From Pen to Pin: The Multimodality of Black Girls (Re)Writing Their Lives

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to understand how Black adolescent girls make sense of and challenge public conceptions and representations of Black girlhood today through the use of multimodal literacy—examining traditional forms of writings (hence the term, "penning") as well as non-print texts that include image, video, Prezi, and Pinterest, the latter of which functions as an online pin board (hence the term, "pinning"). Drawing from our two qualitative inquiries with adolescent girls ages 13-19 years old, the researchers examined what young Black women do with texts as they take up representations of their public selves in their real worlds outside of school contexts by examining the following research questions: (1) What representations do Black adolescent girls pen/pin against? (2) How do Black adolescent girls (re)pen/pin representations of self? Findings show that the girls penned/pinned against ideals related to physical beauty, sexualizing, and education.

Keywords: Black, girls, multimodality, representation, writing

From Pen to Pin: The Multimodality of Black Girls (Re)Writing Their Lives

Identity formation is experienced by youth during their adolescent years. Adolescents typically "try on" different identities and identifications as they explore multiple manifestations of self. Identity development is influenced by a combination of how one self-defines, others' (sometimes imposed) definitions of the person, and who the person aspires to be. This developmental period during adolescence can be unique for Black girls as they seek to establish selfhood among negative public perceptions (Muhammad, 2015). Quite often, young Black women seek ways to make sense of their identities while confronted with public projections of Black girlhood and what it means to be a Black girl—perceptions that do not always offer wide and varied identities. These projections from the media are often negative, inaccurate, or incomplete and stem from history portraying Black women and girls in public spaces as hypersexual, not beautiful, or confrontational with labels related to historic images of the *jezebel*, *mammy*, and *sapphire* (Collins, 2009; Muhammad & McArthur, 2015; Pilgrim, 2002; Townsend, Thomas, Neilands, & Jackson, 2010; Womack, 2013). Brice (2007) referred to these representations as intellectual assaults against African American females that affect the selfhood of both women and girls. These pervasive images are still present in the media today and have the potential to further marginalize the lives of Black girls.

Literacy practices have historically been used as a means for Black women to negotiate public perceptions of who they are and to author their own lives, rather than be defined by others. Over time, Black women have used their pens to make sense of their identities for their personal development and to educate others. Writing was purposeful to display truth and help dispel falsehoods about their lives. With this in mind, it became important for us to understand how Black girls take up such contemporary manifestations of public views today through

literacy—particularly multimodal literacy practices. In our experiences as young Black women, scholars and educators, we personally know the tensions that we and other Black girls experience with combating ideals of self in the context of what is seen and heard in media outlets such as radio, television, literature and the Internet. These images affect the ways Black girls make sense of their identities and literacies (Brooks, Browne, & Hampton, 2008; Brooks, Sekayi, Savage, Waller, & Picot, 2010; Richardson, 2007; Sutherland, 2005; Winn, 2010; Wissman, 2008). Additionally, we have both worked with young Black women for a number of years and hear them pushing back on what they see and hear on mainstream media as it relates to young Black womanhood. We ask ourselves and the girls we work with how we/they resist, accept, or are indifferent about the ways the public projects their/our lives. This wider inquiry created the need for this study. The purpose of this study is to understand how Black adolescent girls make sense of and challenge public conceptions and representations of Black girlhood today through the use of multimodal literacy—examining traditional forms of writings (i.e., "penning") as well as contemporary forms of writing which include non-print texts such as Prezi[1] and Pinterest[2] (i.e., "pinning"). We use "penning" to refer to how the girls in Gholdy's study used the pen to write in traditional ways, composing print language. Further, we use "pinning" to refer to the ways in which the girls in Erica's study utilized the pin (i.e., text, image, and/or sound) to create fuller representations of young Black women and girls in digital spaces. We examine what young

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[1] Prezi is a browser-based presentation software application that allows users to present text, videos, and images in animated fashion. In our study, we also use the concept of "pinning" to refer to the array of text, video, and image that can be displayed on/uploaded to Prezi.

[2] Pinterest is a form of social media that functions as an online pinboard/bulletin board. Pinterest allows users to upload or "pin" text, photographs, images, videos, etc. to individually-and/or group-designed pinboards. Users can interact with one another by posting comments below any pinned item. Users can also choose to follow and/or re-pin items from other boards, which are often grouped by such themes as cooking, fashion, favorite books, hairstyles, and more.

Black women do with texts as they take up representations of their public selves in their real worlds outside of school contexts by examining the following research questions:

1. What representations do Black adolescent girls pen/pin against?

2. How do Black adolescent girls (re)pen/pin representations of self?

To respond to these questions, we draw from our two individual qualitative inquiries. In our individual research, we each worked with a group of adolescent girls ages 13-19 years old as they engaged in different forms of writing to make sense of and resist ascribed representations to their identities. In each of our studies, we invited Black girls to participate in a literacy collective where we served as their facilitators as we read and composed texts related to their identities. In the methodology section, we discuss in detail each of our two projects and how we combined data for focus on our research questions for the current study.

Theoretical Framework

In this study, we draw upon a multiliteracies perspective that helps us to examine Black girls' use of both print and non-print. Cope and Kalantzis (2000) defined multiliteracies in terms of both theory (the "what") and practice (the "how"); the "multi" in multiliteracies encompasses the manifold ways (i.e., the diverse modes and tongues) in which individuals communicate. Cope and Kalantzis further suggested that, "A pedagogy of Multiliteracies...focuses on modes of representation much broader than language alone. These differ according to culture and context, and have specific cognitive, cultural, and social effects" (p. 5). Cope and Kalantzis urged readers to utilize this approach as the "new norm(al)" (p. 18) for literacy pedagogy where the diverse needs, interests, and backgrounds of all learners are recognized. Moreover, given that the diverse needs, interests, and backgrounds of Black girls are often overlooked (Evans-Winters, 2011;

Richardson, 2007, 2009), a pedagogy of multiliteracies is thus vital. Their identities are multiple, vast, and complex; therefore, the approach to literacy and meaning-making must be also.

According to Cope and Kalantzis (2000), "the what" of the multiliteracies framework refers to the need for students to learn and encompasses three concepts of Design: 1) *Available Design*, which includes the texts, tools, materials, language, and so on for meaning-making; 2) *Designing*, or the process of making-meaning; and 3) *The Redesigned*, or the knowledge that is produced. In this latter phase of Design, students not only make *new* meaning, but they are themselves made *anew* through this process: "*...*meaning-makers remake themselves. They reconstruct and renegotiate their identities...the Redesigned...is also evidence of the ways in which the active intervention in the world that is Designing has transformed the Designer" (p. 23). These three concepts illuminate the essence of a multiliteracies framework as it focuses on multiple types of text (print and non-print) and a recursive, dynamic (rather than simply linear) meaning-making process.

