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“Black Female Teachers are our School Parents!!”: Academic Othermothering Depicted in Multicultural Young Adult Texts

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Abstract: This study examines the ways in which fictional Black female teachers enact their academic othermother identity in support of Black adolescent female students’ academic, socioemotional, and cultural needs in urban secondary literacy contexts. Sharon Flake’s *The Skin I’m In* and Sapphire’s *PUSH* were the multicultural young adult texts used in this study. Black Feminist Thought (Academic Othermothering) was the theoretical perspective that drove this study. Critical Content Analysis was the analytical tool employed to interpret data. This study found that fictional Black female literacy teachers depicted in multicultural young adult literature texts enact their academic othermother identity by: (1) disrupting the dominance of formal literacy assessments and curricula, (2) incorporating dialogic journal writing in literacy instruction, (3) creating spaces for Black girls to author their lives and re-imagine self, and (4) negotiating multiple identities and external influences. This study provides pedagogical strategies designed to support teachers working with Black girls to infuse an ethic of care in the urban secondary literacy classroom.

Keywords: Academic Othermothering; Black Girl Literacies; Black Female Literacy Teachers; Multicultural Young Adult Literature; Urban Secondary Literacy Classrooms



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Introduction¹

In Foster's (1993) study of the life histories of Black female teachers, Miss Ruthie, an 86-year-old retired Black schoolhouse teacher, reflects on her role in a Black community in the rural deep South and offers advice to new Black female teachers entering the profession:

The first thing she's gonna have to do is to get their attention. And then she's gonna have to try and work in there a kind of mother like. She's gonna have to be the mama for all of them, that's the first thing. Then when she gets them to feel that, she's gonna have to let them know I'm your mama until you get back home. That's what I tell them, long as you're in here with me. I'm your mama, until you go back. And then when you go back home, you go back to your other mother at home. (quoted in Foster, 1993, p. 109)

Miss Ruthie's response details the multiple yet intersecting identities of being a Black woman, teacher, community activist, and academic othermother to her students. Embedded in Miss Ruthie's narrative is a conception of the role of teachers that goes beyond the institutional goal of solely promoting cognitive growth and focuses on the socioemotional well-being of Black children. Miss Ruthie's narrative highlights a historical tradition among Black female teachers to enact an academic othermother identity in support of their students. This charge is grounded in Black female teachers understanding the marginalization and invisibility that Black children face. Miss Ruthie's charge to enact an academic othermother identity highlights the ways in which Black female teachers

disrupt the marginalization and invisibility of Black students by centering their needs.

A former high school student, Josanique Everson, discussed with me how Black women have ensured that she thrived as a student in toxic school environments. She said, "Black female teachers are extensions of my biological mother. They are our school parents!!" She drew upon her own lived experiences and emphasized how Black female teachers offer not only academic support, but also support in navigating life challenges. Her narrative is also rooted in her own experience with teachers that focused solely on her academics at the expense of her socioemotional well-being. She highlighted how Black female teachers focus on the whole child and stand in the gaps on behalf of their Black students: "Black female teachers care beyond the school work. They always want to know how you are doing outside of the state tests and the homework assignments. They always stand up for us!"

Taryn's narrative highlights how Black female teachers understand the importance of focusing on the whole child and advocating to support both the academic and socioemotional needs of their students. Drawing upon both a historical and contemporary context of Black academic othermothering (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002, 2005; Collins, 2009; Edwards, 2000; Foster, 1993), Miss Ruthie and Taryn's narratives provide insight into the many facets of the role of Black female teachers in the lives of their Black students, and served as the impetus for this analysis.

Statement of the Problem

As double minorities, being both Black and female, Black girls are confronted with various forms of oppression that work in conjunction with other

¹ I acknowledge that there is a gender spectrum and that myriad pronouns are available when referring to individuals in my writing. Throughout this article I use

pronouns to refer to individuals that correspond with the pronouns that they use to refer to themselves.

forms of oppression to produce social injustice and marginalization (Collins, 2000; Epstein, Blake, & Gonzalez, 2017; Greene, 2012, 2016; hooks, 2000; Morris, 2016). “The citizenship of Black girls,” argues Brown (2009, p. x), “is tied inherently to their socio-political identity as members of a historically oppressed and marginalized group.” Evans-Winters (2011) points out the intersection of race and gender positions Black girls at the lowest caste within society, resulting in Black girls’ experiences being “left out, whited out (subsumed under White girls’ experiences), blacked out (generalized within the Black male experiences), or simply pathologized” (p. 13). Black girls’ experiences are often generalized with the experiences of Black males and White, western, middle class girls, which continues to leave Black girls voiceless and their experiences invisible (Collins, 2000; Fordham, 1993; Lorde, 1984; Peoples, 2008).

Black adolescent girls often experience socioemotional, academic, and economic challenges that impact their daily lives at a disproportionately higher rate than their raced and gendered counterparts (Epstein, Blake, & Gonzalez, 2017; Morris, 2016, 2019). The National Women’s Law Center Report (2014) reports that “Black girls experience higher rates (67%) of sexual trauma, sexual violence, and sexual harassment compared to 56% of their White counterparts, which impacts their academic achievement” (p. 5). Black adolescent girls experience disparate school disciplinary practices, which include often being criminalized through out-of-school suspensions and expulsions (African American Policy Forum, 2015; Morris, 2019). As reported by the African American Policy Forum (2015), “Black girls made up 61% of all girls

disciplined, compared to White girls, who made up only 5% of such girls” (p. 19). Black girls are suspended 6 times the rate of White girls and more than any group of girls, and 3 times more than any group of boys. They are subjected to expulsions 53 times more often than White girls (African American Policy Forum, 2015; Morris, 2019). There are high incidences of Black girls referred to juvenile justice system instead of referrals for counseling: “Black girls’ enrollment represented 17%, yet made up 31% of law enforcement referrals and 43% of school-related arrest” (National Women’s Law Center, 2014, p. 16).

