STREET LIT AND BLACK WOMANHOOD:

CONTRADICTIONS, CONSTELLATIONS AND SISTER CIRCLES

by

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(Under the Direction of Jennifer M. Graff)

ABSTRACT

In this study, the author examines how five Black women who read Street Lit, a genre of fiction literature that focuses on the narratives of urban life, construct their identities while also learning how to navigate womanhood. This study is organized in a manuscript style format.

In the first manuscript, this article examines how Black women readers see themselves in within the context of the Street Lit texts they read. The author argues that the intersections of race and gender are present in both Street Lit and the reader's personal experiences. These readers participate in both cooperating with and resisting against narratives that specifically speak towards the experiences of Black women.

In the second manuscript, the author uses Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 199) and Bakhtin (1981) to examine how a group of Black women, who are avid Street Lit readers, use an authoritative discourse to speak about sexuality. The women, in dialogue with the texts and each other in the form of Sister Circle conversations, spoke about the relationship between sexuality and Black women. The narratives that emerged illustrate that the participants maintained the stereotypical, authoritative language used about Black women, but they used their dialogues with each other to negate those associations.

In the third manuscript, the author examines how Sister Circle conversations can be considered an indigenous method of communication and could be used as part of a qualitative research design. Five Black women participated in a series of Sister Circle conversations over a six month period in which they incorporated tenets of Black Feminist Thought into their discussions about themselves and other Black women. The author examines the findings of these conversations while also discussing the affordances and constraints of using this method in research design.

INDEX WORDS: Black women, Black girls, urban fiction, Street Lit, Black Feminist

Thought, Sister Circles, Bakhtin

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DEDICATION

To my parents.

To my grandparents.

To the students and teachers of Frederick Douglass High School.

To my ancestors.

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I am grateful to Spirit for allowing this experience to be part of my life's journey. These words are the smallest possible measure of the gratitude I am able to express. To my Grandmother Mary: You were the first person to put the words PhD into my mind, not knowing that I would accept you and the ancestors challenge for me to do this. To Amanda Godley: Thanks for calling me up and interrupting what I thought was a lifelong career in the English classroom. I am always grateful for your advice and the gentle press. I don't remember, was it a chipmunk or squirrel? To my dissertation committee: Thanks for your tough questions, encouragement and flexibility.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Reading is part of our identity. What we read, who we share it with (or keep it from), and how we interpret the texts we read become a part of an inextricable and personal relationship between ourselves and the word (Sipe, 1999). Regardless if the reading selection is mandated or self-selected, each reader is confronted with a glimpse of the author's take on the fictional world he or she created, as well as the opportunity to recognize their ideological constructs of reality. In both contexts, literature and other forms of text can serve as societal mirror, reflecting back to the reader, glimpses of life as others, or they themselves, have experienced it to be (Shohat, 1995; Sims-Bishop, 1990; Weedon, 1997). Whether it is classified as fiction or otherwise, literature that is defined as multicultural and/or culturally relevant has been championed for all students because of the domination of stories written by and centered on white, middle class realities (Applebee, 1991; Brooks & Browne, 2012; Cai, 2002; Larrick, 1965; Tatum, 2009; Yokota, 1993).

As scholars and educators continue to move towards more inclusive classroom spaces that incorporate literature that mirror the students, that spirit of inclusion falls short when it encounters a genre or culture that challenges the very idea of what is considered literary and worthy (Daniels, 2006; Hunt, 1996; Kaywell, 2000; Purves, 2001). This is evident within the genre of Street Lit. Street Lit has been described as a popular genre of books that depict--in gritty detail-- urban life (Hill, Perez, & Irby, 2008). Street Lit's appeal to Black adolescent females seems to be primary focus of critique by scholars with regard to not only their suitability for

young readers but also their substance and place within the African American literary tradition (Brooks & Savage, 2009; Chiles, 2006; Stovall, 2005). These critiques run the spectrum: some are situated as warnings for teachers and parents about the content of Street Lit while others offer Street Lit as an entry point for at risk or incarcerated youth (Guerra, 2012; Hill, Perez & Irby, 2008) A fair amount of discussion within those two parameters is centered on preparing teachers who are not familiar with the genre how to understand it. Yet, this creates a mismatch between understanding what readers are gaining from choosing Street Lit and how their lives have been shaped by its presence. Given the ongoing relationships between readers, texts, and contexts (Sipe, 1999) and what scholars know thus far about why Street Lit is attractive to Black urban adolescent females, it would behoove scholars to better understand how Black girls and women view Street Lit as a necessary texts in their lives. The purpose of this study was to investigate how Black female readers are engaging with Street Lit and how the genre has contributed to their construction of their lives as Black women.

Problem Statement

Street Lit has a dedicated and growing readership and to decide whether these texts are worthy of being read is not the intention of this study. The aim was to understand what Street Lit readers, specifically Black women, are understanding about themselves within the context of this genre. While I commend scholars for inviting Street Lit into the scholarly literature, I note how their critiques further marginalize the genre. Academic critiques position Street Lit as something to warn parents and English educators of, rather than understand the rationale behind who reads Street Lit and for what reason (Brooks & Browne, 2012; Brooks & Savage, 2009; Chiles, 2006; Stovall, 2005). In essence, the readers of Street Lit have been ignored in the movement of multicultural and young adult literature and thus the research on the genre has been relegated to

handful of research studies which mainly center the text as the primary data rather than the readers themselves.

Research Questions

Street Lit is ripe for exploring the aspects of identity and text engagement. However, there have been few empirical studies to take up Street Lit and its readers as a research site. Street Lit as a main focal point within empirical research, has remained speculative at best, relegating its content to hypotheses about how researchers believe that Street Lit *might* be effective in certain contexts, but never venturing to test those assumptions with readers (Brooks, 2009; Guerra, 2012). In an effort to understand how Black females are engaging in the genre of Street Lit with each other and community, I constructed a study whose aims were to interview Street Lit readers about their experiences as intersectional women of color and how they in turn take up the genre both individually and collectively in their daily lives. In answering these questions, my study reveals how the confluence of Street Lit and Black women lives speak to the realities of intersectional identities and how they are co-constructed and maintained. The main questions guiding this study were:

1. How do urban, Black, young adult females see themselves within the context of Street Lit that they read?

2. How do "sister circles" conversations involving Street Lit as a point of discussion play a role in guiding the Black woman's co-construction of self as Black urban female?

This research contributes to the understanding how Black females' engagement with Street Lit plays a role in the constructions of self-identity and societal understandings of the Black female identity. Studying how Black females construct their identities in light of other

influences (including mainstream and social media) and descriptions of Black women will help scholars and educators understand the need for a variety of sources of knowledge, regardless if that source is considered to be risky or controversial. This research study reveals findings that 1) contest the recurring metaphor of "mirrors and windows" in Street lit; 2) the seen and unseen of Black female literacies and sexuality; and 3) the importance of bringing forth indigenous qualitative methodologies that honor participants of color.

Literature Review

As evidenced by the previous citations of articles that have used Street Lit to hypothesize future findings about their readers, this study aims to focus specifically on the Black women readers of the genre. Focusing on the readers of this genre adds to the limited scholarship that exists on the literacy practices of Black women and girls, while also extending the argument that while much attention is given to the deficits of Black girls and women, there still remains a crucial need to examine how to design and implement literacy research that emphasizes the intersectional identities and ways of communication that Black girls and women use. I am including Black girls, specifically adolescents age 11-17. The majority of the research listed later in this review includes Black girl participants and it is important to consider that demographic for obvious reasons. First, Black girls grow up to become Black women, who traditionally have faced the same intersectional, oppressive realities. Second, Black girls usually learn "ways of knowing" from other Black women. This learning can take on the form of literacy patterns (Richardson, 2005) or learning how construct knowledge for our own survival (Collins, 1990). So, to not examine the research on Black girls' literacy practices would not be in sync with the realities of our continuing and overlapping histories.

Conceptually, this review takes up the research that has included Black girls and their

literacy practices. Taking up this research means to situate myself as a Black feminist scholar and researcher who is specifically interested in research that includes participants who identify as Black or African –American and whose contributions add to the critical work of understanding more of what Black women have to contribute to in terms of knowledge and ways of being.

Using a Black Feminist framework, I read a number of articles whose findings add to the overall conversation about Black girls and their engagement with literacy and text. For the purpose of this review, my definition of literacy is shaped heavily by Richardson's (2002) definition. She defines literacy as "a way of being in the world…storytelling, strategic use of polite and assertive language, style shifting/codeswitching, and preaching" (p. 687). Collapsing literacy into the neat, defined categories of reading, writing, and speaking usually do not encompass the languages and style of Black women. Therefore, I was looking for not only literacy research with Black girls but studies which spoke directly to how our literacies showed up in our responses to texts and with each other.

Black Girls and Text Engagement

Research suggests that Black girls' literacy practices, as it relates to engaging with texts, reveals that engagement means much more than being interested in a text. More than thirty years ago, Sims (1983) conducted a study that focused on one African American girl's experience with reading African-American children's literature. Sims concluded that African American cultural experiences and literacy practices within the book itself, contributed to the girl's interest in reading and engagement with the texts. The same conclusion could be made of other studies that report that African American females not only need engaging texts (Sutherland, 2005), but also safe spaces in which to discuss their engagement the texts (DeBlase, 2003). Sutherland discovered that using texts that centered Black women's experiences gave students "a

launching point of discussion of participants' personal experiences in homes, school, and communities" (p. 366). A study by Carter (2007) found that African American female students responses to a British literature secondary curriculum were linked to a lack of engagement with the texts and their experiences with being "negatively positioned" (p. 42) when attempting to disrupt Eurocentric notions of beauty. These results and others (Muhammad, 2012) support the notion that Black females engagement with texts in classroom spaces is directly linked with their ability to identify with the texts while also being validated.

While Black girls do not always feel this isolation when engaging in literature, it is not surprising that when Black girls do feel connected and engaged with texts, it occurs outside of the classroom space. Often times, researchers will use the format of book clubs so that participants can pick and engage with texts that either they choose or are selected for their connection to the participants identity (Brooks, Browne & Hampton, 2008; Muhammad, 2012; Polleck, 2010). Two research studies done with Black girl book clubs showed that the literature the participants selected led to discussions that impacted African American girls and women specifically, such as colorism and personal relationships (Brooks, Browne & Hampton, 2008; Polleck, 2010). Muhammad's study (2012) revealed that the connection and engagement with texts is not only occurring during reading, but writing as well. When African American girls read texts were engaging, their writing in turn helped them to "openly and unapologetically express themselves"(p. 210).

Alternative Research Sites and Texts

Along with considering book clubs and their role in helping to create relationships between participants and texts, research conducted with playwriting, poetry, and multimodal work also uncovered the various ways in which African American girls and women, when given

the opportunity, express themselves. From a Black Feminist framework, it is necessary to consider all of the ways that Black girls engage with the word, and not just those opportunities that are school sanctioned. Norton (2013) explored whether writing poetry could help Black and Latina girls engage in topics that would normally be censored in classroom spaces. Turner (2013) searched for how Black girls literacy practices could be expanded by studying a group of girls who used "documentaries, digital stories, youth radio, and wikis" to show their engagement and meaning making. Turner reported that multimodal work allowed "youth to voice their frustrations and aspirations"(p. 507) and argued that these "new literacies" can be helpful in helping Black girls to accentuate the literacy practices that they already use. From a slightly different angle, Winn's (2010) article reported on the use playwriting and performance in youth detention centers. Extending the question how African American girls practice literacy, this study revealed that incarcerated Black female youth have a need to engage with stories that resonate with them, but also yearn for the ability to "rewrite those stories as well"(p. 445).

Notwithstanding this previous research, there is still more work to be done. Although several studies have mentioned the connection between African American girls and their engagement with relevant texts, additional studies are needed that address the relationship between Black girls and women and censored texts, not just their creation of them. Also, there is a need to look at African American girls who have been engaged with literature over a significant amount of time. By studying Black girls who have engaged with literature over a sustained time could lead to more substantial findings about the relationships between these girls and the texts.

Street Lit as a research site. Street Lit is ripe for exploring the aspects of identity and text engagement. In the context of this dissertation, I am defining a research site as a particular

location. For example, the Street Lit text specifically is a specific, physical item located within the participants' lives. It is located, literally, on the bookshelves of their homes or stuffed in their book bags at school. Within this study, Street Lit texts will serve as a site in which to conduct research through reading, responding, and listening to others who are engaged in a similar process. The definition of research site can also be expanded to include the historical context in which the narratives of Street Lit are made possible. To further illustrate, the narratives of Street Lit mirror some the realities of urban life, which include instances of drug use, crime, and poverty. Therefore, looking at the narratives of the text includes an examination of the environment that helps to create these realities.   However, there have been few empirical studies to take up Street Lit as the aforementioned research site. The studies that have used Street Lit (Gibson, 2008; Newhouse, 2010; Nyberg, 2012) look at different aspects of engagement, including how the participants engaged with Street Lit as a literacy practice, as a way of analyzing gender, and as a way of creating literacy practices as a family. The results of these studies found that Street Lit was already infused as a literacy practice in the lives of Black girls and women. Yet, because of the precautions surrounding the quality and reputation of Street Lit is possibly why more studies using this genre have not been attempted. Also, epistemologically, it is important to centralize the varied ways in which Black girls and women live, so to only stay within book club formats or use canonical literature may constrain other research opportunities. In Chapter 3, there is further discussion of the examination of Street Lit as a historical site and its development into a physical Street Lit text and site of potential research.

Based on a previous interview study I completed with Black girls who read Street Lit, the majority of them remarked that Street Lit had been a part of their reading selection since middle school. But, in the aforementioned studies, participants who have been reading Street Lit

for an extended period of time (more than a few months) was not considered part of the research design and more importantly, the participants reading selections were chosen by the researcher. In particular, this study explores how Black girls see themselves with the literature they are self-selecting and engaged with over a significant period of time.

Sister Circles as a research method. Traditionally, research on African American female readers has been completed outside of classroom spaces. It is not surprising that researchers opt to remove Black girls from the context of the classroom to discuss their reading, even when they are still engaged in the practice of reading texts. A literature review compiled by Elsie Smith (1982) revealed that empirical studies concerning Black adolescent females have been disjointed at best. Smith cites a number of factors for the lack of research done on Black girls including the assumption that all "education and socialization problems facing white girls apply uniformly to Black girls as well" and that Black females "have a tendency to exhibit fewer behavioral difficulties" (p. 262) . What Smith's review indicates is that Black girls, as an independent research group, is limited within research because they are not deemed as a separate entity from other women, especially within the parameters of literacy education.

Choosing to work alongside other Black women means that certain changes in research design, similar to removing the participants from classroom settings, may garner more authentic participation. In alignment with the theoretical framings of Black Feminist Thought and Bakhtinian dialogic theory, creating a Sister Circle conversation between myself and the participants is another change I hope to incorporate in the research design. Sister Circles, which are discussed in depth in Chapter 3, take another approach to group interviewing that includes the researcher as participant. Often used in group therapy or psychotherapeutic environments, Sister Circles embrace the idea of impromptu conversations that are focused on the mutual

support of the participants (Mckay, 2002). In the studies that focused primarily on African American female readers (Brooks, 2006; Brooks, 2008; Gibson, 2010; Irvin-Morris, 2012), showed that the research design did not take into account the role of researcher as participant or the impact of using the group conversations as a supportive environment to discuss their engagement with the texts and each other as Black girls and women.

The multiple ways in which Black women express literacy cannot be captured in traditional qualitative group interviewing. Focusing on a series of pre-determined questions is not suggestive of an environment where women are allowed to express themselves without the limitations of organized turn-taking and a designated leader. Studies using Sister Circle conversations as a research method show the need to expand qualitative research methods to meet the needs of African American female participants.

Conclusion

There are significant gaps as it relates to studies that focus on African-American girls and their engagement with texts, specifically Street Lit. Within that gap, methodologies that do not center Black girl/woman hood are also lacking. What these gaps show is that there needs to be more work done as it relates to theorizing and communicating with African American females about who they are and how that impacts their engagement with texts.

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Structure of the Dissertation

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Organized in a manuscript format, this dissertation study's findings are presented in three separate chapters that will be submitted to scholarly journals. In Chapter 3 I examine how two Black women Street Lit readers construct their identities through their readings of the genre. Using primarily individual interview data, I examined how Street Lit readers consistently see their own lives-- reflective or their imagined-- through their reading of Street Lit. I argue that the

longstanding metaphor of Bishop's (1990) windows and mirrors should be extended to include how women are attempting to reconcile how they see themselves as part of the literature they are reading, while also considering how Black women are viewed and treated at the intersections of their lives. This chapter will be submitted to the Journal of Adult and Adolescent Literacy.

In Chapter 4, I move further into the construction of identity by examining how Black women navigate womanhood using their own seen and unseen literacies. More specifically, using data from individual interviews, the participants made sense of the sexual narratives surrounding Black women in both Street Lit and in their real lives by using an authoritative discourse. This article will be submitted to the Journal of Literacy Research.

In Chapter 5, my objective was to explore Sister Circle conversations as an indigenous qualitative methodology. This article, using data from a previous study which used Sister Circle conversations, examines the affordances and constraints of using this method in qualitative studies. The aim of using Sister Circles as a methodology centers Black women's literacies which include the sharing and critique of personal narratives. This article will be submitted to the Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education.

Finally, in Chapter 6, I look across the three chapters to identify major themes and discuss implications for research and practice. I conclude with a look towards future research for researchers, practitioners, and Black women readers.

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CHAPTER 2

STUDY METHODS

A constructivist worldview allows me to better understand how Black female Street Lit readers perceive and engage with the genre. Constructivism, often used interchangeably with social constructivism, espouses that "individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work…[and] develop subjective meanings of their experiences—meaning directed toward certain objects or things"(Creswell, 2014, p.8) In addition to developing meaning through experience, knowledge is also constructed through the interplay between experiences.

I used a combination of Black Feminist Theory and Bakhtinian notions of utterance, heteroglossia, and centripetal and centrifugal forces within a qualitative case study design. My aim is to understand how Black females are engaging with the genre of Street Lit and with each other. In this chapter I will discuss both theoretical approaches and the context of the study, followed by the data collection and analysis methods. Although this level of specificity is not required, I have chosen to include this chapter so that its readers will get a glimpse of how my theoretical frameworks are threading through the research design and methods. Also, I chose to couple Black Feminist Thought with Bakhtinian theories—two theories that are usually used in isolation-- and it is important that the dialogue between these two theories is made succinct.

Black Feminist Thought

Even though the word 'feminist' or the theory of Black feminism did not always exist in our vocabulary, the beginnings of a Black feminism were present in the lectures and journals of 19th century Black women like Maria Stewart, Sojouner Truth, Anna Julia Cooper and Frances

E.W. Harper (Yellin & Van Horne, 1994). Their writings discussed issues related to Black women and our experiences of multiple realities such as: poverty, racism, imperialism, welfare, sterilization and abuse (Guy-Sheftall, 1995). Sheftall, who composed an anthology on Black feminist writing, specifically mentions that Black feminism is "not a monolithic, static ideology"(p. 2). Yet, Black feminism focuses on the multiple forms of oppression (i.e., racism, classism, patriarchy) and the lived experiences of Black women. Although the lived experiences of Black women are shared, there is variety within our experiences as well. Therefore, there are varied forms of Black feminism (hooks, 1989; Hull, 1994; Guy-Sheftall, 1995; Lorde, 1982; Walker, 2005). For this dissertation study, I decided to ground this research study in the work of Patricia Hill Collins (1990).