"The how" of the multiliteracies framework refers to "the range of appropriate learning relationships" (Cope and Kalantzis, 2000, p. 19) and entails four interrelated areas of instruction: 1) *Situated Practice*, or an immersive, contextualized method of instruction that draws on students' prior knowledge and experiences; 2) *Overt (or Direct) Instruction*, which includes scaffolded learning experiences; 3) *Critical Framing*, which entails critique of the learning process as situated within the confines of social, historical, political, and ideological power(s); and 4) *Transformed Practice*, whereby theory (i.e., Overt Instruction, Critical Framing) is put into agentive, reflective (re-situated) practice (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; see also Freire, 2000; hooks, 1994). In each of these approaches, students remain active contributors throughout the

entire learning experience by bringing their diverse perspectives, cultural resources, and ways of life to the fore.

Furthermore, a multiliteracies perspective connotes going beyond monolithic conceptualizations of literacy (i.e., literacy as merely reading and writing skills), identity, and text to adhere for wider purposes in a growing diverse world. In this study, we view literacy practices and identity meaning-making as practices that are multilayered and fluid and impacted by historical, political, and sociocultural influences (Gee, 2000). Text is defined as both print and non-print, accounting for more than one mode of communication, and it could include lingual, aural visual, gestural, and spatial forms (New London Group, 1996). This view of literacy seems relevant as youth make sense of their lives in a multimodal world that frequently calls them to draw upon multiple modes to communicate on a daily basis. Given that there are multiple modes of text and communication, our study conceptualizes the act of writing in broader forms as well. Rather than just viewing writing as traditional print literacy, we also define writing as the wider construction of multiple forms of texts (e.g., "penning" and "pinning"). In addition, we recognize that writing is not an isolated activity but happens when there are social relationships to other people and other forms of text. Perry (2012) made an astute point that multiliteracies researchers do not reject traditional forms of literacy, such as print, but "view it as only one form of representation and meaning-making among many—one that has been, and continues to be, privileged above other forms in schooling" (p. 59). In the current study, we employ a multiliteracies framework in order to make sense of what representations Black girls opt to pen/pin or write against, in addition to how they choose to (re)pen/pin alternate representations of Black girlhood. Hence, we understand multiliteracies as a process in which our participants

(re)appropriated text (i.e., made meaning) in order to resist and transcend the unidimensional narrative of young Black females.

Review of Literature

Engaging adolescents in multimodal literacy affords young readers and writers the opportunity to construct texts in ways where they begin to make stronger connections to their lives. This kind of literacy instruction is supported by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE). As part of the growing push for communicative diversity, NCTE (2005) drafted its *Position Statement on Multimodal Literacies* to include "the interplay of meaning-making systems (alphabetic, oral, visual, etc.) that teachers and students should strive to study and produce. 'Multiple ways of knowing' also include art, music, movement, and drama, which *should not* [emphasis added] be considered curricular luxuries" (see first section). Further, NCTE acknowledged that "[y]oung people are particularly adept at recognizing creative applications for new technologies, but their in-school work *should* [emphasis added] be guided by the wisdom and sophisticated curricular knowledge of their teachers" (see tenth section). In each of our individual studies, we served as the guides of the girls. Individually, we approached our studies with over 10 years of experience teaching reading and writing, as well as working with Black girls in literacy collectives and engaging them in learning spaces that incorporated technologies of non-print, social media, blogs, and multimedia presentations. Additionally, we have been researching and writing to include the voices of young Black girls for the past five years. Nevertheless, Jacobs (2012) believed we (educators) must continually ask ourselves *how* and *why* we engage young people in these newer technologies. It was essential for us to engage the girls (i.e., Black female adolescent research participants) in multimodal literacy practices that were both agentive—the girls were encouraged to select topic(s) of their own choosing—and

authentic—the girls were able to share their writing with an affirming audience. Hence, the girls'

writing was both public and purposeful. Jacobs (2012) found that these factors are significant in

determining adolescents' level of motivation and/or engagement with multimodal practices, as

she also posits that educators must not only be attuned to the kinds of technologies that we

introduce adolescents *to*, but that we must also be cognizant of the kinds of communities that

adolescents wish to engage *in,* whether these be digital or otherwise.

We also reviewed literature related to writing, identity, multimodality and adolescence.

Bean, Valerio, Senior, White (1997) used an online class listserv with 22 ninth-grade students to

create dialogue about the novel *Heartbeat Drumbeat* (Hernandez, 1992). The researchers set out

to elicit how students interpreted the young adult novel through public and purposeful writing.

The open response listserv provided a means for students to dialogue back and forth and gave

them opportunities to respond to the novel in any form they chose. Their online responses

compared their own sense of ethnic identity with the identity struggles experienced by the

protagonist. The blog empowered students to put their voices on the record while allowing them

opportunities to negotiate their identities with that of the main character.

In another study using a digital context (blogging) connected to writing and identity, a

teacher-selected novel, *American Born Chinese* (Yang, 2006), was used for ninth-grade students

to respond to the literature by connecting the characters to their own lives and identities (Gomes

& Carter, 2010). Before the responses took place, the text was mediated with the use of

discussion about stereotypes and symbolism within each character. They used this discussion to

then negotiate their own selfhood as they responded to related prompts on the blog. The

participants thought about their own ideals of self to draw upon and make connections with the

characters. In this way, they were able to put themselves in the story. Blogging their writing

enabled the students to have meaningful dialogue and feel comfortable about the various

interpretive stances they held.

West (2008) examined socially situated identities and how literary constructions

influenced her eleventh-grade students' constructed responses to texts read in an American

literature course. West used Gee's (2005) definition of socially situated identity to refer to the

"different ways of participating in different sorts of social groups, cultures, and institutions."

These identities, therefore, are contingent upon the social context and the text, as well as

students' language use and "ways of acting." West expected students to use their identities to

shape their responses and to also rewrite new identities online, which she believed would have

greater impact on their response. Writing gave students opportunities to enact their social selves

in unique ways.

