Critical Readings: African American Girls and Urban Fiction

Urban fiction can encourage and enhance learning opportunities and draw important parallels between texts that readers willingly engage with and those forms that they rebuff.

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Growing populations of adolescent African American girls who have been traditionally disengaged from school texts and, in many cases, labeled remedial learners, are engaging and reading urban fiction (Morris, Hughes-Hassell, Agosto, & Cottman, 2006; Stovall, 2005). The financial successes of the genre and the fascination of young readers with the sexually charged and violent themes presented within the texts provide concrete examples of the disconnect between the readings promoted in school and the texts that engage adolescent African American girls in the out–of–school context. This gap between what students read by choice and what is read in classrooms contributes, in part, to students' struggles to demonstrate literacy strengths within traditional English instruction (Gee, 2000; Mahiri, 2004; Schultz & Hull, 2001).

Despite poor reading achievement, as evidenced by nationally standardized reading tests (Campbell, Voelkl, & Donahue, 1997; Rampey, Dion, & Donahue, 2009), a growing body of research suggests that adolescent African American girls possess strong out–of–school literacy skills (Mahiri, 2004; Morris et al., 2006). Notwithstanding these findings, educators often consider the out–of–school reading activities, which include engagement with "trash" literature, to be supplementary at best and, as a matter of course, undervalued as pedagogical devices in the classroom (Mahiri, 2004; Schultz & Hull, 2001). It is important to note that readers from a variety of racial and socioeconomic classes face similar challenges as their leisure literacy choices are neither validated nor welcomed within their classrooms (Bean & Moni, 2003).

Growing numbers of adolescent African American female students are struggling to demonstrate traditional literacy achievement brought about, in part, by a lack of commonality between their interests and cultures and school–sanctioned literacy texts (Richardson, 2002; Sutherland, 2005). The need to investigate the literacy strengths of this population is amplified when considering their reading proficiency, or lack thereof. While African American adolescent females are performing slightly above African American males and Latino students on national reading assessments (Rampey et al.,

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2009). African American females still lag considerably behind their Asian and Caucasian counterparts; this gap largely exists regardless of the social class of African American females (Campbell et al., 1997; Hilliard, 2002).

Nestled within the intersections of Reader Response (Rosenblatt, 1995; Wilhelm, 1997), Critical Literacy (Collins, 2006; Freire, 1979;) and New Literacy Theories (Gee, 2000; Street, 1993), this article builds upon underexplored understandings about leisure reading habits and, more specifically, literacy strengths, of adolescent African American females as very little research exists that addresses their reading proficiency by considering the reading interests or habits of this population. Creating bridges between the leisure-reading interests of adolescent African American girls and those texts emphasized in schools presents a means of bolstering more traditional forms of reading achievement within schools and may serve as a concrete example of culturally relevant teaching. Urban fiction is an example of a form of text that is capturing the leisure-reading interests of growing numbers of adolescent African American girls.

In this article I provide an overview of the urban fiction genre and its potential significance to adolescent African American female readers. Further, I consider why adolescent African American girls are engaging with urban fiction texts. I conclude with a discussion about how teachers' engagement with urban fiction may serve as an opportunity for demonstrating culturally relevant teaching and enhancing students' literacy acquisition.

In equal parts uncompromising and stereotypic, urban fiction introduces the reader to derogatory language, mature and often vulgar story content and themes, as well as predictable and uncomplicated storylines. In addition, these texts personify many stereotypes about African American women and families, including the negative portrayal of African American females as hypersexual, materialistic, superficial,

vindictive, obsessed with appearance, teenage mothers, and drug users, among others (Stovall, 2005). Due to the content and crude depictions of African American girls and women, many adults would not be comfortable with, nor would they choose to expose children to, urban fiction texts (Worthy, Moorman, & Turner, 1999). Despite the shortcomings of many popularized urban fiction texts, which fail to render complex and dynamic representations of African American youth/protagonists, these books are engaging populations of disengaged adolescents, particularly African American female readers (Morris et al., 2006).