In my embrace of Black feminism and the shared identities of Black womanhood, there will be repeated use of pronouns such as 'we, us, and our' that suggest our shared, collective experiences. The participants of this study, Collins, and I as the researcher participant, occupy realities as both gendered and raced women and using language that is indicative of that mutual identity is central to this study.

Tenets of Black Feminist Thought

In helping to shape Black women's experiences into a critical theoretical stance, Collins argues that, "U.S. Black women encounter a distinctive set of social practices that accompany our particular history within a unique matrix of domination characterized by intersecting oppressions"(p. 26) What Collins posits is that Black feminist thought focuses specifically on the presence of intersections, which cannot be ignored. Acknowledging these intersectional realities is central to understanding the themes that occur across Black women's experiences. Collins recognizes the need for a critical social theory which calls for "a set of principles for assessing

knowledge claims…to those having shared experiences"(p. 275). This study centralizes those principles and shared experiences of Black women rather than relying on theories and methodologies that centralize the experiences of the privileged and elite (Collins, 1990).

The principles are four-fold: 1) lived experience as a criterion of meaning; 2) the use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims; 3) the ethic of personal accountability; and 4) Black women are agents of knowledge (Collins, 1990). Collins' first tenet is centered in the notion that "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, 1990, p. 276) Black women who live at the intersections of multiple and continuous oppressions must use our experience as a form of knowledge in order to sustain and protect ourselves. The participants of this study are viewed as vessels of knowledge based on their experiences and that knowledge is viewed as methodologically and epistemologically valid.

The next tenet is concerned with how Black women use dialogue as a way of promoting connectedness rather than separation (Collins, 1990). Collins uses bell hooks' definition of dialogue as "talk between two subject…one that challenges and resist domination" (p. 279). Epistemologically, dialogue within Black feminist thought cannot happen in isolation. Methodologically, evaluating knowledge in dialogue in community allows for each participant to assess that dialogue for knowledge construction and relevance. This tenet and its perspective on dialogue is significant because the participants dialogue within their community and the Street Lit text themselves are ways in which new knowledge is being created and could possibly help researchers understand how Black women are participating in multiple streams of dialogue for their own meaning making.

The third tenet is described as the theme that "talks with the heart" (Collins, 1990). It uses three subpoints to articulate how care is central to Black feminist thought: 1)belief of individual uniqueness; 2)the appropriateness of emotion in dialogue; and 3) the presence of empathy. These tenets speak to being able to tie Black women's "ways of knowing" in which Black women are making and protecting a space where Black women are cared for in their vulnerability and in their uniqueness. This is critical to building trust and respect with Black women.

Once knowledge claims are fostered through the dialogue, the last tenet of Black Feminist Thought is that the individual is now accountable for those claims. Accountability within this framework means that knowledge claims are not void of an "individual's character, values, and ethics" (p. 284). Situating personal accountability in a research study using Black Feminist Thought means that personal narratives and probing questions are not done with the intention of being intrusive, but rather to present ideas as part of their original context.

Bakhtin and Dialogue

Although this study is supported with Black Feminist Thought, I am also infusing components of Mikhail Bakhtin's theories on language and dialogue. Black Feminist Thought does address dialogue as being central to constructing claims of knowledge; however, Bakhtin provides a specific language and terminology to talk in depth about the intricacies of dialogue. Bakhtin and Black Feminist Thought share the premise that words and language are fluid and dynamic. Language's ability to shift depends on the user, their context, and what words become available or constructed for the intention of the user (Bakhtin, 1981). It is helpful to look at the key concepts of Bakhtin's theories that I believe are complementary to Black Feminist Thought and will help scholars better understand the sociocultural relationships between Black, urban

females and the genre of Street Lit. I will use the following sections to describe the Bakhtinian

terminology used throughout this study. These terms include 1) centrifugal and centripetal

forces, 2) internally persuasive discourse, and 3) authoritative discourse

Centripetal and Centrifugal Forces

Centripetal and centrifugal literally means to move, or have to tendency to move, towards

or away from its center. In the context of Bakhtin's work, centripetal and centrifugal forces have

the influence to be "homeogenizing and hierarchizing" or "decrowning, dispersing" (Bakhtin,

1981, p.425) Bakhtin asserts that language attempts to move towards itself, (centripetal) thereby

creating a unitary language that desires to "unite and centralize verbal-ideological thought" (p.

271)   The centripetal force has the ability to absorb languages, dialects, and even common

sayings, in order to attempt to create and centralize a unitary language. Yet, just as a force can

pull items towards it, there is also an equally strong force that performs the opposite action.

Centrifugal forces, whose goal is to cause "decentralization and disunification" (p. 272), fight

against the presence of a centering or unitary language. These forces are in constant opposition

in that all of the dialects and common phrases that centripetal forces try to absorb into one

language are also attempting to move away from centralization. Bakhtin describes this struggle

by describing, "Every utterance participates in the "unitary language" (in its centripetal forces

and tendencies) and at the same time partakes of social and historical heteroglossia (the

centrifugal, stratifying forces)" (p. 272).

To make plain how centripetal and centrifugal forces work within language, one can

consider how popular text messaging language has been impacted by centrifugal and centripetal

forces. For example, the popularity of sending instant text messages calls for a language and

words that are brief and also exact. One of those expressions is the term LOL , which is an

acronym for laughing out loud. As a centrifugal concept, LOL is moving away from the extended version of typing to another person that you are laughing out loud at a previous statement. The acronym, and its move away from a centralized language, has decentralized this language. However, as Bakhtin notes, centripetal and centrifugal forces are always in opposition. LOL is no exception to this because as soon as it performed as a centrifugal term, the acronym shifted to a centripetal term. The popularity of LOL in terms of popularity and usage means that the term itself has moved towards the center, thereby creating a "homogenizing" and common language. This can be confirmed through the addition of LOL in the one book that is evidence of centripetal terms---the dictionary.

The significance of centripetal language is not only its ability to move towards the center of language, but also that moving can be absorbed into what Bakhtin calls a unitary language. The significance of a unitary language is that language in the centripetal state has stabilized itself. Unitary language is comprised of a "system of linguistic norms…forces that unite and centralize verbal-ideological thought"(p. 271). In other words, our ideologically saturated dialogue gives us a common language with which to speak and think (e.g. LOL). The consistent language and dialogue about Black women and Street Lit is situated through our unitary language of these terms. Thus, how we speak, write, and research the sites of Street Lit and its readers are implicated.

This theoretical take on how dialogue remains in a state of continuous tension will help conceptualize how Black women and Street Lit are in a dynamic and shifting relationship with each other and how that relationships can help illuminate how they are living within the structures of gender, race, and class oppressions. When we consider that our words and language are in constant tension by moving towards and against the creation of a unitary language,

Bakhtin helps us also consider the nuances of what happens when we accept and speak through a unitary language. Separated into two different distinct discourses, authoritative and internally persuasive discourses, Bakhtin describes how we have learned to elevate the discourse that is connected to our perceived authority figures in life while also learning to disrupt them through our own internal dialogue.

Authoritative and Internally Persuasive Discourse

When we take on other's language and ideology through our use of unitary language, there is also the opportunity to take on a deeper form of assimilation. Bakhtin (1981) describes this assimilation as determining the "very bases of our ideological interrelations with the world…our behavior"(p. 342). This deeply embedded behavior and language use is what Bakhtin refers to as authoritative discourse and internally persuasive discourse. The distinction in authoritative discourse is the "demand that we acknowledge it, that we make it our own"(p. 342). Also, this discourse is centered in the authoritative figure such as the "father, of adults, and of teachers" (p. 342). Essentially, authoritative discourse is centralized and powerful as the representative of the authority's voice.

Authoritative discourse is so engrained according to Bakhtin, that it is considered a "prior" discourse, one that was here before we knew what our own discourse was. An example of this type of authoritative discourse would be the texts and rules associated with organized religion. In Christianity, the Bible and the accompanying Ten Commandments operate as a set of rules and a discourse. These texts have been used to structure how we talk about the concepts right and wrong and how we punish those who go against those ideals. Bakhtin speaks frankly when he says that "it is therefore not a question of choosing it…It is given" (p. 342). I believe that it an easy entry point to see how an authoritative discourse can embed itself in our own

discourses before they are fully formed through religion. Yet, authoritative discourses can come from parents, teachers, and even possibly abstract authority figures like social media or Street Lit. Using Bakhtin's language here allows me to explore what authoritative discourses are present and which ones are being formed. However, there is a discourse present that is not acknowledged by authority: internally persuasive discourse.

As a person matures, the impact of authoritative discourse may not be as powerful. Bakhtin attributes that change to a shift in a person's consciousness that allows them to "awaken to independent ideological life" (p. 345). In other words, we all figure out at some point that the authoritative discourses we have adopted are not necessarily what we believe. The internally persuasive dialogue occurs when we separate from the authority and begin to create a discourse that is composed of our own words.

Bakhtin (1981) defines internally persuasive discourse as being "denied of all privilege, backed up by no authority at all, and is frequently not even acknowledged" (p. 342). This discourse is not backed up through our perceived authority figures but rather "tightly interwoven with 'one's own word'"(p. 345). The presence of an internally persuasive discourse leaves room for its speaker to remain open and flexible in their language, thereby creating new ways of making meaning. To use the aforementioned example of authoritative discourse surrounding organized religion, an internally persuasive discourse blurs the imagined boundaries of how one can speak to these topics. There is room for "one's own word" and those words "awaken new and independent words…and not does not remain in an isolated and static condition"(p. 345). Bakhtin recognizes that an individual's words may be highly influenced by authority figures but it does not mean that dialogue will remain stagnant and unchanging. In Bakhtin's view, our own internally persuasive discourse can disrupt the voice of authority and perhaps it always has. This

points directly to the participants and their discussions of Black womanhood and Street Lit. They are engrained with the prior, authoritative discourse but are listening to their own (and others) internally persuasive discourses. It may be helpful for researchers who are interested in examining how these discourses impact Black women and their relationship. This study hopes to incorporate how Black women have learned to navigate both the authoritative discourse and their own internally persuasive discourse concerning Black womanhood.

The Dialogue between Black Feminist Thought and Bakhtin

Because the participants and I identify as Black women, it is important to situate this study within a framework that recognizes the multiple and varied oppressions that embody our experience. The aim of this study is acknowledge our existence as Black women and add to the conversation of how Black women learn to navigate and interrupt these oppressive structures in our daily lives (Johnson-Bailey, 2004).

Using a hybrid of Black Feminist Thought and Bakhtin's theory on dialogue is important for this project because it centralizes the experiences of Black women while also privileging the created dialogue amongst us. As previously stated, the tenets of Black feminist thought support the notion that the lived experiences of Black women are considered to be valid constructions of knowledge and those experiences are shared primarily through dialogue. Black feminist thought positions dialogue as the foundation of knowledge claims, but does not articulate the tensions that may arise during the dialogue itself. These tensions can be explored deeply through the concepts of centrifugal and centripetal forces, authoritative and internally persuasive discourses. Both Black Feminist thought and Bakhtinian theory are centered in the dialogical. Black Feminist thought is anchored through how Black women talk with each other about their intersectional realities and subsequently how that dialogue helps us to navigate Black

womanhood. Bakhtin, through his view of language and dialogue as unstable, co-constructed through context, and comprised of competing forces, becomes helpful in articulating how dialogue leads to the replication of authoritative and internally persuasive discourses. These elements can help to possibly answer with specificity what is occurring within Black women's dialogue.

Patricia Hill Collins defines dialogue as the "talks between two subjects, not the speech of the subject and object. It is a humanizing speech, one that challenges and resists domination" (Collins, 1990, p. 279). In this study, it is critical for the dialogue between Black women to be centralized and both of these theories view dialogue as part of the (co) construction of knowledge. Notwithstanding the importance of dialogue between Black women, another form of dialogue is also present within this study: between the participants and the Street Lit texts. My exploration of how participants are communicating with their self-selected Street Lit texts is reflective of both Black Feminist Thought and Bakhtin, and their thoughts and descriptions about Street Lit and their lives are central to their understandings about themselves and their experiences as Black women. It is a necessary and intentional act to center Black women and their dialogue with themselves and others in order to help make sense of their experiences.

Data Collection

Collins (1990) writes, "In spite of a lengthy socialization process, it may be also more difficult for Afro-American women to experience conversion and begin to totally think and act according to a sociological worldview"(p. S27). I understand Collins' point in that I have been taught a research framework that privileges white perspectives of gaining access to communities. Yet, in order to prevent my prospective research from becoming another report of the disenfranchisement of Black women readers or their personal lives, I am centering my research

design and data sources (Table 1) within a Black feminist framework, and a methodology that is

centered in Black women's experiences. The chart below outlines the data sources, the

conception of the source, location of the data collection, the amount of time used to collect the

data. The conception of source (i.e., site, source, tool) are the ways in which I am using the data

in context. Sites of data are locations and historical contexts of the item or method. I can use

social media as a site for collecting research but it is also a tool with I am collecting the data as

well. A data source is a specific item that contains data within it. Street Lit texts are a data source

because they provide the narratives that the participants refer to. Tools are research methods that

were used in the study to collect data.

Table 1. Data sources used in study.

Data Source	Conception of Source (e.g., site, source, tool)	Location of Data Collection	Amount of data collection
Individual interviews	Tool	Participants' homes, local shopping centers	2 interviews per participant (Average 1 hour each)
Sister Circle conversations	Tool	Participants' homes	2 Sister Circles (Average 2 hours each)
Group Text message data	Tool, site	Used group text message via social media app	Approximately 200 messages

Social Media data	Tool, site, source	Facebook, Instagram	Collected and archived approx. 50-75 images and posts
Life Notes	Tool	Done by researcher via audio recorder	Daily throughout observation period
Street Lit Texts	Tool, site, source	Participants personal collections, library	Referenced between 10-15 novels

In order to answer my research questions and guided by my emphasis on dialogue, two central methods of collecting data were used: individual interviews and Sister Circle conversations. The individual interviews were held face to face for no longer than one hour and the Sister Circles were originally allotted for one hour but because of their impromptu nature, they happened without much preplanning and each lasted longer than one hour. The desired sites for both the individual interviews and the Sister Circle dialogues were the participants' homes, which worked in most individual cases. The one exception to this was two participants preferred meeting in a local food court within a shopping mall to hold their interviews Initially, I had concerns about meeting in public, open places such as coffees shops or malls because they are not as conducive to conducting individual interviews due to issues of noise pollution and confidentiality concerns. However, following the instincts of my participants allowed me to witness more of their personal, lived experience as consumers and citizens to the community in which this mall was held. After the individual interviews were complete, all participants, including myself, were invited to participate in Sister Circles conversations. The description and protocol of the individual and Sister Circle groups will be described in detail in the next section.

After the participants offered consent of their participation, I "followed" them on the social networks that they frequently access and/or comment through. Those social networks include Facebook and Instagram. Also, I collected their cell phone numbers in order to create a group short message service (SMS), otherwise knowing as a group text message, but the participants rarely used the function during the data collection. Rather, they used the group messaging applications embedded within Facebook to communicate with other participants and myself. I held individual interviews and Sister Circle conversations, took Life Notes, read group messages, and read social media posts for approximately four months. The participants have not concluded that my study is over in any official capacity because we still communicate via the same mediums up until the present moment. Below are brief descriptions of the methods of data collection for this study.

Individual semi-structured interviews. The semi-structured interview, a significant part of this research study, allows for the incorporation of "both open-ended and more theoretically driven questions"(Galleta, 2013, p. 45). The proposed questions were geared towards helping to facilitate narratives from the participants about their experiences as Street Lit readers and as Black women. In the semi-structured interview process, there was an informal list of questions or themes that are directly related to the research questions. However, the informal nature of the interview did not preclude participants from talking about themes, or telling stories that are outside of the parameters of the research guide. Also, if the participant introduced a new idea, I reserved the inclination to probe those instances without the pressure of following a strict guide.

Sister Circles. Sister circles, a method of talk therapy used in psychology or psychotherapy, is not a new phenomenon. Nellie McKay(2002), in her foreword written for the book, *Sister Circle: Black women and work*, defines the practice:

Sister Circles are not a late-twentieth-century phenomenon in the experiences of African

American women. Beginning in the nineteenth century, African American women have

met regularly with each other for the purposes of communication and mutual support in

spaces as diverse as beauty parlors, book clubs, and sorority and church group meeting

places, among other places. In fact, the survival of black women in America, physically,

emotionally, and psychologically, has largely been the product of the support these

women have given to each other in these nontraditional venues over the centuries of their

collective American lives. (p. x)

Psychologists have adopted this already present phenomenon by using it as a form of group

therapy (Barnett, Stadulis, et al, 2011). They have a broader definition of the term which is more

inclusive to the idea that Sister Circles are not always structured within an organization, but have

the ability to form spontaneously solely for the purposes of the participants. Neal-Barnett and

colleagues define Sister Circle as the "support groups that build upon existing friendships, fictive

kin networks, and the sense of community found among Black women"(Neal-Barnett et al, 2011,

p. 267). I am adopting this definition for the Sister Circle definition because it accounts for the

multiple ways in which Black women can congregate, whether it was organized or not, for the

participation in their own healing. Often, within Sister Circles there is suggested topic or theme

that has brought them all together, with the most popular examples being support groups for

diabetics, book clubs for readers, or the common interest of vegetarianism. In this instance, the

Sister Circle is led by a professional health practitioner or a survivor of a particular ailment.

(Neal-Barnett et al, 2011)

I used the Sister Circle conversation as a thematically focused group dialogue. Once individual interviews have been collected, I proposed that one of the participants volunteers to have the Sister Circle meeting at her home. The offer was immediately accepted and food and drink was purchased and shared by all of the participants.   The plan was to allow the conversation to move towards the desired direction of the participants. The time limit of this Sister Circle was not fixed, with the express purpose that the participants will have enough to listen and share as much as they want. This method did create long transcripts and Life Notes entries, however each participant felt welcomed in the Sister Circle and felt as if she could discuss what was necessary at the time without penalty. In the planning stages, I thought I might offer possible themes that can help steer the discussion if there is a lull. However, I never needed the list of themes during the Sister Circle conversations nor were there guidelines for conversations necessary. The participants, who were already familiar with each other, spoke freely with each other and me during the process.

Even though it was not guaranteed to occur, I had to account for the possibility that the participants may assign me the role of "elder" or "mentor". This possibility turned into a reality in that the participants still viewed me as their former teacher and still did not refer to me by my first name. Their decision to keep those parts of our relationship formal did not negate anyone's involvement as a participant or contributor to the dialogue between Black women. Assigning this role is part of the Black feminist structure in that lived experience, regardless if one is labeled as an elder or otherwise, is central to meaning making made amongst Black women.

