good and he likes that other people know that she looks good. Why get mad at that? (5.14.2008)

While Jules was considered with a "bad" example of a male, Snow was "good"; participants did not complicate these seemingly superficial conceptions of the male characters.

In my view, neither character was totally bad or good; to a degree, they both featured positive and negative attributes. However, despite his many negative traits which involved him murdering and filling his community with drugs, there were few critiques of Snow, based on his interactions with Zya. Snow was viewed as protective and selfless while Jules, conversely, was viewed as mistrustful, domineering, selfish, and jealous. Because he was kind to Zya, Snow was viewed favorably by participants. This suggested their genuine connections with the protagonist.

In line with existing literature (Alvermann, 1998; Kaplan and Cole, 2003), Monet demonstrated that she may have learned about appropriate behaviors from the examples of characters within the text. While the story provided the opportunity for some to view images that were aligned with their conceptions of the roles of women and men, other participants were afforded the opportunity to challenge those negative representations of behaviors associated with African Americans, as demonstrated within our conversations, one participant seemed to learn from the experiences and behaviors of characters.

Although I fought to reveal my enthusiasm, I was quite excited to see that some participants were being more critical of Zya and holding her, as well as other women who dated men involved in illicit activities, as accountable for their decisions. I appreciated that they were making personal connections when referencing their conceptions of appropriate behaviors for girls and boys because I understood that participants viewed themselves as accountable for their behaviors and choices and were potentially learning from the mistakes of the protagonists. I understood that my

perspective was conservative and limiting in that it neglected to consider the multitude of reasons why a person might date a drug dealer or someone involved in illegal professions (reflective journal, 5.14.2008).

Also, although I was somewhat concerned that participants were not more critical of Snow, I was happy to see that they valued his treatment of Zya. However, I wanted participants to question if his good treatment was enough to justify Zya pursuing a relationship with this dangerous man.

Black Women as Admirable Chickenheads

While Jonelle recognized that “you’re going to be real disappointed” (6.4.2008) by some of the images of females within the text, overall, participants viewed the text as being empowering for women as the protagonists were viewed as being successful, powerful, and intelligent African American woman. Throughout our discussions, however, students demonstrated having contradictory views about the representation of women within the text. They saw women presented as both powerful and foolish and they admired and admonished those representations, depending on the context.

While they admired her style and beauty and intellect, Zya, at certain points of the text, was regarded as a “chickenhead” or a female who engaged in foolish behaviors over her male companions. Zya, for instance, had an abortion because she assumed that her boyfriend, Jules, was having an affair. Further, Zya justified this action by stating that she could not raise a child by herself. Several participants actually laughed at this. Monet cited, “I didn’t know what she was talking about

when she said this. She is crazy” (5.12.2008). Four of my six participants were raised in single parent homes led by their mothers. They neither agreed with nor identified with Zya’s decision to have an abortion based on frustration with her boyfriend. Nor did they understand her apprehension about raising her baby without the involvement of the child’s father. Even my two participants who were raised in a two parent home disagreed with Zya’s decision to have an abortion. Alexis called her “dumb” and Jonelle referred to Zya as “immature”.

Participants unanimously agreed that Zya, as well as the other women in the story were realistic in that they accurately depicted some types of women they called as “chickenheads”, or women who were overly reliant on men. Monet stated:

Women throw themselves out there like that. So, why not portray women like that. But, not all women. But I feel as though when people write these urban fiction books, they got to be talking about somebody’s relationship in order for them to get their point across. But women these days just doing stuff out for boys like that. It’s like they’d do anything for boys. It’s like, here at my school. For example, girls will actually stay back [fail an entire year of schooling] for the boys. And like when the boys pass, they’ll be looking real dumb because they pass and they fail thinking the boy was going to be with them. (5.14.2008)

Monet saw girls and women within her school and community behaving in ways that were reflective of the stereotypes of women within the text and she largely condemned these behaviors. Building on notions of women as foolish, dependent, or chickenheads, Antoniese compared Vida’s behaviors with her female associates from

school. “She allows men to do whatever to her and she gets money and stuff” (5.14.2008).

Participants recognized that the characters were only representative of “a kind” of woman. Alexis spoke to this when she commented, “All women aren’t like that. But the authors wanted us to understand that story. Sometimes the stories that we hear aren’t the most popular or the best but they are still somebody’s story” (5.14.2008). All participants envisioned themselves as being successful in their future careers like Zya. They viewed Zya as powerful and intelligent but "dumb for boys." Participants considered society and independent and free and how they both contributed towards the characters becoming gold diggers or hustlers. Exposure or a lack thereof to opportunity, according to some participants, influenced the choices that Zya made. With limited exposure to other career opportunities, some students suggested that Zya did not have much choice in her profession as a drug dealer.

Antoniese stated:

It’s not like it started with the drugs. It [the book] said she ran out of her foster care home to be with Jules. She was like 16 or something. Maybe it started with just a hard life period. That’s all she knew. Not just the drug life but the hard life so that’s all she’s going to know the rest of her life, a hard life. And to the point that she loves him when he goes to jail, she could not have chosen to just stop. What else did she know how to do?” (5.12.2008)

Based on her upbringing and relationship with a man who was a drug dealer and her lack of family or outside influences, Antoniese felt that Zya had limited options and no real choice but to become a drug dealer as that was her primary model for a career.

Antoniese analyzed Zya's behaviors and choices by connecting the text with her own experience. She referenced the impact of a hard life, a term that was not used within *Supreme Clientele*, as an influence that predetermined Zya's decision to sell. A hard life seemed to serve as a justification for Zya's decision to hustle. The morality associated with selling drugs and infesting communities was ignored based on Antoniese's conception of the impact of a hard life.

Alexis agreed with Antoniese's outlook when she commented, "Not only is she a part of her direct environment, which is Harlem, but the very principles or morals or lack thereof that governs her society at large" (5.12.2008). Alexis believed it was inappropriate to critique Zya's decision to become a drug dealer as "our privileged view" skewed students' connections with Zya's reality; her decision was one of necessity according to Alexis. Alexis believed Zya was largely predetermined to hustle based on her observations within her community. Alexis' earlier comment, "She doesn't know any better. Selling drugs is all she knows when Jules went to jail. I know better" (5.14.2008). Alexis analyzed the behaviors and perspectives of characters by relying on her exposures to life in the hood that were reflected in the popularized and often derogatory images of African American life. She stated,

White picket fences aren't for everybody. We're told hood life is the life that you need to get out of. So you find the life that we're told you're supposed to have, the white picket fence sort of thing. But, is that for everybody? If that was the case, would not everybody have that life already? Maybe life in the hood is not a choice but a mentality for some people. (5.19.2008)

Alexis believed Zya's choice to become a drug dealer was predicated upon a mentality that was shaped by her exposure to drug trafficking. Demonstrating analytical reasoning, rather than critique and place judgment, she implored other participants to try to understand why someone like Zya would become a drug dealer.

Some students demonstrated an opposing perspective, however, that was less tolerant and forgiving of Zya's decision to hustle. These participants bestowed the responsibility of Zya's decision upon Zya alone and gave no credence to the impact of her surroundings and influences. Tamia stated:

It's like being in a relationship. But if you have a reason to want to get out. If you see what's coming for you, if you really want to get out, you'll get out...That's like, once you're in a relationship and he hits you or something and then you really already know what you're getting into but you already have the piece of it and you still keep going. But then, once you get to the end and he really beats you up then you can't be mad because you could have been gotten out. (5.7.2008)

While Tamia demonstrated critical analysis when she connected Zya's decision to hustle with being in an unhealthy relationship. Although she understood why Zya began selling drugs, she blamed Zya for continuing to sell drugs after she became aware of the consequences of this choice. Zya made connections numerous times within the text between pain, violence, death and selling drugs. Yet, according to Tamia, she still chose to maintain her livelihood by selling drugs. This decision, according to Tamia, merited no sympathy as it was a conscious and a well informed choice.

Keaira also believed Zya was presented as a character who could have made other choices, although less lucrative, than becoming a drug dealer. She stated:

She was powerful and then she was pretty and then she was supposedly smart. She had everything. She could have just made it on her own without the hustle. Like, she worked about the restaurant. She had no previous experience. But she got really good at becoming a waitress. Just like when she got into the drug game. Jules had to teach her everything. But, she kept doing drug related activities and it helped to build her up so she could stand her up and be the leader of the empire. You could work in the real world, 9-5. You could learn. Go to classes, go to school. She could have did something with her life and really changed. She wanted the money at any expense. So, she chose to stay in the life. (5.14.2008)

Keaira saw Zya as potentially empowered because she possessed the tools to survive based on her appearance and intelligence. Antoniese believed that Zya could have thrived in a number of trades the same way she was able to learn and master selling drugs and waitressing. Tamia and Keaira believed Zya had choices about her career options. Tamia, for instance, referenced that Zya was fluent in Spanish and could have used to this knowledge to obtain a number of jobs.

But then at the same time, that hard life thing. Ok, she had a hard life but that's not like her excuse for not learning because she knew Spanish.

Where'd you learn that from? We weren't 16 on the streets hustling to learn Spanish; we learned Spanish from school.... Spanish is hot. If you know

Spanish, there are like a thousand people who will hire you because there are so many people who speak Spanish now and don't know English. (5.14.2008)

Tamia cited that Zya had been exposed to professions outside of hustling and could have used Spanish in a number of professions. Further, Keaira reflected on how Zya spoke of loving fashion and dreamed, as a young girl, of becoming a clothing buyer for a store. "She must have had some exposure to know about being a buyer. Who knows about stuff like that?" Keaira believed other participants were neglecting to consider Zya's full range of exposures and challenged their perspectives about Zya as a victim. Although exposed to dealing drugs, some participants emphasized Zya's other exposures such as Spanish fluency and becoming a buyer for a store. As such, several students believed Zya made a conscious choice to pursue the career of a drug dealer over that of other exposures.

Tamia stated, "She could have still worked, saved her money up and got out the hard working way. She just chose the easier way I think to make it move faster; the money comes faster" (5.14.2008). Tamia felt Zya's choice was motivated by laziness as opposed to a lack of exposure.

Further, Tamia viewed Zya as selfish and short sighted. Tamia maintained a critical view of Zya as having contributed nothing positive to her community and therefore a menacing presence. She commented:

She could have used it [her intelligence] for something good though. Like, Bill Gates, he makes computer chips and stuff and computers. That's positive. Drugs. Look what it did to her best friend, her best friend's mother...That's putting [drugs] back into the community. She doesn't want to

see Vida hurt but how many other people is she hurting in the way that she didn't like to see Vida hurting. She could have hustled anything. But I think since you know drugs was the first thing she really seen, hustling really applied to her. That's probably why she got passionate about 149it. (5.14.2008).

Based on Zya's exposures, which necessitated selfish outlooks, Tamia's perspective shifted somewhat in that she acknowledged the impact of one's community upon outcomes.

Participants were critiquing and analyzing, activities both associated with critical literacy, by relying on their personal experiences. They engaged with the text by continuously reflecting on their own experiences to authenticate their reading of *Supreme Clientele* and critique representations that were not aligned with those experiences.

While they critiqued Zya and Vida for being “chickenheads” and overly reliant on males, some participants failed to make connections between their behaviors and realities and those presented in *Supreme Clientele*. For instance, Zya's made major life decisions were significantly influenced men. An example brought up in our discussions was Zya's choice to sell drugs based on Jules connections and her decision to become a supplier to the Supreme Clientele group with the encouragement and support of Snow. Interestingly, while Monet stated that her boyfriend decided “to get me pregnant without me even knowing” (5.12.2009), she failed to see her commonalities with Zya or Vida. While she critiqued Vida for being fooled into taking and, subsequently, becoming addicted to heroin and critiqued Zya for being

"so dependent" on men in general, Monet characterized herself as allowing her boyfriend to make a life altering decision without her knowledge or approval. This suggested a disconnect between her and the text.

Through their comments regarding gender portrayals within the text, students demonstrated complexities their their understanding of characters within *Supreme Clientele*. While they admired characteristics of some and were engaged with the storyline, participants demonstrated various conceptions of gender based behaviors and beauty that extended beyond a superficial reading and understanding of the text.

Unlike a previous concern, I was beginning to see participants be even more critical of Zya's behaviors. I did not see Zya as an admirable character and hoped participants would choose not to emulate her based on their admiration of her beauty and the attention that she received from males as I recognized these were concerns of participants. Also, I was humbled by participants' views that representations of African American women should not have been limited to those that I considered to be more positive and that representations should be inclusive of all stories, including those that I deemed to be less than ideal representations of African American womanhood (reflective journal, 5.19.2008). Despite the exposures to drugs, violence and sex from engagement with urban fiction, I learned that participants were critical of some of the images they were reading about in *Supreme Clientele*.

Relationships

The participants demonstrated a keen interest in exploring the behaviors of both females and males within the context of romantic and platonic relationships. In many ways, the conversations participants had about the texts corresponded with

Alvermann's findings (1998) that girls engage in leisure reading activities to explore behaviors associated with relationships. Some important differences between the texts examined in Alvermann's study and the text examined in present study is that *Supreme Clientele* demonstrates love and gender roles associated with the African American community as opposed to Whites. Based on the lack of assorted representations of African American womanhood and manhood within the media at large, it was significant to understand how participants interpreted the representation of African American love and relationships. Specifically, students focused on aspects of the text that led to conversations about trustworthiness, commitment, having a relationship with a drug dealer, and sex. These themes served as a window to understanding the multidimensional ways in which participants engaged with and understood issues related to relationships.

Ridin' No Matter What?: Travails of Friendship & Commitment

Platonic relationships

As students debated about the representations of friendship within the text. I noticed that most of the participants were very critical of Zya. I was confused by their critiques, however. On one hand, as presented earlier, participants viewed Zya as an admirable character because she received a great deal of attention from males and maintained her appearance well. However, participants were also skeptical and critical of Zya's levels of commitment to others; participants largely viewed Zya as a selfish character. They were particularly critical of Zya's behaviors and outlooks which they associated with her occupation. They believed that hustlers or drug dealers were selfish or acted selfishly, based on their occupation which emphasized

personal safety and quick money. Alexis commented about the mentality of drug dealers, stating, "... when you got power, people are gonna be so jealous. Like, you got to make sure you're protected 24-7. Like she [Anari] was telling her you can't have a lot of friends" (5.7.2008). According to Alexis, based on competition and jealousy from individuals who strove to emulate Zya's success, many who sold drugs, drug dealers could neither readily trust nor be trusted. Participants felt that Zya's interactions with most characters were reflective of this mentality.

