

Spring 2007

## Spoken Self: Recognizing, Renaming, and Reclaiming

Gayle Frances Tremble

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# THE SPOKEN SELF: RECOGNIZING, RENAMING, AND RECLAIMING

by

GAYLE F. TREMBLE

(Under the Direction of William Reynolds)

## ABSTRACT

In the era of standardization, how can educators explore ways to hear the beating hearts of the students they encounter? How can educators recognize the multitudinous sounds of the students when each marches to the beat of a different drum? With these questions in mind, how then can educators affect change in the classroom to cultivate critical thinkers when the curriculum is not designed to feed each student's own educational diet? There is not one magical quick fix, and I have come to realize that there has been and continued to be a cacophony of voices debating what should be the primary goal of education, what should be taught, how teaching should be done, and who should decide. From these debates evolved distinct versions of curricular philosophies or orientations. During my studies, I have found that to move beyond the complacency in the classroom, teaching—curriculum—must be an understanding, a conversation. This “extraordinarily complicated conversation” (Pinar et. al., 2002, p. 848) between teachers and students across texts allows us to study historically and theoretically as we examine issues of race, class, gender, and politics through multiple lenses.

Attempting to create meaning in the lives of students, this type of education—of understanding—empowers students through their own voices

about their lived experiences. One way to create meaning and encourage investigation is to promote a curriculum that engages students, one that uses their own language, their own culture. This study then explores how African-American women's literature can be used to encourage culturally richer classrooms as students, especially African-American girls, discover who they are.

I look through the lens of Black Feminist theory because it affords me the opportunity to amplify issues of race, gender, and class, particularly as these aspects relate to African-American girls and other minority groups in mainstream schooling. Through this lens, I use a literary analysis to explore general and specific issues or themes of identity and subjectivity in the novels and works about and by Black female writers. This study helps us in understanding self and otherness. Instead of ridiculing others who are different, people can move to feeling comfortable about differences and sharing power with others.

INDEX WORDS: Literature, African-American Women, Black Feminist Theory

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in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

STATESBORO, GEORGIA

2007

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May 2007

## DEDICATION

I dedicate my time and work on this study to my four-year-old daughter,

Larkyn Nicole.

She is the reason I write and is truly the wind beneath my wings.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank Dr. William Reynolds for the guidance and support he directed toward this study. Because of his excitement for and openness regarding curriculum, he has allowed me to “create.” Additionally, I would like to thank the members of my committee, Dr. Saundra Nettles, Dr. John Weaver, and Dr. Audrey Watkins, for their willingness to see me through this work. Dr. Nettles encouraged me to pursue my research and provided invaluable insight, Dr. Weaver helped to broaden my perspectives and challenged my thinking, and Dr. Watkins, through her close reading and encouraging feedback, helped to further my development as a researcher and refine my own writing. I express sincere gratitude to them for their contributions to my work.

I wish to thank my family. To my parents, James and Martha Johnson, thanks for being beautiful parents, for I know that I would not have gotten this far in life without their support and sacrifices. To my husband, Phillip, I am indebted. Even when I felt that I was neglecting him, he always understood. Thanks for cleaning, cooking, and just being patient as our lives seemed to be put on hold for a while. Finally, and most importantly, I would like to thank God, who is always there for me.

To my friends and colleagues, thanks for the support, especially from Pearl Johnson. I thank Michele Taylor for her willingness to help. I also send gratefulness to Melanie Thornton, Amy Ballagh, and Leslie Mashburn, my graduate school gang.

To all of you, I am indebted.



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## CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

She said, But my description cannot  
fit your tongue, for  
I have a certain way of being in this world  
And I shall not, I shall not be moved.

--Maya Angelou

My dissertation study relates to revisioning how the fiction of African-American<sup>1</sup> women can be used to help create an understanding of a cultural self. Maya Angelou (n.d.) says it best in her poem, *Our grandmothers*, when she proclaims that she defines herself, names herself, and speaks for herself. Because African-American women write themselves into history, their works are not only personal but also political. Indeed, by offering an activist-focused pedagogical practice to build a politics that will raise societal consciousness, African-American women writers are challenging the systematic structure of education that privileges a few. Undeniably, students can find it enjoyable and helpful to read about characters that have different and similar life experiences. The dilemma then is this: few works by African-American women with African-American heroines were and are used in classrooms. My dissertation addresses issues of how cultural perspectives and perceptions of self can become skewed to support dominate groups and explore how African-American women's fiction can be used as a forum to reject naturalized notions as well as make classrooms

more interesting and culturally and intellectually richer as students, especially African-American females, discover who they are.

This study speaks to the need of more reading of African-American women's literature to encourage culturally richer classrooms. I look through the lens of Black Feminist theory because it affords me the opportunity to amplify issues of identity and subjectivity as they relate to race, gender, and class of African Americans, particularly African-American girls and other minority groups in mainstream schooling.

### Context of Study

African-American women and people of color have made and are making substantial strides in America. Mae Jemison became the first African-American woman astronaut to travel into space in 1992; Toni Morrison was the first African American to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993; Jacquelyn Barrett was elected the first African-American woman Sheriff of Fulton County, Georgia in 1992; and Condoleezza Rice is the first woman to serve as National Security Advisor and the second African American to serve as Secretary of State (Stinson, 2005). However, not to discredit the strides that are being made by African-American women, we must acknowledge that there are, nonetheless, significant concerns about Black women and young girls, especially relating to education.

In spite of reports showing that Black girls outperform Black boys in school subjects, Black girls generally do not feel good about themselves or school. Based on their historical past, there is pressure for them to be resilient, to learn

to play the game, and to echo what their teachers want to hear. In fact, research shows that elementary-age Black girls are prone to suffer from low self-esteem and to be ignored more by their teachers than do their White counterparts. Additionally, they receive more reinforcement for helping the teacher with nonacademic tasks; in other words, they receive positive reinforcement for social behaviors rather than academic skills. This trend continues through their middle and high school years (Paul, 2003; Lightfoot, 1976). Many times because of traditional perceptions of her position, she will not be challenged to excel. Girls of color are more likely to have lower levels of confidence in their competence, thereby being positioned for “general” or “low” level coursework, which inevitably impacts their future.

In addition, there has been an increase in violence or aggression, which results in more juvenile arrests in females (Paul, 2003). According to a report by the US Juvenile Justice (2005) Department: “The female violent crime arrest rate for 1997 was 103% above the 1981 rate, while the male arrest rate was 27% above the 1981 level. These statistics illustrate that State and local juvenile justice agencies must be better prepared to meet the unique needs of both at risk girls and female juvenile offenders” (para. 1). Additionally, Black girls or girls of color make up 39% of the general female population but represent 52% of the girls in juvenile institutions and tend to receive more severe dispositions at their arrest hearings and in court (Paul, 2003; Children’s Defense, 2004). Compiled with the pressures of dealing with stereotype factors, health issues, and low self-

esteem, more and more Black teens, especially girls are finding solace in other forms of escape.

An increasing form of escape is suicide, which is rising faster for African-American girls and boys than for White girls and boys. Suicide has become the third leading cause of death in individuals between 15 and 24. Pryor (2004)

notes:

For years the suicide rate for Black people was half or less than half of the rate for White people. Suicide rates among Black teenagers have historically been much lower than the rate among White teenagers, but this is changing. In 1980, the suicide rates for White children ages 10 to 19 was 157 percent **greater** than for Black children of the same age bracket. By 1995, however, that gap had significantly decreased and the suicide rate for Whites was only 42 percent higher than that of Blacks.

The largest increase in suicide rates for Black teens was in the South - a 214 percent increase. (para. 4)

Researchers have noted that there are few reports on the rising suicide rates of African Americans, especially African-American girls. Furthermore, Sandra Nettles and Joseph Pleck (1996) maintain that the “dynamics of suicidal behavior have been studied far less in black female than male adolescents” (p. 155).

Regarding explanations for the rising suicide rate in the African-American community in general, some researchers note that there is no conclusive cause for the increase but speculate that a contributor may be the deep despair felt in poor communities, “where jobs or uplifting role models can be scarce” (Sanchez,



1998, para. 15). Smaller communities tend to draw less on the varying cultural traditions within them. Furthermore, schools and other institutions act as means of spreading a particular culture; and smaller communities tend to have little representation and role models to reflect the ever-changing world.

Concurring with my own beliefs, role models (in fiction or in reality) can uplift individuals as they learn about who they are and about others. Therefore, it becomes important for youths, especially young Black girls, to feel good about themselves and their past. In other words, these children need to be included, not excluded, in their education process. The exclusion of understanding of self in the curriculum leads to the exclusion of knowledge about self and others.

“That is, what we ... choose to tell our children in schools—the school curriculum—represents who we want them to think we are and who they think they might become” (Castenell & Pinar, 1993, p.5). Children need to see themselves in history, and the contributions of past individuals should not be undermined. After all, the existence of people of color and White students as well as men and women are all interconnected. My dissertation, hence, explores how African-American women’s fiction, which should be integral and not an addition to the literature class, can help increase an understanding of and pride in a cultural self. Furthermore, this paper discusses how this body of literature can help students examine their own biases as they challenge assumptions about self and others.

### Purpose of Study

My dissertation study addresses how African-American women's fiction can be used to encourage an understanding of a cultural self. Lisa Delpit (1995) writes: "Until [teachers] appreciate the wonders of the cultures represented before them ... they cannot appreciate the potential of those who sit before them, nor can they begin to link their students' histories and worlds to the subject matter they present in the classroom" (p. 182). In short, helping students to appreciate and understand self and their own cultures is a prerequisite of self love, which may lead to commitment to humankind.

Because literature can be an invaluable source to help us understand human diversity, my dissertation can be used to help schools prepare for the evolving realities—guns in schools, high drop-out rates, teachers molesting students, educators teaching to standardized tests, and voiceless students in the learning process—in and beyond schools. In a 2006 article entitled "The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts," approximately 500 dropouts ages 16-24 from varying parts of the country were interviewed. Nearly half (47%) noted that they dropped out of school because classes were not interesting or relevant, and they further stated that they went to school because they had to, not because they learned anything. They went on to cite that the teachers told them what to do without involving them in the lessons (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison). Because of the realities and issues that students are facing today, schools must do a better job of linking their worlds and interests with the subject matter at hand. Hence, there are three purposes to my study. First, I challenge

the current literary curricula that have a callous disregard for diversity by promoting either directly or indirectly monocultural practices and ideas. Second, in a multicultural nation, I offer a way to help schools rearticulate to their students, especially African-American girls, the narrow Anglo-American curriculum we provide. Third, I advocate a curriculum—an understanding—that helps educators to make their classrooms more interesting and culturally and intellectually richer for students.

#### Limitations of Study

This study has three limitations. First, this study on the surface details one genre, one sex, one race, and one culture. No doubt, there are many notable types of works (nonfiction, poetry, etc.) and both men and women and multicultural writers whose work should be used in the classroom. In addition, I must not give the impression that I am devaluing the high aesthetic works of many White male and female writers. My task is to stress in this study that the realities of individuals' lives are different, but the struggle to understand the value of differences is topical and relates to our global future.

Next, this study promotes finding self through reading literature. However, with many competing factors such as television, video games, and i-pods, fewer and fewer children are reading. Hence, the issue of getting America's children to read remains prevalent. This study advocates drawing students to reading by stimulating personal involvement through relevance. In other words, this study encourages a student-centered approach to peak students' interests and tap into their own knowledge and experiences.

A third point that may be viewed as a limitation of the study is the influence I have on it, as I am an African-American woman who is studying how African-American women novelists use their works to establish voice, thereby encouraging an understanding of a cultural self. Obviously, I must be passionate about the topic on which I write. However, I, as researcher, must authenticate this passion with substantiations of novelists, critics, and other experts.

### Curriculum Studies and the Discovering of Self Through Literature

Undeniably, I have learned that Curriculum Studies is about helping students understand themselves and empowering them to not only think reactively but proactively about their past, present, and future. In learning this, I understand that Curriculum Studies is not a series of courses about developing and implementing new programs or selecting textbooks; furthermore, curriculum is not about drill and skill development. Evolving from development to understanding, curriculum is about relationships and lived experiences. It is about looking at race, class, and gender through multiple lenses. Moreover, curriculum, more precisely reconceptualized curriculum, is about understanding how diverse our students are and linking their worlds to the subject matter presented. Just as literature can help us think about ourselves and others, the reconceptualized curriculum, ultimately, should be a way for us to think genuinely about the curriculum field and about ourselves and our students. Indeed, to move toward an understanding, then “curriculum ceases to be a thing, and it is more than a process. It becomes a verb, an action, a social practice, a private

meaning, and a public hope. Curriculum is not just the site of our labor, it becomes the product of our labor, changing as we are changed by it” (Pinar et. al., 2002, p. 848). Specifically, the individual should not be shaped or judged by the curriculum but should create the curriculum. It is exploratory and should be based on lived experiences. Considered the Father of the Reconceptualization, Pinar urges us to view curriculum as an intellectual exploration—thinking about ourselves and our students. Reconceptualized curriculum allows us to move beyond rote memorization, revised assessment practices, and increased rigor, which were practices so strongly echoed in the voices of the traditional intellectualists and behaviorists.

This “extraordinarily complicated conversation” (Pinar et. al., 2002, p. 848) between teachers and students across texts allows us to study historically and theoretically as we look at issues of race, class, gender, and politics through multiple lenses. Attempting to create meaning in the lives of students, this type of education—of understanding—empowers students through their own voices about their lived experiences. As Madeline Grumet (as cited in Pinar, 2004) notes:

The educational point of the public school curriculum is *understanding*, understanding the relations among academic knowledge, the state of society, in which we live, in which others have lived, and in which our descendents will someday live. It is understanding that informs the ethical obligation to care for ourselves and our fellow human beings, that enables us to think and act with intelligence, sensitivity, and courage in both the

public sphere—as citizens aspiring to establish a democratic society—and in the private sphere, as individuals committed to other individuals. (p. 187)

In a society where students are accustomed to being passive learners, this type of education—of understanding—teaches students not what to think, as they are accustomed to, but how to think to enable them to engage and question the world. Providing this authentic way of seeing the world, this type of understanding, helps students to engage the world morally and legally.

My belief, aligned with reconceptualized curriculum studies, is that curriculum is understanding and respecting differences to build bridges among people as it seeks to create new understandings and transform individuals. William Reynolds (2003) asks: “Can we allow the very things that make curriculum studies so exciting, openness and creativity? Can we dwell with multiplicities? .... Can we see curriculum studies as a rhizomatic field and not as a field circumscribed through definition(s)? Can we create and not debate?” (p. 446). Instead of being bound by parameters, curriculum should allow individuals to become. *Becoming* allows one to create many spatial and rhizomatic connections, thereby developing into a creator rather than an observer.

This study addresses hearing and understanding the historically excluded and repressed voices of the African-American woman so that she is able to become. Undoubtedly, the curriculum of today still lags behind in African American and other representations. “One overlooked factor is repression, the repression of African Americans in American society, the repression of women,

the repression of other marginalized groups.... Such repression is evident in the schools in several ways, including funding inequities, tracking, teaching practices, and a curriculum that is Eurocentric and unrelated to the lived experience of students” (Castenell & Pinar, 1993, p.7). Because curriculum can be understood as racial, political and gendered text, the school curriculum sends a message to all students about who they are and how they fit into the world. It is my hope that this study finds where women, more precisely Black women, have been erased or devalued. In addition, it is my hope that this study penetrates the current educational infrastructure by expanding how students construct meaning about self and others. Indeed, learning must be perceived as a holistic process that integrates culture; students must recognize, rename, and reclaim their past as they become explorers in the self-discovery process.

I believe the reconceptualized curriculum allows us to unveil the repressions of the past in order to understand and attend to the future. Part of what we need to do as a nation, as an educational entity, and especially as a South, is understand our past. “The past remains, hovering like ghosts .... Culturally and psychosocially dysfunctional patterns will continue, deforming not only the South, but, given its pivotal role in presidential politics, the American nation as a whole” (Pinar, 2004, p. 241). Undeniably, people become complacent, especially if they have been doing something for a long time, and it is working reasonably well. Black and White students become accustomed to the books and novels that are read in classrooms; therefore, stereotyped characters are looked upon as representations of reality. And teachers,

particularly, have become accustomed to using textbooks and then matching objectives in the textbook to the standards. I propose using literature of African-American women not as a “sentimentalization of the past, but a psychoanalytically-informed interdisciplinary study and re-experience of the past” (Pinar, 2004, p. 241). In fact, one way to promote an understanding is through engaging the student by authentically uncovering the past. This type of curriculum, of understanding, at the same time propels students toward the future.

A curriculum, however, directed toward the “average” individual and that is established by Anglo-American standards is one that is very one-dimensional and does not propel students forward. It does not help students “become” or gain the critical skills they need to address the complex and sometimes countless issues and conditions—identity crisis, violence, poverty, standardization—they face today. Educators, students, and society will have a “better chance of survival under these complex conditions if they allow conceptions to expand in ways other than confining learning to the limits of repetitious outcomes that are mandated by the official curriculum” (Roy, 2003, p. 22). Students must be able to “become.” Just as the reconceptualized curriculum challenges the Tylerian or traditional curriculum, revisioning the literature of African-American women challenges the notions of a “one-size” curriculum and a “one-text” authority and invokes a group of conversations between and among students about themselves, others, and the past.



Furthermore, Patricia Collins' stance can be aligned with the reconceptualized curriculum in that she challenges the one-size curriculum by advocating education for social change. She provides a pivotal book, *Black Feminist Thought* (1990) that delves into ideas of Black feminist intellectuals and Black women. The book is used in many women studies programs. "Gender must join class and race as a major analytical category of research in African-American Studies" (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 2002, p. 340). Indeed, this work and others provide rich and valuable information to help us understand Black women's experiences in transforming the consciousness of society. Collins (1991) supports engaging in a conversation that will help loosen the chains that tie women to the traditional, dominant modes of thinking about a woman's place in society and school. Hence, she advocates moving individuals from objects to subjects—achieving personal autonomy.

A strong voice in advocating a curriculum that promotes personal autonomy is bell hooks, who is the "most prolific, most anthologized black feminist theorist and cultural critic on the contemporary scene" (Guy-Sheftall, 1995, p. 269). As does the reconceptualized curriculum, bell hooks (1989) advocates an understanding that brings about political transformation. She notes that the need for speech "becomes both a way to engage in active self-transformation and a rite of passage where one moves from being object to being subject. Only as subjects can we speak. As objects, we remain voiceless—our beings defined and interpreted by others" (p. 12). This opening of a dialogue,

especially in the classroom, is the beginning stages of social change in moving women from being defined by others toward being defined by self.

