

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

Engendering Sisterhood, Solidarity, and Self-love: Black Feminist Pedagogy and the Identity
Formation of African-American Girls.

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Education

by

Monique Lanier Lane

2014

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Engendering Sisterhood, Solidarity, and Self-love: Black Feminist Pedagogy and the Social Identities of African-American Girls.

By

Monique Lanier Lane

Doctor of Philosophy in Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2014

Professor Tyrone Howard, Chair

2014

Efforts towards urban school reform regularly overlook the complex socio-cultural contexts in which Black female students are situated and the ways in which their subordination is regularly perpetuated in schools. The propagation of urban misogyny in youth popular culture and corresponding reductive media narratives that position young Black women as hypersexual, aggressive, and anti-intellectual profoundly influence the evolving identities of these youth. This reality—coupled with the unremitting urging by policymakers for educators to align curriculum with standardized tests—has created classroom contexts that disregard the educational needs and cultural subjectivities of these youth. Drawing from a Black feminist framework, this study involves analyzing Black feminist pedagogical practices employed for two years during the

author's recent research as an English teacher at a public South Los Angeles high school.

Specifically, a qualitative methodology is utilized to explore the immediate and long-term impact of a Black feminist curriculum on African-American female students' orientation towards school and the development of their racial/ethnic and gender identities. This research offers concrete examples of pedagogical processes that engender self-actualization and an authentic craving for cultural and intellectual empowerment among young Black women. Implications for classroom pedagogy, and teacher education are explored.

The dissertation of Monique Lanier Lane is approved.

Kimberly Gomez

Thomas Philip

Venus Evans-Winters

Tyrone Howard, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2014

DEDICATION

In the midst of celebrating Black female empowerment and the culmination of this research study, I sit with a heavy heart. There are millions of Black women and girls—at home and abroad—whose full expression of humanity is stifled by interlocking forms of race, class, and gender oppression. Many of us agonize over our subordination in silence; our pain is overshadowed by the ubiquitous image of the *strong, Black woman*. Notwithstanding the few who have masterfully commanded respect and recognition in public domains (shout out to Oprah Winfrey and Lupita Nyong'o), most of Africa's daughters have been simply consigned to oblivion. I will continue to put pen to paper until we *all* have the liberty to cultivate our gifts and determine our destinies. Black women matter. Our stories are important. The struggle is not in vain.

Mary Virginia Jones...I write for you

Tarika Wilson (Rest In Power)...I write for you

Latasha Harlins (Rest In Power)...I write for you

Karyn Washington (Rest In Power)...I write for you

To the hundreds of abducted Nigerian schoolgirls...I write for you

May your legacies remain tenaciously ablaze in my heart

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION	ii
DEDICATION	v
TABLE OF CONTENTS	vi
CHAPTER 1: STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM	1
Introduction: Girl Interrupted	1
Study Rationale	2
Theoretical Foundations: A Black Feminist Perspective	4
Social Context of the Study	6
Black Girls Left Behind: The Problem with NCLB	8
Teacher Ideology and Practice	10
Pushing Towards Transformative Education	12
Study Overview	14
Beyond the Bell: The Creation of a ‘Safe Space’	14
Methodology: Critical Race Feminist Autoethnography	19
Data Collection	20
Study Contributions	21
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW	23
Introduction	23
The Oppressive Nature of Schooling and A Call for Identity Work	23
Why Black Girls?	23
Schooling and the Threat to Identity Development	26
Identity Work	33
Black Feminist Pedagogy and Research with Black Girls.....	35
From Theory to Practice	35
Distinguishing Features of Black Feminist Pedagogy	37
Education as Liberation	39
Othermothering	40
A Politicized Ethic of Care	41
Empirical Studies	42
Moving Forward	44

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY	47
Introduction	47
Background Into the Site	47
Demographic Profile	47
Organizational Dysfunction & Academic Turmoil	49
Taking the Road Less Travelled	50
The Ideological, Pedagogical, & Organizational Structure of BGU.....	52
A Black Feminist Orientation	52
BGU Pedagogical Structure	53
Organizational Structure: Who Joined BGU?	56
Critical Race Feminist Autoethnography	59
Data Collection	61
Participant Selection	61
Data Sources	65
BGU Curriculum	66
Field Notes	67
Video Recording	67
Interviews	68
Student Artifacts	70
Data Analysis, Positionality, & Limitations.....	71
Data Analysis	71
Positionality	73
Limitations	74
CHAPTER 4: STUDENTS’ INITIAL PERCEPTIONS	75
Introduction: A Hard Knock Life	75
Invisibility	81
Hood Life: A Social Ecology of “Less-Than”	81
King High: Now You See Me, Now You Don’t	85
Hyper-visibility	89
Danger: Educated Black Woman	89
The Illusive Image of the Ghetto Black Girl	91
Sexual Immorality	94
Outliers: Undercurrents of Love and Empowerment	96

Conclusion: Resistance Against Multiple Adversities	102
Resilience in the Name of Liberation	102
Just Tryin’ to Get By	105
CHAPTER 5: UNPACKING THE PEDAGOGY	109
Introduction: Four Pieces to the Puzzle	109
You Are What You Read	110
Critical Feminist Literature	111
Girls Run the World	119
Positioning Students as Agents of Change	119
“I Want a Girl With Extensions in Her Hair”	121
Teaching is Love	127
A Politicized Ethic of Care	127
A Community of Queens	133
Collectivity	134
Conclusion: In Love and War	140
CHAPTER 6: IDENTITIES EVOLVED	144
Introduction: Reversing the Tide of Black Female Inferiority	144
Heightened Collective Consciousness	146
Self-Definition and Coming to Voice	153
Challenging Reductive Representations of Black Femininity	154
Holla If You Hear Me!: Coming to Voice in BGU	158
A More Positive Orientation Towards School	161
Intellectual Empowerment in BGU	162
Education for Liberation: Shifts in the Purpose of Schooling	166
If You Unite Them, They Will Come	170
Conclusion: Meeting Once a Week Ain’t Hardly Enough	171
CHAPTER 7: MAINSTREAMING BLACK FEMINIST PEDAGOGY	176
Introduction: A Pedagogy of Power	176
Implications: Classroom Practice and Teacher Education Programs	180
Beware of Copy and Paste Methods of Instruction	180
Towards a Holistic, Consistent, and Authentic Approach	182
Implications for Teacher Education Programs	184
Limitations and Further Investigations	186

AFTERWORD: WHERE ARE THEY NOW?	190
Updates on Former Black Girls United Youth	190
Brittney	190
Tanya	192
Lisa	193
Kenya	194
Nia	194
Erykah	196
Ashanti	197
Concluding Thoughts	198
APPENDIX A	200
Sample Student Budget.....	200
APPENDIX B	201
BGU Thematic Units & Corresponding Readings	201
APPENDIX C	203
BGU Constitution	203
APPENDIX D	207
BGU Student Information Sheet.....	207
APPENDIX E	210
BGU Weekly Minutes	210
APPENDIX F	211
BGU Student Reminder Slip	211
APPENDIX G.....	212
Template for Identifying Shifts	212
REFERENCES.....	214

LIST OF TABLES

Table 3.1 <i>Description of Participants.....</i>	64
---	----

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 3.1 *Black Feminist Pedagogical Framework* 56

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To my Black Girls United QUEENS- I cannot express how thankful I am to have had the privilege of building community with you. There were countless occasions at King High in which I became overwhelmed by the grind of teaching. In those moments, your energy kept me motivated, and our conversations reified my purpose. The two years we spent together in BGU will be remembered as some of the best times of my life. In all of your future endeavors, please remember your self-worth, and your individual and collective agency; through the sharing of your stories, you possess the power to change the world. I love each of you to the moon and back! Over six years have passed, and I'm *still* reppin' "sisterhood, solidarity, and self-love."

Mentors

Tyrone- For over 11 years your office has functioned as a place of refuge at UCLA. I appreciate you for reassuring me when I felt overlooked, uninspired, and doubtful of my potential as a scholar. In our many conversations, you pushed me to dream bigger and brighter than I have ever imagined. Because of your encouragement, I am beyond excited to venture into the next chapter of my journey. Thank you!

Dr. V- Your earnest commitment to the social and academic empowerment of Black young women across the globe motivates me to continue to fight on behalf of urban girls. You have modeled how to be successful in academia, while maintaining a strong commitment to self-care, family, and community uplift. Thank you for setting the bar so incredibly high. I am honored to call you my mentor.

Dr. Morrell- You are a great example of how to inspire others through your teaching *and* research; your passion for your work is contagious. I aspire to be as successful as you, and I'm looking forward to joining the movement at Teachers College.

Dr. McLaren- Thank you for the many conversations in which you challenged me to think about my work in new and exciting ways, and for your consistent kindness. It has been a pleasure working with you; I am eager to embark on our future endeavors.

Dr. Gomez- Our recent conversation about navigating the job market was extraordinarily useful. I will continue to look to your wisdom as I progress in academia, and I'm anxious to hear your feedback on this project. Thank you for signing on at a moment's notice.

Dr. Philip- Thank you for so graciously consenting to be a member of my committee. As a former urban high school teacher, you offer an important perspective regarding the practical applications of this study. I am looking forward to receiving your insights.

Teachers, students, and staff at King High School- I thank you for allowing me to participate in a very special community. During our time together, I grew immensely as a young adult and educator.

Dr. Amah- Easily one of the hardest-working women I know, you embody strength, perseverance, and love. For over sixteen years (wow, you're gettin' old gurl!) you have been

such a great friend and source of encouragement. I am so proud of all of your accomplishments, and I'm forever grateful to you for "lifting as [you] climb".

Dr. Cam- I appreciate you for insisting that I pursue my doctorate, and for supporting me throughout the process. Thank you for always showing up when I needed counsel: the innumerable texts, emails, and difficult conversations have played a tremendous role in my evolution as a scholar. Your tireless work on behalf of young people in urban communities is a constant source of motivation, and I aspire to inspire folks the way that you do.

Family and Friends

Mom and Dad- Although we've been apart for many years, I want to thank you both for being my first supporters. You challenged me to put my education above all things. Even in our distance, I am encouraged by your faith in my intellectual capacity.

Jake- You were the first person to discover that I was destined to be an educator. Your reassurance and endless praise have invigorated me throughout my journey. Thank you!

Kashana and the Philips Family- I don't know where I'd be if you hadn't taken me in on that dreadful night, several years ago. Thank you for your boundless support, and for showing me the true meaning of family and friendship.

Jynné and Sparkale- Sisters, thank you for humoring me, as my very first students. Because you have held me in such high regard, failure has never been an option. I want to thank you for believing in me more than I ever believed in myself. I love you tremendously!

Karisa- There isn't enough room on this page for me to express my thanks to you! We have traveled through murky waters to finally arrive where we stand today. Throughout this process, I have been so grateful to have such an amazing writing buddy by my side, and someone who I can call a true friend. I am excited to watch you continue to flourish, Dr. Peer!

Lena- My precious baby girl, you are the purpose behind each breath that I take. With your arrival, I learned the true meaning of devotion. Thank you for keeping me humble, patient, and centered. I pray that the universe blesses you with a fiery and unyielding passion to pursue your wildest dreams, and teachers who appreciate the beauty of your humanity.

Nikhil (my love)- It's been an amazing road for us. I thank you for believing in me beyond measure, and for holding us down throughout this tumultuous and often unpredictable journey. I could not have completed my degree without your patience, sound advice, and unconditional love and support. You are such an amazing blessing to Lena and me, and I am so proud to call you my partner!

VITA
Monique Lanier Lane

EDUCATION

- 2008 – Present **University of California, Los Angeles**
Graduate School of Education & Information Studies
Doctoral Candidate in the Division of Urban Schooling
Faculty Advisors: Tyrone Howard, Ph.D.; Ernest Morrell, Ph.D.
- 2003 – 2005 **University of California, Los Angeles**
Graduate School of Education & Information Studies
Master of Education
English Language Arts Single Subject Credential
- 1998 – 2003 **University of California, Los Angeles**
Bachelor of Arts, Psychology
Minor in Education and Applied Developmental Psychology

PUBLICATIONS

- Lane, M.** (under review). *A community of queens, a pedagogy of power: Black feminist pedagogy as a site of resistance for African-American girls*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Lane, M.** (in press). Black girl interrupted: A reflection on the challenges and possibilities from the community to the academy. In V. Evans-Winters and B. Love (Eds). *Endarkened feminist knowledge: Black women speak back, up, & out*.
- Lane, M.** & McLaren, P. (in progress). Positioning students as agents of change: A lesson for urban educators.
- Amah, I. & **Lane, M.** (in progress). A Black feminist epistemological approach: Reframing the college going pathways of young African American women.

CHAPTER 1: STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Introduction: Girl Interrupted

It was a typical day in Honors twelfth grade English at King High School¹ in South Los Angeles, in 1998. I had recently received acceptance to UCLA for undergraduate admission and was anxious to take on the challenges and opportunities that college would present. Deeply proud of my accomplishment, I knew I would be the first person in my family and one of the few in my community to matriculate into higher education. Disengaged with our teacher's mechanistic application of the traditional curriculum² and insulted by her low expectations, my peers and I participated in casual small talk - our usual escape from classroom boredom. Seemingly out of nowhere, our teacher rose to her feet from behind her desk and threw her arms up in frantic despair. Obviously frustrated by our inattentiveness, she cried out, "I really don't know *why* I waste my time with you guys anyway! *None* of you are going to college! You aren't going to do *anything* productive with your lives!" The lunch bell rang, interrupting her rant, and like soldiers at war we all left - virtually unfazed by the tongue-lashing we'd received from our drill sergeant. Of course, we had been exposed to multiple forms of racial stereotyping and deficit thinking (Solórzano & Yosso, 2004) expressed by many adults before; however, this particular incident epitomized our perception of teachers' opinions of urban youth of color³.

As a high school student I encountered various instances in which one or more dimensions of my identity was unmercifully attacked. In one eight-hour school day I occupied

¹ This school has been given a fictitious name. Pseudonyms will be utilized throughout this document to protect the anonymity of the individuals involved.

² In this paper *traditional curriculum* refers to coursework and pedagogies that are typically standards-based, yet fail to respond to the unique and varied academic needs of low-income students of color.

³ *Urban youth of color*, in this context, refers to working class and working poor (non-white) individuals residing in densely populated cities.

multiple spaces - each commingling race, class, and gender⁴ politics. In class well meaning, yet misguided ‘educators’ frequently trivialized my intelligence. In the hallways teenage boys ogled and assaulted my maturing brown body via sexist epithets. Moreover, the ubiquity of reductive images of low-income African-American⁵ women in the media, that positioned us as icons of cultural deviation and pathology, resulted in habitual hazing from my peers - many of whom misunderstood my negation of prescribed notions of Black femininity. Despite my efforts at negotiating these offenses: a front of indifference, mean-muggin’⁶, and the seldom quick-witted counterattack, *each* interaction left an imprint of shame on my dignity, and the collective effect was a powerful strike against my humanity.

Lacking a formal space to critically analyze these experiences, I bore my stigma of shame in silence. The college prep courses for highly gifted students traditionally disregarded oppressive social conditions and often reinforced them through curricula that valorized White middle class norms. As such, I was young, gifted, and *deeply embattled*. There was, however, a glimmer of hope. I had *big* dreams. With my head buried in my books, I envisioned a revolution where young Black women unite - striking back against ‘the machine’, to subvert the oppression that has so skillfully been woven into the fabric of American schooling.

Study Rationale

My personal battles in school are consistent with a larger body of experiences among urban Black female youth, throughout the nation. With the turn of the twenty-first century, the

⁴ Not to be confused with *sex*, or the biological and physiological characteristics that define males and females— *gender* refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviors, and emotional traits typically assigned to and associated with each sex.

⁵ The term ‘African-American’ is used to denote individuals in the Diaspora, who self identify as Black or African-American, and reside in the United States. In this paper, ‘African-American’ is used interchangeably with ‘Black’.

⁶ ‘Mean-muggin’ refers to a popular behavior among urban youth, in which a person stares in a hard and intimidating manner. Although it is often exercised to provoke a fight, mean-muggin’ in this context was utilized as a visceral reaction to the disrespectful behaviors initiated by *other* individuals.

continuing struggle for young Black women's liberation has become increasingly volatile. The evolution of urban misogyny and corresponding disreputable media narratives⁷ tremendously impact the fragile identities of these youth (P.H. Collins, 2004; Townsend, Neilands, Jones-Thomas, & Jackson, 2010). As traditional education offers limited critical analyses of Black women's shifting social struggles, standardized curriculums remain disengaging and, thus, undermine the development of their transformative⁸ agency in classroom spaces.

Recent scholarship has produced a number of important studies examining the role of standardized curriculums on the self-perception and academic well being of African-American female students (Fordham, 1996; D.F. Grant, Battle, Murphy, & Heggoy, 1999; Power-Carter, 2007). Most of this work tends to focus on interrogating the differential ways in which Black female youth negotiate conventional schooling environments, with little attention paid to practicable and effective methods of academic instruction that reconcile the marginalization experienced by this population of learners. Nonetheless, this scholarship reifies the evaded notion that urban schools are failing the young Black women they serve. Academic literature examining declining high school graduation rates, urban Black girl resiliency, and disparate life outcomes among these women substantiate this claim (Akom, 2003, Anyon, 2005; Evans-Winters, 2011).

This research extends the work of a broad range of empirical and conceptual studies that have been previously conducted. The introductory chapter begins with a review of the broader

⁷ Patricia Hill-Collins makes the claim that popular media depictions of Black women portray this population as aggressive, hypersexual, poor, and uneducated. For more information, see Collins, P. H. (2004). *Black sexual politics : African Americans, gender, and the new racism*. New York: Routledge.

⁸ Solorzano (2001) defines transformational resistance, as student behavior that illustrates “an awareness of her or his oppressive conditions and structure of domination”, and action that is “motivated by a sense of social justice” (p.221). Thus, while transformational resistance refers to an *action*, transformational agency pertains to a student’s *understanding* of her or his capacity to take action in ways that are individually and socially empowering.

educational context of my study, utilizing Black feminist theory as an analytic lens to examine the significance of current reform practices, and teacher ideology and pedagogy, to the educational encounters of African-American female students. These arguments will illuminate the factors that impede the self-definition⁹ and self-determination¹⁰ of urban Black female youth.

I argue that Black feminist pedagogy, as a tool for developing viable self-identities, is an instructional practice that has the potential to serve as a buffer for African-American young women. I maintain that within the context of this study, Black feminist pedagogy functioned as a protective shield, equipping the participants with the necessary armor to combat disempowering and alienating schooling environments. Hence, this work responds to the paucity of educational scholarship that examines the ways in which Black feminist teaching philosophy and curricula moves beyond the *abstraction* of critical pedagogy¹¹ to the *implementation* of classroom pedagogical practice.

This chapter proceeds with an overview of my study, the research questions guiding this work, and a description of the major contributions this scholarship offers to both theory and practice within education and African-American gender studies.

Theoretical Foundations: A Black Feminist Perspective

In recent years, a litany of scholarship has focused on re-conceptualizing academic underachievement for African-American students (Adkins-Coleman, 2010; Akom, 2009; West-Olatunji, Behar-Hornstein, Rant & Cohen-Phillips, 2008). Regrettably, few studies in this area

⁹ *Self-definition* is defined as the act of rejecting ascribed notions of one's identity, and instead, naming one's *own* reality—in the context of and relation to family and community (Collins, 2000, p.112-113).

¹⁰ Collins (2000) characterizes *self-determination* as the “power to decide one's own destiny” (Collins, 2000, p.300)

¹¹ Critical pedagogy refers to the task of educating students to “actively question and negotiate the relationships between theory and practice, critical analysis and common sense, and learning and social change” (Giroux, 2007, p.1). Critical pedagogy is frequently conceptualized in educational scholarship; however, there are fewer empirical studies in which this practice has been *applied*.

have focused specifically on African-American *female* students, whose unique struggles are often conflated with the experiences of African-American males or White girls (Bartee & Brown, 2007; Chambers, 2009; Fordham, 1996). Currently, an abundance of educational research on Black female adolescents targets pathology through deficit based ideologies, thereby disparaging the rich culture, intellectual prowess, and academic potential of these youth (Obbo, 1997; Smith, 1999).

In objection to the prevalence of deficit-oriented discussions around the positioning of African-American female students—this study draws on Black feminist¹² theory as the ideological anchor for analyzing Black girls’ complex negotiations of American schooling, as well as the varying methods by which they are [mis]educated. For centuries, Black feminist/womanist theory has publicly challenged the economic, political, and ideological subjugation of African-American women in the United States. From Sojourner Truth’s antebellum critiques of normative analyses of womanhood (Campbell, 1986), to Ransby and Matthews’ (1995) contemporary examination of counter-revolutionary gender discourse in hip-hop culture, Black feminist ideology functions as “collective, oppositional knowledge” (Collins, 2000, p. 23) exercised by Black women as a means of self-determination and an initiative towards the collective empowerment of all oppressed peoples.

In the field of education, Black feminist theory has frequently been employed as one of many epistemological tools for investigating the recurring patterns of marginalization that threaten Black girls in K-12 schools (Evans-Winters, 2011; Henry, 1998; Mogadime, 2000; Power-Carter, 2007). Much of this work purports that the growing academic underachievement

¹² The term ‘Black feminist’ is used to denote Black women residing in the United States, whose scholarship and political activism explicitly challenges the simultaneity of race, class, and gender oppression inherent in the Black American female experience. This includes the work of women who contribute to “gender- enhancing feminist scholarship, without explicitly naming itself as feminist” (hooks, 1994, p.126). In this paper, *feminist* is used interchangeably with *womanist*.

of African-American female youth is fundamentally tied to the simultaneity of race, class, and gender oppression they endure in schools—as well as that which is present in their respective communities (Evans-Winters, 2011; Henry, 1998; Sears, 2010). Accordingly, Black feminist theory functions as a vital theoretical foundation for examining how the differential treatment of African-American females is *manifested* in traditional educational settings.

Recently, Black feminist scholars have introduced Black feminist *pedagogy* as an extension of and advancement beyond Black feminist intellectual work. Collins argues that “it is not enough to imagine empowerment for Black women in isolation from deep-seated changes in the social structure overall” (P. H. Collins, 2004, p. 3). Accordingly, the objective of Black feminist pedagogy is to subvert the social and institutional subjugation of African-Americans and other subordinated groups through the use of liberating, gender-centered classroom instruction (Mogadime, 2000; Omolade, 1993; Sears, 2010). A detailed discussion of Black feminist pedagogy, as a practicable and effective method of empowering *Black female youth*, will be elucidated in Chapter two.

Social Context of the Study

Public schools have historically played a significant part in reproducing the social, economic, and ideological hierarchies embedded in larger society (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; H. Giroux, 2007). Through discriminatory laws and practices these institutions have effectively segregated, alienated, and deculturalized¹³ urban youth of color, thereby positioning these students to occupy subordinate roles in society (Anyon, 2005; Chambers, 2009; Spring, 2010). This is best represented by the failure of public schools to distribute resources equitably

¹³ Spring defines deculturalization as the “educational process of destroying a people’s culture (cultural genocide) and replacing it with a new culture” (2010, p.8). Examples include (but are not limited to) the implementation of Anglo-centered curriculum, and forbidding languages other than English in the context of educational institutions.

(Darling-Hammond, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 2006) as well as the consistent implementation of dehumanizing pedagogies and curricula that reflect belief in the cultural, linguistic, and racial superiority of upper middle class White individuals (Delpit, 2012; Joseph, 1995; J. Oakes, 1981; Power-Carter, 2007).

The function of public schools as traditionally oppressive, hegemonic forces justifies the argument that these institutions are fundamentally responsible for settling the outstanding “educational debt” owed to socioeconomically and racially marginalized youth (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 3). Ladson-Billings maintains that current racial and economic disparities in academic performance are a consequence of longstanding and persistent failure to produce equitable schooling conditions for these individuals. Both across the nation and in California specifically, educational policies such as *Race to the Top* purport to pay down this debt by promoting urban school districts to allow alternative educational models—often in the form of corporate charters—to assume control of failing public schools (Fine, 1994; Kafka, 2008). As Rose (2009) contends, we must divert social responsibility for remedying public ills away from the private sector and instead utilize the public school as a site that cultivates equal opportunity for *all* students regardless of social, economic, or geographic location.

In the following sections, a Black feminist framework is utilized to uncover the suppression of *Black girls’* self-actualization, in what is ostensibly a Democratic schooling environment. First, I will illuminate how recent school reform efforts have overlooked the cultural subjectivities and educational needs of African-American female students. Next, I examine how teacher biases and corresponding curricular and pedagogical decisions alienate Black girls in K-12 classrooms. I conclude this discussion with a call for the immediate restructuring of educational policies and practices, and the development of innovative

educational research, in order to engage the intellectual aptitude and social potential of this historically marginalized group.

Black Girls Left Behind: The Problem with NCLB

A plethora of educational scholarship has documented the varied ways in which public schools are failing the most vulnerable populations of youth they serve (Darling-Hammond, 2007; Delpit, 1988; Howard, 2008; Irons, 2002). The nation's urban poor students of color are faring well below their white counterparts based on a wide variety of academic measures (Ladson-Billings, 2006). This is particularly pronounced in California, where escalating high school drop-out rates among socio-economically disenfranchised Black and Latino students have been a product of severe overcrowding, disparate access to resources, and the re-segregation of public schools (Oakes, 2005; Orfield, 2004).

Past reform efforts such as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)¹⁴, the push for scripted curricula, and the current rhetoric around value-added teacher assessment methods overwhelmingly prioritize standardized test scores as indicators of school and district progress, as well as teacher effectiveness. The resulting added pressure on teachers to create curricula around standardized tests leaves educators with a modicum of space to employ engaging curricula and pedagogies that empower racially and economically marginalized youth. Black feminist scholars purport that in communities of color where youth must navigate the harsh realities of urban life, curricula based solely around standardized test content make for irrelevant learning conditions that disengage these students and divert them from reaching their full academic potential (Case, 1997; Joseph, 1995; Ladson-Billings & Henry, 1990).

¹⁴ Although several school reform efforts were in place at the time of the study, The No Child Left Behind Act was at the height of its notoriety in the state of California. The push for standardized curriculum strongly influenced the academic culture of the school site.

This claim is legitimized upon close inspection of African-American female student reading performance— as measured by standardized test scores—and high school graduation rates. In spite of the fact that the number of Black women in college has recently surpassed all groups by race and gender (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011)—the high school dropout rate for African-American girls is 50% greater than for White female youth (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). Furthermore, Muhammad and Dixson’s (2008) large-scale quantitative analysis of high school aged Black girls’ performance in schools found that these adolescents hold a lower mean test score and report less enthusiasm for their academic environments, as compared to their peers. The research reveals that on most measures, the academic accomplishments of young Black women can be attributed to sustained resilience and the aid of multiple systems of support in the face of extraordinary adversity (Evans-Winters, 2011; Winn, 2011). This is a major call for concern, as there are detrimental socio-political ramifications for the failure of schools to adequately foster the development of critical academic literacies among urban Black female student populations. Continual negligence by stakeholders will undoubtedly result in plummeting test scores, increasing high school drop-out rates, and lead to disparate life outcomes among this population of learners (Anyon, 2005; California Department of Education, 2009; Muhammad & Dixson, 2008; National Center for Education Statistics, 2008).

It is critical that educational researchers acknowledge school reform practices that regularly overlook the complex socio-cultural contexts in which Black female students are situated and the ways in which their subordination is perpetuated in schools (Evans-Winters, 2011; Miron, 1996). Immediate *restructuring* and *re-culturing* of the school and classroom settings into transformative intellectual communities is necessary in order to disrupt dominant

notions of failure and meet the specific needs of today's urban African-American female student population.

To fulfill the ideal of a progressive public education system as the cornerstone of democracy (Katz, 1987), Freire calls for the “democratic intervention of the educator” (Freire, 2005, p. 102). He argues that to truly embody the task of educator and pedagogue, teachers must develop a political consciousness around the liberatory potential of both public schools generally and their pedagogical practices specifically. Thus, an investigation of teacher *ideology* and *practice* are central components to a re-examination of the ways in which Black female youth experience schooling. In an effort to ensure that these students are provided ample opportunities to meet their full academic and social potential, we must first illuminate the necessity for educators to engage in critical examinations of racial and social injustice.

Teacher Ideology and Practice

As America's K-12 public schools become more racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse, the teaching force is becoming progressively homogenous (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003). A great majority of our nation's K-12 educators are White, and on account of their racial privilege, these individuals benefit heavily from social and systematic inequality (Howard, 2010; Lipshitz, 1998; McIntosh, 1990).

Bearing in mind the lack of diversity within the teaching force, Williams and Evans-Winters (2005) maintain that the insidious nature of White privilege leads to hesitance among White students in teacher education programs. They make the argument that these teachers often fail to engage in analyses of how instructor racial biases contribute to student performance (p. 201). In alignment with Williams' and Evans-Winters' findings, Picower's (2009) scholarship on the unexamined Whiteness in teaching illustrates how White pre-service teachers perpetuate

institutional racism. She contends that these individuals consciously “relied on tools of whiteness”, which includes espousing color-blind ideologies and disregarding their “social positionality, as it intersects with those of their students” (p.199). This is critical to note because teacher ideologies are heavily reflected in their curricular choices.

Powell’s (2009) exploration into the racism embedded in a required high school curriculum reveals findings parallel to those of studies conducted decades prior—where it was determined that educators’ most commonly utilized literary depictions of African Americans included portrayals of these individuals as subservient, unintelligent jests, with embellished behaviors and distorted speech patterns (Brown, 1933; Larrick, 1965). Moreover, research has consistently illuminated the stereotypical and reductive ways in which *Black women* are represented throughout traditional American literature narrative texts. Characterizations as mummies, matriarchs, and jezebels have historical significance, as they have consistently operated as a means of ‘othering’ and subjugating African-American women (Christian, 1985).

The blatant dismissal of Black girls’ subjectivities in K-12 curriculum poses a grave danger to these students, as their budding identities are informed by uncritical examinations of demeaning reading materials. Black feminist theory suggests that there is a great dichotomy between the corroboration of the experienced realities of African American females and the explanations offered by dominant Eurocentric narratives (P. Collins, 2000; Higginbotham, 1995). As such, theorists advocate the implementation of a Black feminist pedagogy, which encompasses “learning strategies informed by Black women’s historical experiences with race, class, and gender bias and the consequences of marginality and isolation” (Omolade, 1993, p. 31).

This method of instruction uncompromisingly counters traditional Eurocentric curricula— in that it is grounded in an Afrocentric orientation to reality, recognizes both student

and teacher as fully human, and regards each individual as a contributor to the production of knowledge (hooks, 1994). The vitality of a Black feminist pedagogical framework in educational settings is championed by Gloria Joseph (1995), who argues that although this framework is designed to raise the socio-political consciousness of African-American female students, its philosophy and practice give credence and respect to all people of various cultures. According to Joseph, it is undoubtedly an epistemological construct with the potential to engender social and educational transformation.

In order to construct affirming classroom spaces for African-American female students, Black feminist theorists argue that it is imperative for all educators to possess the willingness and vulnerability to extricate themselves from hegemonic ideologies and pedagogies. Furthermore, they need to do so explicitly and unabashedly in order to garner trust, respect, and academic engagement from these youth.

Pushing Towards Transformative Education

Bearing in mind the embattled state in which Black girls find themselves, educational scholarship and theory bereft of liberatory reform efforts are “simply rhetoric contributing to cyclical patterns of marginalization and domination” (Evans-Winters, 2011, p. 11). Any educational reform strategy with the objective of democratizing schooling for Black female youth must be grounded in an enhanced framework of *quality* academic instruction that belies previous efforts. Oakes, Franke, Quartz, and Rogers (2002) contend that “a deep caring and democratic commitment must be accompanied by highly developed subject matter and pedagogical skills” for teachers in urban schools (p. 229). Additionally, highly qualified teachers in urban schools “need to understand local urban cultures” and acquire “skills to develop urban youth literacies across academic content areas” (p. 229-230). In essence, a holistic approach to

teaching is fundamental to servicing the academic needs of historically subordinated youth. The *highly qualified* educator possesses deep emotional investment, heightened community awareness, and engages in rigorous pre-service pedagogical training.

Substantive, forward thinking directives for educational policy should address two fundamental sources of sub-standard education: teacher racial biases, and corresponding reductive and demeaning pedagogies that undermine these students' achievement potential. By doing so, we reverse the history of denying African-American female students access to one of the most central avenues to attaining academic success, that is, access to *quality instruction*. A Black feminist epistemological construct can aid policymakers, scholars, and classroom practitioners in disrupting oppressive schooling systems by providing a framework individuals can utilize to understand the various factors that contribute to the academic disengagement, and the social and cultural disempowerment of these youth.

Notwithstanding the necessity to examine the educational barriers burdening Black female students, it is critical for stakeholders to become acquainted with academic contexts and methods of instruction that result in the social and academic empowerment of these youth. As such, scholarship by Akom (2003), Sears (2010), and Mogadime (2000) illuminate pedagogical practices that have cultivated intellectual curiosity, individual agency, and self-determination among these young women. This research, which will be discussed extensively in Chapter 2, contributes significantly to the field of culturally responsive pedagogy¹⁵ and has implications for classroom practitioners and other professionals who are interested in eradicating the “matrix of domination” inherent in K-12 practice and curricula (Collins, 2000, p. 227).

¹⁵ Culturally responsive pedagogy refers to an ideological standpoint and corresponding pedagogical practices aimed at disrupting injustice through dynamic curricula, respect for cultural backgrounds, and explicit care for all students (Gay, 2000; Howard, 2010).

Finally, this literature can provide policymakers with data to make informed decisions when developing educational directives aimed at transforming the ways in which young Black women are positioned in schools. The implementation of new, effective reform policies is critical, as continued neglect will undoubtedly contribute to the criminalization (Farmer, 2010; Winn, 2010a), and labor exploitation (Beale, 1970; Davis, 1983) of African-American female youth, and ultimately prevent these young women from participating in society in ways that they deem meaningful. Accordingly, a critical re-examination of the conditions plaguing urban Black female students through a Black feminist orientation fosters a democratic consciousness aimed at moving society towards a “more perfect union,” as articulated in our nation’s Constitution.

Study Overview

Beyond the Bell: The Creation of a ‘Safe Space’

After graduating from King High school in 1998, I returned five years later as a bright-eyed and enthusiastic novice English teacher. Despite subtle changes in the appearance of the school and the evolved fashion trends among students, the academic culture of King High remained the same. Disempowering pedagogies, corresponding academic disengagement, and low teacher retention rates continued to be the norm. Although I excelled in this environment as a student, I was well aware of how the inequitable opportunities to learn¹⁶ provided inadequate priming for the social and economic mobility of others. With a thorough understanding of my community’s hopes and needs for education, I sought to construct a critical pedagogy (Freire, 1973; hooks, 1994, 2003) that would challenge the ways in which urban youth of color have traditionally been educated in public high schools. My initial aspirations were to utilize critical

¹⁶ Racial re-segregation, resource [mal]distribution, the high percentage of unqualified teachers, and sub-standard curriculum at King High School contributed to poor educational outcomes among its students.

ethnic literature¹⁷ as a pedagogical tool for increasing literacy capacities, fostering empowering ethnic identities, and promoting gender justice for these youth.

In the process of implementing this pedagogy I witnessed high levels of participation¹⁸ in my classes. However, I quickly recognized that many of my African-American female students withdrew from class discussions involving the intersections of race, class, and gender oppression. I was astounded by how often many of these young women vehemently refrained from voicing their opinions during class conversations; yet, they did so *incredibly* via written form. This was evidenced during a unit on performance poetry, in which each student was required to develop an original poem in response to an experienced form of social or institutional oppression; every member of the class was expected to formally present his/her writing in front their peers.

The energy of critical youth expression generated during the days leading up to student performances created an invigorating classroom atmosphere. However, on the third afternoon of drafting I was propelled back to earth when I learned that Ashanti, an eleventh grade honors student, was refusing to participate in the assignment. With conviction, she informed me that she was not simply refusing to *share* her poem, she explained that she was not going to make the effort to *write* one at all! Surprised by her blatant disregard for my expectations, I utilized the best weapon in my arsenal; I called her mother, Yolanda—who later coerced Ashanti into completing the assignment. The following day Ashanti’s poem appeared on my desk, beautifully handwritten. After reading it, I immediately understood her hesitation to write and eventually perform her work.

¹⁷ I define *critical ethnic literature* as texts that explicitly resist oppressive structures of domination through the telling of individual and collective stories—written by non-white identified individuals.

¹⁸ I measured participation holistically, as a function of student attendance, involvement in class discussions and activities, and the quality of and rate with which students completed written assignments.

In her poem Ashanti spoke directly to her mother. Alternating between literal and figurative language, she revealed her deep reverence for and connection to Yolanda, whom she reliably consoled through multiple familial hardships. In the snippet that follows, she discusses Yolanda's challenges with poverty, depleting self-worth, and domestic abuse:

“Your struggle and your strife is my drive towards perfection
Even though you're a part of me, I try to be your reflection
Because I see a *light* in you
And when I see your shine dimming, I try to *enlighten* you
Even when there was no lights, no gas
Water was cold just like life
And there was times where I wanted to be “like Mike”
And you was Tina cuz' pops was just like Ike
My heart shattered at the tormenting sight
I swear I wanted him to die every night
The recycling fight
The cycle of my life...”

Although Ashanti eventually caved and completed the written portion of the assignment, it took a great deal of encouragement from her mother and myself before she consented to reading it aloud. Her writing was deeply personal and evocative, and she did not feel safe exposing her vulnerabilities to her peers. The commotion over Ashanti's poem eventually led me to question several other Black female students regarding their inconsistent participation in class discussions. I learned that there were various explanations for their resistance: many felt isolated by their experiences and doubted the ability of their peers to empathize; the unfamiliar practice of speaking out against racial and gender injustice made individuals uneasy; several young women were simply too frightened to vocally engage in front of other students, who they perceived to be judgmental.

My encounter with Ashanti reified what I had already known intuitively. That is, traditional schooling environments had inculcated in these young women a general sense of

powerlessness, isolation, and fear of external analytic expression. Despite my best efforts to design a curriculum that encouraged student voice and critical analysis, I came to the conclusion that I had created a classroom environment that was insufficiently empowering, relative to the needs of *all* of my students. Hence, I had not created a *safe space* for African-American females to *consistently* engage in public critiques of their social positioning.

It is important to note that I did not come to this conclusion on my own. In my numerous informal classroom encounters with Black female students, many of the young women confided in me that they occasionally felt negatively positioned by the curriculum. This was particularly the case during discussions in which we explored the intersectionalities of race and gender politics. These students generally felt uncomfortable discussing such issues in the presence of their male peers, who they believed wouldn't understand or appreciate their unique, gendered perspectives and realities. As such, Black female students—who were generally self-assured and outspoken—were the *only* individuals who *openly* admitted to silencing themselves in my class, in an effort to avoid feeling marginalized, attacked, and/or disregarded.

Because Black girls were the sole group of students who publicly expressed their discomfort in my class and displayed inconsistent patterns of classroom participation, I felt compelled to intervene and offer an unorthodox *safe space* for these youth. At the time there was a special program at King High designated for Black male students¹⁹, as well as a separate, and rather popular student group organized and operated by Latina/o youth²⁰. Although I believed that Black male students and Latina/o students could have benefitted from *additional* support

¹⁹ With the support of LAUSD, King High School administration designed entirely *Black male* English classes for students who had the lowest test scores and poorest overall academic performance. These classes, led by African-American male faculty, went beyond the traditional English curriculum to include special texts and pedagogies that directly responded to the specific needs of urban Black male youth.

²⁰ *Liberación* was a campus organization that provided support for Latina/o students in an effort to improve their academic performance and socialization at King High. This organization was led by a Latino faculty member, and was widely known and well respected across campus.

services at King High, I felt it necessary and *urgent* to intervene on the behalf of Black girls—who, in my opinion, were crying out for help.

Patricia Hill-Collins defines a *safe space* as a setting in which Black women are allowed to freely engage in critical discourse around relevant issues (2000, p. 110). Within these spaces Black women’s self-defined, group standpoint emerges – which, according to Collins, is “essential to U.S. Black women’s survival” in a shamelessly unjust society (p.98). It is through this independent, self-defined standpoint that African-American women’s individual and collective activism is generated and sustained. Traditionally, these locations have included Black churches and community organizations; although it is important to note that a distinguishing feature of a *safe space* is that it is free from the “surveillance of more powerful groups” (p. 111). Thus, these locations become threatened by the inclusion of those who are not Black *and* female.

In an effort to combat the social and intellectual alienation my African-American²¹ female students endured, I sought to create a *safe space* for these young women to develop their critical agency—beyond the traditional classroom walls. As such, I founded an organization at King High entitled Black Girls United (BGU). Grounded in Black feminist theory, and borrowing from the major tenets²² of Black feminist pedagogy, BGU functioned as an alternative and unorthodox setting within our mainstream urban schooling context; African-American female students were afforded the opportunity to *collectively* read the world (Freire, 1973), and move towards transforming their place within it (hooks, 1994; Omolade, 1993). Each week during lunch, members of BGU utilized critical ethnic literature to investigate and work towards

²¹ The participants involved in BGU self-identify as Black and/or African American, although it is important to note that these young women constituted a pan-ethnic group. They were of various ethnic backgrounds, including Jamaican, Belizean, and Brazilian, speak a variety of languages and dialects, and hold different immigration and citizenship statuses. Such varied ethnic and cultural identities contributed to the multiple perspectives among the young women, and greatly enriched the conversations and writing that took place within BGU.

²² The defining features of Black feminist pedagogy are extensively outlined in Chapter 2.

resolving historical and contemporary issues facing the African-American female population. These student-led, Socratic seminar based discussions often resulted in meaningful community activities²³ that emerged organically from our conversations. In sum, our shared objectives were to engender solidarity, self-love, and self-definition within each participant of Black Girls United.

Amidst a rampant culturally irrelevant schooling curriculum on campus, BGU provided a striking example of how engaging young Black women as critical feminists of color helped to foster the development of empowered, self-defined identities. This dissertation study allows further investigation of how the organizational structure of BGU fostered within participants the *desire* and the *skill set* to circumvent prescribed notions of Black femininity. To focus my research, I addressed three pressing questions that emerged from my teaching practice in BGU:

RQ: In what ways, if any, did Black Feminist pedagogy impact the racial/ethnic and gender identities of the African-American young women participating in Black Girls United?

- In what ways, if any, did Black feminist pedagogy influence how the students in BGU *understood* their identities, as young Black women?
- From the participants' perspectives, in what ways, if any, did BGU help students negotiate the *social* and *academic* terrains of school?

Methodology: Critical Race Feminist Autoethnography

This study utilizes an autoethnographic approach to document the effects of Black feminist pedagogy on the identity development of African-American female students. Similar to other qualitative methods, autoethnography relies heavily on storytelling to assist in the interpretation of social interactions (Alexander, 1999; Spry, 2001). However, autoethnography is distinctive in that through the public exposure of personal narratives, a powerful process of self-investigation occurs. During this process, the *autobiographical* and *personal* is linked to the

²³ Community activities included neighborhood protests, collective health and fitness undertakings, and engagement with local women's organizations apart from King High School.

cultural and *social* (Ellis, 2004, p. xix). Thus, the act of self-narration fosters the critical interpretation and eventual transformation of personal, as well as broader social and political circumstances (Carey-Webb, 2001). In the case of this investigation, the narrative documentation of the effects of my teaching practice is connected to a larger socio-political project. That is, through the public, narrative disclosure of students' engagement with Black feminist pedagogy—this research aims to assist African-American female youth in the development of their expression of voice, as they become agents of change and advocates of their education. Moreover, another objective of this study is to ultimately subvert the historically oppressive means by which African-American female youth are schooled.

The tradition of autoethnography derives from the longstanding convention of personal storytelling in the fields of anthropology and feminist ethnography (Jirousek, 2006; Visweswaran, 1997). As an extension of critical race theory²⁴, *critical race feminism* complicates the feminist practice of autobiographical storytelling within autoethnography through the centering of *non-white* racialized female experiences. As such, this autoethnography draws on critical race feminist philosophy as an effort to denaturalize Eurocentric notions of femininity within educational research practices (Muhammad & Dixon, 2008; Thompson, 2004). As young Black women authoritatively utilize their collective voice in the narrative articulation of their differential schooling experiences, the hierarchy of knowledge claims is inverted, and the “multiple layered realities in which Black girls exist” becomes the focus (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010, p. 22).

Data Collection

²⁴ For a detailed discussion of critical race theory, see Solorzano, D. (1997). Images and words that wound: Critical race theory, racial stereotyping, and teacher education. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 24(3), 5-19.

In order to document the impact of Black feminist pedagogy on the identities of African-American female student participants, I collected data through *five main sources*: 1) Nearly two years of analytic memos documenting my reflections on the BGU lessons and student responses; 2) Video-taped BGU meetings; 3) Two sets of semi-structured, in-depth interviews with a representative research sample group of six students; 4) Student artifacts²⁵, and 5) BGU curriculum. Former student participants were selected for the research sample based on variations in familial socio-economic history, positions within the school academic tracking system²⁶, involvement in other school-related extra curricular activities, and ethnic background. This group equitably represents the diversity of the BGU participants in these areas. An elaborate discussion of my research methodology and data analysis can be found in Chapter 3.

Study Contributions

Researching the diverse ways in which African-American female students experienced and responded to Black feminist pedagogy has valuable implications for classroom practice and teacher education programs. Furthermore, it can likely contribute to future curriculum reform endeavors and educational research on this under-theorized, often overlooked group. This study fills a tremendous void in educational scholarship that critically addresses what young Black women want, need, and can benefit from in urban schooling contexts. It is unique in that it utilizes student voices to interpret how African-American females are situated in schools—positioning these youth as experts of their own socio-political location, and empowering them as co-participants in the effort to radically transform the state of U.S. public education.