It is important to note that in conversations about selling drugs or hustling and the choices that accompany that decision, participants were critical but largely non judgmental about the profession. While participants critiqued the behaviors associated with characters who sold drugs in *Supreme Clientele*, they often talked about this profession in non judgmental terms. Several of the students consistently referred to Zya as a person who sold drugs as opposed to a drug dealer. This was significant because students seemed to separate the job of selling drugs from Zya's personal character. Antoniese stated, "You can sell drugs and still be a good person. It's about survival. That's all. Selling drugs is bad but just because you do that bad thing doesn't mean that you are a bad person outside of that" (5.14.2008). According to Antoniese, selling drugs had little to do with the character of the seller; the act of hustling drugs was viewed by some participants as a mechanism for surviving. In fact, Tamia often referred to Zya as a hustler instead of a drug dealer. She explained:

If it's natural born. Hustling don't necessarily have to be drug related. You don't have to hustle drugs. You can hustle anything. People be hustling CD's and stuff and bootleg DVD's. People be making money. I don't think it

necessarily have to be drugs. But if you were a natural born hustler, you'll hustle anything. Like take this book. It's supposed to be sold for \$15 and you sell it for \$30. You just hustle. I think it's really like that. (5.14.2008)

To Tamia, hustling referred to trying to turn a profit by selling a number of things as a means of making a living, not just drugs. This conception of hustling lessens the stigma often associated with selling drugs. This suggests that participants sympathized with Zya's character and did not want to associate her with the negative connotations often associated with drug dealers.

Tamia critiqued Zya for what she deemed to be a jaded perspective on friendship and commitment when she stated:

I can't trust somebody that's killing the people in her community and people that are close to me. I couldn't trust her. She is about money and about herself. It's about her...its gonna always be about her. In the end, when she asks Snow, would he choose money over happiness, her thing was money.

(5.12.2008)

Tamia believed that individuals involved within the business of selling drugs could not be genuine friends because, in her view, their success was necessitated on a selfish disposition in which they consciously and intentionally profited from the deadly habits of others. Here, Tamia talked about herself as if she were a character within the story, suggesting that she was making connections to her own experience. Further, Tamia employed literacy skills to make connections between Zya, the characters, her profession as a drug dealer, and the impact of her selfish behaviors on the community at large. Selfishness was not a quality, according to Tamia, that made

a person trustworthy and worthy of being considered a friend. According to Tamia, “Zya doesn’t know what it is to be a friend. She knows how to take care of herself” (5.12.08). Participants generalized and stereotyped individuals who sold drugs as innately untrustworthy. Complicating the findings of Sutherland (2005), participants demonstrated that while they read, they were not “blank slates” in search of models of behavior. They brought their own perspectives to the text and were critical of the images that they encountered.

Although viewed as selfish and untrustworthy, some participants identified positive attributes of Zya's character that extended beyond her physical appearance. Jonelle, for instance, reminded the group of how Zya sat with Snow at the hospital until he recovered from his coma as being an indicator of friendship and devotion. Referencing this same behavior, Tamia, however, re-emphasized her conception of Zya and friendship when she commented, “She isn’t a friend to Snow. She stayed with him in the hospital. But I think she also stayed with him out of guilt because she said he would have never gotten hurt had he not come to help her.” While her remaining with Snow while he laid unconscious in the hospital suggested friendship to Jonelle, to Tamia, Zay’s behavior was reflected a selfish was based on Snow’s role as Zya’s distributor.

Keaira also believed Zya only cared for Snow out of protection for her only drug connection; Tamia and Keaira viewed Zya's actions as a savvy business choice to ensure that Snow would survive and continue to serve as her supplier. Without his support as her drug connection, according to Tamia and Keaira, Zya would lose

access to drugs and money which, to “typical” hustlers, took precedence over friendship according to participants.

Participants also critiqued Zya’s treatment of Vida after she discovered that Vida was addicted to drugs. According to Alexis, “all she cared about was making her money and revenge for Vida smoking her out to Heavy. She didn’t care that her so called best friend was a junkie or that her stuff [drugs] was feeding Vida’s problem” (5.14.2008). Here, Alexis connected Zya's mission to make money and Vida's addiction to drugs and implied that Zya was accountable for Vida's addiction. Again, participants were very critical of Zya so much so that they neglected to consider Vida's role in becoming a drug addict. In fact, Tamia explicitly blamed Zya for Vida’s drug addiction when she commented, “She [Zya] killed her. It was her drugs that Vida was taking and not Jules’ gun. She was gonna die anyway” (5.28.2008). Tamia talked about Zya’s selfishness when she chastised Zya for not understanding or not caring that her drugs were feeding and ultimately killing many people in her community, including her best friend Vida.

Like Jonelle, Monet attempted to defend Zya when she noted, “if not her drugs, it would have been somebody else’s” (5.28.2008). In this comment, Monet revealed her belief that Zya was simply capitalizing on an opportunity to sell drugs that others would have taken. Unlike other participants, she did not view Zya as untrustworthy or selfish based on her occupation but viewed her as merely an opportunist. Monet believed Vida was responsible for consuming drugs and that the responsibility should lay on Vida and not Zya and that if Vida had not purchased drugs from Zya, she would have purchased them drugs from someone else.

Jonelle saw similarities between Zya and individuals who did not sell drugs. She believed that all people, not just individuals who sold drugs, could disappoint and be poor friends at any given point. Even though someone may consider themselves to be your friend, according to Jonelle's, at some point, "they may disappoint you. That just seems to be normal in this story. How people you love disappoint you" (6.14.2008). Unlike other participants, Jonelle viewed the story as emphasizing friendship and did not consider it to be a condemnation of individuals who sold drugs. In her mind, the characters' professions were largely unrelated to their personalities and behaviors.

Monet was the only participant who defended Zya's drug dealing and did not hold her accountable for Vida or the problems within their relationship. Throughout our meetings, Monet defended Zya's character as being trustworthy and a friend. Monet illuminated a section of the text where Zya chose not to testify against Anari and suffered the consequences of being incarcerated. Other students critiqued this action, however, citing that Zya made this choice based on fear of Anari and the brutal consequences that would surely follow if she testified. Most participants viewed Zya as "a typical drug dealer" who was, according to Alexis, untrustworthy and unworthy of friendship. This is important to note as it emphasizes that participants viewed Zya through different lenses: admirable based on her appearance but disapproving based on her selfish disposition.

Keaira considered the impact of Zya's community on her selfish disposition but concluded, based on her own experience, that this was not necessarily related to her upbringing. When reasoning whether or not Zya was trustworthy, Keaira made

connections between Zya's situation as a foster child and her own experience of being kicked out of her house by her mother:

It's good that she can take care of herself. I have to take care of myself.

That's what you've got to be able to do. But there was way more things that she could have done than become this person. She's pretty and smart and nice, even though she was in foster care. Her decision to sell drugs changed into a different person. Being trustworthy is a part of who I am. If I lose that, then, people may not want to help me when I need it. (5.14.2008)

Keaira saw similarities between herself and Zya in that they both, at times, were responsible for their own welfare and did not have parental help and support. On an aside, I wondered why Keaira felt the need to make a personal connection between upbringing and professional outcomes as well as character flaws. It occurred to me, however, that Keaira may have viewed commonalities between herself and Zya as a potential condemnation. It seemed to me that she did not want to be linked with Zya, despite sharing what she considered to be similarities within their upbringings.

Keaira linked selling drugs with un-trustworthiness, a characteristic that she deemed essential to her own survival. Keaira relied on the good will of friends to help support her in times of need made possible by her friends' ability to trust her in their homes. According to Keaira, Zya's selfish behaviors that enabled her survival as a drug dealer but not as a valued member of the community arose from her profession and not her upbringing.

Unlike the other participants, Keaira and Antoniese believed that neither Zya nor Vida were trustworthy, based on their shared history of antagonism and jealousy.

Unlike several participants who seemed to take every opportunity to characterize Zya as a miscreant, Keaira and Antoniese blamed both Zya or Vida. Keaira emphasized a scene in the story where Vida alerted Zya that Jules was cheating with another woman and she railed against Zya for believing Vida. “She’s coming at you telling you he’s got some other woman pregnant. Why believe her when she hasn’t done anything to show you that she is honest and trustworthy?” (5.12.2008). In Keaira’s mind, Vida and Zya did not have a friendship but rather a bond based on the fact that they had known each other a long time and had born witness to each other’s hardships. Their relationship, according to Keaira, “ain’t no friendship” (5.12.2008).

Antoniese attempted to understand Zya and Vida’s relationship commenting: “They’ve said how they’ve had a kind of a jealous relationship” (5.14.2008). Although “sister friends”, Zya and Vida consistently demonstrated selfish tendencies towards each other and demonstrated sparse commitment, according to Antoniese. Again, castigating Zya, Tamia stated “You’re not my sister if you put drugs, or money, or a man over me. If I can’t trust you. If I can’t count on you. You not worth my time and I’m not going to call you my friend. That’s a special title for special people” (5.14.2008). Tamia connected the text to her own life, speaking as though she were communicating directly with Zya. She viewed friendship as something “special”, exclusive and accessible only to people that put her as a priority and that she could trust and rely upon.

However, towards the end of our conversations, Tamia's seemingly inflexible regard of Zya shifted slightly and she cited Vida as having a role in creating her negative interactions with Zya. She commented:

They knew each other every since the 7th grade. But Vida put Heavy over Zya like every time. Zya put Jules then Snow and then her job over Vida like every time. Zya put Jules down so quick when he betrayed her but she and Vida betrayed each other like all the time and they never cut each other off. But they still said they were best friends. That confused me. (5.14.2008)

Although she described Zya and Vida as best friends, Tamia eventually admitted they had a relationship of convenience that became evident when their addictions or commitments to men took precedence over their commitments to one another. This shift may have been reflective of the impact of our conversations. Although each participant clearly had her own conceptions of the issues raised, they appeared to be learning from one another.

Tamia was the only participant who linked Zya to the various problems that arose the text and throughout most of our conversations, she seemed especially unyielding towards Zya. What I ultimately gathered, however, was that Tamia perceptions of Zya were shaped by her conceptions of friendship in which someone like Zya would be unworthy of friendship. This was evident in a conversation between several participants about Vida's role in the story.

Antoniese: She was a good friend in the end.

Tamia: Ain't no such thing as a good friend tomorrow and a bad friend today.
(5.14.2008)

Tamia critiqued Vida in the same way that she critiqued Zya earlier and chastised both characters for maintaining what she saw as inadequate conceptions of friendship. Through conversations about friendships, participants demonstrated that they

disapproved of selfishness, which they saw as incompatible with friendship. For them, trustworthiness, reliability, and consistency were hallmarks of friendship. Although one participant felt that all people demonstrated selfish tendencies, most participants felt that hustlers, in particular, were largely incapable of demonstrating friendship because of the beliefs and behaviors demanded by their occupation. Through the discussions about friendship participants, provided insight into their own personal values and outlooks and used the book to help formalize their own conceptions.

Romantic relationship

While they accused Zya of being a bad friend, they did not critique Zya for being in relationships with two men who sold drugs. They seemed to view friendships differently than romantic relationships.

Participants disagreed when they discussed Zya's conceptions of commitment as they considered whether or not she should have left Jules without explanation when she suspected him of cheating on her. Characterizing unconditional commitment as “riding, no matter what”, Antoniese challenged Zya’s level of commitment to Jules when she stated:

She’s supposed to be down for her man. She did the same thing that she said she wouldn’t do. She said that she wouldn’t leave him because she was with him when things were good and now that he’s down and out. She said she wouldn’t leave him. She could have at least gone and talked to him.

(5.12.2008)

Antoniese felt that Zya should have remained with Jules during his incarceration even if he had been unfaithful, suggested that commitment was easily demonstrated in happy spells but much more difficult to demonstrate in “bad times”. She viewed Zya’s decision to leave Jules while he was incarcerated as a blemish on her character. She did not seem to judge Jules in the way she previously judged Zya, as being untrustworthy based on the mentally associated with the occupation of selling drugs.

Unlike Antoniese, however, most of the group stated that Zya’s decision to leave Jules without explanation was appropriate and realistic. Tamia, for instance, believed Zya was within her right to leave the relationship in an abrupt manner because she viewed Jules as being uncommitted. That Jules had not proposed to Zya was evidence of his lack of commitment, according to Monet, who commented, “Zya don’t got diamonds on her hands. She can leave whenever she wants.” The ultimate commitment, according to Monet, was a marriage proposal, regardless of his history unfaithfulness. As Zya was neither engaged nor married to Jules, Monet believed her commitment to Jules should have been limited. Participants believed that commitment should be mutual. For the most part, they viewed Jules as being unworthy of commitment based on his behaviors and were not as critical of how Zya, behaved towards Jules as compared to how she interacted with Snow. Participants considered whether or not Zya was truly committed to Snow. Alexis commented:

She’s always putting him in danger. He got beat up by Heavy because of her. He got put in jail because of her. He was always putting himself in danger to protect her. She only saved him like once. That’s when he got locked up and she got away. He looks out for her and she looks out for herself. (5.19.2008)

Alexis conveyed her belief that commitment should be equitable and Snow sacrificed more for Zya than she sacrificed for him.

While participants largely viewed Jules as undeserving of Zya's commitment, based on his infidelities, several viewed Zya as undeserving of Snow's dedication. Alexis commented, "...seems like Snow is a person you would be loyal to. But since she [Zya] doesn't have that understanding about how she's supposed to respond to people that were there for her, she has a very, very like skewed idea about relationships and these terms" (5.19.2008). Alexis believed Zya pursued relationships in a unhealthy manner based on her lack of exposure to healthy relationships. Alexis contended that Zya did not know what commitment looked like based on her limited yet tainted exposure with Jules. Therefore she did not fully understand how to demonstrate love or commitment.

Although she held Zya accountable, in this instance Alexis seemed to view Zya with sympathy. Referencing Zya's lack of commitment and her inability to appropriately prioritize relationships over money, Alexis commented, "She always has to keep business first" (5.19.2008). Based on Zya's practice of prioritizing her work over her personal relationships, participants seemed to conclude that a relationship with a person who was a drug dealer, as a friend or romantic partner, was not desirable. Tamia critiqued Zya for her consistent decisions to choose money over her relationships, commenting, "You happy to be my friend. But then, when there's a test and it's either our friendship or money. I already know you as a person from knowing Zya through the book that you going to put money over me" (5.14.2008). Ultimately, participants decided if a person's primary focus is attaining money, even

if they are not a drug dealer, that person may not be in a position to be a good friend as demonstrated by Zya.