Author of eleven books including her famed *Ain't I a Woman* (1981), hooks uses the power of her pen to declare a commitment to social change by raising the consciousness of society relating to the lives of Black women. She affirms that “women are the group most victimized by sexist oppression” (1981, p. 43). Because the issue is still topical today, she remains committed to finding those spaces for change and helping women move toward self-hood.

And how can those spaces for change be connected to literature by African-American women? In an era of constant change and turmoil and in a time when over half of the adolescents between the ages of 14 and 17 have had some type of sexually transmitted disease, when guns are used in schools, when high school drop-out rates are increasing, when teens are murdering their parents and each other, when teachers are molesting students, when educators are pressured to teach to a standardized test, when fewer families are reading, even eating together, and when many children remain faceless and voiceless in the learning process, how can we educators make things better for the students? In a sometimes bizarre world where students are trying to find themselves, how do we empower them to address the complicated and sometimes horrific challenges of today? Indeed, it seems absurd to suggest that reading and evaluating literature could help them construct their identities by providing some relevance to their lives. Reading and evaluating relevant and engaging literature, I believe, promote an understanding of a cultural self and of others. Moreover, a

lack of understanding of self and others becomes immobilizing to our students and inevitably our society.

Indeed, they become immobile because, many times, students are uninterested and cannot find a connection with or relevance to the literature that is put before them; therefore, they end up not “getting” it. In addition, they resort to memorizing literature components or echoing what the teacher wants to hear. Creating meaning, however, in children’s lives should be a crucial goal of education. Interest creates meaning, which establishes a voice toward independent thinking. In many of today’s classrooms, the “creating of meaning” factor is ignored. “[Teachers] hear only silence, they see only immobile pencils” (Delpit, 1995, pp. 17-18). When children must speak, write, and read in the voice of another without hearing their own, they lose their own sense of self; they become empty individuals in the hollowed places we call schools. Indeed, in many schools, students are asked to read the works that are adopted as standard reading for all students. However, children should be empowered to inhabit ideas comfortably enough to construct their own meanings and to pose questions about ideas they do not understand.

In going through the Curriculum Studies program, I have come to pose questions about what our current educational system has become. With the emphasis on accountability through reforms such as No Child Left Behind, which expands testing and intensifies standards for students, teachers, and schools, students are taught from a curriculum that is not based on needs, interests, or lived experiences. The educational system has become one of rote

memorization, constant testing practices, increased rigor, and Canonized readings. Nonetheless, if we are able to transform what we teach and how we teach, we begin to transform the lives of our students.

Pinar (1997) comments: "What is necessary is a fundamental reconceptualization of what curriculum is, how it functions, and how it might function in emancipatory ways. It is this commitment to a comprehensive critique and theory development that distinguishes the reconceptualist phenomenon" ( p. 126). In order to bring about transformation and social and educational change, reconceptualist phenomenon challenges traditional ways of thinking about curriculum, develops new understandings of what is considered knowledge, and redefines perceptions of human relationships. This understanding and expression can lead to empowerment and ultimately a political voice toward social change for equality. Advocates purport that if no one challenges what is considered "standard," then those practices are reinforced. Indeed, curriculum should not stifle one's lines of flight but give rise to an individual's becoming, to an individual's recognizing, renaming, reclaiming, and, ultimately, celebrating self.

### Research Questions

General:

- How can African-American women's fiction encourage racial, cultural, and gender understanding?

Specific:

- How can understanding the past, dispelling perceptions, and illuminating the thematic, stylistic, aesthetic, and conceptual approaches of African-American women writers offer possibilities to enable the African-American female to claim a powerful voice in a world that has historically silenced her?
- How can the thematic, stylistic, aesthetic, and conceptual approaches of African-American women writers help students explore the possibilities for their own lives as they choose to accept or reject various societal standards?
- How can African-American female novellas have an impact on current education in the United States?

#### Autobiographical Roots/ Personal Justification

School, sex, drugs, and personal image were important issues that my generation faced, and they continue to be topical for youths today. I was one of the fortunate ones in school because I was not a teen mother and did not use any type of drugs. I usually did well in school, and my classmates voted me “Most Likely to Succeed.” This success, I believe, goes back to my development of a love for reading; hence reading and literature became my favorite subjects in school. My parents would provide me with books such as *Cinderella*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and *Snow White*; and later my teachers, with the Dick and Jane primers. These books encouraged my reading early on, but instilled in me a false sense of beauty and made me internalize a set

of values and ideas imposed upon girls by a dominant society. And quite honestly, I do not remember any of the books I read in middle school. My guess is that they did not resonate with me, so they are lost to me.

In high school, I remember reading works by Tennessee Williams, Shakespeare, Hawthorne, Faulkner, and Poe. Many of the works, I thought, were very good and were read because of their high aesthetic values. I, nevertheless, felt as if the works did not include me, a young Black girl growing up on the coastlands of the South. In the works that I did read or see that included African-American women or girls, the characters held subservient roles. For instance, I remember thinking, *“Why was I not reading about any young, beautiful Black maidens who found their prince charming or reading any love poems about me?”* In the stories that I read, there were African-American women characters who were the all-embracing individuals who needed or demanded little. In the same sense, I demonstrated behavior and thinking like the Black characters in the works I read—silent and submissive. As a result, I ended up memorizing literature components and echoing what I thought my teachers wanted to hear. Indeed, I learned how to play the game. Many of my friends, unfortunately, did not. Some became teen mothers, some addicted to drugs, some dropped out of school, and others made other negative life-changing decisions. It was, and is my belief, that if some of my friends—these girls—who are very intelligent, connected with someone or something meaningful to them in school, where we spent most of our days, their lives might have been a little different.

I surmise that encouraging meaningful works is key. At an age when students are trying to discover who they are and assert their own independence, they may find it enjoyable and worthwhile to read about the identity crises and self assertion issues of others and relate their own experiences to those fictional characters, as evident by the popularity of such works like Salinger's *Catcher and the Rye* and Golding's *Lord of the Flies*. There is a strong need to incorporate the works of African-American women into the curriculum to engage the Black girls, the forgotten group in the classroom. Making some strides today, African-American literature, especially literature by Black women, is focused on opening a racial dialogue by establishing that Black women are multidimensional, thereby empowering Black girls to address issues of self and subjectivity.

More integral readings of authentic works, I believe, of African-American women's fiction, will help young girls to find themselves in a literary culture and bring about self-pride and an understanding. Indeed, if African-American girls are able to witness the evolution of their African-American fictive counterparts as they struggle to understand human nature, including their own, I think they will learn what I have learned. That is, as they search for self and their own voices, they will learn to look inward before looking outward.

### Note

<sup>1</sup>: African-American: I use the terms *African American* and *Black* interchangeably. At various periods in history, African Americans have been known by a variety of terms. Antiquated terms include *Colored* and *Negro*. Currently, *African American* is used most often, and since the 1960s *Black* is generally used and accepted. The term *Black* is also included in the broader term *people of color* (African American, 2006).



## CHAPTER 2

## LITERATURE REVIEW: RECOGNIZING THE (UN)SPOKEN SELF

“All of us, readers and writers, are bereft when criticism remains  
too polite or too fearful to notice disrupting darkness  
before its eyes” (Morrison, 1993, p. 91).

Desiring, as Morrison does, to look beyond the surface for new and even oppositional interpretations of literature, I propose using the fiction of African-American women to help readers and writers search for self and their own voices. This dissertation is a theoretical one that examines how African-American women’s fiction can be used to create spaces above, beyond, and through traditional curricular practices and ideas in school. According to Lisa Delpit (1995), there are many assumptions made about poor children or children of color that have increased the likelihood that they will not be successful in the classroom and ultimately in America. They are looked upon as the “other” who will need to conform to dominant America’s standards. However, allowing these students to bring into the classroom their own stories, ideas, and languages helps teachers and their students to recognize and celebrate individual differences.

These differences can be enriching and enlightening to the lives of students and their teachers. Participating in the creation and recreation of meaning helps students to decide what is valuable for them. Stories then have the power to touch lives by allowing the reader to search for self by interpreting the world and reflecting on ways of thinking, feeling, and acting. African-

American women use the power of the pen as a tool for personal and group empowerment. Through the review of literature, I discuss five bodies of literature: ideological assumptions about self, the significance of literature as it relates to searching for self, the historical origins of Black Feminism as my dissertation is rooted in this perspective, an overview of literary criticism, and an overview of how literature can be analyzed.

#### Identity/Self Constructed

“‘Identity’ remains one of the most urgent—as well as hotly disputed—topics in literary and cultural studies” (Moya & Hames-Garcia, 2000, p. i). There are many philosophical assumptions about identity and the self, which have sparked an identity war among ideological camps. There are many interpretations of identity or self. Essentialists say that identity is unchanging and framed by an individual’s association with a particular social group. Ignoring internal and historical factors, Essentialists look at one aspect such as gender as a defining factor of one’s existence. Postmodernists affirm that identity is constructed rather than deduced from experience. In other words, we are who we are based on our surroundings; external forces help shape who we are, which means we are who we are in relation to others. Post positivists argue that identity is more than membership within a social group and more than a social construct, but is also the lived experiences of occupying more than one kind of identity. Post positivist realist theory of identity is “that the different social categories (such as gender, race, class, and sexuality) together constitute an individual’s social location are causally related to the experiences she will have”

(Moya & Hames-Garcia, 2000, p. 81). For example, an individual coded as a White female may not have the same experiences as an individual coded as a Black female. Post positivist theory purports that all social categories constitute one's social location and "situate[s] them within the particular social, cultural, and historical matrix in which she exists" (Moya & Hames-Garcia, 2000, p. 82). In addition, experiences will influence, not entirely determine, the formation of one's cultural identity. Interpretations of experiences help construct identities.

In addition to these assumptions, there are many psychological aspects of identity, which are grounded in Freud's or Piaget's theories of human development. Freudian in nature, Erikson's theory of development encompasses the life cycle of an individual. Identity versus identity crises is the fifth stage (12-18 years), during which Erikson believes children are faced with peer pressures and decisions about future and other social matters. Children are looking to be themselves, find themselves, and/or share themselves (Crain, 2000).

Experiences and interactions with others who have or are facing similar pressures and decisions become important at this stage.

Famed psychologist and author of *Shades of Black* (1991), William Cross (1991) asserts that African-American adolescents go through a sub-stage of Erikson's fifth stage of development. Because ethnic minorities encounter discrimination or oppression due to being of a culture whose ways of being and thinking are not that of mainstream society, they encounter cultural identity (Lee & Wicker, 2006). Cross (1991) highlights five stages of this development from Pre-counter to Internalization-Commitment. The individual devalues his/her own

culture while valuing western culture in the Pre-counter stage. During the second stage, Encounter, the individual encounters discrimination/racism, which marks internal conflict. By finding positive role models, the individual may move to the third stage, which is Immersion-Emersion, and begins to appreciate his or her own culture. The fourth stage provides a calmness and self-love, and the fifth stage moves individuals to forming coalitions across cultures. Cross (1991) cautions that individuals may encounter these stages at different times, may revert to any of the stages at any given time, or may not get to the latter ones at all.

My own beliefs about an individual's sense of self has been influenced by Cross's cultural identity theory and many others including leading Black Feminist thinker, bell hooks. Inspired by Paulo Freire, hooks (1990) declares that a movement toward identity is one that allows the individual "to become—to make oneself anew" (p. 15). To become, one must move from object to subject, and this "process emerges as one comes to understand how structures of domination work in one's life, as one develops critical thinking and critical consciousness, as one invents new, alternative habits of being, and resists from that marginal space of difference inwardly defined" (hooks, 1990, p. 15). One's knowledge and truth about the world are developing and are based on continuous inquiry and genuine explorations of his or her own realities. Therefore, people, especially young people, need to interact with role models in reality and through fiction to appreciate their own cultures and be exposed to and allowed to bring into the classroom their own languages and cultures to assert themselves in this ever-

changing and complex world. This assertion helps to move them from object to subject, from invisible to visible, and from unspoken to spoken.

Additionally, in the depiction of Black women characters, African-American female writers are becoming highly visible as they have made and are making substantial strides in literature. Allowing their heroines to defy conventional roles, these African-American writers (through their works) help Black women to question interlocking forces of race, class, and gender to engage the world. Nonetheless, when I say African- American female writers, I do not mean every Black woman who has written fiction, but I suggest the conscious, collective effort of many Black women who challenge traditional ways of thinking and through their works and lives declare that the personal is political. Undeniably, more and more African-American writers are focused on the theme of discovering one's self. Through their novels, for example, contemporary writers weave in an integral point about self-hood as noted by scholar Kimberly Conner (1994), "Self-discovery and self-definition consist of learning to recognize and trust [one's] inner voice, to find the source of value and authority out of which to live in the ground of [one's] own being, while rejecting the formulations others try to impose" (p. 148). The pursuit of identity is certainly not a new theme, yet to African-American women writers, the continuation of the theme develops a voice not only for their protagonists but also for themselves as Black women as they move from object to subject and as they, through their works (which is a body of literature that has been historically marginalized), offer an activist-related pedagogical

practice to help build a politics that will raise the consciousness of society and change ways of thinking about equality.

With this in mind, why do many African-American females offer this activist-oriented practice through advancing the idea of finding one's identity—finding one's self, one's voice? The search for self goes back to the images of Black women in America when the first slaves were brought to America in 1619. When planters realized that they could not continue to bring slaves from Africa due to European political opposition, they “realized the importance of American-born black slaves” (Christian, 1980, p. 5). Hence, as Christian (1980) notes, “Black women were brought as slaves to this country to fulfill specifically female roles and to work in the fields” (p. 5). The Black women were brought to produce a labor force to continue the economic vitality of a society. She was seen as inferior, even less than her Black male. Without a voice, the Black woman was seen as “mother and worker” (Christian, 1980, p. 7)—the mammy.

From slavery through the Jim Crow era, the mammy image served the political, social, and economic interests of mainstream White America. During slavery, the mammy caricature was posited as proof that blacks -- in this case, black women -- were contented, even happy, as slaves. Her wide grin, hearty laughter, and loyal servitude were offered as evidence of the supposed humanity of the institution of slavery. (Pilgrim, 2000, para 2)

This caricature served as an all embracing figure that had no voice, no power, and did not want to be free. “This image of the mammy persisted beyond the

Civil War into the literature of the 1890s” (Christian, 1980, p. 12). Many authors—White, Black, men, and women—have portrayed the Black female as the loyal, all embracing, one-dimensional individual.

In addition, Daniel P. Moynihan, an influential White male social scientist and critic of the 1960s, applied his matriarchy theory that “further reinforce[d] distortions concerning black women’s actual status” (Smith, 1995, p. 256).

Furthermore, hooks (1981) adds:

By labeling black women matriarchs, Moynihan implied that those black women who worked and headed households were the enemies of black manhood.... His generalization about black family structure, though erroneous, had a tremendous impact upon the black male psyche. Like the American white male of the 50s and 60s, black men were concerned that all women were becoming too assertive and domineering (p. 180).

She further notes that Moynihan suggested that the negative effects of racism of Black people could be eliminated if Black females were “more passive, subservient and supportive of patriarchy” (1981, p. 181). Hence, this ideology that Blacks could only be liberated if Black women were not liberated was taken as evident by the Black Liberation Movement of the 1960s.

In their struggle for manhood, Black men sought control over women’s minds and bodies. In the Black Liberation Movement, women were discriminated against sexually. Amiri Baraka (as cited in “But Some,” n.d.), activist of the Black Liberation Movement publicly insisted that “Not only are men and women

different ... there is no reciprocity in their relationship to each other; hence, a black man is not 'for' his woman as a black woman is 'for' her man. The two do not submit to one another; rather, the woman submits to her black man" (para. 6). Not only were women seen as inferiors in the Black Liberation Movement but also they were discriminated against in the Feminist Movement. Barbara Christian (1985) writes: "Until the early [1900s], black women in both Anglo- and Afro- American literature [and society] have been usually assigned stereotyped role.... [The Black woman] relates to the world as an all embracing figure, and she herself needs or demands little, her identity derived mainly from a nurturing service" (p. 2). For some time, she was a part of a forgotten group, her life being defined by others.

Feminist theorist Barbara Christian describes that defining self and self-understanding and how that self is connected to the world in which it is positioned is at the core of much good fiction. Moreover, Black women writers of the present tend to focus more on this theme of self not only because it is the type of writing that is tenaciously alive but also because of the way Black women have been conceptualized by Black and White society.

#### Significance of Literature

How then does literature help individuals to understand the realities of people's lives and contribute to a cultural consciousness? Literature has the power to transform lives. In many schools, students are asked to read the works that are part of the literary canon, which are works adopted as standard reading for all students. The works are usually written by White males, who in many



works have established the protagonist to be in some way a male who is superior to others in class, gender, and race. In "Imagination, Community, and the School" from Maxine Greene's book, *Releasing the Imagination: Essays on Education, the Arts, and Social Change* (as cited in Shaw, 2000), Greene suggests that society must "enable the diverse young to join the continually emergent culture's ongoing conversation" (para. 36). In other words, she believes that children should be empowered to inhabit ideas comfortably enough to construct their own meanings and to pose questions about ideas they do not understand. Greene (as cited in Appleman, 2000) asserts that "learning to look through multiple perspectives, young people may be helped to build bridges among themselves; attending to a range of human stories, they may be provoked to heal and transform" (p. 3). In studying her ideas, I began to take a closer look at education and what it has become. Greene believes, as I do, that education has become a system of rote memorization and canonized readings. With these practices, children's interests become irrelevant.

Furthermore, interest creates meaning, which establishes a voice toward independent thinking. Gutek (1997) writes: "The learner's own self-activity is related to the learner's interests and willingness to expend effort. Students have their own intuitive self-interests, which attract them to certain acts, events, and objects. With intrinsic interest, no external prodding is needed" (p. 35).

Therefore, the curriculum should be designed to touch the lives of students by integrating significant, interesting components. When students' interests are incorporated, then learning is enhanced and becomes meaningful.

