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Contemplating and Extending the Scholarship on Children's and Young Adult Literature

Wanda Brooks¹ and Desiree Cueto²

Abstract

To commemorate the 50th anniversary of the *Journal of Literacy Research*, this article reviews the trajectory of a particular line of scholarship published in this journal over the past five decades. We focus on African diaspora youth literature to contemplate and extend the ways in which literacy researchers carry out textual analysis research of diverse children's and young adult literature. We situate this line of scholarship (and its trajectory) within the broader literacy field and then narrow to a focus on diverse books. Next, to turn our gaze as literacy researchers forward to the future, we present our own critical content analysis of a young adult text collection. Our analysis incorporates postcolonial theory and a youth lens to interrogate how underlying ideologies identified within the novels support, refute, or reconstruct dominant beliefs about Black girls. We end with a set of implications for researchers interested in theorizing about or further investigating diverse children's or young adult literature.

Keywords

African American children's literacy, critical content analysis, young adult literature

Serving as a school counselor in an ethnically diverse city in the Northeastern United States, D.C. (second author) learned that a number of Ethiopian and Jamaican girls disliked being mistaken for "Black American." African American girls, therefore, surmised that those groups thought they were "too good" to hang out with "regular Black girls."¹ Some of the Afro-Caribbean and African American girls spoke negatively about the girls from Ghana and Nigeria, commenting on their dress, speech, and bodies. In turn, the girls from West Africa used words such as "cotton pickers," in hushed tones, to label the other groups of Black girls. Despite each group's desire to separate itself from the others, many on the school's staff perceived them as indistinguishable, referring to them collectively as "the Black girls."

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Whether they were communicating in a language as recognizable as Standard English or as localized as Patois, “the Black girls” were too often viewed as a problem in the school where Desiree worked. Byfield, Denzer, and Morrison (2010) caution that when differences go unacknowledged, they threaten to subsume the expansive historical, geographic, and linguistic parameters of a diverse group. In this case, the categories of “Black” and “female” minimized the unique, individual, and cultural experiences the girls brought to school. The youth expressed feeling inferior in the school environment, both in terms of their intellectual capabilities and their physical appearance. The connection for them was clear: “It’s because we are the Black girls.” What also became evident was that the strife between the various groups was largely propelled by their desire to alter negative social constructions and to negotiate new identities for themselves.

Sutherland (2005) states that the “power inherent in representing oneself as complex is important for Black women’s identity construction” (p. 392), which she adds must be nurtured during adolescence. Unfortunately, few places within the school’s curriculum counterbalanced the one-dimensional images the girls struggled against. For example, there were a handful of books on the school’s reading lists with an African American protagonist, but most were biographies or historical fiction. There were no realistic representations of African or Afro-Caribbean cultures on those lists despite what culturally relevant curriculum theorists (e.g., Ladson-Billings, 2014) and multicultural children’s literature scholars such as Bishop (2007) have argued for decades:

. . . African American children’s literature can be affirming for children who have historically not found affirmation in classroom materials. It can also connect with other children of color whose life experiences in this society are tainted by the poison of racism and often marked by struggle. Reading such literature has the potential to help all students understand who we are today as a society and how we might become a better society tomorrow. (p. xiv)

Perhaps as a result of what was lacking in their curriculum, the girls in Desiree’s school struggled to fully appreciate the similarities and complexities shared across them as a group.

Inspired by these girls and others like them, our essay focuses on African diaspora youth literature² to contemplate and extend the ways in which literacy researchers carry out textual analysis research of diverse children’s and young adult literature. We situate this line of scholarship (and its trajectory) within the broader literacy field and then narrow to a focus on diverse books. To commemorate the 50th anniversary of the *Journal of Literacy Research (JLR)*, we rely heavily (but not exclusively) on research published within this journal. Next, to turn our gaze as literacy researchers forward to the future, we present our own critical content analysis of a young adult text collection. Our analysis incorporates postcolonial theory and a youth lens to interrogate how underlying ideologies identified within the novels support, refute, or reconstruct dominant beliefs about Black girls. We end with a set of implications for researchers interested in theorizing about or further investigating diverse children’s or young adult literature.

Contemplating the Scholarship

Three complementary and overlapping strands of extant literature make up the studies we reviewed. The first strand, *teaching and learning through culture*, reports on research about culturally congruent, responsive, and relevant literacy pedagogy. Next, *readers, responding, and diverse literature* narrow our focus to highlight explorations of readers' engagements with and interpretations of culturally relevant (or sustaining) curricula: African American and African children's or young adult books. Finally, the strand titled *complicating cultural representations* reviews textual analysis studies of youth literature from across the African Diaspora.³ Strands 1 and 2 focus on scholarship from *JLR* since the high number of studies published in this journal parallels the literacy field at large. However, in Strand 3, we include scholarship from other outlets to contextualize and augment the scant research on children's and young adult literature found in *JLR*. We provide in-depth descriptions of studies that serve as exemplars for each strand, and we limit our discussion to research that addresses Black K-12 students or African Diaspora youth literature.

Teaching and Learning Through Culture

During the mid-1990s, the literacy field published a significant number of studies about the ways teachers value and rely on students' cultures during literacy instruction. Several essays in *JLR* exemplified this trend by encouraging the readership to pay more attention to the strengths of students from varied backgrounds (Au, 1998; García, Willis, & Harris, 1998). For example, Au (1998) wrote about a diverse constructivist framework for building curricula that prepared teachers to work successfully in high-poverty communities. Teaching practices based on this framework included validating the language/knowledge children bring to school, using literature that celebrated children's heritage and promoted cultural understandings, and taking activist roles in questioning practices and policies that undermine children's achievement. In another compelling essay, García et al. (1998) anticipated a time when, "Tensions created by difference would not just be described, but analyzed, with the aim of confronting inequities and building on strengths" (p. 185).