While they believed commitment was essential for a successful relationship, participants differentiated between relationships that were worthy of commitment and those that were not. While Jules was undeserving, Snow was viewed as someone worthy of commitment based on his dedication to Zya. Unlike their analysis of platonic friendships, participants did not place much emphasis on how hustling shaped Jules' and Snow's behaviors. Instead, they focused on and judged how these characters treated Zya.

Within these conversations, participants provided insight into their beliefs about the dispositions and behaviors needed to build and maintain healthy relationships. While admiring some traits of individual characters, participants critiqued other behaviors and characteristics. Participants disagreed about what friendship looked like, how it was demonstrated, and which individuals were worthy of that type of relationship. They seemed to view platonic relationships differently than romantic relationships. While they appeared to suggest that a drug dealer could not invest in a friendship because of selfishness, they could, however, pursue meaningful romantic relationships. Participants' responses and connections to their own lives created more character and dilemma complexity than I had originally anticipated. I found it interesting that participants separated the profession of selling drugs from the character traits and personalities of those same individuals. I was unclear where this mentality came from, however. I was unsure if participants were more compassionate based on having personal connections with drug dealers or if

they existed within homes and communities that reserved judgment of individuals based on their professions. When asked, participants, for the most part, cited that they had little to no exposure to hustlers. I never fully understood why they separated the act of selling drugs from the personality and characters of individuals.

Further, when discussing Zya's character, participants made a great deal of personal connections, especially when referencing friendship and commitment. They spoke as though they were characters within the story or as if they were Zya. These seemed to be topics of particular interest to the girls, possibly because they had first hand experience with friendship and relationships. However, as it related to relationships, participants seemed to have a less complex view of romantic relationships in comparison to platonic friendships. The girls had stronger expectations for their interactions with their female friends than with their boyfriends. Participants viewed whether or not males were good or bad based simply on how they interacted with Zya. I appreciated that treatment, above money and physical appearance, was important to the girls. I also agreed with their progressive belief that the girlfriend was not supposed to be the self sacrificing and "ride or die" partner. Participants seemed to view romantic relationships as being grounded within equitable practices where both parties made sacrifices and the same forms of commitment.

While I was originally concerned that participants might begin to look up to Zya's example, based on her beauty and ability to get a great deal of attention from males, participants seemed to view Zya as an unreliable and untrustworthy person who was largely unworthy of emulation. I was, however, concerned about their

views of dating men like Snow, who were devoted and committed boyfriends but were involved in illicit activities. Although explored in chapter seven, participants ultimately concluded that sacrifices to live a life like Zya and the risks involved with dating a drug dealer in exchange for money and tangible items “wasn’t worth it.”

The Role of the Hustler’s Girlfriend

As they explored relationships in *Supreme Clientele*, participants continually emphasized the role of the girlfriend of a drug dealer, implying that it was different from being involved with someone who was not a hustler. A street hustler’s girlfriend, according to Monet, was to “look good and ride out” or be committed to the drug dealing boyfriend, regardless of his circumstance. This comment reminded me again of an earlier conversation and suggested a connection between engagement with the story and participants’ prior understandings. Essentially, Monet suggested that regardless of his indiscretions with other women or illegal activities and their consequences, one of the implicit requirements of being the girlfriend of a drug dealer was to accept these challenges in exchange for material goods.

Women who “are used to that fast money” were typically attracted to drug dealers, according to Antoniese and participants referred to women who dated drug dealers for their money as “gold diggers.” A gold digger, according to participants, feigned interest in a male in exchange for money or material possessions. Engaging with the text by relying on their own experience, Tamia stated, “they gold digging. If that’s what they like, they can get themselves another one [hustler]. If you need money, that’s what you can do to get it” (5.7.2008). Although she dated dealers, Zya was not viewed as a gold digger by the participants because she formed emotional

attachments to Jules and Snow. Vida, Zya's best friend, on the other hand, was judged by participants to be a gold digger as she remained with her boyfriend, Heavy, according to participants, because he payed for her lifestyle which included getting her hair fixed and nails manicured regularly and purchasing expensive clothing.

Alexis seemed to view the relationship differently than other participants in that she believed that the typical relationship between a drug dealer and his girlfriend was personified through Zya and Jules. "They never really had much of a real relationship. They just had sex and sold drugs and brought stuff" (5.19.2008). A relationship between a gold digger and a drug dealer was not "real" according to Alexis. "He gets a pretty girl who he can have sex with and she gets money and things" (5.7.2008). Love typically had little to do with being the girlfriend of a drug dealer, according to participants. Tamia commented:

You know he's getting money and not giving it to you. He just buys you some stuff. She blinded [deluded] herself with the girls. You got to think that there's a lot of girls like her that's looking for a hustler like that. And then you got a good hustler, you can't think that you're going to be the only one. She was blinding herself. (5.7.2008).

Sharing your man with a number of girls was to be expected when you are involved with a drug dealer, according to the participants.

While Monet and Antoniese reprimanded Zya for her lack of devotion to Jules once he was incarcerated, Monet, along with most of the other participants, critiqued Zya for not being more independent while in a relationship with Jules, especially considering his poor treatment of their relationship. This seemed to contradict

Monet's earlier statement that drug dealer's girlfriend should "ride out" and remain devoted. However, what I came to understand from Monet was that she believed that hustler's girlfriends should be both blind and conscientious at the same time, a concept that Tamia touched upon in a different conversation. Monet believed women who dated drug dealers' should behave as though they were blind to his illicit dealings. Yet as shrewd? women, they should be aware of their boyfriends' illegal activities and not be overly reliant on their boyfriend, knowing that he could be arrested, hurt, or even killed at any point. It was acceptable for a woman to date a man whose profession preyed upon the weaknesses and dependencies of drug users yet it was unacceptable, to Monet, for her to be weak and dependent in a relationship man. As such, Monet's critiqued Zya as being "stupid" and blinded by love.

Participants critiqued how Jules was able to manipulate Zya in the book. According to Monet, this was a mistake and that the girlfriend of a drug dealer was only supposed to feign metaphorical blindness and pretend as though they were susceptible able to be manipulated. Most of the participants, like Monet, agreed with the importance of remaining aware. "He had this mental power over her" (5.14.2008), according to Keaira and in her blindness, Zya's followed Jules' directions to sell drugs at the expense of her own welfare. "Only a total idiot would be running drugs and stuff and giving all that money to Jules" (5.14.2008), remarked who considered Zya to be foolish to have involved herself in Jules' drug running, especially considering that she was not treated as a partner and given money in exchange for her sacrifices.

Unlike other participants, Alexis attempted to sympathize with Zya's naïveté and dependence on Jules. When attempting to understand Zya's attraction to Jules, Alexis commented, "Basically, that's all she knows, to me. She's been with him since she was like 16. She was helping him out with his drugs and stuff. But she got herself into it" (5.7.2008). Although she held Zya accountable for selling drugs, Alexis was the only participant who rationalized Zya's dependence upon Jules, pointing out that Zya had limited exposure to other boyfriends and means of making money. Alexis suggested that Zya was helping Jules based on her love for him. Other participants felt that Zya had defied unspoken rules of being the girlfriend of a hustler when she became too involved with him emotionally and with his business. Further, participants provided insight into what they knew and/or believed about being the girlfriend of a hustler. They talked about Zya as if she were a real person, often putting themselves in Zya's place, and critiqued her behaviors that did not align with their own perspectives. Participants demonstrated critical literacy as they challenged whether or not her predicament was accurate and realistic and how they would have responded in both similar and different ways.

Participants' revealed frustration that extended beyond Zya's naïveté as they confronted the contradiction between their own beliefs about women being self-reliant and Zya's dependence on Jules and Snow. After Jules was arrested, Zya's dependence upon him prevented her from understanding her own abilities and intelligence. Alexis commented:

He [Jules] knew she needed him to be with her. Jules knew what he was doing. He knew that she need me with her because I know how she is. She's

not independent. She's been with me all these years so she's not going to know how to do anything by herself. She says on the next page, I'm going to need him. I can't raise the baby by myself. (5.12.2008).

In this response, Alexis interacted with characters as though they were real as she suggested that Jules intentionally created a relationship in which Zya was dependent upon him. By this, characters seemingly transformed from fictional to real as Alexis interacted with the text. Zya did not have the maturity or experiences to understand the impact of this dependence, according to participants and she was limited by her dependence on Jules, according to Alexis. Tamia also critiqued Zya's naiveté when she commented, "even when she was in it with Jules, she was just a hustler's girlfriend. So she only experienced as much as he allowed her to" (5.12.2008). As with previous themes, participants largely believed Zya's dependence was hinged on her decision to rely solely on Jules. Thus, , according to most participants, Zya was at fault and not Jules which suggested that participants did not view Zya as a victim of her circumstances.

Interestingly, despite their critiques of Zya's dependence on Jules they saw this as realistic. Making connections between the text and her own experience, Jonelle commented that many females in their school actually referred to their boyfriends as "daddy" as a means of signifying their dependence upon and his dominant role within the relationship. According to Tamia, this was symbolic of power and influence that Jules had over Zya, as she lovingly referred to him as "daddy." According to participants, this was somewhat typical for girls who dated hustlers. Participants pointed out that Jules did not refer to Zya as "ma" which

indicated to them that he did not regard Zya as figure upon whom he depended in the same way. While students highlighted the lack of equity between Zya and Snow, they implicitly made the same about the relationship between Zya and Jules. They viewed Zya as making more of an investment than Jules in their relationship.

Through these conversations, participants provided insights into their exposure to drug culture or knowledge about drug culture as well as their relationships. Further, participants demonstrated that their experiences were complimented by the attributes of some of the characters within the story which suggested that participants engaged with the text based on commonalities between their lives and aspects within the text.

Participants' comments revealed that they held the female characters accountable for their affiliations and decisions, rarely viewing them as sympathetic or as victims but rather as naïve or poor decision makers. This was significant in that it demonstrated that participants were very critical of the behaviors of the female characters and did not admire them, contrary to what many adults assume about the motivation of the readership of urban fiction. I especially found conversations about having a relationship with a person who sold drugs to be interesting. There seemed to be somewhat of a contradiction in the outlooks of participants. On one hand, participants cited Zya as being untrustworthy and a poor choice for a friend, based in part on the mentality that she possessed as a result of her profession as a drug dealer. Concomitantly, participants did not chastise Zya's decision to pursue romantic relationships with men who sold drugs.

With that said, I was overwhelmed in a number of ways after having several conversations with participants through which I began to understand their perspectives on interacting with individuals who sold drugs in both platonic and romantic relationships. Urban fiction presented the opportunity for me, as an adult, to engage students in issues that impacted them in various ways. While none attested to dating a man who sold drugs, it was apparent to me that the temptation was real and accessible within their lives. Yet, participants, for the most part, demonstrated a critical stance towards the prospect of dating a drug dealer. This came without my interrogation or mentorship. Participants were critical of those models of behavior that did not reflect with their experience. While many adults critique urban fiction, they fail to see that this genre may not be corrupting adolescents but providing an opportunity for them to analyze and voice their thoughts about issues that are of pressing concern in meaningful and constructive ways. I hoped that participants would question and discuss why a girl would be willing to risk their personal safety to involve themselves with a drug dealer. After speaking with participants about relationships, however, I began to understand and appreciate the potential power of these texts in motivating conversation around the issues, such as those risks involved with dating a drug dealer, that were negatively impacting growing numbers of African American female adolescents.

Nasty Girls

Many adults assume that young people are engaging with the urban fiction because they want to see representations of sex. While Kaplan and Cole (2003) find that adolescent girls read leisurely as a means of exploring curiosities about sex,

participants in this study differed with regards to their interests in reading urban fiction to access information about sex or “nasty stuff”. The pre and post interviews, in particular, provided insight into the varied reasons that these adolescent African American girls engaged with urban fiction. Although participants rarely considered the appeal of sexual references within urban fiction texts within our literature circles, they indirectly emphasized the sexual references as an appeal within post interviews. They did so, often, however, to critique teacher’s and adults negative responses to the genre.

Tamia believed adults took issue with urban fiction texts based on the “nasty stuff in the books” or sexual content. While some students read to learn about sex, others stated disinterest in the graphic descriptions provided. In our discussions conversations about sex rarely arose. This could be, in part, due to the participants’ comfort level in vocalizing their curiosities about sex with an adult or their reluctance to discuss sex at all. In the post interviews, questioned them about the lack of conversation about sex.

Several participants spoke of their ability to access information about sex from a number of different sources other than urban fiction. Alexis learned about sex “from my friends and from the media”. Tamia stated, “I don’t need to read to learn about sex. One of my best friends is pregnant in case you didn’t notice. I can talk to her or some of my other friends.” In a separate interview, Keaira stated, “Have you turned on the tv lately? Sex and stuff is everywhere. Some girls might like that stuff but they can learn about sex from a bunch of different places. Yes, it’s in the books

but it's a like a bunch of places" (5.28.2008). Keaira cited that the erotic content in urban fiction was accessible through a variety of outlets.

Tamia, however, presented a unique argument for why adolescents might read as a means of exploring the sexual content when she stated:

I really think that video games are bad. But, its boys inside playing video games instead of outside on the street doing what's in the video games, which they could do. But, if they're inside playing it, then they not outside.

Watching music video and stuff like that, everybody say that's bad. But then at the same time, watching it and reading it is the less time you spend actually doing it. (6.9.2008)

For Tamia, urban fiction was a distraction from engaging in "nasty stuff" in "real" life. This suggested that Tamia read urban fiction as an escape. She was able to vicariously live through the experiences of the characters, including sexual experiences, instead of engaging in those behaviors herself. Again, participants seemed to read urban fiction, in part, in order to vicariously experience the adventures of the protagonist.