Vasudevan (2009) uncovered the manner in which incarcerated male youth employed

multimodal practices to resist deficit framings of young Black and Brown men mired within the

juvenile justice system. Vasudevan further examined the role of geography in the boys'

multimodal literacy engagement in locations that included the teacher's office, restaurants,

museums, sporting events, and even digital spaces like YouTube and shared how one Latino

student, EJ, took on multiple identities—as performer, playwright, research assistant, blogger—

in order to challenge public constructions of adjudicated male youth, and young Black and

Brown men, in particular. Such fluidity in terms of when, where, and how learning took place

afforded EJ and many others the opportunity to fashion multiple, if not newer selves that

translated beyond juvenile delinquent and/or criminal.

These studies collectively show that as adolescent learners engage in multiliteracies, they

also actively engage in making meaning of their identities. The current study aligns with research

literature that has reported on the need to expand notions of literacy and tools of meaning-making but also extends the literature by focusing expressly on Black girls and identity, as we specifically compare multiple modes of traditional (e.g., penning) and non-traditional (e.g., pinning) forms of text construction. In the following section, we discuss how Black girls in each of our studies engage multimodalities that offer broader understandings/representations of young Black womanhood and Black girlhood.

Methodology

We used data sources drawn from two different qualitative projects with 14 Black girls ages 13-19 to understand:

1. What representations do Black adolescent girls pen/pin against?

2. How do Black adolescent girls (re)pen/pin representations of self?

Description of Project 1: Gholdy. From the first qualitative project, we pull from 108 writings of 12 Black girls whose ages are 13-18 years old. Girls of this case study participated in a four-week summer writing collective study focused on reading and writing for social change. The girls in this study met for three days per week for three hours per day on a large urban university campus located in the Southeast. The summer literacy collective in the current study focused on the ways the girls represented multiple forms of self through traditional forms of writing. These "pennings" or writing artifacts consisted of nonfiction and literary writings (journaling, personal narratives, poetry, public addresses, essays, and letters). Before the girls wrote their pieces each week, they read and engaged in a number of print and non-print texts to help incite thoughts for their own writings. The goal was to read print and non-print texts (e.g., image, video) to support the girls' understandings of identity prior to writing their own pieces.

The girls were not encouraged to write about any particular identity as I (Gholdy) entered the study understanding the diverse nature of Black girlhood. They were asked to write openly and without reservation as they (re)constructed their lives through writing. In addition to their writing artifacts, I also drew upon data sources from pre- and post-interviews with the girls, observation videos, and field notes from each day and researcher analytic memos. I found that the girls wrote across different representations of their lives, and as they wrote to make sense of Black woman- and girlhood, they also frequently wrote against representations of Black girlhood and public perceptions of what it means to be a Black girl in today's world. This part of the data is examined in the current study.

Description of Project 2: Erica. The second data set is drawn from the online "pinnings" of fifteen year-old Jordan and nineteen-year old Nikayla—two adolescent female participants in a two-year autoethnographic[3] qualitative study. During this two-year period, Erica met with Jordan, Nikayla, and other young Black women in a reserved section of a library located within a large metropolitan city in the Midwest one day a week for one hour and thirty minutes to read, write, and speak about their realities—including their relationships, school experiences, future goals, and identities—and to engage them in critical understandings of self, other[4], and society in order to reveal how these young Black women *think* rather than how they simply (are perceived to) act.

Erica used data collection strategies that included: note-taking in a research journal, video-taped recordings of weekly meetings, video-taped interviews with participants, writings by

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[3] Autoethnography is a form of narrative inquiry that constitutes theory and (self) therapy, description and (self) analysis, concern and (self) critique (Camangian, 2010; Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Autoethnography is a reflexive process that also encourages thinking around larger issues of self as it relates to the positioning of self within society.

[4] Here we refer to the term *other* as individuals who are not Black and female.

participants (i.e., their autoethnographic work), and other literacy artifacts that were utilized or produced (e.g., readings, collaborative work) in weekly meetings. The girls constructed their autoethnographies using such digital tools as Prezi and Pinterest to "(re)pin" alternate representations of young Black woman- and girlhood. Unlike most autoethnographic studies, Jordan and Nikayla had the opportunity to engage in a self-selected study *alongside* the researcher, hence the girls and I (Erica) engaged in autoethnographic research that included self-selected and self-reflective projects to further our understandings of Black female adolescent identity. In designing these projects, the girls and I selected topics (e.g., hair, abandonment), collected literacy artifacts related to these topics (e.g., photographs, paintings, collages) and created culminating digital products (i.e., on Prezi and Pinterest) to share with family and friends.

In both individual studies, we engaged in member checking and asked the 14 girls during post-interviews to talk about their writings and online "pinnings" and why they penned or pinned in the ways they chose. Their pinnings illustrated that they represented themselves in wide and varied ways, similar to the findings in Gholdy's case study. These include making sense of their cultural, ethnic, gendered, community, economic, intellectual, kinship, religious, personal, and sexual identities. In addition, they felt the need to rewrite images of themselves, which is explored within the current study. Taking a closer examination of the pennings (from study 1) and the pinnings (from study 2), we combined all data sources (multimodal forms of writings, pre- and post- audio/video interview data, research journals/analytic notes, and observational data of each session) to understand which types of representations the girls write against and how these writings are constructed.

Method of Analysis

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) was used as a method to make sense of our combined data (Gee, 2005). Gee (2005) noted that language is inherently political and studying language typically lends us to "speak to and perhaps, intervene in, social or political issues, problems, and controversies in the world" (p. 9). Thus, discourse can bring light to critical issues such as public misrepresentations of one's identities. In discussing uses for CDA, Gee discussed seven building tasks of language that include significance, practices (activities), identities, relationships, politics (the distribution of social), connections, and sign systems and knowledge. In other words, he posited that we use language to build these areas. These tasks allow us to make or construct the world. These seven areas, as he argues, always involve writing and speaking language. To code the pennings/pinnings in the study, we specifically draw upon his notions of identity because we seek to understand how they are making sense of the ways others link identifications with their lives, along with examining perspectives on power and authority over the narratives. Gee argued that we use language (through writing and speaking) to construct and make sense of our identities and to take up new identities. Gee encouraged researchers to analyze language to understand how language (in our case, through writing) is used to enact identities. Therefore, with each pass through the data, we used CDA and drew upon the girls' writing and language; we asked ourselves the following questions regarding identity:

- Which identities do the girls write [pen/pin] against?
- How is language used to construct this writing about identities?
- How do the girls use language to write about [pen/pin] these identities?
- How do they mediate personal and others' definitions when they differ?

We were mindful of the identities (through penning/pinning and repenning/repinning) that were relevant in their lives. This analysis led us to three areas of representation that the girls wrote against and the rewriting that occurred consequently. We share the comparison of our coding from the writings with the ways the participants discussed identities and representations in their interview data.