Complementing these essays, *JLR* put forward compelling research that investigated instructional approaches to affirming ethnic or cultural diversity along with ending racial inequities within literacy pedagogy and curriculum (e.g., Ajayi, 2015; Dutro, 2002; Egan-Robertson, 1998; Fairbanks, 1998; Guthrie, Coddington, & Wigfield, 2009; Ives, 2011; Lazar & Offenber, 2011; Maloch, 2005; May, 2011; Perry, 2008; Rex, 2006). These studies explored readers' prior experiences, motivations, engagements, personhoods, and identities. Below, we describe three investigations that exemplify this line of scholarship.

Maloch (2005) carried out a study of the participation patterns of two third-grade African American boys and found that they were most active during the literature discussion portion of their school day. However, difficulties with reading impeded their ability to participate effectively. Maloch (2005) argued that the boys' life experiences

afforded them particular kinds of capital but not necessarily the kinds of capital privileged in school, especially in the literacy events she studied. With their teacher's instructional support, the boys eventually learned to navigate the discourse and interactions with peers during those times and became legitimate participants in the discussion groups.

Similarly, May's (2011) article explored how a middle grades classroom teacher made her literacy instruction more critical, in part, by incorporating social studies topics. May argued that teachers should recognize that students bring languages and literacies acquired in homes and communities into the classroom and structure classroom activities in ways that allow students to build on what they already know. This will enable teachers to influence student learning in more powerful ways. However, she acknowledged that teachers may know little about their students' home practices, which continues to be a growing issue. While our nation's schools have become increasingly diverse, teachers' considerations of the funds of knowledge students bring into the classroom (Gonzalez et al., 1995) and their ability to integrate that knowledge into curriculum and practices lags behind. Findings from this study revealed that powerful opportunities for learning can arise and flourish in flexible classroom spaces that build on students' interests, backgrounds, and traditions.

In the next study, Ajayi's (2015) work with a group of girls in Nigeria highlights African diasporic connections across literacy teaching and learning as a more recent area of interest for *JLR*. Ajayi discussed how antiquated reading instruction in Nigeria's schools has contributed to a more than 50% dropout rate for female students. Instead of continuing to focus primarily on grammar, Ajayi called for the integration of multimodal literacy practices that draw on students' home literacies (p. 217). His study showed that, with access to Internet technology, female students were better able to engage in critical issues such as sexism, religion, and politics.

Together, these studies remind literacy researchers and educators about the importance of using students' home lives, cultural backgrounds, and funds of knowledge as bridges to the literacy curriculum. At the same time, the ability of teachers to fully know students (across varied memberships and evolving cultural groupings) comes with its own assumptions and unanticipated difficulties. The research also reveals how studies about Black youth include participants who come from the United States and those living outside of it (e.g., Nigeria). When designing curriculum for use in culturally relevant or sustaining ways, educators must possess deep and complex understandings of the intersectional and global identities of today's youth.

Readers, Responding, and Diverse Literature

While the research above draws on students' home literacies and researchers discuss culture as an asset rather than a deficit, we now turn to curriculum studies that foreground students' ways of responding to curricula designed to represent culture. We specifically focus on African American or African children's and young adult literature (including excerpted stories from basal readers or literary anthologies). As early as 1972, *JLR* published a study about the influences of ethnic group depictions on

students' reading comprehension titled "Multi-Ethnic Reading Texts: The Role of Inferred Story-Character Identification and Reading Comprehension" (Messmore, 1972). In this forward thinking article, Messmore asked whether "children need specific stories with which they can identify before effective reading can occur" (p. 126). This line of inquiry evolved over many decades. Beyond Messmore's examination of comprehension, scholars currently research how readers' identities, motivations, and cultural knowledge or experiences influence responses to the stories they read.

Athanases (1998) conducted a yearlong ethnography that examined two urban 10th-grade English classes of ethnically diverse students in which the teachers introduced multicultural literature selections (p. 273). The author found that most students appreciated opportunities to read and discuss books about other cultures and those that represented what they had experienced in their own lives, although some students shared reservations. For example, one Black student reported feeling "highly engaged" in reading African American authors' texts, stating that she "felt a growing sense of pride in her heritage" (p. 284). However, a biracial student reported that she "may have felt discomfort in [a Black character's] victimization" (p. 291).

A study by Möller and Allen (2000) also pointed to the necessity to historicize books and to support students as they engage in difficult discussions, particularly those surrounding racial violence. The authors analyzed a literature group that developed when four fifth-grade girls, three African American and one Latina, transacted with Mildred Taylor's (1987) *The Friendship*. Their findings revealed that themes of the literature (racism/Ku Klux Klan) as they "intersected with" participants' lives "left little room for a safe place" (p. 179). The girls in this group became fearful about the past and present, and the authors recognized the need to create safer spaces for students to grapple with potentially difficult themes. Advancing a significant concept of engaged resistance, this study illustrated the different ways in which similar ethnic group members can hold and express a variety of responses to cultural representations in texts, particularly when they present past historical traumas.

Connecting to the idea of safe spaces, Sutherland (2005) found that beyond the classroom, African American girls felt more comfortable engaging in critical reflections about Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970). She explored the experiences of six high-school-aged girls within a heterogeneous classroom context. Sutherland wondered whether there might be the potential for deeper engagement with the issues presented in the book outside of the classroom setting. She found that the girls were more willing to comment on Eurocentric standards of beauty and the language choices made by the characters during individual interviews and focus group conversations, which she facilitated outside of the broader classroom context. Sutherland attributed her findings to the potential consequences the girls may have faced if they risked sharing personal connections to the book in the presence of their teacher or peers. She also felt that the girls were more willing to speak candidly with her in her role as a researcher because she sought to "help teachers to learn more about what African American girls think about and talk about as they read and write about literature that is by and about African American women" (p. 379).