In this article, engagement with urban fiction is viewed as a literacy practice that reflects adolescent and popular culture and coincidentally motivates engagement with more traditional forms of literature. This sociocultural perspective of literacy considers that adolescents interact with different forms of texts in many different ways, and, in doing so, it recognizes and validates the importance of different forms of literature within the lives of adolescents. These various literacy activities, as embodied by urban fiction, enable adolescent African American females to help make sense of the world around them.

Urban Fiction as Contrary to Traditional Conceptions of Literacy

Although schools promote traditional forms of text that qualify as classical or canonical literature, researchers are finding that many adolescents neither appreciate nor pursue reading these forms of text in their leisure time (Smith and Wilhelm, 2002; Worthy et al, 1999). More contemporary views of text have surfaced, however, which seek to acknowledge and validate the out-of-school or leisure-reading interests of a diverse population of adolescents. Alvermann (1998) updated more traditional definitions and asserted that the "conception of 'text' must include...popular music, magazines, and newspapers and adolescents' own cultural understandings" (p. 2). Personal, or out-of-school, texts are especially important to consider for adolescents because, in contrast to school-required materials, these readings elicit the highest rates of engagement for adolescents (Worthy et al., 1999).

Notwithstanding the interest garnered by these nontraditional forms of literature and the relevance of the material to the lives of students from nonmainstream cultures, these texts are neglected and excluded from sanctioned readings and curricula (Schultz & Hull, 2001). Based on its readership, authorship, and content, urban fiction qualifies as a nondominant form of text. Rather than simply dismissing its value based on its qualification as nontraditional or because of the provocative subjects addressed, it is important to recognize and discuss the merits of the genre and its relevance to the reading interests of adolescent African American girls.

Due to the largely unrecognized power of leisure reading (regardless of its form) in engaging adolescents and enhancing their reading skills (Staples, 2005; Wilhelm, 1997), connections can be created between these nontraditional forms of texts and those promoted within schools. These connections may be useful in improving the performance of African American female students in more traditional literacy studies, a process that can begin with a deeper examination of the themes, plots, and character arcs of urban fiction texts.

Overview of Urban Fiction

Urban fiction, also referred to as street literature, hip-hop literature, black pulp fiction, ghetto lit, and gangsta lit, is "the subset of black fiction associated with the streets. Don't think Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Terry McMillan's *Waiting to Exhale*, or Alice Walker's *Color Purple*. Instead, think of the literary equivalent of rap or hip-hop" (McCune, 2005, ¶ 2) Following the framework of Souljah's (1999) *The Coldest Winter Ever*, the novel accredited with the reinvigoration of the genre from its original popularity in the 1960s and 1970s, most contemporary urban fiction novels feature a young African American female protagonist between the ages of 16 and 23 who overcomes her austere surroundings (Morris et al., 2006). Subjects featured in urban fiction novels include incarceration, abortion, crime, drugs, teen parenthood, pregnancy, premarital sex, murder, violence, and abuse (Morris et al., 2006). The female lead surmounts these barriers by relying on her sensuality as well as her ability to negotiate her way through dangerous situations.

African American teenage females whose ages span between 13 and 30 years old support the genre most.

A dramatic event typically takes place within the first two chapters, which shapes the rest of the storyline. Characters within the texts use money and sex to influence others and gain power as a means of overcoming the presented problem. In most urban fiction texts, however, the main characters learn from their experiences by the conclusion of the story, passing along advice that results in the formation of a cautionary tale.

Urban fiction texts are generally written in first person, from the perspective of the protagonist. The text is often written in nonstandard English and prominently features the use of slang and profanity. This genre appeals to disengaged populations of readers who desire to read and interact with texts and issues presented within the genre. Important to the connection of these texts with its young readership, who value the texts as authentic renderings (Osborne, 2001), is the fact that many urban fiction writers are African American authors who hail from the neighborhoods featured within their texts, and they employ references to real cities and neighborhoods.

Allure of Urban Fiction

Not all African American females read urban fiction. However, there are several bodies of knowledge that potentially address why many adolescent African American females do engage with this genre: (a) urban fiction indulges a curiosity about forbidden issues such as sex, relationships, and sensuality, (b) urban fiction serves as an escape and diversion from rigid course work assignments, and (c) some readers share a personal connection with characters, storylines, and problems raised within the text.