Findings

We have organized the types of representations the girls in both studies overtly penned or pinned against. These include:

1. Physical Beauty and Health (being portrayed as unbeautiful or unhealthy)

2. Sexualizing and Objectification (being portrayed as overly sexual)

3. Education (being portrayed as uneducated, less successful or having no goals or aspiration)

We offer examples from the girls' writings in their construction of both modes (e.g., the pen and the pin) to illustrate each of the areas. In doing so, we discuss the power enacted in their writings and support the analysis with interview data.

Physical beauty. The girls collectively wrote about public perceptions of being portrayed as unbeautiful. In a public address expository paper, Almas (a participant in Gholdy's study) wrote a piece entitled, "Toward a Peaceful Slumber." During the same week, we watched videos on self-advocacy, including Best Supporting Actress Oscar acceptance speeches of Hattie McDaniel and Mo'Nique. We discussed their similarities and how literacy practices are used to connect to Black women of the past for support. Following this, we discussed the metaphor of running (with images) to compare with the ideal of advocacy and how writing can be a means toward promoting our ideas and championing for ourselves. Like running, writing involves

discipline, conditioning, and perseverance. We then read from the essays of Anna Julia Cooper ("The Higher Education of Woman"), Maria W. Stewart ("Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality, the Sure Foundation on Which We Must Build"), and Sojourner Truth ("Ain't I A Woman?"). As we read these texts, we engaged in a critical discussion of the context in which these pieces were written and the meanings underlying each. This led to our writings of public addresses on the state of Black girlhood.

In the public address that Almas wrote, she penned against views that label young Black women and girls as not beautiful, writing directly to Black girls. In doing this, Almas re-penned more positive representations of who they are. This resistance against false views and re-penning led to what she named as "a peaceful slumber," which gives a restful state to Black girls where they do not have to feel uncomfortable based on others' negative views of them. Almas wrote,

> We have clashed with too many colors just to blend in with the one pattern that was seemingly made so that the world may always be at a peaceful slumber. The pattern that makes us feel uncomfortable in our brown skin. The pattern that has the audacity to say they could do without your color. The same pattern that stereotypes you, backbites you, and throws condescending compliments towards you. They do it because they hate you; and they make you hate you. The same pattern that rips a part your beautiful colors and every part of the quilt that even dare try to make you associated—As if they were the tailors themselves?! They identify you as the wild and unwanted. As if YOU were the Ape yourself?!

In the text above, Almas used language to express the self-identity imposed on Black girls, penning against views that stereotypes or labels that fall within someone else's standards of what is beauty. She wrote against the notion of conforming to others' standards of beauty and refers to

these standards as "patterns" that make girls feel uncomfortable in their own brown skin. In this pattern, Almas described an absence of Black girls in public images along with a pattern of stereotyping.

Continuing her public address, Almas also rewrote the narrative surrounding the beauty of Black girls:

> I'm here to advise you otherwise. Free yourself from an investment in European standards of beauty that see long, straight hair as the only kind of beautiful hair. Imagine if black women woke up every day, and decided we really love our bodies, society will make ZERO capital off of you. For now, consider yourself as a crayon. You might not be society's favorite color, but one day they are going to need you to complete their painting....To be legendary. To be you. To reach your highest potential…so that the world may always be at a peaceful slumber.

Aiming to re-pen these views with her writing, Almas intended to tell Black girls to go beyond the public and media's perceptions and become free from such false views. She reminded other Black girls that they are needed in society and that they are "legendary" in spite of society's inaccurate depictions. Her language encouraged readers (Black women and girls) to seek their highest potential. In her post-interview, Almas discussed the importance of writing about and against these representations of Black girlhood:

> The piece [a peaceful slumber] talks about how black women are perceived and stereotyped. Often we are thought of as ghetto, ratchet, unfit, haters of our hair and skin tone, sex toys, Independent, has two jobs, a whole lot of kids, and everything under the sun with the exception of beautiful, responsible, simple, loving, confident, "normal beings."

Or if we are beautiful, we are *beautiful for a black girl*—the same goes for everything else

positive that we are.

Here, Almas articulated the same message written in her essay.

In Erica's study, Jordan used image, text, and sound (e.g., photographs, written

commentary, a YouTube clip) to retrace her own journey toward self-love and beauty in our end-

of-the year presentations with family and friends. Through the text of Prezi, Jordan uncovered

her innermost feelings in relation to her beauty and hair. Jordan opened her Prezi with a

photograph of a seemingly happy teenager with long, straight black and blond hair, where she

explained: "This is just a picture of the weave I had earlier this year." Jordan's next slide,

however, revealed her inner struggles with her hair as she wrote: "Like many other young black

females, hair has been a sensitive subject for me." She further elaborated to the audience:

I've had really bad problems with my hair. I've gotten it relaxed. I've gotten braids. It's

fallen out. It gets really dry sometimes. It's just—being around a bunch of White people

it's hard to accept my hair for the way it is.

On the one hand, Jordan believed her hair had been cause for both her physical (e.g., falling out,

dryness) and mental (e.g., accepting hair "for the way it is") pain. On the other hand, Jordan

related one of the root causes of her pain to "being around a bunch of White people." Elsewhere,

Jordan used written text to demonstrate the (false) binary between Black hair (i.e., as bad, short,

kinky, and/or nappy) and White hair (i.e, as beautiful, long, straight, and/or wavy), which made it

"hard[er]" for her "to accept [her] hair for the way it is." hooks (1993), too, echoes this sentiment

as she finds, "The first body issue that affects black female identity, even more so than color is

hair texture [emphasis added]" (p. 85). Shortly thereafter, Jordan announced that she intended to

"go natural" (or rid her hair of chemicals) and to use wigs, weave, and/or braids to protect the

areas where hair had fallen out. There was hope, then, that Jordan's engagement in pinning (e.g.,

photographs followed by brief commentaries) would lead to her healing (e.g., loving all parts of

her self) and ultimately toward a re-imagined outlook of wearing her hair in its natural state.

In a follow-up interview, Jordan shared that she wrote against the ideology of "bad hair"

"because it best related to me." More importantly, she explained how exploration of this topic

helped to shape her current views: "I learned that I need to be more okay with my hair, because

when we did presentations there were so many people sitting there with natural hair. And they

were encouraging it." Here Jordan revealed how she used the pin (i.e., autoethnography) to not

only affirm the beauty within her, but to also embrace the beauty within the other Black females

in her presence (e.g., ". . . there were so many people sitting there with natural hair. And they

were encouraging it"). In this way, Jordan reimagined what beauty could and should look like.