Finally, Henry (1998) documented a weekly reading and writing workshop specifically designed for 14- and 15-year-old African Caribbean girls. The primary text used

in the workshop was Hunter's (1992) *The Diary of Latoya Hunter: My first year at junior high*, a book about a 12-year-old Jamaican-born girl who struggles to get along at home and at school in New York. She developed this workshop because she found that traditional literacy instruction hindered rich discussions about issues that were relevant to Black girls' academic and social lives. Henry grounded her study in Black feminist theory and the notion of "coming to voice." Other issues that surfaced during the workshop were prompted by high-profile news stories and conversations taking place within the local community. Henry found that within the workshop space, the girls engaged in "transgressive speech" or speech that challenged oppressive systems and constructions of their identities (p. 236). Henry's focus on African Caribbean teenagers stands out because the definitions and cultural practices of Black girls in the United States included those from African diasporic³ geographical regions.

As shown through these studies, sometimes diverse books enabled the Black youth to "come to voice," see themselves or others, and become deeply invested in the stories and their characters, while, at other times, readers displayed an engaged resistance or moments of feeling silenced. They also sought comfort in safe spaces where they could discuss long-standing racial stereotypes or racialized trauma. Furthermore, when considering book selections, educators and literacy scholars have taken into account demographic shifts as well as the heterogeneous nature of ethnicity and culture for U.S. youth and those living transnationally. Readers' engagements with and deep interpretations of diverse literature can refute unproblematic expectations that derive from simplistic or essentialist views of ethnicity or culture.

Complicating Cultural Representations

While attending to readers' responses in the studies above, for the most part, researchers did not carry out in-depth examinations of the literature itself. Some researchers, however, carry out in-depth textual analysis of diverse children's and young adult literature as distinct from its role in reader response or literacy instruction. Only one study recently published in *JLR* stands out in that regard (Dentith, Sailors, & Sethusha, 2016). Below, we place this investigation within scholarship found outside of *JLR*.

Since the early 1980s, literacy scholars have sought to define and solidify the African American children's literary tradition (i.e., Bishop, 2007; Johnson, 1990; Sims, 1982). In 1990, Bishop put forward the metaphor of mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. This popular metaphor makes an eloquent case for diverse children's and young adult literature:

Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created and recreated by the author. When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books. (Bishop, 1990, p. ix)

Bishop's body of work laid the foundation for scholars to examine a range of issues related to youth literature about Black culture—from its history (Harris, 1993; Tolson, 2008), to definitions and categorizations (Sims, 1982), its emerging authors, illustrators, genres, and trends (Bishop, 2007; McNair, 2008; Smith, 2001), along with its role as a cultural and literary artifact (Brooks & McNair, 2009).

Complementing this trajectory, researchers have studied the history and content of African children's and young adult literature (Khorana, 1994; Yenika-Agbaw, 2008). However, this scholarship remains sparse. Khorana (1994) writes about the scarcity of research through the 1990s, particularly of African representations in youth literature, which left a gap in scholarship. Khorana's own bibliographical essay attempts to address this gap by raising questions about "an authentic voice in postcolonial African children's literature" (p. x). In her work, Khorana evaluated selected children's and young adult books from the continent of Africa. She outlined economic and social forces that prevented the development of an authentic voice within these books. Khorana noted that African writers have had to confront the dilemma of writing fully from their own perspectives and languages or modifying and translating to reach a broader audience. Her research, therefore, brought forth issues related to assimilation, imperialism, and the imprint of Western ideals on traditional African storytelling motifs.

Khorana's work was followed by that of Yenika-Agbaw. In *Representing Africa in Children's Literature: Old and New Ways of Seeing*, Yenika-Agbaw (2008) conducted a content analysis of West African children's literature published between 1960 and 2005. Her text set consisted of a diverse group of authors, including those of African and non-African descent, whose works portray Africa, Africans, and African traditions. Considering the value of sharing such works with youth, Yenika-Agbaw questions whether the authors "capture the complexity of their experiences as Africans, children, and human beings" (p. xvii). Similar to Khorana, Yenika-Agbaw found that writers, including some West African writers, construct stereotypes in their work. She posits that Africa continues to be represented as a spiritually mysterious continent—one that is either "barbaric and primitive" or "natural and romantic" (p. 8). Set largely within jungles, these books portray Africans as sharing the land with animals, with whom they must compete for food. Along with the troublesome narratives that Yenika-Agbaw (2008) outlines in her study, she maintains that

... because the majority of African children may not have access to these books, they are denied the opportunity to examine these cultural experiences and either agree with the depiction of their culture, or question/challenge inappropriate images of themselves that they may find. They therefore remain doubly marginalized. (p. xvi)

Furthermore, across both African American and African youth literature, theoretically and methodologically, scholars increasingly rely on intersecting theoretical frames and critical analytic approaches to better capture the historical, political, global, and heterogeneous nature of Black culture. For example, several important studies that exemplify these trends explore the images and messages conveyed with respect to Black girlhood (e.g., Brooks, Sekayi, Savage, Waller, & Picot, 2010; Dentith et al., 2016; Rountree, 2008).