Urban Fiction and Forbidden Issues. Kaplan and Cole's (2003) findings, based on comparisons of four adolescent female focus-group interviews, suggested that girls use teen magazines as a way of exploring conceptions of sex, sensuality, and female gender roles. While urban fiction stories are typically presented in novel form as opposed to magazine, topics such as sex, sensuality, femininity, and gender roles are prominent. Kaplan and Cole also found that conversations on these topics were not encouraged with

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adults, so the participants were left with little knowledge other than that obtained through their interactions with text and equally unknowledgeable friends.

Shirley Aaron, a teen counselor, uses urban fiction characters and storylines to have conversations on taboo topics such as sex, drugs, and abuse with adolescent students (Stovall, 2005). Extending from issues such as sex and sensuality, girls pleasure read to explore conceptions of love and relationships (Alvermann, 1998) and other topics some adults shy away.

Within Finders's (1997) study of the literacy habits of adolescent girls, the pleasure-reading materials at the homes of her participants served as an indulgence that enabled an exploration of sexuality and social memberships. She discovered that reading choices involved fictional texts that presented sexualized images of womanhood as well as relationships, and the texts were used as a "guide for life" of sorts. Urban fiction novels present images and topics that are largely ignored or underdeveloped within the homes of female readers; these novels offer an opportunity to explore taboo issues around sexuality and gender-based behaviors.

Reading as an Escape. In her research with adolescent female focus groups, Blackford (2004) discovered that girls read for images and storylines that are contrary to their realities. In addition to augmenting their developing conceptions of self, Blackford proffered that girls use literature as a means of escaping the daily occurrences of their own lives. Hicks (2005) found that girls have conversations with personal texts such as horror fictions because they are unable to do this with regular school texts. As it relates to urban fiction specifically, Osborne found that "black middle class females are drawn to the [urban fiction] stories because they present a side of life that others have tried to hide from them. Street culture has always appealed to these kids" (cited in Osborne, 2001, n.p.). Not withstanding the restrictive imagery and other patent flaws, urban fiction is a form of text that enables outsiders to experience life within a disenfranchised urban setting and problems associated with such a life; engagement with urban fiction may serve as an escape from reality and exposure to the life of a different person. This is also significant in that, contrary to popular assumptions, urban fiction appeals to a variety of readers who come from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds, not just the poor and working class communities reflected within the storylines (Stovall, 2005).

Personal Connections to Text. Regardless of their socioeconomic class or exposures, all African American females can relate to the characters within urban fiction texts based on their positions within society. Sutherland (2005) wrote that although the protagonists of these stories share little in common with the readers, either socially or economically, African American adolescent females find a kinship with the characters not only because of their bold assertions of sexuality but also because of their race. Adolescent African American females are searching for representations of themselves, irrespective of the positive or negative attributes of those characters. Richardson (2002) wrote about the connection that all African American females share with stereotypic images. In her critique about depictions of African American women within various media outlets, Richardson (2002) stated that "though many Black females were not born into literal American ghettos, most, nevertheless, struggle for self-determination and self-definition against the world's ghettoized images of them" (p. 676).

Fordham (1993) encouraged a contextual understanding about the social placement of African American females within American society when considering their leisure reading choices. Popularized images, centering on sexual, angry, apathetic, or sacrificial mothering characters, are the only depictions of African American women presented in texts such as magazines, television programming, and books (Richardson, 2002). As such, literature serves as a form of indoctrination into a society that is oppressive to nondominant members and promotes condescending images without any conscious recognition of this initiation (DeBlase, 2003; Richardson, 2002; Sutherland, 2005).

DeBlase (2003) and Fordham (1993) contended that African American girls become passive consumers of texts without opportunities to acknowledge or explore their thoughts around presentations of race and gender or to renegotiate the commonly held misconceptions of African American girls and women perpetuated in these texts. Some adolescent African Americans may not be cognizant of the oppressive quality of the negative images found in literature, and they may tacitly accept the stereotypic images presented (Fordham, 1993). As a consequence, popularized and degraded images presented in literature are applied to self-image and upheld (DeBlase, 2003). Due to the dearth of multidimensional African American female characters in texts, Black adolescent females are not afforded the luxury to discriminate against readings that contain negative and stereotypic portrayals.