Group Text Message Data. As previously mentioned, the participants took part in group text messages with myself and the other research participants. Because the participants were found through snowball sampling, the majority of them already knew each other and

communicated with each other either by phone or social media platform. The participants were given instructions about the group message as it relates to confidentiality and usage. During the research study, the participants were free to message the group with their thoughts, concerns, ideas, narratives about their daily experiences as Black women and readers of Street Lit. These discussions were not limited by topic or time and they are considered, for the duration of the research study, to be data. In an effort to stay true to a Sister Circle methodology and a Black feminist epistemology, I also participated in these group messages.

Life Notes. Attending to and living with a Black Feminist epistemology and framework means that traditional ways of observing and communicating with participants is a process that will be disrupted and redefined in order to align with the goals of this study. Along with Sister Circles, I embraced taking Life Notes in lieu of field notes. Life Notes, a concept written about by Patricia Bell-Scott (1994), looks at the writings of Black women who have recorded their own experiences and observations. Included in my Life Notes are observations that would be normally included in the qualitative field note process, but Life Notes affords me the opportunity to write without the hesitation or expectation of academic prose. Bell-Scott says that Life Notes can, "authenticate our ability as self-defining women who can speak for ourselves, and also share the rich experiences lost when diversity is ignored" (p. 18). Life Notes are aligned with the study and the theoretical framing which situates me as a participant and researcher.

There is observable data that cannot be grasped through individual and group interviews. In order to capture this data, I took extensive and detailed Life Notes before, during, and after the interview process. I paid particular attention to the setting, the physical placement of participants during Sister Circle interviews, and any artifacts that were presented or mentioned in the interview process.

Street Lit Texts. The last data source are Street Lit texts. The individual interview included questions about Street Lit texts that the participants have read before and are reading currently. The participants were encouraged to bring with Street Lit texts to the interview and Sister Circle conversations. During each of the individual interviews, the participants interacted with the texts by sharing which ones they have read and which ones they anticipating reading. The texts serve as a point of reference for discussions or help to connect the experiences of Black womanhood from the texts to our own. We decided not to read the Street Lit texts together because of the busy schedules of the participants, but each of them remarked on how talking about the genre and sharing books reinvigorated their desire to either start reading Street Lit again or pick up new titles. To reiterate my earlier discussion of Street Lit texts as a research site, I was interested in having the participants talk about the literal Street Lit texts that they read, owned, or borrowed—while also allowing for open conversations about the shared literary and physical environments.

<div align="center">

Data Analysis

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I began my data analysis by transcribing all of my Life Notes, individual interviews, and Sister Circle conversations. My Life Notes did include some of own voice recordings, which I felt at certain points in the data collection process was the most organic way to capture my comments about the participants, Street Lit, and connections to Black womanhood. The data transcription was done entirely by me and for a variety of reasons. First, transcribing the conversations of Black women includes some level of translation. The intricacies of our dialogue which included colloquialisms, African American vernacular, slang, expletives, and everything in between, which meant that an outside transcriptionist would have be able to understand and transcribe appropriately a multiplicity of voices. For example, if a participant

were to ask as part of the dialogue, " How she gon say that to me and me not say something back?", a transcriptionist might interpret this same statement as "How can she say this to me and not expect me to say something in return?" Not capturing the style and language in Black women's dialogue would do a great disservice to the rich dialogue that is being created.

With all of the data transcribed, my overall thoughts were to engage with it in a way that reflects a constructivist epistemology which assumes that Black women have multiple, lived intersections, voices, and experiences. To do this, I adapted a reading guide created by Brown, Debold, Tappan, and Gilligan (1991). Rather than follow a model that prioritize my personal reading of a narrative, I created a *listening* guide which focuses specifically on the narrative constructed by its narrator and also puts emphasis on how that narrative is being interpreted by its reader. In the context of this study, the participants are narrators of their story, while I serve as both reader and listener of the narratives.

My data analysis is threaded through the lenses of both Black Feminist Thought and Bakhtin in that the listening guide takes into account not only the narratives of the participants, but also the multiple voices present within the narratives. To start the process, I isolated individual narratives within the larger transcripts. In order to parse what qualified as a narrative, I used segments of interviews where participants used their voice and memory to recall an experience. Each of those narratives were then cut from the larger interviews and placed within its own document. Then, I would do a purposeful reading and listening of that narrative four distinct times, each time listening for another layer of voice. To help guide these listenings, I created and followed a listening guide. (see Appendix A) Each reading focused on a different set of questions "intended to guide the listener in tuning into the story being told on multiple levels…and draw from his or her resonances to the narrative"(Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg &

Bertsch, 2006, p.159). I listened to the audio recordings and read the transcripts simultaneously. After listening, I used a dictation software on my computer to literally talk my way through the questions on the listening guide. By dictating my thoughts rather than writing them, I am privileging my voice over the default academic written prose. I was more inclined to be honest using my voice and I was recreating another form of a Sister Circle conversation by talking directly to my participants' narratives. Using guided worksheets with focus questions, the narratives were grouped and coded by virtue of I interpreted the narrator's stance. From there, I kept the narratives and the responses to them in separate documents and later viewed them in conjunction with other pieces of data in order to view other perspectives of their shared narratives.

In the chapters that follow, I use those narratives to examine how the participants see themselves in the context of Street Lit, in the discourse surrounding Black women's sexuality, and more specifically how the data collection method of Sister Circle conversations helps to amplify the narratives of Black women in qualitative research.

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CHAPTER 3

READING THROUGH A TWO WAY MIRROR: BLACK GIRL COOPERATION AND

RESISTANCE IN STREET LIT[1]

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[1] Jones, S.P. To be submitted to *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*.

Required Teaser Text: This article examines how Black female readers navigate through their reading of urban literature. Their viewpoints disrupt our assumptions about 'real' literature and how they see themselves in it.

Abstract

This article examines how Black women Street Lit readers see themselves within the context of the Street Lit that they read and how those constructions help them to navigate their lives as Black women. Drawing upon Bishop's (1990) metaphor of books performing as windows and mirrors and Bakhtinian notions of authoritative and internally persuasive discourse, the author discusses how five Black female Street Lit readers cooperated with and resisted Street Lit narratives in their own lives. The findings suggest that the intersections of race and gender and the oppressions that accompany those realities, are part of the readers Street Lit experiences but the readers find themselves viewing their lives through a two -way mirror: their stories are reflected in the genre, but so are the daily oppressions that Black women face.

In 2011, in an attempt to get my high school students engaged in writing research papers, I decided to complete the process alongside them. In between answering questions about writing thesis statements and finding appropriate evidence to cite, the students begged to know what my research topic was. I replied by holding up an unfamiliar book I found on the floor the previous day and saying, "I want to know why y'all are reading these books." On the cover, a Black woman stood facing a wall covered with leopard-print wallpaper. She wore only a black bra, a garter belt, sheer black stockings, and red heels. One female student replied quickly, "Because, Ms. (Author last name). It's real life." Little did I know that this books and that declaration by my former student would set the course to future research concerning Black women readers of a genre called Street Lit.

This study focuses on the experiences of five Black girl readers who were and still are in the midst of learning how to navigate womanhood. It is necessary to situate the context of how I first met them—as adolescent girls. Typically, Black girls in school spaces are often characterized as "less attentive and more disruptive" (Francis, 2012, p. 24) and that behavior causes teachers and other school personnel to recommend Black girls to low level instructional groups or remedial courses (Condron, 2007; Hughes et al, 2005). Black girls are the third most suspended group in U.S. schools (behind Black and Native American boys) and the most suspended of all girl groups nationwide (Connor, 2015). Within this whirlwind that often leaves Black girls and their stories ignored, it is also typical that their relationships with reading and texts are treated in the same manner. However, the Black girls that I taught and those who eventually became part of this study did not fit the typical portrayal of Black girls. Their full, engaged lives are often not part of the research covering Black girls lives.

Throughout this article the terms "Black girls" and "Black women" will be used to refer to the participants. Note that the term Black girls is used often within the Black women's community to include the perspectives of both adolescent and adult women. Examples of this inclusive terminology include organizations and hashtags such as: Black Girls Run; Black Girls Code; Black Girls Rock; and #blackgirlmagic. All of the participants in this study, including myself identify as Black women; yet, the research on Black girls' reading and identity politics are connected with how Black women are eventually viewed as readers and participants in the construction of their identities.

The scholarly conversations surrounding Black girls and reading are centered on how Black girls are constructing and resisting identities through their own literacy practices. More specifically, reading literature as a literacy practice provides a way for Black girls to practice self-examination of the construction of their identities (Brooks, Browne, & Hampton, 2008; Carter, 2007; DeBlase, 2003; Sutherland, 2005). It is within this practice of self-examination that I am interested in investigating further. Although it seems like a solitary practice, self-examination can be a nuanced and critical dialogue between the reader and text and also between readers. It is perhaps this idea of self-examination that inspired me to take up Bishop's (1990) metaphor of windows and mirrors as a starting point to understanding how Black women are navigating the literature they read.

The reflective nature of literature – Bishop's familiar metaphor of windows and mirrors-- means that literature can and perhaps should provide opportunities to view "worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange" and also allows us to reflect on "our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience" (Bishop, 1990, p.1). On its face, Bishop's metaphor has been a critical and necessary component to how we, as teacher educators and

researchers, think about readers' relationships to books. Bishop's aim was to address the lack of representative children's literature for minority children by asserting that reading is equivalent to a form of "self-affirmation" (p. 1) Children need to read narratives that include stories that are similar to their own, but also narratives which allow them to peek into others. Since Bishop's publication, a number of scholars have taken up the metaphor of windows and mirrors to express how readers of color respond. Bishop's observations were correct in that readers of color do not see themselves in the literature they read (Cai, 2002; Gray, 2009; Singer & Smith 2001) and this premise can be further complicated by the fact that when readers of color do see other characters of color it does necessarily equate to a similar experience (Sutherland, 2006). In other words, reading about Black girls, as a Black girl, does not mean that she will resonate with the given narratives. However, Bishop's representation of what literature can provide for its readers falls short when it is placed against the backdrop of a risky genre such as Street Lit and the too frequent assumption that readers should always pick books that mirror their lives (Sciurba, 2014). Bishop's metaphor of being able to see oneself reflected in the literature they read leaves out the important discussion of whether the reflection readers see is accurate and whether the window into others perspectives is valid.

Examining the relationship between Street Lit and its Black women readers means that the metaphor of windows and mirrors does not fit cleanly as an example of what happens to readers of the genre. My alternative view is not a contestation, but rather an expansion of Bishop's ideas. Windows and mirrors are integral to how readers interpret texts, yet this binary is limited in terms of how the ways in which Black women are seeking authentic stories to read while also disrupting those same stories by highlighting the discrepancies between the narratives within the texts and the lives of Black women outside of them. We need Bishop's metaphor to

help understand ourselves, but we also need it to help us see our windows can be shattered and our mirrors can be an illusion.

Following a discussion of the characteristics of Street Lit and its relationship between Black girls and literacy practices, I will discuss the literary theory of Bakhtin to help bring into focus the ignored intricacies of mirrors and windows in literature. I then introduce two Black female Street Lit readers who illustrate those ignored intricacies through their discussions of how they have made meaning in their lives through their reading of Street Lit, and how Street Lit has made meaning of the lives of what it means to be Black women in the US. Rather than following the discourse of how Street Lit could *possibly* be a powerful act of literacy or how its readers could probably benefit from reading it (Guerra, 2012), I center the experiences of Black girls who identify as Street Lit readers while simultaneously navigating girl/womanhood. This navigation is guided by asking: In what ways do young, Black women see themselves in the context of the Street Lit they read? This article concludes with questions that prompt practicing teachers and literacy scholars with suggestions on how to enter into reading Street Lit and how to reach young Black women who may already be reading the genre and constructing their identities based on this practice.

Street Lit and Black Girls

Street Lit, also referred to as urban fiction, hip-hop literature, black pulp fiction, ghetto lit, or gangsta lit is a subcategory of Black fiction which centers on the language and stories associated with the streets (Gibson, 2010). In its genesis in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Black pulp fiction--as it was referred to in that time period--profiled mainly Black male characters who were navigating the perils of urban life (Nishikawa, 2010). The genre attracted readers who felt distant from both the conversation and the actualization of America's Civil Rights Movement of

the 1950s and 60s. Nishikawa writes that early Street Lit readers, "found confirmation that America was not on the path to realizing Dr. King's dream of providing equal opportunity"(p. 4). Also included in their disillusionment about the progression of America's urban centers, readers of Street Lit found that the genre still, despite these hardships, argued that "their lives as marginalized subjects possessed a value of its own"(p.4). The early landscape of Black pulp fiction and authors such as Donald Goines and Iceberg Slim were central to development of Street Lit as a genre, which served as the foundation for the seminal Street Lit novel *The Coldest Winter Ever* by Sistah Souljah. Souljah's novel, published in 1999, reinvigorated the audience for texts that use the language and stories of the street. Understanding the current landscape of Street Lit also means understanding who is currently reading it.

Black girls and women between the ages of 13 and 30 read Street Lit more than any other demographic (Gibson, 2010; Stovall, 2005) The template of Street Lit follows a predictable plot structure. Rather than focusing exclusively on Black males and their experiences, the majority of the contemporary Street Lit is centered on a female protagonist who is bombarded with topics such as incarceration, abortion, crime, drugs, teen pregnancy, premarital sex, murder, violence, and abuse (Morris, et al, 2006). While the risky themes and graphic language of the genre have been critiqued within the African American literary tradition (Brooks & Savage, 2009; Chiles, 2006; Stovall, 2005), Black females are attracted to reading the genre for the frank discussion surrounding the previously mentioned topics. These critiques of Street Lit were situated primarily as warnings for educators and parents about the content of Street Lit and this perspective paused the potential for substantial research between Street Lit and its readers. Even though there continues to be a committed readership to Street Lit, I hypothesize the reasons for not continuing to do research on the genre or its readers may be due to the same issues facing

Street Lit in the 1970s: Street Lit was considered a trend in urban literature and the research was treated as such.

Although Black girls read Street Lit more than any other group, this is not an indication that Street Lit is representative of the Black girlhood experience. As Brooks (2006) and Sciurba (2014) suggest, what may be for one reader may not be everyone. Hughes-Hassell and Rodge (2007) go further in their examinations of Black urban youth to discover not only do these youth have leisure reading habits, but that those texts include a wide variety including Street Lit. This is significant because it shows that Black youth are reading and that what they are reading is as varied as they are (Brooks, Browne & Hampton 2008; Carter, 2007; DeBlase, 2003; Sutherland, 2005). Within the lens of Black girls who read, the discussions eventually turn to ideations of identity--who are they becoming as they read? As Sutherland (2005) posits, when Black girls read books by and about Black women, it does not guarantee that a "complex and empowered" identity will emerge, but the literature does make the discussion about identity possible (p. 396).

Notwithstanding the previous research, there is still more work to be done. Although several studies have mentioned the connection between Black girls and their engagement with texts, (Blake, 1995; Winn, 2010; Wissman, 2011) additional research is needed that addresses the *relationship* between Black girls and women and risky texts, and not merely a concentration of their lives as risky. For literacy scholars and classroom educators to understand Black girls and their relationship to Street Lit and themselves, we must be aware of how we make complicit what literature gets taken up as safe and what assumptions are made because of it. Rather than essentializing how Street Lit could help certain readers in certain contexts, this study aims to incorporate the perspectives of how Black women are and are not reflected in the literature they read.

Discussing Windows and Mirrors through Bakhtin

Moving deeper into the metaphor of windows and mirrors can be enhanced by the dialogical theories of Mikhail Bakhtin. Bakhtin provides the language and concepts to understand what is occurring as Black women read and respond to Street Lit. With regards to mirrors, a reader has the ability to view narratives that are similar to her own. Perhaps nothing is closer to Bakhtinian theory than the idea of internally persuasive and authoritative discourse. Discourse can be attributed to the "directions, rules, models"— essentially how we perform and talk about life using our own words (and the words of others). More specifically, both internally persuasive and authoritative discourses are centered on how we "assimilate others' discourse" (p. 342). Bakhtin provides the flexibility to think about Bishop's windows and mirrors in a complex way because the "directions" in how we act and talk in the world also show up in literature. Dismissing the discourse present in literature leaves large gaps in how teachers and researchers think about responses to literature.

Bakhtin (1981) defines internally persuasive discourse as being "denied of all privilege, backed up by no authority at all, and is frequently not even acknowledged" (p. 342). This discourse is not backed up through our perceived authority figures but rather "tightly interwoven with 'one's own word'"(p. 345). The presence of an internally persuasive discourse leaves room for its speaker to remain open and flexible in their language, thereby creating new ways of making meaning. Internally persuasive discourse is constructed through words that are "half-ours" and "half-someone else's". Inversely, authoritative discourse is so engrained according to Bakhtin, that it is considered a "prior" discourse, one that was here before we knew what our own discourse was. Authoritative discourse is demanding, serving as the word of the "father,

adult, and teacher" (p. 342), and thus acts as our default language while an internally persuasive discourse attempts to free itself from the power the authority has.

Bishop's metaphor is helpful to see what is necessary in how we think about literature is provided for students to read, yet Bakhtin's aim is to think deeper to how discourses work in both the literature we read and within the people who read it. When Black women read Street Lit, are they reading a literature that perpetuates the voice of authority or does it provide a space where an persuasive disruption is allowed to take place? In the analysis section that follows, Black women Street Lit readers are bringing their interpretations of the texts, both as a reflection and illusion, all while using the words of the authority and their own.

Towards Black Women and Street Lit

In order to grasp how Black women see themselves in the context of the Street Lit that they read, I interviewed five young Black women who identify as Street Lit readers. Similar to the beginning anecdote, this study began by reaching out to my former high school students who identified as Street Lit readers and have since graduated from high school. From there, I used snowball sampling (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) and the participants were refined through a criterion based selection process. Once all of the potential participants of the study were screened, I interviewed five women who agreed to participate in both individual and Sister Circle conversations and who gave me permission to view and engage with their social media profiles. This article focuses on the responses of two women: Q and Yarni (all names are pseudonyms). Their responses reflect how they, as Black women, construct their lives and discourse in the context of the Street Lit they read. Although only two voices are present here, how Q and Yarni constructed their lives are shared experiences across the five women that participated in the study. I selected the narratives of Yarni and Q, two women whose authoritative and internally

persuasive discourse was present in the ways that help to extend Bishop's metaphor of windows and mirrors.

Yarni and Q

Yarni and I were first introduced to each other in the high school where I worked as an English teacher. She was enrolled in my English course for a year and we have continued to remain in contact after her graduation from high school. Immediately after graduation, Yarni secured a job at a local restaurant and moved into her own apartment. I eventually selected her as a participant because she frequently placed pictures of Street Lit novels on her social media profile page. She is currently seeking other forms of employment because of her dissatisfaction with the food industry, and often complains of being stuck--both financially and creatively. Yarni, who is 22, often writes her own poetry and posts it publically with comments indicating her desire to be able to write more.

Q, who self-selected a gender-fluid pseudonym, is the only participant in this study who joined because of her relationship with another participant. She accompanied another participant, who is not mentioned in this article, to the first individual interview. She interrogated me briefly about the study and mentioned her interest in participating. Q is from a large northeastern city and currently attends college while working jobs in maintenance and food service. In addition to being an avid reader of Street Lit and Black history texts, Q is transparent about her identity as a Black queer woman.