In addition, reading and evaluating literature can create interest by engaging students in studies that will help them develop a deeper understanding of racial and gender oppression, thereby providing them with the knowledge to accept or reject hegemonic ideas— notions that support existing unjust social orders. Literature is an education resource that seeks to help us understand human diversity. Henry Louis Gates (1992) writes:

Ours is a late-twentieth-century world profoundly fissured by nationality, ethnicity, race, class, and gender. And the only way to transcend those divisions—to forge, for once, civic culture that respects both differences and commonalities—is through education that seeks to comprehend the diversity of human culture .... There is no tolerance without respect—and no respect without knowledge. Any human being sufficiently curious and motivated can fully possess another culture, no matter how ‘alien’ it may appear. (p. xv)

Here, tolerance does not suggest “putting up with” but does mean appreciating beliefs and avoiding stereotyping and ethnocentrism. Hence, ethnocentrism is the belief in the superiority of one’s own ideas and values, and stereotyping is applying an over-generalized behavioral pattern to entire groups. Individuals need to appreciate beliefs or practice empathy, which allows for being nonjudgmental and seeing the world through perspectives that might be different from their own. Indeed, practicing empathy through literature allows students to appreciate the power of diversity outside of literature.

For this reason, exposing students to a variety of literature, allows them to become critical, emphatic, and self-actualized thinkers; they become flexible and self-directed thinkers, which can, inevitably, transfer to interpretation of their ever-changing world and its diverse components. If knowledge and information about self and others are restricted to nonrealistic ideals and nonrepresentational people presented in anthologies, then students do not gain the critical skills needed to “explore the differences between and among us, what separates us and what binds us together” (Appleman, 2000, p. 3). To decrease the chances of becoming immobile, students must possess adequate critical-thinking skills to confront the treacherous challenges of today. Certainly, students must be able to hear stories like theirs and critically analyze them so that they can tell their own stories. Therefore, literature—when authentic and diverse—can empower students to question and engage the world and extend their own lives.

Empowering students means challenging the current literary curricula that have a callous disregard for diversity by promoting either directly or indirectly monocultural practices and ideas. Educators, students, and society will have a “better chance of survival under these complex conditions if they allow conceptions to expand in ways other than confining learning to the limits of repetitious outcomes that are mandated by the official curriculum” (Roy, 2003, p. 22). After all, curriculum is not about skill development but about relationships and lived experiences.

To implement a diverse curriculum and to help students understand culture, race and gender, there is a strong need to incorporate the works of

African-American women into the curriculum to engage Black girls, the forgotten group in the classroom, and, in a broader sense, the rest of the nation. Hence, in the depiction of Black women characters, female African-American authors write from knowledge and perspectives that are their own. They have made and are making significant progress in literature to defy conventional roles of Black women typified during the 19<sup>th</sup> century and earlier. Undeniably, these women write not only to illuminate the past but also to construct the future.

Through the forum of their works, African-American women create an avenue or a line of flight to celebrate, not simply tolerate diversity. In high school, I don't remember reading anything by Black females—maybe a poem by Maya Angelou. When I entered college, I read more works by African-American women. I never realized until then that this historically marginalized body of literature incorporated topics that I was interested in and that could be considered literature. For me and many others, reading the works of African-American women is not just a personal fulfillment of a girlhood dream but has that political potency to open a dialogue toward social consciousness. Consequently, the personal becomes political.

“Reading American literature becomes an occasion for recognizing ourselves, getting to know each other, but also for imagining and discovering in each other's experiences and identities unrecognized or unarticulated dimensions of ourselves” (Moreland, 1999, p. 3). Reading and writing are personal; nevertheless, they become means by which African-American women

can not only recognize self but also build progressive educational and political movements through activist-oriented composition pedagogy.

Discovering those “unrecognized or unarticulated dimensions” (Moreland, 1999, p. 3), means finding where the works of African-American women have been erased or devalued and forging connections between reading literature and activism. Female African-American writers are helping to forge those connections. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the literature of Black women is “a literature frozen into self-consciousness” by the necessity for defending Black women against those vicious and omnipresent stereotypes that typified 19<sup>th</sup> –century European-American culture” (Pinar, 2004, pp. 110-111).

Undeniably, more and more African-American women writers are focused on the theme of consciousness to express who they are and claim their space, their voice.

Although the notion of self-consciousness and voice is revisited throughout the centuries by both male and female and many racial and ethnic groups, for women writers, especially Black women, this theme provides a forum to assail the morals of a society that places restrictions on women through the belief that women should be submissive, dependent, and weak. Furthermore, their thematic, stylistic, aesthetic, and conceptual approaches are important because they present ways for these novelists, in their own languages, to provide a voice for women, to interrupt the reader, to trouble the reader, and to get the reader out of the traditional flow of thought and action.

Writers such as Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, and Tina Ansa give much attention to topics that counter hegemonic ways of thinking; they assert that it is a moral and intellectual responsibility to encourage cultural meaning and write themselves into history. For these writers (and many others), “writing [is] a tool of self-discovery and self-revelation [that enables] them to declare their commitment to action and social change, to express their sense of personal and group empowerment to clarify their engagement with the world and their willingness to take responsibility for the decisions and actions that affected their lives” (McKay, 1990, p. 51). Writing to touch and change lives, these women provide a way to be heard as well as present a conduit to help create change.

#### Theoretical Framework: Black Feminist Theory

Developing out of the desire to bring about change, the Black Feminist Movement was founded in 1973 out of the resistance to and marginalization by Black Liberation Movement and the Women’s Movement. Feminism has evolved over the centuries and has been impacted by a myriad of ideas. While ways of inquiring about the world allow us to “answer a certain class of unanswered questions,” (Short, 1991 p. 14) I believe the ultimate goal of any type of feministic inquiry is to transform the consciousness of men and women and the existence of society. In doing this, feminists will be better able to loosen the chains that tie them to the traditional, dominant modes of thinking about a woman’s place. Hence, this ideology discourages denigrating one by uplifting another and advocates moving individuals from victimization to attainment of personal autonomy. Although women have achieved a great deal of acceptance today,

many women in this country and other regions of the world are still struggling for acceptance and to exercise their own free will. Therefore, it is through the feministic lens that proponents of feminism will continue to interrogate aspects and sources of power and domination, while encouraging men and women to resist all forms of oppression for the betterment of humankind.

During the 1970s as Black women tried to resist forms of oppression, they maintained that they felt some of the oppression and were not treated as equals in the Women's (Feminist) Movement and the Black Liberation Movement. For example, in the Black Liberation Movement, prominent black men would publicly denigrate them. Amiri Baraka (as cited in "But Some," n.d.) in an address, insisted that "[men and women] could never be equals...Nature has not provided thus" (para, 6). In addition, in the Feminist Movement, Black women were usually not invited to participate on conference panels. Women of color, moreover, argued that many of the issues discussed in the Feminist Movement related more to the White middle class experiences rather than their own ("But Some," n.d.). Because the reality of Black women's lives and White women's lives were different, Black women sought a movement they could call their own—Black Feminist Movement.

Born officially out of the second wave of feminism, Black feminism in America is rooted in our early history. For example, Maria W. Stewart in 1831 became "the first American woman to lecture in public on political issues and to leave copies of her texts" (Collins, 1991, p. 3). In her speeches, she urged Black women to rely on self, seek knowledge and improvement for themselves, teach

their girls and boys to pursue knowledge and embrace virtue, and draw together to create a Black women's community that supports change (Collins 1991).

Similarly, in a speech in 1893, Anna Julia Cooper, a nineteenth century intellectual, whose life was situated around the end of slavery and the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, spoke of empowerment and social justice for women. In her 1892 book, *A Voice from the South by a Black Woman from the South*, she expressed her convictions and relayed her experiences of sexism and racism and her concerns of education (Collins, 1991). Cooper also urged Black women not to allow Black men to place them in metaphoric cages, but to help them in their struggle toward equal rights, including the right to equal education and to vote. Black women believed if they gained the opportunity to vote then they would be able to change the educational system so that women could have the right to pursue their educational paths (hooks, 1981).

“Black women intellectuals [like Stewart and Cooper] have laid a vital analytical foundation for a distinctive standpoint on self, community, and society and, in doing so, created a Black women's intellectual tradition” (Collins, 1991, p. 5). Even though the efforts of these women have not been uniform and have been without a clear public, strategic plan, they have been committed to social change and the issues that they brought to the forefront opened doors for women like hooks and Collins and provided a foundation on which the Black Feminist Movement could grow.

Leading Black feminist theorist, Patricia Hill Collins (1991) echoes this commitment in that Black feminism is a “process of self-conscious struggle that



empowers women and men to actualize a humanist vision of community” (p. 39). Speaking not to simply relay racist, sexist, and classist oppressions and struggles that must be overcome, Black feminism speaks to the gaining of new knowledge for the “changed consciousness of individuals and the social transformation of political and economic institutions essential for social change” (Collins, 1991, p. 221). Indeed, it speaks to challenging the status quo. Likewise, a consortium of scholars—Thornton Dill, Nettles, and Weber (2001)—“views race, gender, ethnicity, class, and sexuality as interlocking inequalities and argues, therefore, that all must be simultaneously considered both in theoretical analysis and in efforts to achieve social justice” (p. 4). Black women’s life experiences are an intersection of these dimensions, and Thornton Dill, Nettles, and Weber (2001) purport that these forces must be viewed and analyzed as interlocking because these are systems of intersecting oppressions. For this reason, Black women asserted that issues emphasized in movements such as the Liberation Movement or the Feminist Movement of the 1970s did not specifically address the positions of Black women. More than not, their political and personal voices went unheard. In order to prescribe the recipe of social change, the ingredients of race, class, and gender must be confronted simultaneously.

Furthermore, women like Patricia Collins (1990) and bell hooks are confronting issues of race, class, and gender to help create agents of knowledge, thereby creating agents for change. Collins has provided an invaluable book, *Black Feminist Thought* (1990), that delves into ideas of Black feminist

intellectuals and black women. The book is used in many women studies programs. Indeed, this work and others provide rich and valuable information to help understand Black feminist thought.

Additionally, writer bell hooks (1989) urges women to confront racial issues, but at the same time challenges women of color to “continue to insist on our right to participate in shaping feminist theory” (p. 182). She affirms that “women are the group most victimized by sexist oppression” (1981, p. 43). Because the issue is still topical today, she remains committed to using the feminist lens to finding those spaces for change. She defines feminism as:

a commitment to eradicating the ideology of domination that permeates Western culture on various levels—sex, race, and class, to name a few—and a commitment to reorganizing U.S. society so that the self development of people can take precedence over imperialism, economic expansion, and material desires. (1981, pp. 194-195)

Undeniably, feminism explores not only the struggles of women for equality, but exists to transform the consciousness of individuals and the existence of society. Doing so, allows feminists, more precisely Black feminists, to help change those patriarchal or dominant modes of thinking in the classroom and in society.

Investigating my own beliefs, I find that it is my moral responsibility and obligation to become one of the voices in articulating and changing the dominant societal modes of thinking about the values, interests, and perceptions of women, as I myself am a woman whose experiences are informed by being a

member of the group labeled as the Other. I am drawn to analyzing literature because it is an empowerment tool while simultaneously looking through the lens of Black feminism because it brings to the forefront a form of inquiry that examines social, cultural, and political issues affecting women. Additionally, this framework brings to the front issues impacting the young Black girl, including stereotyping Black girls as nurturers as well as issues of pursuing the all-American beauty dream and respecting self and the body. Specifically, these are matters that affect the Black females' perceptions of self and perceptions of others about the Black female as well as her status in class and, ultimately, society. The lens of Black feminism amplifies these issues in the context of race, gender, and class in education and in society.

Indeed, this framework contributes to the kind of multicultural education that is needed in schools. "We who are concerned about teachers and teaching must insist that our teachers become knowledgeable of the liberal arts, but we must also work like the dickens to change liberal arts courses so that they do not continue to reflect only, as feminist scholar Peggy McIntosh (as cited in Delpit, 1995) says, "the public lives of white Western men" (p. 181). Using this framework to read fiction of African-American women will inevitably build bridges among and between people.

In other words, Black feminism purports that race, gender, and class are interlocking factors that have oppressed the lives of Black women. Black feminism challenges theories of "power based on domination in order to embrace an alternative vision of power based on a humanist vision of self-actualization,

self-definition, and self-determination” (Collins, 1991, p. 224). Therefore, using the lens of Black feminism to explore the lives and works of the writers, I examine issues of identity and subjectivity. Through this lens, I use a literary analysis to explore critical works and novels relating to self and issues of subjectivity, power, and domination.

The classroom serves as an excellent opportunity for students to learn about power and domination as these forces have created stereotypes about women, more precisely Black women. In fact, this framework will help teachers to engage students in studies that will help them have a deeper understanding of racial and gender oppression, thereby providing them with the knowledge to accept or reject hegemonic ideas. Undeniably, Black feminists’ epistemological stance is that knowledge about one’s own experience is empowering for subordinate groups as they can forge their own realities based on lived experiences.

#### Overview of Literary Criticism

Empowering, literature as well as criticism can become catalysts for change. Criticism is an “organized discussion of literature” (Bleich, 1978, p. 4). Indeed, it has the power to elicit responses that are emotional and unprompted or rational and highly structured. “All such interactions with and about a text are based on some underlying factors that cause us to respond to that text in a particular way” (Bressler, 2003, p. 14). That underlying factor is the theory or philosophical assumption and becomes the foundation upon which interpretations or criticisms are based. Criticism of literature, informed by theory,

helps us to broaden our views, as we think thoughtfully and analytically, and moves us to better understand ourselves, others, and our world. Like Black Feminist theory, literary criticism can offer avenues to analyze and question phenomena such as race, class, and gender. Nineteenth-century literary critic, Matthew Arnold, describes literary criticism as a “disciplined activity that attempts to describe, study, analyze, justify, interpret, and evaluate a work of art” (Bressler, 2003). There are three main ideologies of literary criticism with several schools of criticism within these ideologies that have developed in the twentieth century and govern how we formulate meaning when reading text. Author-centered theory focuses on the life and time of the author, text-centered theory focuses on the words on the page, and reader-centered theory focuses on the interaction of the reader with the text (“History of Literary Criticism, “ n.d.).

Historical Criticism is an author-centered belief that relates to uncovering “the historical context of a text ... to ascertain how the authors’ lives influenced their writings” (Bressler, 2003, p. 40). Examining the lives and times in which the authors lived gives readers an insight into the period in which the novel takes place and a deeper understanding of the actions and persona of the characters. And uncovering and examining information about the author can help readers more thoroughly comprehend the works because it enriches an appreciation for it. This type of external analysis dominated literary scholarship during the nineteenth century and early twentieth century.

In opposition to Historical Criticism, New Criticism is a text-centered belief that relates to discovering the meaning of a work based solely on the text itself.

This “approach to literary analysis provides the reader with a formula for arriving at the correct interpretation of a text using only the text itself” (Bressler, 2003, p. 38). The reader uncovers the hidden meaning of the text using a close reading and then surmises the meaning by deducing how elements such as symbols, tone, point of view, connotations, denotation, setting, theme, dialogue, and other elements work together to produce a key meaning of the text. The author’s life and environment are not factors in determining meaning. Rooted in beliefs of British critics T.S. Eliot and I.A. Richards in the 1900s, New Criticism emerged strongly in the 1940s in America. As Eliot and Richards believed and as a reaction to extrinsic analysis (which dominated at the beginning of the twentieth century), New Critics believe that criticism should be directed toward the text and not the writer (Bressler, 2003).

In contrast, Reader-response is a reader-centered belief that relates to the readers as active participants, bringing their own experiences to uncover their own meanings of the text. This audience-centered or reader-centered theory relates to a type of subjective criticism in that it “assumes that each person’s most urgent motivations are to understand himself [/herself], and that the simplest path to understanding is awareness of one’s own language system as the agency of consciousness and self-direction” (Bleich, 1978, p. 298). The reader’s own interactions with and perceptions of the text result in self-discovery. This approach to literary analysis moves away from sole textual analysis because both the “reader and the text interact or share a transactional experience” (Bressler, 2003, p. 282). Louise Rosenblatt’s developed this idea in

the 1930s as she believed that both “reader and writer must work together to produce meaning” (Bressler, 2003, p. 60). There are varying approaches or schools of thoughts of Reader-response differing on the methods to uncover meaning (“Definition of Reader-response,” 1998). From Stanley Fish’s early method of allowing the reader to examine responses to complex sentences in succession, word-by-word to Rosenblatt’s efferent and aesthetic readings (which relate to readers responding based on specific needs or based on their own unique lived experiences) (Westbrook Church, 1997), the overall purpose of reader-centered criticism is the same—to allow the reader to actively participate in the meaning-making process.

In addition, Structuralism is rooted in a Reader-response belief, which allows the reader to bring to the text predetermined codes. “The text becomes important because it contains signs or signals to the reader that have preestablished and acceptable interpretations” (Bressler, 2003, p. 64).

Structuralists are interested in studying those systems that give meaning to our social customs. Additionally, Phenomenology is another major Reader-response approach to literature. It asserts that reader and text are equal and objects and ideas in text have meaning only if the reader takes in or registers their existence.

Other schools of thought or approaches that “declare their membership in this broad classification” (Bressler, 2003, p.69) of Reader-response include Feminism and Cultural Studies. Indeed, these approaches “have developed as a result of an expanding knowledge of how readers make meaning” (“History of Literary Criticism,” n.d., para. 4). Feminism questions the patriarchal views of

society. Feminism espouses exposing “stereotypical images of women, ... rereading canonized works from a woman’s point of view, and rediscovering and recovering works by women (Bressler, 2003, p. 268). In short, feminist inquiry purports analyzing literature to uncover injustices toward women to bring about understanding and inevitably work toward equality.

Studying literary pieces to uncover how the “Other” is repressed by their dominant cultures is the aim of Cultural Studies. This broad group includes Postcolonialism (studying views of formerly colonized cultures), African-American Criticism (analyzing African-American literature from racial perspectives to achieve social justice), and gender studies (studying femaleness and maleness) (Bressler, 2003; “Literary Criticism Table,” 2006).

The literary ideology that I draw from is that of Reader-centered criticism through the lens of Black Feminist theory. Rosenblatt (1995) notes that the “text embodies verbal stimuli toward a special kind of intense and ordered experience—sensuous, intellectual, emotional—out of which social insights may arise” (p. 30). Because these insights can be realized and assimilated into one’s own life, it becomes crucial that African-American girls are presented with authentic readings that will help construct their roles as adults. Reader-centered criticism through the lens of Black Feminist theory permits me to understand how African-American female readers and writers work together to construct meaning based on intrinsic and extrinsic notions. Rosenblatt (1995) establishes that when a “student feels the validity of his [or her] own experience, he [or she] will cease to think of literature as something that only a few gifted spirits can enjoy and



understand in an original way” (p. 64). Allowing for one’s own voice to be heard, this type of reader-centered approach facilitates rather than inhibits self-expression and pride.