With high incidence of socioemotional challenges, Black girls’ academic success and economic outcomes are negatively impacted. Black girls experienced disproportionately lower graduation rates than their raced and gendered counterparts, resulting in economic disparities (Morris, 2019; National Women’s Law Center, 2014). Lower graduation rates among Black girls also greatly impede their ability to secure employment

and economic advancement. According to the National Women’s Law Center (2014), “34% of Black female students did not graduate on time compared to only 19% of White females and 22% of all female students” (p. 27). Across all grades in 2013, “Black girls consistently had the largest percentage of students scoring below the Basic Achievement level in both math and reading when compared to other groups of girls” (National Women’s Law Center, 2014, p. 29).

“As double minorities being both Black and female, Black girls are confronted with various forms of oppression that work in conjunction with other forms of oppression to produce social injustice and marginalization.”

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this critical content analysis is to examine the ways in which fictional Black female literacy teachers academically othermother their Black adolescent female students in the urban secondary literacy context (Short, 2017). Academic othermothering entails Black female teachers serving as mothers by cultivating, nurturing, and sustaining relationships with Black students (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002, 2005; Bernard et al., 2012; Dixson, 2003; Hirt, 2008; Lane, 2018; McArthur & Lane, 2019). Academic othermothering also entails Black teachers using pedagogy as an emancipatory tool by catering to Black students' academic and socioemotional well-being (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002, 2005; Dixson, 2003; Guiffrida, 2005; Hill-Brisbane, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2001; Lane, 2018; McArthur & Lane, 2019).

This study explores the motherly instincts and politicized ethic of care that Black literacy teachers bring to their work with Black girls. This study also illustrates the many facets of teacher-student relationships and the multiple identities Black female literacy teachers assume in supporting the academic, socioemotional, and cultural needs of their Black adolescent female students. According to Lane (2018), a politicized ethic of care is a Black feminist teaching ideology that is rooted in the pedagogies of exemplary Black teachers. Understanding the intersecting forms of oppression that impact the lives of Black girls, Black female teachers employ a politicized ethic of care approach by tapping into “students' cultural frameworks, lived experiences, socioemotional needs, and diverse learning styles” (Lane, 2018, p. 276).

This critical content analysis focuses on two outstanding multicultural literature texts written by former literacy teachers, *The Skin I'm In* by Sharon Flake and *PUSH* by Sapphire. I analyze fictional

teachers' pedagogical practices in support of the academic, socio-emotional, and cultural needs of their Black female students. Texts were selected that illustrate the Black female teacher-Black female student relationship through the lenses of the academic othermother identity. These texts also centered the Black adolescent female protagonist's academic, socioemotional, and/or cultural journey.

The purpose of the study is also to foreground attention to the experiences of Black teachers supporting Black girls within a White-dominated education system. The overarching goal is to highlight the resilience of Black girls in the face of opposition and to provide teachers with depictions of teacher-student relationships in multicultural literature authored by former literacy teachers that can be used to reimagine teaching and learning in the urban secondary literacy classroom and improve the education of Black girls. This study was guided by the following research questions: *In what ways do fictional Black female literacy teachers enact their Black academic othermother identity to support their Black female students in the urban secondary literacy classroom? What strategies do Black female literacy teachers employ to support the needs of their Black female students?*

Review of the Literature

This critical content analysis is grounded in two bodies of literature (1) Black girl literacies (2) Black female teacher/student relationships.

Black Girl Literacies

Hip-hop feminist Brown (2009) defines Black girlhood as “the representations, memories, and lived experiences of being and becoming in a body marked as youthful, Black, and female” (p. x). Brown argues identity markers such as “Black,” “adolescent,” and “girl” locate persons in a larger

social structure as members of a marginalized groups (p. 3). She argues that “the citizenship of Black girls is inherently tied to their socio-political identity as members of a historically oppressed and marginalized group” (p. 3). Despite their socioemotional, academic, and economic positioning, Black girls continue to be resilient in the face of opposition demonstrating their creativity, agency, and self-worth long before entering the literacy classroom (Brown, 2013; Evans-Winters, 2013; Gaunt, 2006). Black girls center their ways of knowing through their engagement in the social world (Brown, 2013). Several scholars have explored the possibilities and potential of Black girls and the influence of literacy on opportunities to engage in self-expression in ways that honor their lives.

Richardson (2003) highlights how Black girls’ literacies are embedded in African American female ways of knowing and performing that she refers to as “African American female literacies” (p. 77), which consist of practices such as storytelling, signifying, dancing, singing, and quilting, among others. According to Muhammad and Haddix (2016), Black girls’ racialized and gendered identities shape their literacy practices in the secondary literacy classroom. Muhammad and Haddix identified six components that center Black girls’ ways of knowing and engagement of literacy practices. . They argue that Black girls’ literacies are: (1) multiple (2) tied to identities (3) historical (4) collaborative (5) intellectual (6) political/critical. Literacy teachers can employ these components in developing pedagogical strategies that honor Black girls in the literacy classroom.