²⁵ Artifacts include tangible objects that are emblematic of a shift in identity development. Such items may include (but are not limited to) written documents and digital media.

²⁶ Students at King High School were academically tracked into the highly gifted magnet, the Teacher Training magnet, the media academy, the business academy, or general education. Over ninety-eight percent of the members in BGU were enrolled in the Teacher Training Magnet, the program in which I taught.

Moreover, it is my hope that this research contributes to the branch of educational literature illuminating the strategies employed by a substantial number of Black female teachers, like myself, as exemplars for effectively educating academically underserved youth (Ball, 2000; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; 2008; Foster, 1993). As Dixson and Dingus note, the historical navigational and pedagogical strategies employed by Black women educators has insight that can potentially inform the practices of *all* teachers (2008).

Although qualitative research is often criticized for its small sample sizes and narrow applicability, the limitations of this inquiry should not overshadow its potential contribution to the field of educational research. This study utilizes narrative qualitative methods because it is particularly effective at capturing the unique, layered perspectives and experiences of the researcher and participants, thereby providing a rich contextual analysis from which grounded theory emerges (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and/or pre-existing theory is supported (Wolcott, 1994). The rich counter-narratives²⁷ of the seven Black female participants are in many ways illustrative of the schooling experiences of numerous other African-American girls in urban educational environments. Thus, the findings of this investigation will offer research informed interventions to aid educators in developing practicable and dynamic approaches to educating this historically marginalized group.

²⁷ Critical race theorists legitimate the experiential knowledge of students of color as key components to understanding and confronting racial subordination in the field of education. Counterstorytelling and other forms of narration are two of many methods by which researchers can draw on the lived experiences of these youth. See Solorzano, D., & Yosso, T. (2002). Critical race methodology: Counterstorytelling as an analytical framework for education research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 8(1), 23-44.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

The present chapter provides a review of the relevant literature that informs this study. I begin with a discussion of the urgent need for new educational research that critically investigates the schooling processes of African-American female youth. Next, I examine empirical and conceptual scholarship highlighting the multiple ways in which traditional urban public schooling contexts negatively impact the development of Black female students' racial-ethnic identities²⁸. I claim that the disempowering nature of K-12 schooling environments makes it imperative for young Black girls to explicitly engage in *identity work*. Accordingly, the subsequent section begins with an overview of the theoretical underpinnings and key concepts characteristic of *Black feminist pedagogy*, and concludes by elucidating the implications of this teaching practice as an exemplar of *identity work* that fosters viable racial-ethnic identities among African-American female adolescents. Finally, this chapter culminates with a brief discussion of the limitations of the existing body of educational research highlighting the effects of Black feminist pedagogy on African-American female students, as well as the significance of the this study as an extension of the existing educational literature.

The Oppressive Nature of Schooling and a Call for Identity Work

Why Black Girls?

There is a pressing need for additional research in the field of education that critically examines the schooling experiences of Black female students as well as illuminates

²⁸ This paper borrows from Erickson's (1968) definition of identity development as a "process of simultaneous reflection and observation...taking place on all levels of mental functioning" where an individual "judges himself [and herself] in light of what he perceives to be the way in which others judge him in comparison to themselves...while he [or she] judges their way of judging him [or her] in the light of how he [or she] perceives himself [or herself] in comparison to them and to types that have become relevant to him [or her] (p. 22-23).

transformative pedagogies that may academically engage and socially empower these youth. Much of the extant literature combines the educational experiences of Black female students with those of their African-American *male* counterparts, which overlooks the ways in which the distinctive socio-cultural positioning of Black *girls* influences both their academic performance and schooling behaviors (Delpit, 1988; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003). In Muhammad and Dixson's (2008) large-scale quantitative analysis²⁹ of high school aged Black girls' performance in schools, the authors found that academically, African-American female youth rank in the middle of their peers and are just as likely to receive academic honors and awards; however, these students hold a lower mean test score, and report less enthusiasm for their academic environments, as compared to their peers. The research reveals that on most measures the academic accomplishments of these young women are not "because of a particularly beneficial environment, but *in spite of constraints*" (p. 176).

Black girls experience a unique set of challenges in K-12 schools due to the simultaneity of their race and gender oppression. As Muhammad & Dixson note, there is an "indivisible oneness of racialized gender experiences and feminized racial experiences" among African-American female students (2008, p. 176). The authors make the claim that race is inextricably tied to gender—thus, the schooling experiences and processes of Black female youth should not be examined apart from their raced *and* gendered realities. The work of Grant (1984) and various other scholars (Evans, 1988; L. Grant, 1984; Morris, 2005, 2007) affirm this notion; African-American female students who resist Eurocentric standards of femininity are excessively and undeservedly reprimanded by their teachers, as compared to their non-White female counterparts.

Moreover, the stereotype of the *strong Black woman* exaggerates and romanticizes the

²⁹ The researchers results were not adjusted to control for socio-economic status.

resilience of these youth. The consequence is neglect from educational stakeholders—many of whom overlook Black girls’ unique educational needs and cultural subjectivities (Collins, 2000; Evans-Winters, 2011; Muhammad & Dixson, 2008). Disregard for the socio-political location of African-American female adolescents is exemplified in the recent and growing concentration of scholarship surrounding the educational barriers that African-American *male* students encounter. Some have argued that the emphasis on *the Black male crisis* has propelled African-American females further into the margins, and nearly renders them invisible in educational research (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; Glassman & Roelle, 2007; T. C. Howard, 2008; Muhammad & Dixson, 2008).

To complicate matters, Evans-Winters and Esposito (2010) maintain that when race and gender oppression are combined with *class* inequities, Black female students are at an even greater disadvantage. Because these youth are more likely to live in economically depressed communities and attend poorly funded schools (Anyon, 1981, 2005; P. Collins, 2000), their exposure to educational resource [mal]distribution, deficit teacher ideologies, and culturally irrelevant pedagogies and curricula is heightened (Delpit, 1988; Evans-Winters, 2011; Fordham, 1993; Tyrone C. Howard, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Morris, 2007). The sum of these factors negatively impacts the self-concept³⁰ and overall identity development of these young women—rendering their pursuit for self-actualization especially precarious and therefore difficult to sustain (P. Collins, 2000; E. Erickson, 1968; Joseph, 1995; Power-Carter, 2007).

This study explores in what ways, if any, Black feminist pedagogy—as a potential method of transformative education—disrupts the subordination of African-American female student participants, and alternatively fosters self-determination among these youth. However,

³⁰ Self-concept refers to how individuals perceive themselves, which includes beliefs regarding personality traits, physical characteristics, and abilities. One’s self concept is an important factor in his/her level of self-esteem and confidence.

before illuminating the distinct features and effectiveness of this teaching practice, the following section will utilize a Black feminist theoretical lens to *further* examine the ways in which K-12 schooling threatens the racial-ethnic³¹ and gender³² identities of these youth. Additionally, the subsequent section will draw on empirical literature to elucidate how disempowering educational environments influence Black girls' academic behaviors and attitudes regarding school.

Schooling and the Threat to Identity Development

Education as a vehicle for self-actualization and civic responsibility is one prominent feature of African American achievement ideology (Perry et al., 2003), and specifically for Black feminist praxis. Historically, African-American women have valued education beyond its function as a means of employability but rather utilized it as a tool for racial uplift, and personal and community empowerment (Baker-Fletcher, 1994; Stewart & Richardson, 1987). Maria Stewart's public intellectual discourse from the 19th century was a harbinger of contemporary Black feminist thought. In one of her most revered writings, she encouraged Black women to utilize their intellectual talents to achieve self-definition and independence. Stewart articulates:

O ye daughters of Africa, awake! Awake! Arise! No longer sleep nor slumber, but distinguish yourselves. Show forth to the world that ye are endowed with noble and exalted faculties...I am of strong opinion that the day on which we unite heart and soul, and turn our attention to knowledge and improvement, that day the hissing and reproach among the nations of the earth against us will cease (Stewart, 1832, pp. 27-28).

Regrettably, K-12 public institutions in the United States are designed such that it is virtually impossible for a young Black woman to attain self-actualization and academic empowerment, as well as work towards community uplift in a standard schooling context (Fischer et al., 1996;

³¹ Phinney (1996) defines *racial-ethnic identity* as a sense of belonging and attachment to group membership. As an extension of Phinney's theory, Wright maintains that a *healthy* racial-ethnic identity includes "pride in in-group identification, confidence in one's academic abilities, competence in awareness of racism, and comfort with respect to self-presentation of racial-ethnic identity" (2011, p. 612).

³² In this paper *gendered identity* is defined as an individual's conception of oneself as male, female, *both* or *neither*. This concept is intimately related to the concept of *gender role*, which refers to the socially constructed values, behaviors, and emotional traits typically assigned to and associated with each sex.

Jeannie Oakes, 2005). This is reified in Gilkes' (1983b) study, where the author surveyed 25 African-American female community members about their views on the purpose of a formal education. These women strongly opposed the ways in which U.S. educational institutions encouraged individuals to adopt a Eurocentric, middle class worldview, where a culture of extreme self-indulgence deterred students from pursuing education as an instrument for self-improvement, community activism, *and* ethnic/racial empowerment.

As U.S. schools continue in the tradition of promoting academic cultures that conflict with African-American women's longstanding ideologies regarding education, many Black girls will actively engage in resistance against these institutions. Although often criticized for its presumed essentialist stance (P. Collins, 2000), Black feminist theory explicitly maintains that African-American women engage in "varied, and even heroic responses" to the "matrix of domination" they face (Davis, 1972, p. 82). As such, Black feminist philosophy can inform our understanding of African-American female students' various oppositional behaviors to combat the multitude of race, class, and gender oppression they encounter in school.

In certain contexts, Black girls manage to remain resilient, and maintain healthy racial-ethnic and gender identities in the face of marginalization and alienation. This was the case in O'Conner's (1997) case study analysis of six low-income African American high school students—two of who were female. The researcher revealed that individuals who had a strong, affirming sense of racial identification displayed elevated levels of self-motivation and were most committed to high academic achievement in their predominantly African-American urban high schools.

Akom's (2003) discussion of educational resilience among Black female students echoes O'Connor's assertion that a healthy racial-ethnic group membership contributes to high

academic performance among these youth. In his intensive 2-year investigation of seven successful African-American female urban high school students, he found that before their involvement with the Nation of Islam (NOI) the student participants engaged in various disruptive and often self-defeating behaviors as a means of resistance against blatant racism, teacher negligence, and the overall ineffectiveness of faculty at their school. The young women credited their eventual social growth and academic success to their participation in the Nation of Islam, a religious entity. They maintained that the cultural competency of their teachers in the NOI and the focus on strengthening the students' "racial identity, educational aspirations, and desire to uplift the black community" (p. 311) prompted their transformational attitudes and schooling behaviors.

Although students' heightened critical awareness of the racialized, gendered, and classed context in which they were schooled often resulted in politically charged conflicts with educators whom students perceived as racist and/or discourteous, several of the *teachers* interviewed by Akom also recognized that it was the students' participation in the Nation of Islam (NOI) that led to their academic growth. The most notable gains among these youth were in their commitments to education, participation in school, leadership among their peers, and their grade point averages. Thus, Akom's study disputes the theory that oppositional behaviors are threatening to the academic achievement of youth of color because they work *against* White cultural educational norms (Ogbu, 1978, 1990; Ogbu & Simons, 1998) and rather suggests that a positive racial-ethnic affiliation *assisted* these youth in confronting, and ultimately succeeding in the face of the racist/classist culture of their school.

Evans-Winters (2011) similarly observed that the process of attaining educational resilience among Black female youth is quite complex and often occurs under an exceptional set

of circumstances. In her 2005 ethnographic study the author examined the situational factors that aid low-income and working class Black girls in developing resilient behaviors. Evans-Winters defines educational resilience as “a means by which students are able to locate and identify their own strengths and the capital available to them from other people, places, and things in their immediate environment” (p. 141). She found that for these youth, resilience was a *learned process* that was developed and refined over an extended period of time—and was, in large part, due to the aid of multiple systems of support. The bi-directional and simultaneous positive influences from family, community organizations, *and* school aided Black female students in negotiating the race, class, and gender stressors that they encountered inside and outside of educational spaces. This resulted in higher academic performance among these youth and a generally more positive orientation towards school.

As promising as this scholarship appears, it is critical to note that in the studies conducted by O’Conner (1997), Akom (2003), and Evans-Winters (2005), Black female students heavily relied on the support of individuals and organizations *both inside and outside* of the school context in order to acquire and preserve their racial-ethnic, gender, and class integrity. Thus, this scholarship confirms the notion that schools *alone* do not cultivate empowering self-identities in African-American female youth. In fact, recent educational research suggests that educational resilience and vigilance is *atypical* for a growing number of these youth. Similar to other marginalized students of color (Martinez & Dukes, 1997; Ogbu, 1978), countless Black female adolescents negotiate oppressive educational institutions by adopting ideologies and schooling behaviors that are often *counterproductive* to their academic achievement (Pugh-Lily, Neville, & Poulin, 2001; Townsend, Neilands, Jones-Thomas, & Jackson, 2010; Winn, 2010a).

This is best articulated by Fordham, who proclaims that the differential treatment Black girls experience in schools leads to varying acts of oppositional resistance (1993). In some instances, African-American female students adopt the historically ascribed, stereotypical role of the “loud, Black girl” as a reaction against “White-defined notions of femininity” and feelings of “powerlessness” (Fordham, 1993, p. 13). In this context, “loudness” often has an adverse effect on the academic achievement of these students, because such demeanor is traditionally characterized as subversive and threatening to Eurocentric prescriptions of gender that are typically reinforced in schools. The scholarship of Lei (2003) and Morris (2007), further assert that African-American female students are disproportionately perceived as unladylike by their teachers and peers, as compared to their White, Asian, and Hispanic counterparts. As such, African-American girls are frequently perceived as openly defiant, loud, and aggressive—behaviors *aligned* with stereotypical notions of Black femininity—and find themselves the source of many of their teacher’s frustrations.

Grant (1984) confirms that the “race-gender differentiated socialization” of Black girls makes them especially vulnerable to behavior modification and excessive punishment in schools (p. 98). The author asserts that many African-American female youth often adopt adverse social roles and behaviors, which stem from a deep desire to be acknowledged, valued, and respected by their teachers and peers. Consequently, self-reliance and assertiveness among these youth is often misinterpreted as defiance, as opposed to precociousness by educators (D. F. Grant, Battle, Murphy, & Heggoy, 1999; L. Grant, 1984). The stigma attached to these behaviors contributes to differential instances of reprimand by educators and other authoritative figures within the schooling environment.

Subsequent works by Winn (Winn, 2010a, 2010b) and Blake et. al. (2011) extend these findings. They indicate that *urban* Black female youth are particularly and disproportionately reprimanded in schools as compared to their non-Black female peers. The overrepresentation of African-American young women in exclusionary disciplinary practices and in discipline sanctions (i.e. referrals, in-school and out-of-school suspensions, and expulsions) poses a grave danger to these youth. Winn contends that the social isolation that young Black women experience significantly threatens their self-esteem and perceptions of self-worth, as well as increases the likelihood that they will have a future in the juvenile and criminal justice systems (2010a, 2010b). Thus, in *urban* settings the mechanisms by which schooling environments shape identity are far more complex for African-American female youth. These adolescents are not only burdened by the pressure to conform to the socio-cultural standard of White femininity, they must also learn to navigate academically disenfranchised and under-resourced schooling environments—most of which are fixated on the containment, surveillance, and punishment of these young women (Evans-Winters, 2011).

For many high achieving Black female adolescents the pressure to conform to Eurocentric gender norms similarly results in self-defeating behaviors. However, instead of internalizing the stereotype of the “loud black girl”, these youth engage in what Fordham calls *ethnic disassociation* (Fordham, 1996). The author argues that some high-achieving Black girls purposefully use silence and invisibility to maintain a non-threatening, “racelessness” persona. For these young women, ethnic disassociation is strategically utilized as an attempt to avoid the extreme judgment and alienation experienced by others who embrace an ascribed Black identity. Although this strategy often results in high academic achievement, it has a negative impact on

these young women, whose self-alienation encourages both “psychological and physical separation from the broader African American community” (Robinson & Ward, 1991, p. 93).

Fordham’s findings parallel the research of Stephanie Power-Carter (2007), whose recent scholarship challenges the invisibility of Whiteness within required high school curriculums, and explores the impact such curriculums have on the budding and fragile identities of African-American female students. In addition to sociolinguistic and ethnographic methods, Carter utilized a Black feminist epistemological framework to examine the classroom encounters of two African-American female students during one particular lesson in a required British Literature English course. This unique lens suggests that many Black females have a particular view of the contradictions between the actions and ideologies of the dominant group, as compared to their own experiences and beliefs (Collins, 2000). The two Black female students in the classroom were the principal subjects of Carter’s inquiry, as they were the only female students who, during formal and informal interviews, claimed to be negatively positioned by the curriculum. Upon extensive observations, and through the stories of these youth, the author inferred that African-American females are constantly negotiating Whiteness to survive, or as the subjects put it, to “pass the course” (p. 51). Furthermore, the Eurocentric images privileged in classroom discussions negatively impacted the subjects self-image as well as their willingness to participate in class activities and discussions.

Carter’s critical analysis of the educational experiences of Black female high school students reveals the academic and psychological struggles that these young women are compelled to endure as their identities are incessantly challenged. Because Black female youth use their racial and gendered identities to frame and understand what happens in their classrooms, many of these young women are compelled to disassociate from their race-gender identities and

conform to Eurocentric sociocultural norms in order to avoid alienation and attain academic success.

In sum, the empirical literature on the K-12 schooling experiences of Black female youth exposes the extensive history of oppression and alienation these young women experience in educational institutions, and their prolonged use of various protective mechanisms as a means of resistance. Whether resisting via racial disassociation, internalizing reductive images of Black womanhood, and/or deliberately embodying a positive racial-ethnic identity—Black girls' responses to disempowering schooling conditions are varied and unrelenting. Hence, this scholarship glaringly demonstrates the pressing need for the Black female student to *explicitly* engage in *identity work*, to preserve her integrity, increase her potential of achieving academic success, and ultimately transform her socio-political location.

Identity Work

In her article *(Un)necessary Toughness?: Those "Loud Black Girls" and Those "Quiet Asian Boys"*, Joy Lei asserts that identity construction involves “an active and dynamic process through which an individual identifies himself or herself in relation to how he or she is constituted as a subject by dominant discourses and representations” (Lei, 2003, p. 159). Thus, in the case of the Black female student, one's self-concept is gradually developed over time, *in response to* and *as a product of* dominant narratives around the meaning of African-American femininity. Considering the historical, unabated denigration of Black women in larger society (Collins, 2000; hooks, 1984) and the corresponding stereotypical depictions of African-American females in the popular media (Collins, 2006; Ransby & Matthews, 1995)—one can infer that Black female youth must incessantly negotiate “fixed categorizations” and “monolithic depictions” of what it means to be Black *and* female in the United States (p. 159). Additionally,

and as mentioned previously, prevalent images of young Black girls as aggressive, and anti-intellectual are reproduced in schools through the curriculum, peer interactions, and culturally [un]responsive pedagogical practices, which regularly perpetuate the hegemony embedded in society.

It is critical to address the interplay between schooling processes and one's racial-ethnic identity, as researchers have discovered a strong correlation between the two. Although some have argued that strong racial-ethnic ties result in greater vulnerability to negative stereotypes (Ogbu, 2003; Steele, 1997), others have purported that adolescents who have both developed a secure, positive attachment to their ethnicity *and* can critically analyze the societal messages they encounter are far less likely to internalize the controlling and reductive images regarding their racial-ethnic group (Martinez & Dukes, 1997; Townsend et al., 2010; Ward, 1990). Furthermore, it has been suggested that individuals demonstrating a strong attachment and sense of pride regarding racial-ethnic group membership are more likely to hold a positive self-perception of academic ability and more optimistic feelings about school overall (Cokley & Chapman, 2008; Spencer, Noll, Stoltzfus, & Harpalani, 2001; Wright, 2011).

It is for these reasons that some scholars have argued in favor of protective mechanisms *within* schools that support Black female youth in developing empowering racial/ethnic identities (Evans-Winters, 2011; L. Grant, 1984; Power-Carter, 2007). As public K-12 institutions willfully continue in the tradition of denying African-American girls opportunities to cultivate viable racial-ethnic and gender identities, these young women must overtly and strategically engage in *identity work* as a buffer against negative race, gender, and class stereotypes. According to Collins (2000) *identity work* is a process by which Black women acknowledge, analyze, and engage in resistance against oppressive socio-political circumstances. This struggle for Black

women's self-actualization and self-reliance has historically taken place in women's clubs and churches—apart from traditional educational spaces. However, as Henry (2009) notes, the necessity for identity work among African-American *girls* within schools is ever pressing, as it can potentially challenge the alienation these youth experience by disrupting the social scripts and dominant race-gender schema that devalue Black womanhood. Moreover, creating alternative settings for young Black women to nurture their individual and collective voices provides them the opportunity to engage in constructive acts of oppositional resistance, which may result in more favorable educational attitudes and academic behaviors.

This dissertation study explores Black feminist pedagogy as a means of *identity work* for African-American female students in an urban high school. Before illuminating the potential impact of this instructional practice on the race-gender identity development of African-American female adolescents, the following section will first elucidate the theoretical underpinnings of Black feminist pedagogy, as well as its defining features.

Black Feminist Pedagogy and Research with Black Girls

From Theory to Practice

Educational researchers have utilized a plethora of theoretical approaches to understand the academic experiences and achievement of Black girls (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; Fisher, 2008; Robinson & Ward, 1991). Among those explored, Black feminist theory remains one of the most comprehensive sociohistorical lenses for framing the schooling experiences of Black girls in light of the intersecting oppressions³³ they face. As a 'critical social theory'³³, Black feminism posits that African-American women have historically faced interlocking forms of oppression, which include economic, political, and ideological stratification. From labor and

³³ According to Collins, a 'critical social theory' is one that constitutes theorizing about oppressed peoples in defense of social, political, and economic justice (2000, pp.31).

sexual exploitation (Davis, 1983; White, 1999), to denial of the rights and privileges extended to White male citizens (Hurstun, 1937; Shakur, 2001), and the reductive and demeaning stereotypes of mammies, jezebels, welfare queens and emasculating sapphires (Collins, 2000, 2004), Black feminist theory argues that African-American women in the United States have been violently positioned as the “objectified other” (Collins, 2000, p.70). The ‘differential treatment’ these women endure transcends class, age, geography, and sexual orientation, and ultimately gives rise to African-American women’s distinctive consciousness. This collective consciousness is also described as Black women’s self-defined standpoint (Lorde, 1984; Shaw, 1991)—a perilous threat to their prescribed subordination.

Furthermore, Black feminism challenges the notion that African-American political activism belongs to men, as well as the belief that feminist ideology and practice belongs solely to White women (Hull, Scott, & Smith, 1982). Cashmore (1996) describes a Black feminist standpoint as “rethinking Black experiences from a feminist perspective and revising white feminist politics from an Afrocentric perspective” (p. 20). Functioning as collective, oppositional knowledge, birthed at the margins of society, Black feminist praxis operates in the interest of freedom for all oppressed people; however, it centralizes Black women’s oppression and activism by placing them at the locus of analysis (Beale, 1970; Collins, 2000). Thus, in order to eradicate all group oppression, it is critical to “overcome the gross neglect of the special problems” facing Black women (Jones, 1949, p. 108).

Because schools are microcosms of communities, Black feminist theorist argue that the ways in which young African-American women experience racism, sexism, and classism in their neighborhoods is often mirrored in their experiences at school. As formerly discussed, societal disassociation with urban Black women is revealed in schools, whose failure to educate these

youth by systematically disengaging them through disempowering and de-humanizing pedagogies and curricula, is reproduced in their subjugated labor positions and resulting racial and spatial isolation to urban ghettos (Anyon, 2005; Henry, 1998; Ladson-Billings, 2000). As such, situating African-American girls' institutional oppressions within a Black feminist framework is valuable because its anti-deficit, anti-pathological stance subverts dominant racist ideologies about Black girls by highlighting the ways in which these women endure various instances of marginality at the crossroads of their multiple identities (Evans-Winters, 2011).

Finally, it is imperative to note that fundamental to Black feminism "is a recognition of the importance of theory as a means for stimulating a particular mode of action" (Taylor, 1998, p. 19). In light of this, a Black feminist perspective on contemporary schooling inequities magnifies the visibility of systematic educational injustices imposed on African-American female students, highlights their varied forms of oppositional behavior, but *more importantly*, offers practicable and effective methods toward creating liberatory learning environments for these young women.

Distinguishing Features of Black Feminist Pedagogy

As African-American women have historically engaged in theoretical examinations of the interlocking forms of oppression they endure, they have simultaneously utilized their collective, oppositional knowledge as a means of resisting their prescribed subordination (Beale, 1970; Christian, 1985; Davis, 1983; White, 1999). Within the field of education, Black feminist pedagogy is the product of a merger between theory *and* activism. Despite its relatively recent appearance in educational scholarship (Joseph, 1995), Black feminist pedagogy has an extensive history among African-American female educators who explicitly situate their practice within a Black feminist/womanist politic (Higginbotham, 1995; Ladson-Billings & Henry, 1990; Washington, 1987; S. D. Williams, 1996). Inspired by the philosophy "lifting as we climb", these

African-American female teachers employ a variety of pedagogies reflecting their appreciation for education as tool for social mobility as well as a means of personal and community empowerment (P. Collins, 2000, p. 25; Thompson, 1998).

Rooted in a history of oppression and activism, Black feminist pedagogical practice is birthed out of the belief that without an explicitly transformative pedagogy, Black women and other oppressed groups will “continue to be disregarded as participants in the learning environment” (Omolade, 1993, p. 33). As such, Black feminist pedagogy is situated under the umbrella of critical pedagogy (Freire, 1973; Henry Giroux & McLaren, 1994) and applied with the clear intention of subverting structural inequities by equipping students with the necessary tools to critically analyze and eventually *transgress* the various social and institutional barriers they face (hooks, 1994; Omolade, 1993).

Notwithstanding the initial function of Black feminist pedagogical practice as a method for the empowerment of African-American students *collectively*, a few educational researchers have taken particular interest in analyzing the effects of these practices on the academic engagement and self-determination of *Black girls specifically* (Henry, 2009; Sears, 2010). These scholars propose that Black feminist pedagogy could be particularly useful in the instruction of these young women—who as a result of the reductive and disesteeming curricula and pedagogies they encounter in schools—are experiencing increasing rates of academic disengagement (Akom, 2003; California Department of Education, 2009), declining test scores (Pugh-Lily et al., 2001), and devolving self-worth (Fordham, 1993; Power-Carter, 2007; Sutherland, 2005).

Currently, there is an abundance of scholarship in which researchers have conceptualized, re-conceptualized, and extended the features of Black feminist pedagogy, thereby creating a dynamic and nuanced framework (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Case, 1997; Joseph, 1995). In

order to study the utility of this practice as a method for instructing Black girls, we must first delineate the defining features that set it apart from other anti-oppressive pedagogical teaching practices.

Education as Liberation

For Black feminist educators, it is understood that the practice of teaching for the purpose of liberation is in direct conflict with the historic role of the institution as a source of oppression. hooks (1994) contends that under these circumstances, it is particularly crucial for Black feminist educators to maintain an acute awareness of their positionality and openly engage in practices that are steadily “at odds with the existing [oppressive] structure” (p. 135). The “political clarity” among Black womanist educators is grounded in the belief that they are both ‘*ethically and ethnically*’ accountable for preparing African-American youth to transcend socio-political injustices— a philosophy that is heavily reflected in their curricular choices (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002, p. 77).

Higginbotham (1995) defines Black feminist pedagogy as a method of instruction that centralizes conversations about how Eurocentric “misinformation” is systematically taught in schools through curricula and informally communicated through social interactions (p. 485). As such, classrooms function as analytic spaces where students confront dominant discourses that subjugate raced, classed, and gendered collectivities. This method of “*truth-telling*”, according to Joseph (1995), presents both students and teachers with alternative ways of constructing and validating knowledge about their realities. In this way, Black feminist pedagogy counters the exclusivity of traditional Eurocentric curricula, which highlights the achievements and perspectives of White men and omits and/or distorts the realities of people of color—especially women of color (Joseph, 1995, p. 466).

Teaching that is reflective of Black feminist philosophy utilizes the classroom as a “site of resistance”; thus, students are provided with varied opportunities to engage in what hooks describes as “*coming to voice*” (hooks, 1989, 1994). The author maintains that students are empowered through collective participation when educators create space in the curriculum for all individuals to engage in dialogue, as well as through the instructor’s recognition of the distinctiveness of each student’s point of view (hooks, 1994, p. 186). The unambiguous acknowledgment within Black feminist pedagogy of the ways in which individuals uniquely contribute to the production of knowledge is humanizing for both students *and* teachers, reflecting the liberatory nature of education as a practice of freedom. This philosophy of schooling as a political endeavor is mirrored in Black feminist educators’ response to the holistic needs of their students through *othermothering*.

Othermothering

The tradition of othermothering in African-American communities has an extensive history as a practice of freedom, dating back to the earliest days of slavery in the United States (Davis, 1983; White, 1999). Defined by Collins (2000) as “women who assist blood-mothers by sharing mothering responsibilities”, othermothers in the larger social context customarily cater to the needs of neighborhood children as a means of assisting biological parents who *may* or *may not* lack the resources or the ability to properly care for them (p. 178). Foster (1993) documents the ways in which this inherited tradition of shared responsibility are apparent in the teaching philosophy and pedagogical practices of contemporary Black feminist educators. The role of these individuals extends beyond academics to include nurturing kin-like relationships—wherein teachers attend to students’ social, emotional, and psychological development.

Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2002) characterizes Black feminist educators’ “embrace of the

maternal” as one measure of their genuine commitment to the success of every student (p. 72). Commonly exhibited by home visits, frequent collaboration with parents, and overall student advocacy, Black women’s othermothering is “not simply interpersonal but profoundly political in intent and practice” (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002, p. 77). This was apparent in a study conducted by Case (1997) in which the biographical portraits of two urban elementary school educators revealed the embedded nature of this “collective social conscience” in the everyday actions of teachers and their overall philosophy of education as a means for racial uplift (p. 36). In essence, the work of Black feminist othermothers on behalf of the African-American community is one of many examples of their expression of personal accountability and a cultural strategy reflective of their politicized ethic of care (P. Collins, 2000).

A Politicized Ethic of Care

Roseboro & Ross (2009) draw on a womanist pedagogy to examine the role of colorblindness and care theory as it relates to liberatory, anti-Eurocentric practice. The authors contend that Black women’s “liberatory ethic of care” is grounded in their unique ideologies and practices around 1) work and care, 2) freedom and choice, and 3) authority and power (p. 34). Accordingly, Black womanist educators strategically perform caring in classrooms by providing students the necessary tools to navigate social and political barriers to freedom. In this context, caring is “infused with love, humility, passion, and power” and demonstrated by unrelenting displays of personal accountability and collective responsibility (p. 36). Thus, the historicized understanding among Black feminist educators to “equate work with care” gives rise to a concurrently political *and* emotional framework for the instruction of African-American students (p. 35).

hooks (2003) discounts the dehumanizing yet conventional system of extracting emotion

from the practice of teaching. One drawback of pedagogies devoid of an emotional connection, namely *love*, is that such methods prevent teachers from gauging and attending to the emotional climate of their students, which could potentially interfere with a student's ability and/or desire to learn (p. 133). The author contends that teaching with love provides educators the clarity to appropriately tailor the mood of a classroom and set the foundation for building community among students and instructor. Essentially, a deeply rooted emotional investment in one's practice is central to Black feminist teaching philosophy, and historically has been regarded as a critical component of Black feminist pedagogy (M. Collins & Tamarkin, 1990; hooks, 2003).

Education as liberation, othermothering, and a politicized ethic of care function interdependently as three core elements of Black feminist pedagogy. While these three conceptual strands are woven into the fabric of Black feminist pedagogical literature, they have not *all* been explicitly mentioned or jointly utilized in research contexts in which Black girls were the foci. The next section will explore the distinctive ways in which Black feminist pedagogy has been applied to educational scholarship centered on Black female youth.

Empirical Studies

Annette Henry's (1998) research unveiled the ways in which African-American elementary school girls frequently positioned themselves as passive and voiceless in co-educational settings, yet appeared outspoken and intellectually self-assured outside of the classroom. In an effort to combat the patriarchal and racial subordination Black girls frequently endure in school, Henry (2009) conducted a separate study in which she designed an alternative space for middle school-aged Afro-Caribbean girls to engage in the Black feminist pedagogical practice hooks (1989) coined as "*coming to voice*".

Through "reflexive literacy research methods", the author crafted a reading and writing project

that fostered the development of critical literacies among these youth (p.164). By providing students the option to engage with texts *they* deemed relevant, the young women in the study were able to “read, write, and speak themselves into the curriculum” (p.164). One of the intriguing findings of Henry’s work is that when students were challenged to unlearn the ascribed, gendered behaviors of passivity and conformity, these youth were intellectually empowered by their ability to effectively problem-pose and problem solve around issues relevant to their unique identities.

Mogadime’s (2000) study similarly illuminates the effects of Black feminist pedagogical practices employed in unconventional educational contexts *within* schools. Her research documents the experience of one “community othermother” who embraced the task of developing a separate lunchtime and after school drama program for Black girls as a “site of resistance” against the largely Eurocentric school curriculum (p. 223). Defined by Collins (2000) as “women who assist blood-mothers by sharing mothering responsibilities”, othermothers in the Black cultural tradition refers to individuals who cater to the needs of neighborhood children as a means of assisting biological parents (p. 178). The role of these individuals extends beyond academics to include nurturing kinlike relationships—wherein teachers attend to students’ social, emotional, and psychological development.

In direct contrast with standard pedagogies, the Black-female centered curriculum described in Mogadime’s study offered narratives of contestation and resistance; moreover, it functioned as a space in which youth could embrace empowering Black female ideologies. For these young women, the counter-narratives presented in the literature functioned as a “pedagogy of hope”, which was emblematic of the transformative potential of each of their own lives (p. 229). Although this study takes place in Southern Ontario, Canada, the outcomes of this research

offer insight into the potential of Black feminist pedagogies and curricula as a strategy towards democratizing education for urban African-American female youth.

Sears' recent (2010) scholarship is an extension of Mogadime's findings. Her ethnographic research documents the usefulness of womanist pedagogies in a community-based all girls organization, suitably named as The Girls Empowerment Project (GEP). Initiated to address the race, gender, and class oppression these youth experienced in schools and in their respective communities, the GEP functioned as a safe space for young Black women to critique the ways in which their identities were both reflective of, and in opposition to dominant discourses that malign urban Black girls. According to Sears, "Africentric womanist" ideology and pedagogy separated students from their ascribed subordinated identities, provided them the tools to negotiate power relationships, and fostered ethnic pride, intellectual engagement, and community solidarity (p. 117).

The collective research of Sears (2010), Mogadime (2000), and Henry (1998, 2009) has implications for utilizing Black feminist/womanist pedagogies to address the oppressive, racialized, and gendered subjugation young Black women endure throughout the Diaspora. Furthermore, it provides a backdrop for this study—as well as other researchers—who wish to investigate the effectiveness of Black feminist pedagogies in traditional urban classroom spaces.

Moving Forward

An investigation of Black feminist pedagogy reveals the ways in which the practice of African-American feminist educators has historically been inspired by a larger politic—to improve the social, political, and economic welfare of Black people, *collectively*. By documenting the social and academic outcomes of Black feminist pedagogies in which *Black girls* are the foci, the scholarship of Henry (1998, 2009), Mogadime (2000) and Sears (2010) has

tremendous implications for teaching, learning, and research in urban school contexts. The carefully crafted ‘safe spaces’ discussed in the literature functioned as “sites of resistance” where the implementation of Black feminist/womanist curricula and corresponding pedagogies catered to the cultural subjectivities of Black female youth as a multiply oppressed group (hooks, 1989, 1994). As such, students engaged in healthy oppositional behaviors including “*coming of voice*”, which directly conflict with social and institutional forces that socialize young Black women in urban institutions to be silent, accommodating, and passive recipients of schooling.

Notwithstanding the significant contributions of Black feminist pedagogical research to educational literature, hooks (1994) reminds us that engaged pedagogies acknowledge the uniqueness of *every* classroom; in fact, hooks asserts that instructional methods must “constantly be changed, invented, [and] re-conceptualized to address each new teaching experience” (p. 10). As such, it is critical to note that Black feminist pedagogy does not suggest that there is one defined set of practices to address the varied academic, emotional, and cultural needs of Black female students. It does, however, offer constructive strategies for educators to cultivate critical social consciousness, intellectual curiosity, and collective agency among Black female youth in order to improve the welfare of their academic and social lives.

What is still missing from these studies is a rich, empirical analysis of how a *holistic* application of Black feminist pedagogy impacts the race-gender and class identities of African-American female students over an *extended* period of time, *within* U.S. urban public schools. In what ways did Black feminist curriculum influence how the students understood their identities, as young African-American women? Did this change over time? What kinds of discourse characterize these moments? How might *centralizing* the voices of the student participants offer new ways of defining, characterizing, and interpreting Black feminist pedagogy? Furthermore,

what does a *holistic* application of Black feminist pedagogy entail?

Building on the work of previous scholarship, this study followed African-American female youth over a period of two academic school years and relies on the descriptive counternarratives of these individuals to examine the ways in which Black feminist pedagogy influenced the development of their racial/ethnic and gender identities. It is my hope that the accounts of these students will offer new insights into conceptualizing and applying Black feminist praxis in an urban schooling context—illuminating new theories and areas of significance that have yet to be explored in educational research. Additionally, the various interconnected tenets of Black feminist pedagogy are applied *simultaneously*, as opposed to simply highlighting one or two defining features—the trend in previous studies. It is likely that the holistic application of these unique methods may have an added effect at uprooting the hegemony embedded in standard classroom settings and ultimately engaging the academic potential, intellectual agency, and self-actualization of Black girls.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Recent scholarship has produced a number of important studies examining the role of standardized curriculums on the self-perception and academic well being of African-American female students (Fordham, 1996; D. F. Grant et al., 1999; Power-Carter, 2007). Unfortunately, most of this work tends to focus on analyzing the differential ways in which Black female youth negotiate conventional schooling environments, with little attention paid to practicable and effective methods of academic instruction that reconcile the marginalization experienced by this population of learners. This research extends the work of a broad range of empirical and conceptual studies that have been previously conducted (Henry, 2009; Mogadime, 2000; Sears, 2010). It utilizes the lenses of both the researcher and student participants to explore the *effectiveness* of Black feminist pedagogy as a tool for developing viable racial/ethnic and gender self-identities. Hence, this work responds to the dearth of educational scholarship that examines the ways in which Black feminist teaching philosophy and curricula moves beyond the *abstraction* of critical theory to the *implementation* of transformative classroom pedagogical practice. Within the context of this study, Black feminist pedagogy functioned as an alternative means of instruction—which equipped the participants with the necessary tools to struggle against disempowering and alienating urban schooling environments.

Background Into the Site³⁴

Demographic Profile

King High School is located in the historic Slauson District, a largely residential urban

³⁴ All persons, programs, and locations named here are pseudonyms.

community located in southwest Los Angeles. By 2005 the area, which was once entirely African American, had evolved into a sprawling multi-ethnic and multi-racial community. This was reflected in the student population at King High School; in 2005 the school enrolled 1,983 students— sixty six percent of whom identified as African-American, while Latina/os made up thirty three percent of the remaining population. It is imperative to note that although students are typically lumped into broad categories such as Black and Hispanic, the individuals in this community represented a wide range of ethnic backgrounds that directly influenced the social and academic dynamics of the school. With a population of nearly 2,000, the school was a microcosm of it's surrounding community of African-American, Belizean, Jamaican, Mexican, Guatemalan, and El Salvadorian residents—just to name a few. This unique blend of ethnicity, family histories, and language created a pressing need for an educational atmosphere that catered to the cultural and academic subjectivities of a uniquely diverse student body.

In addition to serving an ethnically and racially distinct population, King High School was home to an overwhelming number of students whose family incomes ranged from below the poverty line to low-income. In 2005 approximately half of the student body were labeled as “socioeconomically disadvantaged” by the California Department of Education (2006). The exceptionally high number of low-income students qualified King High School for Article V assistance—a federally funded, compensatory education program that supplements the core curriculum and regular school services. The purpose of the organization is to bring a range of resources and support to work with the school in an effort towards ameliorating the impact of negative community conditions on schooling and schooling outcomes.

Accordingly, under Article V, students, parents, and staff were provided tutoring services, access to an on-site school psychologist, parenting classes, and staff development.

Supplementary program components that were provided through Article V included literacy intervention programs, field trips, assemblies, and assisted infusion of technology into the standard curriculum. Among the primary objectives of this title was to ensure that the low-income individuals at King High had a fair opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on state academic achievement standards and state academic assessments. *Theoretically*, the additional funding and resources allocated to King High suggested that there was potential for a rigorous and rich academic environment. However, the *reality* at King High was quite the opposite.

Organizational Dysfunction and Academic Turmoil

During the 2004–2005 academic school year King High School’s base Academic Performance Index (API) of 505 earned a statewide rank of 1—the *lowest* percentile among other majority African-American schools within the State of California (California Department of Education, 2006). This was the school’s sixth year failing to meet the adequate yearly progress (AYP) criteria required by the *No Child Left Behind* mandates. Suitably, the school received an alarming wake up call on August 15, 2005; the administrators had obtained a letter detailing how and why the campus lost its Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) accreditation. The accreditation process was based on two evaluations from visits by accrediting teams within a two-year period. During the evaluations the WASC team identified low academic standards, the lack of a school-wide action plan, behavioral defiance, poor student attendance, and rampant student tardiness. To the dismay of school personnel, students, parents, and the larger Slauson District community, King High had earned the disreputable title of the first school in the Los Angeles Unified School District to lose its WASC accreditation.

After over six years of extreme academic failure and with the recent loss of accreditation, the faculty and staff at King High were principally concerned with bridging students who lag behind to levels of academic proficiency. Unfortunately, the revolving door of school leadership and the questionable directives³⁵ of the Los Angeles Unified School District made that goal extremely difficult to attain. Consequently, rampant student disengagement, high student and faculty transiency, increasingly high drop-out rates, and poor attendance continued to be the norm at King High School.

A few weeks into the 2005-2006 school year I recognized that King High was experiencing a drastic decrease in school morale, which casted a cloud of hopelessness over a great majority of the school community. As the academic standing declined, I stayed encouraged by devoting more time to creative and original lesson planning, and commiserating with a handful of other teachers who had not yet become jaded. However, there were many occasions where I contemplated if students were fortunate enough to locate a comparable source of refuge.

Taking the Road Less Travelled

In the year leading up to the development of Black Girls United, individuals associated with King High School were frequently regarded in the most derogatory terms. The dominant narrative regarding the school was that its students were aggressive, economically impoverished, and anti-intellectual. Moreover, the adult faculty and staff at our school were often labeled as uncaring and largely incompetent. Many of the approaches to improving our campus were typically based on the assumption that something was broken and needed to be fixed. In some cases, the *something* was the youth. In other cases, it was the parents or the teachers and

³⁵ As a consequence of low-test scores, LAUSD initiated mandates that required teachers at King High to revamp the curriculum. The new curriculum heavily prioritized test preparation, and in effect, was highly disengaging for most students.

administration. The trouble with these descriptions is that they, for the most part, reflect the perspectives of *outsiders* and they emphasize reducing deficits rather than developing resources.

Because I was alumni of King High and a long-time member of the Slauson District, I had developed an *insider* perspective and was quite privy to the inner workings of the school and surrounding community. I recognized that the overwhelming majority of the youth at King High School contradict the misconceived notions of those unacquainted with our community of learners. While low-test scores and declining graduation rates frequently overshadowed the true character of these youth, our students held a high level of social responsiveness and sensitivity, intelligence, empathy, and amazing problem solving skills. However, many students were feeling disempowered and even victimized by the poor social and academic standing of the school. Amidst their many gifts and talents there was resentment and a sense of hopelessness that made it virtually impossible and unrealistic for students to focus on state standards and yearly assessments. Furthermore, in spite of the overabundance of extracurricular programs on campus, there were very few spaces where students felt empowered to address *real* and *pressing* socio-cultural concerns that directly impacted their orientation towards school. Most of our campus organizations engaged students through sports, cheerleading, dance, or art.

With this in mind, I sought to create a space within the school context that focused on developing African-American female student agency and empowerment through literature-based discussions of relevant socio-political issues. It was only my second year of teaching, yet I had become regarded for my feminist curricula and ideologies; my disapproval of sexist social conditioning was widely acknowledged and respected by both students and faculty. However, this did not directly translate into female student empowerment in my classes.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, I recognized that many of my Black female students displayed inconsistent patterns of participation in analytical classroom discussions. In my numerous informal classroom encounters with these students, many of the young women confided in me that they occasionally felt negatively positioned by the curriculum. This was particularly the case during discussions in which we explored the intersectionalities of race and gender politics. These students generally felt uncomfortable discussing such issues in the presence of their male peers, who they believed wouldn't understand or appreciate their unique, gendered perspectives and realities. On the contrary, I had close personal relationships with many of these same students—who were assertive, opinionated, and far more self-assured *outside* of the formal classroom setting. Having both experienced and witnessed firsthand the marginalization that Black females endure in urban schooling spaces, I recognized the urgency to create an alternative setting in which they could develop and exercise their critical consciousness and transformative agency.

The Ideological, Pedagogical, and Organizational Structure of Black Girls United

A Black Feminist Orientation

Prior to developing BGU, the African-American young women on campus were often regarded as *loud, ghetto*³⁶, and lacking the motivation necessary for high levels of academic success. This narrative was reinforced by the scores of Black girls at King High who tirelessly auditioned for cheerleading and dance—yet, were often disengaged in traditional classroom spaces. I often wondered if these students had a *safe space* on our campus that empowered them through agency-oriented curriculum, grounded in intellectual rigor and critical dialogue. Where could they collectively ally with one another to challenge the various social and media

³⁶ *Ghetto* is a slang term often utilized to characterize individuals who are perceived as uneducated, distasteful, and low-income.

misrepresentations of African American female youth? What vehicle could they utilize to address the gender stratification, abuse, and powerlessness that they frequently experienced inside and outside of school? Finally, and equally as important, where could they unite in celebration of their collective knowledge, talents, and accomplishments?

