

# Because We're Unique: The Literate Lives of Black Adolescent Girls

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*This qualitative study explores the literacy and language practices of Black adolescent girls as they read and make meaning of a critical text, Angie Thomas' *The Hate U Give* (2017). The focus of this inquiry was to broadly examine how societal and situational factors influence the ways in which Black adolescent girls made sense of the novel, which functions as a culturally responsive critical text. This study embraces the Black Girls' Literacy Framework first created by Muhammad and Haddix (2016) and two interconnected research questions from that framework drove this study: (a) How do Black adolescent girls enact critical literacy practices? and (b) How do Black adolescent girls respond to a culturally responsive critical text? Data were gathered from three Black adolescent girl participants in the form of two semi-structured interviews, a focus group, and written journal entries in response to the novel. Critical discourse analysis was utilized to analyze data across a societal domain, as well as across institution and situation. This study contributes to the current body of literature by positioning Black girls at the center of their literate lives and bringing visibility to the ways in which their intersectional identities (race, class, and gender) influence the ways in which they enact their literacy practice.*

*Keywords:* Black girls, literacy, *The Hate U Give*, Black adolescent girls

## Introduction

As with Black boys, Black girls are being educated during a time of mass incarceration, zero-tolerance policies, and harsh treatment by security/police officers and school personnel. In 2017, the National Women's Law Center released a report that highlighted how racial inequities and discrimination in schools disproportionately affect Black girls, who are 5.5 times more likely to be suspended from school than White girls (National Women's Law Center, 2017). The overrepresentation of Black girls when it comes to exclusionary school discipline is often based upon stereotypical perceptions of Black female behavior, with Black girls more likely to be punished for being "unladylike" (Morris, 2015, p. xi) than White girls and viewed by teachers as "loud, defiant, and precocious" (p.

xi). These stereotypes, as well as the interlocking oppressions of race and class, directly affect Black girls' chances for academic success in school. If these challenges are to be addressed, research frameworks must move beyond the notion that all youth of color who are in crisis are boys, and that the concerns of White girls are indistinguishable from those of girls of color (Crenshaw, Ocen, & Nanda, 2015).

Despite local, state, and federal mandates for schools to promote more nuanced literacy skills and inclusive learning environments, traditional models of education continue to prevail in schools. It is not surprising that schools tend to treat literacy as a “measurable skill” (Abdelhay, Asfaha, & Juffermans, 2014, p. 1), as evidenced by standardized testing and low literacy rates ideologically associated with Black students. It is also not surprising that schools that rely heavily on standardized testing often assign deficit labels such as “at risk,” “underperforming,” and “struggling” (p. 45) to describe Black students whose literacy practices are different from the dominant mode of discourse (King & O'Brien, 2002, p. 45). The use of these labels to describe students of color indicates a hierarchy of reading domains, one in which certain school sanctioned texts are deemed appropriate and serve as the standard by which all other forms of literature are classified and privileged, including what counts as “reading” and who counts as a reader (Alvermann, 2001).

With a monolithic approach to literacy in school that privileges canonical texts, schooled literacy, and traditional modes of reading, Black girls are often excluded and disengaged from literacy in their school spaces. For those not born into the dominant mode of discourse, one may experience major conflicts when attempting to acquire another discourse with another set of values (Delpit, 1992). While this conflict is not inevitable for all Black girls, it is understandable that many do reject schooled literacies, due to the sentiment that mainstream literate discourses have rejected them (Delpit, 1992). The rejection of Black girls from mainstream discourses, reading, and texts positions Black girls as marginalized readers, with schools as a site of exclusion. According to Moje, Young, Readence, and Moore (2000), marginalized readers are defined as:

those who are not connected to literacy in classrooms and schools...those who are not engaged in the reading of writing done in school; who have language or cultural practices different from those valued in school; or who are outsiders to the dominant group because of their race, class, gender, or sexual orientation. (p. 405)

Owing to Black girls' educational experiences being continually impacted by the intersecting oppressions of race, class, and gender status in American society, a critical, culturally sustaining framework is needed to understand how Black girls' social positioning negatively and positively influences their literacy experiences while centering their unique voice and affirming their sense of personhood. One of the ways to affirm the identities of Black girls is through the implementation of *culturally responsive pedagogy*. According to Paris (2012), culturally responsive pedagogy requires that the curriculum moves beyond

relevance to the lives of students of color such that it supports the cultural and linguistic competence of their communities (Paris, 2012).