Sexualizing and objectification. We also found that the girls in the collective studies

wrote against the over-sexualizing and objectifying of Black women and girls. Within this

finding, we discovered that the girls wrote about how public media outlets such as music,

television, and the Internet make Black girls appear to be sexual objects for the pleasure of a

man. In an example from the writings in Gholdy's study, Zafirah wrote to bring attention to the

human trafficking of Black girls. Entitling her public address as "Lured. Beaten. Raped.

Exploited. Degraded," she wrote to an audience of other Black girls and used her pen to fight

back against the sexual assaults taken against them. She discussed the history of this problem and

the wider enslavement that happens when girls are forced to have sex with men through acts of

rape. Before this, we all read multiple texts related to the genre of protest poetry. This included

reading from an interview with Gwendolyn Brooks who talked about the shift of her poetry in

the 1960s from sonnets to more politically imbued pieces due to the social climate of the time. In

addition, we read and watched text (video) about the story of a Xhosan woman, Saartjie

Baartman, and read the poem "The Venus Hottentot" by Elizabeth Alexander. These texts were

used to incite thought about the genre the girls were charged to write. Zafirah wrote,

> Oppressed sisters, I have heard your cry. I have felt your pain and I listen to the murmurs
>
> of your sighs. Your depressed sighs, this isn't just happening to you my sisters. Human
>
> trafficking did not just emerge in the last 20 years throughout the United States. This
>
> crime began with African enslavement in the 1400-1600s. During these times, women
>
> were taken and separated from the men, stripped of their identities and taught to fear their
>
> oppressors. Worked, raped and sold. Worked, Raped, and sold. This crime is worldwide.
>
> "During WWII, Japan had set up a horrifying and outrageous system where women all
>
> across Asia were forced into sexual slavery. The women were housed in what were
>
> known as "comfort stations." Comfort stations, brothels were made for women to be
>
> used as sex objects, as toys. You are not a toy, you cannot be played with. My sisters,
>
> your oppressors have coerced you and that makes you involuntarily submissive. We have
>
> to free the 3 million of you who have been taken and treated erroneously.

Zafirah penned against the Black girls being represented as "sex objects or toys." She wrote on

to re-pen or tell Black girls to seek resilience and agency:

> You must remain strong my sister for help is soon to come. You may think this is the
>
> bane of your existence, but I beg you, I implore do not let your spirit die. Resilience is
>
> what you need to get through this troubled time. We must stay strong, and stay together.
>
> We must be advocates for each other. We must not turn on each other but turn on the
>
> johns, the pimps and those who have used and abused us—taken us from ourselves. We

must protect the tiny wombs, the generations to come so that they do not have to endure

being Lured. Beaten. Raped. Exploited. Degraded.

Similar to Zafirah, Myeesha wrote to address this same issue by writing about the degradation of

Black women and girls. She named her writing, "Ode to the Degrading Rappers and the 'Powers'

Above." In this writing, Myeesha discussed problems with the people both owning record labels

(the "powers") and the artists who create the music. She wrote:

Ignorance. One word summing up you and your rap industry. Spreading the denseness,

failing to acknowledge our women as people, your crudeness to depreciate our women,

and the blindness to see the harm done unto yourselves as well. It feels much like a

wildfire (with no sign of ceasing).

Your lyrics— ripping out the hearts of our young men, filling them up with animosity

toward women, toward other brothers, and toward life. Your lyrics— filling up our

women, conditioning them that they are nothing more than objects to be picked up and

played with, at the user's discretion. Our women are looked at with no importance

whatsoever, as a piece of meat. A piece of meat for these "men" to chew and tear and

break down. And once they finished their meal, they toss the leftovers into the trashcan.

Done with the item, getting what they want, they move on to the next, because of course

there are a million different objects everywhere in different shapes and sizes, no need to

look back at the damage…

Myeesha then ended her piece by stating,

Aware or not, it's happening and it's time for a revolution. Respect is an essential for our

community, self-love is urged on for our Black women, and self-cognizance is in high

demand for our men. They need to see the power they hold, how they treat others and especially our women. Once coming to that self-realization it could cause a revolution within itself. Take time to think about how these songs out here affect us as African Americans, as people, and especially as teachers to the next generation.

Myeesha wrote in very descriptive ways to express how she sees Black girls being represented. Taking a critical lens, Myeesha acknowledged power that is used to construct representations. She believed some music and lyrics degrade Black girls and overly sexualize them. Both girls re-penned representations of resiliency, resistance and agency, while calling to mind the future generations to come.

When asked about her writing in the post-interview, Myeesha said:

The poem about bringing an awareness to what's subconsciously happening within our community and within our Black women. We are always being sexualized and objectified and it is brought aware that our women are feeling degraded and being brought down and it's all because of the way men speak and treat us. I'm saying that people need to realize the problems in our society. People need to notice why women are never truly happy, why they dress the way they dress act the way they act and it's all for men. These men don't respect us. It's up to ourselves to learn what self-love and self-respect is. I'm saying this because it's time for women to love themselves and grow and be their own person, know they don't need guys hollering at them all the time to feel like they are somebody. They need to acknowledge how smart and beautiful and talented they are no thanks to these "men."

Myeesha spoke against the same message she wrote against in her post interview and pushed a message of girls loving themselves and seeking their own beauty amongst a world (and some men) sexualizing who they are.

In Erica's study, Nikayla used her pinning to speak against the hypersexualization of young Black women. To orient readers to her Pinterest board, Nikayla wrote the following introduction (see Figure 1):

> What the society would say about Nikayla well let's see the society would say Nikayla sneaky under handed a hoe she not going to be nothing she's not in school she always around males she's a bad person to be around she think she better then everybody . . . I even got people in my family and people close to my family that says that but they don't be around me they don't know the life I live I have a cousin she young so I understand the things she would say about me so I just let it go . . .

Nikayla began here by naming how others (e.g., society, her family) had chosen to define her—that is, as "sneaky," "under handed," "a hoe," "always around males," "a bad person," and "think she better then [*sic*] everybody." Yet, her title, "my journey (finding myself)," and pins speak to representations of motivation, confidence, uplift, guidance, progress, esteem, determination, optimism, and empowerment.