In *Just Us Girls*, Rountree (2008) examined themes presented in eleven contemporary young adult novels with African American authors and protagonists. She found that Black women writers address the same themes of racism, classism, and sexism, whether they are writing for adults or for adolescents. Rountree (2008) considered how the novels' authors portray the subjects of race, class, and gender, and how protagonists deal with these issues:

Perhaps, because the root causes of these primary issues such as racism and sexism are so deeply entrenched in social, political, and economic institutions and society in general, these issues are never "solved" in literature or real life but are psychologically "managed" by African Americans . . . The function of African American children's and young adult literature is to teach young African Americans how to deal with these issues, not necessarily solve them, so that racism and sexism do not hinder their lives irrevocably. (p. 2)

Rountree maintained the complexity of Black female identity and, therefore, argued that literature must address their unique concerns and needs. She found that contemporary works in this genre mirror those of early Black writers in function but have continued to evolve in content. Specifically, she highlighted this evolution in the works of more current young adult authors: Mildred Pitts Walter, Rita Williams-Garcia, Rosa Guy, Virginia Hamilton, Candy Dawson Boyd, Deborah Gregory, and Jacqueline Woodson. By closely examining works by these authors, Rountree identified how these authors focus on such topics as identity, family ties, ethnic authenticity, African American Vernacular English, interracial friendships/relationships, death, celebrity, commercialism, and consumerism that open new spaces for discussion.

More recently, Brooks et al. (2010) utilized Black feminist theory alongside Spencer's identity-focused, cultural ecological (ICE) theory (Swanson, Spencer, & Petersen, 1998) to examine how writers represent the heterogeneity of Black, urban-teenaged girls in school-sanctioned African American young adult texts. The authors contend that a Black feminist framework provides a "critical perspective through which we can make sense of symbolic textual representations" (p. 10). At the same time, they write that ICE depicts an identity development theory that allows for the consideration of adolescents whose circumstances and experiences fit outside of the traditional norm. While previous researchers have embraced the argument that adolescents are looking to read about themselves in literature, this team questions the problem of assuming that, within African American young adult literature, there are adequate portrayals to be found for all Black girls. Brooks et al. analyzed the works of award-winning Black American authors: Jacqueline Woodson, Rita Williams-Garcia, Sharon Flake, Nikki Grimes, and Sharon Draper. They found that the protagonists' textual heterogeneity manifested across the texts through four enactments of identity: intellectual, physical, kinship, and sexual. They also conclude that these four enactments of identity intersect within the matrix of racial, class, and gender oppression.

Finally, *JLR* recently published an article by Dentith et al. (2016) titled, "What Does It Mean to Be a Girl? Teachers' Representations of Gender in Supplementary Reading Materials for South African Schools." This qualitative study took up a

familiar but now global issue about depictions of both ethnicity and gender in South African curriculum. This study used critical content analysis to examine books written by cultural insiders (mainly Black, female South Africans). Dentith et al. (2016) selected “books that represented features of realistic fiction; that is, stories that focused on the fidelity of life” (p. 402). Key themes that emerged include (a) female characters were multifaceted, (b) relationships matter to female characters, and (c) female characters are valued members of society. The authors conclude,

The image of the vital Black African women, whose strength and worthiness were hidden in apartheid society, are revealed here in the (re)presentation of strong, capable women leaders able to resolve problems, be assertive, and harness the political clout to care for themselves, their families and others in society. This reemergence of a multifaceted Black woman resonates with the work of contemporary African feminists in which new language and practices reflect a new positioning of women and feminism across the continent. (p. 415)

For the past few decades, a growing number of Black adolescent female protagonists have emerged in texts to further validate the Black girlhood experience. The studies reviewed demonstrate that Black girlhood is not a universal or singular experience but a broad spectrum of experiences. Contemporary young adult novels from the African diaspora complicate the Black female experience, the diaspora experience, and adolescence in ways that scholars are now just beginning to deeply examine.

A Critical Study of African Diaspora Youth Literature

Informed by this prior research and how the adolescent girls from our introduction struggled to display their layered and complex identities, our study (a critical content analysis of a text set from across the African diaspora) advances this line of scholarship. Research that openly takes a political stance toward reading children’s and young adult books can be situated within the growing spectrum of critical content analysis research. Johnson, Mathis, and Short (2017) explain that, “Critical content analysis differs from content analysis in prioritizing a critical lens as a frame for the study” (p. 5). We asked the following research question: How do texts, written by Black women, depict the developing identities of Black adolescent girls across the African diaspora?

Postcolonial Theory and a Youth Lens

Postcolonial theory traces its roots to the work of Franz Fanon and the 1963 publication, *The Wretched of the Earth*. However, it grew into a field of study primarily through the work of Edward Said (1978/1979) and his publication of *Orientalism*. Today, the theoretical definition of the term *postcolonial* varies across such disciplines as philosophy, literary criticism, and social sciences. For the purpose of our research,

we define a postcolonial framework as one of resistance that encompasses “all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2002, p. 2). With this, we consider the effects of colonization on the African, Afro-Caribbean, and African American protagonists. While all three groups did not experience territorial colonization like Africans on the African continent, they nevertheless “still can be claimed as victims of internal colonization, including forced migration, dispossession, slavery, economic exploitation, cultural repression, political disenfranchisement, and genocide” (Cotten & Acampora, 2007, p. 14).

There are a number of ways in which postcolonial theory can be utilized to read (and analyze) children’s and young adult books from across the African diaspora. However, given our focus on Black girlhood, we offer an analysis of the protagonists’ experiences primarily based on the work of Carole Boyce-Davies (1994/2007). In *Black Women, Writing, and Identity*, Boyce-Davies articulates a specifically gendered notion of diaspora that remains an unparalleled study of Black women’s writing. Specifically, she introduces the term *migratory subjectivity*, meaning that Black women’s subjectivity exists and is shaped by as well as in multiple locations and positions. Her work frames our belief that Black women’s writing should be read as “a series of boundary crossings, and not as a fixed, geographically, ethnically or nationally bound category of writing” (p. 4). Our critique of such concepts as home/place, identity, and power derives from reading the protagonists’ migratory experiences. Furthermore, we look at how authors present complexities, even within the diaspora, based on historical and colonial circumstances.