Literacy educators are in a position to investigate and address pedagogical injustices and misrepresentations of Black girls in schools and acknowledge the value of a literary framework that speaks more directly to their experiences. According to DeBlase (2003), “by exploring how groups of girls of different racial backgrounds participate in literacy events in a particular classroom, we may more fully understand the differences in how girls’ transactions with literacy contribute to and help shape their social identities” (p. 280). Thus, a focus on the critical literacy experiences of Black girl students can have a direct impact on their racial identity development and academic achievement (Boston & Baxley, 2007). This study is intended to examine how Black adolescent girls enact critical literacy practices outside of the classroom, specifically in response to a culturally relevant critical text.

### Theoretical Framework

To understand how Black adolescent girls read, write, speak, and act in response to a critical text, two interconnected research questions drove this study:

1. How do Black adolescent girls enact critical literacy practices?
2. How do Black adolescent girls respond to a culturally responsive critical text?

To center the literacies of Black girls, a comprehensive literacy framework consisting of six components was developed by scholars Muhammad and Haddix (2016). Black girls’ literacies were investigated across a wide variety of studies and settings and were found to be (a) multiple, (b) tied to identities, (c) historical, (d) collaborative, (e) intellectual, and (f) political/critical (see Figure 1). These literacies are directly related to one another so that the Black girls in all of the literacy studies Muhammed and Haddix (2016) analyzed were never just engaged in one type of literacy at any given time.

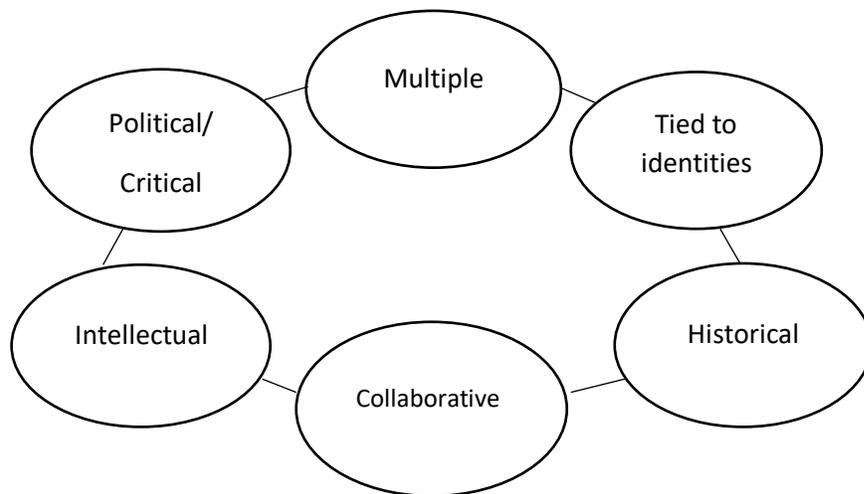


Figure 1. Black Girls’ Literacies Framework

As Black girls read and write about text, they are always coming closer to knowledge of themselves, which ties Black girls' literacies (BGLs) to identity. BGL is also historical in nature, as historical frameworks were used to examine their literacy as well as connect it to the earlier practices within the Black literacy tradition. BGL is also collaborative and inherently social. In all of the studies on BGL that were analyzed, the literacy enacted was not done so in isolation. BGLs are also intellectual and based on critical thinking. BGLs are political and critical, with ties to power and the need to counteract false narratives, as well as the need for social change (Muhammad & Haddix, 2016).