Included in Nikayla's Pinterest board are quotes/messages of inspiration (several of which she re-pinned from other Pinterest boards), a YouTube video featuring Jessie J's "Nobody's Perfect," an image of water, and also images that represent the kinds of work Nikayla produced in our sessions during that year (e.g., collage, painting). Nikayla's choice to pin much of her own work represented a desire to name her worth, to showcase her accomplishments in a public space (i.e., Pinterest), and to offer a diametrical view of Black female adolescents.
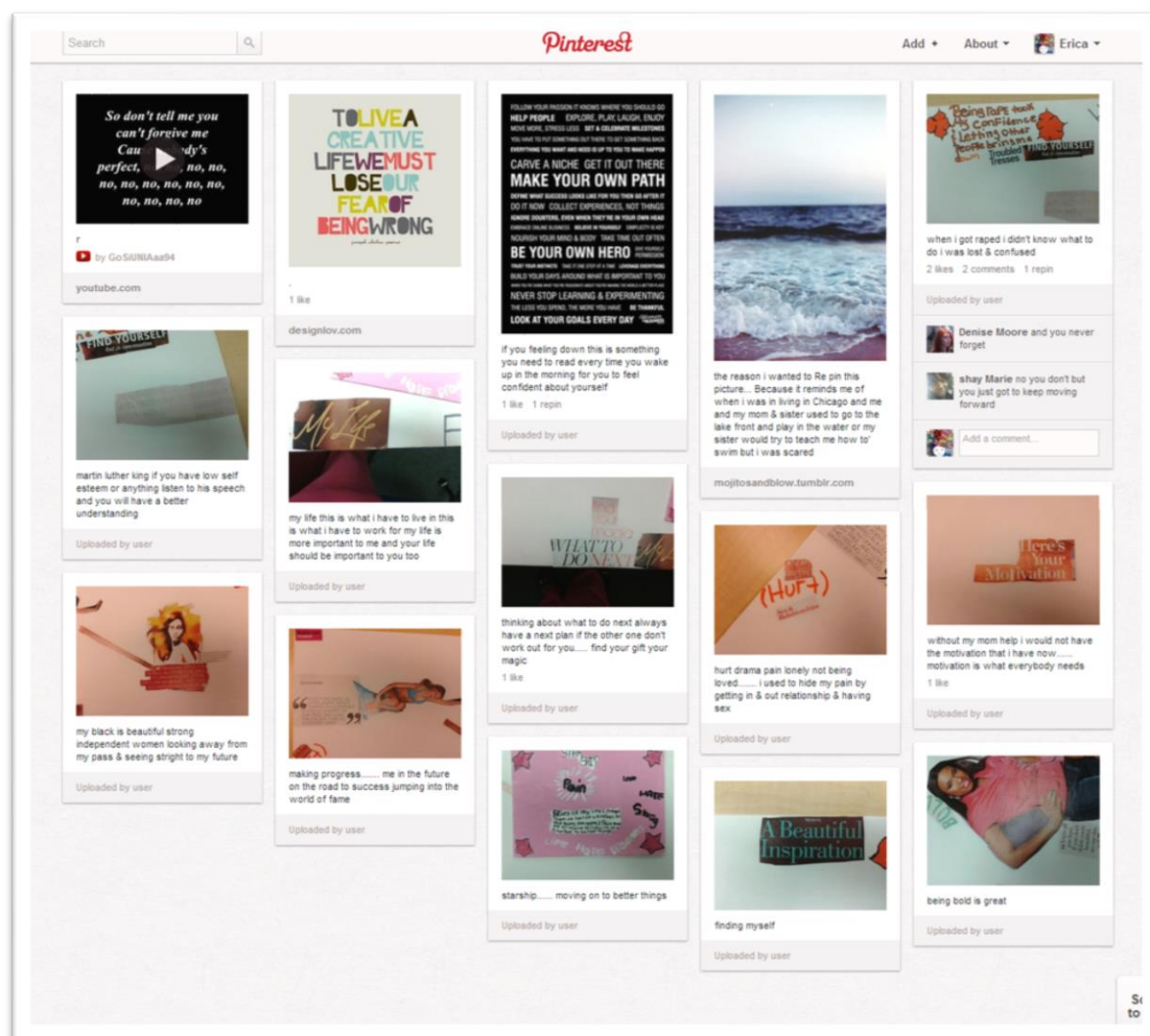
Figure 1. Nikayla's autoethnography (Pinterest board)

In Nikayla's follow-up interview, she reflected on her past missteps/mistakes—what those missteps meant and how she had moved past them—rather than having society pathologize her past, present, and future. When asked why she had opted to focus on her life's journey and what she had learned from engaging in autoethnographic research, Nikayla replied:

. . . I learned more about myself and what I like. I could notice things about myself and I

can work with it. So I can let go of what happened to me in the past. I had choose to

focus on that more so I can learn more about myself and let go of the past.

Nikayla's collection of pins represented her new vision of femininity and self-worth. As such,

Nikayla's pins marked her deliberate attempt to create a self-defined standpoint that was in

contrast to how society and those closest to her might have characterized her (e.g., as deviant,

deceitful, hypersexual, uneducated).

Education. We also found that the girls felt they were being depicted as uneducated to

others in the public. This is illustrated metaphorically through Abia's poem named

"Composition." This writing was constructed during the second week of Gholdy's literacy

collective where the girls were (re)introduced to poetry. We read several poems and images

related to the poems. We read poems of Lucy Terry Prince, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Maya

Angelou and a poem that I had previously written. Abia followed these examples and wrote,

I am the stone that the builder refused

Your future

And being on the ground has made me pay my dues

I am the reason that mornings called mothers and fathers to slave away

In spite

I was still educated at the end of the day

The stone that eventually will be a great foundation

You don't have to put me into your square location

Greatness will come from your quick cancellation.

I am the stone that the builder refused

The inspiration that he used to build this great nation,

 Did not include me or my latter emancipation

The stone that has been misused

The stone that makes lady liberty sing the blues

The stone whose story has just begun

And I will remain a soldier until the war is won

In this piece, Abia used figurative language to discuss the power (the builder) involved in constructing narratives about African American women and girls. She wrote to say that the builder or those in power "refuses" or ignores their strivings. Using words like "cancellation" or "put me into your square location" showed that she referred to the neglect of others to represent their education and brilliance. Confirming that she was writing in this way, Gholdy asked her about the meaning and audience of the poem in a post-interview. She responded:

My audience is African American girls or any people who reads it. I think it is for anyone who casted out or made to feel that they aren't good enough. The builder is the person with power who are trying to build in ways to tear us down.

She wrote against a representation of others not recognizing the brilliance, education and worth of African American girls. In the conclusion of the poem, she re-pens toward a resilience against "the builder" by expressing the need to continue climbing toward goals.

