

Writing While Black: The Power of Words and Student's Self-Empowerment

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This article uses a sociohistoric and Black feminist framework to explore the following questions: 1) What happens when African American young women are afforded the space and opportunities to explore "their truth" through their writing? 2) How do African American young women use their writing to negotiate their identities? Data from the study consisted of manifestos, writing assignments from four eleventh-grade African American female students during a required cultural identity course of a summer pre-college program. A thematic analysis of their writings begins to illustrate how young African American women utilized literacy to share their sociopolitical consciousness, reposition themselves in powerful ways, and create counter-narratives to master narratives informed by whiteness. Our findings demonstrate that their manifestos made visible an overarching finding of self-awareness that encompassed five processes: 1) self-empowerment, 2) double consciousness/intersections/tensions, 3) negotiations, 4) legacy/paying forward, and 5) Black identity development. We believe these processes need to be acknowledged and understood in relation to the identity and educational experiences of Black young women. Lastly, we argue that the manifesto writing assignment begins to illustrate the importance of educators revisioning and reconceptualizing the purposes of writing by intentionally integrating histories, identities, and literacies of historically underrepresented youth.

Keywords: African American; Black; women; self-awareness; writing; literacy; self-empowerment

"There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you." Maya Angelou

Introduction

African American young women are often positioned uniquely as they are constantly negotiating issues of race and gender in a society that is dominated by whiteness. They are constantly bombarded with stereotypes and negative images of Black femaleness that act to maintain White ways of knowing and being in the world (e.g., bell hooks, 1993; Collins, 1990;

Fordham, 1993; Giddings, 1984; Henry, 2009; Patton et al., 2016). The privileges of whiteness are often the “invisible” basis against which other racial and cultural identities are named as ‘other’ and marginalized” (Dyer, 1997; Maher & Tetreault, 1997). Tatum’s (1997) research argues that due to whiteness, African American youth are more likely to be engaged in identity issues earlier than their White counterparts. She also suggests that the plight of African American adolescent females is particularly complicated because societal messages about beauty often leave them feeling devalued.

Further, Harrison (1997) found in her research that African American young women are often perceived as “pushing at the boundaries of school norms” (p. 52). She also found that being White was associated with authority and voice while being African American and female was associated with being quiet and submissive. Mainly, Harrison argued that school practices conflicted with African American female racial and ethnic identity, and how they interacted and engaged in their homes and communities. While there is now a growing body of scholarship by Black women scholars about the experiences and challenges Black young women navigate in schools (e.g., Patton et al, 2016), it is important that we also capture their resilience and the miraculous ways Black young women persist in spite of the challenges that they face, particularly the ways they use literacy and their writings as powerful counter-narratives (Carter, 2001; Christian, 1980; Harris, 1992, Muhammad, 2015).

This article explores how four eleventh-grade African American female students were provided the opportunity to declare “their truth” through powerful writings. The central research questions guiding this study were 1) What happens when African American female young women are afforded the space and opportunities to explore “their truth” through their writing? and 2) How do African American young women use their writing to negotiate their identities? We begin by exploring how Black women throughout history have created spaces to use literacy and writing as a tool to share their lived experiences to make the invisible more visible (e.g., tension, oppression, stereotypes, etc.). Next, we share four student manifestos that demonstrate how, when provided the opportunity, Black young women articulate their authentic realities and tensions they experience in society in powerful and uplifting ways. The manifesto was a writing platform that allowed them to 1) self-define, 2) counter-hegemony or misrepresentations, and 3) advocate for change among themselves and others (Royster, 2000). The young African American women wrote multifaceted and complex representations of themselves that shared their sociopolitical consciousness, repositioned themselves in powerful ways, and created counter-narratives to master narratives informed by whiteness.

Next, we discuss how these manifestos made visible five processes that need to be acknowledged and understood in relation to identity and educational experiences of Black young women: 1) self-empowerment, 2) double consciousness/intersections/tensions, 3) negotiations, 4) legacy/paying forward, and 5) Black identity development. The article concludes with an explanation of how the manifesto, or similar writing assignments, have the potential to create spaces where historically underrepresented youth can engage in critical reflections about themselves and their society. By creating these intentional and affirming spaces, educators are providing the opportunity for the youth to affirm and legitimize their experiences. While the manifesto assignment was designed for high school juniors in a pre-college program, it is adaptable for other grades and contexts (i.e., language arts class, writing circles, etc.).