The purpose of this study was to understand how Black adolescent girls enact literacy practices within Muhammad and Haddix's (2016) BGL framework (BGLF) in response to a critical text, specifically one that is written from a culturally responsive standpoint. The text for this study, Angie Thomas' *The Hate U Give* (2017), functioned as a culturally conscious text in this new age of Black female political activism. In addition, I drew upon Richardson's (2007) work on Black female literacy to inform my understandings of BGL practices. Her work provided further insight into BGL, which she defined as "the development of skills and expressive vernacular arts and crafts that help females advance and protect themselves and their loved ones in society" (p. 329). Richardson also emphasized the intersectional oppressions that Black girls and women must navigate in society. Therefore, BGL is not only the multiple ways of knowing that Black girls use to counter intersecting oppressions, but the ways in which Black girls read, write, speak, and act to make sense of their worlds.

### **Literature Review**

Owing to Black girls and women constantly navigating the swiftly moving waters of race, class, and gender oppression, there is a heightened need for them to draw upon their own "ways of knowing" and being in the world to anticipate how to respond in a variety of situations (Richardson, 2002). A growing body of research on the literacy practices of Black adolescent girls suggests the need for researchers to advocate for spaces where Black adolescent girls can make meaning of their identities through reading and the discussion of issues relevant to them (Boston & Baxley, 2007; Richardson, 2002; Sutherland, 2005; Wissman, 2008). The reading of culturally sustaining critical texts helps Black adolescent girls use their literacy as a tool to have their voices and identities affirmed (Boston & Baxley, 2007; Sutherland, 2005). Findings aligned with research have found purpose in reading and writing and the use of language to take back authority and speak for critical issues in the lives of Black girls (Wissman, 2008). In alignment with this small but emerging body of research, the reading of Angie Thomas' *The Hate U Give* (2017) by the participants of this study and analysis of their critical responses to the novel honor the importance of Black adolescent girls' reading and writing to represent themselves.

### **Black Girl Representation in a Critical Text**

There are several studies that examine the ways in which Black girls responded to their representation in texts, particularly those that countered dominant stereotypes. In a

textual analysis of the beauty aesthetic in several Black young adult (YA) novels with female protagonists, Hinton-Johnson (2005) found positive themes for Black adolescent girls. In terms of body image, skin color, and hair, Hinton-Johnson found that the characters in the stories she analyzed countered the racism around beauty and supported ideas of positive self-representation (Hinton-Johnson, 2005). Similarly, Brooks and McNair (2014) examined depictions of Black girls' hair in Black children's literature, using a content analysis of six picture books. The researchers found three central themes about hair in the texts: (a) connections between Black hair and African history, (b) the assertion that all hair is good, and (c) the bonding that occurs between Black females as hair is being combed or styled.

### **Black Girl Literacies and Sites of Critical Engagement**

With classrooms functioning as the site of hegemonic ideologies, Black girls often seek out creative spaces as a form of resistance (Collins, 2009). Several scholars have explored the potential of designated creative spaces on Black girls' voices and self-expression. In a qualitative study that gathered its data from within an after-school program, Wissman (2009) argued that urban school spaces silence the literacy and language practices of Black girls by being sites of a decontextualized curriculum and constant surveillance. Polleck (2010) examined the ways in which Black and Latina adolescent girls engage in literacy clubs within high schools. She concluded that book clubs enhance girls' literacy and identity development, as well as their social and personal growth as individuals (Polleck, 2010).