Like Abia, Nikayla designed her Pinterest board to reflect images of Black female adolescent worthiness, competence, and success. Because Nikayla recognized that society had already marked her as uneducated (e.g., "she not going to be nothing she's not in school"), she used her pins—quotes and taglines—to represent her esteem and confidence (see Figure 2).
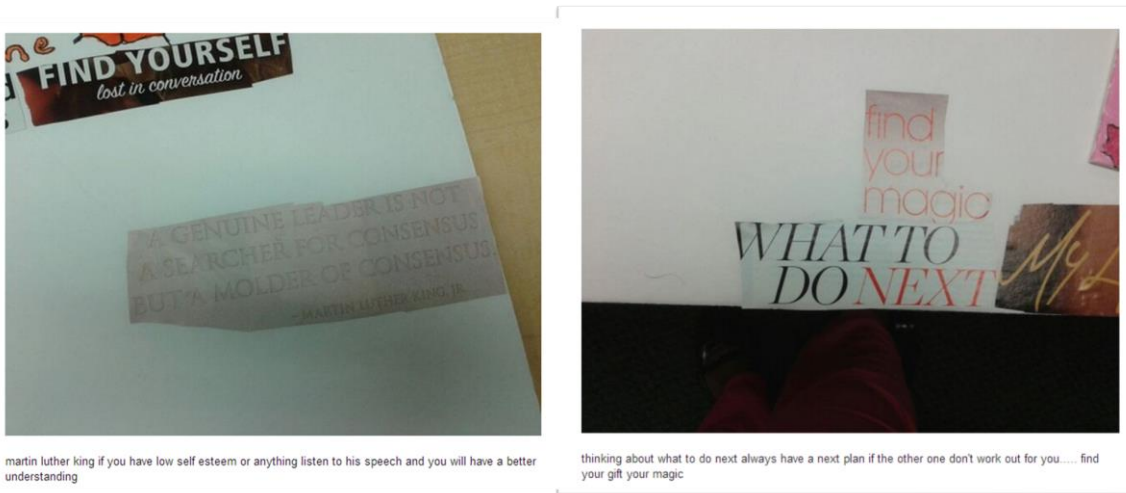

Figure 2. Images from Nikayla's collage

For instance, the embodiment of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. himself (rather than his actual quote) symbolized the hopes and dreams Nikayla had for herself: "martin luther king if you have low self-esteem or anything listen to his speech and you will have a better understanding." Likewise, Nikayla wished to offer her own advice to readers rather than simply have them rely on the message expressed in the quotes when she wrote: "thinking about what to do next always have a next plan if the other one don't work out for you . . . find your gift your magic." In other words, Nikayla reinterprets these messages to elevate her conception of self.

In other places, Nikayla re-presented a "beautiful, strong independent" self who was "looking away from [her] pass [*sic*] and seeing straight into [her] future" (see Figure 3).

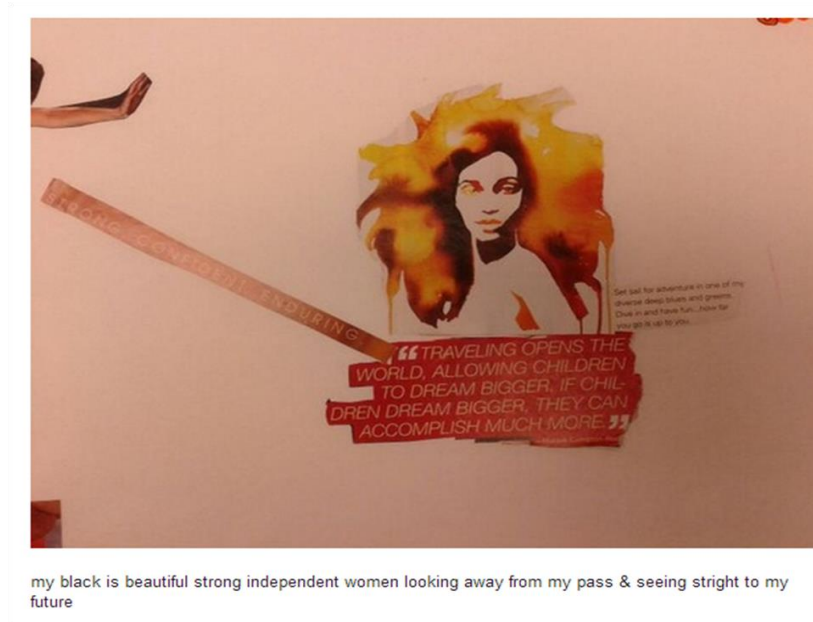my black is beautiful strong independent women looking away from my pass & seeing stright to my future

Figure 3. Image from Nikayla's collage

Nikayla recognized she had had her share of academic and personal struggles (e.g., being negatively judged, being raped, not graduating from high school), yet throughout her pins she maintained optimism, as evidenced in her ability to keep her eye toward the future and to reach for the stars (see Figure 4). Nikayla used the image of a female diving into water to signal her intent to "make waves" in the future (e.g., "making progress...me in the future on the road to success jumping into the world of fame"). Nikayla also pinned a small canvas painting with stars and affirming words placed around the word *pain* to signal her journey out of darkness and into the light (e.g., "starship...moving on to better things").

Figure 4. Images from Nikayla's collage & small canvas painting

Nikayla utilized such pinnings throughout to reveal a continual redesigning of self—from a "sneaky, underhanded 'hoe'" (an object) to "a beautiful, strong independent" young Black woman (an individual). Nevertheless, in her post-interview, Nikayla revealed the on-going tensions between wanting to complete her high school education and bearing the label of "high school drop-out":

> I have been writing. I have a whole notebook that I'm starting over. I still want to do
>
> creative writing, but I want to finish school. I want to start a program for poetry. The
>
> topics are about what happened between me and my brother and what I feel now.
>
> Basically criticizing and being independent. And the one that I wrote last night is about
>
> letting go. But, I want to finish school so people don't have to ask me if I have my
>
> diploma and I don't have one.

As with her pinnings, Nikayla continued to write against the notion of defeat and for her beliefs in "starting over" (in her educational journey) and in "letting go [of negativity]." In this sense, the pen (or the act of expressing her thoughts in her notebook) became another means of reaching these goals.