In a qualitative study situated in an afterschool program, Wissman (2008) documented the constant struggles and marginalization that Black girls are confronted with in school spaces. Wissman argued that school spaces, specifically urban schools, are often plagued with decontextualized curricula,

constant surveillance, and silencing of the literacy and language practices of Black girls. Drawing upon a Black feminist framework, Wissman found that Black girls used poetry and photography as forms of self-expression and used literacy and language to resist the discourses and institutional practices in school spaces.

Price-Dennis, Muhammad, Womack, McArthur, and Haddix (2017) argue that “Black girls’ racialized and gendered experiences necessitate spaces, places, and understanding of the literacies that foreground and honor their lives” (p. 13). Their study highlights the importance of literacy teachers developing pedagogical practices that counter racist, sexist, and classist ideologies in curriculum and instruction (Price-Dennis et al., 2017). My study addresses how fictional Black female literacy teachers’ pedagogical practices grounded in motherly wisdom and a politicized ethic of care support and center the academic, socio-emotional, and cultural needs and interests of Black girls and their ways of knowing and being (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Case, 1997; McArthur & Lane, 2019).

Black Female Teacher/Student Relationships

There is a growing body of empirical scholarship that has documented Black female educators’ engagement in othermothering by infusing a politicized ethic of care in their pedagogical practices in support of their Black students (Lane, 2018; McArthur & Lane, 2019; Watson, 2018). Watson explored how three contemporary Black female educators in New York City public schools enacted a spiritual and politicized care rooted in their understandings of the sociopolitical contexts where their students live and learn. Grounded in an endarkened feminist epistemology and a legacy of politicized womanist care, Watson identified three tenets of politicized care that Black female educators enact in support of their students: (1) Soulful and

politicized purpose driving high expectations; (2) Building relationships through vulnerability, encouragement, communication, and recognition; and (3) Redefining success and envisioning paths for the future. Watson further argued that Black female teachers enacting tenets of politicized care create strong connections and investment in both their educational and professional pursuits.

McArthur and Lane (2019) examined their Black feminist pedagogical practices in two qualitative research studies designed to educate Black girls. Situated in the urban classroom contexts, their research was designed to support the social and intellectual empowerment of young Black women. Both scholars examined how Black women educators engaged in acts of pedagogical love and how Black Feminist pedagogy served as alternative, safe spaces for Black girls. McArthur and Lane argued that their acts of pedagogical love and Black feminist pedagogy entailed the following (1) exhibited care through othermothering practices, (2) established spaces and places for healing to promote holistic well-being, and (3) administered “checkins” as a form of collective accountability and socio-emotional support. Both Watson’s (2018) and McArthur and Lane’s work highlighted the social dynamics of Black female teacher/student relationships and the ways in which Black female educators enact a politicized ethic of care to support Black students and Black girls, respectively.

There continues to be a dearth of scholarship on representations of Black female teachers’ relationships with Black students, specifically Black female students depicted in multicultural young

adult literature. The current study fills the gap by examining the depictions of Black female teachers’ academically othermothering their Black female students in the urban secondary literacy context.

Theoretical Perspective

Black Feminist Thought’s Academic Othermothering framework undergirded this critical content analysis (Collins, 2009). James (1993) defines othermothering as the acceptance of responsibility for a child not one’s own, in an arrangement that may or may not be formal. The concept of othermothering has roots in the African cultural

tradition (Bernard et al., 2012), specifically the West African practice of communal lifestyles and interdependence of communities (Edwards, 2000). Wane (2000) argues that African traditional worldviews suggest that children belong to the larger community, not just to the biological parents. Grounded in a Black feminist approach to social justice and transformation, this shared duty of extended family

assuming child-care responsibilities illustrates the way in which the cultural traditions in the Black community have been designed to nurture and sustain African-Americans as a collective way to cope with and resist oppression (Collins, 2009; Gilkes, 2001; James, 1993).

With roots in women’s relationships with children in the Black community, othermothering has expanded to include Black women’s impact in education institutions and the role teachers play in cultivating, nurturing, and sustaining relationships with Black students (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002, 2005; Bernard et al., 2012; Dixson, 2003; Hirt, 2008; Lane, 2018; McArthur & Lane, 2019). Centering the

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teacher/student relationship in teaching and learning (Foster, 1993), academic othermothering entails mentoring that ensures student success, including enabling Black students to use education as a tool of social transformation to challenge the status quo and enrich their own lives (Collins, 2009; Edwards, 2000; Foster, 1993). The teacher/student relationship involves Black female teachers' pedagogical work as extensions of their social justice agenda to address social conditions of Black children and to uplift them by catering to academic, social, and psychological needs (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002, 2005; Dixson, 2003; Dixson & Dingus, 2008; Guiffrida, 2005; Hill-Brisbane, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2001; Lane, 2018; McArthur & Lane, 2019). Black women assume an academic othermother identity through an "outsider-within" perspective, one in which Black female teachers often contend with the multiplicity of identities—being both Black and an educator—and how both identities can co-exist without conflicting views (Collins, 1998; Hill-Brisbane, 2005).