Similarly, a qualitative study by Sutherland (2005) examined the literacy practices, identity, and social positioning of Black girls as they discussed Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) in their high school English class. Sutherland found that Eurocentric standards of beauty, as well as the dominant society's perceptions about Black girls, served as boundaries of their identities as Black adolescent females. Sutherland maintained that texts with characters from the same racial and gender group were self-affirming for Black adolescent girls, and assisted them with finding their voices within school spaces. Boston and Baxley (2007) conducted a study that combined a textual analysis with the perspectives of Black adolescent girls as they examined multiple perspectives of race, identity, and gender construction in their English classes. The researchers found that the Black girl participants chose books whose characters they could identify with and plots that they could relate to (Baxley & Boston, 2010). The researchers also concluded that when students are provided with more choices about literature that reflects the experiences they encounter, they are encouraged to become lifelong readers (Baxley & Boston, 2010).

DeBlase (2003) investigated how two Black adolescent girls constructed social identities of gender and race through literacy experiences with text representing images of women in subservient ways, as well as texts with strong depictions of women. DeBlase found that the participants did not engage with the texts featuring the subservient women and easily identified themes of racism and sexism within the classroom discussion. Carter (2007)

examined gendered and racial representations by two Black adolescent girls in a British literature classroom. The participants found that representations of themselves within the images of the selected Shakespearean sonnets were absent and did not affirm their physical characteristics. Carter also observed the way the text was taught did not consider at all the self-worth of the participants, nor was the instruction accompanied by critical discussion on how to interpret the ideological hegemony present within the text (Carter, 2007).

### **Hip-Hop and Critical Urban Literature**

Gibson (2010) wrote about Black adolescent girls and their responses to urban literature texts, stating that Black girls have deep ties to urban locales. Representations of Black adolescent girls in urban fiction allow them opportunities to connect with, negotiate, and challenge their portrayals (Muhammad & Haddix, 2016). Gibson concluded that these types of texts should be included in classrooms, and that frank discussions of their controversial subject matter only becomes an issue when teachers are not willing to learn about the complex lives of Black adolescent girls or engage them with culturally responsive pedagogy (Gibson, 2010). Greene (2016) used an urban novel, Sapphire's *PUSH* (1996), in addition to the social networking site Facebook as an online gathering place to examine the ways in which six Black adolescent girls made sense of their representations through discussions and interviews. Her findings revealed that Black girl self-representations were multi-modal and influenced by their collective experiences, society's neglect, and perspectives around personal traumatic experiences, as well as society language norms (Greene, 2016).

Richardson (2007) looked into the ways in which Black adolescent girls analyzed sexist representations of women in hip-hop videos. The study also focused on the ways in which Black girls demonstrated literacy when engaging with hip-hop culture. A similar study by the same researcher examined the meaning of Black womanhood among Black girl participants in an after-school setting, which revealed the nuanced nature of Black girls' constant identity negotiation through controlling discourses of Black female sexuality (Richardson, 2013). Likewise, Love (2012) focused on Black adolescent girls' interpretations of pop culture and how it influenced their identities as Black girls. Love discovered that Black girls used hip-hop culture to construct their identities and make sense of their world (Love, 2012).

Although this study took place on a college campus and not in a K-12 class setting like many of the studies explored in this review of the research, the literate lives of Black adolescent girls are still front and center. I assert that this study expands the research of Sutherland (2005) in particular, whose work with a small group of Black adolescent girls reading Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) highlighted the interconnectedness of literature, literacy practices, and Black girl identity. In her findings, Sutherland (2005) advocated for the use of culturally responsive texts but found that simply adding them to the curriculum was not sufficient. The literature cannot simply be taught alongside texts from the

traditional canon but must be approached differently, particularly when non-Black teachers are using them. Sutherland maintained that when social, historical, and political issues that stem from culturally responsive texts are brought to the forefront in the classroom, their absence or presence has the potential to reproduce racist and sexist ideologies. To make informed decisions, educators must hear the stories of others, particularly their Black girl students, and become familiar with their inner lives.