Discussion

The participants in the study wrote and rewrote representations of their lives. The girls' constructed texts fell within the three concepts of *Design* (Cope and Kalantzis, 2000). The *Available Design* included all the types of texts and tools the girls used to construct representations. More broadly, *Available Design* included their worlds as text (Freire & Macedo, 1987) as they identified representations of Black girlhood that they deemed as inaccurate or negative within public and media outlets (and unfortunately, even within themselves), including the continued denial of Black beauty, the hyper-sexualization of Black females, and a seeming lack of ambition, skill, and/or intelligence. The *Available Design* also included the tools employed in each of the collectives (e.g., Black women's literature, Internet/computers, Prezi, Pinterest, videos, sound, other participants' writings). The girls used all of these texts and tools for sense-making of identities and the ways they were being represented. These texts and tools aided in their developing knowledge about identity. The process of meaning-making or the *Designing* looked different within (e.g., the girls' use of Prezi and Pinterest) and across (e.g., penning and pinning) each of our studies; however, we both engaged the girls in multiple literacies (e.g., reading, writing, discussion and critique) leading to the girls' own perspectives of representation. Penning in more traditional forms of print was used to use language in creative and experimental ways. The girls studied word and crafted different literary pieces, being mindful to put words in the "right places" to push forth their ideals. Pinning revealed how the girls strategically manipulated text, sound, and image in order to redefine Black beauty, femininity, and intelligence in a public (i.e., digital) space.

We found that both traditional and nontraditional forms of print were beneficial for the girls to gain and express knowledge about themselves. Thus, there are affordances in both forms

of penning and pinning. In *The Redesigned* phase of the learning, the girls constructed new or

reimagined representations of who they are as they renegotiated their identities. Nikayla, for

example, remade (or redesigned) herself by not only becoming more self-aware (e.g., "I learned

more about myself and what I like") but also through learning to forgive those who had

trespassed against her ("let[ing] go of what happened to me in the past"). Also, when Zafirah

wrote against the sexual objectification of girls and women, she wrote toward girls/women

redefining their lives, urging her "sisters" to remain strong and resilient.

Furthermore, our methods fell within three of Cope & Kalantzis' (2000) four interrelated

areas of instruction during the Designing phase (i.e., Situated Practice, Critical Framing, and

Transformed Practice). Through Situated Practice, the girls all drew upon their diverse lived

experiences as they expressed in their interviews, which also confirmed conclusions we were led

to in our coding of representations connected to being seen as not pretty, overly sexualized and

uneducated. In other words, the girls confirmed the codes were concluded. Through Critical

Framing, the examination of power in their lives was not absent from the facilitation of

discussion of representation during our meetings with the girls. We discussed questions of, *What

is power? Who has created narratives about Black girls and why have they been created?* These

questions called for critical dialogue about how representations are social, historical and

political, which ultimately led to Transformed Practice where the girls reclaimed the authority of

their lives to voice their critiques of certain representations and re-penned/pinned those that did

not serve them well.

The girls' use of each of these modalities—print, sound, and image—worked in tandem

to reframe public perceptions of young Black woman- and girlhood. Our study, therefore,

reconceives the theory employed as this framework enabled Black girls to explore multiple

multimodal practices were essential in helping the girls push back against the pathologies that are often told or written about them. Whether it was traditional or nontraditional forms of writing, the use of multimodal texts helped to shape and possibly expand the girls' views of themselves and their writings. Worlds formed through multiple forms of literacies. In doing so the girls studied power and its effects. The girls' rewriting of who they are is also connected to the literary traditions of Black women. Historically, Black women wrote to contest representations and images that were wrongfully imposed onto them (Royster, 2000). The girls in the studies here identified those representations that they felt did not best capture who they are (e.g., being portrayed as not beautiful, overly sexual, and uneducated). Writing in this way was a sociopolitical tool of advocating for themselves and their lives. Their selected writing topics in our findings also connect with what Black women have traditionally written about.

Considerations for Teaching and Learning

Findings from this study charged us to ask:

- How can we take instructional aspects of our out of school literacy collectives and infuse them into other educative settings such as classrooms?
- How can classroom teachers invite multiple modes of literacy to help adolescents with identity—particularly with representation when negotiating conceptions of self?

As we suggest implications for classrooms, we consider the need for critical lenses in learning spaces. We believe there are three areas that can be taken into other settings:

1. The use of multiple modes of text for reading and writing as opposed to using one form of text.

2. Infusing texts that help adolescents make sense of their identities (those that are self-imposed and imposed by others).

3. Literate practices (reading, writing, discussion) should be social and collaborative as these literacies become forms of text for each other.

Cope and Kalantzis (2000) argued that schools tended to strip away an individual's unique way of living, learning, and being—in essence, his/her "lifeworld" (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000, p. 134)—yet, this kind of dehumanization is not an inevitable outcome as our study makes clear. The (re)designing of self (e.g., identity, knowledge) will, indeed, call for the redesigning of our pedagogies to include multimodal literacy engagement. Our study affirms the idea of a new norm for literacy pedagogy that encourages youth to re-present—or as we also suggest here, to re(pen) and/or (re)pin—their lifeworlds.

Conclusion

In a growing world that is filled with different forms of technology and ways to communicate, instructional and learning practices must keep up with and engage youth in multiple modes of meaning-making. Multimodal literate practices afforded the girls in our study opportunities to mediate and negotiate narratives told about them to then (re)construct the narratives in their own words and views. They used both their pens and pins to "push back" on wrongful representations created by others. Black girls today have multiple assaults to their humanity as surmised earlier by Brice (2007). In the current media and news outlets Black girls are dehumanized, ignored, and rendered invisible. These acts were demonstrated by the early reactions to the high number of Nigerian girls kidnapped in spring of 2014. It was an unwarranted delay for the media and the public to call attention to this worldly crisis. It was the use of multiple modes (such as social media, writing, and video construction) that brought

attention to capture the hearts, minds, and actions of others to react. Yet, these types of situations indirectly tell young Black women that they are less valued, and as a result, they are affected (oftentimes adversely) by these messages as the 14 girls were in the current study. In many ways, the girls in our study penned/pinned representations of self as a reaction of what they saw in public and media outlets but also to elicit reactions from others through their rewriting. We, therefore, continue to do community-engaged scholarship and work with young girls in schools to help them make sense of their lives and to use multimodal tools to rewrite the narrative for themselves and for the knowledge of others. In doing so, we ask educators in and out of school contexts to consider ways to help Black girls make sense of their identities and to use similar literacy tools to mediate communication and learning. When Black girls are engaged in this type of pedagogy, they have greater chances of protecting themselves and using literacy practices as a refuge from such attacks against their lives.

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Table 1

Participants

Participant	Age	Grade
Almas	15	11
Abia	14	9
Raja	15	10
Atiya	14	9
Fatima	16	11
Jordan	15	11
Nikayla	19	Dropout
Nura	13	8
Myeesha	18	12
Zafirah	14	10
Anisah	16	11
Hena	15	10
Munira	14	9
Ama	16	11

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