At a second level, our analysis examines how Black girlhood is constructed under the category of age. Interrogating social constructions related to adolescence in books written by Black women adds a new dimension to the reading of these texts. Recently, Petrone, Sarigianides, and Lewis (2015) introduced a youth lens to broaden the investigation of social constructs of age in literature. According to them, a youth lens allows readers to identify how “texts reinforce and/or disrupt various figurations of adolescence and youth” (p. 511). Grounded in youth studies, a youth lens serves to confront broadly held beliefs of adolescence as a turbulent life stage. In our analysis, we pull from the idea that adult assumptions about adolescents have consequences (Petrone et al., 2015). By including the youth lens, our research not only seeks to examine how the teen protagonists are treated and represented in novels but also how teen readers might be positioned by the adult authors and publishers of these books.

Method

Data collection. Data consisted of the full texts from three young adult novels written across the African diaspora: Coe Booth’s (2008) *Kendra* (set in the United States), Nana Ekuia Brew-Hammond’s (2010) *Powder Necklace* (set in London/Ghana/transnational), and Lynn Joseph’s (2013) *Flowers in the Sky* (set in the Dominican Republic). The novels were selected based on the following criteria: (a) the connection of the protagonist to a particular region of the diaspora; (b) written by a Black female author

and features a Black female pre/teen protagonist; (c) the book's classification as contemporary realistic fiction, published since 2010; and (d) the author's literary awards, or affirmative recognition within the cultural group the book represents.

Rationale and summary of text set. Although we did not focus on actual responses to literature in our study, the consideration of potential readers remained at the forefront for us as researchers. Each time we read a protagonist in the text set, we imagined how she might be understood by a real girl—Who might find a connection with her? Who might she frustrate? Who might she inspire? While we knew that every Black girl would not relate to each novel in this text set, we expected that a broad cross-section of Black girls would identify with the protagonists in terms of their aged, raced, gendered, and classed locations. When selecting the literature, we considered what Black girls of the millennial generation might learn from the protagonists in our text set. The books chosen for our analysis embodied the potential to accurately reflect the experiences of Black girlhood for Black girl readers (mirrors), provide a context for non-Black girls to witness the lived experiences of others (windows), and for girls to vicariously live through the experiences shared in the books, regardless of their backgrounds (doors). Rosenblatt (1995) writes, “Literature permits something resembling ideal experimentation because it offers such a wide range of vicarious experiences” (p. 190). For Rosenblatt, the power inherent in literature is that it helps readers imagine and articulate new ways of being in the world.

We engaged young adult books from across the African diaspora in dialogue with one another to examine issues faced by a range of Black girls. The decision to analyze works set in three different regions of the African diaspora as well as to carefully select novels that presented various viewpoints and experiences reflects an effort to investigate the similarities and points of continuity as well as differences across the set of books. To do this, texts were chosen connected to Ghana, England, the United States, and the Dominican Republic based on the clear lines of connection that could be drawn across these locations. The Gold Coast (now Ghana) was a major slave embarkation point. To this day, African American and Afro-Caribbean tourists and scholars travel to Ghana to pay homage to the birthplace of their ancestors, the motherland. Likewise, when searching for novels about the Afro-Caribbean experience, we located an interview in which author, Lynn Joseph, referred to Samaná (setting, *Flowers in the Sky*) as an African American settlement in the Dominican Republic. There were also statistical records of mass migrations from the Dominican Republic to New York (setting, *Kendra*) and from Ghana (setting, *Powder Necklace*) to England. Our research also responds to the call of Yenika-Agbaw and Napoli (2011) to “pair books about Africans with books about African Americans, in classrooms, especially those that explore similar themes and issues” (p. xiv). We present a brief plot description of the following three novels:

Lynn Joseph's (2013) *Flowers in the Sky* follows the journey of 15-year-old Nina Perez who has lived most of her life with her widowed mother in Samana, Dominican Republic. When her mother fears that she is taking interest in German tourists, Mami sends Nina to live in New York with Nina's older brother. On arrival in New York,

Nina discovers that her brother's life is far from what she and Mami envisioned. She longs to return home. Instead she finds that she must form new connections and learn to survive on her own.

Nana Ekua Brew-Hammond's (2010) *Powder Necklace* is based on the life of Lila Adjei, a 14-year-old girl of Ghanaian descent who is being raised by her divorced mother. Lila was born in Ghana but has lived most of her life in London. At the start of the novel, Lila's mother sends her back to Ghana to avoid the negative influences of boys. Lila lives in Kumasi for a short time with extended family, then later moves to the Dabada boarding school, and then eventually relocates to the United States with her father. She continues to travel between the United States, Ghana, and England, sharing parts of an identity, developed in each location.

Coe Booth's (2010) *Kendra* is about a 14-year-old African American girl from Bronxwood, New York whose mother, Renee, was only 14 when she gave birth to Kendra. For most of Kendra's life, she has lived in the projects with her grandmother, while Renee pursued various degrees—the last being a PhD from Princeton. After the graduation ceremony, Kendra believes that Renee will finally be ready to take responsibility for her. But she is not. It is not until after Kendra is thrown out of her grandmother's house on suspicion of sexual activity, that Renee reluctantly takes her in. Kendra faces some harsh truths that force her to question her place in the world.

Data analysis. We analyzed the text collection with the intention of explicating the ways that Black women writers speak to the realities of Black girls' lives. We employed the qualitative research method of critical content analysis to examine this text collection. First, based on Bradford's (2009) process for critical content analysis, we situated the books within a particular historical, social, and political context as a top-down analysis. Inherent to these contexts were social and cultural norms reflective of the histories of colonialism and slavery. We read the text set in tandem with the postcolonial scholars Boyce-Davies (1994/2007), Gilroy (2000), Bhabha (1994), and Hall (1997), paying specific attention to ideas of home/place, identity, and an imbalance of power that are central to this framework. Likewise, youth studies scholarship put forth by Lesko (2001/2012), Graham (2004), Mead and Métraux (2001), and Fine (1993) informed our understanding of power relationships between the teen protagonists and the surrounding adult community in the novels.