After considerable reflection I sought to extend the work of Black feminist theorists by creating a critical and culturally relevant student organization that responded to the frustrations African-American female youth were experiencing in school, and in their respective communities. Furthermore, my objective was to develop a space in which they could celebrate Black culture and womanhood. By prioritizing the socio-cultural and academic concerns, rights, and empowerment of African-American female students³⁷, Black Girls United was uniquely poised to catalyze individual and collective changes that I hoped would yield sustainable improvements in how these youth experience urban schooling.

BGU Pedagogical Structure

Black Girls United was a sustained student organization from the fall 2005 semester through the spring semester of 2007. Each week during lunch, members of BGU utilized critical ethnic literature³⁸ to investigate and work towards resolving historical and contemporary issues facing the African-American female population. These student-led discussions often resulted in

³⁷ Because Black girls were the sole group of students who *publicly* expressed their discomfort in my class and displayed inconsistent patterns of classroom participation, I felt compelled to intervene and offer an unorthodox *safe space* for these youth. At the time there was a special program at King High designated for Black male students, as well as a separate, and rather popular student group organized and operated by Latina/o youth. Although I believed that Black male students and Latina/o students could have benefitted from *additional* support services at King High, I felt it necessary and *urgent* to intervene on the behalf of Black girls—who, in my opinion, were crying out for help.

³⁸ *Critical ethnic literature* includes texts written by Black women and other women of color that challenged traditional representations of non-White women in popular literature and in the dominant media. Some examples include *The Autobiography of Assata Shakur* and *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost*, by Joan Morgan.

meaningful community activities³⁹ that emerged organically from our conversations. In sum, our shared objectives were to engender solidarity, self-love, and self-definition through dialogue, reflection, and critical analysis. It was my hope that through Black Girls United students' participation with, and orientation towards school would improve in ways that were conducive to their overall academic success.

My re-articulation of Black feminist pedagogy was developed by combining the distinguishing features of this teaching method (as outlined in chapter two), while incorporating specific methodologies that responded to the sensibilities of my unique group of urban Black female youth. There were four key elements of this framework⁴⁰. First, we utilized *feminist literature* as the basis for each of our discussions. My hope was that my students would develop critical counter narratives by reading literature written by Black women and various other women of color. These texts of resistance and contestation challenged traditional representations of non-White women in popular literature and in the dominant media. In the early stages of BGU I kept a journal where I recorded my ideas for the program. In that journal I assembled a list of discussion topics based on conversations with several of my students, as well as my own understanding of their various struggles. Some of the discussion topics included: rectifying body image issues, demystifying emotional and physical abuse, money management⁴¹, and setting short term and long term goals. A complete list of thematic units and corresponding reading selections are provided in Appendix B.

Positioning students as agents of change was another key feature of the course. The young women in BGU were challenged to develop practical solutions to the problems that we explored

³⁹ Community activities included neighborhood protests, collective health and fitness undertakings, and engagement with local women's organizations apart from King High School.

⁴⁰ See Figure 3.1

⁴¹ See Appendix A

in the class. For instance, we often spoke about how the hyper-sexualization of Black women in the media translates into their relationships at school. In each student-led discussion we moved beyond the problem, to find tangible solutions. Thus, BGU functioned as an alternative and unorthodox ideological space in which students could explore the dialectic of African-American women's oppression *and* their activism (P. Collins, 2000; hooks, 2000). And through this, a process of *rearticulation* happened; students' experiences took on new meanings, and some individuals developed an alternative view of themselves and the world (P. Collins, 2000).

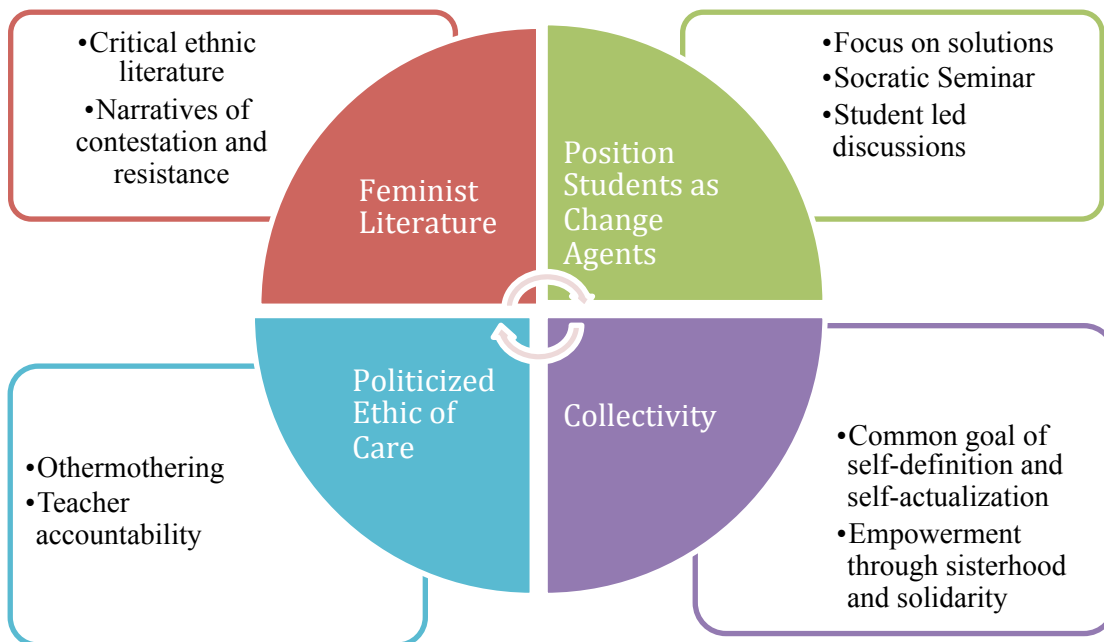
Third, we highlighted *collectivity* in Black Girls United. It is a well-known fact that teenage girls are often mean-spirited and competitive (Way, 1995). Anyon writes about the importance for female youth of color to struggle with and against each other to "imagine what could be" (Anyon, 1983, p. 22). Hence, one of the primary objectives of BGU was to unite African American girls as *allies*, so that they could collectively challenge, learn from, and empower one another as they sought to reconstruct limiting narratives of Black femininity. Group activities such as community jogs and attending local rallies assisted in reinforcing this sisterhood.

Finally, a *strongly politicized ethic of care* was a key element of my Black feminist pedagogical framework. In keeping with the tradition of Black womanist educators, I strategically performed caring by providing students with the necessary tools to navigate socio-political barriers to self and community empowerment. In this context, caring was "infused with love, humility, passion, and power" and demonstrated by unrelenting displays of personal accountability and collective responsibility (Roseboro & Ross, 2009, p. 36). Because of the deeply rooted emotional investment in my practice, *caring* for my students in BGU extended beyond our classroom conversations to include holding them accountable for their academic

performance in other classes, as well as frequent check-ins regarding the physical and emotional health and well being of themselves and their families.

It is important to note that in this chapter the Black feminist pedagogical framework that I employed is described through *my* lens—the lens of the practitioner/researcher, and informed by my understanding of Black feminist theory. This framework evolved after the participants in the study provided their understanding of the organizational structure of Black Girls United during their individual interviews. As such, students’ explanations will be thoroughly outlined in the findings chapters.

Figure 3.1: Black Feminist Pedagogical Framework



Organizational Structure: Who Joined BGU?

A month before the BGU orientation I submitted a Constitution⁴² to the Administration at King High outlining the mission statement as well as the requirements for student participants. During that time I was notified that school clubs and organizations outside of athletics could not discriminate based on race, ethnicity, or gender. Thus, all students at King High were eligible to join BGU as long as they met the criteria outlined in the Constitution⁴³. This news did not worry me, as I was convinced that there would not be many male students or non-Black female students interested in a program *solely* based around the African-American female experience. Thus, in the weeks leading up to the orientation I informed *all* of my students about the new program that I was developing and continued preparing for the orientation meeting that was scheduled to be held in my classroom at lunch. In an effort to reach students representative of the entire student body (High Achievers Magnet, Apprenticeship Magnet, and general education) two of my current Black female students took turns making announcements over the school PA system, informing all students of our mission as well as disclosing a handful of the discussion topics we planned to address in the club.

On November 10th, 2005 the orientation for BGU was held in my classroom, which was located on the second floor of the main building. A longtime friend of mine, Chisom, offered to help at the orientation meeting, and secured my room while I went downstairs to redeem the five boxes of pizza that I had delivered to the school. Upon my return to my classroom, and to my surprise, I saw *over fifty* Black female bodies crowded in my room like a can of sardines. Students sat at desks; they sat on the floor; they assembled in the doorways; and they stood against the long wall in the back of the room. I smiled ear to ear at the sight of all those young

⁴² See Appendix C

⁴³ See Appendix C

women; the sheer number of students interested in BGU reified its potential influence on the social and academic culture of King High School.

As students devoured the pizza, Chisom and I provided each individual with an informational handout⁴⁴ that outlined the primary purpose, objectives, and requirements for joining BGU. We reviewed the major components of the program, a few of which are listed below:

1. Each week a team of two students will lead literature-based discussions. Every student is expected to complete the readings.
2. Discussions will include a *brief* synopsis of the reading, a statement of the problem, and the offering of potential solutions
3. Potluck style lunches each week. Signups will take place at the first official meeting (*next week*).
4. Some meetings will include guest speakers and/or special activities
5. We will vote on a President, Vice President, and Secretary⁴⁵ who will assist with the organization and planning of our meetings and events⁴⁶.

I had previously decided that I only wanted the most committed students in order to preserve the ambition of fostering sisterhood and solidarity through BGU. Thus, *in addition* to the criteria outlined above, students who were interested in joining BGU were to return the following week with a *typed* statement describing what they hoped to gain from the program, as well as their intended contributions. I hypothesized that this small task would weed out the individuals whose interests were tenuous. The following Thursday a total of twenty-seven African-American female students joined Black Girls United, each stapling their typed statement of commitment to the BGU bulletin board that was located on the wall behind my desk. Below are two students' declarations:

⁴⁴ See Appendix D

⁴⁵ The Secretary was in charge of keeping track of the weekly minutes. Refer to Appendix E for the document that was utilized.

⁴⁶ The president and vice president of BGU were responsible for ensuring that participants remembered to attend each meeting and read the assigned literature. As such, student officers created reminder slips that were sent to each student in their 3rd and 4th period classes on meeting days. Appendix F includes a copy of the reminder slip.

“Some of the things that I would like to learn from [BGU] are how to be able to present myself as a Black girl in today’s society, and learn how to set an example the correct way for the younger generation. I would try to put my all into this club as well as my time. I would also try to make it to every meeting that we have.”- Brandy

“My commitment to [BGU] and the members is to show up at every meeting on time. To participate in every activity we have, as well as enjoy myself doing so. Grow with each person in the organization.” - Violet

Despite my best efforts to attract African-American girls from the general education and High Achievers Magnet programs, the overwhelming majority of the students who joined BGU were apart of the Apprenticeship Magnet⁴⁷, the program in which I taught. This is because most of the individuals who actually joined the program were my students, or friends of my students. Additionally, it is important to note that a few months after our orientation three Black males asked to join Black Girls United. They each met the criteria and entered the organization with the understanding that BGU was a space for individuals to negotiate the various issues facing African-American *women*. Although two of the three young men rarely spoke at all during the meetings, I hypothesize that their presence certainly impacted the dynamics of the space. This was discussed during student interviews, and influenced the findings of this study.

Critical Race Feminist Autoethnography

As mentioned in Chapter 1, I addressed three pressing questions that have emerged from my teaching practice in BGU:

RQ: In what ways, if any, did Black Feminist pedagogy impact the racial/ethnic and gender identities of the African-American young women participating in Black Girls United?

- In what ways, if any, did Black feminist pedagogy influence how the students in BGU *understood* their identities, as young Black women?

⁴⁷ The Apprenticeship Magnet was one of two magnet programs at King High School, and was designed to help prepare high school students for a career in teaching.

- From the participants' perspectives, in what ways, if any, did BGU help students negotiate the *social* and *academic* terrains of school?

This study utilizes an autoethnographic approach to document the effects of Black feminist pedagogy on the identity development of African-American female students. Similar to other qualitative methods, autoethnography relies heavily on storytelling to assist in the interpretation of social interactions (Alexander, 1999; Spry, 2001). However, autoethnography is distinctive in that through the public exposure of personal narratives, a powerful process of self-investigation occurs. During this process, the *autobiographical* and *personal* is linked to the *cultural* and *social* (Ellis, 2004, p. xix). Thus, the act of self-narration fosters the critical interpretation and eventual transformation of personal, as well as broader social, and political circumstances (Carey-Webb, 2001). In the case of this investigation, the narrative documentation of the effects of my teaching practice is connected to a larger socio-political project. That is, through the public, narrative disclosure of students' engagement with Black feminist pedagogy—this research aims to subvert the historically oppressive means by which African-American female youth are schooled (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Perry et al., 2003; Power-Carter, 2007).

The tradition of autoethnography derives from the longstanding convention of personal storytelling in the fields of anthropology and feminist ethnography (Jirousek, 2006; Visweswaran, 1997). As an extension of critical race theory⁴⁸, *critical race feminism* complicates the feminist practice of autobiographical storytelling within autoethnography through the centering of *non-white* racialized female experiences (Delgado Bernal, 2002; Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010). Although historically concentrated on legal policies affecting people of color, critical race

⁴⁸ For a detailed discussion of critical race theory, see Solorzano, D. (1997). Images and words that wound: Critical race theory, racial stereotyping, and teacher education. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 24(3), 5-19.

feminism has more recently been extended to include challenges to educational policies and research methods (Matsuda, 1988).⁴⁹ As such, the this autoethnography draws on critical race feminist philosophy as an effort to denaturalize Eurocentric notions of femininity within educational research practices (Muhammad & Dixson, 2008; Thompson, 2004) while illuminating the “indivisible oneness of racialized femininity” within the educational experiences of young *Black* women (Muhammad & Dixson, 2008, p. 176). As African American female youth authoritatively utilize their collective voice in the narrative articulation of their differential schooling experiences, the hierarchy of knowledge claims is inverted, and the “multiple layered realities in which Black girls exist” becomes the focus (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010, p. 22).

Data Collection

Participant Selection

I utilized the voices of all twenty-seven participants of Black Girls United in my analysis of videotaped class meetings, BGU curriculum, fieldnotes, and student artifacts. Additionally, I reached out to twelve students to participate in interviews. Of those twelve, seven were both available to be interviewed and met the participant selection criteria—leaving a subset of *seven* students for interviews. The primary criteria for choosing interview participants was based on the length and patterns of student participation in the program; each of the young women selected for this study were members of BGU for its duration (fall 2005- spring 2007), and attended meetings regularly⁵⁰. Additionally, six variables were considered when selecting interview participants for this research. This purposeful sampling strengthens the reliability of my analysis by avoiding the use of a research sample that addresses only one or two sub-groups of the BGU

⁴⁹ See Matsuda, M. (1988). Affirmative action legal knowledge: Planting seeds in plowed-up ground. *Harvard Women's Law Journal* 11, 1-17;

⁵⁰ Students who attended regularly missed fewer than 2 meetings each month.

members. Thus, in an effort to diversify the sample, I considered variations in: 1) age, 2) positions within the school academic tracking system, 3) ethnic background, 4) degree of verbal participation in BGU, 5) relationship with the researcher, and 6) involvement in other school-related extra curricular activities.

Members of Black Girls United varied in *age*, although most individuals were in the 11th or 12th grades. I was interested in why students volunteered to join BGU, and hypothesized that students' initial interest in the program may have varied based on grade level, and/or the number of years an individual attended King High school. Moreover, a great majority of the younger BGU participants had stellar attendance; yet, they were less vocal during meetings. In an effort to best assess the *effects* of the Black feminist pedagogical practices employed in BGU, I explored whether there is a connection between students' ages and their levels of comfort vocalizing their opinions within the context of BGU meetings.

Position within the school tracking system is another important variable to consider when selecting participants. As previously mentioned, eighty seven percent of the members of BGU were enrolled in the Apprenticeship Magnet—the program in which I taught. I'm assuming this is because most of the individuals who joined BGU were my students, or friends of my students. It is critical to note that the Apprenticeship Magnet was one of two magnet programs at King High School, which partly selected (and accepted) students based on grades and standardized test performance. Furthermore, the program was designed to help prepare high school students for a career in teaching. Because this is a very specific, and narrow group of individuals, one limitation of this study is that the focal students are not adequately representative of the entire King High School student body. Nonetheless, I included one student⁵¹ who was in the general

⁵¹ Of the thirty BGU members, 2 students were enrolled in the general education program. This study will include only one of these young women in, as I have been unable to locate the other student.

education program, in an attempt to address this shortcoming.

The third variable in selecting participants is *ethnic background*. Although all BGU members self-identified as Black and/or African American, the young women constituted a pan-ethnic group. The students in Black Girls United were of various ethnic backgrounds, including Belizean and Brazilian; furthermore, they spoke a variety of languages and dialects, and held different immigration and citizenship statuses. Such varied ethnic and cultural identities contributed to the multiple perspectives among the members of BGU, which greatly enriched the conversations that took place within the program. Hence, including an ethnically diverse sample of participants for this study is essential to determining the effects, if any, of Black feminist pedagogy on the racial/ethnic identities of the participants.

In deciding which students to include in this study, I chose a unique blend of young women based on *the degree to which each individual verbally participated* in Black Girls United. Initially, the program was created to provide a *safe space* for African-American female students to share their collective voice and wisdom. After reflecting on our class meetings (via videotape and field notes), I discovered that the members of BGU could be divided into two distinct groups: those who spoke at almost every meeting, and those who never uttered a word. In order to uncover the effects, if any, of Black feminist pedagogy on students' racial/ethnic and gender identities, it is important to include the opinions of all members—particularly those who were most reticent. Does the silence of some students imply that they were uncomfortable sharing their thoughts and opinions in BGU? If so, what does this say about the usefulness of the space, and the effectiveness of Black feminist pedagogy in general? Interviews served as a useful data source to answer these questions.

The fifth variable in selecting participants is a student's *relationship with the researcher*.

As detailed earlier in the chapter, many of the members of Black Girls United were my English students. In order to assess the effect of Black feminist pedagogy on students' racial/ethnic and gender identities, it is critical that I am transparent with respect to my own positionality, and differentiate the extent to which my personal relationships with students influence the findings of this study. Thus, in determining the participants for this research, I chose to select four individuals whom I formerly taught, and three students whom I knew by association. Essentially, including individuals from both categories was beneficial in determining the degree to which my personal characteristics and connections with students factored into: why students joined the program, how much they enjoyed the program, and the impact of Black feminist pedagogy on their racial/ethnic and gender identities.

One of the sub-questions of this study is to determine, from the participants' perspectives, in what ways, if any, did BGU help students negotiate the *social* and *academic* terrains of school. In answering this question, and in order to best determine the degree to which Black feminist pedagogy assisted students in navigating the schooling process, it was imperative that the participants involved in this study represent the full spectrum of the members in Black Girls United. This includes individuals who, at the inception of the program, were highly active, mildly active, and fairly inactive⁵² in school. Thus, *involvement in other school-related extra curricular activities* is the sixth variable utilized in selecting participants.

Table 3.1: Description of Participants

Name ⁵³	Grade	Track	Ethnicity	Verbal Participation	Relationship w/Researcher	Additional Extracurricular Activities
--------------------	-------	-------	-----------	----------------------	---------------------------	---------------------------------------

⁵² For the purpose of this study, students who were *highly active* participated in two or more extracurricular activities outside of BGU; students who were *mildly active* participated in one additional extracurricular activity outside of BGU; students who were *inactive* did not participate in any additional extracurricular activities outside of BGU;

⁵³ All of the names of the participants in this study are pseudonyms.

Ashanti	11 th & 12 th	General Education	African American	Vocal	Student	Yes (mildly active)
Tanya	11 th & 12 th	Apprenticeship Magnet	Belizean	Vocal	Non-Student	Yes (highly active)
Nia	11 th & 12 th	Apprenticeship Magnet	African American	Vocal	Non-Student	No (inactive)
Brittney	11 th & 12 th	Apprenticeship Magnet	African American	Reticent	Non-Student	Yes (highly active)
Lisa	11 th & 12 th	Apprenticeship Magnet	African American	Vocal	Student	Yes (mildly active)
Kenya	10 th & 11 th	Apprenticeship Magnet	African American	Reticent	Student	No (inactive)
Erykah	9 th & 10 th	Apprenticeship Magnet	Belizean	Reticent	Student	Yes (mildly active)

Data Sources

I collected five major sources of data to begin answering my research questions. Because there is no baseline established for measuring any movement over time, I developed a template⁵⁴ to assist in locating students' *initial* interpretations of their racial/ethnic and gender identities, as well as to aid in locating *shifts* in these identities. This template was utilized in the analysis of data sources. Sources of data include:

1. BGU Curriculum: Thematic units, lesson plans, corresponding literature, and student work
2. Field Notes from in class and out of class interactions
3. Video Recordings from the BGU classes
4. Individual interviews from seven former members
5. Student Artifacts

This research employed data triangulation techniques in order to acquire a diverse range of information about what occurred during BGU meetings, as well as how Black feminist pedagogy impacted the race and gender identities of the participants. These data sources also systematically

⁵⁴ Refer to Appendix G

provided me the opportunity to examine my engagement with the study participants in multiple settings, which was necessary for appropriate member checking.

BGU Curriculum

An analysis of the curriculum and pedagogy utilized in BGU helped me answer the primary research question: *In what ways, if any, did Black Feminist pedagogy impact the racial/ethnic and gender identities of the African-American young women participating in Black Girls United?* In an effort to develop an understanding of the effects of Black feminist pedagogy I first decoded the various attributes of the framework. This includes a review of the weekly themes, corresponding literature, lesson plans, and student work associated with each meeting. As mentioned earlier in the chapter, a team of two students led the meetings each week. The methods by which students facilitated these discussions is important to include in my analysis of the impact of Black feminist pedagogy, as they contributed to the participants' levels of engagement during each meeting and their interest in the program in general.

Secondly, the next step of curriculum analysis includes personally *asking* student participants about the BGU curriculum during our interview sessions. At that time, individuals were given the opportunity to review the entire reading list and corresponding thematic units⁵⁵, as well as the lesson plans associated with each session. With the help of the reading list and lessons plans, students' memory recall was triggered, and individuals were able to reflect on and draw connections between the content of the readings, their personal analysis of each text, and the degree to which the literature influenced the ways in which they understood their racial/ethnic and gender identities.

⁵⁵ See Appendix B

Field Notes

Over a period of two years I recorded over one hundred weekly observational field notes during various in class and out of class activities. Because students facilitated our weekly meetings I had ample opportunities to take notes during our discussions, as well as later in the day (usually during my 6th period conference). Most of my early notes were written on loose-leaf paper that I found lying around my classroom. I eventually purchased journals to capture my reflections on key moments that arose during our discussions and out of class activities. Over a two-year period I completed a total of 4 journals, all of which were specifically designated for my BGU observations and musings.

Field notes are a useful data source to address all three of my research questions: *In what ways, if any, did Black Feminist pedagogy impact the racial/ethnic and gender identities of the African-American young women participating in Black Girls United? In what ways, if any, did BGU influence how the students in BGU understood their identities, as young Black women? From the participants' perspectives, in what ways, if any, did BGU help students negotiate the social and academic terrains of school?* In an effort to address each of these questions I organized my field notes into four main categories: 1) students' engagement with and discussion of the literature, 2) specific instances where individuals spoke implicitly or explicitly about their race and gender identities, and 3) occasions in which students talked openly about the social and academic barriers they faced in school, and 4) the degree to which BGU influenced their academic behaviors and social interactions. Organizing my field notes by the aforementioned thematic codes assisted me in developing an understanding of the effects of Black feminist pedagogy on students race and gender identities.

Video Recording

Over thirty-five hours of videotaped⁵⁶ weekly BGU meetings provided me with insight into all three of my research questions. In the analysis of video I focused primarily on students' engagement with and discussion of the literature, in addition to specific instances where individuals expressed their collective and individual understandings of their race and gender identities. Similarly, it was effective to use the video to analyze how students narrated their social and academic schooling experiences within the context of our meetings. Finally, using video as a data source was helpful in that it captured the organizational structure of BGU meetings from beginning to end. This was useful in documenting my Black feminist pedagogical framework as it originally played out, as opposed to relying solely on my memory recall.

Still, this data source was limited because I set up only one video camera in the back of the classroom, in an effort to prevent it from distracting students. As a consequence, I cannot see the faces of roughly one-third of the individuals in the room. These students had their backs to the camera, making it difficult to ascertain their verbal exchanges, facial expressions, and hand gestures. Thus, the camera angle limited my information on both their verbal and non-verbal behaviors. In order to ensure participants' privacy, I have transferred all video of students to my computer, which is password protected.

Interviews

I conducted two sets of semi-structured, in-depth interviews with each of the six participants. In situating this methodology within a Critical Race feminist theoretical framework, I was most interested in the relationship between the students' individual subjective experiences, and the larger social, cultural, and/or political contexts from which they emerged. Thus, my aim was to

⁵⁶ The thirty-five hours of video include over eighty percent of the Black Girls United class sessions. The remaining classes were not captured on video, due to technical difficulties (i.e. camera failure, insufficient space on videotapes, etc.)

analyze the ways in which the schooling experiences of the interviewees have been shaped by the intersections of various structures of domination—as opposed to exploring them as isolated events. Moreover, a semi-structured, open-ended protocol provided opportunities for me to ask core questions while maintaining the freedom to continue with follow-up questions when unexpected topics emerged during the interviews (Brenner, 2006). In this context, the intent was for participants to oscillate between modes of informant and respondent as they made meaning of their own lives and experiences. I am hopeful that this methodology enabled students to *realize* themselves in one way or another over the course of the interviews.

I conducted two rounds of interviews with each participant. In the first round of interviews my goal was to ascertain students' unique raced-gendered perspectives of their personal and family histories, schooling experiences, and orientation towards school *prior* to joining Black Girls United. What familial and community cultural practices do they find meaningful? What kinds of racialized and gendered experiences did students encounter in their homes and communities before joining BGU? How do students describe the social and academic landscape of King High?

In my second round of interviews I focused on students' understandings of their evolving race and gender identities *within* the context of BGU. How did individuals narrate their experiences in the first year of the program? Did this change over time? I was also interested in whether or not students' involvement in BGU assisted them in negotiating the social and academic barriers they encountered at King High School. Did the agency-oriented curriculum in Black Girls United empower students with the necessary skills to transgress these barriers? Finally, as mentioned earlier in the chapter, I utilized student interviews in an effort to fully recount the features of Black feminist pedagogy. How do students recall the organizational and

pedagogical structure of the program? Were there specific strategies and/or techniques that I failed to include in my analysis of the framework?

Because several years have passed since students participated in BGU, I provided participants with our reading list, as well as selected video footage during interviews to assist in their memory recall, and enhance the reliability of participants remembering what took place. The video footage selected included both meetings in which BGU members were highly energized and passionate, as well as those in which we covered topics that resulted in less verbal participation and/or attentiveness⁵⁷.

Student Artifacts

Student artifacts were a valuable data source to address all three of my research questions: *In what ways, if any, did Black Feminist pedagogy impact the racial/ethnic and gender identities of the African-American young women participating in Black Girls United? In what ways, if any, did BGU influence how the students in BGU understood their identities, as young Black women? From the participants' perspectives, in what ways, if any, did BGU help students negotiate the social and academic terrains of school?* Artifacts included (but were not limited to) written documents and digital media that students created during the time in which they participated in BGU. During interviews, some individuals choose to include tangible objects, which, in their opinions, are emblematic of a shift⁵⁸ in racial/ethnic or gender identity development. Likewise,

⁵⁷ Attentiveness, for the purpose of this study, is measured based on students' verbal and non-verbal cues. This includes talking aloud in class, speaking only to their neighbors, and individuals who are engaged in other activities (texting on the phone, working on homework, etc.).

⁵⁸ Although some scholars contend that racial or ethnic identity can be measured (see Wright, B.L., *I know who I am, do you? Identity and academic achievement of successful African American male adolescents in an urban pilot high school in the United States*. Urban Education, 2011. 46(4): p. 611-638.), one limitation of this study is that there is no baseline established that allowed the researcher to measure any movement over time.

upon reviewing video footage of BGU meetings, I noticed that some students opted to share specific artifacts that were representative of the impact that BGU had on their social and academic endeavors. To ensure students' privacy, artifacts (collected during interviews) were stored in a locked file cabinet in my home office.

Data Analysis, Positionality, and Limitations

Data Analysis

I utilized data triangulation in this study in an effort to acquire a diverse range of information about what occurred in Black Girls United and a thorough understanding of how the participants made sense of these interactions. Hence, the BGU curriculum, field notes, videotaped meetings, interviews, and artifacts were all “resources for potential data” (F. Erickson, 1998, p. 1162). The information that these sources contain were transcribed, organized, coded, and systematically reviewed in order to become the eventual *data* that substantiated my assertions regarding the research site and study participants.

To effectively analyze my data sources I used Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 1995) and grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Fairclough describes CDA as a three-dimensional process that includes, “analysis of (spoken or written) language texts, analysis of discourse practice (processes of text production, distribution and consumption) and analysis of discursive events as instances of sociocultural practice” (p. 2). As such, micro (i.e. text syntax, rhetoric), meso (i.e. power relations in production and consumption), and macro-level (i.e. intertextual understandings, societal currents) interpretations of discourse provide a system by which one may read into the academic, social, political, and ideological meanings of discourse data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Thus, in my analysis of data I looked closely at the specific structures of text, as well as the socio-political systems and contexts in which they

emerged. Specifically, I was interested in how the discursive exchanges within BGU reproduced and/or resisted dominant notions of Black femininity.

Combined with Critical Discourse Analysis, I utilized grounded theory as an inductive “bottom-up approach” to analyzing my corpus of data. Straus and Corbin emphasize the importance for researchers to “acquire a way of thinking about data and the world in which they live... to be able to easily move from what they see and hear and to raise that to the level of the abstract, and then to turn around again and move back to the level of data” (p.8). Hence, the researcher starts on the *ground* with the data, which inductively evolves into more abstract phenomena. This method of analysis is critical to this study because although it allows for the researcher to be open to concepts and patterns that emerge during the analytical process, it does not presume an objective stance. Theoretical constructs—or *abstraction*—are integrated into the analysis as a means of accountability to the research subjects and the conditions in which they live.

Data reduction and analysis for this study included labeling phenomena, discovering emerging categories, conducting a cross-comparison of categories, developing hypotheses and theoretical perspectives derived from the data, and checking for confirming and disconfirming evidence for each assertion. First, I coded the data utilizing grounded theory techniques. This included an in-depth examination of the data sources that includes identifying, labeling, categorizing, and recounting the phenomena found in the text (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Thereafter, I employed selective coding in the refinement of these categories, ultimately to contribute towards developing hypotheses, or building theory (Strauss & Corbin, p. 202). I created a categorization chart that assisted in my evaluation of the frequency, intensity, and duration of these codes, with the aim of more accurately reflecting the narratives and

perspectives of the participants, as well as the degree to which Black feminist pedagogy shaped their race and gender identity development. In the final stages of data analysis, I searched again for supporting and disconfirming evidence for each of my initial assertions, paying closer attention to those that were substantiated across several data sources. Upon my conclusion of the data analysis process I acquired a deeper understanding of the following questions: How did African-American female students narrate their struggle in Black Girls United? What happened *after* they named their problems? Was there a *difference* in how they conceptualized their race and gender identities? Lastly, did the participants report a shift in their social and academic behaviors as a result of their participation in BGU?

Positionality

As a teacher-researcher, I am aware of my own positionality and political interests. By virtue of the fact that I conducted research at the high school I formerly attended and the school at which I previously taught, objectivity was a critical area of concern. There are certainly benefits to being so closely linked to a study and its participants. My relationship with King High School and its students and faculty granted me tremendous access to the micropolitics of the research site that I would not have been privy to as an outsider researcher participant. Such access begot tremendous responsibility on my part to capture their voices with depth and precision.

By the same token, I am aware of the potential pitfalls to being organically linked to one's research. As a former student *and* teacher at King High School, I accept that I have certain preconceived notions about the focal students and the school site itself. Although unsure of whether such preconceptions have skewed my data collection, I feel it is important to recognize them for the sake of revealing possible biases. Over the course of six years, my role with the

participants has evolved tremendously, as I am no longer simply their *teacher*. Over time I have become a mentor and friend to several of the young women. Furthermore, my personal history and experiences as a Black woman has influenced the purpose of this research and the methods employed. While this may pose a validity threat (e.g. students altering behaviors and responses based on my positionality), I utilized multiple data sources to help ensure that the study is presented accurately and fairly.

Limitations

This investigation utilizes narrative qualitative methods because it is particularly effective at capturing the unique perspectives and experiences of the researcher and participants, thereby providing a rich contextual analysis from which new theory emerges and/or pre-existing theory is supported (Maxwell, 1996). A drawback of qualitative research is that it does not produce externally generalizable results for a specific hypothesis. Thus, this research does not make the claim that Black feminist pedagogical practices influence the race and gender identity development of *all* African-American female students in urban schools.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that qualitative studies are concerned with stories and intricate human realities that can be learned from small samples of individuals (Maxwell, 1996). Thus, given the focus on the rich counternarratives of these Black female students and the goal of understanding the ways in which Black feminist pedagogy impacted their race and gender identities, the actual sample size of this study is not as significant as the insight gained through the telling of their stories.

CHAPTER 4: STUDENTS' INITIAL PERCEPTIONS

Introduction: A Hard Knock Life

Pac⁵⁹ said, “We ain’t meant to survive, cuz it’s a set up. And even tho you’re fed up, you gotta keep your head up.” So many of my girls are struggling to keep their heads up—which I understand—considering all the pain that they endure. And I’m certain I only know the half of it. Some [students] are so stressed out. Aged beyond their years. At 15 and 16 years old, some of them look older than me! They are tired, but resilient. Pac was right, “they ain’t meant to survive.” It seems that prosperity and happiness are privileges—rewards that only a lucky few low-income Black girls manage to procure after a long and grueling hazing process that we call life. Relentless struggle is what these students have been conditioned to expect as young Black women. With the odds stacked against them, a rough existence is perceived as normal, natural, and unjust. I’ve encountered these sentiments in their written assignments. Today, I was reminded of that truth. It’s a ‘hard knock life⁶⁰, for Black girls. (Journal 1, Entry 6, p.17)

I wrote this field note on a Thursday, during my sixth period conference. It was the day of the first Black Girls United meeting, and I was mentally and physically exhausted. Earlier that afternoon, over 50 young women flocked to my classroom during the lunch break, each hoping to be selected for the program. We covered several important topics in that gathering, including the primary objectives of the organization, as well as the requirements for joining BGU.

Notwithstanding the empowering, feel good energy that saturated my classroom that afternoon, I was distracted by a statement that a student expressed in the final moments of our meeting. After the logistics of the organization were covered, I asked individuals to share their perceptions of the current condition of Black womanhood. The answers varied: Black women were “invisible”

⁵⁹ Tupac Shakur was a popular American rapper, who passed away in 1991 and rose to great prominence in 1994. In the field note above, I reference his 1993 hit song, *Keep Ya Head Up*. Shakur originally dedicated the song to Latasha Harlins, a 15 year old African-American girl, who was shot and killed in 1991 by Korean store owner, Soon Ja Du. Harlin’s murder gained national attention when her perpetrator was merely fined, sentenced to probation, and required to complete community service as a consequence of his crime.

⁶⁰ The phrase “a hard knock life” was originally a song title from the 1977 Broadway musical production, *Annie*. The upbeat tune makes light of an orphan girl’s repeated and extreme misfortune during her residency in a children’s group home. The jingle re-emerged in 1999 as a single from rapper Jay-Z’s third album entitled *Vol. 2... Hard Knock Life*. The context of the song was altered in Jay-Z’s version, which highlights the social and economic trials of urban, inner city youth. As a result of the sustained popularity and global commercial success of Jay-Z’s rap song, the phrase “a hard knock life” has become an anthem for low-income adolescents across the nation.

(Daniella, BGU Class, Week #1); Black women were survivors of oppression and domestic abuse; Black women were “trying to rediscover their *queendom*” (Nia, BGU Class, Week 1). The last student to respond was Chrisette, an 11th grader who was perched against a stool in the back of the room. Without prompting, she stood tall and asserted:

We are the underdogs. Everything we have, society tries to take from us—to keep us on the bottom. They don’t want us to win. We have to protect our children, our families,...our education. But we fighters. And some of us fight so hard, we die tryin’ to make it to the top. You know, those are the statistics. The rest of us just keep fightin’. But some of us...most of us... *end up defeated*. - Chrisette, BGU Class, Week 1

Chrisette’s comment resulted in several nods of agreement from her peers. As the bell rang, I informed the group that we would begin the following week’s meeting with a reflection on Chrisette’s observation. Later that day, during my 6th period conference, I had the opportunity to think deeply about the events that transpired in our meeting. I was saddened by students’ interpretations of the condition of Black womanhood. Resilience was a common theme; however, the concept of African-American women’s imminent defeat was similarly prevalent. As a twenty-four year old Black woman and alumna of King High School, I had experienced (and was negotiating) many of the oppressive social conditions that my students highlighted in our first discussion. Still, I was bewildered and disheartened by the number of young women at the meeting who were experiencing feelings of impending defeat; personally, I had never grappled with such thoughts. Hence, I was gravely concerned about the academic trajectories and life prospects of the BGU students. That afternoon I wrote, “*Why do so many of these girls believe that they are destined to fail? And how can I possibly expect them to give a damn about school, if they are convinced that failure is lurking around the corner?*” In the months that followed, and over the course of two years, the members of Black Girls United answered these questions. Each week in class they named their realities as urban African-American young women, and

resiliently “struggled with and against each other” to re-conceptualize the profoundly embedded, dominant narratives around the meaning of Black femininity (Sears, 2010, p. 22).

The goal of this dissertation study was to determine the effects of Black feminist pedagogy on the race and gender identities of the members of BGU. My research questions were as follows:

In what ways, if any, did Black Feminist pedagogy impact the racial/ethnic and gender identities of the African-American young women participating in Black Girls United?

- In what ways, if any, did Black feminist pedagogy influence how the students in BGU *understood* their identities, as young Black women?
- From the participants’ perspectives, in what ways, if any, did BGU help students negotiate the *social* and *academic* terrains of school?

In order to answer my first and second sub-questions, I had to disentangle the multiple factors—both inside of school and outside of school—that shaped the ways that the participants understood themselves as racialized and gendered beings, *prior* to joining the program.

Furthermore, it was imperative for me to determine how students interpreted and negotiated the social and academic culture of King High School. I utilized all five data sources in my analysis:

1) two sets of semi-structured, in-depth interviews with a representative research sample group of seven students; 2) 35 hours of video recordings from BGU classes; 3) my curriculum (i.e. student work, thematic units, lesson plans, and corresponding literature), 4) two years of field notes from in class and out of class interactions, and 5) student artifacts⁶¹. Because there is no baseline established for measuring any movement over time, I utilized a template⁶² that I developed to assist in locating students’ *early* interpretations of their racial/ethnic and gender

⁶¹ Artifacts included (but were not limited to) written documents and digital media that students created during the time in which they participated in BGU. During the interviews, some individuals chose to include tangible objects, which, in their opinions, are emblematic of their racial/ethnic and/or gender identity prior to joining Black Girls United.

⁶² Refer to Appendix G

identities. This template was utilized in the analysis of each data source.

It is important to note that because I did not have access to interviews with participants, artifacts, student work, or video of students *prior* to their participation with Black Girls United, I relied on data from the first five weeks of the program to answer my first and second sub-questions. It was during those early weeks of BGU that our literature and class discussions were focused specifically on how the cultural shapings of gender play out in students lives as urban African-American adolescents⁶³. Moreover, I hypothesized that the degree of the influence of Black Feminist Pedagogy on individuals' race and gender identities would be minor, if at all, so early in the program. Finally, the bulk of my analysis draws on student interviews, video recordings, and artifacts. All three of these information sources provided *firsthand* accounts of individuals' interpretations of the numerous factors contributing to their race and gender identity development, leading up to their participation in Black Girls United. Alternatively, field notes⁶⁴ and BGU curriculum were useful in that they elucidated my interpretations of the participants' race and gender ideologies.

An analysis of the data has illuminated Black Girls United students' understandings of their race and gender identities prior to joining the program. The findings reveal that participants had a powerful, collective recognition of their status as a *multiply subordinated* group. While the objective of my research was to examine race and gender as separate entities, I have discovered that for BGU youth, race and gender are deeply entangled, and were rarely teased apart in discussions around identity. This finding reinforces the scholarship of Muhammad and Dixon

⁶³ Refer to Appendix B for Black Girls United thematic units and corresponding readings

⁶⁴ As mentioned in chapter three, I recorded over seventy-five weekly observational field notes during various in class and out of class activities, over a period of two years. I completed a total of 4 journals, all of which were specifically designated for my BGU observations and musings.

(2008), who maintain that there is an “indivisible oneness of racialized gender experiences and feminized racial experiences” (p. 176) amongst high school aged Black girls. The African-American young women in BGU both support and extend the authors’ findings; in the context of this study, race and gender are also inextricably tied to *class*. The students in Black Girls United—via multiple sources of data—have articulated an intersectional analysis that speaks truth to power, by naming and addressing the simultaneity of race, gender, and class oppression that they encounter in their daily lives.

The subordination experienced by BGU youth played out in two major ways: individuals felt a general sense of *invisibility*—and at the other end of the spectrum, *hyper-visibility*—resulting from various socially denigrating experiences in their communities and at King High School. A plethora of Black feminist scholarship has unearthed the historical patterns as well as the contemporary means by which society silences African-American women (Collins, 2000; Davis, 1983; hooks, 1984). The students in BGU have a similar testimony; their general sense of *invisibility* was attributed to the prolonged deprivation of critical resources in their communities (e.g., economic capital) and at school (i.e., motivated teachers). A common thread across data sources was the perception that poor Black women are at the bottom of society’s racialized gender hierarchy. As a consequence, the desires and needs of low-income African-American girls are disregarded—rendering these adolescents insignificant, voiceless, and ultimately invisible.

Alternatively, ubiquitous messages of Black women’s inferiority in U.S. popular media resulted in BGU participants’ shared consciousness of their *hyper-visibility*. Portrayals of African-American women as anti-intellectual, aggressive, and inherently sexual in mainstream television, film, and music have been well documented in extant Black feminist scholarship

(Collins, 2004; Harris-Perry, 2011; Morgan, 1999). This specific, fixed stylization of Black women and girls in popular media was reinforced at King High School through disempowering interactions with teachers and peers (i.e. discourse that malign Black female youth, and teachers' low academic expectations). In sum, the participants of Black Girls United experienced extreme alienation as a consequence of being inundated with stereotypical depictions of themselves. This posed a tremendous threat to the self-concept, moral standing, and perceived intellectual capacities of these individuals.

The dialectical relationship between Black Girls United students' *invisibility* and *hyper-visibility* was the most prominent feature of their intersecting race, class, and gender identities. However, there were fleeting occasions in which participants felt inspired in their communities and/or at King High School. I refer to these instances as *outliers*, which I have grouped into two categories: 1) *protective mechanisms* employed by parents and/or guardians, and 2) *small serendipities* at King High. Numerous BGU participants engaged in resilient social and academic behaviors, which they often attributed to the varied *protective mechanisms* employed by their parents and guardians. For instance, participants reported that their parents and guardians worked multiple jobs and provided rides to and from school. From the students' perspectives, the purposes of these protective mechanisms were to increase BGU participants' access to the critical material resources previously mentioned (e.g., economic capital), and/or to promote students' focus on academics.

Additionally, there were several *small serendipities* at King High School, which similarly functioned as empowering outliers. For example, some students in Black Girls United reported joining extra-curricular school activities "on a whim" or simply "falling into" academic enrichment programs at the urging of caring teachers and/or administrators. Several of these

programs/organizations inculcated in students a sense of intellectual satisfaction, racial pride, and enhanced self-esteem. Moreover, connections with a few committed faculty members at King High (i.e., teachers and college counselors) inspired youth to stay focused on their academic pursuits; these trusted faculty members also served as a “listening ear” when the young women in BGU needed to vent about problems at home and at school. Together, these *small serendipities* were the result of students’ perceived good fortune, and functioned as distractions from the dehumanizing schooling conditions that they encountered regularly.

Sadly, the empowering *outliers* in BGU participants’ communities and at King High School were not powerful enough to subvert the abundant negative messages students received in those same spaces. As such, Black Girls United youth participated in varying acts of oppositional resistance against their perceived race, class, and gender subordination; most of these acts were intentional, complex, and socially situated (Fordham, 1993). Resistance among BGU participants is aligned with Robinson and Ward’s (1991) concept of *resistance for liberation* and *resistance for survival*. The authors describe *resistance for liberation* as behaviors that serve a higher purpose of individual and community uplift, whereas *resistance for survival* often involves self-defeating and/or destructive activity. The following sections will explicate my findings, which have been divided into four categories: 1) the multiple phenomena that contributed to BGU students’ feelings of *invisibility* and 2) how ubiquitous messages of African-American women’s inferiority, resulted in participants’ *hyper-visibility*, 3) the socially and academically empowering school and community *outliers*, and 4) students’ diverse methods of *resistance*.

Invisibility

Hood Life: A Social Ecology of “Less Than”

Andrea (facilitator): [Poses question to the class] What's the first word that comes to mind when you think about your community?