Academic othermothering informs my understanding of the ways in which Black women assume a politicized ethic of care and accountability to Black students as if they were their own family (Collins, 2009). Black female academic othermothers serve to ensure the academic success and socioemotional wellness of their Black adolescent female students. The academic othermother perspective highlights the multiple identities of fictional Black female literacy teachers and the ways in which they enact these identities to support the academic, socio-emotional, and cultural needs of their Black female students.

Methodology & Research Design

The critical content analysis was based on two multicultural young adult texts: *PUSH* by Sapphire and *The Skin I'm In* by Sharon Flake. Texts were

selected based on the following criteria: They needed to include (1) a Black adolescent female protagonist between the ages of 13 and 18, (2) a Black adolescent female protagonist illustrating an academic, socioemotional, and/or cultural journey, (3) Black female literacy teachers enacting the academic othermother identity, (4) Black female literacy teachers and Black girls' relationship depicted as the main storyline, (5) literature texts authored by former Black secondary literacy teachers, and (6) a storyline situated within an urban secondary literacy context. Grounded in principles of Black feminism, the criteria were selected to closely examine the teacher-student relationship and to understand the ways in which Black female literacy teachers enact the academic othermother identity in support of their Black female students.

Online book review repositories were reviewed, including School Library Journal, Publishers Weekly, Kirkus, and Good Read. Scholarly literature databases were also reviewed, including Education Resource Information Center and Gale's Literature Resource Center. I also perused outlets and solicited recommendations on an online professional listserv of librarians and literacy professionals. For each of the online book review repositories and scholarly literature databases, I executed advance searches using key terms, including "Black teachers *and* Black girls," "Female teachers *and* Black girls," and "Black Female teachers *and* Black girls." The two texts selected met the criteria outlined in the selection process. The search yielded additional texts focusing on the illustration of teacher/student relationships but did not meet all criteria. These stories included *The Mighty Miss Malone* (2012) by Christopher Paul Curtis, *Ruby Lee and Me* (2016) by Shannon Hitchcock, *Ninth Ward* (2010) by Jewell Parker Rhodes, *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (1976) by Mildred Taylor, *Piecing Me Together* (2017) by Renee

Watson, and *No Laughter Here* (2003) by Rita Williams-Garcia.

Critical Content Analysis

Critical content analysis focuses on implementing a critical lens to analyze text (Short, 2017) in order to “locate power in social practices by understanding, uncovering, and transforming conditions of inequity embedded in society” (Rogers, 2004, p. 4). Critical content analysis served to highlight the political stance that Black female literacy teachers take around issues of inequity and power in society regarding Black girls (Short, 2017). This analytical framework was employed to unearth and document the motherly instincts and politicized ethic of care that Black female literacy teachers bring to their work and how such a pedagogical approach supports Black adolescent girls academically, socioemotionally, and culturally. Critical content analysis also served to highlight the socio-political positioning and social dynamics between characters depicted in texts. It accounted for the values and ideologies that are privileged and considered normative, and the conditions of inequity within society (Rogers, 2004; Short, 2017).

The research purpose and question selected for this study were grounded in the current educational environment that Black girls confront. Initially, I began with a broad question (*How do Black female teachers engage in academic othermothering?*). After I immersed myself in both the literature texts and the theoretical frameworks that grounded the study, I revised this query into a more specific research question: *In what ways do fictional Black female literacy teachers enact their Black academic othermother identity to support their Black female students in the urban secondary literacy classroom?* I read each text selected in this study twice. I drew on Rosenblatt’s (1995) notion of the aesthetic stance to motivate the first step of analysis, immersion as a

reader. The initial focus was to respond to the whole texts instead of analyzing the texts in parts. Drawing upon Rosenblatt’s (1995) efferent stance, the second reading focused on acquiring information to analyze the texts. The second reading focused on a response to the texts and included writing reflections based on literary elements in the texts that stood out to me.

The next step of analysis entailed selecting a set of critical theoretical framings that provided a lens to critique the text based on my research focus. I found that the study could benefit from a Black Feminist framework, specifically Collins’s (2000) *Black Feminist Thought* (Academic Othermothering). *Black Feminist Thought’s Academic Othermothering* highlights how Black academic othermothers serve to ensure the academic success and socio-emotional wellness of the Black adolescent female students. *Black Feminist Thought’s* tenet, *Academic Othermother Identity*, provided a lens for analyzing texts (Short, 2017).

In addition to reading the texts both aesthetically and efferently, I conducted close readings using the theoretical framework as a guide. Since the critical content analysis focused on how Black literacy teachers act as othermothers, I examined excerpts from the text that focused on the ways in which Black literacy teachers academically othermother Black girls in support of the socioemotional and academic needs of Black girls. I revised the research questions slightly as a result of the theoretical frameworks and the texts (Short, 2017). I also read related research that implemented the same methodological and theoretical framework. The close readings and multiple revisits to the theory and texts allowed me to develop broad themes and categories that emerged from the data (Short, 2017, p. 12). Once broad themes and categories were established, I revisited the theory and texts again to refine codes. This process entailed identifying

overlaps in tenets and codes and merging codes, as well as establishing sub-codes. I began with 2 tenets, 3 codes, and 3 sub-codes that were then reduced to one tenet, two codes, and three sub-codes. The two tenets were academic othermothering and politicized ethic of care. I collapsed tenets since there was considerable overlap. This process also resulted in collapsing codes and sub-codes. I wrote theoretical memos for each tenet and code based on the scholarly literature and excerpts found in the texts (Short, 2017).