### **Methodology**

A qualitative case study design was used to understand the ways in which Black adolescent girls enacted and responded to critical literacy texts. A common research strategy in psychology, sociology, political science, and social work, case studies arise out of the need to understand complex social phenomena (Yin, 2003). The rationale behind selecting a multiple case study design was to enable analysis of the data from within each participant's situation and compare it across the data from other participants as they utilized the multiplicity of their literacies to interpret a critical text.

A qualitative research design was selected for several reasons. Reflecting upon the work of Bogdan and Biklen (2007), “qualitative research has actual settings as the direct source of data because the content in which the events occur are important” (pp. 4–6). Therefore, a qualitative research design was selected to interpret how Black adolescent girls make meaning of their literacy, their identities, as well as the critical literacy texts in which they interact. Additionally, a qualitative research design was selected to draw upon the advocacy and participatory perspective (Creswell, 2009) and the long tradition of critical theory research. According to Creswell (2009), “an advocacy and participatory perspective focuses on the needs of marginalized populations and holds that research inquiry needs to be intertwined with politics and a political agenda” (p. 9). To ensure reliability, a triangulation of data sources (individual interviews, a focus group, and written journals) were used here. This was to ensure that comprehensive data were obtained and that inadequacies found within a single source was minimized. CDA was the analytical tool used to interpret the data.

### **Setting**

Through purposive sampling, three Black adolescent girl participants in a freshman-level humanities class were recruited during the fall semester at a large public research university in the southern United States. The intent of the course was to prepare students for work at the university level and to focus on student success and cultural awareness. The texts that were taught in the course were all written by women authors of color and included such novels as *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison (1970) and *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros (1984). Optional texts included *PUSH* by Sapphire (1996) and the one that was selected for this study, Angie Thomas' *The Hate U Give* (2017). All three of the participants had read Thomas' novel as an optional text for the class and voluntarily joined the study.

### **The Selected Text of the Study**

Angie Thomas' *The Hate U Give* (2017) is inspired by the Black Lives Matter movement and tells the story of 16-year-old Starr, who must navigate between the mostly Black, poverty-stricken neighborhood she has grown up in and the White, upper-crust suburban prep school she attends. Her life is turned upside down when she is an eyewitness to a police shooting of her best friend, Khalil. Her friend was unarmed during the confrontation and speculations arise in the media after his death that he may have been a drug dealer. In the coming weeks during the investigation, Starr finds herself torn between the two very different worlds she inhabits, having to contend with speaking her truth and trying to stay alive herself.

This text was selected for several reasons. First, it was written a Black woman author whose novel represents a distinct, critical view on Black adolescent female life, as well as social issues that have been well-publicized within the public sphere: the police killings of unarmed Black persons and the collective dynamic of Black communities. Additionally, it contains a relatable Black adolescent girl character, an engaging plot, and a relatable story line. Reading level and content appropriateness was also a consideration in choosing this text, as well as the fact that this novel was published within the year prior to the beginning of this inquiry. Thus, its application was timely within the lives of the participants.

### **Participants**

The participants for this study were three Black female college students in late adolescence, 18 and 19 years of age, enrolled in the freshman-level humanities course.

#### ***Lily***

Lily is an 18-year-old freshman college student who would best be described as pragmatic and a critical thinker. She loves to read YA-themed romance novels, as well as watch popular teen dramas such as *Riverdale* and *Jane the Virgin*. She is the daughter of a Ghanaian mother and a Nigerian father. She describes both of her parents' careers as "working class" and credits them with nurturing her spirit of perseverance and commitment to hard work.

#### ***Jane***

Jane is an 18-year-old freshman college student. The middle child of single mother, Jane hails from a mid-sized city in the eastern part of the state. Describing herself as "funny, hardworking, and a little bit of a 'jokester,'" Jane likes to read YA mysteries and novels in the fantasy genre, with books such the *Divergent* series among her favorite.