Chloe: [Raises hand] Poor.

Andrea (facilitator): Umm, ok, can you elaborate on that [Chloe]?

Chloe: Yeah, ok [pauses]...we don't have a lot. Of *anything*, really. Not in my neighborhood. Money, clothes, food. You know, a lot of people don't even have enough food to get by. *We* cool tho'. My family's getting by. You know, folks' in the hood just have less. *Less than* everybody else.

Andrea (facilitator): Ok, good. So, people in the hood automatically have less than everybody else. Ok. Why? What do you think...well, what's the cause of the poverty in your community? And in the hood in general?

Tanisha: [Interjects] It's like this, [pauses] basically, we ain't *got shit*, cuz we *ain't shit!*

Andrea (facilitator): Says who?!

Tanisha: *Everybody*. [Looks around for approval from the class] Don't even front! *Society* says so! [Side chatter ensues, and some students respond with 'yep']

Ms. Lane: Do *you* believe that you 'ain't shit'?

Tanisha: *Heck naw!* [Laughter]

The excerpt above was taken from our third Black Girls United meeting, which was facilitated by an 11th grade student named Andrea. For homework, students were required to read an article by Taigi Smith entitled, *What Happens When Your Hood is the Last Stop on the White Flight Express?* (2002). The purpose of Smith's reading was twofold: 1) to highlight the beauty and cultural wealth of students' respective communities, and 2) to discuss how community revitalization projects often lead to the displacement of families of color, and specifically single mothers. Smith's reading familiarized students with this process; her personal story of gentrification in the Mission District of San Francisco provided the backdrop against which students could compare the progression of gentrification in the neighborhoods surrounding King High School. When Andrea opened the discussion by asking individuals to share the "first thing that comes to mind" when they think about their communities, the conversation moved in a surprising direction.

Rather than reflecting on the advantages of living in urban districts, students illuminated—and subsequently, critiqued—the scarcity of economic capital in their respective communities. Chloe’s assertion that “folks in the hood have *less than* everybody else” opened up “Pandora’s Box.” Individuals went on to describe their neighborhoods as “dirty,” “depressing”, and “crowded”. For many participants, a by-product of living in economically impoverished urban areas meant that individuals could not adequately access the resources to meet their basic needs in shelter, employment, and health. For instance, an 11th grader named Kennisha revealed that the inaccessibility of healthy foods in her neighborhood was a major obstacle to the physical health and well being of individuals in her community. She asserted, “Me and my family have to leave South LA to grocery shop because all of the stores around here have old, spoiled food—the leftovers that they not gon’ send to the stores in the rich areas! But they could care less about *us!* We don’t matter. So they just throw us the scraps!” Kennisha’s comment reaffirms Tanisha’s sentiment that people in low-income communities are disposable to the larger society. As such, individuals are prohibited from acquiring the resources to adequately sustain themselves.

In my first set of individual interviews with a sub-sample of seven former BGU students, the participants discussed the centrality of *race* and *gender* in the subordination of economically under-resourced individuals. During my conversation with a young woman named Tanya, we discussed her awareness of this concept as a student attending King High. As she recounted the subordination that she experienced at the intersections of her multiple identities, Tanya asserted:

Well, before I joined [Black Girls United] I used to feel like, nobody cares about poor *minorities*. Especially *poor Black women*. Like, for us...poverty is a cycle because racism and sexism keeps us from getting jobs. White people can escape the poverty, because they’ll get hired before we do. And men—you know—they *always* gonna be above women in our society. You know what I mean? But as a Black woman, it’s like...we’re *stuck*, you know? We’re forced to live in crowded inner cities. In apartments and projects where we’re stacked on top of each other. And you got single moms havin’ to live that way too! Squished! Like, that’s why *so many* Black women have a ‘I don’t care’ mentality. Like,

what the hell am I supposed to do?! Because in order to *do better* you have to be *given better*, and put in better situations. And that's why so many of us have just given up. You feel me? Cuz' we need to be put in better situations. But, we don't have access to better situations. - Tanya, Interview #1, 10/26/12

The notion that the deprivation of low-income Black women has pushed individuals into a state of powerlessness was a common theme amongst Black Girls United students. On many occasions—as I reviewed video of BGU classes, interviews with students, field notes, and artifacts—the Black Girls United participants regarded being poor, Black, and female as a trifecta of suffering. In my conversation with Nia, she described why it is particularly challenging for low-income Black women to maintain a sense of dignity in the face of interlocking oppression⁶⁵. Prior to joining BGU, Nia briefly attended Pierson High School, which was located in an upper middle class suburb 40 minutes from King High. In our conversation, she recalled an experience in which a White male student referred to her as “ghetto” during a class discussion. In the following, Nia articulates why being called ghetto by a White male was one of the most dehumanizing experiences of her life, and the ways in which it reinforced her attitude regarding the status of Black women in the larger society.

When he called me ghetto, I learned that being a poor Black girl is the worst thing to be! Cuz' you're not just poor, or just Black, or just female. You're *all three!* And to call somebody ghetto is the worst! Especially if you're called a 'ghetto Black girl'. And, that's how I felt before I became a part of [Black Girls United]. Like, you can call me a lot of things, but as a Black girl, *don't you dare* call me ghetto! Because it means that you're *nothing*. Not smart, not beautiful. You are classless. I mean, he said it like he was disgusted. 'You are a ghetto Black girl'. *You are nothing*. Like, 'I don't even see you. I don't even recognize your existence'. It was really degrading. After someone calls you that, what do you do? How do you respond to that? Like, what can you *really* do about it? I was flabbergasted.

-Nia, Interview #1, 10/12/12

During my second interview with Nia, we spoke in greater detail about her understanding of the

⁶⁵ The term “interlocking oppression” refers to the simultaneous and intersecting race, class, and gender subordination that is experienced by African-American women in the United States. See Patricia Hill Collins (2000) for additional information on the term.

socio-political location of low-income Black women, prior to entering Black Girls United. This member checking was useful in verifying an important finding from her previous interview—that is, being poor, Black, and female was the lowest notch inscribed on the social ladder. As I pushed Nia to further articulate her feelings, she proclaimed, “I think that if you’re poor and Black, nobody cares. If you’re a poor Black woman, you’re *really* in trouble!” (Interview #2, 12/08/12).

Although this sentiment appeared frequently in conversations about how African-American women fit into the larger society, the participants’ sense of invisibility was also at the center of many discussions regarding students’ academic experiences at King High School. African-American girls comprised the majority of female students at King; however, many of these youth felt overlooked on campus. In many ways, the invisibility that the participants experienced in their neighborhoods (and in the larger society in general), were reinforced and/or reproduced at King High School through their interactions with highly uninspired teachers.

King High: Now You See Me, Now You Don’t

In my second interview with a former BGU student named Tanya, I asked, “What motivated you to attend [King]?” Without hesitating she replied,

I’m not gonna lie, what is every kid who attended [King] High feeling about school? [Imitating her peers] ‘Oh my God, they filmed [Take Me Out to the Ball Game] here’. Like, that was my *only* motivation [laughing]. And then you know, sports and basketball. -Tanya, Interview #2, 12/22/12

Tanya went on to describe King’s notorious reputation for producing well-known college and professional athletes, and the history of the school as the “go to” location for urban blockbuster films. Her response was not unpredictable; I previously posed the same question to six other former BGU students, and their reactions were comparable to Tanya’s. In my interviews, students confirmed that they enrolled in King High School because: it was the safest local school,

it was their home school, and/or it had the highest population of “cool kids”. What was missing from those responses was the mentioning of the school’s academic culture. As a former King High School student *and* teacher, I understood exactly why the school’s academic reputation was not a motivating factor for students’ enrollment. In my experience, there were certainly more than a handful of hardworking and dedicated faculty at King. Nevertheless, the school’s extensive and complicated history of low academic performance—as compared to other high schools in the district—cannot be denied⁶⁶.

For Black Girls United participants, King High School lived up to its poor academic reputation—which students attributed to character flaws amongst the teaching faculty. In numerous discussions with BGU participants, individuals labeled educators as lazy and aloof. In our fourth Black Girls United meeting, a student named Rikeshia commented, “Too many teachers act like they don’t wanna be here. They assign you work, and then they do they own thing, like we ain’t even there! Like they don’t have an important job to do!” (Rikeshia, BGU class, Week 4). For 10 uninterrupted minutes, students collectively painted an all too familiar image of the “typical urban public school teacher” as rude and indolent. Furthermore, participants declared that the urban educator is always under the impression that he/she benefits students by simply showing up to work. One of my interviewees, Ashanti, was an 11th grader at the time of our class discussion. After listening to Rikeshia’s remark, she took pleasure in providing a demonstration for the class. Imitating her math teacher, Ashanti slouched in her chair, crossed her arms, and shouted,

Yep, cuz’ [Mr. Abacha] don’t care! Look, this what he do. [Pretending to be a male teacher, she deepens her voice] ‘Open up your book and turn to page 52. Read til’ you get to the end of the chapter. Answer the questions at the end, and turn the work in by Friday’. [Rising, and returning to her normal position in her seat] If you give me the work on Monday, *why* is it due on Friday? Look, don’t give me that

⁶⁶ For a detailed discussion of King High School’s academic standing, refer to chapter three.

much time to do this *stupid little work!* That's just rude! – Ashanti, BGU
Class, Week 4

In my interviews I sought to confirm the sentiments above, which were expressed in video taken over four years prior. The description of educators as individuals who assign bookwork, and subsequently ignore students was disturbing, to say the least. Thus, I asked each of the seven former BGU participants to describe “typical experiences” with teachers back when they were in high school. A common theme across *each* interview was that many of their teachers made students feel unimportant and invisible—as if urban youth were not a worthy investment of their time. A student named Tanya suggested that the alleged behavior of those educators was to be expected, since she and her peers were low-income people of color, attending an economically under-resourced school:

I think teachers were way too comfortable because they were teaching kids who they thought didn't *'give a fuck'* about education. And the few of us who went home and complained to our parents ended up shut down. Because we just poor Black kids. And, you know, Latinos too. You know, we wasn't at Beverly Hills High. [King] students and parents didn't have the money or the power to get rid of those teachers. We wasn't rich White kids, so...like, we just had to deal with it.
- Tanya, Interview #2, 12/22/12

When I asked Tanya to elaborate on why she and her peers were perceived as the kind of individuals who do not value education, she suggested that youth are able to discern the difference between teachers who care authentically, and those who pretend to care—and student disengagement is a consequence of the latter:

I don't think [negligent teachers] were *really* invested in us in the first place. I think they automatically came in like, 'these kids ain't about to amount to much.' And you know, we could tell! So, you know, *all hell breaks loose* in the classroom! Like, that's why they couldn't control their classrooms. Ain't nobody about to listen to you! You can't keep students' attention if the teaching sucks *and* we know that you could care less about us! You act like you don't care if I'm here or not. So, you may as well just pack up and go back home. [Laughing] Shoot, I may as well just go back home! - Tanya, Interview #2, 12/22/12

The notion that several educators teach with the assumptions that urban students of color 1) don't want to learn, and 2) will lead trivial lives was consistent throughout the interviews. Kenya noted, "There were some teachers who didn't seem like they were there for our best interest to learn. *They* were smart. *They* went to college. But they didn't believe in us. So they weren't helping *us* get there. There wasn't any kind of motivation per se. They weren't pushing us to do better." (Kenya, Interview #2, 01/12/13).

Overall, the Black Girls United participants agreed that numerous teachers at King High School were impediments to student success. Although individuals recognized that the overwhelming majority of their teachers had a strong grasp of their respective subject matter, and were highly educated—students maintained that the teachers who were uninspired and disenchanted were at the root of the persistent academic failure among countless students at King High. As Ashanti pointed out,

The teachers were a barrier to student success. They didn't offer a helping hand. As a matter of fact, they were openly content with student failure. On a average day I'd hear a teacher say, 'I don't gotta be here, *you do*. I don't need to graduate, *you do*. I'm getting paid one way or the other.' So it kind of made me feel like, what the fuck am I really trying for? As long as I pass, I'm good. But I think most kids were turned off where they didn't even care about passin'. Like, 'I'm not about to try to go out my way and the teacher don't care.' It's not like them teachers were really tryna' give me advice or sit me down, and really work with me. I honestly think the graduation rates would have been much higher if more teachers actually cared and realized that *we matter too*. - Ashanti, Interview #2, 12/01/12

Black Girls United students' treatment by unmotivated and deficit-minded teachers amplified the feelings of invisibility that these youth regularly experienced in their communities. In the vignette that commenced this section on *invisibility*, a student named Tanisha declared, "...we ain't *got shit*, cuz we *ain't shit!*" (BGU Class, Week 3).

Although Tanisha's righteous indignation was strident, it was also commendable. She was brave to declare—in front of her peers—that society regarded her as disposable. Tanisha's comment

captures the sentiments expressed by adolescents across a four-year time lapse and a variety of data. As Ashanti mentioned in the quote above, the individuals in Black Girls United wanted the world to know that they “matter too.” Sadly, juxtaposed against students’ invisibility was a glaring spotlight. However, according to these youth, the *hyper-visibility* that students encountered functioned as an unwelcomed instrument of social control and gender stratification.

Hyper-visibility

Ubiquitous messages of African-American women’s inferiority were a constant threat to the students in Black Girls United. The participants were frequently exposed to reductive representations of themselves plastered across television and movie screens; moreover, egregious acts of racialized sexist discourse were the norm in hip-hop culture. Historically, stereotypical images such as the loyal Mammy, the emasculating Sapphire, and the overtly sexual Jezebel have played a disproportionately significant role in the lives of African-American women and girls (Collins, 2000; Rose, 1994). The primary stereotypes that individuals in Black Girls United identified were symbols of African-American women and girls as anti-intellectual, “ghetto,” and hypersexual. According to the participants in this study, these messages typically originated from the media, and were perpetuated by their relationships with teachers and other students at King High School.

Danger: Educated Black Woman

One of the most marginalizing stereotypes that students encountered was the belief that Black women are unintelligent. The following field note discusses a scenario in which a student named Latrice took the initiative to fight against this label.

Today, [Latrice] walked into our meeting wearing the most AWESOME shirt. On the front, in large, bold red lettering, it read “Smart Black Woman,” and “SURPRISED?” in capital letters on the back. After I complimented [Latrice] on her shirt, I asked her to explain its meaning. She told me that she was wearing it “in case people are confused.”. She was specifically referring to

her peers and some of her teachers at [King], who have made inaccurate assumptions about her intellectual potential, and the aptitude of Black girls in general. I'm most excited about the other reason behind her shirt. [Latrice's] manager at [Eternally Young] made a comment that she was "shocked" that [Latrice] was applying to such prestigious universities. Her manager assumed that she didn't have the grades for college - especially universities like USC and Loyola Marymount. [Latrice] explained that the scenario with her manager inspired her to have the t-shirt made. She's wearing it to work today. Simply brilliant! (Journal 1, Entry 12, p.32)

Latrice was a 12th grade honors student at King High School. The decision to take on a part-time job stemmed from her desire to save money for college, and assist her mother and father with household expenses. Latrice's manager was oblivious to the degree to which her comment reinforced numerous other messages that Latrice had received regarding her perceived intellectual inferiority. At the time of the incident, Latrice's cumulative grade point average was a 3.9, and she was a highly competitive candidate for some of the nation's most esteemed post-secondary institutions. However, she often found herself insulted by the expectation that urban African-American girls are not capable of attaining high levels of academic success.

In an interview with Nia, she shared a story similar to Latrice's; she was another example of a young woman who did not fit the "dumb Black girl" mold:

When I went to [Pierson High] the way I spoke, it changed. Well not changed. It was just different because I was with kids from different backgrounds. A lot of other races, you know? So when I came to [King], a lot of my teachers and other students were like, 'You're so articulate.' People would actually say that! 'Oh, you're so smart. You speak so well.' Like, I get that I didn't necessarily sound exactly the same as students at [King], but is that really a sign of intelligence? Because I was smart before I enrolled at [Pierson], ok! But yeah, people at [King] would be like, 'Where are you from?' And I'm like, um...down the street people! - Nia, Interview #2, 12/08/12

Although Nia came to this conclusion four years after high school, while reflecting back on her adolescence, she and Latrice shared a similar sentiment. That is, as high school students they both refused to accept the widespread belief that African-American women were inherently unintelligent. In our fourth Black Girls United meeting we discussed the African-American

tradition of utilizing education as a site of resistance. Students had previously read chapter nine of Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Power* (2001). The chapter entitled, *Rethinking Black Women's Activism* illuminated how Black women acknowledged the "activist potential of education," and skillfully utilized their knowledge for self and community uplift (p. 210). An 11th grader named Ria led the conversation; she developed a PowerPoint presentation that highlighted several different famous (e.g., Oprah) and less known (e.g., Anna Julia Cooper) African-American women who valued education as a cornerstone of Black community development. In the exchange that followed, the participants discussed the importance of sharing what they learned with their female peers who were not members of BGU. They agreed that so many young women have internalized—at least to some degree—the "Black girls are stupid" stereotype as a consequence of being bombarded with such misrepresentations. As Erykah noted:

Yeah, I'm gonna pass this along, because we need to stop dumbing ourselves down. It's a lot of girls here who think that being smart is whack. But you know, you can't just listen to everything you hear on TV because that's make believe. *Being stupid is not cute! People are going to just call you ghetto!* And I get that some girls might just want some attention— but it's like *why?* What's wrong with being a smart, educated Black woman? You don't have to be dumb to keep somebody's attention. - Erykah, BGU Class, Week 4

In the statement above, Erykah illustrates how many African-American female students' perceived intellectual inferiority was typically associated with another contemporary stereotype: "the ghetto Black girl." In various conversations with the participants of this study, individuals recognized the ways in which society regarded African-American women and girls as complexly mediocre (i.e., simultaneously expressing multiple inferior traits).

The Illusive Image of the Ghetto Black Girl

In my experience as a teacher at King High School, the term "ghetto" was by far the most

commonly exercised slur against African-American young women. The rabid nature of its use was revealed during my interviews with former Black Girls United students. In the first round of interviews my goal was to have the young women reflect on their racialized and gendered perspectives of their personal and family histories, schooling experiences, and orientation towards school *prior* to joining Black Girls United. In doing so, I sought to determine individuals' understandings of the social and academic landscape of King High. For each interview, I asked participants to recall "How Black girls were perceived at [King] High." For the five out of seven students whose response included the term "ghetto," I requested that individuals provide a definition of the term. The responses are below:

"Black girls were ghetto—meaning, they brought the drama."

–Brittney (Interview #1, 10/19/12)

"It was the typical stereotype - that she was going to end up on welfare with so many kids, and claiming, 'Oh, I don't know who the child's father is.' If you're ghetto, you're just classless." –Erykah (Interview #1, 11/16/12)

"The expectation was for Black girls to be the stereotypical loud, ghetto girl who just has children all about and doesn't want to do something better for herself. Who's going to be stuck in the hood forever." –Kenya (Interview #1, 11/09/12)

"Like, you're excessively loud regardless of where you're at. You use slang with everything, and you use hand gestures to get your point across. You probably have multi-colored hair [laughing]." –Ashanti (Interview #1, 10/05/12)

"If she's ghetto, she's loud, and not presentable. She wears long, ugly, distracting fingernails, and always chewing gum like she ain't never ate a meal. She's rowdy. She's hood. She's not normal. Doesn't do what normal people do." -Tanya (Interview #1, 10/26/12)

The image of the "ghetto" Black girl was also discussed in the section on *invisibility*. Nia mentioned that being referred to as such made her feel as if she were "nothing" (i.e., voiceless, and without purpose) (Interview #1, 10/12/12). The term is also included in this section on *hyper-visibility* because the "ghetto Black girl" was regarded by Black Girls United students as

one of the most seemingly impenetrable stereotypes about African-American female students attending King High School. I searched across various data to decipher the ways in which BGU participants defined the expression. Collectively, students believed that it was all encompassing: the female who was labeled “ghetto” was considered dumb, unambitious, loud, poor, and aggressive. Moreover, her behaviors were so extreme, that they exceeded the bounds of acceptability.

It is critical to note that while students agreed that the actions mentioned above were an accurate portrayal of the ways that a *small minority* of Black female students *occasionally* behaved, they acknowledged the fact that their comments were also tremendous overgeneralizations regarding the character of Black female youth as a whole. Further, the insidious nature of this representation of African-American young women impacted the ways in which teachers at King High interacted with these youth. An 11th grader named Lisa described this phenomenon during a BGU meeting,

I don't know what teachers think about Hispanic females, but they think that *we* are hopeless and have no future. So they treat a lot of students like future baby mama's and welfare recipients. No expectations. No standards. They act surprised if you get an answer right on a quiz. And you know who they think are the potential welfare queens? The loud girls who come in late and disrupt the class. Those are the ones who really get a bad rep, cuz teacher's think they just gon' be havin' babies and collectin' checks. After [Marquetta] came in late to period four, she sat down and started talking to the girl behind her. I heard [Ms. Jenkins] tell her—in front of the whole class—she was like, '[Maggie] you should work on your posture and sit up straight. You gon' need a strong back when you're *barefoot and pregnant for the fourth time*, waiting on your check from the state!' I was like damn, when I come in late is that what she be thinkin' about me too? - Lisa, BGU Class, Week 2

In Lisa's experience, educators often assumed that unless African-American young women were quiet and showed up to class on time, they would inevitably end up jobless, with multiple children whom they were incapable of supporting. Numerous other examples were cited by BGU

students in their discussions of teacher's interactions with Black girls who didn't fit the mold of traditional femininity (i.e., passive, quiet, and obedient). Their conversations echoed Fordham's (1993) findings, that "loudness" often has an adverse effect on the academic achievement of Black female students, because such demeanor is traditionally characterized as subversive and threatening to Eurocentric prescriptions of gender that are typically reinforced in schools. Furthermore, the way in which a student's perceived "loudness" is intrinsically linked to her sexuality is an added attack on the character of African-American female youth.

Sexual Immorality

The alleged hyper-sexuality of low-income Black women and girls is a product of the mutually constructing systems of racism, classism, and sexism. Images of the "Bad Black Mother" and "Welfare Queen" date back to the 1960's, but gained increased popularity throughout the Reagan/Bush era (Sears, 2010; Collins, 2005). During this time the denigration of poor and working class Black femininity was created in an effort to severely limit social welfare supports for women who were deemed lazy. The lingering image of the poor African-American woman who takes advantage of public assistance and is unable to control her reproduction has remained consistent in contemporary discourse about urban Black girls (e.g., stigmas associated with teenage pregnancy). Many of the participants in Black Girls United were acutely aware of this externally defined construct of Black womanhood, and critiqued the ways in which it appeared in the social exchanges between male and female students at King High:

Every year they created this ho list. It was basically a list of girls—usually Black girls—who supposedly slept around with a lot of dudes. Some of em' already had babies. It was crazy because the list circulated around the whole school and it was embarrassing for the girls. And it was unfair because even if it wasn't true, the whole school was gonna think you were that way, regardless. And you were going to get teased and talked about for the rest of your years at [King]. So it was like, whatever you do, you better stay off that list. - Kenya, Interview #2, 01/12/13

The “Ho List”, like the image of the welfare queen, served as a major threat to the sexual morality of the African-American female students at King High School. A young woman who was labeled promiscuous bore a proverbial scarlet letter on her chest, and was a victim of eternal shaming and public scrutiny. The irony here is that while certain Black girls were berated for their purported sexual activity, they were also sent the message that selling their sexuality was a viable (and often praiseworthy) means of escaping poverty.

Television shows such as VH1’s *The Flavor of Love*, featured predominately Black and Latina women, who participated in various (habitually sexual) challenges to compete for the affection of rapper and D-list celebrity, Flavor Flav. Several of the women on the show have since utilized their 15 minutes of fame as a platform for new endeavors in the entertainment industry. Likewise, the narrative of women exploiting their sexuality in exchange for an improvement in their economic and social status was also present in a number of hip-hop songs. For instance, in Lil’ Wayne & Birdman’s *Stuntin Like My Daddy*, Wayne boasted, “When I was 16 I bought my first Mercedes Benz. I must've fucked a thousand bitches and they girlfriends.” The theme of the materialistic, sexualized African-American woman that was present in a multitude of popular music in the early 2000’s was at the center of Karrine Steffans’ infamous memoir, *Confessions of a Video Vixen* (2005). Her novel, which was based on a true story, was heralded as the harbinger of how-to-get-rich books for video vixens longing for financial independence and entrepreneurship.

Aside from providing fodder for water cooler conversations, these tremendously influential images taught young Black girls that if all else fails (or if school becomes too challenging), you could sell your sexuality in the name of social mobility. A 10th grade student in our third Black Girls United meeting struggled with this truth:

The only opportunities they make African American women seem like they can do is be video vixens. Like oh you're an African American woman, just go and be a video whore and that's how you're gonna succeed and become successful. It's like, ... I don't know. It's weird. [Shifting into a softer, questioning tone] But, what are these girls supposed to do tho', if they didn't go to school or anything? Is it necessarily a bad thing to dance in videos? Long as [the men] aren't touching you and stuff, right? Like, what if that's all she can do to feed her family? I don't know. I guess—I guess it's not right for her to be dancing naked in front of all those men. *Especially if she likes it.* Man, I don't know. I guess I'm just confused. [Nervous laughter] –Kiera, BGU Class, Week 3

The students in BGU grappled with the message that it was acceptable to be overtly sexual in order to make money—yet, that same behavior was disdainful if carried out with the intent of personal pleasure. This principle remained a constant source of query and critique for the participants in this study, and will be discussed in greater detail in upcoming chapters. Together, interminable [mis]representations of African-American women and girls as anti-intellectual, ghetto, and overly sexual were the primary source of students' feelings of *hyper-visibility*. These controlling stereotypes collectively functioned to obscure the true source of Black female youths' subordination: the simultaneity of racial oppression, patriarchal tyranny, and the class stratification inherent to Capitalist economic structure.

Outliers: Undercurrents of Love and Empowerment

In Venus Evans'-Winters (2011) ethnography, she examines the situational factors that aid low-income and working class Black girls in developing resilient academic behaviors. In large part, the tenacity of African-American female youth was due to the aid of multiple systems of support. The bi-directional and simultaneous positive influences from family, community organizations, *and* school aided Black female students in negotiating the race, class, and gender stressors that they encountered inside and outside of educational spaces. The participants in Black Girls United similarly described a variety of influences—both inside of school and outside of school—that inspired students to continue their educational pursuits in the face of the barriers

previously discussed (i.e., *invisibility* and *hyper-visibility*). Examples of such *outliers* are students' reports of the *protective mechanisms* employed by their parents and guardians.

In my first interview with Lisa, she discussed the challenges of attending high school as a foster care youth. From 2004-2008, King High experienced an increase in the number of adolescents in out-of-home care, who were placed with relatives as opposed to traditional foster families. When Lisa was in the 11th grade, her mother's drug habit resulted in an unstable living environment, and like numerous other students at King, Lisa was forced to find alternative housing. She and her two sisters moved in with her aunt—a time which Lisa described as highly unstable. In the years that followed, Lisa lived in countless neighborhoods across South Los Angeles. She regarded those areas as “jacked up and depressing,” with the “usual drug addicts and prostitutes” (Interview #1, 11/02/12). Although the situation was far from ideal, Lisa's aunt worked several jobs in an effort to equip Lisa with the same material resources her peers possessed. In our conversation, Lisa noted:

With my aunt, we lived in some apartments that were just a “step up” from the projects. A whole bunch of poor Black folks, and everybody on Section 8. And I didn't realize just how poor we were back then, but my aunt was struggling to pay her bills. But you know what, we was always taken care of. Like, we had decent clothes and new shoes when we needed them. And now when I think back, *it's like, wow!* She did that so we would think that we was just like everybody else. Because when I went to school, the kids with the money had on those same new [shoes]. So it was kind of like, my aunt, she did things that made it seem like we weren't struggling. Like, to look out for us. So I didn't really know that I was more poor than the next kid, even though we really, really were struggling sometimes. —Lisa, Interview #1, 11/02/12)

Lisa's aunt worked vigorously and strategically to avoid the teasing and alienation that her niece would inevitably confront if she were stigmatized as “more poor” than her peers. In my analysis of data, I encountered various other examples of parents' *protective mechanisms*. For instance, many parents/guardians made concerted efforts to limit their children's exposure to

neighborhood gangs and potential bullying; this allowed the participants in BGU to focus on their number one priority: school. In the following, Brittney describes how her mother drove her to school each morning as a *protective mechanism*, and eventually arranged for her to receive a car during her senior year of high school.

For me, I feel like I didn't have to worry about getting harassed by gangbangers like other kids when they had to walk to school, or when they came home from school. Because my parents made sure that no matter what, I wasn't going to be around that. *My mom, especially*. She used to give me rides to school all the time, and then when I was in the 11th grade she asked my granddad if he would buy me a car—cuz she and my dad knew they couldn't afford to get me one. My mom is close to her dad, and I'm like close to my granddad. If I didn't have my granddad, I wouldn't be driving around. He purchased my first car and my second. Cause he saw how I was doing in school. And they wanted to make sure that there weren't any distractions. And so, he bought my first car when I was fifteen and a half. – Brittney, Interview #1, 10/19/12

Numerous parents and guardians of BGU members did everything within reach to provide their children with the best life possible; the *protective mechanisms* employed by Brittney's mother and Lisa's aunt are two examples from a collection of many. These stories contradict the dominant narrative about the parents of urban students of color, and the purported limited degree to which these individuals participate in the educational pursuits of their offspring (Lightfoot, 2004). Although most parents of BGU participants were not able to attend PTA meetings and/or chaperone field trips, they were consistently informally supportive (i.e., making personal sacrifices for the sake of their children's education). A student named Bianca put it best when she wrote in a reflection on her mother, "...and when I'm threatened by failure, I think of her commitment to my success. She pushes me to be my best. Don't nobody hold me down like my mama..." (Bianca, BGU Class, Week 5).

In addition to parents'/guardians' *protective mechanisms* as inspiring *outliers*, BGU participants encountered *small serendipities* at King High School that challenged the largely

disempowering nature of schooling for these youth. As mentioned in chapter three, 87% of the members of BGU (26/30 students) were enrolled in the Apprenticeship Magnet—the program in which I taught. In my analysis of data, I discovered that the Apprenticeship Magnet’s practice of providing opportunities for students to be taught repeatedly by the same teacher—was often regarded as critical to BGU participants’ ability to sustain themselves in an extremely challenging educational environment. Naturally, when a student encountered a “bad” teacher several years in a row, it adversely affected her enthusiasm towards school (as revealed earlier in the chapter); however, when individuals formed meaningful relationships with authentically caring faculty, they flourished. In my interview with Erykah, she proclaimed:

I love Ms. Johnson! I had her for the 9th and 11th grade. Like, you could tell she really cared about her students. And having her for two years helped because she really pushed me to grow as a student and she’s the reason why I joined the [Church Club] and the [Living for Literacy] program. She pushed all of us. She was just like, ‘you should really do it, [Erykah]’, and I just joined because she said so. I trusted her because she had already taught me for two years, and you know—by then—she really knew me and knew my likes and dislikes. I wasn’t even thinkin’ about joining clubs or anything, but it really made me feel like a leader. I felt limitless when I was around her. Because she made me think outside the box and do something positive for myself. - Erykah, Interview #2, 01/19/13

As Erykah mentioned, teachers who were regarded as authentically caring often introduced students to extracurricular activities and encouraged individuals to engage in a variety of positive social and academic behaviors. In my conversations with students, they were impressed when—on a rare occasion—an educator pushed them to think outside of the box and pursue an endeavor that they had originally considered unattainable. In the quote above, Erykah stated that when she was in the presence of Ms. Johnson she felt “limitless”—which was a powerful space to occupy, even if momentarily. A noteworthy finding that emerged from the data is the number of African-American women, of all ages, who were amongst the educators that were highlighted as “inspiring.” In my interviews with former BGU students, several participants spoke candidly

about how they developed a coincidental closeness with Black women faculty. Because I taught four of the seven interviewees, my name was frequently cited as one of few supportive Black female role models at King High. During my interview with Ashanti (Interview #2, 12/01/12), she jokingly recalled how our closeness emerged out of my demand that she arrive to class on time:

Interviewer: Ok, so tell me, how did our relationship develop?

Ashanti: [Laughing] I was comin' late to summer school for like three days in a row, and you said, 'Hey if you don't come on time you ain't passin.' What you need me to do to help you?' So right there I was like, '*Oh, she one of them teachers that give a fuck*'.

Interviewer: And so, you automatically started coming on time after that? It was that easy?

Ashanti: [Laughing] Hell naw! I remember you pulling me to the side like, you was like, 'Let me tell you something. You don't show up on time to my class you gon' fail.' And like the first day I thought you were just, like, bullshitting. I was just like yeah alright. And I think like the next day you was like, 'How can I help you? Tell me how I can help you.' And I was just like what you mean? And you was like, 'I can call you in the morning. You need to get woke up?' And I was just like yeah, I guess. So I gave you my phone number. I remember it was on a Friday cause I was like this lady ain't gon' call and wake me up, she gon' forget. And I remember that Monday morning you called at like 5 o'clock in the morning. *I was pissed* when my phone was going, I'm like *what?!* I'm like *she really called my phone*, like *she really called my phone and woke me up!* And it was like after that, everyday you called and woke me up and I was on time. *Every single day* after that I was on time. Fo'real. I used to dread it in the morning! I used to know you was gon' call too. Sometimes I just wanted to cut my phone off, but I'd be like *I gotta go to school, I gotta go to school*.

Interviewer: [Laughing] *What?!* You were going to cut off your phone on me? So tell me, why'd you keep it on if you knew that call was coming?

Ashanti: Like shit, I don't even know! It was like, I knew you'd be disappointed. And it got my attention, like *why the fuck do she*

care? You took the time out of your busy mornin' to call me. Like, it kind of made me open my eyes a little more or kind of push me. Made me want to do better. So you kept callin' and I kept answerin' and that's how we got close.

Ashanti's mother typically left for work hours before it was time for her to get dressed for school. Because there was not an adult in the home to hold her accountable for waking up on time, she would often oversleep, and arrive to school a half hour late. Before enrolling in my summer school course, Ashanti was able to pass her classes with a C or better because—according to her—former teachers were not “big on attendance.” My expectation for Ashanti to arrive to class on time, and my efforts to provide a wake-up call each morning was confirmation that I genuinely cared about her, and wanted her to reach her full academic potential. Because she had not experienced such high expectations from previous teachers, when I challenged Ashanti to do her best, it “opened” her eyes, and influenced her to strive towards excellence in my class.

A handful of other African-American female faculty mentioned by students also performed caring in ways that were genuine and heartfelt. In keeping with the tradition of Black womanist educators, the “care” described by participants was demonstrated by unrelenting displays of personal accountability and collective responsibility (Roseboro & Ross, 2009). These teachers characteristically went above and beyond the call of duty (i.e., providing rides to school, making home visits, and feeding students), and were often labeled as pushy and loving. Another Black Girls United student named Tanisha asserted that these Black female educators stayed “on yo’ head”—meaning, they frequently questioned students’ whereabouts, monitored individuals’ academic progress, and confronted youth who engaged in harmful social behaviors—thereby embodying a “no nonsense” motherly love.

Together, the *protective mechanisms* employed by the parents and/or guardians of BGU

participants, and the *small serendipities* at King High School served as inspiring *outliers* that reinvigorated students amidst unfavorable community and school conditions. Notwithstanding the positive influence of these outliers, they offered little recourse for Black Girls United youth. The persistent isolation and “race-gender differentiated socialization” of African-American female students significantly threatened their self-esteem and perceptions of self-worth. This, in turn, resulted in a number of oppositional behaviors (Grant, 1984, p.98).

Conclusion: Resistance Against Multiple Adversities

The students in Black Girls United faced innumerable challenges both in and out of school that jeopardized the development of their fragile identities. I recognized two common ways in which students negotiated feelings of *invisibility* and *hyper-visibility*. At times, individuals participated in what Robinson and Ward (1991) refer to as *resistance for liberation*, wherein students’ attitudes and behaviors counter normative discourse about Black women and girls, and typically result in self and community elevation. Conversely, there were circumstances in which students engaged in resistance strategies such as ditching school or mouthing off to keep from being silenced. These survival techniques were frequent and self-defeating for several Black Girls United participants. Overall, I identified a variety of oppositional behaviors and a strong undercurrent of resilience in *each* participant.

Resilience in the Name of Liberation

One liberating and resistance tool that students regularly utilized was deliberately working against the stereotype that African-American young women are intellectually inferior. Although the participants in BGU represented a wide spectrum of academic performance (most students held B and C averages), many individuals had aspirations of attending prestigious universities, developing a strong career path, and ‘giving back’ to their communities. In order to meet their

goals and transcend systemic barriers, BGU participants often called upon the strength of close family members and highly regarded African American ancestors. In a field note that I wrote after our fourth Black Girls United meeting, I described my initial perceptions of students' drive to pursue excellence:

Today we talked about goals. Longterm goals and short-term goals. I was in the presence of future rock stars: professional dancers, lawyers, surgeons, business owners, and teachers. I am encouraged by their vision. Who do they look to for inspiration? They call on their mama's, older siblings, and elders. And of course, there's always Oprah. (Journal 2, Entry 5, p.14)

Although students' grades were not always reflective of their post-graduation career goals, the participants in BGU were raised to value a strong work ethic and a clever mind. For a handful of students, drive was instilled at a young age, and the African-American adage of "lifting as we climb" was at the root of any individuals' success story. Erykah's upbringing was emblematic of the spirit of determination and community uplift that many BGU students personified. In our first interview she stated:

When I was little my mother used to tell me, 'You gonna be somebody. I want my kids to do better than me.' Because as Black women, you know, people think we're probably not gonna do well. We're going to be looked down on regardless. And so, I have to be on top of it, cause if I fail I'm making everyone in the race look bad. And that's how it is for Black people 'cause if you think about it, you watch the news, a robbery happens. I used to always catch myself, I'd be like 'Dang, why does he gotta be black?' [Laughing] It hurts to see my own people embarrass themselves, especially after what all of our people went through. But I felt like, I can use my education and street smarts to get success. So I used that as my advantage. Its like, okay I may go to [King], but I'ma get my education, *I'ma' get mines regardless*. And it was important to help my peers to. I used to have friends, they would be like 'Oh well this teacher doesn't even care, so why am I even doing this work?' And I would find myself, like, being the mama of the group, encouraging everyone like, 'You're doing this for yourself, and for your family and community. Don't give them the satisfaction of failing, cause then all along they're gonna be like, 'Yes I was right. That student doesn't have the potential of being anything.' - Erykah, Interview #1, 11/16/12

Surpassing society's low expectations for African-American women and girls was a chief objective for students in Black Girls United. As Erykah mentioned, individuals worked towards

academic success and the recognition of their intellectual aptitude with the intention of uplifting one's relatives, community members, and other African-Americans in the process.

Likewise, there were several other participants in BGU whose priorities were centered on undermining an equally prominent image of Black femininity: the sexually irresponsible, poor Black woman. These youth were not necessarily interested in attending the nation's most prestigious universities; however, they were similarly engaged in a liberatory act of resistance. For a handful of students in BGU, graduating high school and avoiding teenage pregnancy was at the forefront of their desires. Although several of these individuals were not sexually active at the time in which they joined BGU, the decreasing graduation rates among King High students⁶⁷ and the negative portrayal of young Black single mothers in the media inspired students to be the first in their families to graduate high school. Moreover, most youth planned to earn a high school diploma before embarking on parenthood. The list below includes the short-term and long-term goals of a BGU student named Patrice, and reveals her desire to complete her education before starting a family (Patrice, BGU Class, Week 4):

1. Graduate high school → Make parents proud, 1st generation
2. Get my AA Degree in communications → Get a good job
3. Get married to a fine Black man → No kids
4. Start a family → 3 kids

Patrice was in the 11th grade when the members of Black Girls United developed a list of their academic, career, and personal goals. Her top priority was to make her parents proud, and become the first person in her family to graduate from high school and earn a college degree. Although she longed for marriage and children, she was very clear about the order in which they

⁶⁷ Refer to chapter three for a detailed discussion regarding the academic performance of King High students.

should occur. Developing oneself personally and intellectually before starting a family was priority for numerous participants in BGU. Kenya, like Patrice, looked forward to becoming the first in her family to graduate high school and eventually go to college. In her list, she explained that her mother dropped out of high school in the 10th grade, and her sister became pregnant at 15 and never obtained the credits required to graduate. Thus, it was critical for Kenya to “do something better” with her life, “instead of what they did or what society [tells Black girls] to do” (Kenya, BGU Class, Week 4). Although a great majority of Black Girls United youth unabashedly aspired to subvert oppressive stereotypes about African-American women and girls, there were certainly moments in which individuals engaged in behaviors that were counterproductive to fulfilling their ambitions.

Just Tryin' to Get By

Each member of Black Girls United had aspirations of graduating high school—at the very least. This was an ostensibly rational goal; however, the uninspiring conditions for learning at King High School made it challenging for students to attain the success they envisioned. One tremendous barrier for participants was maintaining high grade point averages. Remaining motivated while attending classes with disenchanting teachers and lackluster curricula proved to be an extremely difficult feat for BGU youth. As such, students frequently made choices that hindered them from passing their classes and graduating on time.

Sadly, this was the case for a BGU participant named Daniella, who was a senior during the first year of the program. As an AP (Advanced Placement) English student, Daniella felt disrespected by her English teacher’s low expectations and inability (or refusal) to create a captivating curriculum. The teacher, Mrs. [Ramirez], typically assigned work from the textbook that was boring and easy to complete. As a result, the students in Mrs. Ramirez’ class would disengage by arriving to class late, listening to music, and playing cards. As a budding poet,

Daniella utilized her time in Mrs. Ramirez' class to fine-tune her talents by creating a book of poetry in lieu of completing the assigned reading. As a result, she was failing English, having only earned 32% of the total points. One day after school, Daniella shared a poem that she developed while Mrs. Ramirez read a newspaper at her desk. Teeming with enthusiasm, she stood tall and recited the following:

I am POOR
Do you hear me?
I am buried beneath your riches and your gold
The weight of your wealth conceals my sound
I am BLACK
Do you see me?
Racism dulls my radiance.
With each slay of your whip, I fall deeper into an abyss of darkness.
I am WOMAN
Can you hear my cry?
It lies deep within my womb. I am careful not to plea too loudly.
For, I might awaken you.

-Daniella, BGU student, Week 4

After sharing her poem, Daniella insisted that I keep it. I tucked the sheet of paper away in the center of my second BGU journal, and I've held onto it for over four years. When I came across her writing during data analysis, I was reminded of the tremendous effect that feelings of *invisibility* had on the African-American female youth in BGU. When I asked Daniella what prompted her to write that specific poem she replied, “[Ms. Ramirez] could care less if I pass her class. Half the time, I don't think she even know I'm there. If she don't care, why should I?” (Journal 2, Entry 11, p.20).

There was an enormous price to pay for feeling *invisible* at King High School. In my interview with Ashanti, she shared how her boredom with certain classes led her into habitual ditching. As a consequence, she was only motivated to maintain a C average—which was the requirement for playing on the basketball team. After injuring

her knee in the 11th grade, her options post graduation were severely limited because she did not have the G.P.A. to attend a university. She explained:

Listen, I was just tryna' get by, that's what it really was. Making sure I had a C average, just to be able to play on the basketball team. *Cuz school was so damn boring*, like I hated most of my classes. I really wanted to go to college after, get a Bachelors degree, like try to get a scholarship and go to college. But, when I got hurt, all that changed. I had to get surgery 11th grade, and that messed up my last year of ball. But by then it was already too late. I couldn't go to no university cuz I was able to fail a lot of my classes and keep a overall C average and still play. I had D's in, like, the important classes for college, you know? Like if I put as much time as I put in basketball into school, shit I would've been a straight A student. But that was hard to do at [King] cuz, like, what's the motivation? I ain't finna sit in no class if the teacher ain't teachin shit. But lookin back, I was a *student athlete*, not just a athlete. I should've been doing work in my classes regardless of them teachers. But you know, I was a kid. Needed inspiration or sumthin.' Dumb. And in the long run it fucks you. *Literally*. [Laughing]. - Ashanti, Interview #1, 10/05/12

Several of the participants in Black Girls United sacrificed their grades, academic performance, and life prospects to engage in behaviors that—in their opinions—reclaimed their humanity in the face of an unjust schooling environment. As Ashanti mentioned, urban adolescents need to be “inspired” to achieve academic success amidst severe educational inequities. In the case of numerous African-American female participants in this study, cheerleading and athletics did not require students to maintain passing grades in all of their classes, which severely limited their options to pursue higher education in a competitive (i.e., university) setting. For the remaining individuals who managed to earn high grade point averages, the alienation they experienced at school (i.e., *invisibility* and *hyper-visibility*) was an impediment to their self-worth, and negatively impacted their outlook on school. In the following, Nia recapped how the lack of stimulating programs for Black female students left her in a state of longing:

We were the lost generation. I really felt like they expected the Black girls at our school to be ok. They felt like, ‘We don't have to worry about the Black girls.’ They can do all the gang intervention and all the male intervention. And they can

bring in males from other places to come in and help with the boys. And there was nothing for the girls to do. Because it was like, ‘The girls are gonna make it.’ You know, they felt like they don’t have to worry about us. The *Black* girls. They don’t have to make any special programs for us. We can either cheerlead, play softball, run track, and that’s it! – Nia, Personal Communication, 10/03/11

Before joining the organization, the participants in Black Girls United were desperately searching for an alternative space that affirmed their unique cultural backgrounds and intellectual talents. In the reflection above, Nia craved a “special program” for Black girls that would encourage self-determination in light of their shared group oppression. This sentiment is what drew many youth to BGU. There was seemingly “nothing to lose,” and the lure of “something different” was appealing (Kenya, Interview #1, 11/09/12). Students’ yearning for more was palpable—and in Black Girls United, African-American young women could potentially journey together in sisterhood, empowerment, and social/intellectual advancement.