Looking through the lens of Black Feminist theory, I use a Reader-response approach (where the text becomes the stimulus that creates or draws out responses based on students’ lived experiences). As a word of caution, “research in the area of reader response points to the highly idiosyncratic nature of the response process, and to the fact that literary works can yield a variety of different interpretations. Despite these caveats ... open-ended discussion[s] ... have enormous potential to raise critical issues and themes” (Taxel, 1991, p. 130). Hence, the purpose of analyzing literature is to open new and even oppositional ways of thinking about curriculum, about self, and about others. Therefore, the value (as it relates to self-expression) of this type of approach through the lens of Black Feminist theory can not be denied.

Self-expression and pride enable each reader to claim his or her own voice. This became evident to me just a few years ago when I began formulating my ideas to begin a major paper. One of my professors suggested that I read Tina McElroy Ansa’s work. Through research and reading her four novels, I learned that Ansa is a novelist, filmmaker, teacher, journalist, and storyteller who grew up in Macon, Georgia, in the 1950s. Incorporating mythical elements, she writes of a small, fictional Georgia town, blending in stories that she heard on the porch of her home and at her father’s “juke joint.” Although I had never heard of her before my professor (who is a White female) suggested her works to me, I

instantly felt a connection to Ansa and her work; I felt an awakening. I never thought that something that resonated with me could be considered fiction and that I could read and write about for a major paper.

Other than the few Black women that were taught in classes such as Morrison, Hurston, and Angelou, I always felt that forgotten and contemporary works, especially ones written by African-American women, were not considered literature and had to be read “in a closet.” I was excited again about reading because I could bring to the literature my own way of thinking, my own experiences, and my own responses. The validity of my experience became actualized because the encounter with literature was not a routine, time-honored one, but one in which my own understanding was valuable. This understanding can be realized not only through the aesthetics and human experience that the literature presents but also through an analysis of several elements of the works of African-American women like Tina Ansa’s. Looking through the lens of Black Feminist thought affords me the opportunity to “shatter the prevailing mythology that inhibits so many from acting more decisively for social change and to create a more just society and viable future for all” (Joseph, 1995, p. 464). In this dissertation, I detail and analyze, through the lens of Black Feminist thought, the structure, artistic representations, style, and context to uncover how the theme of self-hood is unveiled or constructed in the works of African-American women and how the interaction with these works can be a possibility to help adolescents transform self from unspoken to spoken.

## Overview of Literary Analysis

Undeniably, analysis of the elements of structure, artistic representation, style, and context in works can help change the narrowness of thought to create broader and more profound understandings. This dissertation uses the lens of Black Feminist thought (under the distinction of reader-centered or audience-centered criticism) to provide a literary analysis to investigate and explore text to wholly understand and fully appreciate the work. In other words, the interaction of reader and writer becomes important in the self-discovery process. As student readers grow intellectually and emotionally, they move beyond their own worlds as they discover that they can form and state their ideas as well as respect the ideas of classmates, even if the ideas are different from their own. Indeed, using critical analyses to explore text not only provides ways of seeing but also defines how an individual questions and engages the world. These critical readings of a work involve trying (through a reader-centered approach) to “solve [a] problem or analyze a difficult point” and entail useful methods of analyzing structure, characters, style, context, or theme (“Analyzing Literature,” n.d., para. 2).

A structural analysis refers to the first method of analysis and is the study of the selection and arrangements of events (“Analyzing Literature,” n.d., para. 2). The design of the work that the author chooses can give a deeper understanding of the underlying message of the work or issues of the time. The story may take on a design of chronological order, flashback, or flashforward. Chronological order refers to the natural development of the story where one event leads to the next, flashback denotes an incident that interrupts a present

action, and flashforward relates to a future action interrupting a present one (Meyer, 1999).

Authors may also incorporate unusual patterns within the structure of their work to “philosophically mirror [their] intentions” (“Elements of Literature,” 2004, para. 6). For example from a Black Feminist perspective, Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1994) becomes a chronological telling of events, but each of the four sections is divided into seasons. The novel begins with autumn and ends with summer. The seasons parallel the events of the characters’ lives and move from hopefulness of autumn to the “blighted, death, delivering ‘Summer,’ with Pecola’s insanity and stillbirth” (Wagner, 1986, para.11). Using seasons to chronicle the events of the novel is a unique structural device that drives Morrison’s point that one’s environment (society) can have a dark, hostile impact on children growing up under the gaze of the blue-eye ideology.

Evaluating the artistic representation of characters is a second type of literary analysis that helps to uncover or discover underlying meanings (“Analyzing Literature,” n.d., para. 2). A study of elements such as a character’s name, actions, appearance, dialogue, or perceptions can play a vital role in the development of a thesis or central idea. For example, Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1994) features the Breedlove family. However, in the novel, the family is dysfunctional and does not nurture each other to garner the strength to stand against the harsh realities of their lives. Lacking love, the family is not connected; and their surname symbolically contrasts their lives and environment.

Additionally, Zora Neale Hurston uses character name to imply a deeper point about her heroine in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). A Black Feminist reading would assert that Janie, Hurston's heroine, is struggling to assert her independence. After she meets the man of her dreams, Tea Cake, she begins to move toward self-hood. Because Tea Cake respects Janie's ideas, she begins to learn how fulfilling life can be. Tea Cake teaches Janie to share her opinions and enjoy life, thereby providing her with confidence to voice her own ideas. Nevertheless, because Janie depends on him for happiness, he must die so that she can move toward self-hood. And like a teacake, Tea Cake is sweet to her, but not entirely good for her.

Analysis of style is a third way to view literature and refers to examining the literary devices or techniques that an author uses to contribute to the work as a whole. Elements such as symbols, language, text, and cultural devices can be analyzed. Undeniably, whatever form images and symbols or language and text take, they can carry powerful messages within. These representations aid readers in uncovering and reinforcing meanings. Because these elements can convey meanings without forcing them, certain implications become more significant to the characters' actions and states. Readers learn to look below the surface, which sharpens their evaluating skills.

Other valuable literary devices to explore are journeying and use of guides. For example, Toni Morrison uses female guides in *Song of Solomon* as her male protagonist tries to understand his past to authenticate his present. Tina Ansa uses spiritual guides in *The Hand I Fan With* (1996) to help her

heroine move toward personal autonomy. Journeying and use of guides are prevalent styles in many works, especially in the works of African-American women, as the devices become not only effective literary ones but also strong cultural devices. A Black Feminist reading would note that creating interest, style—the techniques and devices—can caution points outside of the text about personal or societal issues and conditions.

A fourth method of analysis relates to analysis of context (“Analyzing Literature,” n.d., para. 2). Works can also be situated in various contexts and, therefore, studied to reveal much about a time period and writer or sociological and psychological state. Examining these elements gives readers an insight into the period in which the novel takes place and a deeper understanding of the actions and persona of the characters. Moreover, uncovering and examining information about the author can help readers more thoroughly comprehend the works because it enriches an appreciation for it. For example, novels about women’s sexuality were almost nonexistent during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* outlines issues concerning women and details the emotional and sexual needs of her heroine. Chopin, a White female, wrote in an age when a woman’s culture was defined by “the belief that women did not have the same sexual desires as men” (Showalter, 1993, pp. 172-173). Through an understanding of her time and life, the reader is better able to understand and appreciate her work.

Similarly, Zora Neale Hurston wrote during a time period when Black women were viewed as less than their male counterparts. Black Feminist

thought illuminates the fact that in 1941, it was difficult for Hurston, or any woman, to write about sexuality. However, Hurston allows her character to seek out her sexual and emotional desires in a world that expects her to follow conventional means. Hurston details her heroine's moving from a sixteen-year-old dreamer to a woman who eventually experiences both love and personal growth. Indeed, one who moves from object to subject.

Writing during dangerous time periods, Chopin and Hurston challenge the views of their times about a woman's role; hence their writings become powerful and political. An analysis of their lives and times can bring about an appreciation of their works and at the same time help the reader to acknowledge that these women are innovators of American women's fiction because they opened doors for successors to explore the issue of women's sexuality.

Finally, thematic analysis refers to examining the central idea that controls the entire literary piece. "The theme can take the form of a brief and meaningful insight or a comprehensive vision of life; it may be a single idea such as 'progress' (in many Victorian works) ....The theme may also be a more complicated doctrine, such as Milton's theme in *Paradise Lost*, 'to justify the ways of God to men'" ("Literary Terms," 2006, para. T). African-American women writers tend to focus on the theme of finding self. This consistency of vision becomes a conscious effort to preserve and extend the self-hood theme in order to build American, African-American, and women's literary traditions. Alice Walker declares that in order to continue the legacy of foremothers, writers must "garner wholeness from bits and pieces of the past and recreate them in their

own image” (Christian, 1980, p.182). Indeed, they make it clear that finding self and self-expression are a tradition; however, from a Black Feminist stance, these do not mean exerting control over others but are used as means to discover who the individual is and how that individual fits into the world.

Theme is an effective way to analyze the author’s perceptions or points about life, and more and more African-American women are committed to relaying the theme of self. “The extent to which Afro-American women writers in the seventies and eighties have been able to make a commitment to the exploration of self, as central rather than marginal, is a tribute to the insights they have culled in a century or so of literary activity, “ affirms Literary Feminist theorist Barbara Christian (1985, p. 172). Over the years, these women have developed a voice through their literature by finding creative ways to express their desires for independence. Indeed, to provide a more intricate analysis, I choose to pull from the theoretical category of reader-centered (which reader, writer, and text interact) to analyze structure, representations, style, context, and theme because analysis and “criticism of literature can hardly be a simple or one-level activity” (Frye, 1990, p. 71). The study of these elements in the works of Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, and Tina McElroy Ansa and through the lens of Black Feminist thought reveals the uniqueness of this type of literature.



## CHAPTER 3

## FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSIS: FROM UNSPOKEN TO SPOKEN

You may write me down in history  
With your bitter, twisted lies,  
You may trod me in the very dirt  
But still, like dust, I'll rise...

--Maya Angelou

Undoubtedly, African-American women have moved forth in creating a unique type of literature—a literary tradition. Nevertheless, throughout the centuries, as Angelou (2004) articulates, Black women have struggled with oppressive histories and knowledge that have rendered them voiceless. This section sets the frame for analyzing the fiction of African-American women. It addresses the matter of why Black women write, what they are contesting when they write, and what they are celebrating when they write. Indeed, through an analysis of their work, we can understand that they are contesting practices and ideologies that disempower, exclude, and distort them. And at the same time, an analysis of their work reveals that they write to name themselves and open up social, educational, and political possibilities for themselves.

#### Educational Reforms: Disempowering the Self

Embracing the stance that authentic knowledge is based on one's lived experiences, Black Feminist theory invites individuals to open up possibilities through questioning and engaging the world to reveal the varying systems of oppression. A part of this system is, in fact, books and educational reforms,

which have been and continue to be systems of oppression. These entities contribute to the conception and perception of a Black woman's position in that books by Black authors and about Black characters with authentic experiences were almost nonexistent in the early history of our country. Even during the 1950s and 1960s, many books and textbooks had not properly presented the contribution of African Americans to American culture, as exemplified by Dick and Jane primers and many other misrepresented history books. Many book publishers were reluctant to even publish books written by African Americans because they feared that school boards, made up of predominately white males, would not adopt them. For the reason of public exclusion, very few African-American works, especially by women, gained accessibility into school systems until much later.

Similarly, school reforms have been reductional, disallowing for the development of one's own skills and interest. Beginning with the nineteenth century, school reforms have been many. The Yale Report of 1828 is a famous document that defended a classical education. "The United States overwhelmingly adopted the mind-as-a-muscle metaphor as the basis for explaining to future teachers what they ought to teach and how they ought to go about it" (Kliebard, 1995 p. 5). In other words, the classics such as Greek, Latin, and math had proven to be of value; therefore, teachers would teach these subjects through drill, practice, and rote memorization.

Along the same lines as the Yale Report, The Committee of Ten in 1892 submitted a report that stated that all children should have a college education.

“All students, the Committee reasoned, regardless of destination, were entitled to the best ways of teaching the various subjects .... Education for life, they maintained, is education for college” (Kliebard, 1995, p.11). Attempting to educate children in the same manner and based on a college education, many systems adopted this idea. Differences such as intelligence, ethnicity, and interests were not considered.

After the years of the Yale Report and the Committee of Ten, many other reforms followed. In 1912, Frederick Winslow Taylor advocated the scientific management of schools, which became popular. “In the schools, scientific management had little to do with learning; it was about saving money” (Bracey 1997, para. 16). Creativity and student interest were not as important as the end product—students functioning as obedient citizens. In 1945, a conference was held and many psychologists felt that the majority of the population would never attend college. This idea led to Life Adjustment Education, which was a “genuine attempt to make schools serve an increasingly diverse population, but it assumed that the students couldn’t be challenged academically” (Bracey, 1997, para. 22). In 1983, *A Nation at Risk* report “blamed public schools for America’s difficulties in competing with Japan and West Germany in world markets” (Spring, 2001, p. 431). To decrease economic problems of a nation, increased rigor and revised assessment practices were believed to be the methods to help make America’s children number one. All students were taught from a curriculum that was not based on needs, interests, and lived experiences of students. In 2004, President Bush signed the *No Child Left Behind Act*, which expanded testing and

intensified standards for teachers, schools, and students. Its backdrop is rooted in standards and accountability.

In the midst of reforms rooted in standards and accountability, African-American novelists are challenging these notions of a “one-size” curriculum and a “one-text” authority. As well, Black Feminist theory supports not only uncovering injustices but also celebrating self-actualization through understanding self and others. Not until recent years has there been an explosion of encouraging and integrating ethnically diverse practices, texts, and lessons throughout the curriculum. Women and ethnic studies have found their way into college divisions, and schools are beginning to incorporate multicultural activities, studies, and literature into the curriculum. And yet there is still much educating and reform to take place, as some educators believe that observing ethnicity during a particular time during the month, studying one work during the school year, or tasting foods from other cultures is an example of a diverse curriculum. “This in itself may be a helpful strategy for learning about a specific ethnic group. However, it often substitutes for integrating the contributions and experiences of African Americans [or other ethnic groups] throughout the curriculum during the whole year” (Gollnick & Chinn 2002, p. 103). Integrating different perspectives allows students and teachers to connect and understand each other as well as contribute to a cultural consciousness.

#### Literary Canon and Curriculum: An Exclusion of Voices

Then, does the literary canon contribute to cultural consciousness?

Whereas, Black Feminist thought calls for a transformative consciousness, one

where institutions and individuals reconstruct their way of thinking about the “Other,” the literary canon is regarded as denying self understanding and understanding of others not included in mainstream society. “Linking debates regarding the ‘canon’ with questions of self, identity, and differences enlarges the curricular debate from an exclusive preoccupation with equity or with multiculturalism to include debates regarding the relationship between knowledge and ourselves” (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 2002, p. 328). These authors purport that canon debate is not exclusively about an equal representation of works, but that the debate is much more expansive. It is a debate about knowing and preserving the self.

*Merriam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* (1993) defines *canon* as “a sanctioned or accepted group or body of related works” and “a criterion or standard of judgment” and “a body of principles, rules, standards, or norms” (p. 167). Today, the canon implies a status of prominence, denotes a sign of privilege, and has become a body of literature against which other works are judged. In fact, the canon, which I believe undoubtedly represents works of high aesthetic values, is the foundation on which many school systems build their curricula; and the anthologies, which contain these works, become the basis of their literature programs. “To appear in the Norton or Oxford anthology is to have achieved, not exactly greatness but what is more important, certainly—status and accessibility to a reading public” (Landow, 1989, para. 1). The anthologies then become the enforcers of the canon, and the “gatekeepers of the fortress of high culture include influential critics, museum directors and their boards and trustees,

and far more lowly scholars and teachers” (Landow, 1989, para. 1). Therefore, the knowledge, beliefs, and understandings of these gatekeepers, by way of anthologized authors and their works, are legitimized by entrance into the canon.

In order to understand how we have come to regard the canon and anthologies, it is important to understand the European impact on American literary identity. “English literature was a basis of literary education in the United States.... Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, Dickens, Woolf—these still play a large role in determining the way citizens of the United States with a higher education think and behave” (Miller, 1999, p. 27). These are English people who are widely recommended as part of the canon and widely read. (Miller, 1999, p. 33).

“The growth of English studies at a more advanced level owes it first impetus to a group of Scottish educators [Adam Smith, David Hume, Lord Kames, and Hugh Blair] who divorced the studies of rhetoric and oratory from their early roots in grammar” (Applebee, 1974, p. 8). During the 1700s, they turned their attention to more of the expressions, style, and figurative language of works. Blair and others argued later that works of English and French authors such as Addison, Swift, Milton, and Shakespeare could be applied to this universal principle. And although the handbooks that Blair and his colleagues published did not include any literature to be read, they laid the foundation for future handbooks, which included works such as Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and Pope’s *Essay on Man*. Shortly thereafter, many colleges in America (with the

University of Pennsylvania leading the way) slowly followed a similar pattern of using texts to analyze (Applebee, 1974).

Thomas Budge Shaw is credited with writing one of the first textbooks in literary history; this textbook was an important part of English Studies. Shaw was a professor in Russia when he wrote *Outlines of English Literature*, which was published in England in 1848 and reprinted in America in 1849. It was a narrative emphasizing the literature and its contexts as opposed to lessons on moral development. While maintaining some of the same structure of Shaw's work, many authors used his work as a basis to make publications more student-friendly by focusing on the authors who they believe contributed to the cultural and historical development of America (Applebee, 1974).

With a growing concern to prove its greatness, coupled with a resentment of British refusal to recognize American authors, "what Americans wanted was a literature that would match the magnitude of the continent and exalt the destiny of a great nation" (Hubbell, 1972, p. 5). America wanted a national literature that would prove its intellectual greatness. Therefore, in a push to establish a national literature, American and British literature were separated, and many American writers emerged. "By the 1830s, it was generally thought that the three best American writers were Irving, Cooper, and Bryant ..., and they pointed the way for the greater writers who were soon to follow: Hawthorne, Emerson, Thoreau, Poe, Melville, and Whitman" (Hubbell, 1972, p. 15). Writers such as these slowly emerged as leading writers and laid the foundation for America's literary heritage.