Data Collection and Analysis

While I feel that Bishop's (1990) "windows and mirrors" metaphor for books is a great place to begin thinking about the collected data, I am not satisfied that the metaphor ends neatly at the borders of reflection and observation. I have taken up the metaphor of the two-way mirror

instead to communicate the ways in which Black women Street Lit readers are experiencing the literature and their lives as Black women. A two-way mirror performs the same function as a regular, reflective mirror, but the image can also be seen through from the other side. This effect creates the illusion that the object and its reflection are the only items visible, yet on the other side, the image is being observed by another person. I will use the metaphors of both reflection and illusion to organize the findings.

The process for collecting the participants' narratives rests in the intersections of Black women's experience. I could not focus exclusively on race or gender nor could I collect only one form of data. Those data sources include a form of field note taking called Life Notes (Bell-Scott, 1994), dozens of Street Lit texts, and social media data to help contextualize the participants' full living lives as young Black women. The primary data for this study is transcripts from the individual semi-structured interviews I conducted with the participants. The semi-structured individual interview, which allows for "both open ended and more theoretically driven questions" (Galleta, 2013), I was able to collect information on how the participants were introduced to the genre of Street Lit, how the intersections of race and gender impact their constructed lives as Black women, and in what ways Street Lit has contributed to this construction. To account for fact that I have served in the role of teacher to all of the participants with the exception of one, I intentionally used the semi-structured interview time to not only ask questions about the research, but also to encourage informal questions or narratives that reach beyond the constraints of an interview.

To continue a holistic analysis of the data, I analyzed transcripts of individual interviews, Life Notes, social media posts and Street Lit texts using a relational method of narrative analysis (Brown, Debold, Tappan & Gilligan 1991). I initially isolated narratives from within the original

individual transcripts. From there I adapted a listening guide which allowed me to listen to different voices present in the narrative. Those voices included those of the: participant/researcher; the narrator and her relationship to self; the narrator and her relationship to other; and the narrator and her relationship to community. Isolating the narrative into these multiple voices recognizes that Black women are actors and narrators of their own stories. These narratives carry with them remnants of authoritative and internally persuasive discourses. Black women can create and respond to themselves and others as a way to understand their experiences. Through these responses, I was able to cull instances of the mirrors and windows metaphor, along with the use of authoritative and internally persuasive discourses in the participants' transcripts.

The Two Way Mirror of Street Lit

Two prevailing themes thread Yarni and Q's experiences with Street Lit and navigating Black womanhood. The participants illustrate how a) Street Lit acts as an accurate reflection of their realities as Black women and b) both Street Lit and the discourse of the participants act in concert with intersectional oppressions present in Black womanhood. In the following sections, I will provide examples of these themes by sharing participant perspectives of what it means to be 'real' Street Lit and a Black woman.

Mirror, Mirror, On the Wall: Yarni's Reflection

In a culture where educators and researchers emphasize the importance of reading choice and response for all students (Ivey, 1999), Yarni, who self-identifies as a Black woman, started reading Street Lit in middle school and consistently referred to Street Lit as being "real." Although she defined the concept of "real" in her own way, she indicated that it was this reflection of "realness" that initially attracted her to the genre and convinced her to remain with

the genre. In individual interviews she described how Street Lit blurs the lines of fiction by bringing "the streets" to the page.

When asked about her affinity for Street Lit, she describes how the genre served as a mirror to what is real. She describes by saying, "It's something that I can imagine happening to me or somebody I know...stuff you see in these streets for real. So, it's like...kinda an inside on other people's lives." During our conversation about Street Lit, Yarni describes it as a genre that resembles non- fiction, a genre whose storylines could happen to someone without too much pull at the imagination. Street Lit enables Yarni to catch episodic realities of "people around me might have went through" and she believed that Street Lit would provide her with those stories.

Yarni believes that these books and their "real" topics have prepared her to understand the realities of other Black women who are living these same narratives. As she is reading, she then transposes these lessons on to her own life. When asked about the how narrative of the drug dealer is real in her life, she responds, "It's a lot of girls that are drawn to that money but then when they get with that person, it's a whole different thing. That person that they thought was just oh so sweet he might be controlling…" Yarni, connects this Street Lit narrative to her personal life by adding, "So reading these books tells me...if somebody with a nice suit tries to talk to me it might seems that he is doing something legit, but everything is not what it seems."

The reflective nature of Street Lit means that Yarni could imagine these uncompromising and tough narratives happening to others, but also it reflects what Marshall, Staples & Gibson (2009) would call the "cautionary tale" impact of Street Lit---where readers are warned about the "realities of urban life"(p. 29). Yarni, through her own reading methodology, is seeking out truthful stories, within the realm of fiction, to teach her about how to navigate Black womanhood.

In contrast, Yarni also uses the mirror to critique what appears as 'real'. When reflecting on her conversations with other Black women Street Lit readers, she analyzes the dominant reflection of her peers. When a sexually active female protagonist is centered in Street Lit she argues,

> We all take something from it. Where I might see...somebody might think oh she is a slut or something like that...she was a whore in the book. I might say no...this is her outlet. I think she wanted to do it.

Yarni questions whether the common interpretation of this narrative is accurate by challenging the idea that good women do not openly desire sex. Through the lens of Street Lit and Black womanhood, Yarni has sought out a literature that is reflective of her life experiences and other Black women that she knows. Yet, she doesn't absolve the genre of her critique by acknowledging that, at times, the reflection may not tell the complete story. Yarni is using her own internally persuasive discourse by acknowledging the distance between her own thoughts and how they differ from the authoritative discourse of Black women. Internally, Yarni believes that not all sexually active Black women characters are complicit with the discourse of promiscuity. An authoritative discourse surrounding promiscuity would include words such as hoe or freak or discussions about how many sex partners a woman is perceived to have had. The Street Lit text in this case acts as a form of authoritative discourse, bringing forth a centralized dialogue about Black women and sexuality by referring to women by derogatory names or placing them within narratives that are centered on their sexuality. However, Yarni uses her discourse and the discourse of others to challenge the windows and the mirrors of Street Lit. Yarni is both a reader and critic of Street Lit and it is important to note that Black women such as Yarni, regardless if what they read what is considered to be "risky," are not passive readers.

Q and the Illusion of the Two Way Mirror

Q recalls her first "hardcore Street Lit" book, which she distinguishes from the earlier erotica she read, as a book about the "fast lifestyle. You know drugs, women, money." However, the impact of this narrative with Q, who identifies as a queer woman, is more aligned with the window portion of the Bishop (1990) metaphor. She recalled that while reading she felt like "this is the life that I want to live." As Sutherland (2005) suggests, "literacy and identity are inextricably intertwined" (p. 397). Therefore, Q navigates through the heteronormative world of Street Lit and connects her queer identity to the male characters and their relationships with women. She exclaimed,

> You know I want to be able to wake up in the morning and not have a care in the world.
> Just walk around with a lot of money in my pocket. Girls falling at my feet, you know? I
> wanted that lifestyle. I wanted the experience you know?

Q is reading Street Lit initially as a window into a lifestyle that one day could be reflective of her life.

Although she speaks positively about her beginnings with Street Lit and the narratives present in it, Q's discourse about Black women is ripe with illusion. Q can see an imagined part of herself through the Street Lit that she reads. Yet on the other side of the mirror is the presence of a discourse that still marginalizes Black women. When I asked Q about the intersections of race and gender in the lives of Black women, she replied, "...nobody cares about what the Black woman go through. You only get recognition when you're doing wrong." The authoritative discourse in Street Lit and in Q's explanation are the same. Street Lit characteristically writes about Black women attempting to get out of difficult situations and Q recognizes that in her own

life. Black women are systematically ignored expect in cases of where they are shamed for doing or saying something inappropriate. ,.

Bakhtin asserts that the authoritative discourse acts as default language and Q participates without hesitation. Q explains that she recognizes that intersectional oppressions of Black women exist and it supports what Richardson (2009) would call "the embodiment of not good enough" (p. 755). Yet, as Q continues to talk, she gravitates towards a discourse that perpetuates the stigma that follows being both Black and female. She explains,

> I love Black. I do. I just feel like Black women should just, if you think more of you, than everyone else will think more of you. But if you have this self-pitying, self-loathing,...submissive, docile demeanor about yourself, that that just open doors for people to walk all over you."

Q brings up a visible contradiction to the "mirrors and windows" perspective about literature in that the metaphor falls short of including how we talk about and see ourselves as Black women. According to Q, she feels as if Black women (including herself) are not cared for yet she holds Black women responsible for making others care. Brooks, Brown & Hampton (2008) remind us that we should keep in mind that we all carry our own "racialized and gendered positioning" while we read (p. 668). Such positioning is often co-constructed by discourse simply because it serves as the authority and we have used it to guide how we talk about and understand Black women. Q is participating in an authoritative dialogue about what she sees in her own mirror, but a more accurate reflection of that dialogue brings forth the reality that Black women embody—the double edged sword of blame and accountability.

In comparison to Yarni's perspective towards the reading of a sexually free Black woman character in Street Lit, Q is resistant against Black women who attempt to exhibit this same

freedom in reality. She refers to the current generation of Black woman as "easily manipulated" and then follows up that statement with a narrative of a Black woman who wanted to change the color of her hair. To Q, to exhibit this type of freedom isn't reserved for Black women. She often refers to the consequences of these choices by asking, "How you gon go into somebody job looking like a telly tubby or something...how does that work?" Q's dismissal of a Black woman's desire to change her hair fits into a common authoritative discourse surrounding gainful employment for women. The discourse expects Black women in this instance to perform the standard, conservative style of dress and Q is in agreement. Q's two-way mirror of reading affords her the opportunity to imagine herself as part of Street Lit yet, the illusion of Black women fully participating in society--without restriction-- dominates how Q refers to other Black women who want to make change.

Even though Q has been a dedicated Street Lit reader since she was 14, she now holds Street Lit more responsible for the 'two-way' mirror of how she reads Black women. When asked what she needed Street Lit to do for her now, Q stated,

> I feel like that it would be better for Street Lit if you could just take the nasty and the gritty and...I'm not gon say make sunshine from it, at least a little bit...show that you just not perpetuating stereotypes.

She then describes how Street Lit is ignoring "real world problems" such as the Black Lives Matter movement. Q feels that the problems that Street Lit has traditionally taken up should shift from the personal narratives of the street to discussions about the systems that make those very narratives commonplace. In other words, Street Lit should be reflection of the street as it currently exists. In Street Lit and on the streets themselves, authoritative discourses demand a listening and agreeing ear. Yet Q's internally persuasive discourse is fighting against the

authoritative discourse surrounding what Black women can do and say. Q's thoughts exemplify the ongoing tensions between these discourses and how they can impact how Black women read literature and respond to others who fit and don't fit the prescribed notions of Black womanhood.

Although the perspectives of Black women readers vary from person to person, it is worth noting that Q attempts to balance her identities as a queer woman of color. She offers what I believe to be a solution of how Black women readers are *already* reconciling and taking ownership of this two way mirror. She says, "Everybody has a story. Just create endless possibilities yourself. You can write your own Street Lit."

Implications For Black Girl Street Lit Readers And Other Risky Texts

In addition to Bishop's (1990) perspective of windows and mirrors and Sciurba's (2014) take on the continuum of textual relevance, both Yarni and Q revealed that a requirement to reading engagement is its appearance of "realness." And realness only comes through the idea that the stories do not seem impossible to recreate in their lives or the lives of others. Street Lit blurs the genre lines of fiction and non-fiction; it is simultaneously their story and it also belongs to others. Educators who have Street Lit readers in their classrooms can use the genre to discover what elements their students resonate with and which parts help keep them in touch with the realities of the street that they observe and participate in. It is, therefore, important to critically examine how we label certain genres and their readers, and how those discussions should be accounted for when considering how and what Black girls read.

Although Street Lit and other risky texts have not made significant progress to be included in the canon of appropriate classroom literature, Yarni believes that Street Lit helps to navigate her way through Black womanhood by presenting her with narratives that help her to determine how she would react to similar scenarios. Also, Q views Street Lit as an opportunity to

live out the narratives present in Street Lit, possibly both in print and in person. Street Lit provides fictional pathways through real-life scenarios. Ivey (1999) suggest that a "one-size-fits-all" approach to reading can limit the needs of our students (p. 189). Teachers can give students choice by providing Street Lit books or using excerpts as part of a student-centered curriculum. More likely than not, students may have already been exposed to Street Lit through their own personal reading choices or are looking to engage with literature that speaks directly their experiences. Both Q and Yarni can attest to Street Lit being a personal reading choice because they were introduced to the genre in a way that literacy educators promote as creating lifelong readers—their mother and aunts introduced them to the genre because they are also readers. Street Lit has already been situated as a viable book choice by its readers, but extra attention from teachers may in fact lead to a critical incorporation of the genre in classrooms.

Q's careful balance between her need to imagine herself in the literature while simultaneously critiquing how Black women can define who they are provides an entry point to discuss positioning while reading. Q can use literature as a way to imagine freely but, that freedom falls short under the weight of what it means to be both Black and female. Teachers can take up this task in their classroom by asking students to keep a double-entry reading journal that interrogates how Street Lit characters and storylines intersect with the realities of the street and whether those similarities or differences help them to construct how they read the texts and read the world.

Yarni and Q's take on Street Lit, provide evidence that Street Lit "brings forth issues and themes that matter to them" (Sutherland, 2005, p. 396). Whether those issue and themes are a reflection or a mirror, it is critical that we consider the ways in which Black girls and women are bringing a critical eye and discourse to what they read. Black girls do read with filters; and they

do have something to say. Whether it be bringing forth an internally persuasive discourse or abiding by the voice of authority, listening to how Black women are interpreting literature and responding to it is important to understanding how the metaphor extends beyond mirrors and windows. Approaching Street Lit and its readers with this perspective will help us to understand how readers cooperate with and resist the literature they read.

Take Action

1. Purchase some Street Lit for yourself and your classroom library. Also, encourage students to bring in their own 'real' texts!

2. Create a 'Keepin it 100' journal modeled after a double entry reading journal. Ask students to consider how their particular novel keeps it "real". They can pose questions such as:

   a. Write about a pivotal scene from this chapter. Did the character or novel keep it 100? In other words, did the character, language, or actions stay true to the ways of the Street? Why or why not?

   b. As a reader, how would you critique what the book is saying about Black girls/boys? (any topic related to the themes of Street Lit could work here)

3. Street Lit authors are often local and involved in the community. Have students host a book festival where Street Lit authors come in to talk about their work and provide writing workshops for students who are interested in creating their own Street Lit.

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CHAPTER 4

The Visible and the Void: Navigating the Constellation of Black Female Literacies in Street Lit [2]

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine how Black women who read of a genre of literature referred to as Street Lit have learned to navigate womanhood. More specifically, I look at the unitary language they use concerning the visible and the invisible language surrounding Black women's sexuality. The findings illustrate that the five Black women participants are both cooperating with and resisting against the tropes associated with Black women and sexuality. These findings suggest that Black women maintain their use of dominant language concerning sex and sexuality but they also frequently negate the stereotypes as they construct their identities via their reading of Street Lit texts and the world.

Keywords: Black women, Street Lit, womanhood, identity, sexuality, Bakhtin

The Visible and the Void: Navigating the Constellation of Black Female Literacies in

Street Lit

'African American female literacies' refers to the constellation of African American

cultural identities, social locations, and social practices that influence the ways that members of

this discourse group make meaning and assert themselves sociopolitically in subordinate as well

as official contexts. (Richardson 2003, p.755)

...the observer outside of the hole sees it as a void, an empty place in space. However, it

is not empty; it is a dense and full place in space. - (Hammonds, 2004, p. 309)

This research study explores the identity construction of five Black women as they

discussed their relationship to a genre of fiction named Street Lit and how they have learned to

navigate, thus far, the literacies of Black womanhood. Identity, as characterized by Sutherland

(2005), is "multilayered, relational, and in flux" (p. 365). The relationship between literacy and

identity construction has been researched by numerous scholars, all of whom would suggest that

how we practice our own literacies is informed by who we believe we are and how that identity

is embodied within particular contexts (Fecho, 1998; McCarthy & Moje, 2002; Sutherland,

2005).

I define Black woman literacy(ies) as Richardson (2003) does. She considers literacy to

encompass, "the constellation of African American cultural identities, social locations, and social

practices that influence the ways that members of this discourse group make meaning and assert

themselves sociopolitically in subordinate as well as official contexts" (p. 755). The "social

practices" illuminated in this study concentrates on young Black women who read Street Lit. Street Lit, also referred to as urban fiction, is a subcategory of Black fiction which centers on the language and stories associated with the streets (Gibson, 2010). Black girls and women between the ages of 13 and 30 read Street Lit more than any other demographic (Gibson, 2010; Stovall, 2005). The majority of the current Street Lit is centered on a female protagonist who faces obstacles such as incarceration, abortion, crime, drugs, teen pregnancy, premarital sex, murder, violence and abuse (Morris, et al, 2006). The reflective nature of literature--the familiar metaphor of windows and mirrors--means that literature can provide opportunities to view "worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange" and also reflects "our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience"(Bishop, 1990, p.1).

In reality however, little is known about how Black women navigate womanhood in light of the intersectional realities of their lives. Sutherland (2005) would describe it as how we "occupy particular social positions" (p. 366). This study poses this question: How do Black women co-construct themselves in the context of the Street Lit they read? This study answers an ancestral call to "add to the knowledge base of Black (diasporic) resistance practices" (Richardson, 2009, p. 765) by providing a window into five women's experiences with Street Lit and Black womanhood.

Through individual interviews and Sister Circles conversations (Neal-Barnett, et al, 2011), this study examines how the participants' literacy practices and identities as Black women are influenced by the discourses that accompany them. Rather than focusing primarily on the Street Lit genre or hypothesize about its impact on Black female readers, the following study focuses on the stories and realities of the street for Black women.

My aim in taking up the literacy practices of Black women is not to make a generalization about how we read, think, write and speak. All Black women are not the same. In this paper, I am concerned with the "social language or discourse...that [has] shaped their development as human beings" (Richardson, 2009, p. 754). Our discourse, how we communicate with ourselves and the world is helpful to understanding the daily ways in Black women communicate and for what purpose.

Looking across their individual and Sister Circle narratives, I share the participants' stories of how they have learned to navigate Black womanhood through the lens of resistance. How these participants make sense of their own narratives and the dominant language used within them has implications for our collective understanding of how Black women navigate their lives as literate, intersectional beings. Throughout this paper, the use of collective pronouns "us, we" and "our" will be used on purpose to indicate not only my participation as a Black woman, but also to showcase the similar identity formations that the participants and I share.

Theoretical Framework

This study integrates Black Feminist Thought with Bakhtin's framework of unitary language to examine how Black women are creating, imitating, and resisting the conversation surrounding Black women and sexuality. Theories often offer frameworks and terminology that can be easily transferred to any group of people. However, it is important to identify a theory that centralizes the experiences of Black women, especially as those experiences result from living at intersections of race and gender. Thus, I use Black Feminist Thought to help observe and discuss how Black women are taking up their sexual selves. It is important to clarify how Black Feminist Thought is being defined and how it accounts for the experiences of Black women specifically.