CHAPTER 5 UNPACKING THE PEDAGOGY

Introduction: Four Pieces to the Puzzle

The critical issue is the degree to which we hold the moral conviction that we must humanize the educational experience of students from subordinated populations by eliminating the hostility that often confronts these students. This process would require that we cease to be overly dependent on methods as technical instruments and adopt a pedagogy that seeks to forge a cultural democracy where all students are treated with respect and dignity (Bartolome, 1994, p. 425).

In *Beyond The Methods Fetish: Toward a Humanizing Pedagogy*, as demonstrated above, Lilia Bartolomé calls for educators to abandon mechanistic applications of popular teaching strategies for racially, culturally, and/or linguistically subordinated student populations, and instead utilize a sociohistorical approach to developing humanizing pedagogies for these youth (Bartolomé, 1994). In the previous chapter, I illuminated how the socio-political location of Black female adolescents at King High School resulted in perpetual feelings of *invisibility* and *hyper-visibility*, and I examined how students' orientation towards school was influenced by the marginalization they experienced. As a social justice educator and African-American woman, my visceral response to Black female youth's marked alienation was to create a safe space that spoke to their oppression, power, and potential.

As previous chapters have illuminated *why* I created Black Girls United, this chapter will offer a glimpse into *how* the program functioned. In developing the structure of Black Girls United, I relied on the scholarship of Black female practitioners, such as bell hooks (2003), Gloria Joseph (1995) and other African-American female colleagues who explicitly situated their teaching practice within a Black feminist/womanist politic. Inspired by the philosophy "lifting as

we climb⁶⁸,” these luminaires employ a variety of pedagogies reflecting their appreciation for education as a tool for social mobility as well as a means of personal and community empowerment. Thus, my (re)articulation of Black feminist pedagogy involved developing a framework that was heavily influenced by these scholars—although, it also responded to the sensibilities of my unique group of urban Black female youth, and was informed by my personal experiences as an African-American woman in a particular time, location, and socio-political context.

There were four characteristics of Black Girls United that were at the core of my Black feminist pedagogical framework: *critical feminist literature*, *positioning students as agents of change*, *a politicized ethic of care*, and *collectivity*. I applied each of these features intentionally and strategically; they emerged as a result of my ideological posture as a self-identified Black feminist. However, it is critical to note that the interpretations of participants from interviews and other data sources (i.e., 35 hours of video recordings from BGU classes; my Black feminist curriculum; two years of field notes from in class and out of class interactions; and student artifacts) has provided additional insight into my utility of Black feminist pedagogy.

In the sections that follow, I paint a vivid picture of the general landscape of Black Girls United (i.e., the instructional approaches). Collectively, the four elements of my Black feminist pedagogy represent my efforts to take an “informed approach” to “potentially offset the unequal relations and discriminatory structures and practices” that young Black women at King High School endured both inside and outside of the classroom (Bartolomé, p. 412).

You are What You Read

⁶⁸ The National Association of Colored Women (NACW) originated in 1896 out of the African-American women’s club movement. Its founders included Harriet Tubman, Frances E. W. Harper, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, and Mary Church Terrell. The NACW motto, “lifting as we climb” represents the club’s aim to empower and uplift all Black women through ambitious and brazen displays of social activism.

Critical Feminist Literature

Interviewer: Do you even remember doing the readings in [Black Girls United]? Because I know that obviously for the week that people had to lead, that person definitely had to do the reading to know what the heck we were talking about. But how do you think the readings played into the space? Could we have just eliminated the literature and had the same effect? You can be as honest as—

Brittney: [Interrupting] No! I think having—like the literature is a good part of it. It was important. And I always read. Cause if you don't have some opinions that offers perspectives, you don't know where to start. I mean you probably have a starting ground, but having something that's already written, that you can refer to and reflect on, is good. Cause it drives so much of the conversation. Which we needed, because *we were up there teaching, not you!*
[Laughing] So the readings gave us something to compare our own experiences to. And that's what got us going. – Brittney, Interview #2, 12/15/12

Critical feminist literature was at the core of Black Girls United and served as the basis for our weekly discussions. In the planning stages of the organization, I kept a journal where I recorded my ideas. In that journal, I assembled a list of conversation topics based on exchanges with several of my students, as well as my own understanding of their various struggles. The literature selected for the program emerged out of my list of topics. Some of the themes⁶⁹ included: rectifying body image issues, demystifying emotional and physical abuse, the hypersexualization of Black women in popular youth culture, money management/financial literacy, and setting long-term and short-term goals. In an effort to gather writing that reflected students' realities and interests, I accumulated scholarship from various sources—including my personal library. I also borrowed from friends and colleagues who were kind enough to pass along relevant reading materials.

The Black Girls United curricula was primarily composed of texts of resistance and

⁶⁹ For a complete list of Black Girls United thematic units and corresponding readings, refer to Appendix B.

contestation⁷⁰— written by Black women and other women of color—that challenged conventional representations of non-White women in popular literature and in the dominant media. I was hopeful that the material would spark students’ attention, whether they agreed, disagreed, or were left speechless; my objective was for the weekly readings to trigger raw, emotional responses from participants. Because BGU was not a required course in which individuals would receive a grade⁷¹, it was critical that the literature was engaging enough to keep students invested in the program, with a fervent desire to read each week.

Taking into consideration students varying grade and skill levels⁷², I introduced participants to an assortment of texts (i.e., narrative literature, expository texts, and poetry). Students drew on Joan Morgan’s *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: My Life as a Hip Hop Feminist* (1999) as a starting ground for critiquing the misogyny in the rap lyrics of songs such as Too Short’s (2003) “Shake That Monkey” (BGU Class, Week 12). Additionally, the participants read about the shame that women of color HIV survivors endure in Stella Luna’s (2002) *HIV and Me: The Chicana Version* (BGU Class, Week 40). Moreover, *The Black Beauty Myth* by Sirena J. Riley (2002) served as a highly engaging starting point by which individuals could critique societal pressures to conform to Eurocentric standards of beauty (BGU Class, Week 22).

As Brittney mentioned in the opening transcript, feminist literature drove our *student-led*

⁷⁰ From a Black feminist intellectual tradition, texts of contestation and resistance challenge dominant social discourse that gratuitously characterizes African-American women as morally flawed, immortal, and inhumane.

⁷¹ It is important to note that students were not instructed to complete additional assignments (i.e., homework) outside of the weekly readings. All written work (e.g., free writes, short poems, and handouts) was assigned and fulfilled during our meetings, and was utilized strictly for engaging students in discussion. Hence, I did not grade students’ work, or participate in any formal assessment of these assignments. I did, however, retain several exemplars of student work, which I have utilized as potential data sources for this study.

⁷² Refer to chapter three for a detailed description of the Black Girls United participants’ academic backgrounds.

conversations in Black Girls United. Each week, a member (or team of two students) facilitated discussion, and I rarely intervened to ask a question or offer my opinion. Patricia Hill Collins (2000) reminds us that a distinguishing feature of a *safe space* is that it is free from the “surveillance of more powerful groups” (p. 111). As I fashioned the pedagogy of Black Girls United, I believed that it was imperative for the participants to have an opportunity to engage in critical dialogue that was self-orchestrated (i.e., students controlled the planning and facilitation of the lessons). While I was aware that as a teacher my presence alone might have intimidated some students, requiring the members to lead our discussions was my attempt at limiting that potential threat.

In BGU, the facilitators generally followed the Socratic Seminar method of instruction. Presenters challenged their peers to think critically by engaging them in a series of open-ended questions—the point of which was to encourage exploration and divergent thinking over simply locating the “right” answer. When individuals struggled to produce critical questions for discussion, they asked for my assistance, and we co-constructed stimulating lessons. Furthermore, the topic for each week was decided in advance, sufficient enough for the facilitator(s) to plan engaging, and thoughtful activities. In my second interview with Tanya, she explained how the organization of the program was central to its operation. She noted,

[Our classes] were very organized. That was super important. We did lots of planning. But we always planned in advance. Like even when we went off topic in the [BGU] meeting and some member brought up, “Oh so next week we should talk about this,” and we all agreed on it, then from that very moment it was a planning stage of well, “What’s going to be stated? What are we gonna focus on? Do we want them to take something extra home with them to read and think about? Is it gonna be a Q&A? Or is it gonna be everyone starts discussion as whole?” And we would kind of base it around what we knew the members of [BGU] wanted to see or wanted to hear, or what intrigued them you know. - Tanya, Interview #2, 12/22/12

Tanya was the Vice President⁷³ of BGU in the second year of the program, and she played a large role in assisting facilitators with developing lessons. Because there was a syllabus in place, most students were able to plan their presentations two-to-three weeks in advance. However, there were several occasions in which the class spontaneously decided to discuss an issue that was not included in the syllabus. In those instances, the student leaders had one week to prepare a lesson and distribute the required readings⁷⁴.

Generally, our discussions commenced with a facilitator referencing a passage from the text. However, as Tanya mentioned in the quote above, the members of BGU worked diligently to locate exciting ways of sparking dialogue. Sometimes the presenter would open with an unsettling statement that was pertinent to the weekly theme, such as “Black women are unattractive” (Lisa, BGU Class, Week 22). Typically, such statements were followed by numerous passionate responses from the class. On other occasions, the facilitator would introduce the topic via a multimedia presentation (i.e., Powerpoint, video clips, and/or musical selections).

In my interviews with former BGU participants, individuals mentioned that our meetings operated like college classes. They believed that the material was rigorous, and each member was expected to come to class well read, and ready to engage⁷⁵. As a former English teacher, I was aware that my high school students frequently skipped the required reading. Accordingly, when former BGU participants confirmed that they completed the majority of the readings—I

⁷³ As discussed in Chapter three, the students in Black Girls United voted annually on a President, Vice President, and Secretary, who assisted with the organization and planning of our meetings and events.

⁷⁴ The elected officials were responsible for ensuring that participants remembered to attend each meeting and read the assigned literature. As such, student officers created reminder slips that were sent to each student in their 3rd and 4th period classes a day or two prior to our meetings. Often, handouts of the assigned reading accompanied reminder slips. Refer to Appendix F for a copy of the reminder slip.

⁷⁵ See Appendix D, the Black Girls United Student Information Sheet

was overwhelmed with disbelief. During the interviews, students attributed their willingness to read to three major characteristics of the feminist literature. In Black Girls United—unlike traditional classes—*each* text was relevant, current, and triggered an emotional response.

Attending a class that offered a multitude of *relevant* material was new to the students in BGU. Most individuals claimed that the curriculum in their classes failed to address real life issues. For instance, in our 11th BGU meeting, Nia proclaimed that she valued the readings in Black Girls United because they were “original pieces” written by “real women” who spoke about “real issues” (Nia, BGU Class, Week 11). In the following quote from Denise, taken from a statement she made during class in her second year of the program, she discussed how her disengagement from many of her high school classes was due to her disinterest in the curriculum, which was far removed from what she experienced in her daily life.

I feel like we don't get real world preparation in high school outside of [BGU]. Like how we talk about how to conduct ourselves in a interview, or how to get a good credit score. You know, where's the real life preparation? Even with just how to *deal with people* in everyday life. Like, they don't teach us that in school. But we expected to get good grades tho'. Even in spite of what you're going through outside [of school]. But there isn't any, like teaching, you know, to help us grow.
– Denise, BGU Class, Week 32.

In Denise's opinion, the typical high school curriculum did not assist students in navigating their personal life or professional endeavors. As a result of Denise's disengagement in many of her classes, she stated that she often ditched school and missed out on a number of important opportunities to learn. During our BGU meeting, she explained why reading Cheryl Broussard's informative text *The Black Woman's Guide to Financial Independence* (1996)—which taught students how to create a budget and decipher a credit score— were important to her as a senior in high school. She noted that although those materials were not “typical readings,” they were integral to assisting her in “becoming a responsible adult” (Denise, BGU Class, Week 32).

According to the participants, another important feature of the feminist literature in Black Girls United is that it was relevant, *and* current—which was not always the case in my traditional English classes. Like most educators working in the *No Child Left Behind* climate of high stakes testing, I was desperately concerned with acquainting my English students with a wide array of canonical texts, because they were regularly present in the annual state exams. Consequently, my ninth and 11th grade English students did not *always* engage with literature written in the 21st century. Although I made a concerted effort to introduce texts with culturally (i.e., racially or ideologically) relevant themes, the material was not always contemporary. In the following statement from my interview with Ashanti, she compared her frequent *disconnection* from the texts in my 11th grade honors English class to her consistent *engagement* with the literature in Black Girls United.

[In typical English classes] You gotta get through shit. You gotta learn stuff like *A Raisin in the Sun*, and what's that book like nobody really gave a damn about? [Recalling the text] Oh yeah, *Fences*! Now the whole storyline of it, that's kind of like deep. Like I get it or whatever. But they was *boring as hell* cuz' that was like *way* back in the day. But, in [BGU] we was always talkin' about something we live around and what we was *really* going through as teenagers. Stuff that will really catch like the teenager's eyes, and really get them into it. So you know, it was a lot more interestin' to do those readings. You can't sit and talk about like, something like *Fences* and expect us to relate. Like what the fuck? We *got* gates already! – Ashanti, Interview #2, 12/01/12

Although both *A Raisin in the Sun* (1958) by Lorraine Hansberry and August Wilson's *Fences* (1986) have garnered national recognition as classical fictional novels—by Ashanti's teenage standards—both were outdated, and uninteresting by default. On the opposite end of the spectrum, according to the women, the material in Black Girls United was stimulating for the participants because we customarily examined topics that were explicitly relevant to the lives of urban African-American female *teenagers*. For instance, we spent three consecutive weeks (i.e., three meetings) investigating why some of the young women at King High School were

participating in a movement to reclaim the term “bitch” (BGU Class, Weeks 13-15) through a textual analysis of *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost* by Joan Morgan (1999).

Working to dismantle patriarchy by reclaiming sexist epithets was considered a hot topic at the time, and in Black Girls United, we had the freedom to explore the issue until the students were ready to move on. Although the readings in my honors English class centralized and normalized the ideas and experiences of people of color, we focused on topics that were not necessarily intriguing for Black female *adolescents*. When we had the luxury of reading material that was written for a youthful audience, I felt pressured to quickly complete those texts. This was primarily because it was mandatory that I stay on track with my timeline to be in accordance with the California Department of Education’s proposed pacing plan for satisfying the state standards in English Language Arts.

The third and final feature of the feminist literature in Black Girls United is the emotional responses most texts triggered from students. This was possibly most evident during a class in which several members shared personal experiences of sexual harassment (BGU Class, Week 36). Prior to class, students read *How Sexual Harassment Slaughtered, Then Saved Me* by Kiini Ibura Salaam (2002). After approximately 20 minutes of dialogue, the participants were still highly energized and excited about our discussion. When the bell rang signaling the end of lunch, numerous students booed with irritation and disappointment at the thought of having to return to their regular classes. After school I wrote about the experience.

Amped. That’s how I’m feeling today. The girls were so pissed when the bell rang for 5th period, that three students [jokingly] threatened to lock themselves in my classroom in protest. [Kiini Ibura] Salaam’s reading had them on edge! Folks debated the difference between a woman and a lady, and if females who carried themselves as “unladylike” somehow incited sexual misconduct. The conversation was heated! There were smiles, hugs, and laughter. On the flipside there was anger, alienation, and indecision. And I LOVED EVERY MOMENT! (Journal 3, Entry 19, p.112)

The Black Girls United meetings were engrossing because we were fearless to examine subjects that were considered touchy (i.e., the use of the N word; BGU Class, Week 14), emotional (i.e., the skin color hierarchy in the African-American community; BGU Class, Week 22), or taboo even (i.e., genital mutilation; BGU Class, Week 62). The passion that was triggered by the literature is an element of the program that former Black Girls United students vividly remembered. During my interview with Tanya, she explained that in BGU “there were *feelings* attached to the content. It wasn’t like most classes where the content dictates that $A+B=C$. In [Black Girls United] students got to explore how they *feel* about that equation!” (Tanya, Interview #2, 12/22/12).

When I interviewed another student, Ashanti, she agreed with Tanya’s assertion that most high school classes did not provide students the space to reflect deeply on their feelings about the curriculum. My English classes were an exception to the rule; I frequently requested for individuals to share their personal opinions and sentiments in their analyses of required readings. In spite of this, Ashanti—a former BGU member, and one of my past honors English students—was hesitant to develop an emotional connection to the majority of the literature in my honors English class, yet she was happy to passionately engage in Black Girls United. In the following quote she explains why:

As far as in class you’d be like, “Should I raise my hand? Naw, I don’t really care about what’s going on anyway with this subject or with this book.” When I was reading a boring book in English class I was just like “I really don’t care. What time is the bell going to ring?” And I wasn’t bored *all the time* in yo’ class, you know. Some of them readings was cool. But in [BGU] I was *always* into it. It got way deep. Fast. Cuz of the subjects we was talkin’ about. It got, it got gritty. And students *wanted* to get emotional in [BGU] cuz [emotion] really was like the base of everything, *like the core of it*. You didn’t have to hold back. – Ashanti, Interview #2, 12/01/12

It was not uncommon to find literature that was either 1) relevant, 2) current, or 3) emotionally

stimulating in a typical class at King High School. However, it was the sophisticated interplay of *all three* characteristics in the literary texts in BGU that incited many highly charged, intellectually stimulating lunch conversations. In addition to introducing participants to *critical feminist literature, positioning students as agents of change* was another structural feature of Black Girls United that ran counter to the norm.

Girls Run the World

Positioning Students as Agents of Change

In Black Girls United, one of my chief objectives was for students to take ideological control over their race and gender identities, thereby accessing the “elusive sphere of freedom” that womanist philosophers have coined ‘self-definition’ (Collins, 2000, p. 112). Chapter four revealed the ways in which a variety of outside forces triggered profound feelings of powerlessness and vulnerability within BGU participants (e.g., unequal access to social and economic resources, and ubiquitous messages of African-American female inferiority). In response to the marginalization that Black young women at King High were experiencing, I aspired to create an empowering *safe space* for these youth. I was prudent in my efforts to construct a liberatory⁷⁶ learning environment; It was my intention to utilize my classroom as a vehicle through which individuals could showcase their leadership capabilities, intellectual aptitude, and resourcefulness. Appraising students’ engagement during each meeting—coupled with the informal conversations that I frequently had with several of the participants—was how I gauged the overall success of the program.

One example of *positioning students as agents of change* was the vital role that the members of BGU played in the development, organization, and direction of the program. In my

⁷⁶ I define *liberatory learning environment* as a setting that cultivates in African-American young women: intellectual curiosity, individual agency, and self-determination.

interview with Nia, she illuminated the importance of “providing students with *both* structure and autonomy” (Nia, Interview #2, 12/08/12). As discussed in the previous section, there was a set structure in place in Black Girls United, which was clearly articulated in the BGU informational handout⁷⁷. Students were expected to complete the readings for each class, attend weekly meetings, and actively work towards Black women’s social and academic advancement. Likewise, the members of Black Girls United were the face of the program and at the center of its operations. I consulted students regarding the curriculum (i.e., topics and corresponding literature for the syllabus), they held office (i.e., President, Vice President, Secretary), and the participants of BGU facilitated each discussion. Situating students as leaders had a positive influence on their overall self-concept. In my second interview with Tanya, she reflected on the structure of the program. She noted, “I used to hate when clubs had teachers doing everything. They made all the decisions and it was like, man, who is this for, *me or you?* But [BGU] was about the students, and we did everything by ourselves. You were more so like a *helper*. And that is how it should be. It was *our* program. And takin’ over as leaders gave us the power. It made us feel powerful” (Tanya, Interview #2, 12/22/12).

In addition to developing the structure of Black Girls United *alongside* students, my efforts to position members as agents of change were revealed in the makeup of our weekly meetings. In Black Girls United we engaged in discourses around various issues students were experiencing in their personal lives and within the African-American female community. The purpose of our discourse was for participants to move beyond simply exploring these issues; it was equally critical for the students in BGU to collectively formulate practical solutions to the topics that we explored in the class. As such, I assisted facilitators in designing lessons that would satisfy both requirements (i.e., analyzing the problem and locating solutions).

⁷⁷ Refer to Appendix D

It is important to note that during these conversations I rarely offered my personal opinions. When I verbally participated, I generally followed the Socratic Seminar method of asking questions that I felt would push students to think about the subject in new ways. Hence, the members of BGU were provided the space to develop a critical interpretation of their own socio-cultural experiences, without an adult coercing them to think, feel, and behave in a particular manner. The following vignette demonstrates how the participants were positioned as agents of change: 1) students were empowered as leaders as they governed the direction of our class discussion, and 2) they challenged each other to move through and beyond their subordination as African-American women, to locate opportunities for self and community transformation.

“I Want a Girl with Extensions in Her Hair...”

It was the 22nd week of Black Girls United and the typical lunchtime routine ensued. Students assembled into my classroom alone, or in pairs, anxiously awaiting the discussion of the week. At the last meeting, everyone was instructed to read two texts: “The Black Beauty Myth” by Sirena J. Riley (2002), which appears in the anthology “Colonize This!” and the lyrics of LL Cool J’s classic rap song, “Around the Way Girl” (1990). My goal was for students to contrast Riley’s examination of the impact of Eurocentric standards of beauty on the body image ideologies of African-American women, with LL Cool J’s love poem, expressing his intense affection for Black girls from the hood. By this time, we were a few weeks into the second semester of BGU and students were becoming increasingly familiar with the Socratic Seminar method of instruction that guided our conversations.

As students settled in, I took my usual seat in the green director’s chair stationed beneath the whiteboard at the front of the classroom. The thunderous base of LL Cool J’s “Around the Way Girl” blared in the background alongside a sea of brown girls swaying in unison to the

melodic tune. Over the course of a twenty-minute lunch period, students in BGU began to unearth the discursive production of Black female inferiority in the popular media, specifically relating to traditional notions of beauty. Class commenced as the facilitator, Andrea, addressed the room with a quote from the text:

- Andrea (facilitator): So the quote says, “White women give themselves too much credit when they assume that Black women still want to look like them.” So the author...um, Riley...is arguing that Black women...*nowadays*... aren’t...*necessarily* following White beauty standards. So, she says that we have our own, separate standards that we are tryin’ to meet. What do ya’ll think about that?
- Loreal: [Her left hand darts in the air] Nope. I think that’s a *lie*!
- Andrea (facilitator): It’s a lie? Ok, why?
- Loreal: I actually read that part, and no, I don’t agree because...well, I don’t know what city *she* lives in, but all these Black girls at [King] are walkin’ around with pressed hair and weaves, tryna look like White girls! [side chatter ensues, and some students respond with ‘yep’]
- Chloe: [Standing] Yes, and check me out. My weave is new. And I’m cute! But I ain’t hardly trying to look like no *White* girl! [class laughter]
- Loreal: Well *who* you trying to look like? Who has straight hair? And your weave is blonde too! [Class laughs]
- Chloe: I’m trying to look like myself! What’s wrong with adding a little extra hair? Ya’ll do it too!
- Diane: Cuz you addin’ that *good hair*! Why don’t you add some nappy hair? [Laughing] I’d pay money to see [Chloe] with some nappy hair in her head! [Class erupts in laughter and side chatter]
- Loreal: *Oh no she didn’t say good hair!* I *hate* that term! Hair is hair! Just cuz somebody’s hair is straighter than others’ don’t mean they have good hair! *God* didn’t say straight hair is good! He just gave you a certain type. And that don’t mean yours is better than mine!
- Andrea (facilitator): Well, *somebody* said straight hair is better than nappy hair! So...if *God* didn’t say it, then let me ask ya’ll...*who* said it then? Where did the whole, good hair vs. nappy hair come from?
- Kennisha: From the beginning of time. Slavery. The mixed Blacks, the Blacks who looked more White... um, they stayed in the house, while *my* ancestors was in the fields pickin’ cotton! If you look

more White, you—like, you get treated better in this world. Even today, all these um advertisements, and all these commercials with Black actresses and singers and stuff, they *all* look White! Wearing weaves, perming they hair, and getting nose jobs just to be on TV! [Several students applaud and snap their fingers in agreement]

Chloe: Yo, she right tho'. [Rises to her feet] Cuz when I wear my weave [swinging her hair from right to left], I get love from *all* these dudes up here! So I blame it on society! They *brainwashed* me! And they brainwashed these little boys! [Class laughs]

In the conversation above, several students disagree with Riley's assertion that Eurocentric notions of beauty no longer heavily influence the body image philosophies of contemporary African-American women. Andrea references the 'good hair versus nappy hair' construct, discusses how it could serve as an example of self-hate within the Black community, and questions the cause of its pervasiveness. In response, Kennisha cites the U.S. system of slavery as the foundation for ideologies that privilege *Whiteness* and subordinate women of African origin. Although several of these students recognize and have a critique of the interlocking forms of oppression inherent within U.S. social and political structures, early in the conversation many fail to recognize their individual agency within these systems. This is apparent in Chloe's comment in which she contends that she is rewarded with positive male attention when she wears blonde hair weaves; she defends her behavior by attributing her decision to straighten her hair on brainwashing by society and the young men who spark her interest. Over ten minutes of discussion ensued wherein various students cited multiple, legitimate examples of the ways in which they are affected by Eurocentric media images—focusing heavily on their perceived victimization. The conversation below resumes during the point at which our facilitator Andrea became annoyed, and interjected with a comment that

challenged her peers to reflect on their *own* accountability in perpetuating these ideological and behavioral norms.

- Andrea (facilitator): Ok, but let's look at the LL song, for example. Ya'll say that Blacks have been brainwashed, but this *brutha...LL Cooool J...* is feelin' chicks from the hood. With braids, and like cornrolls and everything. So, I highlighted this line on the first page: "I want a girl with extensions in her hair— Bamboo earrings, at least two pair." So when he talks about extensions, he's talking about —
- Diane and Tina: [Interrupting, in unison] Braids!
- Andrea (facilitator): Right, braids, cornrolls,...you know, *Black* hairstyles. And he says he wants a girl with bamboo earrings. So, like, he is representin' for girls in the hood. Like *us!* Like—
- Kennisha: [Interjecting] And that's nice and all, but he's just *one* man. *One* rapper, who actually appreciates us... our beauty! Black ways of dress, and nappy hair or whatever. What about the rest of the Black dudes out here? And the rest of the *world?*
- Andrea (facilitator): So, are we supposed to hide our natural hair, and natural beauty just cuz the rest of the world doesn't appreciate it? So, then, are there Black women...like, entertainers, who are weave free, with their *own* noses, [laughter from the class] who aren't blonde...
- Diane: [Yelling from the back of the room] Yeah! My girl Lauryn [Hill]! Oh, and Erykah Badu...and Jill Scott.
- Andrea (facilitator): Ok, she just came up with *three examples* in less than a minute! [Class laughs] And I'm sure there are many more. So, if... if all these Black women, you know, if they can do it, what's *our* excuse? And like, to keep it real, I'm gonna call myself out here too. Cuz I perm and weave my hair—
- Chloe: [Interrupting] But they not *cute* tho! [Several students boo in disagreement]
- Diane: What?! They pockets are *fatter than yours*, so they must be doin' something right! That African, *Afrocentric* look is a part of they image and it's making them a *whole* lot of money! I think they are... just...*bold!* And we ain't! They makin' that choice even though they working in a industry run by White people! *Controlled* by Whites! So...we have the choice—just like they do—to wear our hair natural...or nappy or whatever you want to call it. We just livin' in *fear!*
- Andrea (facilitator): Fear of what?
- Diane: Fear of *rejection!*

Because the goal of every discussion was to *position students as agents of change*, facilitators were instructed to move their peers away from simply critiquing oppressive social conditions and instead challenge them to develop (individual and collective) transformative ideologies and behaviors. In light of this, Andrea pushed the group to think of successful Black women in the media who wear their hair in its textured, coily state. Diane immediately recalled several examples and came to the conclusion that women such as Lauryn Hill and Jill Scott have made the conscious, valiant choice to reject Eurocentric standards of beauty in an industry that has historically been controlled by White individuals and White theoretical and social conventions. The willingness of these women to embrace a more Africentric⁷⁸ image in such an appearance-driven industry led Diane to believe that many other Black girls are merely *fearful* of taking the same risk in their everyday lives. As class drew to an end, two students experienced a self-critical revelation that led them to make the empowered decision to begin resisting popular commercial influences.

- Ms. Lane I think you raise a good point, [Diane]. This idea that our fear takes away our agency. Our *choice*. Because I'm not sure that every Black woman with straight hair is trying to look White, or *be* White. Women, we love versatility. So many of us, you know? [Many students nod in agreement]. But when we're walkin' around *fearful* of showing our true colors...runnin' away from our natural beauty...our *gifts*—then that's a problem! Living in that kind of fear is a *problem*. And I agree that it is certainly a sign of brainwashing.
- Andrea (facilitator): You better *preach* Ms. Lane! [The class laughs]. Ok then ya'll. Ok so we gotta hurry. Ok let's hurry up cuz the bell about to ring. What I want to know is what are we going to *do* about it? I'm not trying to live in fear forever! [Joking]. But forreal, why should I believe that my—my natural hair is a *bad thing*. Like, my natural *texture*. You know, it is brainwashin'. Like [Diane] was sayin', it's fear, you know. If *my girl* Lauryn Hill can rock dreads, then I can! Well, hold up,... [class laughs] I'm not

⁷⁸ *Africentrism* refers to a worldview that relocates the values, experiences, and expressions of Black-identified individuals and places them at the center, rather than at the margins of popular U.S. thought.

taking it *that far!* But...forreal...the next time I get my hair done I'm going to get some of those kinky twists. With highlights. Cute! I'mma spice em' up!

Lynnette: [Standing from across the room] Oooh, I like those! [Andrea] I should try them with you...yeah, I'll try it out too [Andrea]!

[The bell rings, indicating that lunch has come to an end].

Andrea (facilitator): Ms. Lane, I think we need another week. I have more quotes. I only, I think I only got through, like, half my questions. I have, like, four more questions. It wasn't enough time. We barely got to get into what [Riley] was really tryin' to say. I don't think everybody understood her...um, where she was comin' from. Her point of view.

Chastity: [Standing up and packing her bags]. Yeah, I didn't get to finish reading it, I wanna see where she was going with some of those arguments! [Several students nod in agreement].

After Diane's insightful revelation that numerous African-American women are living in fear of rejection, I intervened to ensure that we were not labeling *all* Black women with straightened hair as fearful or as victims of societal brainwashing; rather, my goal was for students to continue to look deep within *themselves* to try and determine the roots and influences of their own personal body image concepts and behaviors. This led to a particularly noteworthy occurrence that transpired at the end of our discussion: Andrea recognized that she had been socially conditioned to regard her natural hair texture as innately inferior and made a choice to move towards a self-defined concept of beauty. Her decision to take a break from straightening her hair inspired Lynnette, who similarly resolved to experiment with kinky twists—a new, African inspired hairstyle.

After twenty minutes of discussion, the bell rang for students to conclude their lunchtime activities and head to the next class. By that time many individuals in Black Girls United had clearly articulated a complex understanding and critique of African-American women's station within the White American system of beauty; moreover, two individuals discussed how they were empowered to reject the dominant rhetoric, and instead decided to engage in oppositional behaviors and attitudes. As individuals were preparing to leave, Andrea—with backing from

several other students—asked for my permission to extend our discussion into the following week. The members’ collective, expressed interest in engaging with the text more thoroughly exemplified high levels of academic engagement as well as a genuine desire for intellectual rigor.

In sum, *positioning students as agents of change* involved offering BGU participants ample opportunities to rally in favor of their own self-interests, as experts of their socio-political location. Further, students were tasked to “dream their way into individual and collective freedom” by locating and implementing behaviors that were subversive to their perceived oppression (Sears, 2011, p. 145). In this way, BGU functioned as an alternative and unorthodox space in which students could explore the dialectic of African-American women’s oppression *and* their activism (P. Collins, 2000; hooks, 2000). As the vignette demonstrated, a process of *rearticulation* happened, wherein the participants’ experiences took on new meanings, and some individuals developed an alternative view of themselves and the world (P. Collins, 2000). Working strategically to *position students as agents of change* was due, in most part, to the politicized ethic of care that I engendered as a Black feminist educator, and by proxy, the intense affection that I held for my students and their communities.

Teaching is Love

A Politicized Ethic of Care

Chrisette: You *love* us, huh Ms. Lane?
Ms. Lane: [Looking down at papers on the desk] Yes ma’am.
Chrisette: Mmmhmm. *I know. Why* you love us? You know we *crazy*, right?! [Joking]
Ms. Lane: [Still looking away, shuffling papers on the desk] You’re funny, [Chrisette]. I love you because it comes with the territory.
Chrisette: [Laughing] What territory? Teachin’?
Ms. Lane: Mmmhmm. [Looking up at Chrisette, and smiling] It is *literally* my job to love you. [Pointing to the door] Now get to class punkin’.

This conversation took place at the conclusion of a Black Girls United meeting, a few weeks into the second year of the program (BGU meeting, Week 45). One of the benefits of video recording our sessions is that I was able to capture conversations between BGU members and myself that took place just before and immediately following our meetings. This particular discussion occurred just after our class ended, as the participants were departing to the next period. I was seated at a student desk that was positioned four seats in front of where the camera was stationed, and two rows to the left. Initially, I did not notice Chrisette when she walked over; I was focused on sorting through a stack of papers that I was planning to return to individuals in the subsequent period. When she asked me if I loved my students, I answered “yep” without missing a beat—in spite of the fact that my mind had already vacated the sphere of Black Girls United, and I was immersed in the dealings of period five Honors English. Answering “yes” to Chrisette’s question was a visceral response. Indeed, I loved *each* of my students.

In keeping with the tradition of other Black feminist educators, I equated “work with care” (Beauboeuf- Lafontant, 2002, p. 35). Further, in accordance with the African-American philosophy of educating to liberate, I believed that choosing to teach was a political act. The two, combined, gave rise to a concurrently political *and* emotional framework for the instruction of my students. This ideological lucidity was mirrored in the *politicized ethic of care* that I exhibited in Black Girls United. Similar to other womanist educators, caring was “infused with love, humility, passion, and power,” and was demonstrated by unrelenting displays of personal accountability and collective responsibility (Roseboro & Ross, 2009, p. 36). Hence, at the center of a *politicized ethic of care* was an authentic love for the students.

In the previous chapter, the participants in BGU explained that, through their lens, the majority of teachers at King High School did not display authentic forms of caring. These

practitioners were perceived as choosing to teach because of their fascination with the content area, or simply because they were in need of a paycheck. From the students' perspectives, these individuals were disconnected and did not regard urban youth of color as a valuable investment of their time or worthy of sincere affection. Consequently, the behaviors of these alleged uncaring teachers contributed to the sense of invisibility frequently experienced by the members of Black Girls United.

hooks (2003) discredits the dehumanizing, yet conventional system of extracting emotion from the practice of teaching. She maintains that one drawback of pedagogies devoid of an emotional connection, namely *love*, is that such methods prevent teachers from gauging and attending to the emotional climate of their students, which could potentially interfere with a student's ability and/or desire to learn. As a social justice educator and Black feminist, I understood this concept, and unabashedly communicated the deeply rooted emotional investment that I held in my practice.

In my interview with Tanya, she recalled that I had an "actual and fo'real *love*" for the members of Black Girls United (Tanya, Interview #2, 12/22/12). In her opinion, my love for students was demonstrated by one very specific act: "pulling out all the stops" to assist students socially and/or academically. She proclaimed,

I knew you cared about us. Like *really* cared because you were *always* there to help us. We didn't even have to ask a lot of the time cuz, you'd be like, "You look tired [Tanya]. You hungry? You want some carrots?" And then you'd go to the fridge lookin' for some food. Or just, like, you'd see somebody just wasn't their usual self and you would step away from everybody and talk to that person separately. You know? You went out of your way. Or if somebody was havin' family drama you would ask about how they were doin'. Or even being nosey and asking about people's grades all time. Just checkin' in with people *all the damn time*. It was about showin' concern. Like, you were uncomfortable when we were unhappy. It made *you* uncomfortable. Or, like, even if we came to you about a problem and you didn't have the answer we knew we could come to you anyway cuz you always connected us with whoever *had* the answer. -Tanya, Interview #2, 12/22/12

Tanya's examples of the ways in which I performed caring are emblematic of how I generally engaged with the members of Black Girls United. As a result of participating in weekly conversations around relevant social issues—I established a closeness with several members of BGU, and had the privilege of getting to know them as *whole* people. Thus, a *politicized ethic of care* involved an *authentic* concern with individuals' social and academic development beyond the bounds of my classroom.

As mentioned in previous chapters, caring for students authentically and holistically is common in Black feminist teaching practice, and is often referred to as *othermothering*. Defined by Collins (2000) as “women who assist blood-mothers by sharing mothering responsibilities”, othermothers in the larger social context customarily cater to the needs of neighborhood children as a means of assisting biological parents who *may* or *may not* lack the resources or the ability to properly care for them (p. 178).

As an educator, I inherited this convention of shared responsibility, which was apparent in my interactions with BGU participants—particularly when we discussed their physical health and eating patterns. Similar to most teenagers, many of the young women in BGU battled fatigue and low levels of energy. I often informed students that their recurrent lethargy could be attributed to two things: inadequate sleep, and most of all, terrible food choices. On any given day, I'd encounter BGU participants (and other students at King High, in general) devouring Hot Cheetos, Top Ramen Noodles with Tobasco Sauce, and excessive amounts of sugar (i.e., candy). I often harassed students: “You can't be any good to anybody else, if you can't be good to yourself” (Ms. Lane, BGU class, Week 49). I was concerned that these young women would fall short of meeting their prestigious career goals, providing for their families, and/or engaging in important community work if they ate foods that limited their brain function—or worse—if they

developed a serious illness (e.g., type 2 diabetes).

After months of pestering students, one member of BGU decided that altering her eating habits was extreme; however, she offered to accompany me on my after school jogs. I traditionally ran on a treadmill at home, but because students were volunteering to join me, we decided to jog around the local neighborhood. Tanya described this tradition during her second interview:

We were in our second year of [BGU] and you were *still* bothering us about the Hot Cheetos. So finally I was like listen, I can't give up my good food, but I'll come run with you. And then, we told some other people and they joined in! And we was committed to it too! Like, you don't see high school students doing that. Like, "Uh, its afterschool, and I'm ready to go home!" But, like we were willing to be together after school to do this together and laugh about it. Joke about it you know. And that hill was hard! And on the way back we'd be lazy and we'd be walking back. But you made us finish! –Tanya, Interview #2, 12/22/12

In addition to caring about students holistically, I also held them accountable for their actions.

The individuals who signed up for the weekly jogs were lovingly encouraged to finish the route and keep up the pace.

There were other occasions in which I held students accountable to my expectations. When participants displayed unpleasant attitudes, I urged them to be mindful of the ways in which they engaged with their peers and myself. For instance, one Tuesday (during the the second year of the program) a member named Ashanti entered my classroom during lunch with an uncharacteristically uptight disposition. It was not atypical for students to gather in my room during lunch on days that BGU did not meet; I traditionally played music, graded papers, and conversed with students during the half hour break. When Ashanti walked into the room she looked at me coldly, and sat down in a seat directly in front of my desk. Instead of greeting me, she stared blankly. When I inquired about what was troubling her, she insisted that nothing was

wrong, ate her food, and grimaced. At the end of lunch, I pulled Ashanti aside and told her that if she had a problem with me that she needed to be mature and discuss it like a young adult. She immediately defended her actions by insisting that she did not have an attitude, and managed to mumble an obligatory “I’m sorry.” Instead of accepting Ashanti’s apology, I informed her that her actions were unacceptable and disappointing. I insisted that she pull herself together and provide a “real” apology when she was ready to acknowledge her poor behavior.

The next day, Ashanti walked into my room at lunch and placed a handwritten card on my desk. She had folded a piece of white printer paper in half, and wrote “I Love You” in bold lettering on the front. On the inside she taped a recent picture of herself. Opposite the picture was a note that read:

Dear Ms. Lane,

I would like 2 apologize for what I did the other day. I never meant to make you feel that what I did was a “punk ass move.” And I understand that. So, I’m giving you what you asked for, a “REAL” apology and I hope you will accept it. So for the last time, I’M SORRY MS. LANE!!!

P.S. I also want to thank you for everything you’ve done for me. You have done more for me than some of my family members and I’ve been around them my whole life. You’ve taught me things that I never known and you help me make better choices in life. Ms. Lane, you treat me as if I’m more than just a student 2 u and anything I ever asked you 2 do you did and I really appreciate that. So I don’t NEVER want you 2 feel that I don’t appreciate what you’ve done for me because I do.

Love always,
[Ashanti]

Holding students accountable for their actions was critical to engendering *a politicized ethic of care*. However, it is important to note that I was participating in a reciprocal process in my interactions with youth: I engaged with students respectfully and ungrudgingly, and commanded the same in return. Hence, in my exchanges with BGU members, I embodied a saying that is common in the African-American community. That is, “practice what you preach.” How could I

possibly presume that students would treat me with kindness, if I did not behave similarly?

In my second conversation with Nia, a former BGU participant, she maintained that my decision to practice what I preached was critical to developing and sustaining the positive energy that she recalls experiencing in Black Girls United. She noted,

I think it was more of the teacher's presence, let's say that. It was more of your presence. And the respect. Just a genuine—like, you respected everybody. *Every kid*. Even the ones that people called losers. [Laughing] You know? Your classroom was comfortable for those kids too. Even outside of [BGU], your classroom was comfortable. I mean being that you were Ms. Lane, everybody called your classroom home and you opened up your classroom as somewhere to come to—but you're not gonna act a fool! You're going to come here and,.... I can't even put my finger on it... it was like you set the tone. You were positive. You gave us respect and we gave it back to you, and then we gave it to each other.
—Nia, Interview #2, 12/08/12

Nia brought up an interesting point in our interview. Namely, teachers set the tone for how students behave. Although Black Girls United was a student-centered organization, according to the students, *my* presence often dictated how the participants interacted. When I interviewed Tanya, another former member, I asked her if any teacher could have headed Black Girls United. Similar to Nia, she declared that the reason that BGU was successful was because I “actually represented all of the things that [BGU] stood for.” Hence, I personified the mission of the program, —which, according to Tanya— was “empowering yourself and others.”

In sum, there were three major components to a *politicized ethic of care*. First, was assisting students from subordinated groups in empowering themselves and their communities through a liberatory education. Second, I engaged in authentic care, which valued students holistically. Finally, individual and collective acts of personal accountability were central to how I performed care in BGU. The *politicized ethic of care* that I exhibited gave rise to the collective participation that was at the core of student relations in BGU.

A Community of Queens

Collectivity

- Nia (facilitator): I mean, I wonder what you guys think about this. I notice that in most videos the so-called “pretty” girl is a light skinned chick who is treated respectfully, and she gets to walk around with the guy. And the other girl, the dark girl, she’s not so pretty, but she’s *shakin it*. And the next scene is, the guy has sex with the dark skinned girl, *leaves her*, and goes home to wifey...*the light chick!* Is it just me, or have you guys noticed that too? Cuz when you watch videos it’s like watching a movie, and when we watch movies we think that’s real life. We accept it, like ‘well, this is real life,’ sooo...the more we accept it the more it actually *does* take place in real life. And when we see these guys using the dark girls for sex only, but valuing the light girls to where those are the ones worth marrying. Then what—well, *how* does that make us think about ourselves as dark girls. Or, as light-skinned girls?
- Ashanti: (Nodding head) That’s true.
- Karrine: Preach! [Raising her arms in the air and snapping her fingers]
- Ashanti: Yep! Preach [Nia]! [Snapping her fingers]
- Nia: [Bell rings] I’m not *tryna* preach, I was tryna ask a question! [Laughter from class]
- Ashanti: Well, look, we’ll answer yo’ question *next time* girl! Let us give you yo props! You did a good job! Everybody, show yo’ love for [Nia]! [Ashanti stands and begins clapping. The entire class claps for Nia, while four students and Ms. Lane give a standing ovation along with Ashanti].
- Nia (facilitator): [Shaking her head from left to right and looking around the class] Ya’ll are *so* dramatic. [Smiling] Stop clapping *right now!* [Laughing] *For real!*

When students joined Black Girls United, they were implicitly supporting the objective to acquire a sense of sisterhood, cultural appreciation, critical consciousness, and transformative agency. These ambitions were plainly articulated in the student information sheet (see Appendix D), which was distributed to individuals on the day of the orientation. Truthfully, at the start of BGU most participants did not have a complete understanding of the terms ‘critical consciousness’ and ‘transformative agency’, although they were briefly defined in the handout.

Moreover, in my interviews with seven former members, numerous individuals admitted that they were initially unclear about how we'd engage in cultural appreciation. To my surprise, the single objective that was unambiguous to students was the sisterhood that we hoped to achieve. Aside from the informational handout, I never explicitly clarified how we would accomplish this sisterhood; however, from the very first meeting the young women in Black Girls United congregated in the spirit of love, encouragement, and uplift.

Through my analysis of data, I determined that there were a few specific reasons why the spirit of collectivity emerged so seamlessly in Black Girls United. First, students were working towards the *common* goals of self-definition⁷⁹ and self-determination⁸⁰. Secondly, despite the fact that there were leadership positions within BGU, the members did not identify hierarchies within the program (i.e. a chain of command among students). Finally, there were tangible features of BGU that inspired a sense of solidarity.

In the transcript at the opening of this section, the participants of Black Girls United exhibited tremendous gratitude after Nia (the facilitator) shared a particularly insightful comment. Although Nia did not anticipate such positive feedback (she actually became quite embarrassed), her peers insisted on showering her with praise by applauding and shouting “preach” (BGU Class, Week 24). During my interview with Kenya, I asked her why she thought her classmates were so much more supportive of each other in BGU than in traditional classrooms at King High. In response, she maintained that in Black Girls United, the students had a “purpose that was bigger than themselves” (Kenya, Interview #2, 01/12/13).

⁷⁹ *Self-definition* is defined as the act of rejecting ascribed notions of one's identity, and instead, naming one's *own* reality—in the context of and relation to family and community (Collins, 2000, p.112-113).