With more pressure on the establishment and maintenance of the political, social, and intellectual development of America, there was a growing concern of the purpose of schools. Uniformity was believed to be one vehicle to help thrust America to the forefront. In 1894, in an attempt to unify entrance requirements for colleges, the initial Committee of Ten, made up of college presidents, principals, and other influential educators (teachers were not included in this group of ten), was formed. This committee provided points of view about and recommendations for teaching English. What grew from their statements were implications for the need of uniform requirements, more precisely order and standardization. To help high schools order their curriculum and prepare students for entrance exams, colleges released reading lists that included Latin and Greek epics, as well as other classics and other “body of English standard authors” (Applebee, 1974, p. 35). In general, colleges dictated the high school literary curriculum; and this idea of a standard reading list—though with gradual changes—is still used by many schools today. The “aim [of this reading list, this Western canon, and a unified American studies] was to create by speech act the unified culture we do not yet have. Such claims do this by appealing to a certain selective way of reading the past as though it were a tradition we all in the United States share...” (Miller, 1999, p. 37). This medium became a way to push forward and further develop a literary culture of “greatness.”

Even today there is an ongoing debate about what is considered greatness and what should be taught in the literature class. Some argue that the current curriculum is an exclusion of voices of women and people of color, and



others contend that what is needed is an English curriculum that promotes the “values of traditional liberal education” (Applebee, 1992, p. 27). The National Research Center on Literature Teaching and Learning (under the direction of Arthur Applebee) conducted a series of studies that has brought to the forefront what is being taught in American schools. While I have found no other recent study similar to this study, the information from Applebee’s study allows even today educators and stakeholders the opportunity to participate in the current great literary curriculum debate as they move to improve education and empower students through their own voices.

The first of the series of studies was conducted in the spring of 1988; these studies included nationally represented samples of schools and mirrored to some degree a similar series conducted in the spring of 1963 (25 years earlier) by the Educational Testing Service. The results of the studies beginning in 1988 “suggest that the curriculum as a whole remains relatively traditional in its emphases” (Applebee, 1992, p. 30). There have been gains made in the broadening of the canon, but the gains have only been minimal. “The study found only marginal increases in the percentage of selections written by women (from 17% in 1963 to 19% in 1988) or by writers from alternative cultural traditions (from 0.6% to 2%)” (Applebee, 1992, p. 28). Table 1 highlights this point, noting the top 10 required readings in any English class in approximately 488 nationally represented schools. Indeed, only one female (Harper Lee) made the top ten and no member of minority groups was included.

Table 1

*Ten Most Frequently Required Titles*

Ten Most Frequently Required Titles, Grades 9-12 (Public Schools, Top 10)	
<i>Romeo and Juliet</i> (Shakespeare)	84%
<i>Macbeth</i> (Shakespeare)	81%
<i>Huckleberry Finn</i> (Twain)	70%
<i>Julius Caesar</i> (Shakespeare)	70%
<i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i> (Lee)	69%
<i>Scarlet Letter</i> (Hawthorne)	62%
<i>Of Mice and Men</i> (Steinbeck)	56%
<i>Hamlet</i> (Shakespeare)	55%
<i>Great Gatsby</i> (Fitzgerald)	54%
<i>Lord of the Flies</i> (Golding)	54%

Adapted from (Applebee, 1992)

Of the required readings found in the participating schools, I ask “where is the infusion of the many voices that make up America?” According to another study conducted by a College Board and published in *USA Today* in 1995, “the 10 works most frequently recommended in curriculum guides were *The Scarlet Letter*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Lord of the Flies*, *Great Expectations*, *Hamlet*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Grapes of Wrath*, *The Odyssey*, and *Wuthering Heights*” (“Reading Lists,” 1995, p. 10). This list resembles the list in the study headed by Applebee in 1988. Furthermore, in an informal research done by Gerald Graff where he looked at statistics and other materials at one university for a four-year period, he found that “for every reading of [Alice] Walker there were approximately *eighty-three* readings of [William] Shakespeare. Shakespeare 83, Walker 1” (1992, p. 21). The United States has changed dramatically in the past few years; therefore, the question of does the literature it encourages speaks to its entire people arises.

Unquestionably, while strides have been made since 1963, the advancements are still not substantial. Works written by white males are significantly higher than any other group for required reading. However, with the push for a continued national heritage, there has been an increase in American works required for reading than in the past. Table 2 displays the characteristics of required book-length works.

Table 2

*Characteristics of Required Book-Length Works\**

Characteristics of Required Book-Length Works* (Public Schools, Grades 7-12)		
	1963	1988
Author		
Male	84.6%	82.8%
White	100.0%	98.1%
National Tradition		
North America	40.3%	61.9%
United Kingdom	55.0%	29.2%
Europe	4.7%	8.0%
Other	.0%	.9%

\*Based on titles required in 5% or more of schools.

Adapted from (Applebee, 1993).

The report also indicates that women and nonwhites are underrepresented in the curriculum. Overall in all works of literature, representation was marginal for these groups.

Other findings indicate that the voices of nonwhite and female groups were nearly inaudible; and further findings in the study conclude that teachers used selections found in anthologies more frequently than other sources of

literary materials. Conversely, women and minority authors were included more in the 1989 editions of anthologies than in earlier versions.

Findings also suggest that there are three central reasons why other cultures and traditions have not made their way into anthologies and the curriculum at a more rapid pace. First, teachers remain personally unfamiliar with specific titles; secondly, teachers are not certain about the literary merit or the appeal to students; and finally, teachers remain concerned about community reactions to the introduction of noncanonical works (Applebee, 1992). As long as these behaviors and attitudes remain, women and other cultures will not gain access into the curriculum; therefore, these groups will ultimately remain immobilized.

Miller (1999) describes this attitude and way of thinking as an “ideological element” (p. 23). It is “by definition unquestioned, since it is an unconscious assumption, a cultural artifact taken as a fact of nature. This particular ideologeme may have had all the more power of being an unspoken presupposition that guided the choice of the canon and the devising of curricula” (Miller, 1999, p. 23). Undoubtedly, people become complacent, especially if they have been doing something for a long time and it is working reasonably well. Teachers, particularly, have become accustomed to using textbooks and then matching objectives in the textbook to the standards. In many cases, teachers become conformists, not innovators. That is, teachers have learned to keep a low profile in a bureaucratic system. If they do not stir up any trouble, then their lives will continue to be safe. Being “safe” equates to the present condition of the curriculum.

Although Applebee's study was conducted in 1988, currently in many parts of the country, schools still exist within social contexts. More precisely, cultures, beliefs, and ideas of society are related to and shape social curricula. Schools and educators promote being safe by adopting what is usually dictated by the community and society, but sometimes the traditions and needs of the students go unnoticed and their voices unheard. Allegiance to the students who sit before them is lost, and Miller (1999) affirms that "those who devise syllabi and curricula must take responsibility for their choices, not defend them by pointing to universal criteria of exemplarity" (p. 23). Responsibility is lost when dominant ideologies in the form of standardized reading lists and national assessments reveal themselves as instruments to create and maintain a national culture.

Weaver, Carlson, and Dimitriadis (2006) affirm that one way that public educators can assume responsibility is by defending "forms of pedagogy that engage young people in a deconstructive and reconstructive reading of cultural texts" (p. 4). Specifically, responsibility lies in encouraging students to critically analyze practices of their every day lives as these practices relate to their fast-changing worlds. Weaver, Carlson, and Dimitriadis (2006) further assert that educators must move beyond the borders of their own conventional fields and draw upon other modes of thinking, researching, teaching, and understanding. This allows for a breaking away from traditional modes to reflecting upon political implications of particular phenomena. Moreover, educators need not use the excuse that it has always been taught and taught a specific way, but rather seek ways to interconnect cultures as well as balance stories of "positive autonomous

experiences in minority cultures” and stories by and about women (Pace, 1992, p. 37). Indeed, young people not only need to draw upon their own critical curiosity but also see that there are others who look like them and who have posed questions, sought answers, and initiated change. “The reader seeks to participate in another’s vision—to reap knowledge of the world, to fathom the resources of the human spirit, to gain insights that will make his [or her] own life more comprehensible” (Rosenblatt, 1995, p.7). Reading literature impacts the reader’s perception of self and encourages responses to situations and to others. Current literary curricula mirror society in that it can reproduce hegemonic ways of thinking, maintain contemporary understandings, and enforce historical perceptions. Without knowing, we make false assumptions, generalize, blame the victim, and continue to be comfortable.

Only when ways of thinking change will society and schools become equipped to move out of the traditional flow of education. Professor William Reynolds (2004) notes that a nomadic way of thinking is needed because it allows one to “get out, move through the middle” (Reynolds & Webber, 2004, p. 17). Indeed, educators can move beyond the sedentary, territorialized curriculum and educational system. Changing ways of thinking does not come easily, and many times teachers are bound by accountability measures; however, “[to] become involved in change, we have to see that it is needed. We must believe that our voices matter, that we can speak up, that we can make a difference. The silent parade of women and people of color that visit our classrooms through this canon does not deliver that message” (Pace, 1992, p. 38). When this is

understood, educators gain the courage to stand firm on their beliefs, even in the midst of resistance.

“In their instruction, teachers need to find better ways to insure [*sic*] that programs are culturally relevant as well as culturally fair—that no group is privileged while others are marginalized by the selections schools choose to teach” (Applebee, 1992, p. 32). Applebee goes on to caution that teachers must also guard against a curriculum that polarizes the separate traditions, one that breaks groups into opposing factions. Our country is very diverse, and we must form coalitions across cultures by listening to the voices of each other.

“In spite of the energetic attempts by conservative politicians and educationists to impose a single language and a single literary curriculum, United States cultural life is made up of diverse, interpenetrating cultural communities speaking and writing in different languages” (Miller, 1999, p. 41). America has always been a country occupied by diverse cultures, yet the experiences of these cultures have not always been reflected in literature. In fact, education has generally been a tool for Anglicization. However, since the 1960s and 1970s, the attempt to Anglicize has been met with grave resistance.

In any case, the “melting pot is no longer hot enough or capacious enough to melt all this difference down” (Miller, 1999, p. 41). With this in mind and in my opinion, the canon must evolve so that it speaks to the voices that make up America. Furthermore, the reading approaches in the classrooms need to be culturally conscious so that practices allow for the integration of student interest and voices. Quite honestly, I enjoyed reading works that included *Wuthering*

*Heights*, *Lord of the Flies*, and *Macbeth* because they were beautifully written with unique aspects about life; but, more importantly, they conferred a status of (at least I thought) implied greatness or being better than others. Nevertheless, I often wondered about “other” works that challenged assumptions rather than reinforced them; I often wondered about works that delved into the hearts and souls of Black folks; and I often wondered about works that reflected the thoughts, issues, and concerns of, especially, African-American women. I did not usually see these wonderings reflected in the canon that I was required to read. As Black Feminist theory would ask, I asked where were the distinguished books that spoke the language of the African-American female experiences.

#### Representations Through Images: Distortions of Self

Language is one way through which we share meaning and make sense of our environment. Language here does not mean simply spoken words, but implies means such as visual images, bodily gestures, or written words that are interpreted. “In language we use sounds and symbols to stand for or represent to other people our concepts, ideas, and feelings. Representation through language is therefore central to the processes by which meaning is produced” (Hall, 2003, p. 1). Language is a powerful tool in that it can be an expression of who we are and who we want to become. Language announces to the world our courage of convictions as well as our celebration of life. “It is by our use of things, and what we say, think and feel about them—how we represent them—that *we give them a meaning*. In part, we give objects, people and events meaning by the frameworks of interpretation which we bring to them” (Hall, 2003,



p. 3). For this reason, language is a double-edged sword in that it can convey a perpetuation of a status quo. For instance, stereotypical representations through the language of various media have contributed to the perceptions of African-American women.

Because Black women have been viewed as objects, the journey from object to subject has been a difficult one because “stable cultures require things to stay in their appointed place” (Hall, 2003, p. 236). During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, to keep things stable, there were popular representations of the naturalness and normalcy of denigration of the Other.

Typical of this racialized regime of representation was the practice of reducing the culture of black people to Nature, or naturalizing ‘difference’. The logic behind naturalization is simple. If differences between black and white people are ‘cultural’, then they are open to modification and change. But if they are ‘natural’—as the slaveholders believed—then they are beyond history, permanent and fixed. (Hall, 2003, 245)

If an image, idea, or practice is perceived as normal, natural, or inherent, then representations of these images, ideas, or practices are validated when they are reinforced through media or other means. For example, early media illustrated Black women in subjugated roles. In Figure 1, Hattie McDaniel plays (in Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind*) the role of the maid, the mammy, a role of the devoted, content caretaker; and a role that she played in other movies such as Booth Tarkington’s *Alice Adams*. Both novels, adapted for the big

screen, were Pulitzer Prize winning novels. Although McDaniel was the first African-American woman to receive an Oscar for her performance in *Gone with the Wind*, she was often criticized for the subservient roles she played (“Hattie McDaniel,” 2006).

Figure 1

*Subservient Roles*



*In 1939, Hattie McDaniel (back) as Mammy and Vivien Leigh as Scarlett O'Hara Gone with the Wind. (“Hattie McDaniel,” 2006)*

The perception that African-American women could be seen only as devotees contributed to the naturalization concept and added to the powerlessness and voicelessness of African-American women. “Inherent in these cultural images of African American women is the belief that they have a proclivity for performing tasks of domesticity” (Jewell, 1993, p. 21).

Print and visual media have portrayed African-American women based on myths and stereotypes. "From the intricate web of mythology which surrounds the black woman, a fundamental image emerges. It is of a woman of inordinate strength, with ability for tolerating an unusual amount of misery and heavy, distasteful work" (Wallace, 1999, p. 107). And because of this nurturing, super heroine image, which has remained to some extent unchanged over the years, Black professional women at times deal with issues of invisibility and undermining, especially in the work setting. In other words, their authority or knowledge is challenged more often, or they are mistaken for the secretary, housekeeping staff, or clerk. These types of cultural assumptions have been leading factors in the disempowerment of African-American women.

"Cultural images of African American women based on stereotypes are at the very foundation of the problem of African American women's limited access to societal resources and institutions" (Jewell, 1993, p.12). The more these images are impressed in the minds of young girls and society, the graver they become, thereby making the task of changing these perceptions more difficult. "I began to feel my history and my mythic background distorted by the absence of any images of my foremothers in power" (Lorde, 1984, p. 67). And the question that women, including me, tend to ask is "where were the images of my foremothers not being denigrated or trivialized?" When children are constantly subjected to images that trivialize or denigrate their sense of self, how can "we expect them to strive for educational and vocational goals that society implicitly or explicitly tells them they cannot attain?" (Clift & Shane, 1976, p. 308).

Through the lens of Black Feminist theory and an analysis of the works of African-American females, we can bring to the surface representational languages and images to uproot the stems of domination.

Implicitly or explicitly, the language of media can project precepts. The photos, which were released by Yahoo News in 2005 (later removed) in Figures 2 and 3 fueled an ongoing debate of victims of Hurricane Katrina. The women in the first photo are described by the Associated Press (AP) as looters and the headline read, "Looters in New Orleans take home groceries." Viewed as "looters," which has a negative connotation, the women are looked upon as lazy and dishonest and as having an active role in an act that is not acceptable. A similar picture with a caption of "New Orleans residents wade through water for food" was released on Yahoo News shortly thereafter by Agence France-Presse (AFP) and describes the individuals in the photo as "finding" food, which has a connotation of innocence, and their act is viewed as more passive and more acceptable.

Figure 2

Controversy over New Orleans photos captions (*Looters*)

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**AP Associated Press** AP - Mon Aug 29, 7:32 PM ET

Looters carry bags of groceries through floodwaters after taking the merchandise away from a wind damaged convenience store in New Orleans on Monday, Aug. 29, 2005. (AP Photo/Dave Martin)

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“Looters in New Orleans take home groceries.”  
 (as cited in “Controversy,” 2005, para. 2)

Figure 3

Controversy over New Orleans photos captions (*New Orleans Residents*)



“New Orleans residents wade through water for food.”  
(as cited in “Controversy,” 2005, para. 3)

“These images, definitions and labels attribute the depressed socioeconomic status of African women to the possession of innate qualities and the absence of a work ethic and other prescribed social conventions” (Jewell, 1993, p. 21).

These images help legitimize how one is seen by others and by self. To some degree, they validate one’s self worth because they act as tools to help construct one’s meaning of self to self and to others. “Meaning is what gives us a sense of our own identity” (Hall, 2003, p. 3). Certainly, meaning is circulated through various media such as the internet, books, television, and arts. These means,

when constantly reinforcing the stereotypical perceptions, can render women, especially Black women, voiceless. Therefore, “our tasks as social scientists are to discover alternatives and possibilities, as well as new ways to speak to our sisters, while we fight the academy’s partners in silence—the print and broadcast media” (Omolade, 1994, p. 113). One way to combat the “academy’s partners” is to endorse positive, authentic images in schools because schools reflect society’s views, thereby impacting one’s view of self. Through the writings of African-American women, these views can be transformed to help African-American females move from unspoken to spoken, from nameless to named.

#### Renaming Self: From Nameless to Named

“For women, then, poetry [or any form of writing] is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence.... Poetry [or any form of writing] is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought” (Lorde, 1984, p. 37). Poetry, better yet, writings that reflect Black women’s unique perspectives become forums to help them rename and speak for themselves. These types of writings help raise questions such as “Who am I” and “What am I doing here.” Black women’s writings bring to the forefront realities of Black women’s lives, especially as their lives relate to existing as an object in an institutionalized world. They have depth from which to draw as they capture a culture as anthropologists, incorporating experiences that are meaningful, emotional, and real.

“Works in different media and from different cultures, works by women and minorities, need to be identified, categorized, edited, republished, brought into

the open, made available in the university and to the general public so they can be effective there. This work is essential and necessary” (Miller, 1999, p. 87). In order to preserve the vitality of the different cultures, these types of cultural works must be brought to the forefront not only to be studied but also to help students understand that these works are intertwined with their pasts, presents, and futures. These works become an expression of who they are and who they want to become. Barbara Omolade (1994) insists that Black women’s writings are expressions of their own thoughts and dreams. “[Their writings] attempt to speak on several levels: simultaneously: as conversation and story, documentation and scholarship, lament and challenge. They are a defense, an appeal, and hopefully a celebration not only of what Black women are and what they’ve done, but also what they must do” (p. xxi). Revealing their deepest aspirations, their writing yells to the world that they are no longer silent or invisible.

Understanding that they are writing because they have something to say, Black women have discovered that “there can be no scholarship or writings on behalf of the oppressed unless it points toward liberation, no real writings except those which lead to revolution and freedom” (Omolade, 1994, p. 113). In short, Black women authors offer hope in order to create a language of possibilities—they provide a safe place to talk about and deal with issues that Black girls and women face daily. But most importantly, their writings can inspire agents for social change. In the past, writers and producers cast Black women in terminal roles, ones where they were supporting the needs and desires of others. Today, many African-American women writers cast their heroines in roles that are real,



that inspire, and that offer hope. “Her historical method is to take the melody and spread it to the singers in the chorus behind her, and as each one sings the melody and improves upon it in her own way, the sounds come together. Each one becomes a griot, a storyteller of the past and futures. They all learn to create a song loud enough to end the silence” (Omolade, 1994, p. 115). These women produce new visions and inspire other visionaries, as individuals will proceed in life according to how they perceive their future. Hence, literature can open up one’s world. For example, Zora Neale Hurston’s book, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1995), can be a significant one in that it can inspire girls and women to experience new possibilities.