#### ***Simone***

Simone is 19 years old, a first-generation college student, and the only child of a single mother. She hails from a small, rural town in the eastern part of the state. She describes herself as a "realist" and "overly cautious" when it comes to everyday situations, including the activities she does in her spare time. Although she read and liked the novel for this study,

she could not recall the names of any other books she liked, simply saying that she preferred reading urban fiction and “books about drama.”

### **Data Collection**

A variety of three primary data sources informed this study: (a) two semi-structured individual interviews, (b) one semi-structured focus group interview, and (c) six prompt-driven and free-write participant journal entries. Data were collected over a period of approximately 53 days, from mid-January to the beginning of March of the spring semester following the humanities course.

### **Data Analysis**

To understand how the written and oral discourse used by the participants in response to the selected text was employed, CDA was utilized. The CDA for this study involved asking questions about six language building tasks: *semiotic building* (relevant sign systems), *world building* (the situated meaning of words and phrases that seem important in the situation), *activity building* (the main activity going on in the situation), *socioculturally situated identity and relationship building* (the relationship between values, knowledge, and cultural beliefs), *political building* (the relevance of the social goods of status, power, gender, race, and class in the situation), and *connection building* (the kinds of connections within and across utterances in the same interaction) (Gee, 1996). Although the end result of this CDA is a set of themes, I maintain that there are data in the analysis supporting each theme.

CDA accounted for the micro context in which the orders of discourse for this study are embedded, which include genre, discourse, and style across three domains—society, institution, and situation (Fairclough, 1995). Interviews, a focus group, and journal entries were used to examine each Black girl participants’ discourse on the way in which they represented themselves and their identities, as well as how they made meaning of a critical text. To answer the first research question of how Black adolescent girls enact critical literacy practices, CDA across a societal domain was conducted using primary and secondary discourses through journal entries and interviews. To answer the second research question of how Black adolescent girls respond to a culturally responsive text, CDA was employed across institution and situation through the discourses found in a focus group interview.

### **Findings**

Throughout the study, Lily, Jane, and Simone discussed how Black girls are constantly barraged by damaging stereotypes in the media and that these messages do affect who they are and how they see themselves. All of the participants in this study developed their own ways to counteract stereotypes about Black girls and women—whether by speaking out against them directly, avoiding them altogether by creating their own alternative version of Black girlhood, or consistently code-switching and creating multiple identities in various social settings. While reflecting on the novel *The Hate U Give* during the course of the study, Lily, Jane, and Simone enacted critical literacies by constantly questioning the text and its

implications for Black girlhood by negotiating their identities, positionalities, and power through their words in the interviews and journal writing.

### **Orders of Discourse across a Societal Domain**

Lily, Jane, and Simone engaged in both prompted writing and free writing. As a group, their prompt-driven writing was generally brief and concise, while their free writing tended to be longer, more expressive, and more personal. Although Lily was very shy and reserved, she was comfortable using free writing as her main form of expression. More outspoken Jane used free writing to extend her initial thoughts and conversations in the prompted writing to express more intimate accounts of conversations that occurred in the focus group and interviews. Simone, often unsure of certain questions I asked her on the nature of Black girlhood, used her free writing to delve more deeply into the questions asked of her. During both interviews, when thinking deeply upon a specific question, she would often ask, “Can I write about that thought later?” The chance to mull over her thoughts through free writing offered Simone a way in which to expand her ideas and discuss issues that were easier and more convenient than speaking them.

Each participant also used free writing as an opportunity to express their feelings, expand their ideas, and talk about things that would often be considered taboo in discussions situated in White-dominated public settings. For Lily, she returned to the topic of colorism time and time again in her free writing, as well as her dissatisfaction with the confining nature of Black identity. Lily also criticized the novel for its lack of attention to colorism, namely, the refusal of the author to include a physical description of Starr, despite the appearance of a dark-skinned girl on the mass-market hardcover edition of the book. For Simone, free writing allowed her to explore her conflicted feelings of Black social dynamics and the White society in which she mostly attended school. She also expressed her dissent on the benefits of attending a PWI versus an HBCU. Jane drew upon the internal pressure she experienced to constantly be “strong” and outspoken in a hegemonic society that sought to dominate her.