⁸⁰ Collins (2000) characterizes *self-determination* as the “power to decide one's own destiny” (Collins, 2000, p.300)

There was a kind of *togetherness* in [BGU]. It wasn't like other classes where you think, "I'm doing my thing and she's over there doing her thing." You know? In [BGU], it was like, ... it was more like, we're doing the same thing, *together*. You know? We all had something in common. We all wanted to do better as Black young women *and* for ourselves, and that was clear. That was the *point* of the program. So there was no real reason to be mean to the next person. We were *all* in it...*together*. –Kenya, Interview #2, 01/12/13

Because of the atmosphere of “togetherness” described by Kenya, the members of BGU frequently displayed empathy and care towards their peers. In my interview with Nia, she recalled that the participants felt a responsibility to “uplift” each other, despite the fact that “they had different income levels” and were from “different walks of life” (Nia, Interview #2, 12/08/12). This was particularly evident in the ways in which students engaged during our weekly meetings. Another former student named Erykah elaborated on this point during our first individual interview:

I feel like we lifted each other up when needed. Like, we were all so different and so alike at the same time. But when someone had a personal experience and they were sharing it and they would get emotional, we would all just have that moment of silence and just hug and comfort one another—which I felt was really good. And we just would learn from the different experiences people had. Everybody was welcomed to share. Nobody was thought of as weird or an outcast or nothin'. In my other classes if a student was emotional people would just stare at you like “Okay, why is she crying?” But in [BGU] it was just an aura of sisterhood and support. Everyone knew that's what it's about. We're all *one*, so why put down one another when we could lift each other up?

As Erykah asserted, Black Girls United was a space where students were welcomed with open arms. As such, young women who were shunned in spaces outside of our program felt “socially accepted” in BGU (Kenya, Interview #2, 01/12/13). In my conversations with previous members of the organization, the participants agreed that the sisterhood that students experienced in Black Girls United could likewise be attributed to the absence of social hierarchies (which, were common at King High).

You know what? We didn't really have power hierarchies. There was no competition. Like, *for what?!* Because we was about a sisterhood. Any student could lead, you know? It was

whoever volunteered, or whoever was volunteered by somebody else. And if you felt you needed support you could lean on the president or vice president for support. And anybody was able to give ideas about what we *could* be doin' or *should* be doin in the program. It always seemed like everybody was all together. It was a even playing field. You just had to be Black and female, basically. -Tanya, Interview #2, 12/22/12

Valuing *collectivity* over competition was a key component of my Black feminist framework because it prevented students from mirroring the social hierarchies they experienced outside of the program. In Black Girls United, young African-American women were not stratified based on appearance, popularity, grades, or alleged misbehavior; instead, there was a true “sense of oneness” between the students and (Tanya, Interview #2, 12/22/12).

It is also critical to note that although Black Girls United was a student organization, I was considered a part of the BGU sisterhood. Individuals often referred to me as “mama Lane”, “mom”, or “auntie Mo.” It was clear that the participants acknowledged my positionality as “the adult in charge” (Ashanti, Interview #1, 10/05/12); however, because the members of BGU facilitated the weekly conversations, and we co-constructed the curriculum, I was *practically* regarded as an equal participant. As revealed in previous sections of this chapter, I did not speak very often during the Black Girls United meetings. When I contributed, my aim was to push students to reflect on the topic in a new, and perhaps more critical fashion.

On other occasions in which I was vocal during meetings, I shared examples from my personal or professional life. For instance, when we read *How Sexual Harassment Slaughtered, Then Saved Me*” by Kiini Ibura Salaam (2002), I talked about the hurt I experienced as a teenager watching my mother endure a vicious cycle of domestic abuse (BGU class, Week 36). As Jeff Duncan-Andrade (2009) notes, to be a true critical educator means that one “painfully examines their own lives and actions within an unjust society and [share] the sensibility that pain may pave the path to justice” (p. 7). I believed that in order to inspire students’ process of

ideological transformation, it was imperative that I humbled myself—and was open, honest, and vulnerable alongside the participants. As a result, our conversations often felt like “girl talk, only deeper” (Ashanti, Interview #2, 12/01/12).

There were also tangible features of Black Girls United that contributed to our sense of *collectivity*. First, the seats in my classroom were arranged in a U shape, or semi-circle, which I believed was integral to engaging in democratic conversations. The facilitator typically chose to lead at the opening of the U (which was the front of the classroom), where a large whiteboard was located. Additionally, to encourage *collectivity* within the organization—it was tradition for each member, including myself, to wear our bright red Black Girls United shirts at each meeting. The word ‘Queen’ was written in bold, cursive lettering across the front of our shirts, with our logo on the back in a colorful red, black, and green pattern. Essentially, our BGU shirts functioned as a reminder of our rich ancestry, intellectual talents, and inherent overall *greatness*. In my interviews with former students, several individuals maintained that our shirts served a very special purpose in the program. This was particularly apparent in my conversation with Lisa (Interview #2, 01/04/13):

- Ms. Lane: So how did you feel about the red queen shirts with the black “Queen” written across the top?
- Lisa: It was empowering.
- Ms. Lane: Oh really? Why?
- Lisa: Because of what it represented. Like, you are a *queen*. You are valued, you’re respected. Like, you’re strong. [Laughing] And it’s like solidarity, we’re in this together. Like we have our... we’re in this together. Like *self-love*, like in that song, what’s the song? [Singing] “Self-love...”
- Ms. Lane: [Singing] ... “self-preservation”. Yeah, by Jaguar Wright.
- Lisa: Yea, that whole thing.
- Ms. Lane: Did it make you feel differently?
- Lisa: I mean yea it does, it made us, well it made *me* remember that I was royalty. So it’s just like, it was a mind thing, like you know how a lot of times the more you see something, it

kinda embeds itself. So in your mind having a shirt that said queen with the, the um African stuff on the back, it just reminded me like, “Okay well, you’re a queen, so you to behave yourself as such.” And then after awhile, it kinda started to really like get to the mind. Like, okay well if you *act* like you’re royalty—not like snotty and you know like things like that—but it’s just like, if you act like it, sometimes you just gotta fake it till you make it. *And eventually it’ll become embedded in you.* And you’ll realize that you were worth more than how other people may treat you. Or even worth more than you think you are to yourself. So um, yeah I like the shirts. I think the shirts were tight.

Ms. Lane: I like that, “Fake it till’ you make it.” It’ll eventually sink in. Ok, so what kind of reactions would you get at school?

Lisa: Yeah, it actually, arose a lot of questions. Because I mean, you would see one of us, and it was like, “Ok well, she has on her red queen shirt, that’s something she went and got made.” But as they would see more of us like okay, “*Queen again?!*” Then it’s like they’ll stop like, “Hey, where did you get that shirt from” or “What does this mean? What’s [BGU]?” And then I’d tell them “Oh we talk about women issues and being Black and stuff”, then they’d want to know more about what we used to talk about and do in class and stuff. Being nosey [laughing]. And then it was actually interesting because it not only drew the young ladies attention but it drew the males’ attention as well. So I mean, it gave us some opportunity to talk about the program.

Ms. Lane: So would you say the overall response from your peers was positive or negative or somewhere in the middle? What would you say?

Lisa: From the things that I experienced, I thought that it was positive. Now I’m not necessarily sure if it was because we were doing something different, something outside of cheerleading, and sports, or just tryin’ to be cute getting bad grades. Or like, a wannabe video chick. I don’t know what was in they heads for sure. But for me, I felt like they thought it was something positive. I think people were thinking...It gave people a different type of perception of what Black girls stood for. We were outside the box, you know?

Lane: So it gave people a different image of the Black girl at [King]? And it sounds like some folks were intrigued by it?

Lisa: *Exactly.*

As Lisa reported, the Queen shirts were a symbol of respect, honor, and strength for the young Black women in BGU. According to my former students, this representation subverted the dominant narrative about African-American female students as hypersexual and unintelligent. The Queen shirts garnered numerous inquiries on campus, and were frequently the cause of the positive attention that the young women received on Thursdays. Out of the seven former BGU members interviewed, three students had held onto their shirt—after having graduated more than four years prior. In fact, one former participant, Kenya, wore her shirt to our interview.

In addition to the Queen shirts, there were several activities outside of school that deepened the bond between the members of Black Girls United. As previously mentioned, we participated in weekly jogs during the second semester of the final year of the program. We also visited theme parks, concerts, community rallies, and participated in the school's homecoming parade. In sum, the general sense of *collectivity* experienced by the members of Black Girls United had a particularly powerful, lasting impact on several of the members.

Conclusion: In Love and War

Together, the foundational components of *critical feminist literature*, *positioning students as agents of change*, *a politicized ethic of care*, and *collectivity* gave rise to an alternative safe space for the African-American female participants in Black Girls United. While the previous sections have illuminated specific strategies and approaches to teaching that have resulted in an unusually stimulating urban classroom environment, it is imperative to note that there were also instances of discord between the individuals in BGU. Many of the topics covered in our weekly meetings ignited passionate responses from the members. As a former student named Brittney noted, “students had a chance to really listen to one another’s stories, and actually learn from each other’s experiences. But we didn’t think the same, and we didn’t always agree. Sometimes

it was *super* heated” (Brittney, Interview #1, 10/19/12). As Brittney noted, the young women in BGU had indeed developed a sisterhood; however, they were not a monolithic group, and often disagreed in class. As such, zealously and conflict were regularly at the center of our conversations.

I refer to these instances as respectful rifts. Any group working collectively in the spirit of transformational resistance must struggle with *and* against each other, to stimulate a new consciousness and incite oppositional behaviors (Sears, 2011). In the moments where individuals fervently disagreed in Black Girls United, the members of the organization remained courteous towards each other. This was evidenced in a conversation that took place during the second year of the program, in which the members of BGU debated the inappropriate nature of a popular rap song (BGU class, Week 36):

- Brenda: Honestly, when I listen to songs, I never feel like they talkin’ bout me! [Laughing] I never looked at it like that! I just...be like...the song *tight*! [Laughing] [Several students nod in agreement]
- Ashanti: What about that Too Short song? You know, you don’t really think about it, like, damn he talking about females! He’s bad mouthing females. And it don’t even make sense, really!
- Brenda: “Sadiddy” makes sense. I think—
- Ashanti: [Interrupting, and raising her voice] No it *don’t*!
- Karrine: Nuh uh!
- Nia: Hold up, let her talk, [Brenda] how does Sadiddy make sense to you? Wait, have you guys all heard that song by Too Short? Saddidy? He talks about “You’re a saddidy bitch.” You went to college but, [imitating the rapper] “You’re actin’ all sadiddy *BITCH*”! [Class erupts in laughter]
- Ms. Lane: Oh my, I haven’t heard that one. My *goodness*! Let me write this one down! So that’s [writing] Too Short, Sadiddy Bitch. [Class laughs]
- Nia: It’s literally just bitches, and bitches, and more bitches.
- Brenda: [Standing] But that’s not even his worst! It’s actually not that bad, when you think about it.
- Nia [Looking at Brenda]: So *why* do you think Sadiddy makes sense?
- Brenda: Cuz you know, people get a education and start to act stuck up and stuff. Why you gotta act like that? You ain’t too

Ashanti: cute to get slapped! [Laughing]
 Whaaaaat?! I can't even listen to this. I gotta admit, I be listening to the song, like, it *do* bang. But how you gon' say it's ok for him to slap a woman across her face cuz' she don't wanna holler at him?

Brenda: That's one part of the song that I actually like. Out of all the other parts of the song, that one part makes a lotta sense! You ain't *never* too cute to get slapped!

Ashanti: So, *you* ain't never too cute to get slapped? Yo *mama* ain't too cute to get slapped? [Several students yell "ooh"]

Brenda: Hold up! [Leaning forward, and frowning] My mama ain't in this. That's *different*.

Nia: [Raising her voice from across the room] I don't think she's talking about *your* mom, [Brenda]. But if it's not cool to slap *yo'* mama, how's it ok to slap another woman? [Chatter from other members of the class] That could be someone's mama too! That could be *my* mama, or [Ashanti's] mama, or—

Ashanti: [Interrupting] That's all I'm sayin!

Brenda: [Taking her seat] Well, I ain't never said it's alright to slap *nobody's* mama. We talkin' about these *boogie* girls, right out of college. But...whatever. I wasn't takin' it like that. I don't think a mother should be slapped. [Laughing] Not even a *baby* mama!

Karrine: [Interrupting] Look [to the class], I just think we need to realize how men listen to this and think its ok to copy what he says. And *any* woman could be a victim. Like, what you gon' do if that happens to *you* after you get your degree? Just because you're not down some dude slaps you! *That ain't cool!*

Brenda: It's like...I mean, I feel you. I just don't think it's right for people to act stuck up. But yeah, I don't want *nobody* touchin' me!

In the example above, tensions flared between Brenda and Ashanti when Brenda made the assertion that no woman is “too cute to get slapped.” It escalated even further when Ashanti used Brenda’s mother as an example for why her claim might be unreasonable. As the discussion progressed, students raised their voices, interrupted each other, and grew increasingly uneasy in their seats. Ultimately, the other members of BGU (i.e., Karrine, and Nia) intervened as mediators in an effort to keep the conversation focused. Specifically, Karrine and Nia were determined to help Brenda pinpoint the connection between the degradation of women in videos, and the mirroring of such behavior in the romantic partnerships that students frequently

encountered in their communities. As Tanya pointed out during our second interview, the young women in BGU were negotiating how to “be a Black woman in our society,” and “in order to be successful they had to work together, *as siblings*” (Tanya, Interview #2, 12/22/12). She further noted, “Siblings bicker, but in the bickering we made each other better.” Thus, conflict and individual and collective accountability are inherent to any true sisterhood.

In sum, my Black feminist pedagogical practice required that I “listen, learn from, and mentor” the students in Black Girls United (Bartolomé, 1994, p. 423). It was a dynamic framework that provided me the freedom to shift my practice in order to meet the particular needs and desires of the participants. Furthermore, the student-centered structure of the organization created an environment in which knowledge was co-constructed *alongside* students, as opposed to banking methods of education wherein the teacher talks, and students meekly receive and repeat the information (Freire, 1973). As such, the organization cultivated intellectual curiosity, individual agency, and self-determination among the young women involved. The subsequent chapter will provide an exhaustive discussion of the vitality of my Black feminist pedagogical framework, and its impact on the race and gender identities of the African-American female participants.

CHAPTER 6: IDENTITIES EVOLVED

Introduction: Reversing the Tide of Black Female Inferiority

won't you celebrate with me
what i have shaped into
a kind of life? i had no model.
born in babylon
both nonwhite and woman
what did i see to be except myself?
i made it up
here on this bridge between
starshine and clay,
my one hand holding tight
my other hand; come celebrate
with me that everyday
something has tried to kill me
and has failed.

-Lucille Clifton

Lucille Clifton's poem, "won't you celebrate with me" describes the difficulty of developing an internally defined understanding of self, amidst the dominating forces of racism and sexism. Written in the heart of the civil rights movement, the poem documents Clifton's ambitious plight to find strength in adversity, and to form "a kind of life"—as each day, "something has tried to kill" her, and "has failed." Notwithstanding the author's triumphant movement from "object" to "subject" (Freire, 1973), her use of lowercase lettering throughout the poem suggests that a lingering sense of smallness remains. Hence, although Clifton has advanced in her *individual* efforts towards self-discovery and self-creation, she is unable to disrupt society's persistent subjugation of Black women as an entity.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of my Black feminist pedagogical framework on the race and gender identities of the members of Black Girls

United. What I have discovered is that the African-American female students participating in the program underwent a journey comparable to what Lucille Clifton describes. The young women in BGU gathered in fellowship each week, in an effort to reconstruct dominant notions of Black femininity and celebrate the resilience of African-American women. From the students' perspectives, there were few accurate and empowering representations of African-American girlhood in their communities and at King High School, prior to joining Black Girls United. This led to immense feelings of *invisibility* and *hyper-visibility*, as well as engagement in various self-defeating behaviors as a form of resistance (e.g., ditching school).

An analysis of the data has revealed that after two years of participating in Black Girls United, most of the students came to a conclusion that was analogous to the sentiments expressed by Lucille Clifton in the opening poem. That is, the asphyxiating presence of individuals' interlocking race, class, and gender oppression could not be easily disrupted. Fortunately, however, Black Girls United was a vehicle by which students could *begin* to subvert their perceived and experienced oppression, by engaging in a *collective* process of self-exploration and self-definition. Essentially, my Black feminist pedagogical framework appeared to have assisted most individuals in crafting alternative understandings of their race, class, and gender identities, which resulted in positive social and academic behavioral shifts.

From the examination of interview quotes, video transcripts from former BGU classes, my Black feminist curriculum, field notes, and student artifacts, I maintain that Black feminist pedagogy was a tool for developing viable self-identities for the young women participating in Black Girls United. Considering the highly oppressive conditions

in which students were socialized and schooled, their movement towards self-determination⁸¹ is truly worthy of celebration. In the following sections, I clarify how my Black feminist pedagogical practice fostered in several youth 1) a heightened critical consciousness of African-American women's socio-political location, 2) an empowered sense of self that rejected popular, reductive notions of Black femininity, and 3) a more positive orientation towards school. It is important to note that despite the overall success of the program, its impact was limited for one former member. Hence, this chapter concludes with the critical perspective of single participant, who argued that Black Girls United did *not* sufficiently provide the ideological and material capital necessary to deflect daily assaults on her humanity.

Heightened Collective Consciousness

In the beginning [of Black Girls United] the girls talked about the condition of Black women in general terms. They were aware of racial hierarchies, and classism and sexism— but I believe their perspectives were, for the most part, limited to what they saw happening in their families, with their friends, and in their hoods. I'm not sure that they understood how racism, sexism, classism, and other "isms" unite Black women on a larger scale—in spite of our individual differences and place and space in time. Today, after two years of lovin' on each other, fussin' and cussin', and sharing our stories, I think they finally get it! (Journal 4, Entry 14, p.61)

When I wrote the above entry, I was experiencing a strong sense of awe and fulfillment. I had recognized— just three weeks before the final Black Girls United meeting—that over the course of two years, my students had seemingly developed a heightened critical awareness of Black women's socio-political location, and an appreciation for our diversity of experiences. In the early stages of BGU (i.e., weeks one through five), the participants shared criticisms of the various ways in which Black

⁸¹ Patricia Hill Collins characterizes *self-determination* as the “power to decide one’s own destiny” (Collins, 2000, p.300).

women and girls were marginalized in society. They spoke openly about racial prejudice, economic stratification, and sexism, and the ways in which these three forms of oppression function as an impediment to social justice for themselves and their loved ones⁸². Hence, an emergent critical consciousness was indeed present for most of the students at the start of the organization.

However, what was frequently missing from these early conversations was an *explicit* connection to African-American women who lived *outside* of students' respective communities and peer groups. In fact, when discussing their relationship with the general public, individuals in BGU often prefaced their analyses with phrases such as, "When you're a Black girl in South L.A. you get looked at like you're a criminal..." (Andrea, BGU Class, Week 2), or "If you from the eastside, and you a Black female, people treat you like..." (Ashanti, BGU Class, Week 4). While students were able to clearly identify African-American women's group standpoint early in the program, it wasn't until after *the first semester* of Black Girls United (i.e., after week 15, of a total of 70 weeks) that I began noticing the ways in which the participants' understandings of themselves had expanded to include the experiences of Black women outside of their communities as a criterion of meaning. In my second interview with Erykah, she provided an explanation for the dramatic shift in her thinking:

Interviewer: Was there a difference in how you saw yourself as a Black young woman before [BGU] compared to how you felt about yourself at the end of the program?

Erykah: Yes. Definitely.

Interviewer: How so? Can you explain? Because you were in...what...the 9th and 10th grade during [BGU], right?

Erykah: Yep. I was young. [Laughing] In the beginning I really loved being a Black girl and I knew I was special. But, I think...I kind

⁸² Refer to chapter 4 for in depth discussions of students' interpretations of interlocking race, class, and gender oppression.

of feel like I didn't really have a good connection to *other* Black women. Not in the beginning. Like, you know, outside of just *my* neighborhood, or my friends. Because, you know, we kind of lived in a bubble at [King]. And that's all we really knew. And whatever we saw on television, you know. So, I really, honestly believe that those readings helped me to *really* see how crazy racism and sexism are. It's like...we *knew* it was happening, but...when you read about other people's lives and they live in other parts of America—because those women were from all over, but they were dealing with problems that I could relate to. It was like...*it was like looking in a mirror* kind of. And you know, sometimes new topics were brought up that I hadn't dealt with yet myself, but it increased my knowledge. My knowledge of *Black* women. Because I felt like maybe one day I would come across some of these issues as I get older and really get into the world. So, I learned that being a *Black* woman was more complicated than I thought it was. *We're* complicated. I learned a lot about our lives and how we think about things. I was just a sponge, taking it all in.

Erykah was one of many students whose connection to, and understanding of, Black women was significantly broadened by the feminist literature. Through her engagement with the weekly readings, she recognized the complexities of African-American women's varied experiences *and* group commonalities.

Student comparisons of their personal realities against those of their BGU *peers* was another factor contributing to their expanded perspectives of African-American women's collective struggle. As previously mentioned, many of the participants' initial perceptions of Black women were limited to their knowledge of the life experiences of their African-American female family members and peers—who often shared commonalities in age, social class, sexual orientation, educational histories, and ethnicity. During my analysis of the data, I discovered that in several of the discussions that took place throughout the first *and* second years of the program, students were surprised to learn of the *diversity* of their lives as urban Black female adolescents. There were

numerous moments in in which individuals' personal truths *contradicted* the realities of other students in the organization. It was during these times that students struggled to accept the fact that Black women and girls have “diverse responses to common challenges” (Collins, year p. 25). This often resulted in heated exchanges, wherein the participants struggled with and against each other to re-conceptualize their own beliefs about African-American femininity. These moments of discord between the students of BGU were critical; challenges to students' interpretations of urban Black girls' collective identity often sparked a new consciousness among the participants.

Omi and Winant (1994) refer to this ideological shift as a process of *rearticulation* (p. 99). When Black women and girls engage in critical group dialogue, they are often presented with an alternative understanding of themselves and their worlds. This commonly empowers individuals to engage in transformational acts of resistance against oppressive social structures (e.g., poverty and sexism). One powerful example of *rearticulation* in Black Girls United was the evolution of the relationship between two students, Tanisha and Kiera—both of whom were juniors at the start of the program. The root of their friction lied in the fact that they fundamentally disagreed on the significance of their varying experiences with race, class, and gender subordination.

Tanisha was a student with a dark brown complexion. Her middle-class mother and father raised her in a single-family home, roughly 15 minutes from King High School. Kiera, who had a pecan-colored skin tone, lived with her mother and younger sibling in a low-income community of apartment complexes located five minutes from the school. Tanisha and Kiera's tumultuous relationship originated during a conversation about gentrification in the third week of the program. When the facilitator, Ayanna, referred to

the process of gentrification as “the whitening of yo’ neighborhood, like the whitening of yo’ teeth” (Ayanna, BGU Class, Week 3), Tanisha brazenly asserted that only “darker-skinned Blacks” would be negatively affected by this process, as “light-skinned people” will simply “blend in with the Whites” (Tanisha, BGU Class, Week 3). After considering Tanisha’s comment, Kiera intervened on behalf of African-Americans with lighter skin:

- Kiera: [Looking at Ayanna, the facilitator] Can I say somethin’? Hold on, that’s *so* ignorant. That’s the most *ignorant* thing I heard all week!
- Tanisha: Ok I’ll give an example. Light-skinned girls have it easier cuz people think you less Black, and so you get treated better.
- Kiera: [Tanisha], you’re *wrong*! You’re not makin’ *any* sense right now! You need to get some light-skinned friends cuz’ you don’t know what you talkin’ about.
- Tanisha: I *got* light-bright friends!
- Kiera: And all of them are rich? They all live in mansions? They all got maids and picket fences [Tanisha]?
- Tanisha: They got more money than me!
- Kiera: [Interrupting] And *you* got more money than *me*! Explain that!
- Tanisha: I don’t have money. My parents got money cuz they got jobs.
- Keira: Ok but look at where you live tho’. Your parents have more money than *my* parents. Are they dark-skinned like you?
- Tanisha: Yeah...
- Kiera: [Interrupting] *Exactly*! You’re *wrong* [Tanisha].

This discussion between Tanisha and Kiera lasted for 10 minutes. It was the first of many exchanges in which the young women disagreed about race and class prejudice, sexism, and skin privilege. For the most part, Tanisha insisted that Keira’s lighter skin protected her against overt acts of social injustice. Because one of the main features of my Black feminist pedagogy was positioning students as agents of change, I traditionally allowed the young women in BGU to resolve their altercations without broadcasting my personal opinions on the matter. I rarely intervened during quarrels; on such occasions, I simply posed questions that required students to think critically or more carefully about the situation. Because Tanisha and Kiera interacted passionately—yet, respectfully—I never

felt pressure to participate as a mediator. I was confident that they were mature enough to reconcile their issues without my assistance.

It was not until the second semester of the second year of the program (week 56 out of a total of 70 weeks) that Tanisha had a change of heart. During our weekly meeting, Kiera disclosed a private family matter: two of her close relatives had endured vicious acts of sexual assault. Kiera's grandmother was raped by her White employer, and her aunt was sexually violated by a domestic partner. As a survivor of sexual assault, Tanisha walked away from that meeting with an alternative view of Kiera, and light-skinned Black women in general.

When she returned to my classroom after school, Tanisha explained to me that she had not previously conceived of a situation in which lighter skinned Black women's bodies would be violated, apart from the institutionalized sexual exploitation of African-American women during the slavery era in the United States. She referenced the ways in which Black women with lighter complexions were held in high esteem in rap songs and popular music videos, and how that phenomenon played a key role in how she understood their experiences as dissimilar to her own. Although Tanisha still believed that Kiera was "annoying", she learned from that day's meeting that *all* Black women are vulnerable to acts of racism and sexual malfeasance. She asserted, "No matter if you're light skinned or dark skinned, I guess rape don't have a preference" (Journal 3, Entry 4, p.46). Ultimately, Tanisha recognized that individual variations in how African-American women experience racism and sexism do not overshadow "recurring patterns of differential group treatment" (Collins, p. 26). Several weeks later, I learned that Tanisha volunteered to participate as a guest speaker for a local community forum against rape

among Black and Latina women (Journal 3, Entry 11, p.92).

In sum, engaging with the critical feminist literature, and through the sharing of students' multifaceted personal stories, BGU participants developed a heightened consciousness of the socio-political location of African-American women as a whole. Because we explored a variety of issues in the program, students were introduced to topics concerning Black women across the diaspora (e.g., female genital mutilation in Africa), as well as domestic phenomena that some individuals had not encountered in their own lives (e.g., adoption, child and domestic abuse; extreme poverty and homelessness). As a former student named Tanya asserted during her interview, the young women in Black Girls United "travelled down a path together," eventually reaching the conclusion that they are "similar *and* different at the same time" (Tanya, Interview #2, 12/22/12).

Patricia Hill Collins (2000) maintains that one of the many benefits of young Black women gathering in fellowship is that it often leads to novel ideas, which inspires alternate behaviors, and ultimately results in new forms of consciousness. Collins writes about the interdependence of action and thought:

A dialogical relationship characterizes Black women's collective experiences and group knowledge. On both the individual and the group level, a dialogical relationship suggests that changes in thinking may be accompanied by changed actions and that altered experiences may in turn stimulate a changed consciousness. (p. 30)

Several Black Girls United participants reported that the program transformed how they understood Black women's socio-political location, and by proxy, how they saw themselves. For many individuals, this shift in thinking was accompanied by new forms of action. One significant outcome of students' expanded perspectives of Black women

was their reimagining of, and ultimate opposition to, existing discourse around African-American female inferiority.

Self-Definition & Coming to Voice

In chapter 4, I described how the students in Black Girls United were adversely affected by social discourse that malign African-American women and girls, including derogatory depictions of themselves in the popular media (e.g., hip-hop music, television, and film). For instance, individuals reported feelings of *hypervisibility*, as a result of their ubiquitous encounters with caricature-like images of Black women as loud, ghetto, hypersexual, and anti-intellectual. In essence, the young women in BGU struggled each day to retain their humanity in the face of “crooked images” (Harris-Perry, 2011, p. 30). As discussed in the previous section, Black Girls United regularly exposed the participants to counternarratives of African-American women that expanded individuals’ understandings of their race, class, and gender identities. In my conversations with former BGU students, they maintained that reading the assigned literature and participating in class discussions assisted them in sharpening their critical analytical lenses. Nia noted:

You’re looking in between the lines of *everything*. You are not just viewing something on the surface. Everything I started to look at, I was *analyzing*. And questioning. I had to stop myself. Like “Listen Ms. Analyzing, I need you to stop. It is what it is, and you need to let it be. Don’t try to find the *bigger picture* and solution to *every single thing!*” But I really couldn’t help it. Because you start to analyze magazines, you start to analyze music videos, you start to analyze music in general, you know. You start to analyze your own surroundings. Why are Black women treated like prostitutes in these videos? Why are all the so-called pretty women light? Or the smart women are never Black. Like you start to analyze things that were happening at school, and *everywhere* really. –Nia, Interview #2, 12/08/12

According to the data excerpts, participating in Black Girls United aided the students in

critically analyzing what they saw happening in the world, and their place in it. As Nia pointed out, students began paying closer attention to the over-representation of Black women in discourse and imagery that highlighted cultural pathology. As a result of engaging with the critical feminist literature, and listening to each other's stories, the participants in BGU began to re-construct Black femininity, by recognizing and placing great value on African-American women's collective intelligence, resilience, beauty, and overall humanity. This new angle of vision—for several students—resulted in a more empowered sense of self, which rejected discursive and symbolic constructions of Black girls as inherently inferior (Collins, 2000).

Challenging Reductive Representations of Black Femininity

Since that meeting about appreciating our natural beauty, [Ayanna] has experimented with so many different hairstyles. I've seen other students compliment her in [BGU]. She has the most gorgeous, thick and kinky hair. She's still quite reserved in 2nd period—sort of sinks into her desk at the back of the class, with her pen and notebook. But I can see a difference in her. There's a light shining from within. Her demeanor has changed. When she comes to [BGU] on Thursdays she walks differently. There's a pep in her step. Shoulders back. Head up. Wearing her afro puff like a crown. Queen blasted across her chest. It's beautiful to have participated in her journey. (Journal 3, Entry 4, p.11)

In the fieldnote above, I described the behavioral shift that I witnessed in a student who was both a member of Black Girls United, and enrolled in my 9th grade English class. The journal entry was written several weeks after a class discussion, in which students argued that Black women's decision to wear their natural hair is often a sign of resistance against Eurocentric standards of beauty (BGU Class, Week #24). I noticed that my student, [Ayanna], was engaging in a process of *self-definition*, wherein an individual rejects externally defined definitions of self, and instead, crafts identities that foster individual empowerment (Collins, 2000). This often is accompanied by feelings of *self-love*, which is the unconditional love, nurturing, and acceptance of oneself (Sears, 2011).

In my interviews with seven former participants, I asked each individual to share any changes that they recognized in themselves, as a result of their experience in the program. Developing a stronger sense of self-love and/or self-definition was a common theme amongst the interviewees. Some of their responses are below:

“I was in the high school environment with my peers who didn’t like always accept me, so it was hard to love me and be confident. But as far as [BGU] it made me look at myself differently. A little more positively. It gave me a little like, a little spark you know.” –Kenya (Interview #2, 01/12/13)

“I learned that it’s ok for others to have an opinion of me, but my own self-concept is what matters most. That it was important for me to love *myself*, no matter what. And that’s what matters.” –Brittney (Interview #2, 12/15/12)

“It just was such an empowering thing like this helped me to learn me, to find me, and respect me, *for me*. And accepting myself in the skin that I’m in, and thinking of it like ‘you are a *beautiful* African-American girl,’ no matter what anybody says.” –Tanya (Interview #2, 12/22/12)

“Yeah, to accept your hair texture mentally and physically. Um, I’ll have to say I recognize my self-worth every single day. Like no matter how much someone may disrespect you, just always know your self worth because it could go a long way. So I think that’s the main thing I held on to. Self-love and self worth. Cuz’ in those videos, Angela Davis, even though she was—you know, going through her spills and people framed her and did everything, she knew her self worth, and she had self-love.” –Erykah (Interview #2, 01/19/13)

“[BGU] was one of the best things that could have ever happened to me at [King High School], to be perfectly honest...It was a really great experience and um, it teaches you know, young Black men and women more about themselves and how to, you know, love yourselves and love your hair and your skin.” –Nia (Interview #2, 12/08/12)

After reviewing my interviews with former members, and analyzing the remaining data sources, it was clear that Black Girls United played a significant role in raising the self-confidence of several participants. However, it is important to note that the program did not equally impact students. For some individuals, the Black feminist pedagogy simply ignited “a little spark” (Kenya, Interview #2, 01/12/13). For other students, Black

Girls United was “one of the best things that could have happened” during their high school experience (Nia, Interview #2, 12/08/12). Notwithstanding the variance in degrees of influence on the participants of BGU, the general rise in students’ self-confidence resulted in varying acts of oppositional resistance among the participants.

Several Black Girls United members reported making strategic efforts to operate *outside* of the box of traditional Black femininity. According to a former student named Tanya, her involvement in BGU caused her to be less intimidated by the deficit ways in which society viewed urban Black girls. In fact, she used her marginalization as inspiration to achieve “the unexpected” (Tanya (Interview #2, 12/22/12). In my conversation with Tanya, she recalled:

It helped me learn how to be strong. Like this is what I want, this is how I feel, and I don’t care what *anyone* has to say. And I don’t care how society views me, and that’s just what it is! Before [BGU], I really wasn’t like that. Like you know, it was like, “Well I *wanna* do this, and I *wanna* do that,” but that was it. *And I felt intimidated* and I felt like, “Hmmm, that’s not something I should be doing as a *woman*,” or “Maybe that’s not something I should doing because I was *Black*,” [BGU] was there and it helped me reconfigure that whole train of thinking. And I felt like, “Nah, I *can* do that. I *should* do that. Matter of fact, I *better* do that. Just because they say I *can’t* do that, now I really want to accomplish it!” You know, like, I just wanted to be *great*. –Tanya, Interview #2, 12/22/12

According to Tanya—as well as several BGU other members—it was important to strive for overall greatness, and surpass society’s limited expectations of African-American female youth. One stereotype that numerous students challenged was the hypersexual image of young Black women. By far, the most examined issue in Black Girls United was the omnipresent, controlling representation of young African-American women in popular youth cultural media, as sex obsessed, modern day Jezebels (Morgan, 1999). We often discussed this phenomenon during weeks in which the scheduled topic was starkly different.

For instance, during our 22nd week, the class was engaged in a conversation about Assata Shakur and Angela Davis' journey as political prisoners (BGU Class, Week #42). Somehow, we oscillated back and forth, between a discussion about the inhumane treatment of African-American female revolutionaries in prisons, to debating the social consequences of Black women's participation as sexual objects (i.e., arm candy) in music videos. After a conversation about the ways in which students mimic the lewd dancing in music videos at King High School dances, several individuals admitted that because of their involvement in BGU, they chose to use greater discretion in how they engage with young men at school dances.⁸³

- Andrea: After reading, and this stuff [looking at a stack of previous readings on her desk] and what we be talkin' about in here, I don't even mess with a lot of those songs. Like, I just go outside and cool off. Come back when the music's not so bad.
- Chloe: What? Then I guess you ain't *never* dancin', [laughing] cuz it's *always* bad. That's why I just don't go anymore. I'm good. I rather stay home and eat takeout.
- Andrea: Ain't no takeout comin' to yo' neighborhood!
[Laughing] I'm just kiddin'. But foreal, you know what I mean. Some of it's worse.
- Ashanti: I ain't never seen [Chloe] go outside to cool off! [Class laughs] Naw, but, I feel you. Like,... and I can't even say that I don't dance to [disrespectful music], cuz I do. Sometimes. Probably most of the time. It's the *way* you dance tho. You ain't gotta dance like a hooker. I ain't finna be lookin like a *tramp* out here in these streets. Especially cuz' everybody know I be in here wit ya'll *every week*. Like, I don't want *nobody* seeing me act a fool and be like, "Ain't she a [BGU student]? Ain't she in [BGU]?"
- Tanisha: And you *know* you gon' get called out too! Somebody'll see you and tell Ms. Lane! *Huh, Ms. Lane?*
- Ms. Lane: I have eyes and ears all over this school! [Looking around the class with a stern expression]
- Chloe: *See?!* That's why I don't even go man! [Class laughs] Naw

⁸³ Several years after Black Girls United came to an end, I learned that five former participants identify as LGBTQ. These individuals did not explicitly discuss their sexual orientation in the program, apart from making general, ambiguous statements about their romantic relationships.

I'm just kidding. I just don't want people lookin' at me like that *period*. And, . . . I used to *really* think that was cute. Like really thought it was . . . like, I was big shit dancing to those songs. Trying to fit in. But, . . . now, *I'm good!* As much as we talk about how degrading it is up in here, *I'm good*. Forreal.

Ashanti: But, I feel like, I'm not gon' be influenced by *other* people. Like, even *outside* of them dances. I'm not following *nobody*. And *not* just cuz' I be like, "Oh, Ms. Lane gon' find out." Because a lot of like, like I remember certain situations that happened, and like outside of [BGU], and I'm with my friends and some bullshit happens, and I'm just like "Yeah, nah I'm cool." Like I'll *really* look at it from *our* perspective. How we would look at something in [BGU] versus just how I be out with my friends. I be like, "No y'all look like *rats*. I'm bout to *go*. Like fo'real, fo'real. Especially like with *my* lil crew. Like, they *really* out there. Sometimes I have to really—just have to step back and be like "Aye, y'all doin' too much. I'm bout to *go*. *Take me home*." Cause I could end up like a lot of them. Like, a lot of girls that's havin' sex in bathrooms and all kind of stuff, cuz' TV says that's what you have to do to get liked by boys at school. That really ain't my cup of tea. I'm *cool* on that.

This transcript demonstrates how Andrea, Chloe, and Ashanti developed new perspectives regarding their individual and collective displays of sexuality, and the conceivable meanings of such acts. This, in large part, was influenced by the weekly discourse in Black Girls United. As a result of multiple BGU conversations, several individuals regarded the stereotype of the sexually aggressive African-American woman as fundamental to their subordination as urban adolescents. In addition to altering their behavior by choosing to refrain from perceived "lewd activities" (Chloe, BGU Class, Week 42), the participants in BGU also spoke out against injustice to self and community, far more frequently than they did *prior* to joining the organization.

Holla if You Hear Me!: Coming to Voice in BGU

In general, Black Girls United inspired numerous members to locate and utilize

their voice as emotional beings, intellectuals, and agents of change. As hooks asserts, feminist pedagogies and other critical pedagogies have historically emphasized and supported the process of “coming to voice” for students who are in a position of race, class, and/or gender [dis]privilege (hooks, 1994, p. 185). Through the practice of coming to voice, people from subordinated groups are frequently empowered to have their presence recognized—and beyond that—*valued* as fully human. As for the individuals in Black Girls United, several students reported that finding their voice assisted them in navigating certain forms of social domination, both inside and outside of school. In my interview with Ashanti, she discussed how her participation in BGU encouraged her to become more vocal, especially in her relationship with her mother. She recalled:

I became *way* more vocal. And expressing—like, really just expressing myself like to *anybody*. Any and *everybody*. Like my mom catches it the most I think its cuz I held back for so many years. When I felt she was doin’ wrong. I would just, like, not say nuthin’. Like I, I just, I’d just cry or like I said, I’d write. Like a lot of times I used to cry. Nobody knew I was a *big ass cry baby* [laughing], but I would just go in the room and be like— cry, cry, cry, cry, come out smiling, and nobody’ll ever know. Like, regardless of how she would take it, regardless of how she would feel, like since [BGU], I’m just like hella—when it come to expressing myself, whatever’s on my chest, I’m bout to *say it!* And I think that [BGU] like helped me with that. Like *a lot*. Cuz’ at first I wouldn’t talk about nuthin’. Like you couldn’t get me to talk. Even in class and stuff. I was just quiet before. Now I be like—always got sumthin’ to say. People probably be wantin’ me to just *shut up!*
—Ashanti, Interview #2, 12/01/12

Ashanti was typically reserved before joining Black Girls United. After two years of participating in the program, she no longer feared other people’s reactions to her self-expression. As a product of her heightened self-confidence, Ashanti bravely exposed her anger, fear, pain, and vulnerability to other individuals—particularly her peers at King High School, and her mother.

Similarly, Nia’s process of coming to voice involved revealing her opinions and

emotions more liberally. Nia was particularly outspoken when male students at King High School engaged in the common practice of referring to African-American female students as “bitches” (Nia, Interview #2, 12/08/12). In our second interview, Nia recalled pledging for a moratorium on the term.

Nia: And I remember talking to a boy or whatever—wow, that’s funny I just remembered that—, and he was like “Where you goin’?” And I’m like “I’m going to my [BGU] meeting. He’s like, and excuse the word, he was like “That’s where the *smart bitches* go to huh?” [Laughing]. That’s funny I just remembered that. I was like, “Why would you call your Black friend a *bitch*? How are we bitches?” He was like, “In a good way.” I said, “A bitch is *never* good!” Like damn, I started going straight *preacher* on him. I was like, “Would you refer to your *mom* as a bitch, in the *good* way?” And he was just like “Alright, that’s where the *smart* girls go.” You know, like—and I noticed outside, people were like, oh those are, those are the smart girls. Those are those girls who, you know, those girls want more in life [laughing].

Interviewer: And your decision to speak up was somehow connected to your participation in the program?

Nia: Oh yeah! Because, I mean, I know that I found myself because of [BGU]. Like, being able to speak up. Because I hung around a lot of guys, and I was on a mission to end the “b” word and take it off the face of the planet! And what I noticed was that around me, it wasn’t used. They were like “We’re not gonna’ even say that word around [Nia] because we know we’re gonna’ be hearing the, hearing the—

Interviewer: [Interrupting] Hearing the *sermon* today!

Nia: Yeah, like, “She about to go hard on us for the b-word!” So around me... so around me, I started noticing different things. Like certain people who would act a certain way that I wasn’t cool with— I started noticing like that’s *not* what I’m about. Like, we can be cool but I don’t have to accept that behavior in my inner circle, just because that’s how you are and because we wanna’ be friends. You know, *I can’t*. And I’m *gonna*’ speak up about it. I’m not comfortable with that, and I’m not havin’ it, and that’s *just it*.

In sum, the four elements of my Black feminist pedagogical framework (i.e., *critical feminist literature, positioning students as agents of change, a politicized ethic of care, and collectivity*) ignited a flame in students that inspired an empowered sense of self (i.e., self-definition), and the process of “coming to voice” (hooks, 1994). The amplified self-confidence that several youth gained from the program was extremely helpful in individuals’ efforts to negotiate daily attacks on their humanity (both inside and outside of school). Additionally, several students maintained that Black Girls United influenced their participation in school, and desire for intellectual advancement.

A More Positive Orientation Towards School

The primary purpose of this study was to determine the effects of Black feminist pedagogy on students’ race and gender identities. Additionally, I was interested in investigating whether my Black feminist pedagogy assisted students in navigating social and academic barriers at King High school. In the previous section, I reviewed the various ways in which BGU members’ processes of coming to voice inspired them to defy demeaning stereotypes about Black female hood—which, in turn, informed their participation in social contexts at King High School (i.e., school dances and peer-to-peer interactions). Interestingly, the data also suggests that students’ participation in Black Girls United generally resulted in more positive dispositions towards school.

Chapter four revealed that several BGU participants had a negative outlook towards school, and were academically disengaged (i.e., ditching school and minimal effort towards completing their coursework) prior to their membership in the organization. Furthermore, students experienced heightened feelings of *invisibility* and *hypervisibility*, as a result of the social and academic barriers that they frequently encountered both

inside and outside of the educational context. An examination of the data indicates that my Black feminist pedagogy prompted a shift in participants' orientations towards school in three specific ways: 1) students were *intellectually empowered* as a result of the program 2) there was a change in individuals' *purposes* for attending school, and 3) BGU members' reported an increase in their *desire* to attend school.

Intellectual Empowerment in BGU

Approximately one semester after the inception of Black Girls United, the young women in BGU garnered the reputation of being “smart” and “wanting more in life than the typical student” at King High School (Tanisha, BGU Class, Week #12). Black Girls United was an organization that was viewed apart from cheerleading and athletics—which were the extra-curricular activities that several African-American female students joined. In fact, numerous participants maintained that there was an “unspoken, queen-like culture” in [BGU] that inspired individuals to “be smarter overall” (Lisa, BGU Class, Week #53). In my second interview with Lisa, a former member of the organization, she noted:

We created like this, this *queen-like culture*, where it's like, “You're a queen, and because this is what you are, you are not gonna' act like anything less than that. You're gonna go to class, you gonna get your butt in there on time, you gonna do your work” and it's like, it was a—I guess I can say for me, *it was a unspoken requirement*. It was just like, “Ok well, no one ever told me that this how you're going to act in [BGU] , or this is how we want you to respond and things like that but it was just, “Ok well, now that you've decided that this club is something that you want to participate in, and now that we have this, now that we've embraced each other as sisters, we're gonna uphold each other to this standard.” –Lisa, Interview #2, 01/04/13

Experiencing a sense of intellectual empowerment was one major benefit of participating in Black Girls United. Similar to various other participants, Lisa believed that “being smart” was an unspoken rule in BGU. This finding came as a surprise during the data

analysis process; as the organizer of the program, I never required members to maintain a certain G.P.A. or academic standing⁸⁴. In fact, students reported that their feelings of intellectual empowerment emerged as a result of the influence of their Black Girls United *peers*. Nia maintained:

When I came to [BGU] it was like, “This is home. This is where I can express myself. This is where I can learn.” I could finally voice my opinion and formulate educated discussions. We learned *so many* different things. And when I say I knew it all, I thought nobody could teach me *anything*, because of what we were being taught [in BGU]. *I was challenged*. Listening to everybody else, and how they would speak made me want to *get my dictionary swag!* [Laughing] Like, I felt—how some people used to speak—I was like, “Hold on! I don’t know about this! You’re using a bigger word! I don’t even know what that word means! And I started feeling, like, *inferior* and I was like “Okay, I’m gonna’ have to get my dictionary swag. You know, I’m gonna’ have to change the way I say certain things. I’m gonna’ have to fix the way I speak out loud. It’s like everybody had stepped up their game. It just made me want to be smarter. –Nia, Interview #2, 12/08/12

In my second interview with Nia, she revealed that she was inspired to become a stronger intellectual as a result of her membership in Black Girls United. Her peers’ expansive vocabularies motivated Nia to improve her own mental rolodex of “bigger word[s]” (Nia, Interview #2, 12/08/12). Furthermore, prior to joining the program, Nia connected intelligence to *Whiteness*. She admitted, “I used to want to be the little Jewish White girl, who is smart and rich and has a maid,” but after spending a semester in Black Girls United, Nia was “proud to be a African-American young woman,” and realized that “Being a Black girl and being intelligent go hand in hand; it’s not an *unusual* thing!” (Nia, Interview #2, 12/08/12).