According to Barbara Christian, Hurston’s novel is a “significant novel, a transitional one, in the development of black women images in literature” (1980, p. 57). Detailing young Janie Crawford’s struggle from immaturity and being led by others, to self-actualization and womanhood, Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1995) has recently become “one of the most ... taught and best-loved novels in the African-American canon” (Lowe, 2002, para. 1). When the novel opens, Janie begins to tell her story to her friend. Indeed, Janie has lived and grown, and she wants her story heard.

Janie recounts her story at the point where she is a sixteen-year-old dreamer. Craving love, Janie leaves her first husband to marry an aspiring man who eventually becomes mayor of a black township and who treats her like a “pretty doll-baby” (Hurston, 1995, p. 197) to be admired by others. In her second marriage, Janie has economic security and an enviable position but is isolated

from the townspeople and made to keep her opinions to herself, to keep her voice inaudible. Janie depends on her third husband for her own happiness. He teaches her that she has a life to live and should express her own ideas and opinions. Hurston's novel ends with the conclusion of Janie's story to her friend. One of the most important learning tools of the novel and the reason that women like Hurston write is in what Janie's friend says: "Ah done growed ten feet higher from jus' listenin' tuh you, Janie. Ah ain't satisfied wid mahself no mo'" (Hurston, 1995, p. 332). In helping to strengthen and encourage her friend, Janie has also grown; and Phillips (1994) writes that in "redescribing one's life to another, that individual begins to talk differently" (p. 131). Just as this story has moved Janie's friend, this type of fiction can help students to talk and think differently about themselves and their ever-changing world.

Undeniably, Janie and Hurston have stories to tell and through experiencing and telling, each not only has grown as a person but also has deepened an understanding of self. Hurston and other Black women authors seek to give speech, give voice to the inarticulate. While expressing her frustration with the dark impact of patriarchy, Hurston chronicled her journey from object to subject, from being named by others to naming of self. Speech is a communication piece that helps one to move from object to subject. Likewise, Black Feminist thought encourages "collective identity by offering black women a different view of themselves and their world than that offered by the established social order" (Collins, 1995 p. 341). To create a voice for the individual who is

denied or has lost self expression is the charge of Black Feminist theory and the purpose of writing for many Black female novelists.

Reclaiming Self: Taking Back, Looking Forward, and Envisioning  
a Language of Possibilities

Black female novelists understand that valuing self, beginning with one's past, is integral to moving forward. "African American women [must] strengthen their own collective efforts before forming coalitions with other groups of individuals committed to social change" (Jewell, 1993, p. 188). Hence, through their literature, Black women creative writers, along with academicians and Black feminists, have undertaken the challenge to establish and maintain "complex self-help exchange networks" in an effort to bring about positive change (Jewell, 1993, p. 188). Offering exchange networks through contemporary interpretations of the Black experience, African-American women writers are using their works not only to document Black experiences but also as a transformative means of expression. "Black women writers, therefore, must first reclaim the perspective of their people and give a voice to the long-silenced experiences of the past, which is especially true for contemporary writers who now have the benefit of Afrocentric historical scholarship" (Bracks, 1998, p. 8). Liberating and reinvigorating, their works offer ways to unravel the stereotypical threads of women's, more precisely Black women's, positions constructed by society. Just as Black Feminist theory contends that literature is an instrument for social justice and empowerment, African-American writers not only seek to make audible the voices of the present and lost voices of the past but also seek to

create role models, participants instead of spectators in the reading experience, and agents for change through empowerment.

In the same way, book clubs have appeared all over America and have become exchange networks for these women as well. Miller (1999) writes:

It is natural that they [women and minorities] should look elsewhere to find works that help them establish a sense of cultural identity, just as it is natural that sooner or later American citizens in general will come to recognize that English literature is the literature of a foreign country, literature no doubt deeply linked to our own self-development, but foreign nevertheless. (p. 89)

In looking elsewhere, women of color have found solace in books that relay experiences and address issues similar to theirs. Evident, some of the top selling books in 2006 are by authors such as California Cooper, Kimberla Roby Lawson, Bebe Campbell Moore, Sister Souljah, Terry McMillan, Connie Briscoe, and Lolita Files. Best selling African-American male novelists include E. Lynn Harris, Michael Baisden, Carl Weber, and Eric Jerome Dickey ("Best Selling Books," 2006). The characters that these writers create are complex and they deal with issues of health, career, love, race, sex, and finance as they touch the core of experiences of, especially, African-American women. These works of fiction document the experiences of Black women (and men). Reported in the *Essence* Best Selling Books (2006) list, these ratings are based on reports of retail stores in cities such as Atlanta, Alabama, Florida, and North Carolina. The reading list becomes significant in that it relays that Black women want stories

that reflect their own vernacular and cadence—in other words, stories that reflect their own stories in their own voices.

In the classroom, African-American girls need to march to the beat of their drums. Vital, then, are more key readings and texts that speak to concrete experiences that address the social, emotional, and cultural issues that contribute to the developing selves of these girls and other marginalized groups. “The Alice Walkers, Toni Morrisons, and Zora Neale Hurstons crop up frequently, but they appear usually as add-ons [to the English curriculum]” (Graff, 1992, 9. 23). What becomes essential is a literary curriculum that is not an addition but an integrated focus that brings in students’ voices and interests, one that gets students talking between and among cultures. Nettles and Pleck (1996) suggest that in order to hear the students’ voices and engage them, “interventions need to be designed with knowledge of African-American culture if they are to be effective with African-American youths” (p. 172). Unquestionably, if an understanding of culture is gained, then classrooms can not only build self-esteem but also open a dialogue between and among people, provoking activism by developing agents for change. An integrated classroom can create public spaces to rectify curricular distortions and omissions.

An integrated focus begins with “putting neglected works in the classroom, in the curriculum, in the books, in the conferences, and study groups... [However,] knowledge is not enough. These works must be put to work” (Miller, 1999, p. 87). They must work to decenter antiquated ways of thinking, challenge stereotypical ways of being, and advance unconventional and even uncover

oppositional interpretations of the world. They must work to transform. “And when I speak of change, I do not mean a simple switch of positions or a temporary lessening of tensions, nor the ability to smile or feel good. I am speaking of a basic and radical alteration in those assumptions underlining our lives” (Lorde, 1984, p. 127). The fiction of African-American women can help bring forth these alterations in that it can reveal and question hegemonic ways of thinking to bring about untapped perspectives to build bridges between and among people and cultures. Hence, agents for change begin with knowledge of self and others and move to opening dialogues between and among people provoking activism for social justice.

The question, then, is how do schools and society help African-American girls gain knowledge of self and others? Audrey Watkins (1996), in a study, asked African-American female participants their perspectives on what knowledge should be included in Black girls’ education to enable them to grow intellectually and construct social, emotional, and cultural identities as they become and foster agents of change. “For ordinary African American women, those individuals who have lived through the experiences about which they claim to be experts are more believable and credible than those who have merely read or thought about such experiences” (Collins, 1995, p. 346). Because Watkins’ study is of Black females in their own voices, their stories enrich our thinking about African-American females. Additionally, Lisa Delpit (1995) says that we must keep the perspective that people are experts in their own lives; and there are certainly aspects of the outside world of which they may not be aware, but

they can be the only authentic storytellers of their own experience. In other words, these women in Watkins' study provide a perspective that is their own; they are able to invoke their own lived experiences as they capture a culture. Based on participants' responses, several possibilities (relating to knowledge) came out of Watkins' study. First, "parents and teachers should develop and transmit expectations based on possibilities, not on limitations nor on what exists in the children's environment .... The openness empowers children by allowing them the freedom of self-expression to express their being and what they are becoming (Watkins, 1996, p. 307). An accumulation of negative encounters ultimately affects one's view of the world and one's place in it. Because people proceed in life according to how they perceive their future, these young women, especially, need to feel empowered through having self respect and pride in their lives and their pasts.

A second point that came out of Watkins' study (1996) relates to issues of stereotyping and denigrating and the need to discuss these practices inside and outside of the classroom. "The problems blacks face [especially Black girls] in society need to be openly addressed and social contradictions need to be uncovered" (p. 307). Before these practices can be fixed, they must be thought about and brought to the forefront. In doing so, teachers are better able to nurture the historical wounds as they encourage students' intellectual talents for construction of more authentic selves.

While many teachers have good intentions to encourage students' intellectual talents and to create an educational system that is best for all

children, all children do not have exactly the same needs. Delpit (1995) offers a critique of the pedagogy that fails to recognize the racial and cultural differences among children in the U.S. public school classrooms. She suggests that we begin with opening a dialogue. Dialogue involves respecting individual existence, individual freedom, and choice, thereby helping groups to form coalitions across groups. “The modern American culture as a whole, which inevitably encompasses the individual cultures of our students, must be more than merely acknowledged by teachers and curriculum writers; culture must be inherent within the curriculum” ( Kocis, 2002, p. 33). Similar to the participants in Watkins’ study, students can be the only authentic storytellers of their own experiences. With a curriculum that advocates integration and understanding of self and others, students, especially young women, are no longer the voiceless victims. Just as a reconceptualized way of viewing the curriculum calls for integration and understanding, Barbara Omolade (1994) observes:

Black feminist pedagogy aims to develop a mindset of intellectual inclusion and expansion that stands in contradiction to the Western intellectual tradition of exclusivity and chauvinism. It offers the student, instructor, and institution a methodology for promoting equality and multiple visions and perspectives that parallel Black women’s attempts to be and become recognized as human beings and citizens rather than as objects and victims. (p. 129)

This intellectual inclusion and expansion are reasons African-American women write and relate to revisioning the way African- American females view the world,



others, and selves. An analysis of their work helps to develop understandings and relationships void of mistruths because these speak to knowledge about self and others. In turn, this authentic knowledge has the power to heal and transform lives.

CHAPTER 4  
ANALYSIS: CELEBRATING THE SPOKEN VOICES OF  
AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN

don't think you can ever forget her

don't even try

she's not going to budge

no choice but to grant her space

---Rita Dove

Just as Dove's poem (2006) speaks of Lady Freedom, Black Feminist theory speaks of transforming lives through helping women to discover their space and declare their voice, which first begins with self-understanding. Poet and short fiction writer Alexis DeVeaux (as cited in Christian, 1985) writes: "I see a greater and greater commitment among black women writers to understand self .... You have to understand what your place as an individual is .... You have to understand the space between you before you can understand more complex or larger groups" (p. 171). This understanding of self means recognizing and respecting one's own feelings. This understanding also implies a social responsibility to be a contributing and constructive member of one's social group and, inevitably, one's world. Furthermore, Barbara Christian (1985) describes that self-understanding and how that self is connected to the world within which it is positioned is at the core of much good fiction. To create Black women as authentic individuals, Black women writers employ (through their creative

conceptual and aesthetic approaches and powerful stylistic literary devices) the dominant theme of claiming a self.

Accordingly, this theme of self-identity, while certainly not a new theme, is so prevalent in the works of African-American women. "The extent to which Afro-American women writers in the seventies and eighties have been able to make a commitment to an exploration of self, as central rather than marginal, is a tribute to the insights they have culled in a century or so of literary activity" (Christian, 1985, p. 172). To dispel distortions, this type of writing becomes an occasion to construct self as they write with authority about issues impacting African-American females. Commencing with the struggles of the writers of yesterday, the consciousness of the lives of Black women writers today has been a collective effort. Nellie McKay (1993) notes that the determined consistency of the female African-American writer that spans over hundreds of years has produced a notable body of literature (p. xii). Seen in the works of Zora Neale Hurston (who is seen as a foremother of later generation African-American authors) and contemporary writers such as Toni Morrison and Tina Ansa, the tradition of selfhood is strong as they write to help women to confront present-day issues of self-empowerment.

As Hurston, Morrison, and Ansa write about the theme of self-hood, they use many approaches to lead not only their African-American protagonists but the readers on a journey into African-American history, life, and folklore, and sometimes into the realm of the supernatural. Using literary and cultural devices of conjuring, journeys, storytelling, folktales, and nature-related elements, these

concepts—as they relate to the theme of self-hood—are of special interest to African-American women because they flow into ways not only to understand and express self but also to celebrate rich cultural traditions and practices. Exploring how they delve into the theme of self-hood from the Black Feminist perspective, this section (which is a subjective reading) briefly discusses Hurston’s and Morrison’s work but focuses on two works of Tina McElroy Ansa<sup>1</sup> who deals with issues that African-American females face today.

#### Hurston’s and Morrison’s Exploration of Self Through Literary and Cultural Traditions

Zora Neale Hurston’s life and novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1995), can be used as didactic sources to help students gain knowledge toward understanding that the struggle to be heard—the struggle for self and to write one’s own story—is universal. Indeed, Zora Neale Hurston, born in 1891, has become a leading proponent of giving authentic voice to women. Viewed as a foremother, Hurston helped lay the foundation for contemporary writers like Toni Morrison and Tina McElroy Ansa to continue the tradition of giving voice to their characters.

When the story opens, Janie describes her story to her friend. She begins her story where she is sitting under a blossoming pear tree watching bees pollinate flowers: “She was stretched on her back beneath the pear tree soaking in the alto chant of the visiting bees, the gold of the sun and the panting breath of the breeze when the inaudible voice of it all came to her” (Hurston, 1995, p. 183). Janie begins to want to satisfy her blossoming sexuality. She begins to

acknowledge her sexual desires. She wants to be a pear tree “*any tree in bloom!*” (Hurston, 1995, p. 183), and wants to be unified with a love much like the bees and the trees. Janie knows that she does not want to be the property of another; she only desires to create (like the bee and tree) a fulfilling and mutual relationship with a man. Hurston cleverly illustrates this harmonious relationship through nature and has her protagonist spend most of her life searching for this type of bond.

However, when Janie’s grandmother, Nanny, notices Janie’s growing sexual urges, she advises Janie on womanhood and marriage so that she will not be “*de mule uh de world*” (Hurston, 1995, p. 186). Nanny encourages Janie to marry a stable farmer, Logan Killicks, whom she does not love. Janie notes that the “*vision of Logan Killicks was desecrating the pear tree, but [she] didn’t know how to tell Nanny that*” (Hurston, 1995, p. 185). Janie is young and is not yet able to articulate her own desires; therefore, she does what others want her to do. Janie is asked to follow the desires of her grandmother and marry for security, not for what she wants—love. Hence, she becomes submissive and forgoes her desire to marry for love.

Desiring love, Janie leaves her first husband to marry an aspiring man who eventually becomes mayor of a Black township and who treats her like a “*pretty doll-baby*” (Hurston, 1995, p. 197) to be admired by others. In her second marriage, Janie has financial security, but is made to keep her opinions to herself, to keep her voice inaudible. Her second husband, Joe (Jody) Starks, never consults her about what she wants in life, so she is always yearning to

voice her opinions. When Janie is asked to give a few words of encouragement when Starks is pronounced mayor, Starks asserts: "'mah wife don't know nothin' 'bout no speech-makin'. Ah never married her for nothin' lak dat. She uh woman and her place is in de home'" (Hurstons, 1995, p. 208). Starks sees Janie as inferior and something he must possess. Her thoughts, her opinions do not matter. In other words, she should be like an object—existing but voiceless. In order to move from this position, she must "own and enjoy her own desire as well as the activity which realizes it" (Benjamin, 1998, xvi). Throughout their marriage, Janie tries to assert herself, but is smothered by Starks domineering personality and power.

After Starks' death, Janie meets and eventually marries Tea Cake, who becomes her guide and lover and ultimately helps her to transcend the misery of being defined by others. In a sense, he becomes her teacher because he listens to her. He helps her to discover who she is and what she can do: "[Tea Cake] could be a bee to a blossom—a pear tree blossom in the spring. He seemed to be crushing scent out of the world with his footsteps. Crushing aromatic herbs with every step he took. Spices hung about him. He was a glance from God" (Hurstons, 1995, 261). Tea Cake has evoked an aesthetic moment where Janie relates him to the bees and tree image she formed in her early life. Tea Cake reminds Janie of her girlhood dreams of the bees and the pear tree and of what a mutual relationship should be. He has the personality to make Janie think he may be the one to give her the sort of love she desires. He does not talk to her but talks with her.

Hurston's novel ends with the death of Janie's third husband and the conclusion of Janie's story to her friend. One of the most important learning tools of the novel and the reason that women like Hurston write is in what Janie's friend says. She declares that she is not satisfied with being an object to be possessed by another (Hurston, 1995). Indeed, Janie has uplifted her friend. Hurston, through her character, uses the style of storytelling to typify—just as Black Feminist theory supports—the growth of a Black woman from object to subject who knows her mind and power. Black Feminist theory maintains that “African-American women and other individuals in subordinate groups become empowered when we understand and use those dimensions of our individual, group, and disciplinary ways of knowing that foster our humanity as fully human subjects” (Collins, 1990, para. 27). More precisely, groups become empowered and move from object to subject when they resist hegemonic ways of thinking. In Janie's telling of her story, students, like Janie's friend, can evaluate self and grow in appreciation for others and of their own value and potential.

Similarly, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1994) is a novel that helps students to evaluate self and society's impact on individuals designated as the Other. Because of her life, Hurston would forge through her works a new path in African-American literature for successors like Toni Morrison. Born Chloe Anthony Wofford in 1931, in the small town of Lorain, Ohio, Morrison was the first Black woman to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993. Her award winning literature tends to chronicle small-town Black American life, employing

troubled characters that seek to find themselves and their cultural riches in a society which impedes such discovery.

*The Bluest Eye* (1994) is a novel that details the life of an eleven-year-old Pecola Breedlove—a poor, Black girl in America—who struggles for self-affirmation in a world that sets forth as normal Anglo-Saxon standards of beauty and middle-class status. Praying for blue eyes so that she is beautiful and accepted by society, Pecola develops an intense desire for blue eyes that becomes evident throughout the novel. She ravenously consumes three cups of milk from a Shirley Temple cup. Claudia, who is one of the main characters and is telling the story, notes: “We knew [Pecola] was fond of the Shirley Temple cup and took every opportunity to drink milk out of it just to handle and see sweet Shirley’s face” (Morrison, 1994, p. 23). Consequently, around the 1930s and 1940s, America was obsessed with the Shirley Temple look and everything that the look symbolized—innocence, beauty, middle-class, and the American dream.