Unlike Keaira and Alexis, Antoniese, Jonelle and Monet acknowledged that they read to learn about sex. Each of the three, however, held different motivations for wanting to learn from the text. Antoniese read out of curiosity and felt actually learned from the interactions of the characters. Despite her many flaws, Zya was intimate with only two other characters in the text within the span of 10 or so years. She loved both men. Vida, on the other hand, was very promiscuous, as a result of her desire to feed her drug habit as well as her position as a gold digger, and she

ultimately contracts HIV. Antoniese asked, “Who wants to be like Vida? What did all of that get her?” (5.19.2008). This comment revealed to me that participants connected having few sexual partners, like Zya with remaining healthy, desired and successful and connected promiscuity to risking ones healthy, desirability, and success. Some adults fear exposure to the explicit content because they assume adolescent readers to will mimic the irresponsible behaviors of characters. To the contrary, Antoniese suggested that urban fiction led her to conclude that she did not want to emulate the promiscuity and self-destructive behaviors of Vida so she learned from the text in positive ways.

Jonelle acknowledged that she was uncomfortable asking questions about sex to adults when she stated, “I probably don’t think we should talk about that [sex] with other adults because like a lot of adults don’t want young children having sex” (6.4.2008). She read, in part, to learn about questions she had about intercourse. Monet felt that sex should not be a taboo topic and read openly to explore her curiosity. She explained that a lack of conversation around the topic resulted in adolescents “getting in trouble”. Despite her exploration and comfort with the topic, Monet was, consequently, pregnant or as some would say, “in trouble”. She stated that, “At school, they try to hide those things. We want to talk to them about the stuff that we’re seeing. But they’re like, ‘oh no. You shouldn’t be’. They don’t want us reading urban fiction in school” (4.29.2008). Monet read urban fiction as a way of exploring the taboo topic of sex. She, in fact, admired “the way she [Zhane, her favorite author] makes sex seem. Like, I just never knew it could be like so adventurous. Like, I never knew that until she after she wrote about it” (4.29.2008).

Monet viewed sex as an act of empowerment for females. There seemed to be a contradiction in her perspective, however. Although she viewed sex as empowering, she viewed pregnancy as a burden, making comments like, “I don’t know who’s going to take care of this baby. My mother better make some more time in her schedule. I’ve got things to do” (5.14.2008). It seemed that Monet’s sources for learning about sex neglected to explore the potential consequences or responsibilities. Within *Supreme Clientele*, for instance, Zya ultimately gave birth to Snow’s child. Her relationship with her child was not explored. Hence, readers like Monet may not have considered the ramifications of the lessons she was learning from the text because those lessons were not explicitly addressed.

While these participants did not deny reading to learn about sex, they spoke about having access to a number of outlets to learn about sex. A desire to gain exposure about or be entertained by the sexual scenes within urban fiction was not, for most, what they suggested as motivating their engagement.

Judgments

Participants spoke about feeling judged based on teachers’ assumptions that they read urban fiction to gain exposure to sex. Sex was viewed as “nasty”, hence participants felt as if they were judged as nasty when caught reading the texts. Engagement with urban fiction, hence, was connected with students self perceptions as being judged. Instead of being viewed as readers, participants felt they were seen as rebels and miscreants for reading urban fiction. Unlike the girls in Hartman’s (2001) and Finder’s studies (1997), participants in this project did not hide their personal reading interests while at school. Instead, they seized opportunities,

especially during “free time” within classes, to openly read urban fiction and they felt pressure from teachers to either hide or discontinue the practice of engaging with the genre. Antoniese commented,

They judging a book before they actually read it. They don't know if something has sex or if people just went into a room and talked. They don't know how vague it is or not. They just judge it by the way it looks. That's the book I brought in Ms. X's class, *Caramel Flavor*. Ms. X said uhhh because the woman and the man were like this [hugging] on each other [on the cover]. They could have been in love. They could have been married....(6.4.2008)

Antoniese felt that teachers make negative assumptions about urban fiction texts based on the covers and titles. Like Antoniese, other participants cited that their teachers' often expressed disapproval in a variety of ways which included grunting telling students to put texts away, saying “don't read those in my class.”

While participants said that they were drawn to the urban fiction tales for a number of reasons, they felt, overall, that teachers often focused on the more controversial aspects of the texts, primarily the sexual descriptions. Further, Jonelle talked about being interested in exploring conversations about sexuality but was dissuaded by teachers' responses and their lack of interest in and disapproval of the genre. Jonelle commented,

I feel as though it could be more to it [reading urban fiction] than just wanting to read about sex and that's what a lot of people just jump to the point and be like you just want to read about sex. Man, you're a freak...So, it's like, if

they could just listen to what we got to say and just listen to that this book really teaches us life lessons. It teaches us to want to be strong, independent, self motivated, self confident like. If it teaches us more than drugs and what we already know... Because, adults really want children to really learn about themselves and become their own person and become a better person. And from reading books where you can be betrayed, it makes you want to like... watch out for yourself ...and have a better mindset for yourself so you can do greater things. (6.4.2008)

Jonelle felt that many of her teachers, as well as other adults, had negative perceptions of urban fiction texts that did not account for their significance to adolescent readers. Jonelle's reasons for reading and the benefits she saw in urban fiction were neither known nor acknowledged by her teachers.

According to participants, teachers made gestures and comments that made participants feel as though they were doing something wrong in reading urban fiction. Tamia stated, "But like, a lot of teachers I know shake their heads and stuff. They don't really like it" (6.9.2008). According to Alexis, one of her teacher's embarrassed her in front of her entire class when she instructed Alexis to put her urban fiction book away and find "more constructive books" to read. This comment was made during "free time" in her class when students had the choice of either reading a book of their choice or writing in a journal. Alexis said that her teachers often conveyed the belief that the urban fiction texts were not valuable.

Tamia found that her teachers seemed relatively unconcerned about the drug and violent references and tended to critique the sexual aspects of urban fiction.

Tamia commented:

They don't never say nothing about the drugs. But when Ms. X says it's a nasty book because she sees something on the cover, they just refer to nasty as the sexual stuff and it's like they basically just shake their heads at the sexual stuff. When it be talking about drugs and stuff, I don't really hear that many old people complaining about the fact that you know they was from the 70's and they used to get blazed [high] all the time. They just be talking about the sex like, yeah. That's all I really hear them complain about. (5.9.2008)

Tamia explained how teachers and other adults, in her experience, referred to urban fiction as "nasty," focusing on the sexual descriptions and rarely referencing illicit activities featured within the texts like selling dealing and homicide.

Despite receiving negative and potentially embarrassing feedback from teachers, students still read urban fiction openly when allowed. Monet spoke about her open rebellion with regards to reading urban fiction during free time in class.

I have told teachers not to touch my book. We barely get to read and then they'll try to take our books from us. When we don't do nothing [in class] they'll try to take the books. They don't like us to read these books. It's these books and they can't tell me what to read. (4.29.2008)

Here, Monet demonstrates a fierce desire to read. She pointed out that teachers did not appropriate enough reading time for students. Reading, specifically urban fiction,

for Monet signified a form of ownership that she personalized. She openly defied teachers who attempted to regulate her ownership of her reading habits.

In several sessions and in their individual interviews, several participants challenged teachers' negative perceptions about urban fiction texts, especially as it related to sex. For instance, Keaira commented,

Like, I don't see how people, adults, they get offended by the sex part. But, they're doing it. So, that kind of confuses me. It's being hypocritical because you may not want me to be introduced to it but I already am. You know that.

(6.4.2008)

Keaira felt that denying her exposure, through urban fiction, to issues that were of interest to her, especially pertaining to sex, was futile as she could gain exposure in other ways. She also critiqued those adults opposed to urban fiction, based on its illicit content, as being hypocritical and refusing to pass along knowledge about a topic with which they were familiar. At the age of fifteen, Keaira acknowledged that she had already been exposed to a variety of taboo topics, including sex. Therefore, teachers' attempts to quell her curiosity were futile. Further, she felt that conversations about such topics may have been useful to her.

Several participants questioned why their teachers were so adverse to urban fiction when they identified both content and themes as sharing similarities to in-school readings. Tamia stated:

He [her English teacher] wants to discuss Oedipus and Macbeth. You know, they was nasty too. I'm just saying. If they want to call it [urban fiction] nasty, real recognizes real. They was nasty, having sex with their wives,

daughters, and sisters and stuff like that, and marrying their mothers. You know that's some funky stuff. (6.9.2008)

Tamia found connections between the “nasty” behaviors found within urban fiction and the school-sanctioned texts in the curriculum. She understood that sex, when featured within urban fiction, was viewed differently than when it was featured in more traditional forms of text that were read in class. Understanding this connection, Tamia challenged teachers’ negative conceptions of urban fiction.

Participants talked about castigation, embarrassment, and negative judgments from teachers when they read urban fiction books publicly and openly in class. Part of participants’ motivations to read urban fiction was wanting to explore more mature content. This seemed to contradict teachers’ expectations about appropriate interests and behaviors for adolescent girls. Urban fiction books were viewed as too mature for them. However, participants wanted to be viewed as mature. The conflict likely extended beyond urban fiction texts and reflected the broader issue of teachers seeking protecting the childhoods and desired innocence of student. Participants found teachers’ behaviors to be oppressive in many respects. They were seeking out a venue to explore their interests and rather than being provided with that space, teachers seemed to chastise and reprimand students for their interests.

The conflict, between adults and adolescent readers, may also be the result of adultism, a discrimination against the interests and behaviors of youth. Adultism, according to Margaret Pevec (2007), involves adults diminishing “a sense of joy and excitement about the world” (p 1) for adolescents and imposing, instead, their feelings of fear, based on their own experiences. Adults may have feared that

students would mimic the negative behaviors of characters in urban fiction texts. They were devaluing the interests of the adolescent readers. They were also neglecting to consider the normality of adolescent youths' curiosity about taboo issues like sex.

In general, most participants demonstrated minimal interest in exploring sex in our discussions. For the most part, they spoke about sex only if asked. This could have been, in part, based on their discomfort with the topic and their relationship with me, as they had not known me long and may not have felt comfortable speaking about this topic. Or their lack of use of the text to explore sex within our conversations could have been based on their lack of experience with sex. However, participants demonstrated a desire to have a forum in which to discuss issues raised in urban fiction that were often considered taboo and overlooked by teachers and other adults.

I was saddened to hear participants' accounts about feeling judged by teachers. I wondered how those judgments influenced the ways in which girls saw themselves (reflective journal, 6.9.2008). These judgments could have had an effect on how girls viewed themselves both as readers and as young people who were attempting to understand and define themselves. Participants seemed frustrated by these judgments. This led me to begin to consider that girls may have read, in part, to rebel against those judgments. As such, I wondered if part of the appeal of urban fiction involved the rebellious nature of the texts. When questions about this line of reasoning, participants cited that they would like to read these books and have similar types of discussions, such as those within our literature circles, with their teachers and

parents. This suggested that my line of reasoning that engagement was motivated due to rebellion, was not applicable.

Discussion

Conversations with participants demonstrated that they engage with urban fiction texts by connecting the stories to their own lives and, in some cases, they actually enter the story as if they were characters. Through this engagement, participants demonstrated admiration for some of the female characters and yet maintained a critical stance with regards to the protagonist. While reading, participants critiqued those behaviors that conflicted with their beliefs and experiences. Participants revealed that they were interacting with the text in very complex ways. While they seemed to connect with the protagonist as beautiful and well kept, they critiqued her selfishness, challenged her interactions with other characters, and ultimately deemed her unworthy of friendship and trust. Further, participants revealed that they did not view Zya as a victim of her circumstance but as a willing a person who made conscientious and informed decisions which negatively impacted her reality. Finally, although sex may be an appeal of the genre, participants found other aspects of the texts, like aspects of the story related to relationships and representation of women to be captivating.

CHAPTER 7: LEARNING MATTERS

"I've heard about stuff like this but it must be true. I don't personally know somebody like Zya, but she must be real. Why could they write about her if she wasn't like somebody they knew?" (Jonelle).

This chapter emphasizes how adolescent African American girls used urban fiction to learn lessons that they deemed to be applicable to their lives and how they processed images within the text. As such, responses within this chapter continue help to address the questions a) *What elements of texts do adolescent African American girls select and discuss and what is their significance?*, b) *What are the interpretations of adolescent African American females of urban fiction texts?*, c) *How, if at all, do participants relate the texts to their own lives?* and d) *How, if at all, do conversations about urban fiction texts with peers and an adult facilitator influence how participants make meaning of the texts?*

Based on the perceived authenticity, participants learned lessons that they considered applicable to their lives. Participants spoke in contradictory terms about how they viewed stereotypes associated with living in disenfranchised communities as they explored their perceptions of the text as an authentic rendering of "life in the hood". They consistently referenced how their engagement with urban fiction was contingent upon the believability and authenticity of portrayals within the texts. Hence, they engaged with and learned from the text when they believed the text reflected real life. What they learned and how they processed those lessons varied, however, based on how the presentation of characters and the storyline aligned or did not align with their own beliefs and experiences. Throughout our conversations participants highlighted conflicts between their beliefs about and experiences with life

in the hood and those portrayed in the *Supreme Clientele*. Further, participants suggested that the text exposed them to lifestyles that served as deterrents to particular behaviors. As students learned about ways of behaving, their thoughts provided insights into both their thoughts about incidences in the text and their own realities.

Gully: The Perceived Authenticity of Urban Fiction

In this section, I explore how participants reported to engaging with the text based on their perception that the story was realistic and based on someone's life. Students demonstrated a conflict with how to regard the text. Authenticity, they reported, was an important factor in their motivation to engage with texts. While *Supreme Clientele* was not "the perfect story about somebody's perfect life", as cited by Jonelle, it was perceived by students to be representative of someone's genuine experience. "Someone" referred to individuals who live in modern day ghettos and surrounding neighborhoods. The text, in part, was appealing to participants because they divulged "real" and often untold experiences; participants attested to seeking out texts where they could learn from someone's "real" life. Based on what they perceived as an insider perspective provided by the book about life in the hood, participants stated that *Supreme Clientele* did more than simply entertain the reader and that its authenticity provided insight about life's travails, friendship, and the experiences of a drug dealer.

Referencing its authenticity, Jonelle stated, "This is like real. I never knew before I read stories like this that people could write this real and be this up front about life. When I read my first urban fiction novel, I was just thinking, that's gully"

(4.28.2008). This comment suggested that urban fiction texts were somehow more authentic, genuine and applicable to her reality than other texts she had read.

Although Jonelle lived in a neighborhood that she described as being similar to the depressed Harlem community presented in the novel, she had relatively little direct exposure to illicit activities. She viewed *Supreme Clientele* as an honest portrayal of what she believed to be the nature of drug culture and used “gully” to describe how harsh yet real the urban fiction seemed.