In several of the videotaped Black Girls United meetings, I discovered that the participants frequently made references to “feeling smarter” (Danielle, BGU Class, Week #19) when they were amongst their BGU peers. Furthermore, individuals often asserted

⁸⁴ Refer to Appendix D for the Black Girls United Student Information Sheet.

that their opinions about intelligence had shifted as a result of the program. Prior to joining BGU, several students believed that smart, urban Black girls were anomalies; this is similar to what Nia reported during our interview. However, after experiencing the Black feminist pedagogy in BGU, many individuals dramatically altered their position, and developed an *expectation* for themselves, and their BGU peers to be “smarter than average” (Erykah, BGU Class, Week #38); this inspired many students to work harder in their classes. In the following transcript (from our 60th meeting out of a total of 72 meetings), three students—Tanya, Daniella, and Chrisette—explain how their membership in BGU resulted in pressure to be intellectually gifted.

- Tanya: When people ask me, when they ask me what I do in here, and like, I’m like, “I’m Vice President,” then they automatically have a expectation that I’m like a straight A student. [Laughing] *Which ain’t the truth!* But like, so, it’s pressure, like—I don’t know how people think that—
- Chloe: [Interrupting] I think it’s cuz’ we in the magnet too. You know—
- Tanya: [Interrupting] But I don’t know if it’s that because it’s a lot of girls in the magnet. Like, a *gang* of Black girls in the magnet, and they not focused in school.
- Andrea: And everybody in here ain’t in the magnet.
- Tanya: You right. So...honestly, like, the *magnet* thing. I don’t think that’s the case.
- Daniella: It’s because we walkin’ around with a big ass *QUEEN* on our shirts! You ever met a *stupid* queen? I haven’t! [Laughing] Like, if you’re a queen, you’re... you’re above everyone. Except Kings, or, I guess. But, like, if you a queen you have a higher standard. We *have* to be smart. We *have* to try harder. We *have* to set a example. Even if you didn’t think you was coming here for that—I know I wasn’t even thinkin’ like that at first. I was just like, I’m gonna’ see what this program is about, and I liked it, but I wasn’t thinking about really setting no example. But then, after some weeks I was like, wearing the shirt, and we always reading about important stuff in here, so I was like, “Yeah, I gotta improve. I gotta set a example.” We about more than the regular—“Oh she think she cute. She in cheer. She play

ball.” Like, we gotta be on point with our grades and stuff.

Chrisette (facilitator): Ok wait, who else felt like they had to do better to be in [BGU]? I did, cuz’ I was like I’m not about to *embarrass myself*. Everybody came to—to *work*, it seem like. On the first day! I was like, man! I gotta come correct. Even in my other classes. Cuz like, like [Daniella] said, [BGU girls] are *supposed* to be smarter. That’s how you looked at. And the teachers too. [Ms. Ross] always winkin’ at me when I wear my shirt. Like—she’s proud. And it makes me try harder, and be smarter because people expect us to do good and set a good example. We from [BGU], like, we [*BGU girls*]! Well I don’t know about ya’ll cuz my grades were already good when I started! [Laughing] No, but forreal, it did make me smarter and made me wanna’, like, *try harder* cuz people watchin’ us, forreal. And on top of that, like, before we read all this stuff I used to—I had read about “Oh this dude invented this, or oh this other Black dude fought this war,” but like, where were the women? How did we make history? And like, [BGU], in [BGU] everything is about women and it’s like, you know what? *We’re smart too! I am somebody!* Ya’ll was just hiding it from us! So it tells me that—like I said—people think I’m supposed to be smart, and that’s good cuz’ people thinkin’ that’s, like—it’s a *White thing* to be smart and get good grades. But I’m like, “Sorry, you’re *wrong*. It is a *Black* thing. And not just for the men. [Black young women] too!

Tanya:

According to the participants of Black Girls United, the pressure to “be smart” primarily originated from the expectations of teachers and non-BGU affiliated peers. Moreover, wearing the red Queen shirts each week played an important role in students’ decisions to work harder in their classes, and efforts to set a “good example” for other African-American young women at King High (Chrisette, BGU Class, Week #60). As Nia mentioned in our interview, “folks were looking at [BGU girls] regardless, so they figured they might as well be inspiring.” Thus, for many members, the desire for intellectual and academic growth was triggered by their newfound *purpose* for attaining an education; self-edification *and* community uplift became the impetus behind students’ educational pursuits.

Education for Liberation: Shifts in the Purpose of Schooling

After experiencing the pedagogy in Black Girls United, several members developed a new perspective regarding the purpose of attending school. In the early weeks of the program (i.e., weeks 1-5), we spoke often about the African-American tradition of attaining a formal education for the purpose of self and community liberation (Perry, Steele, and Hilliard, 2003). This position became the backdrop of subsequent conversations regarding education, which occurred occasionally throughout the duration of the program. Moreover, participants were inspired by the National Association of Colored Women's (NACW) old adage, *lifting as we climb*; various data reveal how this expression became students' ideological mantra. In the following example, Brittany discussed how her inspiration for achieving a high level of education shifted considerably as a result of her participation in BGU:

I realized that the more you learn, the better you are for yourself. And then you can *share that* with others. I came in knowing that education is important because my parents were big on that. Not going to college and getting my degree wasn't an option. *Not for me!* I knew, like "You don't have to be like everyone else—hanging out, having kids." [Laughs] Partying—like, you *can*, but there's better things you can be doing. And that's the biggest thing I advocate for. You know, but to add to that—and I learned this from [the program], even with like my cousins and everyone younger than me, whatever you wanna do, make sure you have options. You have to have options. Don't limit yourself. And going to school provides you with options. Furthering any education, in any field, it gives you options. It gives you the *tools*. And you *can* be an example! The biggest thing—what's most important—is, you know, you can do better for *yourself*, for your *family*, and for your *community*. All three. And that was the biggest lesson for me. What's the point of it all, if you're not helping other's—other *people* along the way? (Brittney, Interview #1, 10/19/12).

According to Brittney, education was a top priority before joining Black Girls United, and her parents often reinforced the importance of school. However, one of the greatest lessons that she acquired as a result of her participation in BGU, was to help *other* people

during her journey to success. Brittney’s ambition was to learn as much as is mentally conceivable, in order to have the “tools” to uplift her family and community in the process of her personal development (Brittney, Interview #2, 12/15/12). Likewise, in my interview with Lisa, I learned that she also believed that that it was imperative to set a positive example for her family and community. Although, Lisa’s primary motivation to succeed in school was her younger, and more impressionable sister:

Lisa: My drive has been my baby sister. Once I realized that it was ok to *be* intelligent. That I should be proud of that. Like, you showed me that. We used to talk about it—like, it’s something to be proud of, you know? And I wanted to be a trendsetter at [King]. Like, once I realized that, it was like, I got do good for my little sister too.

Interviewer: How old is she?

Lisa: Well, she’s— now she is 14. So, um, yea, like, I wanted her to know that she can make it and I mean, my mom, she has seven kids. *Seven* of us, and everybody knows the statistics. Foster kids, you got *seven* of them and out of all of us that are adults, I’m the *only one* that made it. And one out of seven of us, you know, its not... it’s not...

Interviewer: Yea, poor statistics

Lisa: You know it’s not really too good, so um, she’s been my drive for a very long time and just showing her like oh okay I do the things that I do because I want you to see the things—something *better* than what you always see, or what you’ve been seeing your entire life. *I tell her today, I don’t care what you do, I want you to strive to be better than what I am.* So with her seeing me doing something and me using her as my drive all these years, and just allowing her to see something different, it allows me to keep pushing.

During my individual interviews with both Brittney and Lisa, I discovered that they developed an interest in family and community uplift after only *one semester* of participating in Black Girls United. Alternatively, there were other members who had the same epiphany much later in the program. Daniella is one example. It was not until the

final weeks of BGU that she made a conscious choice to earn an education for the purpose of “giving back” to those who are economically less fortunate (Daniella, BGU Member, Alternate Correspondence).

During the last five weeks of Black Girls United (year #2, weeks 65-70), the students recited inspirational poetry at the start of each meeting. It was tradition for the members of the program to choose each of the selections, which were only occasionally self-authored. At our 69th meeting, Daniella—who was in the 11th grade—volunteered to read a poem by Maya Angelou, entitled “Phenomenal Woman.” After reciting the poem aloud, Daniella asked if I had an *original* poem that I would not mind sharing with the class. Initially, I passed on the opportunity; I did not write poetry often, and I could not recall the last time that I was drawn to the pen. Seemingly frustrated, and with the brevity of a prosecutor, Daniella responded,

What about that “Where I’m From” poem you wrote with your ninth graders last year? They dared *you* to write one because *they* had to write one, *remember?* You still got it, *don’t you?* –Daniella, BGU Class, Week #69

I was stunned by Daniella’s response; I had initially failed to recall my “Where I’m From” poem. Furthermore, I was baffled that this student—whom I had never formally taught—was aware of the poem. Perplexed, and on the spot, I knew that my only alternative was to retrieve the piece from my computer, and recite it to the group. The poem read:

I am from early mornings and mama singin’ the blues
From kickbacks and cadillacs to breakin’ all the rules
Where I’m from, crooked cops make pit stops on boulevards of despair
Police brutality’s a grim reality – but I guess it ain’t supposed to be fair

Where I’m from, soldiers in camouflage pump black fists high with pride
The legacy of Malcolm and Assata behind every stride
Revolution’s the only solution...at least that’s what they say
But first we must break the cycle of self-hate impairing shorty’s around the way

Cuz' I'm from "Aye aye baby, what's yo name?"
Bloodshot eyes gazin' at me from behind—and he know he got game!
From bad-mouthed ballers, gold chains heavy like steel
They are Kings in disguise. They'd rather hide. What's the appeal?

I am from Queen, to doodoo mamas, flips, and two-bit whores
When will we realize that we're worth so much more?
Where fem-in-ist is syn-on-y-mous with lesbian or *bitch*
But I'd rather be that, than a fuckin' door mat
and u can get with it or be dismissed.

After school, Daniella returned to my classroom and thanked me for my impromptu reading; she believed that most teachers would have graciously declined her request.

Daniella continued by expressing how my poem really "opened [her] eyes" to how an individual can attain a high level of education, "and still be committed to the needs of the community" (Daniella, Alternate Correspondence, Week #69). On the day of our final BGU meeting (Week #70), I found a card in my mailbox. It was from Daniella, and was accompanied by a written note that further expressed her gratitude. She concluded by saying:

I want to be like you when I get older. At first I didn't realize these things, but after all of your college degrees I'm happy to see a Black person can still be dedicated to the community and want to be here with us. You want to see us improve, and that is what I would like to do when I finish college and become a teacher. —Daniella, Alternate Correspondence, Week #69

In sum, the African-American students in Black Girls United learned to value education beyond its function as a means of employability. They learned that that an education can also be utilized as a tool for racial uplift, and personal and community empowerment. Overall, students' intellectual empowerment, and the shift in their understanding of the purpose of school were accompanied by a greater *desire* to show up regularly.

If You Unite Them, They Will Come

Prior to joining Black Girls United, most students alleged that school was incredibly uneventful. Moreover, a handful of participants believed that attending King High was altogether a “*complete* waste of time” (Tanisha, BGU Class, Week #3). Thus, for several members, Black Girls United was an exciting place of refuge, where African-American young women had the opportunity to be challenged as intellectuals, while feeling socially and culturally validated. Students often cited the spirit of *collectivity* in BGU as the primary reason why their engagement in the program was sustained. In my interview with Erykah, she maintained that her Black Girls United “sisters” were the reason why she “never missed school on a Thursday” (Erykah, Interview #2, 01/19/13).

[BGU] motivated me when I didn’t feel like coming to school. I loved the conversations and the sisterhood. *Especially* [Andrea]. She was just always like in there, like, “No, men should do this. Us women, you know, we gotta do this, we gotta do that.” And I always would look at her, I’m like *wow*. I was like, “I hope I become that outspoken one day.” Yeah, I loved hearing everybody speak. Especially the older girls, and [Andrea] because she always told it how it was. It made me more confident. Like, as a little sister—a young *Queen*—I had someone to look up to, and I knew that on Thursdays I was gonna’ come to school and *learn something*, and *actually* have fun. – Erykah, Interview #2, 01/19/13

Erykah was a member of BGU during her 9th and 10th grade years at King. The older students in Black Girls United were a tremendous source of inspiration, and as a result, Erykah was more motivated to attend school on Thursdays. In particular, she regarded Andrea as a big sister, and was most impressed by her assertive, “tell it like it is” demeanor, and intellectual prowess (Erykah, Interview #2, 01/19/13).

The *collectivity* in Black Girls United challenged the tradition of young Black women at King High School engaging as competitors. In my first round of individual interviews with former BGU members, they unanimously agreed that the African-

American female students at King High were infamous for “bring[ing] the drama” (Brittney, Interview #1, 10/09/12). As such, the sense of *sisterhood* and *oneness* that developed among the participants of BGU was a welcomed form of oppositional—yet, transformative behaviors for the Black female participants. In 35 hours of video transcripts, I counted 326 occasions in which students directly, and explicitly referred to themselves and/or their peers as a “queen.” On 75 separate occasions, one or more students candidly referred to me as a “queen” during class. Therefore, it is not surprising that students reported an increase in their desire to attend school as a result of their membership in BGU; to be deemed as a queen is one of highest compliments that a young woman can receive. According to a student named Foluke, “If a person is considered to be a queen, that means that they are beautiful, smart, powerful, and *highly* respected” (Foluke, BGU Class, Week #56). Sadly, these are adjectives that urban Black girls seldom hear in reference to themselves (Sears, 2010; Evans-Winters 2011; Power-Carter, 2007).

Conclusion: Meeting Once a Week Ain’t Hardly Enough

During the first and second years of Black Girls United, I frequently found myself reciting an old English proverb to my colleagues. That is, “Necessity is the mother of invention.” I was inspired to share this adage when individuals inquired about the origins of Black Girls United, and surmised that the program was a tactic that I developed to remedy the pathological behaviors of our African-American female student body. In response to these misinformed individuals, I retorted that Black Girls United was not, in fact, a genius ploy to cure troubled youth. It was, however, a creative effort, that originated out of the necessity to arm Black Girls against vicious attacks on their fragile

identities and overall personhood.

Black Girls United was an unquestionable example of counter-culture at King High School. Prior to joining the program, the African-American female participants often struggled to negotiate the *invisibility* and *hypervisibility* they experienced inside and outside of school. As such, numerous individuals engaged in harmful behaviors, such as ditching school, ditching class, arriving to class tardy, and underperforming in their core subject areas. As reported earlier in this chapter, the members of BGU appeared to benefit from my Black feminist pedagogy in three major ways. Students developed 1) a heightened critical consciousness of African-American women's socio-political location, 2) an empowered sense of self that rejected popular notions of Black femininity, and 3) a more positive orientation towards school.

The young women in BGU learned to value and respect each other as equals, even across their differences (Butler, 1993). Furthermore, a number of the students stated that they were starting to feel better about *themselves* (i.e., self-definition, an increase in self-confidence, and coming to voice) as a result of participating in BGU—which they reported as the first steps towards improvement in their overall participation in school. Hence, I was alarmed when I made a sobering revelation during the analysis of my interviews with a former student named Ashanti. I discovered that for Ashanti, BGU did not sufficiently supply her with the ideological capital to subvert threats to her humanity, over a *sustained* period of time. In fact, according to Ashanti, she felt extremely empowered during Black Girls United meetings, but regressed back to self-defeating thoughts and behaviors after leaving my class.

Ashanti: It's kind of hard because it's like you learn so much in thirty minutes and then you go right back out, and everything go in one

ear and out the other. Like it wasn't enough time to *grasp* everything. But you know, it's crazy how much that thirty minutes, once a week can open your eyes too! But then, it's like, you go out and try to face all that shit and try to keep everything that you had in them thirty minutes in yo' head. And at the end of the day you just like, *it's hard*. Especially as a teenager. Like, I don't know. It get's hard. Cause you wanna'—you don't want to look like—you kind of want to be that person that everybody likes. A lot of people want to be like that, but you gotta get it in yo'self and be comfortable with yourself to where you don't fall into the trap. Where you can be smarter, and think twice about shit. Like, look deeper. I think that's what I had to do a lot too.

Interviewer: Hmmm...can you give me an example?

Ashanti: I can remember situations like we would talk about somethin' in class like, "Damn! Like that's crazy." And then I'll go to a party and like do like the *total opposite* of what we just talked about! Of what we all said we would stop doin! It's like it would go in one ear—and when you there, you really see everything clear. Because it was like that lunch was thirty minutes, right. It's impacting you when you sittin' inside of the classroom and you really talking about it, and you analyzing the world and like everything that's going on. But then it's like—okay, lunchtime is over. Friday comes. Now it's the weekend. You out with *all yo' homies*, you not thinking about nothing you talked about *at lunchtime on Thursday!* So it's like, even if [BGU] was longer, I think it would've had to be *way* more sessions of it to make a bigger difference.

Interviewer: Ok, now I understand how it didn't give you the tools you needed to make huge or, maybe lasting changes in your behavior, socially. Right? But what about school? Like, *academically*? Do you recall any changes in that area of your life?

Ashanti: Well, in the first year, of [BGU] yeah. I was doin' real good, cuz' you was my English teacher too. But after that—in my 12th grade year—*not really*, cuz'...well, I think it *could* have. But I never came across another teacher like you, so after I left your 11th grade honors English class and I went to uh, this other AP English class. He taught *completely* different! So it was really like, I went *right back* to how I was before. Like *fo'real, fo'real*. Like I *never* came my 12th grade. My 12th grade year was like a, I wouldn't say a breeze. I wouldn't say a breeze *necessarily*, but yeah. It—I really didn't have nothing else like, to—I felt like my 11th grade year should've been my 12th grade year. Like if I would've left

with the *proper knowledge* that I had from 11th grade, *when I had [BGU] and you*—I woulda' been straight. Twelfth grade all I needed was at least one really good—like *really* good teacher like you. Then, if I would've took that [class] 12th grade, it would've been different. But I didn't. Twelfth grade was just [BGU], but—like, then I had all that other time I spent in classes with bad teachers. It was a fucked up situation.

Ashanti's admission speaks volumes about the power of alternative pedagogies when they are simultaneously reinforced in other educational spaces within a school. As reported earlier in the chapter, and strengthened by the above transcript—the *combined* effect of my Black feminist pedagogy in Black Girls United, and my frequent displays of authentic caring as Ashanti's English teacher had a significant, positive impact on her self-confidence, coming to voice, and school engagement. However, after she no longer encountered a “really good” teacher in her 12th grade year, the brief time that we spent together in BGU was not powerful enough to overshadow the negative experiences and influences that she regularly encountered at King High and in social settings outside of school.

Although most BGU members believed that their participation in the organization was beneficial to the development of their race, class, and gender identities, and their orientation towards school—like Ashanti, several of these individuals agreed that they would have *further* profited from “longer and more frequent meetings” (Kenya, Interview #2, 01/12/13). In fact, during my second interview with Nia, she maintained that she would have “gladly sacrificed more lunches for additional time in the program” (Nia, Interview #2, 12/08/12). Furthermore, she believed that if African-American female youth had access to BGU “on a daily basis” their graduation rates would have indeed “skyrocketed” (Nia, Interview #2, 12/08/12). In sum, my Black feminist pedagogical

practice held transformative potential for the social identities and schooling orientations of *most* BGU youth. However, just as weeds stifle the growth of flowers in a garden, deterrents to urban Black girls' development of viable identities are skillfully predatory and omnipresent.

CHAPTER 7: MAINSTREAMING BLACK FEMINIST PEDAGOGY

Introduction: A Pedagogy of Power

In recent years, examining the relationship between identity and school achievement has had powerful implications for improving the schooling experiences and postsecondary educational outcomes of historically underserved youth (Howard, 2010; Martinez & Dukes, 1997). Regrettably, few studies in this area have focused specifically on African-American girls, whose unique struggles are often conflated with the experiences of Black males or White female students (Chambers, 2009; Evans-Winters, 2011; Fordham, 1996). As education research fails to comprehensively investigate the barriers to academic achievement for African-American females, these individuals are increasingly embattled within traditional schooling contexts. This is evident upon close inspection of young Black women's educational outcomes. Nationally, the high school dropout rate for African-American girls is 50% greater than for White female youth (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). Furthermore, Muhammad and Dixon's (2008) large-scale statistical analysis of high school aged Black girls' performance in schools found that these individuals hold a lower mean test score and report less enthusiasm for their academic environments, as compared to their peers. By most measures the research reveals the academic accomplishments of young Black women can be attributed to sustained resilience and the aid of multiple systems of support in the face of extraordinary adversity (Evans-Winters, 2011; Winn, 2011).

When I embarked on this study, there was a paucity of literature that examined the differential ways in which African-American young women negotiate conventional schooling environments (Evans-Winters, 2011; Power-Carter, 2007; Fordham, 1993).

Even fewer studies offered effective methods of academic instruction that *reconcile* the marginalization experienced by this population of learners (Akom, 2003; Winn, 2010). There is, however, an important body of work that investigates the utility of Black feminist pedagogy as an unorthodox, yet empowering strategy for engaging African-American female adolescents (Henry 1998, 2009; Mogadime 2000; Sears 2010). Both Henry (1998, 2009) and Mogadime (2000) investigated the potential of Black feminist pedagogy on African-American female youth identity development *within* the school setting, while Sears (2010) explored this issue outside of the traditional educational context. The carefully crafted ‘safe spaces’ discussed in the literature functioned as sites of resistance, where the implementation of Black feminist/womanist curricula and corresponding pedagogies catered to the cultural subjectivities of Black female youth as a multiply oppressed group. As such, students engaged in healthy oppositional behaviors, including “*coming of voice*,” which directly conflict with social and institutional forces that socialize young Black women in urban institutions to be silent, accommodating, and passive recipients of schooling.

What was missing from those studies is a rich, empirical analysis of how an *all-inclusive* application of Black feminist pedagogy impacts the race and gender identities of African-American female students in an *urban* context, over an *extended* period of time, *within* U.S. urban public schools. My dissertation expands on the existing research; the length of the investigation (i.e., two years), the location of the study (i.e., a U.S. high school, urban context), the comprehensive discussion of Black feminist pedagogy (i.e., a four-tiered framework) and the placement of students’ voices at the center of the analysis are demonstrative of the novelty of my approach in investigating the utility of a Black

feminist framework on African-American young women's social and schooling identities.

I asked three pressing questions:

RQ: In what ways, if any, did Black Feminist pedagogy impact the racial/ethnic and gender identities of the African-American young women participating in Black Girls United?

- In what ways, if any, did Black feminist pedagogy influence how the students in BGU *understood* their identities, as young Black women?
- From the participants' perspectives, in what ways, if any, did BGU help students negotiate the *social* and *academic* terrains of school?

In order to investigate the significance of Black feminist pedagogy on the evolution of African-American female participants' race and gender identity development, I collected data from five key sources: 1) two sets of semi-structured, in-depth interviews with a representative research sample group of seven students; 2) 35 hours of video recordings from BGU classes; 3) the BGU curriculum (i.e. student work, thematic units, lesson plans, and corresponding literature), 4) two years of field notes from in class and out of class interactions, and 5) student artifacts⁸⁵. A thorough analysis of each data set revealed that the Black feminist pedagogy employed in BGU inspired viable self-identities among most participants. There were three specific outcomes of students' membership in the program. Several individuals developed 1) a heightened critical consciousness of African-American women's socio-political location, 2) an empowered sense of self that rejected popular reductive notions of Black femininity, and 3) a more positive orientation towards school (i.e., intellectual empowerment, shifts in students' *purpose* for attaining an education, and increases in participants' *desire* to attend their

⁸⁵ Artifacts included (but were not limited to) written documents and digital media that students created during the time in which they participated in BGU. During the interviews, some individuals chose to include tangible objects, which, in their opinions, are emblematic of their racial/ethnic and/or gender identity prior to joining Black Girls United.

classes).

These conclusions are in line with prior empirical studies that illuminate the ways in which the marginalization of African-American young women in society is reproduced and/or sustained in urban schools, and the potential of Black feminist pedagogy as a threat to their subordination. However, this research *builds* on previous scholarship by centralizing participants' voices in the analysis of the barriers to urban Black girls' agency. This uniquely positions African-American female adolescents as experts of their own socio-political location, and empowers them in the process of democratizing education for countless other young Black girls, who will follow in their footsteps.

Furthermore, this dissertation study is an extension of previous research because it paints a vivid portrait of a *holistic* application of Black feminist pedagogy. I outlined four characteristics of Black Girls United that were at the core of my Black feminist pedagogical framework: *critical feminist literature, positioning students as agents of change, a politicized ethic of care, and collectivity*. Through the inclusion of interview quotes, video transcripts from former BGU classes, my Black feminist curriculum, field notes, and student artifacts, this study offered new ways of defining, characterizing, and interpreting Black feminist pedagogy. Additionally, this research demonstrates the ways that the *combined* features of Black feminist pedagogy had an added influence on how BGU members' race-gendered identities and orientation towards school changed *over time*; the findings chapters illuminated the kinds of *discourse* that characterized those moments.

Grounding this research in Black feminist theory (Collins, 2000; hooks, 2000) reminds us that the schooling experiences of African-American girls should be framed in

light of the intersecting and unique oppressions they face. As noted by Muhammad and Dixson (2008), and reinforced by the Black Girls United participants—race, class, and gender are inextricably linked for urban African-American girls, and an individual’s experiences in school cannot be fully comprehended apart from her intersecting identities. Because institutions—such as schools—serve as sites where African-American young women are incessantly challenged to negotiate narrowly defined categorizations of what it means to be low-income, Black, *and* female in the United States (Collins, 2000). There is an urgent need for additional supports *within* these spaces that facilitate students’ development of a healthy sense of self. Collectively, the members of BGU confirmed that in educational contexts where many African-American girls are demeaned and alienated on a regular basis, establishing a strong sense of cultural appreciation and self-worth is the *first* step towards developing more positive schooling behaviors. This begs the question—to what degree would Black feminist pedagogy improve African-American female students’ evolving social identities and educational outcomes, if it were integrated into *traditional* academic spaces?

Implications: Classroom Practice & Teacher Education Programs

Beware of Copy and Paste Methods of Instruction

One notable outcome of this research is to highlight the responsibility of K-12 institutions to mainstream empowering curricular interventions for African-American female youth. Alternatives to traditional, disempowering teaching practices are necessary in order to disrupt essentialist views of Black girls’ race-gendered identities, and improve the educational attainment and life outcomes of these youth. The descriptive counternarratives of the students in Black Girls United have provided new revelations

into how the identities of urban African-American female youth are co-constructed and mediated within the schooling context—and the degree to which a Black feminist pedagogical framework *positively* influences individuals’ self-concepts and participation in school.

Notwithstanding the importance of exposing urban African-American young women to empowering curricula and pedagogies, Bartolomé (1994) reminds us of the dangers of “one size fits all” approaches to developing methods of instruction. She notes,

Although it is important to identify useful and promising instructional programs and strategies, it is erroneous to assume that blind replication of instructional programs or teacher mastery of particular teaching methods, in and of themselves, will guarantee successful student learning, especially when we are discussing populations that historically have been mistreated and [mis]educated by the schools. (Bartolomé, 1994, p. 408).

Hence, alternatives to traditional methods of instruction for urban Black girls must be developed authentically and organically, after an educator has engaged in deep personal reflection of his or her practice, and has evaluated students’ expressed interests and cultural sensibilities. A simple, copy and paste approach—that does not take into consideration the subjectivities of African-American female students in a *specific* socio-political context and geographic location—will undoubtedly result in failure.

As such, my intention is not to suggest that my Black feminist framework is a panacea to the widespread marginalization that African-American female students experience in public schools throughout the nation. However, I maintain that the overwhelming success of the Black feminist pedagogy employed in BGU necessitates African-American female students’ increased exposure to these practices; this may prove beneficial for the numerous students who are unable to access extracurricular programs and supports *outside* of their core classes. Therefore, I call on educators and teacher

educators to deeply explore the usefulness of Black feminist pedagogy in conventional urban classroom settings.

Towards a Holistic, Consistent, and Authentic Approach

Throughout the process of conducting this dissertation study, I have contemplated why my Black Feminist pedagogical framework was successful in Black Girls United—yet, it was ineffective according to the African-American female students in my general English classes. I was able to locate the answer to this question after an examination of the collective analyses of the participants of BGU: my traditional English courses had the *potential* to operate as a liberating space for African-American female students, but these classes were not sufficiently empowering for these youth because I employed the four features of my Black feminist framework *separately, inconsistently, and superficially*.

For instance, my English students seldom engaged with *critical feminist literature*; the majority of the assigned readings were written from the perspectives of White males, and only occasionally, men and women of color. Moreover, the [district recommended] literature that students encountered was rarely culturally relevant, current, *and* engaging. Black Girls United students alleged that the *simultaneity* of these three features in each critical feminist text was key to developing a curriculum that inspired individuals to complete the weekly readings.

Secondly, I found that *positioning students as agents of change* was not a priority for me as a new teacher. Because my focus was to maintain order, discipline, and rigor at all times, I provided students with limited opportunities to exercise their autonomy and leadership capabilities. Essentially, although I had the option to be more flexible as the leader of my classroom, I was quite rigid with regards to planning my English curriculum

(i.e., what students read, and the length and frequency of homework assignments and quizzes); in my traditional classes I planned *for* students, not *alongside* them, which was in direct contrast to the structure of Black Girls United.

Furthermore, working in a large, urban public school posed a tremendous threat to the third element of my Black feminist framework: *a politicized ethic of care*. As a self-identified feminist and social justice educator, I had an authentic concern with students' social and academic development beyond the bounds of my classroom. However, working with a large (i.e., over 150) group of students severely limited my ability to connect with each African-American female student on a deeper, personal level; there simply was not enough time in a school day to check-in with every student on a regular basis. As such, I was incapable of forming close and continued relationships with my Black female English students in the same way that I formed bonds with the small group (i.e., 27 members) of BGU youth. Hence, my display of *a politicized ethic of care* was inconsistent, and may have appeared superficial to the African-American young women in my traditional classes.

Finally, *collectivity* in my English classes was generally established via beginning of the year community building activities (e.g., performance poetry). This artificial and short-lived display of solidarity did not produce mutually supportive, *lasting* relationships between students. In fact, youth often worked individually, or in small groups, wherein they were encouraged to compete for grades. Accordingly, the spirit of competition that I unconsciously manufactured in my general English classes worked against my goal of uniting students as allies. To conclude, in-service educators who wish to utilize the Black feminist framework outlined in this dissertation study should proceed strategically, and

with caution. According to the members of Black Girls United, the key to effectively applying a Black feminist framework is employing the four elements of the pedagogy *consistently, holistically, and authentically*. Failure to do so stifles the potential for African-American female youth to unite in solidarity, as autonomous leaders, and active learners.

Implications for Teacher Education Programs

Many teacher education students are desperately searching for theoretical and methodological insight that will arm them with the classroom know-how to transform the academic outcomes of K-12 urban youth. Prior research has confirmed that engaging pre-service educators in systematic self-examinations—wherein individuals are challenged to analyze how instructor racial biases contribute to student performance—often results in a deeper understanding of the interface between their own political ideologies and corresponding pedagogical practices (Williams & Evans-Winters, 2005; Picower, 2009). In these moments of intense self-reflection, it is imperative for teacher education students to be honest about how their race, gender, and class positionality intersects with, and likely poses a threat to, the social and academic well being of their students.

When I interviewed a representative research sample of seven former BGU youth, I asked, “What do you want new teachers to know about teaching urban African-American girls?” Collectively, the students’ greatest concern was that far too many educators’ race, class, and gender biases lead to the perpetuation of urban Black girls’ subordination. As Erykah eloquently stated in our second interview, “An African-American young woman already has two strikes against her. She’s *Black* and she’s a *female*. The last thing she needs is a teacher that makes her feel like she’s less than what she’s worth” (Erykah,

Interview #2, 01/19/13). The BGU youth maintained that before a teacher steps foot in a classroom, he/she must do *their* homework. In order to truly gain an understanding of, and appreciation for African-American female youth's contemporary struggles, teachers must educate themselves on the social evolution of Black women in the United States.

Kenya noted:

You need to know how we started. Know that we're the *original* women of civilization. Start there, and then work your way all the way up to [2014], so you can see how there has been a switch in Black women. How did we get to where we are today? Don't believe everything you see on TV! *Do your homework!* Know who you're teachin'. And that goes for everybody. Even if you—even if you are a Black woman teacher, or if you're from the hood too. Cuz', just because we're from the same place or we look the same doesn't mean that you've been schooled properly. You know? So, they need to do *their* homework. That way, the process can go smoothly. And you will respect us, and we will trust you, and we will want to learn [from you]. –Kenya, Interview #2, 01/12/13

In the quote above, Kenya contends that race-class and/or race-gender sameness does not inherently result in spaces of empowerment in urban K-12 schools. Historically, the ideological posture of an educator (i.e., deficit views of African-American girls) has posed the greatest threat to the efficacy of alternative pedagogies and extracurricular supports for marginalized youth (Picower, 2009; Sears, 2010). In my conversations with former BGU participants, individuals credited the success of the program—in large part—to my understanding of their complex realities as urban Black girls.

Some individuals may argue that my positionality as an African-American woman and King High School alumna afforded me an insider perspective into the lives of my Black female students as well as the inner workings of the school and surrounding community. Although I was well versed in particular community dynamics, six years had passed since I attended King High, and the socio-political landscape for young Black women had grown increasingly complex with the evolution of urban misogyny in popular

youth culture. Thus, I no longer considered myself an expert on the realities of urban Black girls. This was evidenced by my inability to consistently engage them in my traditional English classes. As a new teacher, I had to familiarize myself with the *shifting* social struggles of young Black women by immersing myself in the local school community (i.e., attending organized school events), reading numerous contemporary texts (i.e., *Confessions of a Video Vixen* by Karrine Steffans and *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost* by Joan Morgan), and by listening to my students' diverse stories. Various data sets suggests that the individuals in BGU were *most* impressed by my quest for *additional* information about their lives; I took advantage of opportunities in which BGU participants "schooled" me about the modern-day experiences of young Black women. Because I was open to investigating their lived realities, they were able to "take off the mask of strength, and be vulnerable" with me (Lisa, Interview #1, 11/02/12).

In conclusion, in order for urban Black girls to buy into school, they have to trust that their teachers understand and appreciate their differential social and educational experiences. Hence, teachers' perceptions of these individuals should not be informed by uncritical examinations of dominant social discourse regarding African-American young women and girls. Additionally, new teachers must possess a fervent desire to learn *from* students; educators must trust Black girls' knowledge and expertise of the harsh realities of poor, urban communities. Together, these qualities will aid teacher education students in developing transformational educational practices that assist Black girls in improving their social lives and reaching their full academic potential.

Limitations and Further Investigations

This investigation utilizes narrative qualitative methods because it is particularly

effective at capturing the unique perspectives and experiences of the researcher and participants, thereby providing a rich contextual analysis from which new theory emerges and/or pre-existing theory is supported (Maxwell, 1996). A drawback of qualitative research is that it does not produce externally generalizable results for a specific hypothesis. As such, this research does not make the claim that Black feminist pedagogical practices positively influence the race and gender identity development and school engagement of *all* African-American female students in urban schools. Trying to capture the voice of all whom are young, Black, and female was impossible; further research is needed to uncover the extent to which these findings are generalizable.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that qualitative studies are concerned with stories and intricate human realities that can be learned from small samples of individuals (Maxwell, 1996). Thus, given the focus on the rich counternarratives of these Black female students—and the goal of understanding the ways in which Black feminist pedagogy impacted their race and gender identities—the actual sample size of this study is not as significant as the insight gained through the telling of their stories.

This study adds to the educational scholarship documenting the unique pedagogical practices of African-American female practitioners. Several of the Black Girls United participants reported that their resilience was, in large part, attributed to the authentically caring attitudes and behaviors of many of the Black female teachers the young women encountered throughout their K-12 education. Students maintained that amidst persistent, disempowering schooling conditions, several African-American women stood apart as *othermothers* (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002), because their actions surpassed the bounds of ordinary teaching behaviors. The maternal sensibility driving these women—along with

their commitment to the social and academic uplift of their students—was reflected in their day-to-day practice. Educators reportedly held students accountable to meeting their academic potential, drove students to and from school, orchestrated field trips to visit local colleges, made home visits, and supplied youth with food, money, and other necessary material resources.

The pedagogical practices described here (and throughout this dissertation) have been documented in numerous contemporary and historical scholarship illuminating Black women’s historical tradition of teaching as a political endeavor (Ball, 2000; Mogadime, 2000; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; 2008; hooks, 1994; Foster, 1993). Pioneers such as Mary McLeod Bethune and Septima Clark were important harbingers for contemporary Black female activist-educators, who are both “ethically and ethnically” accountable for preparing youth to access their intellectual talents and transcend socio-political injustices (Beauboeuf- Lafontant, 2002, p. 77). It is my hope that future research continues to illuminate the strategies employed by Black female teachers, as exemplars for effectively educating academically underserved youth. As Dixson and Dingus (2008) note, the historical navigational and pedagogical strategies employed by Black women educators has insight that can potentially inform the practices of *all* teachers.

In addition to illuminating the unique contributions of African-American female educators, I am hopeful that this study will inspire other researchers to investigate similar questions around the potential of Black feminist pedagogy as an empowering method of instruction for *African-American girls*. Additional examinations of the impact of Black feminist pedagogy on African-American female youth would be beneficial to the field of urban education and identity scholarship writ large. Future studies could investigate the

potential drawbacks to, and benefits of employing this practice in traditional urban and suburban classroom settings. How might a Black feminist pedagogical framework conflict with teachers' obligations to prepare students for standardized state assessments (i.e., the Common Core State Standards)? Furthermore, would this pedagogy be similarly effective for male students? It is conceivable that the benefits of exposing young men to a feminist framework may outweigh the potential challenges. Lastly, the implications of this study may give rise to an investigation of unconventional methods of instruction for other historically marginalized female student populations. What are the potential advantages of Latina, Pinay, or other indigenous feminist epistemologies in K-12 schools?

AFTERWORD WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

Updates on Former Black Girls United Youth

I embarked on this dissertation study four years after Black Girls United concluded. At that time, each of the 27 participants had graduated from King High School, and ventured into a new stage of their lives as young adults. Over the years, I stayed in contact with several of the young women through social media (i.e., Facebook and Instagram); most enrolled in postsecondary institutions immediately after graduation, while others searched for full-time employment. For the purpose of this study, I conducted interviews with a representative research sample of seven former BGU members. Their narrative accounts played a significant role in shaping the analysis of the impact of Black feminist pedagogy on the race and gender identities of Black Girls United members, *collectively*.

Because this study was centered on the lives of the African-American female participants during their high school careers, previous chapters have not examined individuals' *current* social and/or educational statuses, or the potential long-term effects of the program. Thus, the following section will provide insight into how the lives of the seven interviewees have progressed in the five years following their membership in Black Girls United. Below, I provide a short description of each participant, followed by a letter written by the individual. The letters include the students' accounts of their educational, career, and personal pursuits.

Brittney

As a high school student, Brittney exuded the maturity of a young adult. Although she was a close friend of Tanya and Lisa, Brittney's poise and thoughtful demeanor

positioned her apart from her peers. What I remember most about Brittney is that she was a star student; her commitment to academic excellence was impressive by any educator's standards. In her senior year at King High, Brittney was President of Black Girls United. While she was not very outspoken, her leadership and organizational skills were admirable. When Brittney informed me that she was planning to become a math teacher, I was ecstatic to have such an authentically caring, intelligent, and dedicated individual join the club of social justice educators.

As a junior in high school, I had the opportunity to travel across the country and visit the consortium of women's colleges on the east coast. After that tour I felt very conflicted on where I should attend college: Should I stay close to home where it was familiar and would provide a safety net? Should I take a risk and explore the east coast where I wouldn't know anyone, or would I travel to the south where people would look like me? Fast forward to senior year, I got accepted to many schools, but ultimately at the age of 17, I decided [a women's liberal arts college]⁸⁶, would be my new home for the next four years. And, even though I left home with the idea that college was a way for me to finally be myself, I still held on to my [Black Girls United] experience, and the notion that "I am enough." Further, despite any obstacles I would face, I would always hold on to my power and purpose. My [BGU] experience allowed me to take risks, feel vulnerable, exposed and safe. And as a result, I was able to use my voice to take on new leadership opportunities. I am forever grateful for my [BGU] experience and the community that was established in such a short period of time, and how I was able to contribute to a similar community while I was in college.

I have always wanted to be a teacher, so when I received the email that I had been accepted to a teaching program during the last semester of my senior year [of college], I was overwhelmed with emotions. Being a teacher meant that I was going to be tasked with the responsibility of empowering students, making sure that they received what they needed to develop their full academic and social potential, building relationships, being my authentic self, creating a safe space for students to take risks and engage in productive struggle. So here we are, three years later, and I am proud to still be in the classroom as a Math teacher. As an educator, I am constantly reflecting on my practice and how I can better serve my students and their families. Since I am just getting started in the classroom, I do not plan on leaving any time soon. I knew being a classroom teacher was going to be hard work, so giving up on a dream that I have had since I was a child, and [giving up on] my students is not an option. I am involved in several leadership

⁸⁶ The names of the institutions associated with each individual are withheld to protect the anonymity of the participants.

teams at my school site and I hope to keep building my capacity as a leader and creating equitable change. I know I want to work towards a Masters degree in Education, and possibly a Ph.D. I have not quite worked out the path I want to take. In sum, my heart is in education, and I know that “education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world” – Nelson Mandela. – Brittney, Alternate Correspondence, 3/24/14

Tanya

I met Tanya during her 11th grade year at King High School, when she enrolled in my homeroom class. We quickly developed a closeness that lasted throughout the duration of her high school years, and continues today. Tanya was a very special King High student. Her bubbly personality and childlike grin were contagious, and my mood frequently improved while in her presence. Moreover, she was as sharp as a whip, and maintained a strong (above 3.0) grade point average as an Apprenticeship Magnet student. Thus, it did not come as a surprise when Tanya ran for Vice President—and won—in the second year of Black Girls United. She played a critical role in organizing her peers, and facilitated several meetings with the grace and know-how of an undergraduate college student. When I reached out to Tanya for a statement about her current standing, she responded:

Looking back on my life, it has truly taken its course, and led me down many paths I never thought I would cross. From marriage, to a baby, I never thought I would be the one who experienced these things at such a young age. After high school, I did go off to college in [Northern California], where I had a full ride scholarship to [an all women’s University]. I did my studies there for 8 months, and came back home and resumed my education at [a local university]. Unfortunately, life took its course, and I didn’t complete either school. I ended up working and realized I couldn’t do both school and work. It was difficult, and not enough time in the day to give them equal attention.

Today, I have completed my AA degree in Forensics Science and Crime scene investigation while working a full-time job at the post office. I plan on continuing my education, working towards my Bachelor of Science degree in Psychology during the summer. In four years or so, I plan on having my Ph.D., although I’m not too sure of the area of study. In the meantime, as I continue to complete my educational goals, I’m eager to get experience in my field and find a career position along the way. I’m working towards building my financial stability, and educating myself as much as possible. More importantly, I am building myself as a person, and building my character because I am a role model to a beautiful three-year-old little girl. I want her to know that she doesn’t have to be a statistic as a Black girl, and know that anything is achievable if you put your mind to it. I

need her to know her worth as a woman and as a Black girl *period*. So, I use her as motivation and as a mirror. Being involved in [BGU] taught me my worth as a woman of color. I learned how to appreciate me for me, and how not to fall or settle for what society thinks of as “normal for Black girls”. I definitely want to implement and embrace those same things with my little girl, especially as a single mother. –Tanya, Alternate Correspondence, 3/24/14

Lisa

In high school, Lisa was the embodiment of the term, “a diamond in the rough.” She had a tough, and relatively unstable home environment, which included several moves from one household to another. I met Lisa in her 10th grade year, when she enrolled in my Folklore class. She stood out as one of the most talented narrative and poetic writers that I had encountered as a teacher at King High School. Interestingly, when Lisa and I first met, she was not concerned with earning a high grade point average; as long as she passed her courses, she was content. Over the three-year evolution of our relationship, I noticed a huge shift in Lisa. She developed a greater interest in school, became more outspoken, and aspired to become a role model for her younger siblings. I am amazed at her ability to endure enormously difficult life challenges, and come out on the other side with a smile on her face and a deep sense of gratitude. In my follow up with Lisa, she informed me that:

Life after high school has proven to be both challenging and rewarding. Standing on the encouragement of teachers who inspired me to press through high School, I managed to graduate from [a local university] with a Bachelors degree in Social Work. Now I'm at a standstill with a brain full of questions. What do I do now? In what capacity do I want to use my degree? Should I go back to school, and if so when? Maybe marriage and children....maybe not. It's time to set new goals.