Further evidence of Pecola’s longing to be normal and therefore accepted comes when she goes into the candy store to buy blue-eyed Mary Janes. The store owner looks at her without seeing her. Sensing his distaste and indifference, she is struck nearly speechless. When she hands him the money for the Mary Janes, “he hesitates not wanting to touch her hand” (Morrison, 1994, p. 49). This action further affirms Pecola’s inner feeling of worthlessness and degradation.

Pecola’s rape by her father at the end of the novel culminates a series of self-degrading instances. All these events contribute to the shattering of who she is,



and she falls victim to a kind of madness. As Claudia continues to tell the story, she notes:

The damage done was total. She [Pecola] spent her days, her tendrils, sap-green days, walking up and down, up and down, her head jerking to the beat of a drummer so distant only she could hear. Elbows bent, hands on shoulders, she flailed her arms like a bird in an eternal, grotesquely futile effort to fly. Beating the air, a winged but grounded bird, intent on the blue void it could not reach—could not even see—but which filled the valleys of the mind. (Morrison, 1994, p. 204)

Nature tells us that birds should fly, and Morrison equates Pecola to a bird that has lost its ability to fly. In trying to be the individual that society will accept, Pecola suffers a breakdown because her physical differences are designated as inferior or lesser (Feng, 1998). Kuenz (1993) notes that Pecola's breakdown marks the dissolution of boundaries between fantasy and reality, self and other, sense and nonsense. Pecola believes the spell that was cast by the magical doctor or conjure man she had visited earlier in the story had worked, and by the end feels that she has the bluest eyes ever.

Claudia says:

I even think now that the land of the entire country was hostile to marigolds that year. The soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers. Certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear, and when the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesce and say the

victim had no right to live. We are wrong, of course, but it doesn't matter. It's too late" (Morrison, 1994, p. 206).

When society does not allow for diversity and hardens its grounds to certain seeds because they are not the idealized ones, these seeds may not grow into the beautiful full flowers that they can be. Morrison uses literary and cultural devices or techniques of storytelling, images in nature, and conjuring in *The Bluest Eye* (1994) to urge society to view the impact that its disregard for cultural richness and diversity may have on individuals.

Hurston's and Morrison's novels detail stories of Black females searching for acceptance in a world that sets forth prescribed standards; in addition, these writers deliver a powerful message to the reader in that their works can help individuals to evaluate factors that shape their own lives. For this reason, writers such as Hurston and Morrison and many of their successors remain committed to delving into this theme of self-hood. "Sharing a common cause," as Black feminists purport, "fosters dialogue" (Collins, 1990, para. 47). Conversations between and among people help form coalitions across groups. Serving as a forum, the works of Hurston and Morrison become voices for women, especially African-American women. Weaving in practices of journeying, conjuring, and storytelling, these writers stylistically offer a vision of the human experience; moreover, they propose that the problems of self-affirmation remain topical in this increasingly complex world. Suggesting that in order to work toward a social healing, the authors and their works give individuals a safe place to talk about humanity and its impact on individuals designated as the Other.

## Ansa's Exploration of Self Through Literary and Cultural Traditions

Through her works, Tina McElroy Ansa also weaves in an integral point about selfhood. Because of her commitment to relaying a strong sense of self, Ansa allows her characters to defy conventional roles, thereby becoming models for the contemporary woman. As does Black Feminist thought, Ansa ventures to place African-American women, especially, at the center of analysis to raise consciousness. Through the medium of her books, Ansa focuses on the Black female's struggles to reject prescribed roles in order to find a greater authentic self. According to Wilfred Samuels and Clenora Hudson-Weems (1990), "authentic existence emerges from self-affirmation, from making choices that lead to self-ownership, rather than from a life of being-for-others" (p. 53). Drawing on Hurton's and Morrison's use of cultural and literary devices such as journeys, storytelling, and the nature-rooted elements, Ansa parallels but extends the self-hood motif, adding a supernatural variation of her own.

Hence, the focal point of this section reveals how Tina McElroy Ansa explores (with such stylistic literary zeal) the self-identity theme in her works to enable the African-American female to claim a powerful voice in a world that has historically silenced her. Like her foremothers, Ansa's stories are about exacting pilgrimages, nature-rooted guides, and inner awakenings. In her novels, she expands these ideas. In *The Hand I Fan With* (1996) (age appropriate for adults) and *You Know Better* (2002) (age appropriate for high school), her fantastical style stands alone.

In addition to incorporating a supernatural element, she also relies heavily on the need for a connection to nature. Nature is used as a means to help appreciate self, others, and the environment without being judgmental. Christian asserts: "According to Nature, birds should fly and young things should grow, but they cannot, if their instinctive need for love and freedom is deprived them" (1985, p.57). Specifically, nature can teach us to not stifle our own or someone else's instinctive needs. It can teach us to take a look at ourselves and others and enjoy the fragrance that each brings as we work toward harmonious connections. Christian notes that writers such as Morrison and Hurston use "metaphors derived from [images of nature] to emphasize the connection between the natural world and the possibilities of harmonious social order" (1985, p. 175). Just as Hurston's character "was stretched on her back beneath the pear tree soaking in the alto chant of the visiting bees" (Hurston, 1995, p. 183) and Morrison's character relays that "the land of the entire country was hostile to marigolds that year" (Morrison, 1994, p. 206), Ansa admires literature that connects people to a place and to the earth.

Near the opening of *The Hand I Fan With* (1996) (age appropriate for adults), main character Lena McPherson is disconnected from her inner self. She feels that she is under heavy obligation to comply with the preconceptions of the community: "To many folks, Lena McPherson was [the town of ] Mulberry" (Ansa, 1996, p. 22). After graduating from college with an economics degree, Lena has a knack for making money; she has a great amount of natural insight and imagination when it comes to business. When she returns to Mulberry (after

her parents are killed in a plane crash) to take over her father's business and puts her business sense into practice, she makes a fortune. She sends money to the needy, cares for the sick, lends money, buys and sells property for people, becomes the inheritor of many properties, and solves the problems of nearly everyone in town. The townspeople begin to think of Lena as the hand with which they fan. Without a thought, she tries to address the needs of the community while neglecting her own.

Because she lacks an inner satisfaction, Lena surrounds her outside life with superficial beauty. Ansa offers a description of Lena's property and home. She owns a mansion named "You Belong" in the woods on hundred acres. The house overlooks a river and has a pier and deck with a natural path extending through the woods and to the river. The lodge is set "smack in the middle of a huge stand of woods ... with a long winding road into the heart of the property from the main highway" (Ansa, 1996, p. 67). There are tall pine, pecan, oak, cherry, dogwood, and cypress trees throughout the property as well as wild azaleas and magnolias. A guest house and stables with several horses are situated on the property also. Evident by the purchase of this property, Lena is a nature lover; but it is not until the end that she comes to appreciate and understand nature and, ultimately, herself. She likes the beauty of the place but is not connected to it because she allows others to keep up the grounds. Lena serves as an observer of nature rather than an active participant in it.

Not completely oblivious to the importance of nature in her life, however, Lena knows her place is special: "From the beginning, Lena felt it was a blessed

place. From the moment she stepped foot on the property, she felt she belonged there” (Ansa, 1996, p. 71). As Lena and her best friend Sister walk the property for the first time, Sister describes it as a spiritual place: “It’s an ecotone, the overlapping of all these environments. It’s the best place for life to form. You know, like the Garden of Eden, the Tigris and Euphrates, the Nile Valley” (Ansa, 1996, p. 71). This foreshadowing indicates that the land will be the canal of Lena’s rebirth. Lena is beginning to realize the importance of the land and its inhabitants, but she still lives outside nature. She does not completely understand that nature is the totality of all existing things; it is the trees, birds, air, and soil. Just as Lena must learn that all of these elements are connected, society, too, must understand that communities and people are interconnected and “while individual empowerment is key, only collective action can effectively generate lasting social transformation of political and economic institutions” (Collins, 1990, para. 49). In order for schools and institutions to transform, individual ways of thinking must be changed. Therefore, there is an interconnection of what is within and what is external to the individual. For Lena, connecting with it does not mean collecting things (for Lena had many trees, etc. shipped in). It means internalizing that it is an interconnection between the individual and all the components of nature. At this point, Lena is lost and nature is lost to her because it is separate from her. In order to understand herself and her world, she must connect with and understand the land, air, water, and even the insects—nature as a whole.

In the middle of *The Hand I Fan With* (1996), Lena still has not connected with her land and herself because she is too busy attending to everyone else's needs. Superficially, Lena has it all; but below the surface, she is hollow. Delighting in the physical beauty of her land, she is still foreign to it because she spends most of her time working and taking care of others. Even with her charity, she realizes, however, she has very few people who love her unconditionally. She feels trapped by a community that looks to her for all its needs; therefore, she is unable to grow beyond just existing.

Like Hurston's Janie, Lena, too, has a main guide to help her move beyond just existing to construct who she is. When Lena and her friend conjure a man for Lena, Herman appears. He is a 100-year-old ghost that no one can see but Lena. Her essential guide, he is a fantastical element deeply rooted in nature. As she starts to open up to Herman, she begins to neglect her duties and responsibilities in town to spend more time with him and the property she purchased: "It was not that he forbade her to conduct her regular voluminous business dealings. It was just that his 'being' got in her way. His laughter got in the way. His invitations to explore her land got in the way" (Ansa, 1996, p. 246). He begins to teach her by affirming that to place the weight of the world on her shoulders is wrong: "'Lena baby, those people ain't in yo' hands. They in God's hands. And you ain't God'" (Ansa, 1996, p. 253). Herman also teaches Lena about her land:

Herman showed Lena things on her property. Stones washed down from the mountains by Cleer Flo'. Trees budding out of

season. Relics from previous civilizations and peoples. Jewelry made of animal bone and feathers. Unusual markings on Baby's [Lena's horse] stomach Lena had never noticed before. Gossamer silver snake skins discarded by growing reptiles. Lena began to walk on the very earth differently. (Ansa, 1996, p. 258)

Because of Herman, Lena's eyes and heart are opening to the beauty that surrounds her. This natural beauty engulfs Lena's being because she not only begins to see but also feel the natural delights of the environment.

Mirroring the efforts of Hurston's guide, Herman continues to teach her by showing her how to gather honey from hives of bees as well as pick sweet berries. Also, he teaches her how to survive on the land by interacting with and becoming part of nature rather than an observer of it: "Herman helped Lena *claim* her land, her spot of earth as her own. She thought she had already claimed it— plotting the buildings, surveying the land .... But Herman showed her she hadn't really *claimed* it. She couldn't do that until she *knew* the land and the spirit under it" (Ansa, 1996, p. 343). For Lena, knowing the land means getting her hands into the soil, smelling like the outside, reaping as well as sowing. Additionally, for African-American females especially, knowing and understanding self does not mean an involvement in a superficial and mis-representational literary curriculum, but immersion in one with an integrated focus to transform lives. In the novel, Herman guides Lena to become one with the outside, with nature. Just as Herman is trying to teach Lena to own herself, to claim herself, by becoming one with nature, Black Feminist thought "views the



world as a dynamic place where the goal is not merely to survive or to fit in or to cope; rather, it becomes a place where we feel ownership and accountability” (Collins, 1990, para. 49). In doing so, individuals like Lena become stronger in claiming and asserting individuality.

At the end of the novel, Ansa shows on one level that Lena is beginning to understand herself, but she also shows that Lena has progressed on a physical level: “She smelled like the earth. Like dirt. Like Herman. Like the rich black loam she brushed from under her nails each night. Like the dusty red roads out on her property when the rain showered down on their hard-packed surface and sent the scent of Georgia earth throughout the air” (Ansa, 1996, p. 358). Lena becomes physically a part of nature; she is more natural in her physical appearance: “She was surprised to see how toned and strong she looked when just a few weeks before she had remembered looking at herself naked in her grandmother’s old standing full-length mirror and seeing a different person” (Ansa, 1996, p. 351). On a physical level, her body is strong and vibrant.

Lena continues to notice how strong her body is: “Even the weak left ankle that had required her to wear an elastic brace from time to time seemed to have grown stronger over the last few months” (Ansa, 1996, p. 355). Working and learning the land, Lena has physically gained strength that she lacked before Herman; and even her weak ankle has healed. She possesses a coherence of body. Further enlightenment comes when Lena feels that she has defeated or made stronger the physical flaw that inhibited her growth. She views herself in a different light, which leads to an inner maturity.

Lena has grown stronger physically, and Ansa shows that Lena, after a year, is ready to embark upon the last phase of her awakening. Learning that Herman must leave her to go back to his ghost world, Lena grows frantic. “But the next moment, it hit her anew that Herman was really leaving her now, in the spring, with wisteria blooming and the jasmine and the honeysuckle about to break into a flower” (Ansa, 1996, p. 427). She does not realize that the season that Herman is leaving is representational of her psychological state. Serving as her teacher, Herman has completed his work; and Lena must find her own way and live for herself. Symbolically, she is the flower that is ready to face the world, stronger and forever changed.

When Herman leaves, a torrential rain storm begins. With its horrific winds, the storm initiates Lena’s final transformation. The gale force winds throw open doors and soak everything inside Lena’s home. Like the storm, Herman’s departure initiates havoc on Lena’s entire being. Playing a dual role, the storm symbolizes the baptism before her rebirth. Everything, including Lena, is being washed anew. At the same time that Lena’s house is being destroyed by the storm, Keba, Lena’s horse, begins to give birth to a colt in the stables. Because the storm washes away the bridge, Lena is unable to go for help. She must save Keba by delivering her colt. Afraid, Lena helps Keba by turning the breech colt around as her family of ghosts and Herman stand behind her giving moral support. As soon as Lena delivers the colt, “the furious storm passed so suddenly, leaving the air wet and warm and still” (Ansa, 1996, p. 450). Just as there is now calmness in the air, there is a tranquility in Lena’s life.

Although weak from the day's events, Lena is able to stand on her own. She realizes that there is a nearby post in the yard, "but she found she did not need the support" (Ansa, 1996, p. 452). The post and Lena's independence of it become symbolic of her triumph. The storm has passed, and there exists a peacefulness in her life. She has learned to slow down and claim many things—her own choices, her land, and herself. "The existence of [Black] feminist thought suggests that there is always choice, and power to act, no matter how bleak the situation may appear to be" (Collins, 1990. para. 49). Lena is transformed, and like the colt Lena is (re)born. She is baptized by the tides of nature and reborn of the earth, coexisting with its elements.

Establishing a personal relationship with the environment, Lena surfaces as a survivor. Attitudes about herself and her life have changed through a connection with the land. Christian (1985) asserts that because "Nature is a part of each human being, it is too complex to be categorized or wiped away. Thus society's perennial attempts to ignore the relationship between human beings and Nature result in waste, pain, and often death" (pp. 62-63). Nature ultimately propels the individual beyond simply existing; it affords each a passage to gaining the responsibility to pilot his/her own life. In the end, Ansa's Lena learns to go after and speak up and out for what she wants; she emerges: "Not as a martyr. Not as a widow. But as someone who had a life to live" (Ansa, 1996, p. 458). Nature, along with its guides, has become the power that awakens Lena. With symbolic representations throughout her novel, Ansa affirms that the use of nature and guides—these literary and cultural devices—embody the ultimate

forces that help her protagonist become conscientious of her authentic existence as she moves toward living.

Just as Lena finds her connection with nature and guides, individuals need to find a connection with something or someone, find what resonates with them, find what uplifts them, or find what brings them to a point of self-actualization. Audra Lorde proclaims: “My fullest concentration of energy is available to me ... only when I integrate all the parts of who I am, openly, allowing power from particular sources of my living to flow back and forth freely through all my different selves, without the restriction of externally imposed definition” (as cited in Collins, 1990, para. 27). For Lorde, the integration of her different selves brings about an inner energy and strength, which, I believe, can ultimately teach an understanding of self and a general understanding of others. Indeed, if students can gain knowledge of who they are and how they can declare their own voices and spaces in the world, they can garner the inner strengths to assert their individualities. And if students are allowed to bring into the classroom a confident, positive perception of who they are, without shame of being ridiculed, we create a safer environment, a safer space in the classroom to dialogue and communicate.

Appropriate for teens, Ansa’s novel, *You Know Better* (2002), addresses issues of self-hood as well. At a time in their lives when teens are trying to find their place in the world, guidance is most crucial. Ansa traces the life of an 18-year-old girl whose accumulation of negative images has impacted her perception of self and her view of the world and how she fits into that world.

Using the literary and cultural devices of journeying and guides, Ansa speaks to the current lost generation of youths (especially young African-American girls), tackling issues of low self-esteem, objectification, and distortions of self.

Ansa continues to use the small town of Mulberry, Georgia, as the 1997 setting for this cautionary novel. Raised by her mother and grandmother who are both respected in Mulberry, one of the main characters, LaShawndra Pines, is an 18-year-old girl who has dropped out of school, goes to parties and clubs frequently, does drugs, gives herself to many men, and calls herself, as well as have others, a “hoochie” and other degrading names. Her grandmother confesses:

I've tried for years to pretend that I did not hear what people said about her [LaShawndra]. I tried to ignore the fact that ...she slept around with just about anybody who would give her some attention for the night and pretend not to know her the next day at school, that at age fourteen she was slipping out of the house at night to go God-knows-where. That deep down she did not think anything of herself. That she judged her own self unworthy of love and esteem. That she casually called her own self a 'little ho.' (Ansa, 2002, p. 73)

She has no sense of who she is and allows her actions and perceptions of herself to be defined by others. Ansa notes in an interview that “women like me are having daughters who have no sense of self, but see themselves as essentially worthless” (Henderson, 1999, p. 68). Not thinking highly of her own

self, LaShawndra's desire is to be a dancer in a music video, to be objectified. She begins to associate with individuals who promise to help her in the music video business. Usually, the individuals do not care for her well-being and end up using and abusing her. One of individuals who promised to take her to Atlanta to Freaknik (a gathering where young girls usually ride topless through the streets of Peachtree) ends up burglarizing her and her roommate's home. Scared that she help cause the burglary, LaShawndra runs away by hitching a ride to Atlanta. She gets into the car of Eliza Jane Dryer, who is a ghost and old family friend; and the two journey on a back, scenic road to Atlanta.