Findings

Two fictional Black female literacy teachers, Flake's Miss Saunders and Sapphire's Ms. Rain, serve as academic othermothers, illustrating their wisdom and motherly instincts in supporting the academic, socioemotional, and cultural needs of Maleeka and Precious, respectively. This study found that fictional Black female literacy teachers academically othermother their Black female students by disrupting the dominance of formal literacy assessments and curricula, incorporating dialogic journal writing in literacy instruction, creating spaces for black girls to author their lives and re-imagine self, and negotiating multiple identities and external influences.

Finding 1: "Don't Worry About Fill-In the Blanks, Just Read and Write!": Academically Othermothering by Disrupting the Dominance of Formal Literacy Assessments and Curricula

In Sapphire's (1996) *PUSH*, Precious is consumed with her score on the Test for Adult Basic Education (TABE). Precious states,

My reading score is 2.8. I ask Ms. Rain what that mean. She says it's a number! And can't no numbers measure how far I done come in jus' two years. She say forget about the numbers and just keep working. (p. 108)

Precious's TABE score of 2.8 meant she had demonstrated the reading ability of an end-of-year 2nd grader. Although Ms. Rain's class is designed to prepare Precious for the TABE assessment, she encourages Precious to not make that her priority. Miss Rain also highlights the role that traditional conceptions of literacy assessments and records play in pathologizing Black girls' experiences and

"Flake's Miss Saunders and Sapphire's Ms. Rain serving as academic othermothers illustrate their wisdom and motherly instincts in supporting the academic, socioemotional, and cultural needs of Maleeka and Precious, respectively."

painting a singular narrative of competence that follows White norms. This compassion illustrates how Ms. Rain's academic othermothering is designed to build Precious' confidence by not allowing her academic identity to be defined solely by a standardized test score. As an academic othermother, Ms. Rain communicates to Precious a broader, more affirming approach to assessing Precious'

academic performance. Ms. Rain also academically othermothers by highlighting that assessments do not account for how Precious' has strengthened her skills and has grown as a reader and writer. In introducing a free-write journal activity, Ms. Rain states, "Don't worry about numbers and fill in the blank, just read and write!" (Sapphire, 1996, p. 108).

Ms. Rain understands that conveying a message to Precious that does not prioritize the TABE assessment and does not put great emphasis on her assessment score allows her to focus on the reading and writing process, which will increase her TABE

score over the course of the class. Precious follows Ms. Rain's directives and continues to write in her journal. Precious documents in her journal that she is changing. She develops a "things

I don't care about no more" vs. "what I care about" list (Sapphire, 1996, p. 108-109). She writes that she cares about her notebook and writing poems.

Precious's focus on her notebook and writing of poems indicates the strong influence that Ms. Rain has on Precious as a reader and writer, but also the things that Precious values and finds important as she continues to develop her skills.

Similarly, Miss Saunders in *The Skin I'm In* (Flake, 1998) highlights how formal literacy spaces prioritize assessments and records in order to determine a student's academic identity. Over the course of the school year, Maleeka demonstrated a marginal academic performance. Miss Saunders does not prioritize Maleeka's literacy scores, but instead focuses on how she is talented in other areas, yet not working to her full potential. Miss Saunders realizes that one of Maleeka's gifts is creative writing. In a conversation with Maleeka about journaling and creative writing, Miss Saunders states, "Writing is clearly one of your gifts, Maleeka" (p. 97).

Maleeka states, "Miss Saunders was saying something about me wasting my potential" (p. 33). Like Ms. Rain, Miss Saunders disrupts the role literacy assessments play in a singular narrative of Black girls' competence as readers and writers and places great emphasis on Maleeka's abilities as a creative writer. Miss Saunders academically othermothers Maleeka by broadening Maleeka's academic identity as a creative writer.

Miss Saunders understands that she plays a major role in supporting Maleeka and shaping her identity. Knowing that Maleeka has not been the same since the passing of her father, Miss Saunders also academically othermothers by creating a space for Maleeka to engage in writing exercises that support

her socioemotionally. Like Miss Rain, Miss Saunders incorporates writing into the literacy instruction—those that were not quantifiable—designed to grow Maleeka's reading and writing skills.

Finding 2: "Writing Can Be the Boat that Carries You to the Other Side": Academically Othermothering by Incorporating Dialogic Journal Writing in Literacy Instruction

Ms. Rain reminds Precious that "writing can be the boat that carries you to the other side" (Sapphire, 1996, p. 97). Ms. Rain academically othermothers Precious by broadening the concept of writing and encouraging Precious to use writing as an emancipatory tool to cope with life challenges in order to "get to the other side." Ms. Rain's academic othermothering consists of dialogic writing, which allows Precious to make meaning of the world and her place in it. Dialogic journal writing provides Precious with a non-threatening, intimate, private space to document her experiences, while being in conversation with Ms. Rain. As an academic mother, Ms. Rain broadens the concept of writing by using it as both a transformative, emancipatory tool designed to offer advice, guidance, and socioemotional wellness, as well as a means of modeling sentence structure and grammar to help Precious become a better reader, writer, and speller. In the dialogic writing exchange, Ms. Rain and Precious discuss Precious' current circumstances and her future plans.