I was saddened and frustrated by Jonelle's comment and perspective because I hoped that, while engaging with the text, students would challenge the representations of African American life by also drawing on their experiences (reflective journal, 4.28.2008). I focused especially on this issue because I am often flustered by the prevalence of negative imagery of African American life and how it impacts the behaviors of adolescent African American children. Jonelle assumed it accurately depicted the lives of African Americans living in inner-city communities. The small details in the story, like the presentation of a female being a gold digger or the existence of drug dealers, validated her experiences, consequently she viewed the story as more believable. Many of the participants felt like Jonelle. Although the presentation of life in the hood in the book contrasted, in some ways, with their own knowledge, beliefs, and experiences, they assumed the portrayals must have been true because it was presented through within *Supreme Clientele*.

This was a contradiction that I struggled to understand throughout our discussions. Although the participants primarily hailed from inner city areas, some in the process of gentrification and others located in close proximity to public projects,

they did not see events in the story as authentically reflecting their lives or communities. Antoniese stated, “I can believe this happens in DC this way a little bit. But I’m convinced even more that it happens this way in NY” (5.7.2008). While they did not see themselves as being able to directly relate to the characters, storyline, or setting, participants enjoyed reading about them and connecting with the larger themes that generally applicable to the human experience, such as friendship and commitment. Alexis stated,

I know there’s a lot of bad stuff going on in Harlem but I don’t, I can’t really say where she’s coming from. I’m not from NJ, so I can’t really say I know where Snow’s coming from. But, I try to picture the characters. (5.7.2008)

This comment spoke to Alexis’ limitations in relating to the events within the story. Four of the participants cited living in or near areas like those described *Supreme Clientele*. Yet only one of the participants thought the storyline could have taken place DC. Interestingly, they considered the stereotypic representations of “life in the hood” as being authentic and realistic and, yet, different from their own inner-city neighborhoods. This suggested internal conflict for participants as they tried to reconcile their personal experiences of life in the hood with popularized portrayals.

Jonelle, Alexis struggled to relate to certain aspects of the text. She commented, “I can’t really relate to everything that’s going on in this book ... I try to make their example in the book and then try to see what she’s doing or relate to how her life is or whatever” (5.28.2008). Again, this comment demonstrated her struggle over whether or not to view the text as an authentic representation of African American life. She could not relate to the text and had to rely upon her imagination

and extrapolate from limited exposure to situations from exposure to the media and the experiences of friends to make the text seem real to her.

Participants' beliefs about the authenticity of urban fiction texts were largely shaped by portrayals of African American in the media. It was not until the end of our literature circle discussions that students began to challenge these representations of life in the hood. Although none had visited Harlem, based on the images presented on television, participants assumed that Harlem was accurately portrayed within the text. Jonelle commented, "She [Zya] lives in a drug environment. Like that's all there is to it. That's the only thing they really can survive off" (5.12.2008). Jonelle stereotyped life in the ghetto but neglected to consider how this profoundly differed from her own existence within a ghetto. I had hoped that participants would have taken the stance, especially based on their experiences within their communities, that stories like those popularized within urban fiction capitalize on stereotypic and popularized images of African American life. I wanted participants to understand, on their own, that African American life was largely not enveloped in illicit interactions and depravity, as presented within the story.

Upon reflection, however, I realized that participants distanced themselves from the setting and storyline presented in *Supreme Clientele*. They did not see the interactions or lifestyles of the characters as being favorable or constructive. While they viewed the text as authentic, for the most part, participants did not feel it was representative of their own experiences of life in the hood. They may have sought to validate the text because they were eager to learn from the mature content and

storylines. They suggested that they could only take lessons from a story that applied to their lives if they perceived the story as real or authentic.

Although, indirectly, participants showed that “ghetto” has many different meanings and representations. For them, ghetto or “hood” were not terms that they considered to be reflective of their neighborhoods. Yet, to an outsider like me, the terms seemed quite applicable. Although living in disenfranchised neighborhoods, participants’ experiences did not appear involve drugs.

Participants further consistently illuminated the authors’ attention to details to justify the authenticity of the text. For example, Alexis felt this made the story more realistic, commenting,

They [the authors] tried to make that [interaction] more realistic too.

Remember like how the police officer didn’t have no warrant. But, that’s his job is to see that King does something that he’s not supposed to do. So, they’re trying to make that more realistic too. Every time he went back, he was like, I don’t really have a warrant so I can’t go charging into that house.

If they find out the warrant is not real. (5.5.2008)

Like Jonelle, Alexis did not have first hand exposure to individuals who sold drugs such as those presented within *Supreme Clientele*. Relying on media portrayals and small details that aligned with her conception of life in ghettos, Alexis also assumed the text was accurately reflected the lives of African Americans living in the ghetto. Hearing her father, who was a police officer, recount some of his adventures and experiences while on duty, Alexis prided herself in her awareness of the legal issues in law enforcement. This is reflected in the comment above in which Alexis

referenced how Wade was aware that following King without a warrant was illegal. Again, the small details of the text which Alexis recognized as being true further reified the text as being true.

Keaira also commended the author's inclusion of accurate yet small details about the law which, in her mind, led to a more believable storyline.

It's [urban fiction is] about telling stories that aren't usually told. You could see people on the corner, you could see people on the block, on the trap [area where drugs are sold], but how in depth, how close do you really get to seeing what goes on behind the scene? Who's connected to a connect who's connected to a connect. (5.28.2008)

Keaira felt that the media rarely provided depth about individuals engaged in illicit activities. She felt that urban fiction did this and provided context for understanding the experiences and motivations of individuals who became involved with drugs. She also felt that urban fiction unveiled stories that ran contrary to those publicized images of African Americans within the media in that characters were portrayed as more than their professions and illegal activities; they were humanized.

Most of the participants believed that they were provided with an insider's view of rap and drug culture. Tamia spoke to this when she commented:

I think that it's easy for people to be pessimistic and be like it's because of the media and this and that. And like, that is true, but when you look at it like rap videos and stuff. Most of them is like girls just shaking their butts. It's really no moral behind them. But when you look at an urban fiction book, you know, it'd take you through the dancer or rappers lifestyle. You can get an

understanding. Because when you turn on the tv, you just see girls just shaking their butts and stuff. You just think, the first thing you think of is uh she's a hoe or she's a video hoe or whatever. But when you read the book and it starts out June 9, she was born, then you get a sense of who she is and why she makes certain choices and stuff like that. (5.12.2008)

Tamia felt personal connections with the characters. Although she cited that she could not personally relate to the experiences of the characters, it seemed that she connected to larger universal themes such as being judged by others who are unfamiliar with you. Further, she felt as though the stories were presented in ways that were compelling and interesting to read about. Alexis appeared to embrace stereotypic presentations of ghetto life when she commented, "Zya lives a hood lifestyle because that is what she knows and what she has seen. Not only is she a part of her direct environment, which is Harlem, but the very principles or morals or lack thereof that governs her community" (5.12.2008) Alexis believed Zya's story was important to understand because it uncovered and validated experiences found within "hood life". Alexis justified Zya's perceptions and actions based on what she believed about ghetto life, which was undoubtedly shaped by media portrayal. Although the representations of life in the hood in *Supreme Clientele* did not reflect their own realities, participants tended to accept the stereotypic representations of life in the hood as reflecting reality and rarely challenged them.

Antoniese considered the text to be appealing as it taught her life lessons . Antoniese engaged with themes in the book that were largely disconnected from the drug life but were applicable to her life in other ways. She commented:

... this book really teaches us life lessons. It teaches us to want to be strong, independent, self motivated, self confident like. If it teaches us more than drugs and what we already know, then, it would probably be more interested in getting other people to read it. Because, adults really want children to really learn about themselves and become their own person and become a better person. And from reading books where you can be betrayed...It just makes you want to watch out for yourself and ... have a better mindset for yourself so you can do greater things. You don't want to end up like Zya.
(6.2.2008)

What she perceived as the authenticity of the writing motivated Antoniese to look beyond those aspects to which she had difficulty related and focused instead on those she saw as applicable to and prevalent within her life. She learned about the negative side of friendship and betrayal and how to be self concerned. Thus, participants did not necessarily read urban fiction to learn about the more sensational aspects of the text. Although *Supreme Clientele* featured issues related to drugs and murder, Antoniese suggested that she engaged most deeply with the parts of the text the emphasized relationships and lessons about life. She, like Jonelle and Alexis, valued the lessons from the text, based on her conception that it was based on realistic depictions of life impoverished and predominantly African American urban communities.

Tamia, originally, was my only participant who challenged the authenticity of *Supreme Clientele*'s representation of life as a drug dealer. She commented,

I don't think it's too realistic. I mean, the hustling. Yeah, people in my family make a whole rack of money and stuff like that. I think it was just like when they [Zya and Snow] had lawyers to cover up all their money. They started buying stuff so it won't look like they have drug money. I was just thinking like, where did you get the money to buy this stuff from? You don't have no loans or nothing. Can't they trace that? I don't really think that this is too realistic. But I think how like some Lifetime movies be based on a true story and they just take it and run. I think that's what this was. (5.14.2008)

Not only did Tamia reveal that she shared personal connections with the text, but she questioned the authenticity of the reading. Based on her personal experiences, Tamia saw characters within *Supreme Clientele* as exaggerations of "real" drug dealers that she knew. In a separate conversation, Tamia stated that her friends and family involved in "the game" did not make nearly as much money as Zya. It is important to note that Tamia contradicted an earlier statement where she claimed that she had no formal ties to individuals who were hustlers. Within the following statement, she contradicts the earlier declaration as she references her personal exposure to cite her thoughts about how realistic she deemed the storyline. Despite seeing it as exaggerated, Tamia deemed *Supreme Clientele* as a credible story that illuminated the controversial and illicit adventures of characters in ways that motivated the reader to learn from the mistakes of the protagonists. She said,

I know people who are kind of like Zya but not Zya. It may not be like real-real, like 100% real. But, it's close enough so I know that I don't want to like

end up like Vida and Zya and Anari and them. That's not a real life.

(5.14.2008)

Although she did not see it as "100% real", for Tamia, the text imitated reality in ways that still rendered relatively believable characters and because she believed in the characters, Tamia was motivated to learn from their experiences. Tamia seemed draw lessons from the female rather than the male characters and she was more critical of those characters that were African American and female like herself.

Towards the end of our discussions, participants began to critique the images in urban fiction and in the media at large. Alexis cited how the media emphasized tales of African Americans living in impoverished areas in major cities across the U.S.; tales that reinforced stereotypes about this group as selling drugs, being violent, and lacking traditional families and support.

Tamia further challenged these images when she considered the motives of those who produced them. stating,

I don't know a lot of people, especially rappers that talk about not leaving the hood and staying loyal to it. That's their reality because we're told hood life is the life that you need to get out of. So you find the life that we're told you're supposed to have. (5.14.2008)

In this comment Tamia juxtaposed sensational messages found within various forms of media, especially music, and the realities of living in the hood. In rap music, she critiqued, the message is sent that living in the hood is a responsibility, of sorts. Yet, according to Tamia, the individuals with power and money who produced and uplifted these images of living and thriving did not actually live in the hood or chose

to leave once they had the opportunity. Tamia continued, “50 [a famous rapper] don’t live in the hood. TI [a famous rapper] don’t live in the hood. But they’ll shoot a video in the hood. They’ll talk about doing all kinds of stuff in the hood but they go home to the county” (5.14.2008). While some of the stories portrayed in Rap and Hip Hop lyrics and popularized media images were real, according to Tamia, they sent an implicit message that connected hood life with a bad life. She believed that while architects of these messages were comfortable uplifting particular lifestyles publicly, privately, they avoided these lifestyles, choosing to live outside of the hood. To Tamia, the underlying message was that life in the hood was not ideal. Such statements demonstrated how some participants reasoned with the images presented within the text. Contrary to widespread assumptions about how adolescents process the images within urban fiction texts, some participants understood that the derogatory images were manipulated, in part, to serve the interests of those who could profit from those images.

Still, participants like Alexis, believed *Supreme Clientele* provided an insider’s view about how to achieve the American Dream from the perspective of disenfranchised African Americans who lived in the hood as opposed to promoting a stereotypic representation of African American life. In fact, she expressed surprise that more adults did not embrace urban fiction like they accepted and endorsed various television programs which promoted similar images. Alexis commented:

People are not going to want to hear about Black people really doing good. Like, say if they did something like the whole SEED school is doing real good. They are not going to put us in the news and be like, ‘oh this school is

wonderful'. They're going to put Beluh, Anacostia. Somebody just got shot walking home. That's what is going to catch your eye. Even if you're not watching, your ears catch it. Two teenage boys just caught in a gun fight. That's what they're supposed to be doing. So, we're not really going to turn our heads because that's what we expect them to be doing. Now, if you hear 2 African American teens just got straight A's, no one really cares because it's not that special or dramatic. (6.2.2008)

Alexis commented on the popularity of negative images of African Americans as she described "eye catching" events and behaviors which often grace the forefront of media outlets. Images found within *Supreme Clientele* emphasized the negatives stories often associated with African American life like those mentioned by Alexis. Most of the participants did not view their experiences as "dramatic" or "that special" and they the stories in urban fiction texts were more interesting, according to several participants. These storylines were interesting and valuable.

Exposure as a Deterrent

Maintaining the theme of learning, participants revealed that their exposure to urban fiction resulted in learning. Building upon their desire to learn, which was presented earlier in this chapter, participants revealed that a great deal of what they learned from the texts, which served as a deterrent to getting involved in illicit activities. While many adults may assume that exposure to illicit activities and sexualized content through urban fiction may negatively influence the behaviors and perceptions of adolescent readers, participants demonstrated that exposure to the "rules of the game" or the unspoken codes of conduct for hustlers, served as a

deterrent rather than an incentive to adopt the hustling lifestyle . Jonelle, for instance, commented, “there’s rules to the game. Like when you call on the phone, that’ll get you caught up. It’s just selling drugs but it’s so much more” (5.7.2008). Participants were indeed exposed to codes of behavior needed to survive in the drug culture. Most of their responses suggested that the texts reified their assumptions about what one had to do to survive as a drug dealer while also teaching them about more hidden aspects associated with living as a hustler.

Participants, for instance, critiqued Zya for attempting to talk business over the telephone. Monet commented, “she can’t try to make those big connects just over the phone” (5.12.2008). Antoniese continued, “Especially at this. I don’t know about the name of the law but they can tap your phone.” Here students brought prior knowledge to their critiques of the text, demonstrating that they learned lessons through their reading. For example, earlier in the book, another drug dealer warned about the importance of speaking in person about illicit activities.