Collins (1990) defines Black Feminist Thought as a "new consciousness that utilizes Black women's everyday, taken-for-granted knowledge" (p. 36). Collins contends that "Black feminist thought aims to empower African American women within the context of social injustice sustained by intersecting oppressions"(p. 26). As Cleage (1993) notes, Black women are "set undeniably apart because of race and sex with a unique set of challenges" (p. 55). This means that the identity of race cannot be isolated from how they intersect with gender, sexuality and nation. Thus, this study focuses on those intersections that are distinct to Black women's identity and literacies.

Collins (1990) moves deeper into Black Feminist Thought by articulating the centrality of dialogue in Black women's experience. She argues that knowledge is "usually developed through dialogues with other members of a community…[and] rarely worked out in isolation"(p. 279). Invoking the spirit and history of dialogue, Black Feminist Thought concentrates on these elements because they do in fact work towards how we create knowledge.

Bakhtin's (1986) concept of unitary language serves as an illustration of how dialogue works. In order for a unitary language to be created, two elements have to be present: 1) centripetal and 2) centrifugal language. These two concepts interact simultaneously and looking closely at these concepts may help to understand how dialogue between Black women works. Centripetal and centrifugal literally means to move towards or away from its center, respectively In the context of Bakhtin's framework, centripetal and centrifugal are forces, "in any language or culture" that have the influence to be "homogenizing and hierarchizing" or "decrowning, dispersing" (Bakhtin, 1975/1981, p. 425). Bakhtin asserts that language attempts to move towards itself, creating a unitary language that desires to "unite and centralize verbal-ideological thought" (p. 271). Languages, dialects, even common sayings are absorbed by the centripetal

force that is attempting to create and centralize an authoritative language. Yet, centripetal forces are met with equal opposition from centrifugal forces whose goal is to cause "decentralization and disunification" (p. 272). The words that encompass Black women's dialogue--the common words, phrases, and ideologies that are being used-- are competing with opposing forces, which want to move language in its own direction. For example, the language that accompanies Black women are often ripe with negative associations. Richardson (2005) discusses the prevalence of the word "bitch" as a description for Black women. The centripetal force of the word "bitch" is attempting to centralize and make permanent its association with Black women. However, opposing forces are working against this centralization by using "bitch" in ways that disrupts its negative connotation. Black women, using centrifugal force, can take up the word in different contexts by changing its meaning and tone. In other words, "bitch" can be made synonymous with "friend" to show a positive association. The centrifugal and centripetal forces are working in opposition in order to make language fit or not fit within certain parameters.

Using the frameworks of Bakhtin and Black Feminist Thought are central to this project in that it prioritizes the experiences of Black women while also privileging the dialogue that is used to make sense of those experiences. The tenets of Black feminist thought support the notion that the lived experiences of Black women are considered valid constructions of knowledge and those lived experiences are shared primarily through dialogue. I will examine the gravitational pulls of centripetal and centrifugal language while centering Black feminist thought and the intersectional experiences of the Black women in order to privilege the experiences of the participants.

Space as a Metaphor

Richardson (2003) and Hammonds (2004) allude to the presence of an interstellar reality where Black women and their experiences exist as part of a constellation and how the visible and the void have an impact on space. In literature, metaphor is used as a way to "shift our understanding about something that we know by reframing how we see it" (MacNaughton, 2005, p. 99). For this reason, I draw on the metaphor of space by using terms that are indicative of movement within (un)discovered territory. These words include: map(ping), navigation, seen, unseen, visible, and void. These terms and the metaphor of space become a lens in which to describe the relationship between Black women, Street Lit, and how we navigate our lives. It purposely focuses attention to the premise that Black women are shaping the spaces we are within while continuing to create, follow, and disrupt our own maps, specifically in terms of our sexuality.

Understanding the use of (outer)space as a metaphor relies on acknowledging that space, in this definition, is where all things exist and move. In space, there are concepts that we are still unfamiliar with, yet once we discover how something works within space we can observe how this phenomenon works. I borrow the construct of space to help reveal the ways in which Black womanhood has and has not been adequately charted and explored. I am not intending to imply that Black women are alien, but I am suggesting that we are often ignored in both literal and metaphorical spaces and this is an attempt to be able to read and navigate our own course of life.

Methods

I collected Street Lit texts, social media data, composed Life Notes (Bell-Scott, 1995), audiotaped individual interviews and participated in Sister Circle conversations. The Life Notes

provide necessary context and details of each participant that are aligned with the metaphor of navigation and the framework of dialogue within Black feminist thought and Bakhtinian theory.

I held two individual interviews with each participant and two Sister Circle conversations with two and three participants at a time, depending on the participants other prior commitments such as caretaking responsibilities and work. I conducted both Sister Circle conversations and individual interviews over a six-month period.

Leaning away from the traditional structure of group interviews, Sister Circles have been defined as "support groups that build upon existing friendships, fictive kin networks, and the sense of community found among Black women" (Neal-Barnett et al, 2011, p. 267). This definition accounts for the multiple ways in which Black women congregate, sometimes spontaneously, to participate in the building and maintaining of their relationships with one another. Similar to Sutherland's (2005) use of group interview methodology, I was prepared with a list of possible questions and themes from interview protocols, but I preferred to have "participants talk because they were engaged" (p.373). I purposely use the word "conversation" rather than interview, because interviews in qualitative research suggest a fixed time length and questions, which conversations are not bound to. As the participants and I met, there was no indication of a time limit and no official "beginning" to the interview.

Each participant was asked the same interview questions about their relationship to Street Lit and their experiences thus far as Black women. I then asked participants to elaborate on their certain statements by asking them to recall narratives in which those statements rang true for them. The affordances of both the individual interviews and the Sister Circle conversations allowed the participants and me to approach any subject without feeling constrained by specific questions, topics or time limits.

Data Analysis

I analyzed the Sister Circle conversations and individual interviews using an adapted version of Brown, Debold, Tappan & Gilligan's (1991) relational listening method. To begin, I isolated narratives from within the original interview transcripts. From there, I used the relational listening guide to listen to different voices present within the narrative. The layering of voices included: me as the participant/researcher; the narrator and her relationship to self; the narrator and her relationship to others; and the narrator and her relationship to community. By listening to the narrative four distinct times, it allowed me to comb the data for how both the participants and I played a role in the creation of our narratives. Both Black Feminist Thought and Bakhtin centralize the presence of dialogue as meaning making. During an interview or conversation, participants were using a unitary language to express how they, and others like them, have learned to navigate womanhood. The relational listening method can help to exemplify these pathways by highlighting how the participants spoke to each other using language that both pushes and pulls against itself. Dialogue is central to the theoretical orientations of this study and my aim was to view the map of how these women navigated their individual lives.

The participants consistently talked about the behaviors and expectations of themselves and other Black women. An overwhelming amount of those behaviors and expectations were centered around sexuality. For this paper, I examine two perspectives surrounding Black women's sexuality: the visible and the void. First, the visible is concerned with the language surrounding the sexual behaviors of Black women in and outside of the cautionary fiction of Street Lit. Black female sexuality is centralized in the plots of the Street Lit and while the participants have situated themselves as claimants to their own bodies and sexualities, they also take up and use unitary language concerning other Black women's experiences. Second, Black

women's sexuality is usually discussed in terms of being a void or empty space. The controlling images and behaviors of Black women, especially in terms of sexual behavior and language, are already formed, expected, and acted upon. Those formed images sustain the perception that Black women's needs are absent and therefore do not require attention. Through visible and the void, I am able to illustrate how the participants reflect upon how their own personal navigation through Black womanhood--a constellation in which the seen and unseen impacts how we see ourselves and others.

#Blackgirls

In Sutherland's (2005) research on Black girls' use of literacy practices, she admits that her first naming of the project was centered on the use of the term African-American. It subsequently shifted to the use of Black because of the participants frequent use of the term and it encompasses the "visible characteristics" which are "regularly ascribed to Black women" (p. 379). As a Black woman researcher, it is important to note that within my own language and the participants that African American and Black are used interchangeably. The given assumption between us is that both terms encompass the same group of people. Even more so, Black as it is used in Black feminist thought is the same Black used in organizations such as Black Girls Run or Black Girls Rock--as a way of defining and affirming women who rest at the intersections of race, class and gender.

Participant Profiles

The Black women who participated in this study provide a small glimpse into the ways in which womanhood is navigated. I used a snippet of their own language from individual interviews to encapsulate how they see themselves and how they want to appear to others. Second, I used photos of the women to showcase their self-representation through how they

choose to embody both their gender and race. All participants self-selected a pseudonym and those marked with in bold font and asterisk were former high school students of the researcher.

Ashlii*.

When discussing Street Lit, Ashlii shares this manifesto towards any skepticism that she receives after recommending it to a friend.

> "They look at me like, why you suggesting that nasty book? I'm like, even though it has those type of scenes in it, it'll still teach you a lesson at the same time...I mean, it's got me through a lot of stuff...That's what I should have sold in school. I should have sold Zane books. It helped me through a lot."

Ashlii was known throughout the high school as the unofficial "snack lady." In order to offset high student fees, Ashlii carried a duffle bag full of candies and juices to sell to other students. She defines herself as "crazy" but this word is not connected to her mental health but rather her boldness towards life. When she talks about life after high school graduation she admits that now "I tell people that if it not benefitting me, I don't care." Ashlii identifies as a

queer woman of color and is attending a local mortuary science school in the hopes of becoming a funeral director.

Gina*

When asked about Street Lit, Gina described it as "real life…[that] you can picture through your own eyes." Gina currently works in the fast food industry but desperately wants to return to cosmetology school. She lives at home with her mother and mother's partner. The first description she uses for herself is "different" meaning that "in a crowd I can stand out by myself." She has over a dozen tattoos and multiple body and ear piercings. She frequently changes her hairstyle and color as a means of self-expression, yet her demeanor, which she describes as "sensitive," makes for a reserved personality. Gina maintains a small cohort of friends and, most of whom have been her friends throughout middle and high school. Gina also identifies as queer, but she chooses to not discuss personal aspects of her own sexuality.
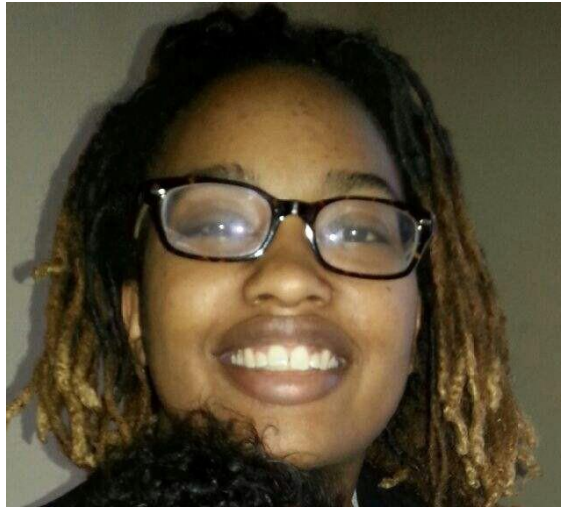
Joy* -

The first born of a set of twins, Joy suffered a small stroke at birth. Her younger sister, who is not part of this study, often takes Joy under her wing and is quite persuasive in what path Joy takes in her life. She is enrolled at a local community college and just recently moved in her with her sister. Joy described herself as "passionate" in that she is extremely connected to her family and what she contends is her responsibility to care for them. She uses the word, "overprotective" to describe her relationship with her mother and feels herself accountable to helping her mother through vetting possible suitors. Shy by nature to members outside of her family, Joy began reading Street Lit as a way to gain friends in school and eventually recommended the genre to others who she felt would benefit from reading real stories that didn't sugarcoat the realities of urban life.

Q –

When Ashlii showed up to her interview, she brought her partner Q with her. After passively eavesdropping on our conversation, Q began to ask questions about the study and she was subsequently recruited to participate. The first novel that Q ever read was a Street Lit book and she describes herself as "unpredictable" and "strong minded." Her strong mind set appears in response to her "three strikes" mindset about how she identifies with who she is. She says, "I'm young, I'm Black and I'm gay. Like that's just...that is three strikes right there. Q currently works two jobs and attends a local college with dreams of becoming an entrepreneur.

Yarni *

I met Yarni as a 16 year old high school Junior. When asked to describe who she is, she immediately spoke of the multiple ways in which she presents herself to others: "Sometimes I think I am more than one person. I have multiple little attitudes." Yarni goes on to describe those attitudes, which range from "fun and charismatic" to "I don't feel like being bothered". Yarni is honest with herself and observant of other people's relationships, thereby making her cautious to enter into friendships and relationships with others. She currently works as a manager in a local fast food restaurant.

Researcher Position

In a research study that focuses on how Black women are learning to navigate who they are in light of the Street Lit that they read, my position as the participant researcher should also be highlighted. I also identify as a Black woman. For four of the five participants, I was their high school English teacher. I kept in touch with them throughout the remainder of high school and college. By the time this article is in press, I will have earned a doctorate in Language and Literacy Education and when asked about the study, I explained that I was interested in talking with women who have been reading Street Lit for a long time because I was interested in knowing what they, as Black women, not only think about the genre but how they create and follow their own map to navigate womanhood.

Due to the fact that I was initially in the role of teacher/ elder to these girls, it was difficult for them to shed that connection. They still referred to me as "Ms. Jones" and I had to consider whether their responses to my questions (about the literature and who they are as women) were valid to who they are and not what they believed I wanted to hear. Both Yarni and Joy asked if whether they had the "right answer" to the questions I asked. I had to ensure them that we were having a conversation only but also had to be constantly aware in terms of how I asked questions, which words I used when talking with them, and how I responded to their thoughts. In other words, I didn't want to play teacher, if I could help it. I reassured them that our conversations did include pre-formed questions and there was no such thing as a "right" answer.

Results: Navigating the Seen and Unseen

Acting as a navigational map of the seen and unseen, two themes connect the participants' experience with Street Lit and Black women's sexuality. In their interviews with me and with others, the participants contributed to the unitary language surrounding Black women and sexual behaviors, and yet within the same discourse, the participants trouble the unseen parts of Black women's sexuality which include how Black women are resisting stereotypes and creating agency in their lives. Below, I provide examples of both the visible and the void by sharing participants' individual and shared knowledge of what it means to navigate Black womanhood.

The Visible: What we see and say about sexuality

In a culture in which Black women and sexuality have been socially constructed to include typical images of the "promiscuous Jezebel, asexual Mammy, breeding Welfare Mama, and emasculating Matriarch" (Stephens & Phillips, 2005, p. 39), Black women receive (and

send) what Simon & Gagnon(1986) call "sexual scripts," which help to organize what is considered to be appropriate sexual behavior. . These controlling images have shifted and updated time to include other models of Black female sexuality such as the: Diva, Gold Digger, Freak, Dyke, Gangsta Bitch, Sister Savior, Earth Mother and Baby Mama (Stephens & Phillips, 2003). Although the participants in this study vary in their identities as queer and heterosexual women, each of them used their language as a way of fulfilling these tropes of Black female sexuality.

In the individual interviews and Sister Circle conversations, part of the visible conversation around Black female sexuality centers on upholding the unitary discourse surrounding these images. When asked how she would describe Street Lit to someone who has never read it, Ashlii brought up the common framework of the cautionary tale and infused the sexual scripts often associated with Black women: "Cause at the end of the book even though it might be a messed up lesson...don't mess around with married men, you know stay in your lane, keep your legs closed," Ashlii went on to copy the criticism that Street Lit uses when writing about sexually active Black women: "First thing, you can't have sex with everybody. That's the first lesson. You can't trust everybody." Her use of second person "you" distances Ashlii from being included in this group of Black women. She insists through her language that she is not to be included in this group, yet she feels authorized to comment on Black women who do fit this criterion. Ashlii uses the frameworks of Street Lit and her personal life to navigate these distinctions of Black womanhood. Street Lit incorporates these pathways to sexual Black womanhood as part of the content and description of their female characters. One could only refer to the popularity of Kwan's popular series *Hoodrat* as emblematic of how embedded and visible Black female sexuality has been taken up. This series of Street Lit books follows the

narratives of multiple Black women who are use sex to gain access to resources such as money, transportation, and gifts. Ashlii categorizes Black women throughout her interview as "ratcheds" and "thots" (AKA That Hoe Over There) but she makes a distinction between them and what she calls a woman. This distinction was made by other participants as well signaling a visible discourse that participates in the labeling and separation of sexual Black women.

The conversation about Black women and sexuality took an interesting perspective, however, when Gina raised the topic in her individual interview. Although sexuality and Black women was a topic that was broached by each participant, only Gina brought forward the perspective of Black women who use their sexuality as way to take advantage of others. Similar to the trope of the Gold Digger, Gina followed the lives Black women sex workers via social media. In our interview together, I learned how Gina used social media to navigate this map of Black womanhood sexuality. Pulling up a social media account named TheyHateThePrettyHoe, Gina explains how she views these women:

It is not funny, the lifestyle. But, it's just funny because a lot of them are Black women and they have this mindset that they are only good for one thing. And you have this man who's basically agreeing with you and putting this in your head that you're only good for that one thing. And I just follow because it's weird...And they think this is the life of luxury and they just living the life.

Gina goes on to say that she follows sex workers on social media so that she can "take a look at the lifestyle without being in that lifestyle." Gina is following the accepted discourse and language about paid sex work, which includes misunderstanding and shame, yet she uses their stories (posts) as a way to navigate her own womanhood. Essentially, these posts have become a new form of Street Lit for her, a map for making powerful decisions about her life.

The participants not only discussed the presence of Black women and sexuality in both print and real life, but they also, inadvertently discussed the absence of sexuality and how it was exhibited as a strength in others. In individual interviews, I asked the participants about the common characteristics that Black women share. Each of them recalled the very characteristics that describe another image, the Matriarch. Using such descriptors as "emasculating" and "controlling" (Stephens & Phillips, 2003), the Matriarch is viewed as having "control over the family unit" and saw no need for men other than "using his seed for childbearing" (p. 10). The participants did not use these exact descriptors, however they did share how Black women, in their experience, dominate their families. When I asked Ashlii about the commonalities that Black women share, she said "strength" because:

> Cause most of Black women, they've been through heartbreaks, they've been through people cheating on them. But at the end of the day, they got kids. They gon do what they got to do for their kids. They got bills to be paid. They gon get out there and they gone make that money so they can pay their bills. They gon live their life.

Ashlii said that her grandmother was the prime example of this matriarch, and she contrasted her grandfather as not being present to the needs of the family: "My grandfather, he really wasn't no help. He just...gave her a check. That was it. She raised us." In a Sister Circle conversation, this notion of the visible, strong Black woman surfaced again:

> Yarni: It's just that strength that we already are born with. I think there's a strength that is instilled in Black women that nobody else has. The ability to make a way out of no way is just in our veins.

> Joy: We will never give up and we just keep moving forward. We just keep pushing. We don't care. This is what my sister had to do to me. She just

>>> keeps on tilling and don't worry about the past and don't worry about

>>> what you're going to do right now.

Q: I think my mom is the strongest Black woman I know. She been through

>>> some things...I've never seen her break from it. She fall in a hole, she

>>> climb out, dust herself off and she keep stepping, you know.