Dear Ms Precious, 1/22/88

When you are raising a small infant you need help. Who is going to help you? How will you support yourself? How will you keep learning to read and write? (Sapphire, 1996, p. 73)

Ms. Rain

The wfr hlp mma it help mi

(the welfare help Mama. It help me.)
Precious. (Sapphire, 1996, p. 73)

Dear Precious Miss,
When you get home from the hospital look
and see how much welfare has helped your
mother. You could go further than your
mother. You could get your G.E.D. and go to
college. You could do anything Precious but
you gotta believe it. Love Blue Rain.
(Sapphire, 1996, p. 73)

Ms. Rain approach to dialogic writing prioritizes Precious' socioemotional wellness while modeling writing conventions. In this writing exchange, Ms. Rain academically othermothers by building a personal relationship with Precious that extends beyond the school work. At the same time, she uses literacy instruction strategies through the use of dialogic writing as an entry to support and advise Precious on personal matters that she is experiencing. As an academic othermother, Ms. Rain helps Precious navigate life's challenges by encouraging her to weigh all her options and to break generational codependency and poverty by prompting her to think about how welfare has helped her mother and given her the hope of exceeding further than her mother.

In *The Skin I'm In* (Flake, 1998), Miss Saunders begins the class discussion focusing on image and perception. Miss Saunders initially centers her own experience in her class discussion. Her rare skin condition prompts her line of questioning to the class. "What's my face say?" (p. 18). Aware of the whispers and the stares she receives from her students because of her skin, Miss Saunders centers her own experience in order to begin a discussion on how she is perceived and how people treat others. She centers her own experience having an atypical skin composition in order to support Maleeka in confronting her own insecurities about being dark-skinned. Miss Saunders also centers her own

experience to begin to unpack the ways in which students judge others based on physical appearance before getting to know someone. This exploration is important as Miss Saunders's tasks serves double duty: To temper classmates' bullying tactics against Maleeka, and to build up her self-esteem and self-confidence. By Miss Saunders centering her own experiences to the class in the presence of Maleeka, the discussion serves as a safe way to support Maleeka's socioemotional well-being. Miss Saunders then builds on the discussion and asks, "What does your face tell the world?" (p. 18).

Miss Saunders incorporates journal writing in her literacy instruction and encourages the class to provide a journal response to the prompt. Miss Saunders academically othermothers Maleeka by creating a space with the literacy instruction for her to work through her own internal struggles and constant bullying due to her dark skin. Miss Saunders academically othermothers by centering her own insecurities in the first line of questioning in the hopes of encouraging Maleeka to be comfortable confronting her own insecurities in the second line of questioning.

Miss Saunders academically othermothers Maleeka and brings awareness to her classmates' bullying tactics by encouraging the class to begin to do the work around how they are perceived by others and how they see themselves. Miss Saunders builds upon the journal writing activity and states,

It takes a long time to accept yourself for who you are. To see the poetry in your walk. To look in the mirror and like what you see, even when it doesn't look like anybody else's idea of beauty. (Flake, 1998, p. 19-20)

In this one-on-one conversation, Miss Saunders continues to academically othermother Maleeka by reminding her that self-love and self-acceptance are

long journeys. Miss Saunders also academically othermothers Maleeka by offering advice through her recollection of her own journey of self-love and self-acceptance even when her own physical features were not viewed as the standard by society and those around her.

Finding 3: “I Want You to Know What It Feels Like to Live in Somebody Else’s Skin and to See The World Through Somebody Else’s Eyes”: Academically Othermothering by Creating Spaces for Black Girls to Author their Lives and Re-imagine Self

In *The Skin I’m In*, Maleeka informs Miss Saunders that “I don’t know where I begin and Akeelma ends” (p. 96). Miss Saunders responds, “It is good that you are getting close to Akeelma. Good writers get close to their characters” (p. 96-97). Previously she had said, “I want you to know what it feels like to live in somebody else’s skin and to see the world through somebody else’s eyes” (Flake, 1998, p. 24). In an effort to support Maleeka in authoring her life and re-imagining self during the writing process, Miss Saunders gives her a copy of *Life of a Slave Girl*, an autobiography about a young enslaved woman. She encourages Maleeka to keep a diary chronicling her experiences to make sense of her world and her place in it, using Black historical literature to support Maleeka in the writing process.

Maleeka’s diary entries are based on the experiences of a young enslaved Black girl named Akeelma (Maleeka spelled backwards with one inversion) during the transatlantic slave trade. Describing Maleeka as a gifted writer, Miss Saunders academically othermothers Maleeka by encouraging her to write and to develop characters and the context that surrounds the fictional Akeelma. In a series of diary entries, Maleeka develops a character that has a vastly different temperament and personality from her own during the transatlantic

slave trade, one that is more bold, defiant, and courageous. Miss Saunders academically othermothers by supporting Maleeka in authoring her new life through the development of Akeelma.