Although the journal writing of this study provided participants with an opportunity to tell their story in their own words in an out-of-school setting, Lily, Jane, and Simone all employed writing conventions found in school spaces, using standard English to express themselves. Though there were some grammatical and punctuation errors in each participant’s writing, it was still based on writing that is commonly taught and endorsed in school spaces. This is very different from the linguistic practice employed by the participants in the face-to-face interviews, in which all three incorporated instances of African American Vernacular English.

As with the novel’s Starr Carter, who speaks out openly in her home and neighborhood yet is more reserved and silent with her White peers at her school, the participants of the study were also aware that to be successful in environments where White middle-class values dominate, they must learn the language and literacy practice of code-

switching. All of the participants practiced some form of code-switching, particularly Jane and Simone, for whom code-switching was not just a way of speaking when in the presence of Whites, but following a self-prescribed code of behavior designed to disprove White assumptions of Black existence. This behavior included speaking out, doing well in school, and always maintaining visibility in their pursuits of personal and academic excellence.

For Lily, strategic silence is in itself a speech act to resist perpetuation of distorted images of Black girlhood. She challenged and critiqued the notion that Starr is a “typical” Black girl for being outspoken about the injustice around her. As Lily stated “sometimes people say things that’s so stupid it’s not worth responding to,” it is evident that her silence is resistance; rather than verbally confronting people with negative opinions of her based on race, she consciously chooses to say nothing at all (interview, January 18). Rather, she persists in her own distinct way of knowing, pursuing her own interests, and being who she is. Through performing her own version of Black girlhood, she asserts herself and refuses to be bound by a narrow representation of stereotyped Blackness.

### **Orders of Discourse across Institutions and Situation**

For the second research question of how Black adolescent girls respond to culturally responsive critical texts, I turn to the BGLF in stating that collaboration is a key component of BGLs. Literacies are not enacted in isolation, but are inherently social and involve a co-construction of knowledge with other Black girls (Muhammad & Haddix, 2016). Because the novel selected for this study focused on multiple social issues, the findings in this section are organized thematically: discourse on the Black girl societal condition and discourse on Black girl empowerment.

### **Discourse on the Black Girl Societal Condition**

Being Black and female, Black girls are continually confronted with oppression that works in conjunction with other forms of oppression to produce social injustice and racial marginalization (Collins, 2009). In *The Hate U Give*, the main character, Starr, navigates life in her predominantly Black neighborhood of Garden Heights and among her peers in a predominantly White prep school in light of the police-sanctioned shooting of her friend Khalil. Starr endures the scorn of her White peers who are unaware of her role on the night of the shooting until she makes it public that she was present and begins to speak out against injustice. The conversation below details an exchange between Lily and Jane in response to asking the participants to share their initial reactions to *The Hate U Give* (interview, January 25):

Jane: Well, yeah, it was like really relatable. While I was reading and was, like, “wow, this is, like, basically what people go through today.” Like, this is literally like most people’s lives and, like, especially like when Starr was with with her friends, I related to that so much. Also, it’s like a lot of my, like, you know, Caucasian friends, like...they things they say about Black people. It’s not very, how would I put this, “acceptable.” But, like, okay, you know, I let it slide, you know?

Researcher: Right, right. Yeah. So, yeah, give me an example. Like, what are some things that they say?

Lily: Because this is the way they talk to me. Thing for me is talking about hair—

Jane: Yes!

Lily: Natural hair and asking all these questions and they don't realize that when they're saying things. Um, what's an example? Like your different hair types. They don't understand that you can have different hair types and some of their questions can be like ignorant or offensive—

Jane: Exactly!