Participants further demonstrated their prior knowledge and experience as well as those obtained from the text when they critiqued characters who did not behave in accordance with the rules of the game because “You have to protect what’s yours. Once people see that you’re powerful and have bank, they’re going to want it” (5.14.2008). With this understanding, Tamia admonished Jules for irrationally and rashly murdering a competing drug dealer, King, after which he commented, “No witnesses, no murder” (5.5.2008). Tamia responded, “I like that part because he already made the assumption that nobody saw him. Not thinking that ain’t nobody here. If somebody hears the gunshot and looks at their peep hole. When the police

come up there and find the gun shells” (5.5.2008). Tamia felt that Jules was foolish and disregarded the rules of the game as he demonstrated a lack of caution when committing a murder and concluded that Jules was going to die or be hurt based on his lack of caution and understanding of the “rules of the game”. Tamia recognized that a particular perspective was needed to survive and thrive within that illegal culture. She viewed Jules as careless and uncalculated; these were traits that ran contrary to the rules of the game. Students emphasized what they had learned from reading the text.

Participants also critiqued King for bringing Zya with him on a drug run. In doing so, he was treating his “job as a vacation” instead of a business transaction as he attempted to “mix business with personal” interactions. Tamia commented, “He [King] caught himself slipping cause he never should have taken her on the trip with him” (5.7.2008). Again, participants critiqued characters based on what they learned from the text about what was needed to survive within the drug business.

What participants learned from the text seemed to serve more as a deterrent than an attractor to joining the drug culture. Although most understood Zya’s initial decision to sell drugs as a means of “getting out”, all castigated selling drugs as a means of attaining money. All of the participants condoned Zya’s original decision to sell drugs after Jules was incarcerated based on her limited exposure to other professions and her expertise with selling, only as a means of temporarily addressing her situation of being penniless and homeless. None, however, saw this as a reasonable profession for themselves. Alexis stated, “I could never. My father would be so disappointed in me” (5.12.2008). Tamia elaborated, “My mother would kill

me” (5.12.2008). Antoniese concluded, “My life is way too precious. I ain’t losing my life or getting shot or something just so that I can have some nice clothes and stuff for a little while. It’s not worth it” (6.2.2008). Participants referenced the influences of their parents while also suggesting that they had no interest in becoming like the protagonist. Yet, all but one of the participants condoned Zya’s initial goal of selling drugs to raise \$100,000 in order to take care of herself temporarily until she could find a more legitimate means of attaining a living. “That’s not really a life. It’s just, nothing, really. Who wants to live like that? It’s nothing. It’s not worth it” (6.2.2008). For Jonelle, what she perceived to be the insider’s perspective led her to conclude that the spoils of selling drugs, such as fancy cars and expensive clothing, were “not worth it” when considering the mentality and danger that accompanies selling. As Keaira cited, "I want to be able to do it on my own. I don't need some man taking some of what I got" (6.4.2008). They believed women could attain success and power, independent of relationships with and dependence upon men, unlike Zya.

Participants demonstrated that they, indeed, learned from reading *Supreme Clientele*. Participants learned about the unspoken codes which determined the behaviors necessary for surviving as a hustler. This prospect is frightening to many adults who may view the lessons from urban fiction as corrupt and immoral. Students, however, demonstrated that while they learned from the text, they were not interested in mimicking the behaviors of characters. The text exposed them to a lifestyle, which on the surface may have seemed glamorous or appealing in some way. However, with exposure to this lifestyle through the text and conversations

about it with others, participants learned and suggested that they were disinterested in pursuing the lifestyles depicted *Supreme Clientele*.

Discussion

Contrary to popular assumptions about the motivations of adolescent readers, participants demonstrated critical analysis skills when engaging with *Supreme Clientele*. They did not appear to read texts blindly as a means of emulating the behaviors of characters. Rather, they viewed *Supreme Clientele* and other urban fiction stories as cautionary tales. They learned through the stories of the characters based on analysis of the behaviors of the characters. While some characterize urban fiction as negative in that it prominently featured drug dealers and violence, participants within this study spoke of how these negative images were deterrents in many ways. Further, participants demonstrated that their responsiveness to and engagement with the *Supreme Clientele* was predicated upon their perception that the storylines within it were real or real enough. The perceived authenticity of the text motivated the students to view the text as applicable to their lives, hence they could learn from the text. Urban fiction was engaging partially because it was viewed as being relevant and believable.

CHAPTER 8: SUMMARY OF FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

"I don't think my teachers really care about why I read urban fiction. I don't think they care about what I read at all. They just want me to do well in school" (Keaira).

Burdened with the responsibility of capturing the many conversations and insights that arose from my research and analysis, I spent many months carefully considering the responsibility of accurately representing the participants' voices while also crafting a message that was meaningful to researchers and teachers alike. This chapter begins with an overview of my findings, followed by my perspective on the significance of this study and how these perspectives evolved over the course of the study. Finally, this chapter concludes with suggestions for future study, based on my findings.

This study was undertaken based on the assumption that a connection can and should be made between students' leisure reading habits and more formal reading promoted in school (Gallo, 1996). Before considering specific ways that teachers might capitalize on the reading strengths of students through the use of controversial leisure texts, it was important to understand why adolescents read urban fiction. As such, this research sought to understand how to translate student engagement with urban fiction to more traditional literacy practices in the classroom. In this chapter, I revisit the research question, *how do adolescent African American girls engage with, respond to, and make meaning from urban fiction texts?* and address the guiding question of *how can an understanding about the engagement, response, and meaning making of adolescent African American girls to urban fiction texts inform school based literacy practices?*

Significance of Study

Although previous studies have investigated adolescents' engagement with young adult fiction (Christenbury, 2000; Herz, 1996; Santoli & Wagner, 2004) and have sought methods of incorporating this form of writing in the classroom as a means of enhancing formal reading engagement for adolescents (Gallo, 2003; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002), few studies have considered the leisure reading habits of historically marginalized adolescents, the reasons they choose to engage with particular forms of literature, and their specific responses to those texts. The present study begins to address this dearth of knowledge.

Three major findings have emerged from this study, which correspond with the analyses presented in chapters five and six and provide: 1) explanations for why adolescent African American girls may engage with urban fiction, 2) insight into the lives of adolescent African American girls, and 3) significant evidentiary support for viewing and treating African American girls as expert readers and contributors.

Participants' responses to *Supreme Clientele* provided insight into how they constructed meaning about the story (Rosenblatt, 1995; Sipe, 1999). While a culture of reading existed within their school, this culture also existed within the homes and communities of two participants. Contrary to popular assumptions reflected in current studies which suggest that adolescent African Americans have poor literacy skills (NAEP, 2007), findings from this study suggest otherwise. As discussed further below, participants demonstrated that they exist within and cultivate cultures that promote and uplift reading. These reading practices, however, often nondominant and nontraditional, were neither recognized nor embraced in school.

Reading urban fiction is an example of one of those non dominant literacy practices that was not only persistent in many of the participants' lives but was also a precursor to social acceptance among the adolescent African American girls at their school. Students participated within this culture by exchanging books with peers and reading those texts in class during free reading time, even at the risk of being embarrassed or openly chastised by a teacher. These interactions reinforce New Literacy theory, which legitimizes non dominant reading practices among historically marginalized adolescents. Participants' demonstrated skills, when interacting with urban fiction, that are translatable within traditional English classrooms. They constructed meaning from text as they demonstrating comprehension. In doing so, participants made text to text and text to self connections which further enabled them to evaluate characters; this is an example of a strategic reading practice to enables readers to evaluate the choices of characters. The demonstration of these skills while engaging with urban fiction provide support to the notion that urban fiction can indeed be used by teachers to instill more traditional conceptions of literacy engagement with in-school texts.

Beyond peer pressure to read the texts for social acceptance, participants engaged with urban fiction based on its perceived authenticity, despite occasional struggles to validate aspects of the text as authentic. The writing style and storylines lent to the credibility of the stories. Participants deemed the text as relevant and cited that they learned lessons through their engagement with the story which were applicable to their lives in part because of the believability of the storyline and characters. In light of this core precept of authenticity, perceptions of *Supreme Clientele* as being real or "real enough" fostered engagement. It is important to note,

however, the participants' engagement with and understandings of the text were quite complicated and extended beyond what they perceived as realistic and unrealistic. Their critiques were connected with the prevalence of those situations and images within their home communities as well as their various exposures, which in some cases were not aligned with my own. With this said, participants were eager to engage with texts that contained messages and storylines that they viewed as both mature and potentially meaningful to their lives. Mature concepts that piqued the interests of my participants' with regards to male-female interactions relating to platonic and romantic relationships, conceptions of beauty for African American women and sex.

Contrary to assumptions that readers of urban fiction texts blindly accept the images presented therein, participants in my study, were critical of the images presented, to a degree. They did not desire to emulate the characters presented within the text but, rather, wanted to learn from those images and the mistakes made by the characters from *Supreme Clientele*. They demonstrated engagement and critical analysis as they inserted themselves in the text and relied on their personal experiences to assess characters' behaviors and situations. So, while some of the participants viewed selling drugs as an individual decision and others viewed it as a direct result of societal influences and critiqued character behaviors, sometimes sympathetically, from various vantage points. While exploring mature and controversial content, such as selling drugs or school apathy, participants used the text to both consider their own lives and choices in comparison to those of the

characters and to explore the behaviors and decisions of the characters in the text that they felt they may confront as they matured into adulthood.

Many adults assume adolescent read urban fiction to learn about sex and drugs (Stovall, 2005). However, participants suggested that they read for a variety of reasons that extended beyond interest in the titillating content. Alexis, one of my participants, learned about “life in the hood.” Jonelle, in contrast, gained insight about relationships, both romantic and plutonic, that involved universal thematic concepts like trust and betrayal. Keaira found the text to be encouraging as “not everyone knows how to stay motivated, no matter what happens in their life, and not let the bad events just stop them from going on,” while Monet viewed the texts as a primer for interacting with males. Tamia felt intimate connections to the characters, not because she could always relate to their experiences personally, but rather because their often untold stories were presented in ways that were compelling.

Finally, participants revealed that they engaged with urban fiction to live vicariously through the experiences of the characters within the text. For instance, through reading, participants were able to experience life as “the hot girl” and imagine themselves as garnering attention from males.

The second major finding from this study also emerged from participant responses. Students provided insights about their personal experiences and curiosities as they interacted with the text, allowing conversations to serve as windows for the research community, into their lives (Galda, 1998) while expanding representations of adolescent girls (Marshall, 2004). The participants’ desire to engage with content often deemed too mature by adults parallels results from Finder’s (1997) and

Hartman's (2001) work. Both authors found that adolescent girls relied upon a variety of texts to understand and adapt to expectations of their behaviors, especially those associated with gender roles and relationships. In my study, participants similarly used the text to explore notions of self conception as they engaged with those parts of the text that emphasized beauty and codes of conduct for African American women as well as appropriate behavior within platonic and romantic relationships. Their responses also suggested self awareness, as participants discussed their conceptions about the one-dimensional representations of African American life that are perpetuated by the media at large. Participants suggested that those portrayals have an impact on their perceptions of African American life and their conceptions of beauty for African American women, specifically.

The third major finding involves the need for active teacher participation with students around controversial texts like urban fiction. *Supreme Clientele* provided an opportunity for students to speak intelligently and comprehensively about a genre in which they were experts. This approach of drawing from students' experiences privileged participants' perspectives rather than that of the teacher. When provided the opportunity, students demonstrated many of the formal skills promoted in classrooms pertaining to more traditional forms of text. While historically marginalized groups typically underperform on standardized test which assess critical literacy skills, participants in my study demonstrated solid analytical skill in recognizing that *Supreme Clientele* was missing the perspectives of individuals like themselves who were "normal" and "boring", in favor of stories similar to those glamorized within the media at large. Several also acknowledged that their

engagement with and continued patronage of urban fiction texts validated these images. As more individuals purchase these stories as opposed to those that represent African American life in more positive ways, participants noted that publishers would continue to profit from static and stereotypic representations. However, participants believed these stories were reflective of someone's experience, even if these groups of people were a minority within the African American community.

Discussion

As the majority of teachers in American are White, middle class, and female, and hail from suburban and rural and largely monocultural areas (Zeichner et al., 1998, Sleeter, 1997), exposure to different cultures becomes increasingly important for the teaching population in order to effectuate meaningful teacher-student dynamics. If exposure to different cultures is appropriately capitalized upon, teaching efficacy, one of the most influential factors on learning (Knight & Wiseman, 2005), can improve (Meier, 2008). Learning becomes more meaningful when connected with the interests and cultures of students. What I learned from my interactions with participants extended beyond understanding their literacy engagement with urban fiction and informed my perspective on teaching efficacy.

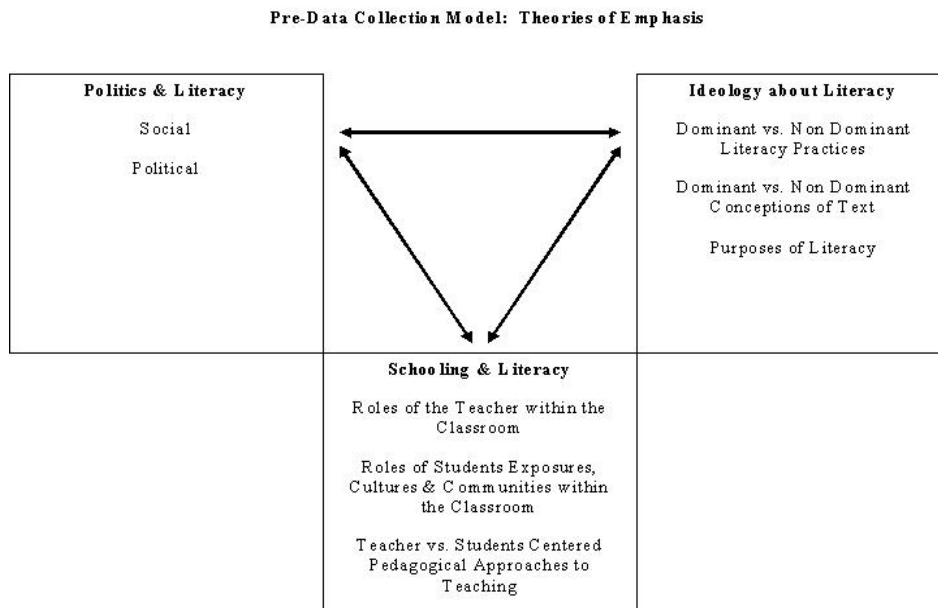
When I first began considering this project, I focused a great deal of attention on the works of Michael Street (2002) and James Gee (1999) and their New Literacy perspectives, Paulo Freire's (1979) and Ernest Morrell's (2002) findings in the field of Critical Literacy studies and Reader Response theories drawn from the work of Louise Rosenblatt (1995) and Lawrence Sipe (1999). These three theories provided a framework that, at the time, justified the significance of: 1) considering the out-of-

school literacy habits of adolescent African American females, 2) legitimizing urban fiction novels as a valid form of literature, and 3) using this literature to foster critical inquiry into social issues that were negatively impacting growing numbers of members of this population. Borrowing from a foundation created by Tozer, Senese, and Violas (2006), as presented below, I viewed the literacy habits of adolescent African American females within the politics associated with literacy, various perspectives on schooling and literacy, and my personal ideologies as a means of positioning this research among existing bodies of knowledge. Although these perspectives were helpful, I found the explorations of Gloria Ladson Billings (1994), as demonstrated through *Culturally Relevant Teaching*, to be the framework best suited for analyzing my interactions with the participants as well as their transactions with the selected text, *Supreme Clientele*.