Dear Diary,

The sea is wild and mean. Water is crashing against the boat like a hundred angry lions. My body is wet with sweat and throw-up from others pressing close around me like sticks of firewood. They chain us together like thieves and beat us till we bleed. I have made up my mind, though. I will show no weakness. I will be strong. Strong like the sea and the wind. – Akeelma (Flake, 1998, p. 85-86)

In developing Akeelma, Maleeka gives her a voice that she herself doesn’t have in her own life. The development of the character and the prompting and questioning by Miss Saunders at different stages of chronicling Akeelma’s experiences challenge and encourage Maleeka to speak up for herself against bullies through her writing. Maleeka re-imagines herself as outspoken and fearless:

Dear Diary,

Where do you run when there’s no place to run? They had me trapped. I could see no way out. Then I scratched one on the face, bit the other on his fat, dirty hands. And when I was running, running to hide deep in the crowd up there, I saw someone I knew. It was Kinjari! Kinjari is not dead. – Akeelma (Flake, 1998, p. 97)

With the support of Miss Saunders, Maleeka draws closer and closer to the character as she develops scenes. Miss Saunders feels that it is good that Maleeka is getting close to Akeelma. Via a series of scenes in which Akeelma stands up for herself on the ship, Maleeka gradually becomes one with the

character Akeelma. This oneness with Akeelma empowers Maleeka to speak for herself and find renewed value, self-worth, and purpose in her own life.

Similarly, Ms. Rain supports Precious in dealing with low self-esteem and self-hatred rooted in media images of beauty. Ms. Rain is aware of Precious' desire to have lighter skin and long, straight hair because society and the opposite sex would find her beautiful and more desirable. Ms. Rain academically othermothers Precious by incorporating creative writing into the literacy instruction designed to support Precious in working through her negative self-image rooted in her desire to conform to Eurocentric standards of beauty: "Write out your fantasy of yourself" (Sapphire, 1996, p. 113). Ms. Rain's writing prompt is designed to create a space for Precious to unpack her thoughts and feelings about how she sees herself and who she wants to be. In a series of writing entries in response to the prompt, Precious writes,

How we would be if life was perfect. I tell you one thing right now, I would be light skinned, thereby treated right and loved by boyz. Light even more important than being skinny, you see them light-skinned girls that's big an' fat, they got boyfriends.... So that's my fantasy to be light. Then I get hair. Swing job, you know like I do with my extensions, but this time it be my own hair, permanently. (Sapphire, 1996, pp. 113-114)

In her writings, Precious envisions a version of herself that is vastly different from who she is, one who is thin, light skinned, with long haired. Ms. Rain academically othermothers by creating a space

that gives Precious voice. Ms. Rain academically othermothers Precious by affirming her and disrupting her worldview by introducing her to literary and historical content of prominent Black figures in the Black community that honor and celebrate Blackness and the Black experience, including Alice Walker, Louis Farrakhan, and Audre Lorde. Ms. Rain further academically othermothers Precious by reminding Precious of how beautiful she is just the way she is. Precious writes, "One thing I say about Farrakhan and Alice Walker they help me like being Black" (Sapphire, 1996, p. 96). Miss Rain uses Black historical and literary content as a counternarrative at different stages of the writing process to disrupt Precious's conforming to anti-Black, Eurocentric standards of beauty. The writing

"Both Flake's Miss Saunders and Sapphire's Ms. Rain negotiate multiple identities as they enact an academic othermother identity to support Maleeka and Precious, respectively."

of Farrakhan and Walker is infused with historical contexts that help Precious shift her perception of self and her overall worldview of Blackness and femaleness. It disrupts instances of conforming to images of beauty that are polar opposites of who she is. These authors incorporate historical content that honors Black figures into the

literacy instruction that encourages her to love her Blackness.

Finding 4: "Their Insights are Fantastic. Right on Target. But Their Test-Taking Skills are Just Terrible": Academically Othermothering by Negotiating Multiple Identities and External Influences

Both Flake's Miss Saunders and Sapphire's Ms. Rain negotiate multiple identities as they enact an academic othermother identity to support Maleeka and Precious, respectively. In a conversation with her colleague, Ms. Tai, Miss Saunders (Flake, 1998) illustrates how negotiating multiple identities leads

to her concerns about how “their insights are fantastic. Right on target. But their test-taking skills are just terrible.” (p. 113). Ms. Tai argues, “Don’t kill their spirits by flunking them and making them think nothing they’ve done really counts because tests aren’t the only way to prove you know something” (p. 113). Miss Saunders responds, “Students have to be held to the same standards as other students across the city and I can’t give them what they haven’t earned” (p. 113). In enacting the academic othermother identity, Miss Saunders experiences internal conflict as both a Black woman and a literacy teacher, and external influences from a teacher colleague.

Another colleague complains, “A bull in a china shop, that’s what she is. She’s not following the curriculum the ways it’s laid out. She’s pushing the kids too hard. Telling them to read fifty pages one night, thirty pages the next. I’m telling you, hiring her was a bad move (Flake, 1998, p. 36). Miss Saunders enacts her academic othermother identity while also experiencing backlash from her colleagues based on her unwillingness to conform to a more standardized approach to literacy instruction. Like Miss Saunders, Ms. Rain negotiated her multiple identities when she received pushback from her colleagues and the program secretary regarding literacy content taught in the TABE course. Ms. Rain’s colleagues were resistant to her focusing the literacy instruction on literary elements such as poetry and storytelling, instead of focusing solely on standardized, skills-based elements of literacy instruction.