Notwithstanding the systemic problems of the presentation of African Americans in both traditional texts and urban fiction, the disturbing and stereotypic images can be used in various ways to further stimulate reading engagement.

Urban Fiction Within the Context of Teaching and Learning

The idea of incorporating such controversial texts into curricula is an incredibly daunting idea. While it merits consideration based on its appeal to some adolescent African American females, the notion of effective implementation causes reticence and a great deal of hesitation on the part of many educators due, in large part, to the vulgar themes, nonstandard language usage, stereotypic portrayals, as well as the poor writing construction of many of the texts. Although further research is needed to identify the merits of teachers specifically engaging with adolescent African American girls around urban fiction, several studies provide insight about the potential benefits of this engagement.

Engagement with urban fiction for educators may serve as a means of demonstrating culturally relevant teaching. Ladson-Billings (1995) and Lee (2007) wrote that culturally relevant teaching is steeped within a pedagogy that acknowledges, values, and builds on students' cultures, experiences, and ways of learning

as a means of creating an effective learning environment. Characteristics of culturally responsive teaching, according to Gay (2000), specifically involve

- Understanding and legitimizing the reading cultures of students
- Creating bridges between home and school
- Employing a variety of strategies to engage various entry points to lessons

In this section, I explore how engagement with urban fiction can potentially benefit teachers and students, because it may serve as a form of culturally relevant teaching.

Understanding and Legitimizing the Reading Culture of Students

Teachers' engagement with urban fiction can serve to legitimize the existing culture of reading around the genre. I am referencing here the growing numbers of African American females who are engaging with the texts. Morris et al. (2006) referenced how adolescent African American teens are voraciously checking out and reading urban fiction texts from libraries so much so that librarians are struggling to keep texts in the library for even small amounts of time. Teacher engagement with this genre taps into the culture of readers who explore and enjoy urban fiction.

As a culture of reading urban fiction exists for growing numbers of adolescent African American girls (Morris et al., 2006), an understanding of this culture may provide opportunities for teachers to create bridges between a nondominant leisure-reading practice and those texts that are failing to capture the interests and, more important, appreciate the literacy aptitude of a traditionally underperforming group. To engage this culture, many teachers may need to challenge traditional conceptions of literacy, including their own, before reading this form of "trash literature," because engagement with urban fiction runs contrary to many popularized and traditional notions of what constitutes "good" or "acceptable" literature.

While some teachers may be reluctant to validate this engagement within school, acknowledgment may result in some students viewing their engagement with the genre as "legitimate," motivating their

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confidence and views of themselves as readers (Wilhelm, 1997). Because culturally relevant teaching encourages students to take pride in their cultural affiliations, engagement with urban fiction may promote the message of taking pride in being a part of the culture of reading urban fiction. This outlook may help to enhance students' perceptions of themselves as readers, their investment in reading, and, ultimately, their reading achievement—one of the goals of culturally responsive teaching.

Creating Bridges

Culturally relevant teaching promotes educators' reliance on a variety of "entry points" as a means of teaching. Incorporating students' reading interests may serve as the entry point into a lesson. Brooks, Browne, and Hampton (2008) wrote that the "documentation of the everyday experiences of contemporary African American girls remains remarkably scant in school libraries, book stores, and the households of youth from all ethnic backgrounds" (p. 661). As such, urban fiction, which may be considered a window of sorts, provides insight about the lives of participants and how more dominant forms of texts can be applied to their realities; this understanding may serve as an entry point for teaching an English-related skill.

Ideally, within this interaction, environments will be created where students' perspectives are valued and are the center of analysis. Morrell (2002) wrote,

> Any pedagogy of popular culture has to be a critical pedagogy where students and teachers learn from and with one another while engaging in authentic dialogue that is centered on the experiences of urban youth as participants in and creators of popular culture. (p. 74)

Urban fiction is viewed in this article as an artifact of both popular and adolescent culture and so qualifies as a text that can initiate this interaction. These conversations may help to create an environment where the teacher recognizes the significance of the social and cultural influences upon the learning outcomes for students.