The model below illustrates my original framework regarding the literacy practices and strengths of adolescent African American girls, as demonstrated through their interest in urban fiction.

Below, I evaluate how my conceptions have changed from my pre-data collection model to my post-data collection models.

Figure 8.1: Pre-Data Collection Model



Politics & Literacy

Urban fiction contains images of African American life that many people find disturbing as these images are not only perpetuated by mass media but also underscored by the dearth of positive images of African Americans. I began this research with a need to justify the exploration of a genre that I also felt compromised African Americans. In my opinion, the writing in urban fiction is often poor, the storylines are largely predictable, for the sake of selling stories, and the representations of African American characters are underdeveloped, at best. Yet, I felt an urgency to broaden understandings about the literacy habits, and more importantly, the strengths of an under-researched and often overlooked group of readers who were engaged with urban fiction. Relying on my own background as

both an African American female and a teacher, I felt that African American adolescent girls, from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds, engaged with urban fiction based on their earnest desire to see themselves represented within literature somehow, even if those images were derogatory or incomplete. This perspective was limiting, however, in that it failed to consider other reasons why adolescent African American females might engage with these texts.

My original emphasis was on how the images that are often perceived as negative within *Supreme Clientele* could be transformed into opportunities for participants to engage conversations where they analyze and critique images. As discussed in previous chapters, participants demonstrated a variety of reasons for reading urban fiction. More important to my research, however, participants demonstrated that they have a multitude of ways of interacting with and understanding the images presented within the texts. What I often deemed as superficial, calculated, and undesirable representations of African American life, participants interpreted as representing the complex pressure that they either confronted or imagined they might face, irrespective of whether the images were considered to be politically or socially responsible.

Ideology about Literacy

Despite my frustrations with the representations of African American life prevalent in urban fiction novels, I believed there was value for adolescent African American girls in reading these texts. Inspired by the messages of Paulo Freire (1979), I felt that what I saw as negative and superficial images could be utilized to enhance critical literacy skills among the urban fiction readership as they engaged

with the genre. Urban fiction, in that respect, is a commodity. Its provocative imagery and accessible story lines promote reading in ways that more dominant and in-school texts seemingly failed to motivate. Although predominantly viewed as negative, urban fiction is a form of text that can and does provide opportunities for readers to not only engage with but to also confront and analyze derogatory images used to represent African American life within the media at large.

Although I sought to understand why adolescent African American girls engaged and identified with the messages within urban fiction novels, I subconsciously hoped my work would serve as an intervention, of sorts, through which participants would be challenged by me and each other to critically evaluate and deconstruct the images within the chosen urban fiction text. I realized, however, that I was falsely assuming that readers engaged with the text without any critical analyses of their own, reading only for exposure to representations of African American life that they might emulate. I learned from participants, however, that when provided with the opportunity to express themselves freely about a text of their choosing, they demonstrated complex literacy strengths. Participants exhibited their skills as they considered the relevance and authenticity of the text throughout our interactions. Without my guidance, participants demonstrated through detailed conversations about character motivation, plot development, and overarching themes that they already possessed some of the literacy skills that I originally hoped they would acquire through our interactions. As evidenced by the level of sophistication in many of my participants' responses, the theory of Reader Response, through its focus on the active encouragement of student participation, played a significant role

in upending many of my assumptions about how young people engage with and process difficult images.

Schooling & Literacy

Having been in the classroom as an English teacher, I understand the reluctance of many teachers to acknowledge and interact with urban fiction. Schools often promote and uphold more dominant conceptions of literacy, which involve reading and responding to more canonical forms of texts. These forms of literacy engagements are primarily non controversial, as they are approved by curriculum specialists and administrators (Gallo, 2003; Morrell, 2000). Further, teachers receive formal training regarding how to organize, present and engage students with familiar stories and test subjects from the more canonical texts (Gallo, 2003). Curricula selected for classroom use often neglects to include those non dominant forms of text that students from non mainstream homes and communities value and that motivate them to read (Schultz and Hull, 2002). Instead, the experiences of teachers', administrators', and school and state curriculum specialists' perspectives, and reading preferences shape classroom instruction as opposed to the interests and cultures of students (Gallo, 1996). Students who benefit from this approach are largely those who come from cultures that are similar to that of the teacher (Irvine, 2003).

In my original view, I failed to investigate how teachers could use the stories in their curricula to center students' responses and interests in critical ways. My emphasis originally did not focus on teaching but emphasized, instead, on the exclusion of non dominant literacy practices. Working with study participants over three months, I began to reevaluate the significance of the role of teachers and their

approaches to interacting with students. In light of this change in perspective, I adjusted my study appropriately to place priority on the interests and reading culture of the adolescent African American girls in my study instead of on what I felt might be “most appropriate” for them. This approach reflected a more culturally relevant approach to teaching as opposed to a critical literacy approach to teaching.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy promotes three primary tenets: students must experience academic success, students must develop and or maintain cultural competence, students must develop a consciousness where they critique and challenge the current social order and their place within that order (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Especially as related to the cultures of both underprivileged students and students of color, a disparity has traditionally existed between their home and school cultures (Ladson Billings, 1995). This chasm between in-school and out-of-school literacy habits contributes, in part, to diminished learning outcomes. This theory promotes the use of students’ cultures to serve as “bridges to school learning” (Ladson-Billings, 1995). As one of many strategies for introducing students’ interests, literature circles provided a forum for the import of student perspectives and cultures.

I have come to realize that teachers do not need urban fiction to critically engage with students about issues that impact their realities in significant ways. In this study, urban fiction was merely a conduit, of sorts, used only to capitalize on and encourage the interests of adolescent African American girls, for beginning conversations about their reading interests and interpretations. I placed their interests and cultures at the center of our interactions and in doing so, I was able to see, first

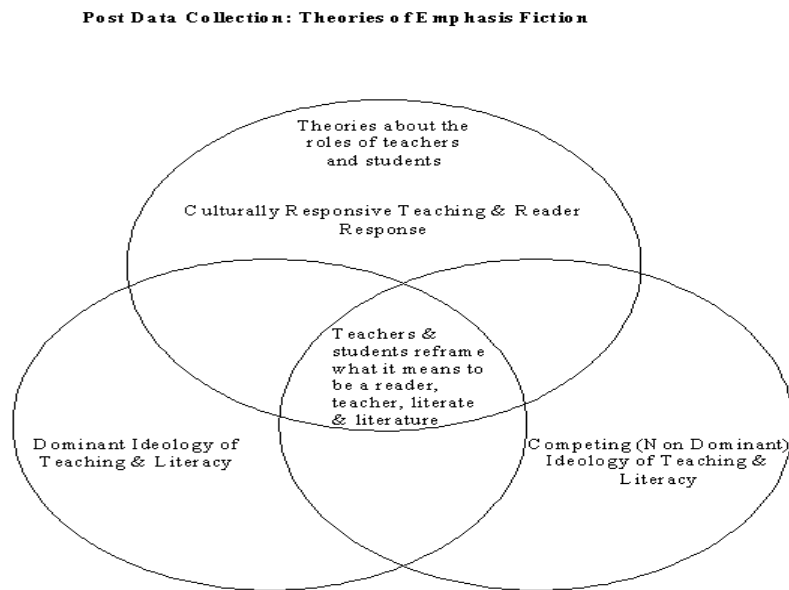
hand, the benefits of culturally responsive teaching and the potential of empowering traditionally underrepresented students to express themselves and showcase their literacy acquisition skills. As such, I would advise teachers to remain open minded and willing to have conversations with students where they are given the opportunity to demonstrate their expertise and exposures.

The literature circles and the significance and diversity of the participants' responses played a profound role in reshaping my outlook on the role of teachers. I saw, first hand, the significance and power of placing students' interests and expertise at the center of inquiry. My role was more of a moderator in that I challenged some of their thoughts and occasionally posed questions to frame conversations. Students' ideas were at the center of attention. Positioning myself this way had the transformative effect of motivating longer and more robust dialogue on many of the discussion points. Next, participants complicated elements of the text which I originally deemed superficial by incorporating some of their own direct experiences as well as those to which they had been both exposed and desensitized through the media and other venues. Participants were grappling with many of the issues presented within the text. They were curious and wanted the opportunity to explore even issues had not experienced first-hand.

As our sessions continued to adapt to the increasingly proactive roles of my participants, the original premise of reading and engaging with the genre merely became a supplemental benefit to the uninhibited exchanges we had. Based on this realization, New Literacy Studies, although helpful, was soon superseded, in my conception, by Culturally Relevant teaching theories. My research was steeped in the

unspoken belief that people were fundamentally dependent upon social relationships and that these interactions produced knowledge and promoted learning as ideas were exchanged (Gee, 2000; Street, 2001). The level of collaboration and sharing of sound ideas within our sessions reinforced Vygotsky's notions that social interaction results in learning (Vygotsky, 1978). Culturally Responsive Teaching ideologies motivated me, within my interactions, to first explore and next understand how the social experiences of students existed within their culture of reading. Below is the updated conceptual framework that guided my study, post data collection.

Figure 8.2: Post Data Collection Model



Recommendations

As student populations continue to diversify in schools, understanding and using various cultures becomes an increasingly daunting task for both pre-service and in-service teachers. Beyond appreciating cultural differences, teachers capitalizing on the interests and experiences of students through the creation of classroom communities which value culture as an important resource to enhance the teaching and learning experience (Turner, 2006). Centering students' interests and privileging their superior knowledge regarding those leisure texts that are captivating their interest presents one means of demonstrating culturally responsive pedagogy (Morrell, 2002). Further, as noted by Alvermann, "...young people have much to teach us, as adults, about the ways in which their uses of popular culture texts work to reference, discredit, or complement other standardizing practices, such as school literacies" (Heron-Hruby, Hagood, & Alvermann, 2008). The goal is not to merely introduce urban fiction in classroom libraries but to interact with the content of the text to validate the ever-developing reading cultures that incorporate these texts and to learn from their interactions with texts of their choice. As seen with participants from this study, when provided with the opportunity, students demonstrate a variety of skills that are needed in order to achieve within the classroom. The following section contains two practical suggestions for teachers and teacher educators about how to incorporate urban fiction into classrooms. These suggestions include having candid exchanges with students about urban fiction and updating conceptions of appropriate literacies in K-12 classrooms.

Conversation with Students & Urban Fiction

In my study, participants demonstrated an earnest desire to explore their viewpoints on various topics as they considered beauty, relationships, power, and choices. Although critical in some instances, conversations revealed that this population of learners needs structured guidance on how to recognize and counter negative portrayals of African American life in the media. For instance, while participants recognized that beauty for African American women was often associated with lighter skin complexion, they were largely unwilling to alter their own perspectives about this, which many did not recognize as inextricably linked to media portrayals. Even after discussions, participants still felt that having a lighter complexion was an invaluable asset, yielding more attention from males, one of the predominant factors in their determinations of the beauty ideal.

Building on this example, beneficial conversations about an urban fiction text might challenge why African American women with light-skinned complexions are considered more beautiful than women with darker skin. Urban fiction can provide an entree into conversations and conceptualizations about issues like skin complexion that negatively impact adolescent African American girls' lives in various ways

While Glazer and Seo (2005) call for the inclusion of multicultural young adult literature within the classroom for all students to read, teachers may work with texts in a number of more intimate ways to create bridges between the home and school reading interests of smaller populations of readers, such as adolescent African American girls. As culturally relevant teaching promotes the inclusion of non dominant literacy practices, of which urban fiction qualifies, teachers can engage with students around urban fiction in smaller reading settings like literature circles

(Daniels, 2006) and book clubs that take place after school (Raphael, Florio-Ruane, & George, 2001), or during sustained silent reading time (Humphrey, 2008). Each of these strategies should only be employed after having attained parental consent, as some parents may be unaware or disapprove of their child's interest in urban fiction content (Stovall, 2005). These strategies can also provide meaningful opportunities for teachers to establish an open and ongoing dialogue with parents who may need guidance on these texts as well.

Further, teachers may elect to either have conversations in small groups with those who engage with urban fiction by introducing a text themselves or letting adolescent readers select an urban fiction title that is currently engaging their interest. It may be helpful for teachers to select a primary topic of exploration, like skin complexion or friendship, because the books present so many talking points that effective conversation requires narrowing of the focus order to emphasize readers' vantage points.

Many teachers and adults rebuff urban fiction based on the sexual content and the stereotypic representation of African Americans in urban areas. Yet, participants in the present study demonstrated that they had a genuine desire to explore many of the taboo and seldom discussed issues explored in the texts. As such, fearing and avoiding controversial issues in the text seem was not the best solution for addressing and unpacking adolescent curiosities. Instead, as indicated from my own findings, confronting these issues not only validated interests and confirmed their status as readers but, of equal import, provided a venue for participants to explore them under the supervision of an adult.