We read the novels repeatedly and closely and made notes in the margins wherever key ideas or issues were raised. We chunked the data (White & Marsh, 2006), breaking it "into units for sampling, collecting, and analysis and reporting" (p. 29). We then reread each book with a focus on passages dealing with the protagonist's age and forced migrations. Emerging from this, we identified and coded initial patterns, which revealed the characters' perceptions of Western prosperity and ideas about opportunities elsewhere, as well as the characters' personal goals and options for achieving those goals within their own communities.

A common element across the set of books was that they all featured protagonists who were Black, adolescent, and female—members of the three most marginalized groups in the world (Crenshaw, 1991; Lesko, 2001/2012). The bottom-up approach to content analysis centered on an examination of how books from across the African

diaspora might reframe dominant discourses and create a perspective on knowledge development that reflects multiple social locations. When we revisited the texts in this phase of the process, we clustered codes into major or minor categories. As a merger of the major categories, we developed five themes that cut across the set of books.

Dependability. Bradford (2009) writes, “The most powerful way to understand Indigenous beliefs and narrative practices is to consult Indigenous people” (p. 15). In this same spirit, we consulted a group of 10 Black girls, ages 14 to 17 throughout the research process as a form of modified member checking (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The group, referred to as the insider panel, possessed characteristics similar to the protagonists in the novels—almost all of them lived in single mother households; seven were African American, two had emigrated from West Africa, and one reported having Afro-Caribbean ancestry. Although we obtained consent from the girls, their role was not to provide data for the study but to serve as a source of corroboration on Black adolescent perspectives. The insider panel met four times. The group’s insights and feedback were immensely helpful with regard to contemporary and cultural issues. The girls also gained new awareness of their own positioning (with respect to race and gender) as they served in this role. Furthermore, talking to the girls sometimes invoked a (re)consideration of certain codes and alternative thematic explanations of the data.

Findings: An Illustrative Theme

Regardless of their location, members of a diaspora share an emotional attachment to their ancestral land, are cognizant of their dispersal and, if conditions warrant, of their oppression and alienation in the countries in which they reside . . . and sometimes articulate a desire to return to their original homeland . . . No diasporic community manifests all of these characteristics or shares with the same intensity an identity with its scattered ancestral kin. (Palmer, 2000, p. 29)

The characteristics that historian Colin Palmer (2000) defines align with our findings, along with his notion that these characteristics are articulated differently across diasporic groups. Below (and because of space limitations), we present one of the themes developed from this inquiry (see Cueto, 2015 for descriptions of additional themes). We chose the theme of *(be)coming home* because it exemplifies the ways in which forced physical migrations away from home challenged each of the protagonists to, once and for all, wrest their identities from oversimplified categories of age, race, gender, and class. As Boyce-Davies (1994/2007) explains,

the re-negotiating of identities is fundamental to migration as it is fundamental to Black women’s writing in cross-cultural contexts. It is the convergence of multiple places and cultures that renegotiates the terms of Black women’s experience that in turn negotiates and re-negotiates their identities. (p. 3)

(Be)coming home captures how each protagonist used her migratory journey to find, define, and empower herself against the currents of age, race, class, culture, and

gender constructions. This theme also illustrates how each protagonist comes to terms with the circumstances surrounding her forced separation from home. As explained by Avtar Brah (1996),

The word diaspora invokes the imagery of traumas of separation and dislocation, and this is a very important aspect of the migratory experience. But diasporas are also potentially the sites of hope and new beginnings. They are contested cultural and political terrains where individual and collective memories collide, reassemble and reconfigure. (p. 193)

Writing out of a tradition of African diaspora young adult literature, the authors of the texts we examined portrayed the struggles their protagonists face as they continue through adolescence while time trying to orient themselves to unfamiliar places and cultural norms, and the ever-shifting realms of power relations. Finally, it is through this theme that we see how the homes that the protagonists created for themselves after migration and re-departure reflected their processes of becoming their own persons. We illustrate the ways in which this theme instantiates itself in each of the books we examined below.

Flowers in the sky. Following in the tradition of Afro-Caribbean writers, author Lynn Joseph (2013) presents the idea of liminality or existing within an in-between space (Bhabha, 1994/2000, Boyce-Davies, 1994/2007) in *Flowers in the Sky*. After being sent from the Dominican Republic, Nina's initial encounters with her new surroundings are jarring. In describing her first introduction to New York, it is just as Nina fears: "Moving steps. You have to jump on fast or you will get left behind, or worse, eaten by the giant metal snake they call an escalator" (p. 31). Here, the escalator becomes a metaphor for the shift in Nina's identity and also in her relationship with Mami. Her sense of self is immediately shaken, as her identity seems caught between her original home and her foreign, exilic home.

Nina's feelings about migration are indicative of what Boyce-Davies refers to as an in-between space that is neither here nor there. She is alienated in her new home and longs to return to the familiar, but she knows that going back is impossible. To make matters worse, Nina discovers that the financial stability she and her mother enjoyed in the Dominican Republic contrasts starkly with her brother's apartment in New York. Moreover, she comes to recognize her mother's selfishness and carelessness. Nina explains, "Mami never once asked Darrio how he earned all the money he sent us . . . Darrio never talked about it either. Ignorance wasn't so blissful. Ignoring the truth meant accepting the lies of your reality" (p. 90).