The unitary language around Black women is present and consistent: Black women who are seen as sexually promiscuous are shamed and viewed as uncontrollable while those whose sexuality is controlled and absent are viewed as admirable, giving, and built to survive the trials of Black womanhood. This repeated story of the matriarch as head of the Black family does *not* mean that the participants thought disparagingly of the caretakers of their families, yet the language they use to talk about Black women and sexuality is confining--it situates Black women and their sexuality as a visible shame. The participants praise the Matriarch image of Black women, yet it is the very image that troubles our ability to be seen as a Black woman with sexual desires. The presence and absence of sexuality in Black women's lives illustrates that we still struggle with this real and visible part of ourselves and others.

The Void: Just because you can't see it doesn't mean it isn't there

Other than what is visible, another way of looking at the space of Black women and sexuality is to examine what is conceived as a void or empty space. Using Hammonds'(1994) work on Black w(holes), she contends the a void does not necessarily equate to nothingness, but rather as something that is not visible optically. She writes:

>>> I suggest that we can detect the presence of a black hole by its effects on the region of

>>> space where it is located. The existence of the black hole is inferred from the fact that the

visible star is in orbit and its shape is distorted in some way or it is detected by the energy

emanating...around the visible star that could not be produced by the visible star alone (p.

139).

What Hammonds describes here is that black holes are indeed invisible, but it is only

through the presence of a visible star that can we discover a black hole is present. In this study, I

posit the research participants' use of authoritative language acts like as the visible star which

indicates the presence of something else--a black hole of Black women's sexuality. This black

hole acts as a pocket of resistance to the authoritative language and sexual scripts associated with

how Black women talk about themselves and others. Although the majority of participants

engaged in conversation about appropriate sexual behavior, some participants disrupted those

notions by accounting for the ways in which women's needs are being ignored. As an example,

when asked how Street Lit has informed who they are as Black women, Yarni begins a narrative

that is repeated often in the genre--dating a man who participates in illegal activity. Yarni admits

that Street Lit prompts her to ask questions such as, "What if they do get locked up, what would

you do? How would you fend for yourself...what would you do at home?" Yarni recounted how

having a face to face relationship is more valuable than waiting on someone to be released from

jail:

> I'll write you. I'll get you a postcard. But as far as being in a relationship, no. Cause
>
> women have needs. There are a lot of sexual needs. So, I like to be able to spend time
>
> with you, or go out with you or even go take pictures. I need attention. Cause if I don't
>
> get it from you, somebody else gon give me attention.

Yarni broke from the Street Lit narrative of remaining loyal and sacrificing her own needs for the

sake of the relationship by admitting that her needs are equally an important part of her

happiness in a relationship. Yet, at first glance, her admission of personal needs could lead to an assumption of her role as a Freak or Gold Digger. But what Yarni is disrupting is the assumption that Black women do not care about themselves as sexual beings and whose relationships do not deserve reciprocity.

In other individual interviews, participants spoke directly to the ways their queerness impacts their identity as Black women. Both Q and Ashlii disrupted the heteronormative stories of Street Lit and they were eager to share with me how their own coming out narratives represent a gap not only in Street Lit but in the conversations about Black women and sexuality. Hammonds (1994) reminds us that the traditional narrative enveloping Black women and sexuality, "does not address even the possibility of a black lesbian sexuality, or of a lesbian or queer subject" (p. 136). Q and Ashlii are alerting us to the presence of who they are and what their stories are, even if their experiences are not reflected in what they read.

Both Ashlii and Q in their individual interviews recalled their own awareness of their queerness. Yet, while each of them embraced that part of their identity, they repeatedly emphasized how other's interpretation of their sexuality impacted them. Ashlii remarked that she "always knew who I was" even if others or Street Lit did not. In her own coming out narrative, Ashlii was forced to interrupt her mother's response to watching two girls kiss in public. Her mother's voice is in italics:

And we rode past the restaurant and she saw girls kissing. And she was like *ewww*. And I was like, what's wrong with it? And she was like, w*hat you mean what's wrong with it? It ain't like you like that.* I just got quiet.

The rupture in the heteronormative landscape in the form of a visible kiss acts like the star whose presence indicates that a black hole may be near. It was not until Ashlii countered

with a question, that her mother's perception of her child was forced into the foreground. The void of Black women's sexuality--in this case that sexuality can be queered--is a perspective that if not interrupted or acknowledged can remain hidden in plain sight. This heteronormative landscape is also littered with the unitary language concerning queer sexuality. Considering the source of this opposition, Ashlii's mother and her vocal opinions about sexuality mirrors what Bakhtin (1981) describes as "hard-edged" and "demands that we acknowledge it, that we make it our own" (p. 342). Ashlii's rebuttal by asking "what's wrong with it?" is splintered by the authority of the mother and the discourse she forces Ashlii to participate in. There is no option for questioning but rather there is an expectation of assimilation to heteronormativity. Ashlii, through her questioning (and possible silence) reveals the varied constellations of Black women's sexuality that Black women have learned to navigate and also how we attempt to take others with us through our disruption of a unitary language.

Q positioned herself along this trajectory by explaining the void of queer Black female sexuality is revealed through the misconception that only Black men get the brunt of the difficult treatment. Q quickly corrects this assumption by saying, "It's really the Black woman...people don't talk about that. And especially if you're Black and you're gay. No. You don't belong here." Within this void, of the things that are not seen but are still present, Q reveals how she learned to move the unseen to the seen. She calls herself "awkward" and "coming into myself" and in what I would describe, using Q's language as inspiration, as a coming *to* narrative Q tells how she first gained courage to approach another woman:

> I just said a quick prayer and you know, I just walked up to her. I was just like, Hey. And
> come to find out she liked me all along. ...I wasn't gon talk to her but...that was like a big
> moment for me...I had never approached, I wasn't even out then.

Q is aware of her position at the intersections of race, gender and sexual orientation, yet, these narratives and how they resist heteronormativity are rarely discussed as part of the map of Black women's sexuality and how they act as a form of resistance of how Black women can tell their own narratives. Overlaying Hammonds' premise about the Black w(holes) of queer Black female sexuality and Bakhtin's unitary language, Q, and possibly other many other queer Black women, are participating in what Bakhtin would describe as a "total" rejection of a unitary language and even possibly an authoritative discourse (p. 343). Bakhtin argues that authoritative discourse "enters our verbal consciousness as a compact and indivisible mass" (p 343). It is perhaps this mass of authoritative discourse, and Q's rejection of it, that helps us to see the invisible Black w(hole). Q rejected the unitary language and ideology around approaching women thereby making disrupting the impact of authority and making seen her own aims. Q and Ashlii represented what Sutherland (2005) would recognize as "identities less about dichotomies and more about recognizing the complexities in being a Black woman" (p. 391). Their narratives centralized how they define themselves as queer women who also have sexualized experiences that don't fit within the parameters of Black womanhood identity.

Discussion

Contrary to the narratives present within Street Lit and the research done on Black females and their experiences, the participants in this research study both affirmed and resisted typical pathways of Black womanhood. The genre of Street Lit provides a real context for its readers and its realness only comes through the idea that the stories are possible to recreate in their lives or the lives of other Black women. Street Lit simultaneously tells their stories, yet it also belongs to others (Author, 2016). However, using Street Lit as the impetus of conversation means acknowledging that Street Lit is in part responsible for the continuation of the

authoritative language surrounding Black women and sexuality. As readers of the genre, the participants have an opportunity to both read and confront the literature and decide for themselves how they will contribute to the language being produced and reproduced.

There still remains power in Black women's dialogue despite the presence of a centralizing language. Collins (1993) writes that "new knowledge claims are rarely worked out in isolation...and are usually developed through dialogue"(p. 279). What Collins suggests here is that dialogue has and will continue to be important to how Black women learn to navigate identity, whether it is through conversation with others or through reading a book. It might also suggest that only through dialogue can centralizing language be resisted in ways that speak to how Black women talk about and experience their own sexualities.

Limitations

What is more central to the importance of dialogue in Black women's spaces is that we have inherited a form of narrative storytelling that helps us to co-construct our identities. So when Richardson's (2002) argues that "African American female language and literacy practices reflect their socialization in a racialized, genderized, sexualized, and classed world in order to protect themselves" (p. 680), she highlights that we have learned to tell our stories for own selves. Thus, when the participants talk about Street Lit and their own lives, they tell and retell the stories that stuck with them, that represent the experiences they likely want to have or possibly to avoid.

Examining the visible and the void of Black women's sexuality is one example of how to articulate what happens when Black women read about themselves and engage with each other about their lives. Using terms that evoke absence and presence brings awareness to how our world functions when we operate from what we can see and not see. It is important to consider

how we act, or how we are perceived to act, when there is already a predominant language concerning how Black women occupy certain spaces. The participants, including myself, have to consider how we will be perceived and what language we will use with each other in order to affirm and make each other aware of the black holes around us.

It bears repeating that the stories you heard here from Black women are not inclusive of every Black woman's experience. And, these women chose to let me into their lives beyond the scope of our first initial meeting as student and teacher. All of the participants, including me, are learning how to navigate Black womanhood, and their stories only reflect a small part of the constellation that encompasses our literacies. Another limitation to consider is that three of the five women identified as queer, which I did not anticipate nor initially plan for before embarking on these conversations. I recognize that the framework of heteronormativity is alive in this study, yet their decision to share with me their realities as navigating, queer women of color ensured that my own knowledge was not created in isolation but rather through their willingness to teach me.

Conclusions

Through this study, the participants have used their voices to contribute to and resist against unitary language surrounding Black women and sexuality. Their efforts, I am suggesting, is done in order to help themselves and others navigate the seen and unseen pathways to Black womanhood, however it may be defined. These women all had one similar star, in Street Lit, with which to guide them. Street Lit looks at the narratives of Black girls by using the relevant experiences and language of the streets. The print based narratives, at times, mirror the realities of Black girls and women in ways that reach into the constellation of what it means to be Black,

female, and present sexually. These narratives—they ones they read and the ones they construct—contribute to our collective identity and ways of existing. Research on Black girls and women and what they read must continue to be explored, especially when the literature they read reifies certain narratives of Black women. Ethically and professionally, it may be sensitive territory to engage in discussions concerning the sexual representation(s) of Black women in literature and beyond, yet what is seen and unseen--or rather what is heard and unheard--occupies the same space. The participants are empowered and engaged in not only their retelling of Street Lit but also of their own stories.

Researchers and practitioners must continue to connect with how Black girls and women are learning to exist and resist within a world that is often blind to their presence. The participants knew that navigating the constellation of Black womanhood meant engaging in the same ritual as reading Street Lit—they had to make meaning of it for themselves. From here, the work must aim to understand what that meaning making looks like for Black women --who are what Richardson (2009) calls "not inherently 'at-risk'" but rather "made at-risk"(p. 765). Perhaps their stories of the (in)visible will encourage us to learn how to navigate the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality with the same courage.

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Chapter 5

Rooted in Dialogue: Using Sister Circle Conversations in qualitative educational research[3]

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Biographical Notes

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Abstract

This article examines how Sister Circle conversations, an indigenous and dialogical method of communicating for Black women, can offer the opportunity for participants to discuss and reflect on their own narratives concerning their experiences. It draws on a research study that used Sister Circle conversations in lieu of group interviews or focus groups in order to facilitate the sharing of personal narratives. This article discusses how Sister Circle conversations have been a consistent part of literacy histories for Black women and this method allows research participants to contribute to the sharing of narratives without the limitations of time or subject. It also argues that Sister Circle conversations can be connected to theoretical frameworks and used as part of a connected research design. It concludes by offering that indigenous research methods can be used as a powerful research tool for capturing narratives of Black women.

Keywords: Sister Circle, indigenous, qualitative, narratives, Black women

After the family has said grace and we have moved through the meats and sides at least twice, talked about the craziness of the world and what the final opinion is on the matter, the men and women leave each other. The women stayed around the kitchen table. They had their hands in the dishwater or were trying to find a used piece of foil to wrap up leftovers to take home. I knew that when the men and women split that way, it was grown folks time and I had no business being in either space--but the women let me stay and eavesdrop. At that moment, and not a moment before then, these women's conversations oozed with gossip, their opinions were real and unedited, and it happened without an official start, finish, or steady topic of conversation. When a man would enter the kitchen, to sneak a piece of sweet potato pie or another beer from the cooler, the women would slip quickly into other conversations or lower their voices so that the momentum would not be halted. I would hear and attempt to translate the sayings from the older women. My grandmothers would validate the stories they heard with Southern, Black euphemisms like, "Sugar ain't even sweet no more" or "Don't ever fatten a frog for no snake." As a young girl, I dared not interrupt these conversations or give the appearance that I understood or was listening. Yet, as I matured, I became less afraid to be a part of these conversations, knowing that my contribution to one meant I was on my way to being a woman in some sense of the word.

This glimpse into after-dinner conversations between women is referencing a familiar experience within lots of families; these conversations for Black women have been an instrumental way of communicating with each other in safe spaces. And these very impromptu and necessary conversations describe the richness and depth that should be a part of a qualitative research methodology involving Black women and girls. Although Sister Circles and qualitative research methodologies seem unrelated, this community practice would fare well as a form of

group interviewing, rooted in indigenous ways of being. The Sister Circle inherently recognizes that dialogue is alive and changing as its participants seek to listen while also communicating with others who share the same experiences.

Sister Circles as a Method

This essay takes up my experience as a participant observer during a research study of young Black women who are readers of a genre of literature called Street Lit. In the context of the study, Black women Street Lit readers discussed with others and me, what it meant to navigate Black womanhood. As a Black feminist researcher and teacher, it was important to me that each part of the research design including research questions, researcher position, data collection and analysis was centered on the experiences of women at the intersections of race, class, and gender. This is what Collins (1990) refers to as a "recognition of [the] connection between experience and consciousness that shapes the everyday lives of individual African-American women"(p. 27). To fully embrace this "connection" means that the traditional and typically Western ways of doing qualitative research had to be suspended in order to facilitate a research study that is cognizant and humanizing in its efforts to glean narratives from Black women. I could not imagine that entering into a research study to learn about Black women's experiences would involve sitting down with a preplanned list of questions in which the participants would take turns answering them, without interruption or possibly emotion. Therefore, I was convinced that these moments required a method that would take into consideration the creation of a safe space where Black women could exist, without caveats.

Sister Circle conversations enabled me to bring together a group of women whose voices would serve as their full participation in what claims they wanted to make about the world and Black womanhood. Using Sister Circles as a method can help participants and researchers use

the "concrete ways to read/re-read our current situations in the world"(Dillard, Tyson & Abdur-Rashid, 2000, p. 3). In the remainder of this article, I will unpack what a Sister Circle conversation is while using Bakhtin to help illuminate their meaning.

Sister Circles: An Indigenous Way of Gathering and Sharing Knowledge

When considering qualitative research, collecting data is connected to its research design and the epistemological assumptions behind them (Botha, 2011). Denzin and Lincoln (2005) describe that data collection can involve a variety of materials including: interviews, artifacts, personal experience and a diversity of texts including observational, historical, and interactive texts. Yet, research and the methods we use to collect data still maintain the "researcher as the authority, and expert who can describe and predict changes" (Lambert, 2014, p. 119). Decolonizing research and their accompanying methods means to be concerned chiefly with the indigenous knowledge and methodologies that occur as part of the norms of a particular place. Dei, Hall, & Rosenberg's (2000) definition of indigenous knowledge "refers to traditional norms and social values as well as to mental constructs that guide, organize, and regulate the people's way of living and making sense of their world"(p. 6). So, in an effort to research 'with' community, rather than 'on' community, indigenous ways of collecting data include mining for ways that are "ethically correct and culturally appropriate"(Porsanger, 2004, p. 109). In other words, as a researcher I am interested in understanding the ways in which indigenous communities are already making sense of the world and observing those processes. My intention is not to create a new, academic method of collecting data but rather take into account that the body of knowledge that already exists is diverse and complex in its current state. To dislocate the data from its source would recreate the same Western paradigm of doing research.

Qualitative research has attempted to access indigenous ways of being in research studies, but the best efforts to incorporate them typically do so in Western ways. The researcher and their interpretations are still centered. As academic researchers, we are compelled to research and write within the boundaries of theoretical frameworks and methodologies, but those traditional frameworks are limiting to our understanding of how indigenous ways of knowing are rooted in the ways of being (Botha, 2011).

When comparing the majority of qualitative research, there is still a need for methods that are decolonized. (Dei, Hall & Roseberg, 2000; Smith, 1999) According to Simonds & Christopher (2013), a decolonized research study purposely "places indigenous voices and epistemologies at the center of the research process" (p. 2185). This article contributes to this body of literature by exploring how indigenous, iterative, qualitative data was collected using Sister Circles in order to better grasp how Black women communicate with each other about their experiences, while also describing the affordances and constraints of using a Sister Circle methodology as part of a qualitative research study.

While I offer Sister Circles as an indigenous method for group interviews with Black women, I do not seek to establish this method as an alternative to group interviews. To do so would suggest that this method could be easily substituted, or is the equivalent to other interviewing techniques. Porsanger (2004) argues that using indigenous methods is not about "competing, or replacing" traditional paradigms, but rather to "challenge it and contribute to the body of knowledge of indigenous peoples about themselves and for themselves" (p. 105). This view would eliminate the need to view this method as an indigenous process.

Conversations between Black women can be a complex space in that they are unpredictable in both time and scope. This article does not attempt to declutter that complexity

but rather it amplifies what could help researchers understand more about Sister Circles as a method. One possible way of entering into this complexity is through the scholarship of Mikhail Bakhtin. Bakhtin offers an accessible way of thinking about decolonization in research methods. Decolonization requires a return to the voices of the participants in the research. Using Bakhtin's (1981) notions of the dialogic and carnival I clarify some of the happenings within the Sister Circle conversations.

Carnival is an institutionalized celebration in which the normalized systems and hierarchies are temporarily suspended (Bakhtin, 1981). Therefore the voices of those who are usually marginalized are, within the time of Carnival, equal to the dominant voices. This act offers a space in which the establishment is ridiculed without penalty and its participants wear masks to hide their identity. I view qualitative research and its methods as a form of a dominant institution, while indigenous methods such as Sister Circle conversations interrupt the status quo by centralizing the ways in which Black women communicate. Using concepts like Carnival, which can be viewed as a decolonized spectacle, can help think through decolonizing methods that center indigenous people. Methods such as Sister Circle conversations rest nicely within theoretical frameworks, such as Black Feminist thought and Bakhtin, which take into consideration the experiences of those located the margins. In this research study, I situated Sister Circles conversations as a natural output of Collins' (1990) Black Feminist Thought because this type of data collection gave preference to the narratives that address the intersectional realities (i.e., race, class, gender, sexuality) of Black womanhood.

Sister Circles: Black History and Black Feminist Thought in Context

The first part to understanding the historical context of Sister Circles is to know that they have been a "vital part of Black women's lives for the last 150 years"(Neal-Barnett, et. al, 2013,

p. 267). Sister Circles have existed directly in a variety of organizations such as literary societies and the Black club movement (Giddings, 1984). Although the groups had a specific purpose for meeting, its participants used the meetings to build on their collective experiences and friendships. Although these meetings were set up with organizational purpose, the conversations that took place between Black women were a continuation of Black female literacy practices that are indigenous ways of being. Richardson (2002) lists these practices as "storytelling, conscious manipulation of silence and speech, code/style shifting and signifying" (p. 680). These practices, which I argue are indigenous ways of being for Black women, are not necessarily captured in the qualitative research process.