One of the first things that Miss Eliza Jane does is simply listen to LaShawndra. As LaShawndra tells Miss Eliza Jane about her music video goals, she notes: "Miss Eliza Jane listened real serious and didn't make a face like Sandra [mother] and Mama Mama [grandmother] always do. So I felt good about going on" (Ansa, 2002, p. 209). Ansa makes an insightful point here in that before teens can be offered advice and recommendations, they must be listened to and feel that their ideas matter. Teachers, parents, and others must listen to the beat of the children's drum. Black Feminist theory expounds that part of claiming self is claiming a right to speak and to be heard.

Throughout the road trip, LaShawndra refers to herself and almost everyone else in degrading terms such as "hos" and "bitches." Miss Eliza Jane asks her not to use such degrading terms in her car. She demands: "Well, you're going to *have* to stop, Lil' Schoolgirl. Words are powerful. After a while, before you know it, you're going to start thinking that's all you and the people around

you are ...” (Ansa, 2002, p. 238). Expressing who we are, words—language—become a powerful tool. No doubt, images and actions relating to these words can validate who we become. Ansa makes a point that as long as attitudes remain, behaviors can not change. Like Ansa, Black Feminists agree that young girls need roles models, especially in a time when their greatest aspiration is to be a “hoochie,” more specifically to be objectified.

After hours of diving, talking, and listening, Miss Eliza Jane pleads with LaShawndra to return home to face up to what she has done because her life can be better and she can change if she respects herself and her family and friends. In the end, LaShawndra realizes: “I want something for my life. It may not be what everybody ...see for me but something just for me, *my life!*” LaShawndra learns that she must define her own life by first understanding that she is not a worthless person. Children must learn self-love and guidance from home, school, and other entities that are a part of their lives. Ansa writes of *You Know Better* (2002): “I hope it’s a cautionary tale. Because I believe that each of us has a responsibility to use whatever means we have at our disposal—and for me, that’s the forum of my books—to rescue the LaShandras<sup>2</sup> and all the rest of our children, because they are all our children” (1999, p. 68). Through the medium of works such as Ansa’s, parents and educators can help children, especially African-American girls, celebrate their spoken voices.

Literature can help lead to spoken voices in that it opens up the world and inspires individuals. Women like Hurston, Morrison, and Ansa inspire women to aspire by endorsing authentic ways of seeing self. Their characters become

voices for the voiceless and their writings, a looking glass for the world. Cheryl Wall (1989) writes: “As women ... we bring to our work a critical self-consciousness about our positionality, defined as it is by race, gender, class, and ideology. The position or place we are assigned on the margins of the academy informs but does not determine the positions or stances we take” (p. 1). Indeed, all of one’s selves—one’s intersections—can inform but does not have to adhere to the perceptions of others. Through the use of storytelling, journeying, guides, and nature, Hurston’s, Morrison’s, and Ansa’s literary and cultural traditions become ways of knowing—of knowing one’s past and constructing one’s future.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Tina McElroy Ansa: Because of her commitment to connecting the past to the present by integrating in her works themes and styles of her foremothers, by pushing the conventional boundaries through detailing a larger vision of experiences of life, and by empowering individuals through providing safe places to dialogue, I chose to focus in detail on Tina McElroy Ansa and two of her four novels. By focusing in detail on one author, I can present a stronger and more intricate analysis that is manageable, but at the same time provide a source for the young, teen and adult readers, especially the African-American female readers. Two of her three novels that are discussed in this study are *You Know Better* (2002), age appropriate for high school and *The Hand I Fan With* (1996), age appropriate for adults. These novels detail the protagonists in a small Georgia town moving from immaturity and being defined by others to a realization of self.

Born herself in 1949 in the town of Macon, Georgia, Ansa grew up as the baby of her family. She witnessed continuously her mother's love for reading and her relatives' love for storytelling, igniting in her a love for reading and storytelling. Ansa majored in English at Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia, and graduated in 1971. Ansa was the first Black woman to be hired by The Atlanta Constitution, where she worked for eight years, and later held jobs as copy editor, layout editor, entertainment writer, feature writer, and news reporter. Since 1982, Ansa has worked as a freelance journalist, columnist, and writing

workshop instructor at Spelman College, Emory University, and Brunswick College (“Tina McElroy Ansa,” 2006).

In 1989 Ansa's *Baby of the Family* was the Georgia Authors Series Award winner, was named a notable Book of the Year by *The New York Times*, and was on the African-American Best Sellers List for Paperback Fiction. Additionally, in 2002, *Baby* was on “The Top 25 Books Every Georgia Should Read”, which was a list published by the Georgia Center. Also, Ansa contributes on a regular basis to the CBS Sunday Morning Series with her essays “Postcards from Georgia.” In 2004, she founded the first annual Sea Island Writers Retreats on Sapelo Island, Georgia. This is a retreat for emerging and established writers. In 2005, Tina Ansa was named as recipient of the Stanley W. Lindberg Award, which is awarded for literary and cultural contributions to Georgia (“Tina McElroy Ansa,” 2006).

As well as the numerous lectures and workshops at libraries, colleges, and universities, Ansa has taken on several projects for the betterment of lives. One that is of particular interest to me and reveals Ansa's commitment to dealing with contemporary issues as they relate to self-empowerment is her Good Lil' School Girl Book Clubs that she has initiated around the country. Started four years ago, this foundation honors and assists women and young people in areas such as education, writing, publishing, career choice, volunteerism, and personal empowerment (“Tina McElroy Ansa,” 1997-2007).

<sup>2</sup> LaShandra: The interview was published in 1999 before the publishing of the book in 2002. Ansa stated that the book was a work in progress. This probably accounts for the difference in spelling of the name, which is “LaShandra,” during the interview to the spelling of the name, which is “LaShawndra,” by the time the book was completed and published.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSIONS

Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.

—Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

#### Summary

Because African-American female authors write to celebrate and rename Black women's experiences, they [just as King (2007) speaks about silence] are no longer silent. Rejecting pre-ordained notions, these women write to claim a presence in powerful realms of society such as educational institutions. In general, educational systems today exist to pass on ideologies that are held by mainstream society; hence many children are then excluded from the educational process. My personal justification lies in the belief that children should be included in the education process. And curriculum needs to be about understanding how diverse our students are and linking their worlds and the subject matter to make learning relevant.

Research-based literature suggests that African-American girls, particularly, suffer more from low self-esteem and distorted self-perceptions than their counterparts, thereby being positioned for lower level coursework, which ultimately impacts their future. Schools preserve dominant traditions by silencing the "Other" through educational reforms and reading lists that are disempowering. In addition, various forms of media perpetuate the existence of subservient experiences for African-American women, which adversely affects their perceptions of self and their views of their place in the world. However,

African-American female authors have become the “loud Black girls” of which Signithia Fordham (1993) speaks. She writes that “‘those loud Black girls’ is here used as a metaphor proclaiming African-American women’s resistance, their collective denial of, resistance to, their socially proclaimed powerlessness, or ‘nothingness’” (p. 25). These writers through their artistic literary approaches paint a picture of who they are and tell a story that reveals their being—physical, social, and emotional being.

Like Black feminists, African-American female authors find ways to articulate who they are and bring forward that consciousness to others. Moreover, Black Feminist thought amplifies the voices of Black women and women of color as it supports maintenance of these women’s self-worth. In the matter of education, Black Feminist thought is concerned with education that exists for social transformation. Indeed, education can change lives and function in emancipatory ways. William Ayers (2004) notes:

Education will unfit anyone to be a slave. That is because education is bold, adventurous, creative, vivid, illuminating—in other words, education is for self-activating explorers of life, for those who would challenge fate, for doers and activists, for citizens. Training is for slaves, for loyal subjects, for tractable employees, for willing consumers, for obedient soldiers. Education tears down walls; training is all barbed wire. (pp. 57-58)

Education needs to be about creating and becoming, it needs to be about bringing into being critical thinkers rather than trained drones, and it needs to be about understanding self and the diversity of human cultures.

Literature can be an education means that helps students understand people and celebrate differences we call humanity. From issues of encountering male domination in Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1995) to searching for the American beauty dream in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1994) to battling objectification in Ansa's *Hand I Fan With* (1996) and *You Know Better* (2002), African-American writers touch on "matters that until recently have been either marginalized within or excluded from not only discourse within and about literature, but education as well" (Taxel, 1991, p. 117). Coupled with the use of their thematic, stylistic, aesthetic, and conceptual approaches, these marginalized or excluded issues "provide young readers with a realistic sense of what the African American experience is today and has been in the past (Taxel, 1991, p. 117). Reading then begins to be not foreign to students as they move toward understanding that literature is about people's lives—lived experiences.

How then can the fiction of African American women encourage understanding of self and others as it impacts the current educational systems? Throughout this study, the fostering of self-understanding in curricular practices of today is addressed on three levels. First, the fiction of African-American women needs to be integrated into the current curriculum to help students peacefully coexist in the world. This body of literature can help students construct unbiased attitudes about people from different cultures and

backgrounds. By understanding the concerns, traditions, fears, and joys (in other words, the stories) of African-American females, other students can not only expand their worldview but also engage in principles of democracy and freedom in the classroom (Sims, 1983). They gain a broader perspective of human diversity.

Second, the fiction of African-American women can encourage Black females to name themselves, rather than being named by society. During a time of introspection and self-affirmation, Black children, particularly African-American females, “need in their fiction to see the world reflected in all its diversity, as well as to confirm the universality of human experience” (Sims, 1983- pp. 25-26). They need to hear themselves echoed and see themselves, too, reflected in the world to validate their own self-worth. In exploring and analyzing how female African-American authors contest social parameters and celebrate Black women’s experiences, the African-American female gains a truer understanding of who she is and her space in the world.

Third, the fiction of African-American women can encourage educators to open up possibilities for their students by discouraging traditional modes of teaching and thinking. “While traditional learning encourages the dominant discourse of cultural hegemony, critical literacy redefines the parameters of knowledge and power by making a space for oppressed voices to name their experience, reclaim their history, and transform their future” (Davis, 1998, p. 67). In order for educators to discourage traditional modes, they must first understand the framework of the student’s lived experiences in order to garner their trust to

join in on developing a community of learners. The fiction of African-American females can promote an understanding for teachers because it can encourage, in themselves and in their students, empowerment and cultural sensitivity as well as intellectual stimulation and development, which should be goals of education (Collier, 2000). Curriculum, indeed, needs to be about breaking away from traditional modes of teaching, thinking, and understanding because these conventional means disempower. Encouraging students to bring into the literature class varied interpretations of literature based on their own lived experiences not only empowers but also affects the future and enhances the reading of the past.

This study has relayed the precious power of differences and how literature can help to transcend those differences; the next step for stakeholders is to put these tools to work.

#### Significance of Study

In an increasingly complex and diverse world, this study is important and even timely because it seeks to expand our nation's literary heritage by offering educators a tool to work toward or an avenue to encourage more diverse literary studies in their classrooms. "By 2020, students of color will represent nearly half of the elementary and secondary population" (Gollnick & Chinn, 2002, p. 4). If schools do not develop a supportive learning environment, more and more problems will occur in our nation. Indeed, there is no one magical, quick fix to the violence in our schools; the alarming drop out rate of our nation, with Georgia having one of the highest rates of all states; or the ethnocentrism and the



lethargy in our classrooms. The problems are complex and require a complex array of solutions. One such solution to combat some of these issues is to affect a curriculum that is relevant to the lives of the students so that we uncover students' gifts and talents. While "knowledge about culture is but one tool that educators may make use of when devising solutions for a school's difficulty in educating diverse children," (Delpit, 1995, p. 167) this study serves then as a contribution to the conversation of cultural diversity in our nation. The contents of this study can penetrate the current educational infrastructure by expanding how students construct meaning about self and others. Furthermore, this study equips educators with a starting point, which they will need to help challenge the oneness in schools—one knowledge, one thought, and one truth—that is made to stand for all in education and society. This study affords educators an avenue to help them find those spaces for change.

#### Implications

It is my hope that this study is used as a springboard to broaden perspectives regarding teacher education programs as they relate to the teachers' roles in moving students from object to subject. Equipping educators begins with helping pre-service teachers and practicing teachers understand the dynamics of cultural diversity. In a world where projections of a widening achievement gap between minority children and their peers are increasing and where the number of culturally diverse students in classrooms is increasing, a curriculum—an understanding—is needed that challenges the conventional educational paths. Nonetheless, before the curriculum can change, there must

be a transformation in teacher assumptions about diversity. This study becomes a valuable resource in encouraging “reconceptualizing and transforming the professional preparation of teachers for culturally responsive pedagogy” (Gay, 2000, p. 70). It is my hope that this study adds to the multicultural conversation as it suggests that pre-service teacher preparation and in-service programs can help educators understand and celebrate America’s culturally diverse student population.

Undeniably, issues about our nation’s diverse student population that schools will face must be brought to the forefront. The 1998 Bureau of the Census (as cited in Gay, 2000) “predicted that they [people of color] would make up 38% of the nation’s population in 2025 and 47% in 2050” (p. vii). Therefore, cultural differences must be understood before they can be appreciated. Boykin (as cited in Bazron, Osher, & Fleischman, 2005) notes that the “cultural underpinning of schools in the United States is largely congruent with middle-class, European values” (p. 83). Although the composition of their student population is changing, schools adopt traditional ideas and practices because these are taught in undergraduate programs and are considered safe.

Many teacher preparation programs are designed to offer foundations of education courses, educational psychology courses, and courses related to areas of concentration. In these conventional programs, uniform training for prospective teachers pervade the courses, and teachers are taught to use learning materials and assessments that are usually determined by textbooks. In addition, these undergraduate or pre-service teachers are taught to instruct using

a lecture-based format and worksheets as well as conduct an occasional cultural diversity activity during the school year. Indeed, these courses are likely to focus on the application of principles and how to teach a specific subject but are “divorced from other factors that affect achievement such as culture, ethnicity, and personal experience” (Gay, 2000, p. 12). Fewer and fewer programs are apt to offer courses related to theory, research, and practice of culturally responsive teaching. Specifically, many teacher preparation courses do not prepare prospective teachers to empower their students through the students’ lived experiences. Intended to assist teachers in mastering content, traditional preparation programs remain lacking in helping teachers to create meaning in the lives of their students.

Helping teachers to aid students toward moving from object to subject needs to begin with altering preconceived notions about children who are designated as the Other. To transform enduring ideas, “teachers need to begin the process of becoming more caring and culturally competent by acquiring *a knowledge base about ethnic and cultural diversity in education*” (Gay, 2000, p. 70). To help teachers move their classrooms toward more inclusive learning environments, teacher programs must do a better job in preparing future and practicing teachers. Hence, the “educational systems need teachers who are trained to provide professional tasks in a wide variety of settings; teacher education must build a hierarchy of knowledge and experiences which extend the trainees’ cultural background” (Washington, 1981, p. 186). Practices and

academic strategies should be aimed toward empowering teachers to empower students through their own languages and their lived experiences.

Then, if pre-service courses and continuing education courses are reformed, educators (especially with the growing number of White middle class female teachers) could begin to think differently about the students that sit and will sit before them. For this reason, I hope that this study will encourage the enhancement of preparation and continuing education programs to assist educators in authentically confronting issues of race, sex, class, and gender. In addition, it is my hope that this study will help educators engage in programs where they can garner from them the value of diversity as they encourage their students to embrace self and others. To do so, a reformed conceptual framework is needed to lead pre-service teachers and practicing teachers toward becoming “more sensitive to issues of diversity through multicultural education and multicultural literature, a powerful medium for understanding the world in which we live” (Jetton & Savage-Davis, 2005, p. 31). More specifically, this study declares through using literature a commitment to hearing the voices of the voiceless in the classrooms.

How then can using literature in preparation and continuing education courses help teachers hear the countless and varying voices in their classrooms? This study affirms that literature can transform the lives of students. Furthermore, literature can also be used in educational training programs to alter assumptions about self and otherness and better equip teachers to teach students from varying racial and cultural backgrounds. Indeed, literature is one

way in which these [pre-service and practicing teachers] can begin to develop new meanings and conceptualizations of what diversity means” (Jetton & Savage-Davis, 2005, p. 31). Applebee (1992) notes that in literature classes teachers remain personally unfamiliar with certain titles of works and adopt what is considered safe. However, through authentically reading and analyzing the works of African-American women and other people of color in these pre-service and in-service courses, teachers can also gain an understanding of values, behaviors, and concerns of self and others. This in turn can help them to become more confident in teaching culturally diverse students as well as give them ideas on how to better construct a curriculum to link their students’ worlds with the subject matter at hand.

The outlook for schools depends on how well they respond to evolving realities in and beyond them. How well a school does in the future will be determined by factors such as undergraduate education or preparation programs and continuing education programs. Today, schools are working to combat criticisms of lethargic and monoculturalistic practices. This study brings to the forefront the disempowering nature of schools for students, especially African American girls, but offer hope to educators by suggesting pedagogy that seeks to understand diversity as it relates to self and others. Gollnick and Chinn (2002) affirm, “In developing an understanding of differences and otherness, we can begin to change our simplistic binary approaches of us/them, dominant/subordinate, good/bad, and right/wrong” (p. 11). Instead of devaluing or discounting others who are different, educators and other individuals can

move toward feeling comfortable about differences and sharing power by practicing empathy. Particularly, teachers must learn how to support culturally diverse classrooms if they are to help their students engage in learning and connect to schools.

It is my hope that this study articulates the precious power of differences. Moreover, I hope that on a global scale that the contents of this study help not only educators but also others to appreciate aspects of culture and values that shape other people's behaviors and attitudes. When we as a nation, as a world can appreciate the power of differences, the answer to conflicts will not always end in human sacrifice.

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## APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

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APPENDIX C

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL LETTER



Georgia Southern University  
Office of Research Services & Sponsored Programs

**Institutional Review Board (IRB)**

Phone: 912-681-5465

Administrative Annex

P.O. Box 8005

Statesboro, GA 30460

Fax: 912-681-0719

Ovrsight@GeorgiaSouthern.edu

**To:** Gayle Tremble  
1706 Windsor Rd, Statesboro, GA 30461

**cc:** William Reynolds, Faculty Advisor  
P. O. Box 8144

**From:** Office of Research Services and Sponsored Programs  
Administrative Support Office for Research Oversight Committees  
(IACUC/IBC/IRB)

**Date:** August 16, 2006

**Subject:** Status of Application for Approval to Utilize Human Subjects in Research

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After a review of your proposed research project numbered: **H07020**, and titled "**Discovering Self Through the Fiction of African-American Women**", it appears that your research involves activities that do not require approval by the Institutional Review Board according to federal guidelines.

*Therefore, as authorized in the Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects, I am pleased to notify you that your research is exempt from IRB approval. You may proceed with the proposed research.*

Sincerely,



Julie B. Cole

Director of Research Services and Sponsored Programs