While I stand at the intersection of life, I remember [the values of Black Girls United]: self-love, sisterhood, and solidarity. To many these are simple words that are often pushed aside, with little meaning. But for this young [BGU] Queen, it has become a way of life. Before [BGU] I was a young woman struggling with the cards that life dealt me, and stood alone with low self-esteem. [Black Girls

United] taught me things that I would have never imagined. Taught me to hold my head up high, and be proud of the beautiful, intellectual I was. It showed me that I wasn't standing alone, but we as [young Black women] stood *together*. In conclusion, I'm using this time to learn, appreciate, and love who I am as a young woman. I'm enjoying life with my sisters, and planning on seeing this beautiful world we live in. –Lisa, Alternate Correspondence, 3/25/14

Kenya

I often refer to Kenya as “my little revolutionary,” because Black Girls United was the beginning of a mental awakening for her. The program scratched the surface of the critical social consciousness and activist mindset that she bore deep within. I follow Kenya on social media, and I am inspired by all of her thought provoking posts. Once she is able to pursue her passion as an educator, Kenya is going to make a significant mark on this world. She commented:

After high school, I attended [a community college] for a year and a half, majoring in child development. I transferred to [another local city college] in 2010, where I presently attend, and major in child development. I will be transferring with my AA degree to [a local university] by the summer of 2015. I've been looking for work since I graduated high school. I think I haven't been hired because I'm not good at interviewing. But I think [it is also] because I'm African American, and most African-Americans are tokens in the work place. I'm currently working on my teaching permit, and I'm in the process of working on applying to a teaching aid/substitute job. When I transfer to [the local university], I plan on staying for a year and transferring to my dream school, [a university located in the south]. I also plan on opening my own preschool when I'm done with my degree. Things that I learned in [BGU] have impacted my life greatly. We once leaned about gentrification of our inner cities that I see going on today. Also, we read an article and had a discussion in [BGU] about good hair and bad hair. African Americans still use these terms (ignorantly) to this day. I love my [BGU] shirt so much that I still wear it with pride ☺. –Kenya, Alternate Correspondence, 3/24/14

Nia

Although I never formally taught Nia, she was one of the most perceptive and articulate students that I encountered at King High School. Nia was extremely outspoken

in Black Girls United. She had a sophisticated method of commiserating with her peers, while simultaneously challenging individuals to think more critically about their social and academic behaviors. As a teacher, I secretly wished that Nia would join my traditional English classes; I knew that she was a gem. We have struggled to keep in touch in the years following her King High School graduation. However, when I reached out to Nia to gauge her interest in participating in this study, she cheerfully agreed.

After high school, I attended [a university in the south] for a year. Although I loved my experience, I moved back home because of the distance and the amount of money my family had to pay out of pocket. When I moved back home, to enroll in the local community college, I was informed that my credits from [my former university] could not be transferred. I felt like all my hard work was wasted and I was a failure because I was now at a community college. Now I know that was foolish thinking. In that same week, my father was diagnosed with stage four prostate cancer. I was heartbroken! For a year and a half I took a break from school to work, take care of my father, and get mentally healthy. In early 2009 I was hired as an assistant teacher for [a local school district]. I loved my job and all the children that I made an impact on. However, I still felt empty. I realized that my lack of learning in higher education was a contributing factor to my emptiness. I decided to buckle down in school and go full throttle with my education. I transferred to a community college and made the Dean's list. Shortly after, I transferred to [a local university] majoring in Psychology. I can gladly say that I will graduate with honors this May 2014, receiving a Bachelor's of Art in Psychology. I can also gladly say that I will be getting married this May 2014 as well. I plan to attend graduate school to receive an M.S. in Industrial Organizational Psychology with a focus in Ergonomics.

I can honestly say that [Black Girls United] played a major role in the shaping of my views on society, education, and me personally. [BGU] has contributed to many of my life decisions. [The program] taught me to aspire for more in life, and never accept anything less. I feel a deep obligation to never stop learning, always respect myself, and others, and carry myself in the most respectful manner, and to teach and inspire other young women. Through [BGU], I was exposed to highly educated, cool, and fun young woman (i.e., Ms. Lane) that I said that I wanted to be like when I got older. For a young Black girl in the inner city, [BGU] helped me to understand that there was so much more power in being educated, and classy, especially in a society where the media mainly portrays girls that look like me as video vixens, "baby mama's," or uneducated lost souls. As a result of [BGU], I saw a reality that was not depicted through the lenses of mass media. [Black Girls United] has helped me to become more confident in all my

endeavors that I choose to pursue. [The program] has also helped me to unlock my powers, strengths, and brilliance in productive ways. Since [BGU], I always try to strive to be an example for young women and those in my community. At the age of twenty-four, [BGU] still has a major impact on my life. I hope that one day in my lifetime I can impact a least one young lady the way that [BGU] has impacted me. –Nia, Alternate Correspondence, 3/27/14

Erykah

I taught Erykah for honors ninth grade English, and she was a member of BGU during her freshman and sophomore years. Erykah was one of the younger, and more reticent members of the program—but, she was a sponge, soaking in all of the wisdom of myself and other BGU students. I have mentored Erykah for the past six years, and have had the pleasure of watching her blossom into a self-loving, brilliant, and generous young woman. She sets the bar high for young Black women everywhere, and I am extremely proud of all of her accomplishments. She stated that:

Since meeting Monique (Ms. Lane) in my freshmen year of high school, I have kept her life lessons and teachings with me always. My life right now is great. I am currently in college going for my first of many degrees in nursing. I recently transferred from [one local university] to another one that has a better nursing program. At times I have felt discouraged that I will never finish, or I may feel behind (as far as achieving my first college degree). But, Monique has been a great example to show me that no matter how long it takes you can and will finish! Down the road of my academic career, I plan to finish and receive all of my degrees, including my Ph.D. in nursing science. But in the meantime, I'd like to gain experience from all internships that come my way. In sum, attending school is my main focus.

I can honestly say much of what I learned in [BGU] has stuck with me to this very day. I truly appreciate of all the Black she-roes that were discussed in the club. Their bravery and life lessons have taught me so much about self-acceptance as well as self-love. The self-love has taught me to accept myself no matter what. And because of that lesson, I have built up the strength to be bold, and returned back to my natural [hair texture]. I liberated myself from wearing weaves and tactics that caused damage to my African tresses. I have given up on Eurocentric ideals and standards of beauty. That had to be one of the best choices I made two years ago! I also find myself trying to be a role model for my own peers, to help them to recognize that we are all Kings and Queens. But most importantly, all of

the discussions of men and women in [BGU], did eventually push me to join clubs and organizations on my own college campus. I joined PAU (Pan African Union) and BSU (Black Student Union). I was really proud to know many of the people we discussed in high school were revisited in college discussions. [Black Girls United] has brought so much in my life, but most of all, it was pride within myself. I will forever thank you, Monique, for creating a positive outlet for young men and women. Many may not have cared as much as she did. But she did and I will always love her for that!

Ashanti

Over the years, Ashanti and I have maintained the close relationship that we established when she was a student at King High School. As discussed in Chapter five, Ashanti and I met when she enrolled in my ninth grade English summer school class. At that time, she was a rising junior. The following school year, Ashanti enrolled in my honors 11th grade English class, where she stood out as a star amongst her peers. In my five years as a teacher at King High, Ashanti was one of the few general education students who enrolled in one of my honors level, Apprenticeship Magnet classes, and *excelled*. She was quiet, and rarely spoke voluntarily; however, Ashanti almost always had the answers to the questions I posed.

Unfortunately, her educational trajectory has been extremely tumultuous. Essentially, King High School failed her. In order to achieve academic excellence, Ashanti needed the support of *several* dedicated and skilled educators, and I was the only teacher whom she recalls as a source of encouragement. Consequently, Ashanti has struggled to stay focused on her academic pursuits (i.e., she is still working on earning a Bachelors degree), because her pursuit of immediate financial independence has taken priority. What I know for sure is that she is a strong, and resilient young Black woman. I have no doubt that with continued dedication and persistence Ashanti will attain the success that she imagines.

Real life began after high school and [Black Girls United]. Since then, I've been trying to find my way. I made a lot of mistakes and left turns when I should've gone right. But, that's apart of the journey. As of today, I'm not enrolled in school, and I drive buses for a living (Para transit). However, I do plan on going back to school once I move [out of state] this summer. In the near future I'm striving for more money. Wherever the money is, that's where you can find me! My passion was always basketball, and since I no longer play due to several injuries, my main focus is making money and trying to be happy. [Black Girls United] had a positive impact on my life, but only at the time I was present inside of the meeting. Once I walked outdoors, it was like it went in one ear and out the other. I loved everything about it, but it just didn't change me inside. I always went back to my regular routines.

Concluding Thoughts

During the process of recruiting former Black Girls United members to participate in this study, I asked students to speak honestly about their thoughts on the program. I explained to them that the objective of this research was to assist other educators in creating empowering spaces for Black girls, both inside and outside of traditional classroom settings. Hence, I explained that it was imperative for participants to illuminate any potential strengths and/or weaknesses of the organization, in order for in-service and pre-service educators to improve on our work. Thus, I am grateful to the interviewees for their honest and candid responses throughout this study. Despite the general success of Black Girls United, the participants have revealed that the organization did not result in *sustained* social and intellectual empowerment for *every* member. In developing the afterword, I strategically placed Ashanti's letter at the end of the group; I did not want her narrative to be overshadowed by the other members' overwhelmingly positive accounts and gushing praise.

While each of the Black Girls United interviewees played a vital role in developing the findings and implications of this study, Ashanti represents the BGU participants for whom the program had minimal transformational influence. She

confirmed that the *invisibility* and *hypervisibility* that many BGU youth encountered inside and outside of the classroom severely constrained her potential to identify and apply her intellectual talents. From Ashanti's perspective, the organization was only *partially* impactful; meeting weekly did not sufficiently supply her with the ideological capital to subvert threats to her humanity, over a *sustained* period of time.

The urgent need for additional research on the utility of Black feminist pedagogy in traditional classroom contexts is confirmed by the explanations of the BGU youth who were positively impacted by the program, as well as the accounts of the individuals whom the organization did not empower. By investigating the social and academic impacts of Black feminist pedagogy on African-American female youth, this research highlights the responsibility of K-12 institutions to disrupt essentialist views of race-gendered identities. However, I call for additional research into the utility of Black feminist pedagogy that is employed on a daily basis, in traditional educational contexts. Only then can we understand the true degree to which this pedagogical method can transform the social identities, educational attainment, and life outcomes of African-American young women in urban educational spaces.

**Appendix A
Sample Student Budget**

Carla's Budget for SF State (Sept. 06' - May 07')



Expected Financial Aid From University(per semester/5 months)(after books & tuition)

1,702.00 (Grant Money)
+ 4,000.00 (Approx. Loan Money)
<hr/>
6,702.00 total
- 3,500.00 (700× 5 or 5 months rent)
<hr/>
3,202.00
/ 5 (months per semester)
<hr/>
640.0 (total left over for monthly expenses)

Monthly Expense Breakdown:

Food:	150.00
Spending:	255.00 (\$45.00 × 5 weeks)
Cell Phone:	100.00
Credit Card:	50.00
<hr/>	
	\$555.00 (total monthly expenses)

Thus, after your rent and expenses are taken care of, you have an additional 85.00 per month leftover (640.00 -555.00 = 85.00)

Cost of Additional Necessities:

Laptop:	1,500.00
Books:	350.00
Bed:	300.00
Bedding:	150.00
Dresser:	75.00
Mirrors:	35.00
Bathroom:	125.00
Couch:	400.00
Kitchen:	200.00
<hr/>	
	\$3,135.00 (total for additional necessities)

Appendix B
Black Girls United Thematic Units and Corresponding Readings

Black Girls United Literature Review Fall 2005 - Summer 2007

“Who You Callin’ A Feminist?!” ... Cultural Shapings of Gender Identity

Corresponding Texts

1. Feminist Theory Excerpts (bell hooks, Patricia Hill-Collins)
2. Excerpts from “When Chicken Heads Come Home to Roost” by Joan Morgan
3. “Motherhood” by Joanna Clark

Women on Lockdown

Corresponding Texts

1. “Masked Racism: Reflections on the Prison Industrial Complex” by Angela Davis

Our Airtime: Representations of Black Women in the Media

Corresponding Texts

1. “Love feminism but where’s my hip hop” by Gwendolyn D. Pough
2. “Because You’re a Girl” by Ijeoma A.
3. “Can I Get a Witness?” *Testimony from a Hip Hop Feminist* by Shani Jamila
4. Chp. 3 from “When Chicken Heads Come Home to Roost” by Joan Morgan (Feminist response to Hip-Hop)

Western Standards of Beauty

Corresponding Texts

1. “The Black Beauty Myth” by Sirena J. Riley
2. “Dreaming Ourselves Dark and Deep”: Black Beauty by bell hooks (pp. 79-97)
3. Song: “Around the Way Girl” by LL Cool J

Abuse & Public Health Issues

Corresponding Texts

1. “Surviving the Silence: Black Women’s Stories of Rape”. (Ruth’s telling pg 87, and Yvonne’s telling pg 123)
2. Article: Border Mystery (Juarez Femicides)
3. “How Sexual Harassment Slaughtered, Then Saved Me” by Kiini Ibura Salaam
4. “HIV and Me: The Chicana Version” by Stella Luna

Reproductive Rights & Sexuality

Corresponding Texts

1. “Nasaan ka anak ko? A Queer Filipina-American Feminist’s Tale of Abortion and Self-Recovery” by Patricia Justine Tumang

2. Guest Speaker: Genital Mutilation in Africa

Our Home: Portraits of the Black Family

Corresponding Texts

1. "And she bleeds" poem by Ntozake Shange
2. Identity Development in Multiracial Families: "But don't the children suffer?" (pp. 167-175) (Ch.9 of Why are all the black kids... by Beverly Danielle Tatum)

"What You Mixed Wit?" ...Exploring Biculturalism

Corresponding Texts

1. Biculturalism (Darder Excerpt)
2. "Puertoricannes" (From "Under the 5th Sun")
3. "When I was Puerto Rican" (From "Souls of My Sisters")
4. "The Black Beauty Myth" by Sirena J. Riley

Sisterhood (Intragender Dynamics)

Corresponding Texts

1. Kennisha's Powerpoint (on Black women and hating')
2. Friends and Money (Essence Mag. Article)
3. "Light Skinned-ded Naps" by Kristal Brent Zook
4. Tongues of Fire: Learning Critical Affirmation

Financial Literacy

Corresponding Texts

1. Selected chapters from "The Money Book for the Young, Fabulous, and Broke" by Suze Orman
2. "The coldest Winter Ever" by Sister Souljah (Chapter 1)("hood rich" mentalities)

Understanding Gentrification

Corresponding Texts

1. "What Happens When Your Hood is the Last Stop on the White Flight Express?" by Taigia Smith

Our Legacy: Setting an Example for Those Who Follow

Corresponding Texts

1. "Black Childs Pledge" (Panther Poem) by Shirley Williams (in The Black Panther, Oct. 26, 1968)
2. "The F Word" by Joan Morgan
3. "Where is the Love?" by June Jordan
4. Phenomenal Woman by Maya Angelou

Appendix C
BGU Constitution - Submitted to King High Administration Fall 2005

BLACK GIRLS UNITED
Constitution Outline

Mission Statement:

As the movement toward the liberation of women grows, the Black woman will find herself, if she is at all sensitive to the issues of feminism, in a serious dilemma. For the Black movement is primarily concerned with the liberation of Blacks as a class and does not promote women's liberation as a priority. Indeed, the movement is for the most part spearheaded by males. The feminist movement, on the other hand, is concerned with the oppression of white females. Thus the Black woman finds herself on the outside of both political entities, in spite of the fact that she is the object of both forms of oppression.

We are involved in a struggle for liberation: liberation from the exploitive and dehumanizing system of racism, from the manipulative control of a corporate society; liberation from the constrictive norms of "mainstream" culture, from the synthetic myths that encourage us to fashion ourselves rashly from without rather than from within. Our art, protest, dialogue no longer spring from the impulse to entertain, or to indulge or enlighten the conscience of the enemy; whiteness, or racism; men, maleness, or chauvinism: America or imperialism...depending on your viewpoint and your terror. Our energies now are invested in and derived from a determination to touch and to unify... to embrace our communities, and to get real with each other! (Written by: Kay Lindsey and Toni Cade Bambara)

Article I: Name of Group

[Black Girls United]

Article II: Purpose of group

To develop a student organization that both explores and critiques the position of Black/African American women in the U.S. and abroad. In doing so, students will seek to acquire a sense of

- *Sisterhood* (to touch one another and unify)
- *Cultural Appreciation* (explore our individual uniqueness as well as our common connection to the African Diaspora)
- *Critical Consciousness* (liberation of the mind)
- *Transformative Agency for oneself, one's education and our community* (Self and Community exploration and Empowerment)

Article III: Membership Requirements/Rites of Passage

- Each member must commit to acquiring a strong sense of *Sisterhood, Cultural Appreciation, Critical Consciousness* and *Transformative Agency*.
- At the second meeting, students must turn in a typed statement of their commitment to the program, which they will each read aloud and staple to our bulletin board.
- Should students miss more than 3 sessions, they will no longer be a member of the organization.
- Certain off campus activities are mandatory (ie: the June sista's retreat and others dependent upon member votes).

Article IV: Officers

Section 1- Officers

- a. President: *contingent upon member voting*
- b. Vice President: *contingent upon member voting*

Section 2: Duties of each Office

- a. President: The President will attend and oversee all committee meetings in addition to working closely with the club sponsor in an effort to successfully run the operation according to BGU objectives and The Associated Student Body Handbook.

- b. Vice President: The Role of the Vice President is to work with the President to plan group functions (off campus/ on campus).

Section 3: Qualifications of each Office

- a. President: The BGU President must be a hardworking student who is committed to performing the abovementioned duties.
- b. Vice President: The BGU Vice President must be a diligent student who is committed to performing the abovementioned duties.

Section 4: Term of each Office

Semester terms for all duties

Article V: Elections

Section 1: Nominations

- a. Officers may be nominated by another member *or* may nominate themselves

Section 2: Date Elections Held

- a. 50 percent of membership required
- b. Secret ballot elections will take place in sponsors room
- c. Winner must receive majority of votes cast
- d. Recall will only take place upon the request of the sponsor
- e. Results will be approved by sponsor

Section VI: Meetings

Section 1: How Often

- a. Meetings will be held every Thursday during lunch

Section 2: What Constitutes a Quorum

- a. Each week discussion will be led by a different team of two students

- b. Discussions will include a brief synopsis of the *reading*; a statement of the problem, and the offering of potential solutions
- c. Some meetings will include guest speakers and/or special activities
- d. Potluck style ea. week

Section 3: Sponsor Attendance

- a. Our sponsor must attend all meetings, activities, and functions

Section VII: Amending the Constitution

Section 1: Percentage of Membership Needed to be Present

- a. At least fifty percent of the members must be present to amend the constitution.

Section 2: How many times a year

- a. The amendment will be updated once a semester

Approval Signatures:

Sponsor	_____	Date	_____
President	_____	Date	_____
ASB Advisor	_____	Date	_____
ASB President	_____	Date	_____
Administrator	_____	Date	_____

Appendix D
BGU Student Information Sheet

<u>BLACK GIRLS UNITED</u> <i>Student Information Sheet</i>

Objectives:

To develop a student organization that both explores and critiques the position of Black/African American women in the U.S. and abroad. In doing so, students will seek to acquire a sense of

- *Sisterhood* (to touch one another and unify)
- *Cultural Appreciation* (explore our individual uniqueness as well as our common connection to the African Diaspora)
- *Critical Consciousness* (liberation of the mind)
- *Transformative Agency for oneself, one's education and our community* (self and community exploration and empowerment)

Weekly Meetings/Discussions:

- Each week discussion will be led by a different team of two students
- Discussions will include a brief synopsis of the reading; A statement of the problem; Offer potential solutions
- Discussions will sometimes include special activities
- Meetings will be held Thursdays at lunch (each member MUST arrive on time!!)
- Potluck style each week

Just a Few of Our Discussion Topics...

1. The Hypersexualization of women in the media (The Exotification and Exploitation of the Black woman)
2. Is being successful/powerful synonymous with being a BITCH?

3. What is our definition of beauty (Light Skinned vs. Dark Skinned; Good Hair vs. Nappy Headed)? Who are the “beautiful” people according to mainstream culture?
4. Intra-gender dynamics: Do Black Women hate on each other?
5. The importance of setting an example and helping to empower and educate those who follow us (what’s *your* legacy?); Empower yourself and your community through education
6. Domestic abuse, sexual abuse, and sexual harassment: Is it a taboo to tell? Is there a link between domestic abuse and hip-hop culture?

Rites of Passage (*Your Commitment*):

- **At the second meeting, students must turn in a *typed* statement (a few sentences) of their commitment to the program, which they will each read aloud and staple onto our bulletin board.**
- Should students miss more than 3 sessions, they will no longer be a member of the organization.
- Certain off campus activities are mandatory (ie: the June Sista’s Retreat and one other activity)

Something to Ponder (we will discuss this at the first meeting):

As the movement toward the liberation of women grows, the Black woman will find herself, if she is at all sensitive to the issues of feminism, in a serious dilemma. For the Black movement is primarily concerned with the liberation of Blacks as a class and does not promote women’s liberation as a priority. Indeed, the movement is for the most part spearheaded by males. The feminist movement, on the other hand, is concerned with the oppression of white females. Thus the Black woman finds herself on the outside of both political entities, in spite of the fact that she is the object of both forms of oppression.

We are involved in a struggle for liberation: liberation from the exploitive and dehumanizing system of racism, from the manipulative control of a corporate society; liberation from the constrictive norms of “mainstream” culture, from the synthetic myths that encourage us to fashion ourselves rashly from without rather than from within. Our art, protest, dialogue no longer spring from the impulse to entertain, or to indulge or enlighten the conscience of the enemy; whiteness, or racism; men, maleness, or chauvinism: America or imperialism...depending on your viewpoint and your terror. Our energies now are invested in and derived from a determination to touch and to unify... to embrace our communities, and to get real with each other! (Kay Lindsey & Toni Cade Bambara)

Appendix E
Black Girls United – Weekly Minutes

Black Girls United

Weekly Minutes Sheet

Date: _____

Topic: _____ **Text:** _____

Key Points (discussion):

Additional Concerns:

Secretary's Signature: _____

Appendix F
Black Girls United – Student Reminder Slips

Black Girls *United*
Reminder!



Student Name: _____

Date: _____



Appendix G
Template for Identifying Shifts
Racial/Ethnic and Gender Identity Development

Category	Markers of Ideological and Behavioral Shifts <i>*Lists are non-exhaustive*</i>	Data Sources
Shifts in students' understandings of what it means to be a young [Black] woman	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shifts in a student's analysis of sexual objectification in popular youth culture • Movement towards a critical analyses of dominant media images of Black women • Development of internally defined understandings of [Black] femininity, gender roles, and sexual agency (i.e. how to <i>be</i> and what to <i>do</i>) • Rejection of Western standards of beauty • Changes in outer appearance (i.e. clothing, makeup, and hairstyle choices) • Shifts in female-female interactions (i.e. movement towards collectivity) • Shifts in male-female interactions (i.e. challenging sexual harassment and gender stratification) • Changes in individuals' academic behaviors as a result of altered understandings of gender identity (i.e. student appreciates and showcases her multiple intelligences—recognizing that they are central to her identity as a young woman) 	Fieldnotes; Interviews; Artifacts; Video; Curriculum
Shifts in students' racial/ethnic identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Statements and/or behaviors emblematic of racial pride • Shifts in understandings and/or analyses of racial discrimination and/or racial hierarchies (i.e. an awareness of the effects of racism in school and society) • Challenges to the traditional narrative of the African-American experience (i.e. reclaiming African-American experiences as stories of survival as opposed to stories of shame and defeat) • Challenges to stereotyped representations of "<i>Blackness</i>" • Comfort in self-presentation of racial-ethnic identity • Movement towards a pro-Black identity (i.e. an overall positive attitude regarding the collective knowledge and experiences of African Americans.) • Changes in individuals' academic behaviors as a result of altered understandings of racial/ethnic identity (i.e. students no longer associate <i>Blackness</i> with school failure, and <i>Whiteness</i> with high academic 	Fieldnotes; Interviews; Artifacts; Video; Curriculum

	performance)	
--	--------------	--

REFERENCES

- Adkins-Coleman, T. A. (2010). "I'm not afraid to come into your world": Case studies of teachers facilitating engagement in urban high school English classrooms. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 79(1), 41-53.
- Akom, A. A. (2003). Reexamining resistance as oppositional behavior: The Nation of Islam and the creation of a Black achievement ideology. *Sociology of Education*, 76, 305-325.
- Akom, A. A. (2009). Critical hip hop pedagogy as a form of liberatory praxis. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 42(1), 52-66.
- Alexander, B. K. (1999). Performing culture in the classroom: An instructional (auto)ethnography. *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 19, 307-331.
- Anyon, J. (1981). Social class and school knowledge. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 11(1), 3-42.
- Anyon, J. (1983). Intersections of gender and class: Accommodation and resistance by working-class and affluent females to contradictory sex-role ideologies. In S. Walker & L. Barton (Eds.), *Gender, Class and Education* (pp. 19-38). London: Falmer Press.
- Anyon, J. (2005). *Radical possibilities : Public policy, urban education, and a new social movement*. New York: Routledge.
- Baker-Fletcher, K. (1994). *A singing something: Womanist reflections on Anna Julia Cooper*. New York: Crossroad.
- Ball, A. F. (2000). Empowering pedagogies that enhance the learning of multicultural students. *Teachers College Record*, 102(6), 1006-1034.
- Bartee, R. D., & Brown, C. M. (2007). *School matters: why African American students*

- need multiple forms of capital*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Bartolomé, L. I. (1994). Beyond the methods fetish: Toward a humanizing pedagogy. *Harvard Educational Review*, 64(2), 173-195.
- Beale, F. (1970). Double jeopardy: To be Black and female. In B. Guy-Sheftall (Ed.), *Words of fire: An anthology of Black feminist thought*. New York: The New Press.
- Beauboeuf-Lafontant. (2002). A womanist experience of caring: Understanding the pedagogy of exemplary Black women teachers. *The Urban Review*, 34(1), 71-86.
- Blake, J., Butler, B., Lewis, C., & Darenbourg, A. (2011). Unmasking the inequitable discipline experienced of urban Black girls: Implications for urban educational stakeholders. *Urban Review*, 43, 90-106.
- Bowles, S., & Gintis, H. (1976). *School in capitalist America*. New York: Basic Books.
- Brenner, M. E. (2006). Interviewing in Educational Research. In J. L. Green, G. Camilli & P. B. Elmore (Eds.), *Handbook of complementary methods in education research* (pp. 357-370). Mahwah, New Jersey : Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Brown, S. A. (1933). Negro character as seen by White authors. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 2, 179-203.
- California Department of Education. (2006). Academic Performance Index (API) - 2006 Growth. from CDE https://http://www.ed-data.k12.ca.us/App_Resx/EdDataClassic/fsTwoPanel.aspx?!P!!bottom=/_layouts/EdDataClassic/Accountability/APIGrowth.asptab=0&reportnumber=1&level=07&fyr=0506&county=19&district=64733&school=1932128
- California Department of Education. (2009). Dropouts by ethnic designation. from CDE

<http://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/DropoutReporting/DropoutsByEthDesig.aspx?cDistrictName=State&cCountyCode=00&cDistrictCode=0000000&cSchoolCode=0000000&Level=State&TheReport=dEthnic&ProgramName=All&cYear=2008P09&cAggSum=StTotGrade&cGender=F>

- Campbell, K. H. (1986). Style and content in the rhetoric of early Afro-American feminists. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 74(4), 434-445.
- Carey-Webb, A. (2001). *Literature and lives: A response-based, cultural studies approach to teaching English*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Case, K. I. (1997). African American othermothering in the urban elementary school. *The Urban Review*, 29(1), 25-39.
- Cashmore, E. (1996). *Dictionary of race and ethnic relations* (4th ed.). New York: Routledge.
- Chambers, T. V. (2009). The "receptment gap": School tracking policies and the fallacy of the "achievement gap". *The Journal of Negro Education*, 78(4), 417-431.
- Christian, B. (1985). *Black feminist criticism : Perspectives on Black women writers*. New York: Pergamon Press.
- Cokley, K. O., & Chapman, C. (2008). The roles of ethnic identity, anti-white attitudes and academic self-concept in African American student achievement. *Social Psychology of Education*, 11, 349-365.
- Collins, M., & Tamarkin, C. (1990). *Marva Collins' way: Returning to excellence in education*. New York: Putnam.
- Collins, P. (2000). *Black feminist thought : knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of*

- empowerment* (2nd ed.). New York: Routledge.
- Collins, P. H. (2004). *Black sexual politics : African Americans, gender, and the new racism*. New York: Routledge.
- Collins, P. H. (2006). *From Black power to hip hop : Racism, nationalism, and feminism*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Darling-Hammond, L. (2007). The flat earth and education: How America's commitment to equity will determine our future. *Educational Researcher*, 36(6), 318-334.
- Davis, A. Y. (1972). Reflections on the Black woman's role in the community of slaves. *The Massachusetts Review*, 13(1/2), 81-100. Davis, A. Y. (1983). *Women, race & class* (1st Vintage Books ed.). New York: Vintage Books.
- Delgado Bernal, D. (2002). Critical race theory, Latino critical theory, and critical raced-gendered epistemologies: Recognizing students of color as holders and creators of knowledge. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 8(1), 105-126.
- Delpit, L. (1988). The silenced dialogue: Power and pedagogy in educating other people's children. *Harvard Educational Review*, 58(3), 483-502.
- Delpit, L. (2012). *Multiplication is for White people: Raising expectations for other people's children*. New York, NY: The New Press.
- Dixson, A., & Dingus, J. (2008). In search of our mother's gardens: Black women teachers and professional socialization. *Teachers College Record*, 110(4), 805-837.
- Ellis, C. (2004). *The ethnographic I: A methodological novel about teaching and doing autoethnography*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira.

- Erickson, E. (1968). *Identity: Youth crisis*. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Erickson, F. (1998). Qualitative research methods for science education. In B. J. Fraser & G. Tobin (Eds.), *International handbook of science education*. Great Britain: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Evans, G. (1988). Those loud black girls. . In D. Spender & E. Sarah (Eds.), *Learning to lose: Sexism and education* (Vol. 2, pp. 183-190). London: Women's Press.
- Evans-Winters, V. E. (2011). *Teaching Black girls: Resiliency in urban classrooms*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Evans-Winters, V. E., & Esposito, J. (2010). Other people's daughters: Critical race feminism and Black girls' education. *Educational Foundations*, 24(1/2), 11-24.
- Fairclough, N. (1995). *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language*. London; New York: Longman.
- Farmer, S. (2010). Criminality of Black youth in inner-city schools: 'moral panic', moral imagination, and moral formation. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 13(3), 367-381.
- Fine, M. (1994). *Chartering urban school reform: Reflections on public high schools in the midst of change*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Fischer, C. S., Hout, M., Jankowski, M. S., Lucas, S. R., Swidler, A., & Voss, K. (1996). *Inequality by design: Cracking the bell curve myth*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Fisher, M. T. (2008). Catching butterflies. *English Education*, 40(2), 94-100.
- Fordham, S. (1993). "Those loud Black girls": (Black) women, silence, and gender "passing" in the academy. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 24(1), 3-32.
- Fordham, S. (1996). *Blacked out: dilemmas of race, identity, and success at Capital*

- High*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Foster, M. (1993). Othermothers: Exploring the educational philosophy of Black American women teachers. In M. Arnot & K. Weiler (Eds.), *Feminism and social justice in education: International perspectives* (pp. 101-123). Washington, DC: Falmer Press.
- Freire, P. (1973). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum Press.
- Freire, P. (2005). *Teachers as cultural workers: Letters to those who dare to teach*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Gilkes, C. T. (1983b). "Going up for the Oppressed: The career mobility of Black women community workers *Journal of Social Issues*, 39(3), 115-139.
- Giroux, H. (2007). Democracy and the politics of critical pedagogy. In P. McLaren & J. L. Kincheloe (Eds.), *Critical pedagogy: Where are we now?* (pp. 1-5). New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing.
- Giroux, H., & McLaren, P. (1994). *Between borders: Pedagogy and the politics of cultural studies*. New York: Routledge.
- Glassman, P., & Roelle, R. J. (2007). Singling Black boys to close the gaps. *School Administrator*, 64, 26-30.
- Grant, D. F., Battle, D. A., Murphy, S. C., & Heggoy, S. J. (1999). Black female secondary honor graduates: Influences on achievement motivation. *Journal of Secondary Gifted Education*, 10, 103-119.
- Grant, L. (1984). Black females "place" in desegregated classrooms. *Sociology of Education*, 57, 98-111.
- Henry, A. (1998). 'Invisible' and 'womanish': Black girls negotiating their lives in an

- African-centered school in the USA. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 1(2), 151-170.
- Henry, A. (2009). "Speaking up" and "speaking out": Examining "voice" in a reading/writing program with adolescent African Caribbean girls. *Journal of Literacy research*, 30(2), 233-252.
- Higginbotham, E. (1995). Designing an inclusive curriculum: Bringing all women into the core. In B. Guy-Sheftall (Ed.), *Words of fire: An anthology of African-American feminist thought* (pp. 473-476). New York: The New York Press.
- hooks, b. (1984). *Feminist theory from margin to center*. Boston, MA: South End Press.
- hooks, b. (1989). *Talking back : Thinking feminist, thinking Black*. Boston, MA: South End Press.
- hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress : Education as the practice of freedom*. New York: Routledge.
- hooks, b. (2003). *Teaching community : A pedagogy of hope*. New York: Routledge.
- Howard, T. C. (2001a). Powerful pedagogy for African American students: Conceptions of culturally relevant pedagogy. *Journal of Urban Education*, 36(2), 179-202.
- Howard, T. C. (2008). "Who really cares?" The disenfranchisement of African American males in preK-12 schools: A critical race theory perspective. *Teachers College Record*, 110(5), 954-985.
- Howard, T. C. (2010). *Why race and culture matter in schools : Closing the achievement gap in America's classrooms*. New York, N.Y.: Teachers College Press.
- Hull, G. T., Scott, P. B., & Smith, B. (1982). *All the women are White, all the Blacks are men, but some of us are brave: Black women's studies*. Old Westbury, N.Y.:

- Feminist Press.
- Hurston, Z. N. (1937). *Their eyes were watching God : A novel*. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Co.
- Irons, P. H. (2002). *Jim Crow's children : The broken promise of the Brown decision*. New York: Viking.
- Jirousek, L. (2006). Ethnics and ethnographers: Zora Neale Hurston and Anzia Yezierska. *Journal of Modern Literature*, 29(2), 19-32.
- Jones, C. (1949). An end to the neglect of the problems of the Negro woman! In B. Guy-Sheftall (Ed.), *Words of fire: An anthology of Black feminist thought* (pp. 108-123). New York: The New Press.
- Joseph, G. I. (1995). Black feminist pedagogy and schooling in White capitalist America. In B. Guy-Sheftall (Ed.), *Words of fire: An anthology of African-American feminist thought* (pp.462-471). New York: The New York Press.
- Kafka, J. (2008). Thinking big a out getting small: An ideological genealogy of small-school reform. *Teachers College Record*, 110(9), 1802-1836.
- Katz, M. B. (1987). *Reconstructing American education*. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1998). From Soweto to the south Bronx. In C. Torres & T. Mitchell (Eds.), *Sociology of education: Emerging perspectives*. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2000). Fighting for our lives: Preparing teachers to teach African American students. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 51, 206-214.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2006). From the achievement gap to the education debt:

- Understanding achievement in U.S. schools. *Educational Researcher*, 35(7), 3-12.
- Ladson-Billings, G., & Henry, A. (1990). Blurring the borders: Voices of African liberatory pedagogy in the United States and Canada. *Journal of Education*, 172(2).
- Larrick, N. (1965). *Piper pipe that song again: Poems for boys and girls*. New York: Random House.
- Lei, J. L. (2003). (Un)necessary toughness?: Those "loud Black girls" and those "Quiet Asian boys". *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 34(2), 158-181.
- Lipshitz, G. (1998). *The possessive investment in Whiteness*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Lorde, A. (1984). *Sister outsider : Essays and speeches*. Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press.
- Martinez, R. O., & Dukes, R. L. (1997). The effects of ethnic identity, ethnicity, and gender on adolescent well-being. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 26, 503-516.
- Matsuda, M. (1988). Affirmative action legal knowledge: Planting seeds in plowed-up ground. *Harvard Women's Law Journal* 11, 1-17.
- Maxwell, J. A. (1996). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.
- McIntosh, P. (1990). White privilege: Unpacking the invisible knapsack. *Independent School*, 49(2), 329-333.
- Miron, L. F. (1996). *The social construction of urban schooling: Situating the crisis*. Cresskill, New Jersey: Hampton.

- Mogadime, D. (2000). Black girls/Black women-centered texts and Black teachers as othermothers. *Journal of the Association for the Research on Mothering*, 2(2), 222-233.
- Morris, E. W. (2005). "Tuck in that shirt!": Race, class, gender, and discipline in an urban school. *Sociological Perspectives*, 48, 25-48.
- Morris, E. W. (2007). "Ladies" or "loudies"? Perceptions and experiences of Black girls in classrooms. *Youth and Society*, 38(4), 490-515.
- Muhammad, C. G., & Dixson, A. D. (2008). Black females in high school: A statistical educational profile. *The Negro Educational Review*, 59(3-4), 163-180.
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2003). School and staffing survey, 1999-2000. Washington, DC: National Education Association.
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2008). Trends in high school dropout and completion rates in the United States, from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2011012>
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2011). Percentage of high school dropouts among persons 16 through 24 years old. From U.S. Department of Education, Digest of Education Statistics.
- O'Connor, C. (1997). Dispositions toward (collective) struggle and educational resilience in the inner city: A case analysis of six African American high school students. *American Educational Research Journal*, 34, 593-629.
- Oakes, J. (1981). *A question of access : tracking and curriculum differentiation in a national sample of English and mathematics classes*. Los Angeles: University of California, Graduate School of Education.

- Oakes, J., Franke, M., Quartz, K., & Rogers, J. (2002). Research for high-quality urban teaching: Defining it, developing it, assessing it. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 53(3), 228-234.
- Oakes, J. (2005). *Keeping track : How schools structure inequality* (2nd ed.). New Haven, Conn. ; London: Yale University Press.
- Obbo, C. (1997). What do women know?...As I was saying. In M. Vaz (Ed.), *Oral Narrative Research with Black Women* (pp. 41-63). Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.
- Ogbu, J. (1978). *Minority education and caste: The American system in cross-cultural perspective*. New York: Academic Press.
- Ogbu, J. (1990). Minority education in comparative perspective. *Journal of Negro Education*, 59(1), 45-57.
- Ogbu, J. (2003). *Black American students in an affluent suburb: A study of academic disengagement*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Ogbu, J., & Simons, H. D. (1998). Voluntary and involuntary minorities: A cultural-ecological theory of school performance with some implications for education. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 29, 155-188.
- Omolade, B. (1993). A Black feminist pedagogy. *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 21, 31-38.
- Orfield, G. (2004). *Dropouts in America: Confronting the graduation rate crisis*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
- Perry, T., Steele, C., & Hilliard, A. (2003). *Young, gifted and black: Promoting high achievement among African-American students*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Picower, B. (2009). The unexamined Whiteness of teaching: How White teachers

- maintain and enact dominant racial ideologies. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 12(2), 197-215.
- Powell, D. D. (2009). Eleven years later: A second successful challenge to eliminate the required high school reading of the same racist novel. Part II, the saga continues. *Journal of Negro Education*, 78(4), 441-456.
- Power-Carter, S. (2007). "Reading all that white crazy stuff:" Black young women unpacking Whiteness in a high school British literature classroom. *Journal of Classroom Interaction*, 41(2), 42-54.
- Pugh-Lily, A. O., Neville, H. A., & Poulin, K. L. (2001). In protection of ourselves: Black girls' perceptions of self-reported delinquent behaviors. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 25, 145-154.
- Ransby, B., & Matthews, T. (1995). Black popular culture and the transcendence of patriarchal illusions. In B. Guy-Sheftall (Ed.), *Words of fire: An anthology of African-American feminist thought* (pp. 526-535). New York: The New York Press.
- Robinson, T., & Ward, N. L. (1991). *Women, girls & psychotherapy: Reframing resistance*. Binghamton, NY: The Haworth Press, Inc.
- Rose, M. (2009). *Why school?: Reclaiming education for all of us*. New York: The New Press.
- Roseboro, D. L., & Ross, S. N. (2009). Care-sickness: Black women educators, care theory, and a hermeneutic of suspicion. *Educational Foundations*, 23(3/4), 19-40.
- Sears, S. D. (2010). *The negotiation of power and identity within the Girls Empowerment Projects*. Albany: New York Press.

- Shakur, A. (2001). *Assata : An autobiography*. Chicago, Ill.: L. Hill Books.
- Shaw, S. J. (1991). Black club women and the creation of the National Association of Colored Women. *Journal of Women's History, 3*, 10-25.
- Smith, P. J. (1999). Our Children's Burden: The Headed Hydra of the Educational Disenfranchisement of Black Children. *Howard Law Journal, 42(2)*, 133-239.
- Solórzano, D., & Yosso, T. (2004). From racial stereotyping and deficit discourse toward a critical race theory of teacher education. In W. De la Torre, L. Rubalcava & B. Cabello (Eds.), *Urban education in America: A critical perspective* (pp. 67-81). Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt.
- Spencer, M. B., Noll, E., Stoltzfus, J., & Harpalani, V. (2001). Identity and school adjustment: Revisiting the "acting White" assumption. *Educational Psychologist, 36*, 21-30.
- Spring, J. (2010). *Deculturalization and the struggle for equality* (6th ed.). New York: McGraw- Hill.
- Spry, I. (2001). Performing autoethnography: An embodied methodological praxis. *Qualitative Inquiry, 7*(706-732).
- Steele, C. (1997). A threat in the air: How stereotypes shape intellectual identity and performance. *American Psychologist, 52*, 613-629.
- Stewart, M. W. (1832). Productions of Mrs. Maria W. Stewart. In B. Guy-Sheftall (Ed.), *Words of fire: An anthology of Black feminist thought* (pp. 26-29). New York: The New Press.
- Stewart, M. W., & Richardson, M. (1987). *Maria W. Stewart, America's first Black woman political writer : Essays and speeches*. Bloomington: Indiana University

- Press.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. M. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Sutherland, L. M. (2005). Black adolescent girls' use of literacy practices to negotiate boundaries of ascribed identity. *37, 3*, 365-406.
- Taylor, U. Y. (1998). Making waves: The theory and practice of Black feminism. *The Black Scholar, 28(2)*, 18-28.
- Thompson, A. (1998). Not the Color Purple: Black feminist lessons for educational caring. *Harvard Educational Review, 68(4)*, 522-554.
- Thompson, A. (2004). Gentlemanly orthodoxy: Critical race feminism, whiteness theory, and the APA manual. *Educational Theory, 54(1)*, 26-57.
- Townsend, T. G., Neilands, T. B., Jones-Thomas, A., & Jackson, T. R. (2010). I'm no jezebel; I am young, gifted, and Black: Identity, sexuality, and Black girls. *Psychology of Women Quarterly, 34*, 273-285.
- U.S. Census Bureau. (2011). *Educational Attainment in the United States: 2011 – Detailed Tables*. Retrieved May 20, 2014, from <http://www.census.gov/hhes/socdemo/education/data/cps/2011/tables.html>.
- Visweswaran, K. (1997). Histories of feminist ethnography. *Annual Review of Anthropology, 26*, 591-621.
- Ward, J. V. (1990). Racial identity formation and transformation. In C. Gilligan, N. D. Lyons & T. J. Hanmer (Eds.), *Making connections: The relational worlds and adolescent girls at Emma Willard School* (pp. 215-238). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

- Washington, M. H. (1987). How racial differences helped us discover our common ground. In M. Culley & C. Portuges (Eds.), *Gendered subjects: The dynamics of feminist teaching*. Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Way, N. (1995). Between experiences of betrayal and desire: Close friendships among urban adolescents. In B. J. Leadbeater & N. Way (Eds.), *Urban girls: Resisting stereotypes, creating identities* (pp. 173-192). New York, London: New York University Press.
- West-Olatunji, C. A., Behar-Horenstein, L., Rant, J., & Cohen-Phillips, L. N. (2008). Enhancing cultural competence among teachers of African American children using mediated lesson study. *The Journal of Negro Education, 77(1)*, 27-38
- White, D. G. (1999). *Ar'n't I a woman? : Female slaves in the plantation South* (Rev. ed.). New York: W.W. Norton.
- Williams, D. G., & Evans-Winters, V. E. (2005). The burden of teaching teachers: Memoirs of race discourse in teacher education. *The Urban Review, 37(3)*, 201-219.
- Williams, S. D. (1996). Black feminist thought: Implications for a transformative women's education. *Thresholds in Education, 22(1)*, 37-41.
- Winn, M. T. (2010a). 'Betwixt and between': Literacy, liminality, and the ceiling of Black girls. *Race Ethnicity and Education, 12(4)*, 425-447.
- Winn, M. T. (2010b). 'Our side of the story': Moving incarcerated youth voices from margins to center. *Race, Ethnicity and Education, 13(3)*, 313-325.
- Wolcott, H. F. (1994). *Transforming qualitative data: Description, analysis and interpretation*. Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira.

Wright, B. L. (2011). I know who I am, do you? Identity and academic achievement of successful African American male adolescents in an urban pilot high school in the United States. *Urban Education, 46(4)*, 611-638.