As *Flowers in the Sky* (Joseph, 2013) progresses, it becomes clear that Darrio is in fact engaging in illegal activities, and he is eventually sent to prison. Even after this happens, Nina's mother does not send for her. Instead, she signs her over to the care of an older woman, Señora Rivera, who agrees to house, feed, and clothe Nina but ultimately becomes her second mother. Boyce-Davies (1994/2007) explains, "In the spatial meaning-expansion of home, female elders are crucial links in its rewriting . . . They become specifically gendered ancestral links in terms of knowledge of healing

arts, survival skills . . . nurturing, re-membling” (p. 127). It is Señora Rivera who convinces Nina that she must embrace Washington Heights as her home, and even shows her how. Nina shares,

I asked Señora Rivera, “How do you find a way to be happy in New York if you miss everything back home?”

“The heart always finds its way if you let it. But you have to be here,” she stressed. “Not far away on the island,” she said, pointing to her head.

“Okay, I’ll try to love it here,” I said.

“No,” said Señora Rivera, “don’t try to love it. Just look to see what there is to do right in front of you, instead of missing what you cannot do back home.” (p. 116)

It is during her time with Señora Rivera that Nina comes to terms with who she is: “In this new world, people were not at all what they appeared to be . . . I wished I could go back to my simple walks on the *malecón* with Mami. But that girl was gone forever” (p. 108). Although Nina never physically returns home, she breaks free from her dependence on her mother by claiming authority over herself: She is *(be)coming home*.

Powder necklace. The idea of returning to one’s ancestral homeland and in the process gaining the wisdom of past generations is not foreign to people of the African diaspora. This idea is taken up by Brew-Hammond (2010) in *Powder Necklace*. The Akan people, who inhabit Ghana and the Ivory Coast, subscribe to the concept of Sankofa, or going backward to move forward. An Akan symbol for Sankofa is a mythical bird flying forward with its head turned backward (Kanu, 2011). However, for the protagonist Lila, migration meant separating from a mother with whom she has had a codependent relationship. Not only was it difficult for Lila to define herself apart from her Mum, but she also had difficulty dealing with her feelings about Ghana and her Black cultural identity.

Although Brew-Hammond alludes to Lila’s misperceptions about Africa, as Lila refers to “miles of dirt” and “bloat-bellied kids too weak to swat buzzing flies” (p. 12), it is not until she arrives on the continent that her racial identity issues are fully revealed. On landing at the Kumasi airport, Lila describes a Ghanaian passenger as a “Black-skinned man with golden-yellow teeth . . . Grinning his ears off and clapping like a seal” (p. 12). Her description of this man provides a clear picture of Lila’s feelings about herself and her Black identity. At this point in the novel, Lila associates Whiteness not only with London, which she considers home, but also with that which is superior, orderly, and beautiful. Fanon (1967) states, “this fact of Blackness alienates the Negro not only from his society but also from himself so much so that he longs to peel off the burden of that corporeal malediction” (p. 111).

Indeed, it is Lila’s time in Ghana and particularly at Dabada, an exclusive, all-girls boarding school, that changes her most in terms of her identity. At Dabada, she is forced

to cut her hair into a short Afro just like all of the other Ghanaian girls. She is miserable and complains bitterly about the lack of water. Water is a symbol of the haves and have-nots, and without Mum's support, Lila is one of the have-nots. She shares, "Those who were able to bathe made sure everyone knew it by painting their throats with chokers of powder. Those of us who did not took the matter into our own hands" (p. 87). Lila begins to realize that she needs to connect with the other girls to survive. Lila eventually makes connections with the other girls as they suffer through drought after drought together. In several crucial passages, Brew-Hammond reveals Lila's budding critical awareness of who she really is. This is particularly evident in the following passage, when one of the Ghana-born girls confronts Lila about her elitist attitude:

"You think you're better than us, don't you? Because you were born in Britain," Hari continued.

I didn't have to say yes because we all knew the answer. Maybe it was the *ferme* but for the first time since I stood in the "Other Nationals" line at the airport, I wondered why I did think I was better than the Ghana-borns—and why most of them thought so as well.

"You're no better than us. You're just like us," Hari insisted, daring me to say the opposite.

I nodded in agreement, but Ivy shook her head.

"No," she said. "She is not like us. She is a *broni*. (p. 81)

Lila learns more about her connection to Ghana from these girls than she ever does from her mother. By the time Mum sends for her, Lila has evolved dramatically in terms of her racial and cultural identity, even to the point of loving her short Afro. By the novel's end, Lila's *(be)coming home* enables her to initiate migration on her own terms. Lila decides that she will return to Dabada to see her old friends, record her memories, and become the narrator of her own story.

Kendra. *Kendra* (Booth, 20080) is unique in that the author shares a reunion story and not a migration story. Whereas the other novels represent a move to another home or land entirely, and the need to bridge two seemingly opposing cultures, *Kendra's* marks the journey to (re)establish connections to her roots, where there seem to be none available. *Kendra* has lived with her grandmother since birth, and her life with her mother Renee has always been distant. *Kendra* has always wanted for something to happen between them—some kind of connection. However, on finding out that *Kendra* has been sent to live with her mother for good, Renee begins arguing with Nana, who sent her there, "But what am I supposed to do with her here? I don't have enough room. Where is she supposed to sleep?" (p. 195). The central question in *Kendra's* journey then becomes what will she allow to confirm or deny her existence?

Kendra's move to Renee's home, like that of each of the other protagonists, reflects her need to confront the forces in her life that threaten her development. She must come to some harsh realizations to gain autonomy. For example, when she asks Renee

a pointed question, “Why don’t you want me? I’m talking about now” (p. 219), Renee is not able to answer. It becomes evident that for Kendra, *(be)coming home* will be the result of her ability to make choices for herself and to reclaim a healthy sense of self, despite the adults around her. Boyce-Davies writes, “Home can only have meaning once one experiences a level of displacement from it” (p. 113). In other words, migration serves as the starting point for reflection, which then lends itself to redefinition.