Lily: And you don't, like, let it, you don't, you let it slide because they're your friends and, you know, they're not meaning to have bad intentions, but you're kind of also, like, you're very clear. You don't...you're not cultured to know about what I do in my life. Or with my hair.

Lily and Jane made meaning of events in the story through both personal and intertextual connections, as they both immediately were able to relate to the manner in which Starr is forced to silence her voice to maneuver in a White-dominated social world. For my participants, this is a world full of implicit racism, comprising the microaggressions of everyday interactions. According to Fleras (2016), microaggressions are “racial biases that operates ‘under the radar’ through thinly veiled compliments, aversive reactions, and seemingly neutral language” (p. 3). For Lily and Jane, who both wear natural hairstyles, these comments were personally directed, subtle but significant. While they agreed that the expressions were more than likely unpremeditated acts, dealing with such incivility as a Black female within White-dominated social situations is an occurrence that comes with daily life. Though Lily and Jane admitted that they let the microaggressive statements “slide,” Lily’s positionality was clear in her distancing language (“You’re not cultured enough to know about what I do in my life.”)

### **Discourse on Black Girl Empowerment**

Because *The Hate U Give* (Thomas, 2017) is the story of Starr Carter’s process of moving from silence to voice, I wanted to know if this process mirrored the lives of my participants. During the focus group, I asked my participants for their initial reactions after reading the novel.

Lily: It makes me kind of feel bad.

Researcher: Really?

Lily: For not getting out there and, like, speaking up for, like, what’s right. Like all the activism stuff kind of scary cause, like, I’m not the type of person that will, like, speak out for, like, what I believe in, you know, I’m like kind of in the background. Right. Like seeing Starr, you know, finally, like, going up there and speaking, you know, what she believes for, what’s his name?

Jane: Khalil.

Lily: Yeah. Like, it makes you, like, like, actually want to get out there but, like, at the same time too, like, scared to go.

Jane: Um, I would probably say it's definitely makes me more empowered of being Black and I think that's, like, how it's slowly progressing in society, like being proud of being Black and not, like, always straightening your hair and being, um, like trying to be like the White person, which is what he has going on with, like, body types and stuff. Accept your body type, accept your skin color, the markings on your skin. Like, it's stuff after reading that is definitely, like, it's, it's fine. It's okay to be Black because you're unique. Yeah.

In this exchange, Jane and Lily represented opposing views toward coming to voice. While Jane was empowered by Starr's outspokenness, Lily responded with reservations. This is not unusual, being that much of Black feminist thought reflects the effort to find a collective, self-defined voice. To learn to speak with an authentic voice, Black girls must leap outside of the frames and systems that society decides and create their own frame. Being that institutions such as schools, media, and other government agencies serve as sites of silencing, it was reassuring that the focus group served as a place in which Lily felt free to share her true self, doubts, and fears.

### **Conclusion**

All too often, the voices of Black girls are left out of the research about them and damaging pathologies propagated in their place. This study stands as evidence that it is possible to include the perspectives of Black girls and illuminate the unique resiliency of this group. Based on the findings and recognizing the dearth of research into BGLs, I recommend further research on the literacy needs of marginalized populations. A recommendation for future research would be a critical exploration of the literacy practices of Latinx, Asian, and/or Native/Indigenous adolescents and their responses to critical, culturally responsive YA texts. A second recommendation for research would be a critical comparative study of how adolescent girls of colors' literacy functions in both in-school spaces and out-of-school spaces. Such a study would lend a clear picture of the ways in which Black, Latinx, Asian, or Native/Indigenous adolescent girls make meaning of their literacies in school and out-of-school settings.

This study positions Black adolescent girls at the center of their literate lives. Understanding how Black girls enact their literacy practices is key to countering narratives of oppression, institutional silencing, and hegemonic educational practices. By highlighting Black girls' own voices and exploring the ways in which they make meaning of literacy in response to critical texts, it is my hope that we can begin to do the work of offering a sustainable change in the field of literacy education.

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