While I appreciate that many critics posit that the responsibility to address critical social issues that impact adolescents belongs parents and not teachers, I support the perspective that teaching is a political act that can either empower students to become critics of our world or passive consumers, unwilling or ill equipped to actively confront challenging issues in their lives. With the courageous assistance of teachers, African American adolescent girls can use their reading interests as a springboard for engaging in critical analysis of some of the controversial issues raised in urban fiction that fall outside of traditionally school-sanctioned texts.

As such, teachers and curriculum developers should not fear and avoid these texts but rather embrace the potential benefits of engagement with this genre within a controlled environment or, alternatively, provide students with texts that contain countervailing views to those presented in urban fiction. Many forms of young adult fiction are comparable to urban fiction but less controversial and jingoistic. For instance, authors such as Sharon Flake and Sharon Draper create stories that, similar to urban fiction, feature adolescent African American female protagonists confronted by quandaries in her urban community. These stories are less graphic than urban fiction texts but feature similar themes and character struggles and often involve considerations of beauty and gender roles. These authors, to name just a few, also provide students with the opportunity to explore taboo and controversial topics.

Critics may further argue that urban fiction further pathologizes African American families in America, as images presented reaffirm derogatory stereotypes. However, participants in the present study demonstrated that urban fiction can empower adolescent readers to challenge images that have traditionally disempowered African

American learners. Participants were not simply reading to learn about sex and drugs. They had very complex motivations for interacting with and understanding the text. Their struggle to rationalize and authenticate truth from fiction may have been confounded entirely without guidance from an instructor well-versed in the representation of African American characters.

With that said, the literature circles, in this particular case, served as a forum for participants to engage in conversations about issues that stemmed directly from the book. In this study, traditional reading engagement was only one of many benefits from our interactions. Open dialogue, as demonstrated through our conversations, built on the literacy strengths of participants, encouraged creative interpretation and deconstruction of the texts, and created a forum for addressing students' curiosities about the difficult topics addressed within urban fiction. Within their post interviews, each participant, independently, asked that I return the next year to continue our literature circle. They also cited that they wanted me to train their teachers about how to have similar types of interactions; this was especially important to note. Their request that I train teachers suggested to me that participants were interested in having similar types of interactions with their teachers as they had with me. This suggested that students desired relationships with their teachers where they were able to have open conversations and explore their curiosities about texts of their choices. This, in my mind, is an incredible privilege when a child is willing to welcome a teacher into his or her world, so to speak. This can and should be capitalized upon and is reflective of a culturally responsive perspective.

Modernize Outdated Definitions of Literacy

Conceptions of literacy and what counts as “appropriate” texts in schools need to be realigned with the current interests of adolescent readers. While classical canonical literature is a valuable commodity, teachers need of training that will enable them to better understand and connect to adolescents’ out-of-school reading habits so that those reading affinities can be incorporated within the classroom agenda. The goal of this effort is to increase formal literacy acquisition. Validating their reading preferences is important for adolescents who, like several of my participants, did not view themselves as readers, despite their voracious reading engagement with urban fiction. They did not view urban fiction as “real reading” and, hence, did not view their engagement as a legitimate form of reading. Yet, they employed the same skills that teachers attempt to cultivate when tasking students with the responsibility to read and process more traditional forms of literature. As such, understanding and legitimizing what students are reading may serve the interests of students and teachers alike.

Pre-service training, especially for reading and English teachers, should expose them to various types of young adult literature and other forms of nontraditional texts, such as magazines and internet blog sites, where adolescents demonstrate consistent and proficient reading engagement. When learning about these various literacy strengths, teachers must be trained to understand, specifically, which aspects of these texts engage adolescent readers. The current study assists in this effort by identifying the appeal of urban fiction for six adolescent girls. Participants in my study suggested that what they perceived as the authenticity of a

text or a rendering of someone's lived experience led them to accept the texts as relevant to their lives. This inspired engagement as participants felt that they could learn lessons that would be applicable to their lives, in spite of perceived flaws in the characters' actions as well as in the writing.

With an understanding of how the texts are appealing, teachers can draw parallels to equivalent ideas within more traditional texts. As such, pre-service teacher training might involve interviewing and observing adolescent readers to understand which texts, in particular, motivate reading for individual students. Further, future teachers could practice, within teaching labs, how to create thematized lesson units on more traditional forms of literature by relying on non dominant literacy habits such as engagement with urban fiction. Teachers can serve as "the bridge" between non dominant literacies and readerships and the dominant reading practices that are often reflected within more traditional curricula (Young, 2008). Teachers can draw from the similarities between more traditional and urban fiction texts to convey concepts and instill skills.

Alan Sitomer (Whelan, 2007), a high school English teacher from Los Angeles, established connections between themes from controversial rapper Tupac Shakur's lyrics in "Me Against the World" and works of Shakespeare; shared themes that included greed, isolation, power, and love, and others. The teacher served as the bridge between these different forms of texts as he familiarized himself with both types of writing to make connections between a seemingly irrelevant text of the Shakespeare verse and lyrics which were deemed by his students as important and pertinent within their own lives. His motivation was "validating students and their

interests. If you diminish their interests, you diminish them-and then you'll never reach them" (Whelan, para 7). By creating valuable connections between those dominant literacy practices of students, Sitomer demonstrates how it is possible to recognize and understand the literacy habits and interests of students and their enhance achievement with more traditional forms of text and also how literature written in the past still holds relevance within contemporary times. Mr. Sitomer's imaginative use of rap to enhance understanding of traditional forms of literature serves as a model for the use of urban fiction which, as the genre, also often contains controversial lyrics and content as well as non standard uses of English. Similar to Sitomer, teachers can use certain pieces urban fiction texts to make connections between themes. For instance, a teacher might emphasize the more salient within more traditional forms of text that appear irrelevant within the lives of students in comparison to those presented within the storylines of urban fiction stories that are, in contrast, engaging the interests of readers. For example, one could compare characters relationships and reactions in more traditional texts to those presented in urban fiction texts. For instance, Tristan and Isolde's decision (Wagner, 2008) to address their dilemma by taking matters into their own hands could be compared to Zya and Snow's efforts in *Supreme Clientele*, to address their dilemma in a comparable fashion; *Tristan and Isolde* is a story similar in nature to *Romeo and Juliet* and is often credited as the impetus for the Shakespearean tale.

Suggestions for Future Research

The present study took place in a community characterized by low income status, less actively engaged parents due to labor and time intensive occupations and urban

setting. Additional research is needed to determine if a similar study with adolescent African American female readers from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds would produce similar findings. Students experiences, which may vary based on their communities, may also influence how and why individuals connect with urban fiction. Although unexplored within this study, it is important to note that urban fiction may be appealing based on its lack of appeal to adults. Future studies may seek to explore how much this serves as an incentive for adolescent readers to engage with the genre. Additional research is also needed to understand how adolescents apply messages from urban fiction texts to their own lives. Also, my research focused on conversations in the literature circles. I did not observe participants in other settings nor did I interview individuals with whom participants come in contact regularly to further explore how readers apply understandings drawn from our conversations or the text to their own lives. As such, it may be helpful to investigate, with greater depth, the influence of the images with urban fictions texts, beyond directed conversations.

Additionally, further study is needed to understand more deeply the reading strengths of African American adolescent girls. This study suggested that engagement with urban fiction is merely one of many literacy strengths that that these readers possessed. From interviews, I learned that participants engaged with other genres of literature, including mysteries, and magazines like *Ebony* and *Jet*. A greater comprehension of the appeal of these texts could also serve to strengthen "learning bridges" between the out-of-school and in-school literacy practices of students.

Deeper analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of character and plot development could offer insight into why and how readers identify with the protagonists in urban fiction stories. Because current research rarely considers the impact of race, class, and gender on the leisure reading habits of adolescents', greater research is needed to explore the out-of-school literacy strengths of historically disenfranchised student group. Greater exploration and application of the theories drawn from the present study, specifically the adoption of non-tradition texts in classrooms, is needed to understand how the out-of-school reading habits of adolescents can be connected to classroom instruction to develop methods for supplementing formal literacy acquisition. While a fair amount of research considers how teachers incorporate young adult literature in the classroom, very little considers the implementation of multicultural young adult novels or other forms of text considered controversial.

There are many reasons why reading and English research has largely neglected to consider the experiences of adolescent African American females and other historically marginalized groups. Most of the reading and English research conducted on adolescents focuses on the experiences and reactions of White middle class boys and girls and, based on my own experience, there is an assumption that the findings from this research can be aptly applied to all groups. While it informs the present study, the lack of diversity in reading and English research suggests that many literacy practitioners and specialists may be unclear about the impact of race, class, and other social constructs on reading preferences and engagement with text.

This disconnect is only exacerbated by outmoded training programs for pre-service teachers. Substantial revisions to teaching methodologies and materials are essential in order to better equip teachers to effectively instruct students whose cultures and interests may be different from their own. Teacher educators need to emphasize that the normality is a relative concept, contingent upon the community or culture from which context must be derived. As such, preservice teachers need training that will help them to better appreciate the urgency of engaging with the cultures and interests of students and not simply assuming that: a) the teacher's background and personal experiences as an adolescent can define "normal" textual engagements or b) the students' backgrounds and interests are substantially similar to their own.

While I believe it is possible to incorporate the core tenets of culturally relevant teaching into teacher education, I am unclear if this exposure will necessarily compel teachers to embrace and implement the fundamentals of this approach. Irrespective of potential obstacles to instituting contextual and reflexive teaching pedagogies, teacher training must establish that the literacy interests associated with White middle class students should not provide the cornerstone of what constitutes acceptable literacy acquisition because, ultimately, such an approach will minimize the contributions and competencies of underrepresented readers. Preservice teachers need training that provides them with exposure to the interests of a variety of students with different backgrounds to enrich the learning environment for all students.

A major problem with culturally relevant teaching is that there are few models of how to apply it in classrooms (Young, 2008). Training begins with investigations

of the communities with whom pre-service teachers will be working. Rather than relying upon assumptions about the types of texts that low-income African American students are engaging with, it would be more beneficial to ask the students themselves. This appears to be a fitting fledgling step in impressing upon pre-service educators the importance of understanding and incorporating those students' interests within lesson planning.

The present study had two essential motivations: 1) to identify the literacy strengths of adolescent African American girls by unpacking their engagement with urban fiction and 2) to contribute to those bodies of knowledge that seek to understand, validate, and capitalize on the cultures of reading that are neglected and undervalued within current research and school systems nationwide. Despite its emphasis on urban fiction, this study generally underscores the substantial value of understanding the reading habits and cultures of historically marginalized groups with the ultimate goal of bolstering their acquisition of more formal literacy skills.

Limitations of Study

There are several limitations of this study. In addition to the sample size, which included only six participants, participants read only one book. Thus, it is unclear whether or not their engagement would be similar across a variety of titles from the urban fiction genre. Although small, I triangulated my findings to ensure reliability and solicited in-depth responses from participants. Because we read one book, instead of several, I was able to dedicate time towards understanding participants' multi leveled connections with the text. Another limitation was that my involvement may have influenced participants' responses. As mentioned throughout,

I was not nearly as successful in masking my opinions about some of the images within *Supreme Clientele*. Participants may have detected my frustrations and responded with comments that complimented my view. I addressed this by attempting to be conscientious of my biases throughout my data collections and analysis and by asking questions of students when I felt as though their responses were not truly their own but attempts to ease my frustrations. As mentioned within chapter three, I relied upon a reflective journal and memos to help distinguish between my personal biases and those responses of participants. Lastly, due to the small sample size drawing broad conclusions about a sizeable population of readers is impossible and, I believe, inadvisable; one of the most corrosive and damaging aspects of the urban fiction texts is the rampant generalization about African American females. They should not be fit within a homogenous category and it is a disservice to them to suggest that they are easily identifiable as a monolithic consumer of any one type of literature. With this said, findings may be translatable to other populations of readers. However, my research hopefully serves only as a starting point for the difficult conversations and reassessments which are patently necessary to understand and better represent a large cross section of learners who are currently growing and developing on the fringes of academic research and practice.

Appendix A: Pre & Post Interview Questions

- Initial Questions
 - Tell me how you feel about reading?
 - What types of stories do you read in school?
 - What types of things do you read on your own?
 - What types of television shows do you watch? When do you watch them? Who do you watch them with? Do you talk about the shows?
 - Tell me how you came to begin reading urban fiction texts? What was the name of the first urban fiction book that you read?
 - How long ago did you first begin reading urban fiction texts?
 - What was going on in your life then? How would you describe how you viewed urban fiction texts before and after you initially read your first book?
 - How would you describe the person that you were before you began reading the books?
 - How would you describe the person that you are now?
- Intermediate Questions
 - What, if anything, did you know about urban fiction books?
 - Tell me about your thoughts and feelings after you read your first urban fiction text.
 - Who, if anyone, was involved in convincing you to read an urban fiction text? When was that? How were they involved?
 - Tell me about what you learned from the text.

- How, if at all, have your feelings about urban fiction changed since you read your first book?
 - How, if at all, have the books influenced your life in good ways?
 - How, if at all, have the books influenced your life in bad ways?
 - Tell me how you go about reading an urban fiction text? What do you do? Where do you do it? When do you do it?
 - Could you describe the most important lessons that you learned through reading urban fiction texts?
 - How do you think your parents and teachers feel about your reading these books?
- Ending Questions
 - Have you grown as a person since first beginning to read urban fiction texts? Tell me about your strengths that you developed through reading urban fiction texts. What do you most value about yourself now? What do others value in you?
 - After having the experience of reading these books, what advice would you give to another about reading these books? Why?
 - Is there anything that has occurred to you during this interview that you may not have thought about before?
 - Is there anything else you think I should know to understand why you read urban fiction texts better?
 - Is there anything you would like to ask me?

Post Interview Questions

The following questions will be addressed at the conclusion of our literature circle meetings. They are:

1. What did members read or write to prepare for the meeting?
2. Summarize the major points the group is addressing
3. What new learning occurred today?
4. What questions emerged?
5. Who will attempt to find answers to the questions?
6. What other resources will we need to address questions for ongoing learning?
7. What will be the focus of the next meeting?
8. If additional materials or resources are needed, who will bring them?
9. What will members read or write in preparation for the next meeting?
10. Best quotes from today's meeting

Appendix D: Sample of Discussion Log

Meeting 1

Group Roles

Discussion Director: _____

Literary Luminary: _____

Connector: _____

Character Captain: _____

Vocabulary Enricher: _____

Meeting 2

Group Roles

Discussion Director: _____

Literary Luminary: _____

Connector: _____

Character Captain: _____

Vocabulary Enricher: _____

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