Based on the controversial aspects within urban fiction texts and its potential lack of appeal to all populations of readers, teachers may work with texts in a number of limited yet different ways to create bridges between the home and school reading interests of adolescent African American girls. As culturally relevant teaching promotes the inclusion of nondominant literacies—of which urban fiction qualifies—teachers can engage students within smaller reading settings such as literature circles (Daniels, 2006) and after-school book clubs (Raphael, Florio-Ruane, & George, 2001) as well as during sustained silent reading time (Humphrey & Preddy, 2008).

Each of these strategies should only be employed after having attained parental consent, because some parents may be unaware of their child's interest in the genre or the content within the genre (Stovall, 2005). Based on their interest and engagement with both the genre and readerships, teachers may serve as the bridge between those nontraditional and dominant reading practices that are often reflected within more traditional curricula (Young, 2008). Authors can draw from the similarities between more traditional texts and urban fiction to convey concepts and instill skills.

Although research is needed to specifically examine claims about the significance of teachers and students engaging in urban fiction as a means of bridging dominant and nondominant reading interests and skills, there are some instructive examples of teachers who have used nondominant and controversial forms of text to engage student populations with more traditional forms of text that are promoted within curricula. For example, Alan Sitomer, a high school English teacher from Los Angeles, established connections between themes pervasive within controversial rapper Tupac Shakur's lyrics from "Me Against the World" and works of Shakespeare; parallel themes referenced in both works emerged including greed, isolation, power, and love (Whelan, 2007).

Sitomer served as the bridge between these different forms of texts as he engaged with both forms and highlighted similarities between a seemingly irrelevant text of the Shakespeare verse and lyrics that were deemed by his students as important and pertinent within their own lives. His motivation lay "in

validating students and their interests. If you diminish their interests, you diminish them—and then you'll never reach them" (Whelan, 2007, ¶ 7). In creating a bridge between those dominant practices valued in schools and those nondominant literacies valued within the leisure time of students, Sitomer demonstrated how it is possible to recognize and understand the literacy habits and interests of his students and enhance achievement with more traditional forms of text and also how literature written in the past still holds relevance within contemporary times.

Sitomer's imaginative use of rap to enhance traditional forms of literature serves as a model for the potential use of urban fiction, which shares similarities, such as controversial content and nonstandard use of English, with popularized forms of rap. Like Sitomer, teachers may use certain facets of urban fiction texts to make connections between themes in more traditional forms of text that appear irrelevant within the lives of students and those presented within the storylines of urban fiction tales—stories that are, in contrast, engaging the interests of readers.

Ernest Morrell, a teacher and researcher, juxtaposed poetry from the postindustrial age against hip-hop lyrics (Morrell, 2002). Morrell began his lesson by requiring students to recite rap lyrics that were both relevant and familiar. Morrell then required students to interpret, compare, and critique images presented from the rap lyrics against more traditional forms of poetry created during the industrial age. He embraced a controversial form of music that appealed to the interests of his students and empowered students with the ability to critically analyze that form of text. He then motivated students to apply those skills to more traditional forms of poetry that were included within his curriculum.

Just as Morrell was able to utilize a controversial form of music to enhance students' confidence with regard to critical literacy skills, urban fiction may be introduced by teachers to emphasize key concepts and enhance skills such as the deconstruction of a medium and a critical character analysis, which are translatable to literacy engagement in general. Both Sitomer's and Morrell's creative instruction relates to potential lessons using urban fiction by evidencing methods through which teachers create bridges between traditional texts and controversial leisure-reading materials. Both teachers were able to build on students' interests in controversial and nonstandardized forms of texts to illuminate lessons that relate to those typically emphasized using more traditional forms of text.

Morrell (2005) wrote that creating bridges between the home and school literacies of adolescents should emphasize more than superficial commonalities between texts; he wrote specifically about the significance of enhancing critical literacy skills for readers. Instruction, according to Morrell, should be "explicit on a role of language and literacy in conveying meaning and in promoting or disrupting existing power relationships" (p. 313). As such, it is important to note that teachers, in serving as the bridge between the home and school literacies of students, can use images and issues raised within urban fiction to enhance critical literacy skills regarding the disturbing and controversial images presented, even if only selecting short passages or specific chapters from a text.