Using three of the four tenets of Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 1990) as a guide, I believe Sister Circle conversations are a viable, if not critical, method of interviewing for the following reasons: they 1) highlight lived experience as a way of making meaning; 2) affirm dialogue as a way to help establish validity and construction of knowledge and; 3) create safe spaces of self-accountability through the inclusion of emotion. Sister Circles conversations privilege the daily, innate interactions of Black women, their literacies, and the (re)production of knowledge. This is turn, could possibly invite researchers to embark on allowing Sister Circle conversations to arise in their research, especially within research that includes Black women and girls.

Sister Circles, as conversations that occur between Black women that provide knowledge and support (Boyd, 1993; Giddings, 1984), can take on a variety of contexts in that they occur suddenly or they can be preplanned meetings--both with extemporaneous topics of discussion. Rather than organizing a conversation with a list of desired questions and topics, Sister Circle conversations emphasize that natural twists and turns of dialogue:

We shoot the breeze, eat mass quantities of food, brag on ourselves and each other, and

talk about everything from the political to the personal. Over the years, I've come to

regard this group of women...as my family, my sister circle. We've shared major

triumphs and traumatic events together: there's never a question of needing or getting

emotional support (Boyd, 1993, p. xi).

This approach allows women to share who they are in the company of others who will not only

listen deeply, but also respond in ways that are challenging and affirming. Sister Circle

conversations center the oral traditions of Black women and encourage us to consider what

methodologies "take into account the experiences of Black women" (Neal-Barnett, et al 2013, p.

272).

Sister Circle conversations are also dialogic (Bakhtin, 1981).Within these conversations

there exists an exchange of words between its participants, which forces those of us who are

listening to investigate our own views and pathways. Our dialogue is composed of "living"

words that "brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological

consciousness"(p. 276). Our words are alive and they are imbued with meaning. Therefore, when

we speak to others in Sister Circle conversations, our words move from mouth to ear, again and

again, picking up new words, phrases, and knowledge in the process. Existing simultaneously in

this dialogic space is also an interpretation of a Black feminist space. Black Feminist Theory and

epistemology is rooted in the dialogue between Black women. The presence of the dialogic is not

done in isolation but rather insists on a congregation of women who live at the intersections of

gender, race, and class. Theoretically, Black Feminist Thought and Bakhtin both prioritize the

existence and meaning of dialogue as knowledge making. In addition, Bakhtin can also take into

consideration the aims of this article, which is to distinguish Sister Circle conversations as a decolonized qualitative research method.

Sister Circle conversations do not fit neatly within qualitative research interviewing methods. Sister Circles and its structure can be closely related to what qualitative research defines as a focus group. Sometimes used interchangeably with group interviews, Kitzinger and Barbour (1999) define focus groups as including a "researcher [that] is actively encouraging of, and attentive to, the group interaction"(p. 20). With such a loose definition, it may be easy to conflate Sister Circle conversations with group interviewing. However, a striking difference between the two is that Kitzinger and Barbour's definition does not make necessarily make room for indigenous ways of communicating. Oral histories are also characteristically close to Sister Circle conversations in that the participants often tell personal narratives. However, it should be noted that oral histories do not necessarily incorporate dialogue and a mutual telling of narratives between the participant and the researcher is often not required. Within Sister Circle conversations, there is a mutual sharing of experiences and narratives regardless of positioning. It is this turn taking, knowledge production that brings a slight, but important distinction to Sister Circle conversations and this positions them as indigenous, dialogic methods that focus on the communication of Black women.

Decolonizing qualitative research means to face what Smith (1999) calls the "site of struggle" between research and the "interests and ways of the Other" (p. 2). If one were to accept Kitzinger and Barbour's definition of group interviews, the researcher is still situated as the moderator and still holds the bulk of responsibility for the sustainability and topic of the conversation. A Sister Circle conversation cannot exist using this definition because these conversations are rooted in a "larger historical, political, and cultural context" (Smith, 1999, p. 6)

In the case of the research study using Sister Circle conversations, it was imperative that a methodology be sought that includes prioritizing shared conversations and connecting those conversations with the historical and cultural experiences of Black women.

The research discussed in this article is based on a study that sought to examine how Black women who read Street Lit co -construct their identities while simultaneously learning how to navigate Black womanhood. Adopting these foci meant selecting a research design and methodology that would allow the participants to fully engage in the telling of their stories. Included in this design was the opportunity to make space for conversation and dialogue as narratives. As noted by Bold (2012), researchers:

> may be interested in analyzing conversation and dialogue for the way in which participants understand each other and develop shared meaning. The dialogue can tell its own story. The dialogue is real and tells part of the story without any explanation (p. 27).

The literature on collecting narratives through structured, semi-structured and unstructured interviews takes into account that these formats of interviewing can create a space for narratives to be shared (Bold, 2012; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In particular, the less structured the interview, the more likely a participant and researcher can "detour from the planned course of action and follow a line of interest" (Bold, 2012, p. 100). I had to consider whether Sister Circle conversations, with their sometimes impromptu beginnings and no strategic plan for the discussion topics, could hold a space for powerful narratives to be shared and sustained, even with women who did talk with each other on a daily basis.

The Study

This study builds upon existing work on Black women's literacies as it relates to their reading of Street Lit, a genre of literature that focuses on narratives dealing with urban life. I

interviewed five Black women who have been avid readers of Street Lit since adolescence and I was interested in listening to their own stories concerning their connection to the literature how it has helped them navigate Black womanhood. There have been limited studies with Street Lit as its focus, and even more so when considering how Black women are communicating with each other about their own experiences. Each participant was interviewed individually twice and participated in multiple Sister Circle conversations throughout the six-month study. Of the five participants, all identified as Black women, four were my former students in high school, and three identified as queer or lesbian. In addition to having Sister Circle conversations and individual interviews, I also collected and read recommended Street Lit texts and followed each participant via social media.

Using Sister Circle Conversations

Collins (1990, p. 275) suggests that wisdom is a requirement for Black women because "knowledge about the dynamics of intersecting oppressions has been essential to U.S. Black women's survival." The five Black women felt sure of their ability to contribute to the wisdom they exported from and imported to others based on their life experiences. For this study, using Sister Circles afforded the participants the opportunity to glean knowledge from each other and also share what they have learned thus far in their navigation of Black womanhood. Even African feminisms, which are not rooted in Western qualitative or feminist epistemologies or methods, mention the emphasis of using "healing methods as necessary research tools for life-enriching and transformative experiences" (Chilisa & Ntseane, 2010, p. 619). Sister Circles have consistently performed as one of those healing methods prior to their infusion in academic spaces. The following sections discuss the ways in which Sister Circle conversations can bring forth narratives for Black women.

Lived Experience

Traditionally, Black women have always used communication and dialogue as a way of securing our voices in space and time (Houston & Davis, 2002). Around the same time as one of the Sister Circle conversations, a Black woman named Bree Newsome, climbed the flagpole in front the South Carolina state legislature and removed the confederate flag. Without prompting, the first topic of the Sister Circle concerned itself with the role of Black women as activists:

Sister 1:   Man, you heard about what's going on with that flag?

Sister 2:   Of course, I've heard! Did you see what happened today though?

Sister 1:   Yeah, she climbed the pole.

Sister 3:   They lock her up though! She got locked down.

Sister 2:   They already paid her bail.

Sister 1:   They put it back up though.

Sister 3:   I would have paid it! I would have put 5 on it.

Sister 1:   But, you know, I was looking at the comments--

Sister 2:   Comments on what?

Sister 1:   Facebook. And they was arguing about what the flag really stood for. Some was saying that it stand for slavery, some were saying it was standing for the war, some was saying--

Sister 3:   Our slaves fought in that war.

Sister 1:   And I looked it up, there are like 13 different versions of that flag. Yep.

Using Sister Circle methods allowed the participants and me to start with a specific topic that resonated with the current realities facing women of color. I do not find it coincidental that the first topic of the Sister Circle centered on the experiences of a Black woman, who by using

her physical body, rejected and resisted the visible systems of racism. Approaching the conversations with an open ended approach gave the participants the advantage of selecting which topics were important to them, unlike the constrained organization of predetermined topics and questions. This is distinctly different than an unstructured interview where there is an overarching question that may lead to other topics. In Sister Circle conversations, the overarching question does not exist. The topics are spun organically through whatever is in the participants mind. There may be some concern for qualitative researchers that if there is no guide to the conversations, then the study runs the risk of not speaking to the research questions. Yet, Bold (2012) would respond to this by claiming, "Narratives help us understand ourselves and other by describing and explaining, by defining self and personal identity"(p. 30). Narratives, just like in real conversations, don't have to be prompted from a list of predetermined questions. Rather those narratives are taken, as is, and attributed to how a person sees and reacts to the world around her. This is the same goal for using Sister Circle conversations as a method.

Another way that lived experience appears in Sister Circle conversations is through the variety of topics that appear in a typical conversation. There is no lack of complexity as it relates to where the conversations will lead and what narratives will be constructed and shared. In the Sister Circle excerpted above, the same conversation began with discussions of the confederate flag and Bree Newsome, to employment discrimination, the prison industrial complex and what it means to be a risk taker. We, as participants of the Sister Circle talked about any topic to which our knowledge as Black women was essential to our understanding and our survival during these life events. Collins (1990) argues that Black women "who have lived through the experiences...are more believable and credible than those who have merely read or thought about such experiences"(p. 276). In other words, instead of carrying shame about painful experiences,

Black women can use Sister Circles to share their narratives as experts. One Sister Circle

participant, Sister 3, disclosed her experience of signing a bail bond for a former boyfriend:

Sister 3:   I did that shit one time and it was the worst thing I did in my life.

Sister 1:   What? Paying a bond?

Sister 3:   Yeah.

Sister 1:   How you know he got out?

Sister 3:   It ain't even that. I put my name on it. That was the worst decision of my
              fucking life. Ain't even seen him.

Sister 2:   You didn't put no name on nobody bond!

Sister 3:   When he got out, he stole all my stuff and pawned the shit and I have
              never seen him since then. I saw him on Facebook and he got some
              girlfriend.

Sister 2:   Wait, you put your name on the bond? Girl!

Sister 3:   Yeah, I don't do thug life anymore!

In this exchange, Sister 3 used the Sister Circle conversation as a way of communicating

her lived experience and expertise. Sister 3's admission of her past faults highlights how Sister

Circle conversations use dialogue as a way of making sense of their experiences while also

allowing the participants to share wisdom and advice on how to deal with similar situations.

Getting the participants to share personal stories was not difficult. Because the research and

participants had known each other prior to the Sister Circles, the ease to which we were able to

start and continue in our conversations could also be attributed to our familiarity with each other.

However this does not mean that these challenges will not arise in other attempts at these

conversations. There is an assumed level of trust that comes with a Sister Circle conversation and

it is possible that all participants may not be willing to engage in these conversations. If that is the case, the Sister Circle cannot exist fully as a shared experience between Black women.

Use of Dialogue in Assessing Knowledge Claims

Sister Circles can provide a space for Black women to use dialogue as a way to make meaning. Epistemologically, women have used metaphorical phrases such as "finding your voice" or "speaking or hearing our truth" as a way to make meaning from our dialogues together (Belenky et al 1997). The idea of working out ideas, problems, or solutions in isolation is not aligned with Black Feminist Thought and African indigenous ways of being. Dialogue is essential because it requires more than one person and their thoughts are vetted with care and critique. Senghor's (1966) explanation of Ubuntu, 'I am because we are', means "the group has priority over the individual without crushing the individual, but allowing the individual to blossom as a person" (p. 5). Essentially, Sister Circles take on this viewpoint by allowing its participants to speak from their own truths with the realization that their dialogue is part of a wider conversation about Black women and navigating womanhood. Bakhtin's theories also resonate with the conversations taking place amongst Black women in that there is room to explore many concepts including authoritative and internally persuasive discourses. Participants in Sister Circle conversations move between discourses by both abiding by and mimicking authority.

As mentioned earlier, Sister Circle conversations are at times spontaneous. One of the Sister Circles conversations occurred in a bookstore after interviewing two participants individually in a local mall. This bookstore is one of the few remaining Black owned bookstores left in the country and they carry titles that range from African history to Street Lit. Without prompting, the participants and I began an hour-long Sister Circle conversation whose topics

ranged from book recommendations, race relations, and cooking. Our impromptu dialogue led to

consensus building about the inconsistencies we witness as Black women and how we can learn

to change them. In one excerpt, I pick up a book entitled, *10 Ways to Stop or Prevent your Good*

Man from Cheating. Here is what ensued:

Sister 4:   See, I hate those.

Sister 2:   (laughter)

Sister 1:   I hate books like that.

Sister 4:   You know?

Sister 2:   Why?

Sister 1:   We all bitter and angry Black women (laughter) Like you can't--if he's gon

                   do it, he's gon do it.

Sister 4:   Right.

Sister 1:   That's just it.

Sister 2:   It ain't got nothing to do with you?

Sister 1:   I mean sometimes it does. But at the same time, if you get with a man, and

                   you know that he was messing around with you while he was with

                   someone else, how you think he gone do you?

Sister 2:   You was the jump off. You gon end up being, yeah.

Sister 4:   But see, I don't necessarily--I mean that's a valid point but at the same

time, what people fail to realize that in a relationship you have to

understand that this other person is human.

Sister 1:   Yeah, that too.

Sister 4:   Mistakes are meant to be made whether or intentional or accidental. You

just have to trust your partner to be who they are. Don't put them on a

pedestal because the minute you do that, that's set it up for failure. You

know? Just be --relaxed in a relationship. Just let it flow. Don't force

anything cause once you force it--

Sister 1:   It's gon go down.

Sister 2:   Or that you have, I guess an expectation that it's supposed to be this way.

Right? And then when that doesn't happen--

Sister 4:   You sad and...

Sister 2:   You're kinda like--

Sister 1:   Depressed and upset.

Sister 4:   Oh you hurt me! Oh you did this to me!

Sister 2:   You end up on Jerry.

Sister 1:   Yeah. Cause now he gon claim the baby ain't is. (laughter)

This excerpt shows an example of how the dialogue of three Black women contributed to our self-knowledge and interpretation of literature that speaks directly to Black women. Although both Sister 4 and Sister 1 identify as queer Black women, they still commented on the wisdom they have used on how to interact in relationships with others. In a mixture of realism and sarcastic truths, the participants and I shared the common experience of Black women taking the brunt of the failure of monogamous relationships. The shared wisdom in this conversation means our truths as "individuals" are not prioritized over what we are learning and affirming from each other. The overall consensus in this Sister Circle conversation is that Black women do not have to accept responsibility for others behaviors. Qualitative interviewing using a Sister Circle method can be a conduit to accessing the process in which knowledge is being created and shared amongst its participants. It was critical that the participants did not feel confined to a set of questions or prescribed opinions about their experiences with Black womanhood. Moving systematically from question to question, which is suggested through other structured interview methods would have not resulted in the data gained from the Sister Circle conversations. Having a list of prompts would have suggested to the participants that there is a correct answer or possibly that we have a to-do list of items to accomplish.

Although there is a richness that is inherent in our dialogue as Black women, Collins (1998) reminds us that " although fostering dialogues among Black women in the here and now is important, of greater significance is reconceptualizing Black women's intellectual work as engaging in dialogues across time"(p. 75). In other words, what are the possibilities of qualitative research if dialogues were not limited to the term limits of the research study, but were brought forth from our experiences as Black women to dialogue with? Because Black women share similar expressions (and oppressions), qualitative research that is rooted in indigenous ways of

being in the world would consider how we communicate with Black women who have had similar experiences in the past and how we would turn learn from those experiences. Sister Circles, as a structure allows for this intergenerational dialogue to occur with the same aim of understanding what we know. I would characterize Sister Circles as minute expressions of a larger oral history. These small yet powerful conversations are not complete histories of individuals but they do encompass stories that reveal how its narrators are experiencing the world. While Sister Circle conversations can capture smaller histories, the discourse used in those same conversations are representative of larger authoritative discourses. It is important to consider how these overarching discourses have shaped how we see and speak to others.

Self-accountability and Emotion

This last tenet is concerned with Black women's ability to remain accountable for their knowledge claims. It is linked to the first tenet of lived experience in that we, as a way of self-protection, take into consideration a person's knowledge claims, but also "simultaneously evaluate an individual's character, values, and ethics" (Collins, 1990, p. 284). Within Sister Circle conversations, knowledge claims cannot be isolated from who is claiming the knowledge. To not take into consideration who is doing the talking and for what purpose, can limit the "moral and ethical connections" to knowledge claims (Collins, 1990, p. 284). Also, Black women are often perceived as having a limited range of emotions and having a space where emotions are not only privileged, but will not collapse into the stereotypes of Mammy or a Jezebel, creates a safe space where Black women can go about the business of being themselves.

Towards the end of one of the Sister Circle conversations, the participants moved towards this phase of self-accountability by connecting the lessons from their personal lives and their own claims of knowledge. In adopting the approach of unlimited time and no constraints on the

topics to be discussed, the participants were in control of the timing, pace, and whether or not to reveal personal narratives in their lives. What takes place in the following transcript is indicative of when a Sister Circle conversation makes room for self-accountability. After discussing the numbers of Black men that we knew that were raised in single parent homes, one participant reflected on her perspective as a Black woman who experienced the same thing:

Sister 3: You gotta think about it. Neither one of them had a father figure. Neither one. And women, our greatest person to look up to is our mother and we always gon have them. For the most part. So, everything I seen my mama do, that I know is wrong, it's actually what I'm trying to deter away from.

Sister 2: Right.

Sister 3: Cause you got addiction. You got prostitution. You got just dependent on every man or even welfare to make it through. And that's not something I want to do.

Sister 2: Right.

Sister 3: So, I seen that on the wall, like that's not where you're trying to go. Don't go this way. So that's my ambition. I don't need nobody to give me ambition because that was my ambition.

Sister 3's personal narrative of the relationship between her and her mother reveals that her views of self-accountability are rooted in her personal experience. Also, because she has this previous experience to reference, Sister 2 acknowledges that the previous actions of her mother have created a new knowledge that is indispensable to her own well-being. A Black feminist framework that uses a Sister Circle conversation would take into account of all Sister 3's story in

part because it is how she has learned to navigate her environment. Also, it is important to recognize that the presence of emotion is critical to the potential of Sister Circle conversations.

When the participants raised questions and issues to themselves and others, they could do without having to abide by the perceived constraints of emotions and language. There are obvious advantages to holding Sister Circle conversations in the participants' native vernacular or language. Even if the participants are familiar with speaking standard American English, using African American vernacular amongst themselves and with me encouraged spontaneity and possibly more honest dialogue. The honesty can be revealed through the range of emotions exhibited in the Sister Circle conversations. If the participants wanted to share narratives that were rooted in anger, gratitude, embarrassment, or love, they were free to embody them in the language they decided to use. For one example, the participants found themselves reflecting on how they each took up risk in their lives:

Sister 2:   How are you with risk? Do you take lots of risks?

Sister 3:   I mean, I do, but to a certain extent. If I don't see an outcome, then I'm not gon even chance it. If I didn't take a risk, I wouldn't be right here. (points to walls of apartment) I wouldn't have my own apartment. I was only making 7.25. I didn't know how I was gon get there, but if I budget this, do this, I can make it work.