This vignette also illustrates how Ms. Rain’s negotiating multiple identities and enacting an academic othermother identity were also rooted in external influences. These views further illustrate how external influences further contribute to Black female literacy teachers’ contention when tailoring their literacy instruction to the needs of their Black

female students and not to a curriculum that further marginalizes them. Each instance illustrates how both Ms. Rain and Miss Saunders are negotiating multiple identities while enacting their academic othermother identities and how this dynamic is further complicated by external influences that often conform to schooling that is in direct opposition of the academic, socio-emotional, and cultural needs of Black girls.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the ways in which two fictional Black female literacy teachers academically othermother their Black female students in the urban secondary context. The study findings reveal that Black female literacy teachers, as represented by these characters, enact an academic othermother identity because they understand the socioemotional, cultural, and academic needs of Black girls. Black female literacy teachers extend their role as literacy teachers beyond standardized tests and reading comprehension and create spaces and opportunities for Black girls to negotiate and resolve personal challenges they may experience. Black female literacy teachers do not disregard key elements of literacy in the process. Instead, they use journaling, storytelling, and historical content to help Black girls address lived experiences and to re-write who they are. This study also revealed Black female literacy teachers whose enactment of the academic othermother identity provides a form of politicized ethic of care. This politicized ethic of care often mirrors Black female literacy teachers’ own childhood experiences. For example, in *The Skin I’m In*, Miss Saunders is drawn to Maleeka because Maleeka’s experiences with colorism is reminiscent of her own experiences being bullied by students because of a skin condition.

Both Miss Saunders and Ms. Rain engage in “women’s work” on behalf of Maleeka and Precious

respectively. However, this work isn't without contention. According to Hill-Brisbane (2005), Black female teachers often contend with a multiplicity of identities, and many identities can co-exist without conflicting views. This study found that Black female literacy teachers enacting the Black academic othermother identity, in the fictional forms in these novels, contend with the multiplicity of identities. However, these identities are most often in conflict. The agenda of the academic othermother is in direct conflict with the agenda set forth for literacy teachers in formal school spaces. Black female literacy teachers enacting an academic othermother identity understand that White-dominated school systems do not have the needs of Black girls in mind (Evans-Winters, 2014). As a result, enacting a Black academic othermother identity is a political and revolutionary act in support of Black girls in ways that are culturally relevant.

Implications for Literacy Teaching and Learning

Black Feminist author and social activist hooks (2014) states, "I celebrate teaching that enables transgressions—a movement against and beyond boundaries. It is that movement which makes education the practice of freedom" (p. 20). This poignant quote offers an emancipatory form of education that extends beyond the traditional notion of teaching and learning. In centering an emancipatory form of education, it aligns with the motherly wisdom and politicized ethic of care that Black female literacy teachers enact in the urban secondary literacy contexts in support of their Black female students. Grounded in the work of Black female literacy teachers, I offer implications for classroom teachers designed to support Black girls in the urban secondary literacy classroom.

Embedding in academic othermothering is a form of politicized ethic of care and healing. Teachers should consider the following questions in incorporating a politicized ethic of care in the literacy classroom: *Do I know my students outside standardized test scores and other traditional assessments? What are my students' interests, passions, talents, challenges, school histories, cultural nuances, literacy traditions, home and community identities? And how can I, as a literacy teacher, cultivate inclusive classroom spaces that honor and incorporate elements of who they are and what they are experiencing into my instruction? How can I bridge their out-of-school and in-school literacies?*

Teachers must disrupt the 'cookie cutter' approach to teaching and learning and allow the social positioning and experiences of Black girls to serve as key elements that drive literacy instruction. Literacy teachers can make instruction more accessible and inclusive in the classroom by focusing on the whole child. This attention entails weaving academics and socioemotional wellness in instruction through literacy strategies, such as dialogic journal writing and creative writing. Dialogic journal writing provides literacy teachers the opportunity to engage in intimate conversations in safe spaces for Black girls. Creative writing provides Black girls the opportunity to tap into the power of storytelling to unearth and document their journey through life challenges and re-imagine self and their futures.

Teachers can also honor and privilege the multiple literacies and learning styles of Black girls by implementing alternate literacy assessments, including portfolio projects. By doing so, teachers communicate to Black girls that the literacy

“Literacy teachers can make instruction more accessible and inclusive in the classroom by focusing on the ‘whole child.’”

classroom honors their multiple literacies and diverse learning styles. It also communicates to Black girls that differences are not deficits and that the learning space is inclusive. This set of expanded possibilities broadens how Black girls view literacy in school spaces and also bridges their out-of-school and in-school literacies. A politicized ethic of care further highlights that classrooms are not expert-dominated, instead assuming that knowledge is distributed. Teachers must disrupt traditional school roles and practices and shift their roles to a more shared knowledge and expertise with Black girls in the urban secondary literacy classroom. This shift in the teacher's role from one who possesses authoritative knowledge to one who facilitates the co-construction of knowledge helps to establish classroom norms that provide Black girls with the opportunity to have autonomy and agency in their learning process.

Conclusion

This study has examined the motherly wisdom and socioemotional, and cultural needs of their Black

female students. Both Miss Rain in *PUSH* and Miss Saunders in *The Skin I'm In* enact the academic politicized ethic of care that fictional Black female literacy teachers bring to their engagement with their Black girl students.

Such teachers support the academic, othermother identity by broadening the conception of literacy and cultivating spaces that provide Precious and Maleeka opportunities to engage in literacy that allows them to construct their identities, represent themselves, and have agency. In many instances this charge was in conflict with traditional models of literacy teaching and learning. Black female literacy teachers must create spaces in the urban secondary literacy classroom for Black girls to explore their possibilities and potential in ways that honor their lived experiences.

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