Bean and Moni (2003), as an example, were able to use a young adult novel that contained images of African American masculinity, sex, and urban life to engage in ways that motivated a critical discourse for adolescent readers; they engaged students in controversial topics excluded from curricula. Yet, relying on a young adult novel that contained controversial images, which are also prevalent within urban fiction, through a form of guided literary discussion known as critical discourse, students challenged the cultures and representation of issues within the text studied as they considered power relations as well as issues influencing the constructions of their own identities.

Building on the example of Bean and Moni (2003), teachers may use urban fiction texts to motivate students to challenge images and storylines found not only within the novels but also within the media and society at large. Although problematic, character dilemmas are reflective of perspectives missing from the canonical texts promoted within schools. When reading an urban fiction text with students, for instance, teachers might question why the perspectives emphasized within the texts are missing from stories promoted within schools. If using *The Coldest Winter Ever*, a teacher might discuss with students why the

author chose to focus on the experiences of a protagonist, Winter Santiaga, who embodies so many negative stereotypes, and why this portrayal speaks to the interests of the target audience.

The goal within this effort to utilize literacy acquisition techniques is to teach students that there is value in all experience, but that the images presented may be problematic based on the pervasiveness of stereotypes. Using *The Coldest Winter Ever*, students may challenge the stereotypes represented through the protagonist and also consider how they, as readers, relate to and understand the text. The following are additional questions instructors could ask to further their students' exploration and deconstruction of urban fiction texts:

- How do they, as readers, relate to the protagonist, if at all?
- Who is the author attempting to appeal to within this writing?
- How do they qualify as the targeted reading audience?
- What assumptions did the author make about the target audience when writing the story?

Within this example, teachers are able to engage with a controversial form of text, which may be culturally relevant to some students, as a means of enhancing critical literacy skills that are translatable to other, more traditional, forms of text.

Final Thoughts

Despite popularized beliefs that urban fiction is trash literature and undeserving of attention or practical application within the classroom setting, these texts are captivating the reading interests of growing numbers of adolescent African American girls. Considering that in-school reading achievement is substandard within this population of readers, it seems essential to investigate the significance of the texts that are capturing their reading interests rather than relying on in-school and dominant forms of texts alone, which appear to garner little interest from members of this group.

Many pundits argue that texts featuring taboo and provocative issues such as drugs, sex, and violence will pique the interests of adolescents and, as such, do not have a place within the classroom. However, there is a particular significance to urban fiction as a genre, because it engages the reading interests of an overlooked and understudied population of readers—adolescent African American girls. Therefore, teachers who are interested in increasing in-school reading achievement might seek to better understand urban fiction as a means of encouraging and enhancing learning opportunities and drawing important parallels between texts with which readers willingly engage and the more traditional forms these students rebuff yet that define literacy achievement in the classroom setting.

Rather than view this nontraditional literacy practice through a deficit lens, it may be helpful for educators to challenge their conceptions of literacy and use these texts as an opportunity to engage with students around the critical issues and images presented. This engagement is a prime example of culturally relevant teaching.

Further exploration with students, such as conducting book clubs and literature circles or encouraging conversations where chapters of a text are used to complement a conversation or theme raised within class, may enhance understandings about the potential significance of urban fiction within the classroom. While I have linked various bodies of research that may help us to understand the appeal of urban fiction texts for adolescent African American females, research that specifically considers why members of this population engage with this genre might be helpful in establishing connections not previously considered.

Also, further study is merited that considers how readers understand and apply messages from the text and how the disturbing images from urban fiction novels can be transformed into empowering conversations where girls learn to critique representations that may influence their conceptions of self and others.

Finally, further research is needed to explore the interplay between how reading, discussing, and deconstructing urban fiction can result in effective critical engagement with canonical and other traditionally accepted texts.

Through the incorporation of nonmainstream and controversial leisure texts, such as urban fiction,

within reading groups designed to explore and encourage the reading interests of participants, teachers and researchers alike may better understand how to create bridges that connect the leisure-reading interests of adolescent African American girls to more dominant reading interests as a means of bolstering more traditional literacy skills.

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