Sister 1:   My first risk…I got put into a school that I didn't want to go to. My first choice was Hudson College* but I didn't get into Hudson. My second choice was Spring Valley*. Got a full ride on band. My third choice was Barbour College*. I got half scholarship on band. At the time, my ex was at Barbour. I went down there. I have so much spite for her. But, why give her all that energy? I'm mad that I put all that time and effort into her. As a process of growing, I just let it go.

In this Sister Circle conversation, the disclosure of personal risk and emotion "heals this binary that separates emotion from intellect"(Collins, 1990, p. 282). This means that participants who engage in this process do not necessarily concern themselves with what is appropriate behavior or language to use while talking about their own stories. Sister 1 was able to admit that she was previously angry with some of her past decisions, but as part of her own knowledge construction, remaining angry was detrimental to her own growth. The Sister Circle conversations afforded the participants an outlet to discuss their emotional and personal growth on their terms. Using this method, participants have shown that the popular trope of the angry Black woman is negated when Black women speak with each other. We don't necessarily have to continuously protect ourselves or portray certain images when we know that within the company of our sisters, we have shared experiences and the language with which to talk about them.

Black women, indigenously, have had a long tradition with personal expression and the presence of a Sister Circle demonstrates how that tradition can be accessed during qualitative research projects. As the participants and I made sense of our life experiences together, they made significant choices about how they talked about themselves and how those experiences could possibly help others when shared. The looseness of the Sister Circle conversations did not deprive the participants of engaging with each other in conversation, nor did it limit their own power to mine their narratives for meaning making.

Incorporating Sister Circles into Qualitative Research

There are two elements that one should consider when incorporating Sister Circle conversations into a qualitative research design. Researcher position and time constraints are important to acknowledge because it will determine how your participants engage with each other.

Researcher Position within Sister Circles

I interviewed three Black women using this methodology and all with the exception of one attended the same secondary school. I was also their former high school teacher. The participants' knowledge of each other did not guarantee that they were friends or that they would use the Sister Circle as a space to listen and support each other. However, my fears of setting up the Sister Circle were quickly assuaged because during my first encounter with a participant, we participated in a Sister Circle--and it happened without provocation or hesitation. To overcome the issue of having participants meet who were not familiar with each other, or still viewed me as a teacher rather than another Sister, I opted to have the Sister Circles away from settings that would suggest schooling. Also, in the same vein as Boyd, we brought food and drinks to our location and there was no pressure as to when to begin, end, or what to talk about. Literally, the Sister Circle conversation started with, "What have you been up to?" Another component to consider is the amount of time Sister Circle conversations take up as part of a research study.

Time Constraints

In qualitative research design there should be multiple opportunities to interview participants. However, it was a very real possibility that the Sister Circle conversations could last more than an hour at each sitting. Therefore, I had to account for the fact that the quantity of the Sister Circle conversations should not be prioritized over the quality. At one point in the research study, a Sister Circle conversation lasted more than three hours. To stop the conversation for time constraints or demand that another Sister Circle be held because it was part of the original research design could be problematic and could possibly result in forcing the participants to bring about narratives that are not ready to emerge. Therefore, if researchers are interested in implementing a design study using Sister Circle conversations, their position and relationship to

the participants is crucial to having successful conversations. If the participants do not feel as if they can speak openly using their own language, it could possibly affect the narratives they are choosing to tell. Also, be prepared as a researcher to have these conversations happen at a moment's notice and quell the urge to limit them or make them into traditional interviews.

Although the practice of Sister Circle conversations were part of my own experience as a Black woman, I was still interested in exploring whether the method could be taken up as a legitimate practice, especially as part of a qualitative research tradition that historically has viewed Black women as "struggl[ing] for self-determination and self-definition against the world's ghettoized image of them"(Richardson, 2002, p. 676). Therefore, it was critical that the participants felt comfortable and their narratives were shared with each other for the purpose of growth and support. To ensure this, I informed the participants that although I was recording our conversations, they would remain private between us and that I would include my stories as well.

The fluidity of the Sister Circle conversation does not exempt researchers from planning for its implementation. It is critical that the sites and the positioning of the researcher are carefully considered when deciding to embark on this methodology. Although these literacies practices of Black women encompass "our way of being in the world"(Richardson, 2002, p. 687), one would need to take into account their own positioning and relationship to the participants involved.

Conclusion

In this article, it has been argued that Sister Circle conversations allow for participants to engage in an indigenous process that speaks to the ways in which Black women communicate for and with each other. In my study with five other Black women, the fluidity suggested by the Sister Circle conversation suggests that focus groups or group interviewing may not center the

perspectives of the participants, but rather limit the scope of what can be shared as part of qualitative interviewing. Sister Circles allow for the participating to construct narratives that are not bound by topic or time, thus creating narratives that fully represented what they choose to share at that moment. In this way, the study illustrates that the use of Sister Circles can be empowering, as a methodological practice, and as part of a larger theoretical framing. It shows that Sister Circles can provide a underutilized route to investigating how Black women face living at the intersections of multiple identities. Their narratives are indeed part of who they are and what they have chosen to communicate and the Sister Circle conversations allow for those narratives to exist as knowledge.

This study has shown how the participants engage in everything from the personal to the political and specifically how indigenous strategies of communicating should be centralized as critical to the construction of qualitative study. Although, the practicalities and implementation of Sister Circles moves beyond traditional notes of qualitative group interviewing (Barbour, 2007), we should not ignore the needs and wants of the participants and the ways in which communication can be naturally structured. It may be no longer useful to consider specific time limits and frequencies as part of qualitative interviewing protocol if using Sister Circles conversations. It proved to be a useful process to not detract from how long the participants wanted to talk and what topics needed to be discussed.

In summary, to capture what I consider to be a rich and complex perspective into the narratives of Black women, Sister Circle conversations can reach beyond their academic use in psychology and become part of the qualitative interviewing methodologies in other areas of academic research. In this way, Sister Circles can help to return research to a more authentic place: the varied voices and narratives of those who allow us to look deeply at their lives.

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CHAPTER 6

TOWARDS NEW UNDERSTANDINGS

This study has investigated the language and literacy practices of Black women who read

Street Lit and how those practices help them to navigate their daily experiences. Looking across

all three manuscripts, I have identified three interrelated themes related to Black women and

dialogue: 1) Black women use dialogue as an entry point to making meaning; 2) the significance

of using dialogue as a form of resistance; 3) Dialogue helps to examine the connectedness of

Black women's experiences but it does not essentialize Black women as a whole. After

reviewing each of these themes, I offer overarching implications for literacy practice and

research.

Dialogue as Meaning Making

In Chapter 3 I discussed how Black women Street Lit readers see themselves in the

context of the literature they read. Even though there is limited research on Black girls and their

relationship with reading, the research that exist that uses Street Lit does not use the voices of the

readers themselves. Rather, the research hypothesizes what the readers *might* conclude about the

literature and its role in their lives. I posited that the research done with Black girls and women

an extension of Bishop's (1990) metaphor of books as windows and mirrors. Positioning the

participants as experts, their dialogue with me and with the Street Lit texts suggest that the

popular metaphor does not extend fully into the daily realities of how Black women live. Our use

of dialogue, through interviews and conversations, has demonstrated that these readers are

reading the world through both cooperation and resistance. In the context of the classroom, it is especially important to consider that if students, especially Black girls and women, do not have the opportunity to engage in meaningful dialogue about the text and themselves, it barely scratches the surface in terms of what we claim to do as English educators and teacher educators. Relevant talk about literature is not limited to figurative vocabulary and to treat it as such, leaves out other translations and forms of analysis that students are willing and able to share.

The metaphor of windows and mirrors was a moving and necessary concept at the time when multicultural literature was practically invisible on classroom shelves and curriculum, but I am concerned that it has become canonized in the same ways most literature taught in classrooms today. The danger of having Bishop's metaphor canonized is that it limits how we interpret how readers are making meaning from the literature. In Chapter 3, recall that Yarni uses Street Lit as both a window and mirror, but also creates meaning for her personal life. The act of reading and responding is still a highly intimate relationship, whose significance is often diminished in exchange for the correct answer. It is therefore critical to think about how dialogue can be used as a teaching and learning tool in classrooms. I would suggest that teachers and researchers examine what authoritative discourses are present in their classrooms and schools and compare those findings with the discourses present in literature. This would be a critical and thoughtful extension of Bishop's windows and mirrors and make room for readers to thoughtfully engage with multiple discourses while also considering their own internally persuasive discourse.

In Chapter 4, I was specifically interested in the process of identity construction as it relates to Black women and sexuality. Using Street Lit texts as the common denominator in our experiences as readers, I attempted to gather information about how they navigate this terrain of

sexuality in terms of what is seen and unseen. Again, I used interviews and Sister Circle

conversations to open up a free dialogue in which any topic was within bounds. Speaking about

sexuality was not a pre -planned topic, but the participants willingly entered in dialogue about

the ways sex and sexuality has entered into their lives thus far. The connection between Black

women and sexuality has been deeply embedded in how they have constructed their identities

and it is evidenced through their use of an authoritative discourse. Their dialogue with other

participants and me served as a conduit to how they are learning to navigate these terrains,

especially in light of how Black women in general are viewed sexually. In Chapter 5, I purposely

explored dialogue through the lens of Sister Circle conversations. I argued that these

conversations are an indigenous method to Black women and have held a steady presence in our

literacy practices for generations. Viewing dialogue as a way of meaning making centers the

idea that Black women have something to contribute to how their world is being constructed.

This idea is significant not only to literacy research but also to how Black women are portrayed

globally because we can no longer ignore that Black women are speaking for themselves in ways

that we have not been able to hear. Once we know how to access those cultural ways of making

meaning, it will certainly open up different ways of telling authentic narratives of Black women.

Dialogue as a Form of Resistance

In Chapters 3, 4, and 5, I discussed that Black women exist at the intersections of

multiple identities, namely race, gender and sexuality. Within those intersections are the

structures of oppression that target those identities. (i.e., racism, sexism, and heteronormativity)

As such, Black women have had to learn how to do the impossible task of learning to live

amongst these systems and the stereotypes about Black women that have been created and

maintained. These stereotypes have been reproduced in Street Lit texts, social media, and even

within our dialogue about ourselves. However, when I examined the dialogue used by the Black

women in this study, I found that the participants are using their voices to disrupt assumptions

about Black identity, gender and sexuality norms. Essentially, talking with Black women rather

than talking *to* or *about* them is critical to understanding that they are aware of what the

discourse is about Black women and they are negating those conversations through their

dialogue and daily actions. In Chapter 5, when looking more closely at how Sister Circle

conversations operate, it was revealed through dialogue that the participants, who often fall into

the trope of being the "angry black woman", completely dispel that myth through their own

reflections. Black women have always taken part in resisting, but the systems that curate how

Black women are portrayed often misconstrue that resistance for anger or other expressions of

valid emotion.

There is a timely and popular research trend in literacy education that deals with the

teaching and presence of emotion in the classroom space (Lewis & Tierney, 2011). As important

as the research focus is, I am equally concerned that examining classrooms and students from

this perspective would leave out the perceptions of students of color, including those of Black

girls and women. This study, throughout the three articles, showed that our dialogue—which is

ripe with emotion—is often used as a form of resistance. If teachers and researchers do not learn

how to listen carefully, we may mistake Black women's dialogue as combative or even as a sign

of consent of the very oppressions that we face as intersectional beings. Therefore, in order to

create a safe space for resistant dialogue to occur educators and researchers have to make

ourselves aware of what forms of oppression exist and act upon Black girls – both inside and

outside of classroom spaces. Then, we should read literature that evokes questions surrounding

those realities and allow the dialogue to perform as it does. Street Lit does exactly that. We

cannot be fully critical and accessible to our students' emotions if we only accept the mild versions that don't disrupt racism, sexism, and classism.

Dialogue and Black Women's Experiences

Situating this study using Black Feminist Thought and Bakhtin provides a useful way of looking at the dialogue of Black women. These theories focus on the realities that Black women face while also acknowledging that our lived experiences count as a form of knowledge and meaning making. Although I made attempts to write about the specific experiences of the five Black women participants in this study, their dialogue included collective pronouns such as "we, us, our" in order to articulate that Black women have shared experiences as well. This study has shown that our dialogue with each other was not essentializing all of the experiences of Black women, but rather it reveals that systems of oppression create shared experiences for a large amount of Black women. For example, it was revealed in one of the Sister Circle conversations that the majority of the participants, including me, had experienced some form of racial and gender discrimination while in school. Rather than simplify those aggressions to 'something that all Black women go through', the dialogue suggested that there were policies and ideologies present that made the school experience uncomfortable for us, thereby creating a similar experience for Black women. To call our shared experiences a form of essentializing discredits the idea that there may be a systemic reason why Black women have so many similar experiences. Rather than shaming or ignoring Street Lit as a literature or the dialogue that arises from its readers, Street Lit may offer insight to understanding how authoritative discourses are continually shaped and disrupted. Collins (1990) makes it explicitly clear that not all Black women will experience intersectional oppressions, but the need for a Black Feminist thought still

exists because if one Black woman faces oppression, we all would benefit from a theory that centers our experience and knowledge as meaningful.

The similar experiences that Black women have may not be readily shared with those who do not know or seem engaged with understanding what those experiences are like. For example, as a heterosexual woman, I did not anticipate, nor take into consideration in my research design that three of my participants would identify as lesbian. Yet, knowing that I would be thinking through all of the intersections and identities that Black women possess, I still did not initially consider sexual preference as one of those identities. But through the presence of dialogue, those participants were willing to share with me and others about their lives as Black lesbian women. I believe those women were willing to tell me about their experiences because for the purpose of telling and learning from each other's stories, even if our realities are not the same. The aim of Black Feminist Thought is focused on the empowerment of Black women and one pathway to that empowerment is a critical analysis of how language and dialogue work. Bakhtin's theories on how language can transform into unitary languages, as related to authoritative and internally persuasive discourses, is also helpful to understanding the power that language holds and how we can engage in its perpetuation or dismantling.

I recognize that I hold a unique position in that the participants possibly see me as an elder in that I have served as their former teacher and I am older in age. In Chapter 4, I discussed how the participants called Ms. Jones throughout the study and questioned whether they were saying the right answers during our interviews together. Sister Circle conversations as a method helps to centralize dialogue and it allows for Black women from a range of backgrounds and ages to speak freely about how they have learned to navigate their specific realities. Dialogue also positions our narratives and the other narratives of Black women that have been shared with

us as helpful and essential to our ability to survive. Therefore, allowing Black women to speak freely with each other would shift the design literacy research and help develop better understandings of Black women overall.

Implications

My dissertation offers several implications as it relates to research and practice for Black women readers. In Chapter 3, I discussed some of the limitations of the mirrors and windows metaphor for readers of Street Lit. The data makes plain that Street Lit readers want an authentic reading experience that follows closely to their own lives, but also ventures into possible narratives they may encounter. Street Lit also makes it possible for its readers to construct their own lives as a counter-narrative, a model of resistance to the narratives present in in the genre. It is the idea of the authentic narrative that pushes Street Lit and other non-mainstream genres into the category of a risky text, and thus researchers and practitioners may be fearful of approaching the literature and consequently, its readers. Judging a book (or in this case an entire genre of literature) by its cover causes certain authors and narratives to remain isolated on the margins of what is deemed good or relevant literature. I have learned that researching Street Lit is only one step to understanding the impact it has on its readers. I believe that an intensive study on readers and their dialogue can help researchers understand more about the impact of literature. This study implicates all educators in that if we desire to have relevant and critical discussions around literature, it would behoove us to concentrate on how they speak about their lives in relationship to their selected texts. Included in this discussion, and also in future research, is helping teachers and teacher educators learn how to incorporate intentional listening in our classrooms with respect to how our internally persuasive and authoritative discourses reveal themselves in the written and spoken word.

As discussed in Chapter 4, Black women Street Lit readers use their voices to call attention to the visible and invisible discourse around sexuality. Black women are participating in a form of language tug-of-war in that they are both cooperating and resisting the conversations about who they are. My study offers a number of implications for thinking differently about how we approach research which includes Black women readers. It is vital for research studies to centralize Black women's experiences but also aim to look at what is not readily apparent. Black women's lives are varied and textured and the research needs to account for the ways in which Black women are seen and not seen, and how we stand in response to it. For example, I suggest that the typical deficit discourse that accompanies Black girls and women may not be a case of what is not present, but rather what is not able to be seen. Acknowledging this shift in perspective could advance how we view Black women and readers and responders.

Finally, I would encourage practitioners and researchers who are interested in examining Black girls or Black women's literacy practices to consider aligning their research design with methods and frameworks that center Black women, their language, and ways of communicating. I believe that Black women are visible to those who desire to see and hear us. The five Black women who participated in this study were vibrant, creative, honest, and humble. I am honored that they shared a space for me to listen and learn from their stories.

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APPENDIX A

Worksheets for Interview Text

I.   FIRST READING - RESEARCHER POSITION AND SUBJECTIVITY

A.   Please make notes here on the first reading – shape of the dialogue or narrative; my own position; feelings and thoughts; questions and confusions

a.   Shape of the narrative

b.   My own positioning as interviewer/reader

c.   Feelings and thoughts

d.   Questions and Confusions

B.   Reader response – Where do you stand in relationship to this story? (e.g., where did you feel most connected to the interview? Where did you feel disengaged? What do you know about the narrator? How is she like you? Different than you? What might this mean for your interpretation?

C.   Briefly note all instances of race and gender (please cite page numbers where found) Summary Interpretation– Race and gender as part of story

II.   SECOND READING – SPEAKING OF SELF; REDEFINING OTHER

a.   Self - What actions does "self" take within the narrative of intersectional stories?

i.   Talking about the self – Does the narrator use 1st person voices? How do they speak for and about themselves?

Use of 1st person voice	Summary/Interpretation

b. Self in relationship to others – What actions does "self" take within the narrative

of intersectional stories to talk about the "others?

i. Talking about the other – How do they speak of the "other"?

Does the narrator discuss and/or describe the "other"?	**Summary/Interpretation**

Summary Interpretation – Speaking of Self/Redefining the Other

III. THIRD READING - SELF NARRATIVES THAT ACKNOWLEDGE

COMMUNITY

a. Is community articulated?

How would you characterize community?	Summary/ Interpretation

b. If community is not (clearly) articulated?

Quote (page number)	Summary/Interpretation

c. Does self align with community? How do you know?

IV. FOURTH READING – PRESENCE OF STORY AND STATEMENT

a. Are the participants using story? How is it articulated?

What is the story?	Summary/Interpretation How is story being used here?

b. Are the participants using statement? How is it articulated?

What is the statement?	Summary/Interpretation How is the statement being used here?

c. Does self align with story and statement? How do you know?

V. FIFTH READING –SELF IN THE PRESENCE OF COMMUNITY (SISTER CIRCLE)

a. Is community articulated?

How would you characterize community?	Summary/ Interpretation

b. If community is not (clearly) articulated?

Quote (page number)	Summary/Interpretation

c. Does self align with active presence of community (Sister Circles)? How do you know?

VI. INTERPRETIVE SUMMARY – SELF IN RELATION TO INTERSECTIONAL IDENTITY, PERSONAL STORIES, AND COMMUNITY