It is not until Kendra sifts through old photos and compares Renee to herself that she considers how dangerously close she came to becoming a teenage mother herself. Kendra has several of these epiphanies that culminate when she sees her parents together. In the final analysis, she reports, “It hits me for the first time, even though it is hard to believe—I never thought of it like this before, but these are my parents. And they have no idea what they’re doing” (p. 239). This realization allows Kendra to move forward, taking what she can from her immediate family, while seeking the support of the strong community that surrounds her.

Theme summary. In *(be)coming home*, we describe how authors of these novels narrate the aftermath of protagonists being sent, involuntarily, from homes where they have spent most of their formative years. These protagonists were relocated to unfamiliar places with distant relatives and estranged parents, or to boarding schools. There, they grappled with identity issues that were either impossible to deal with in their original homes or remained dormant prior to migration. Our work allowed us to interrogate how migration is an important aspect of each protagonist coming to a critical awareness of the problematic nature of her positioning. In all but one of the novels, the protagonist returned home, only to find she either no longer needed it or could no longer connect with it. As a result, she reconstructed home on her own terms. The one outlier was *Flowers in the Sky*, which presented a protagonist who never physically returned home but who still came to terms with her new home in relation to her original one. In the end, each protagonist used her migratory journey to find, define, and empower herself against the currents of age, race, class, culture, and gender constructions.

Extending the Metaphor of Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors

Findings from prior research and the study we briefly presented suggest that the literacy field must continue to develop a knowledge base of practice, theory, and research about diverse children’s and young adult literature. The implications, however, encompass and inform multiple fields, including literacy education, multicultural education, and culturally relevant curriculum and pedagogy.

The need for both educators and researchers to continually question, scrutinize, and rethink ethnic and racial group representations within children’s and young adult literature as well as other forms of texts clearly stands out to us. The backgrounds of today’s youth include students who identify as bi/multiracial, transnational, immigrant, indigenous, and so on. Given this, their cultural beliefs, knowledge, and practices exist within locations of hybridity and heterogeneity. For example, we studied

three novels, set in different locations across the African diaspora, alongside one another, because girls from across the African diaspora come into contact with each other now more than ever before. We contend that their experiences, regardless of location, bare some striking similarities, but they are also quite different. Short, Giorgis, and Lowery (2013) likewise argue that students should engage with a wide range of texts that are representative not only of the diversity within the broader community and world but also of diversity within a particular group or culture. When students read, reflect, and discuss a set of books in relation to one another, they are challenged to think critically about the multifaceted nature of the groups they are reading about.

While we have pointed out the significance of this work for Black girls and other youth from diverse backgrounds, it is also important for White youth. Without culturally relevant reading materials and critical ways to engage with texts, students continue to develop narrow ideas about groups and cultures that differ from their own. This leaves them ill prepared to live in and work in an increasingly diverse and global society. Future research on how educators identify diverse literature and effectively extend an invitation to students to interrogate the cultural intricacies of their own lives as well as the lives of others through books and other engagements with literacy remains vitally important.

Next, inherent in qualitative research are the blind spots and biases caused by a researcher's own perspective or position in society. As adults returning to young adult books, we recognized that our experiences would be somewhat different from today's adolescents. It is for this reason that although we both identify as Black women, we positioned ourselves as insiders and outsiders in our research. In an attempt to maintain a more balanced perspective in data analyses and interpretation, we relied on the girls within our insider panel. This group allowed for a kind of member checking. We shared excerpts of the novels selected for this analysis and also engaged in rich discussions with the insider panel about our findings. Their responses to the books provided us with a member check on both our interpretations and critical analyses of the books as well as helped us consider how we might have responded to complex representations of Black girlhood during our own adolescence. Future investigations, therefore, might solicit and value the expertise provided by youth from a variety of backgrounds who can be included as research collaborators in curriculum studies, especially when the curriculum under study has been designed to depict and represent their actual lives.

Finally, in our search for theoretical frameworks to weave alongside the methodology of content analysis, we became convinced that critical theories would help us make connections between the larger forces of power that shape the day-to-day cultural practices of many different communities and their children. Our own work relied on two theories to highlight the various and interlocking forms of oppression to which girls across the African diaspora are subjected. Similarly, over the last decade, scholars in the field of children's literature have begun to immerse themselves in critical theory or a combination of theories that offer specific criteria for interrogating children's books (Johnson et al., 2017). Willis et al. (2008) point to a researcher's overt political agenda and the emphasis on supporting social equality as denoting a critical approach.

Ultimately, our analysis revealed the benefits of selecting frames (i.e., postcolonial theory and a youth lens) to carry out this line of inquiry. Each framework took into account different yet overlapping forms of oppression that affect the daily lives of Black adolescent girls. Together, they provided a critical lens for reading, analyzing, and interpreting young adult novels from the African diaspora. Whenever researchers aim to uncover how different social structures and power systems are reinforced or challenged within literature, a variety of different theoretical frames currently exist that might support such an analysis. Given this, we call for an increase in studies informed by stand-alone or complementary critical theories to address constructs and concepts central to diasporic groups (e.g., race, decolonialism, hybridity, and indigeneity) that will bring forth new insights related to the selection, reading, and teaching of diverse literature for children and young adults.

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Notes

1. Black girls and Black women are terms used interchangeably with African American girls and African American women except when the girls or women referenced come from varied African diaspora regions. In these instances, “Black” refers to a more encompassing term to include girls and women from the United States as well as other geographical locations across the African diaspora (such as the Caribbean and Africa).
2. The African diaspora youth literature referred to in this manuscript includes children’s and young adult books written by Black authors that describe African, Afro-Caribbean, and African American culture.
3. African Diaspora refers to people of African descent who migrated within and outside of the African continent.

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