Conceptual Framework

This study is grounded in Black feminist theory (cf. bell hooks, 1994; Collins, 1990), which foregrounds the voices and experiences of Black females and provides a lens to better understand Black adolescent females' educational experiences. Black feminist theory is also useful in historicizing Black young women's literacy experiences in the U.S. education system and capturing cultural tensions that exist both past and present. Black women, such as Sojourner Truth, Ana Julia Cooper, Nannie Helen Burroughs, and Mary McLeod Bethune, to name a few, understood the power and importance of education for young African American women and how whiteness and privilege negatively positioned them. We build on the foundation of many African American women scholar-activists who forged an early path and championed the education of young Black women. For example, Mary McLeod Bethune and Nannie Helen Burroughs were two of the first to create schools, learning environments that supported African American young women (Thomas & Jackson, 2007).

Also, it is important to note that there were also Black male scholars such as Carter G. Woodson who was instrumental in capturing the plight of African American women in education. While he spoke more broadly about the experiences of Black people, his work is also relevant to understanding the tensions that Black young women face. Woodson coined the term "miseducation" to refer to Blacks and their educational experiences in the United States. We view Woodson's notion of the "miseducation of Blacks" also as a useful way to capture the immense challenges that African American young women face in our current educational system (1993, p. 1). Woodson wrote, "[The Negro] was pictured as a human being of lower order, unable to subject passion to reason, and therefore useful only when made the hewer of wood or drawer of water for others" (1993, p. 21). He further notes that inequity dominated our education system so much that Negroes themselves would not be able to empower each other, since they are "[t]aught from books of the same bias, trained by Caucasians of the same prejudice or negroes with enslaved minds" (1993, p. 23). Interestingly, in 1933, Woodson's scholarship articulated some of the racial inequities, tensions, and identity politics people of color continue to face today within our educational systems. Woodson suggested that without critical exploration or engagement, Black youth and youth of color would be "taught to hate himself." His observations continue to capture how race and cultural identity can inform educational experiences. More importantly, his work, much like the on-the-ground work of aforementioned African American women scholars, emphasizes the importance of self-empowerment and providing opportunities for young women to critically engage their racial and cultural identities.

Similarly, Du Bois (1903) described a process called double-consciousness, in which he depicted how African-Americans had to toggle between the American experience and Black experience. While the work of women like Mary McLeod Bethune, Ana Julia Cooper, Nannie Helen Burroughs, as well as Black male scholars, W. E.B. Du Bois and Carter G. Woodson's scholarships were decades ago, they were foundational and are still very relevant today as they help us understand the importance of creating spaces where Black youth, especially young African American women, can use literacy and writing as a tool to share their experiences and make visible the tensions they face as they navigate their education. Muhammad's (2012) works continue to build and extend previously mentioned scholars by foregrounding literacy and asserting that "reconstructing a literacy grounded in a historical orientation has the potential to offer new insights into creating spaces for Black adolescent girls' reading and writing within or outside the school" (p. 206).

Background to Study: Summer Cultural Identity Course

In the above sections, we historically situate the inequitable challenges that some students of color have inherited in the U.S. education system and provide a conceptual framework grounding the study. In this section, we share the young African American women's writings from one of five sections of the cultural identity course (CIC) as data that took place over the course of four summers (2013-2017). The CIC took place during a weeklong summer pre-college program at a Predominately White Institution (PWI) for rising high school seniors. The majority of the students in the program identified as underrepresented (i.e., people of color, low socioeconomic status, or first-generation, college students). While the program focused on academic success and college readiness, the CIC was unique as it focused solely on identity and was highly informed by Cross' (1991) Black Identity Development Model, Tatum's (1992) work on Black culture identity, and Ladson-Billings' (2009) culturally relevant pedagogy.

It is important to note that both authors were highly involved in the development and facilitation of the summer pre-college program and the CIC. Author 1, served as the Director of the Program and was involved in all aspects, and Author 2 served as the instructor of the course in which the four young African American women participated. Author 2 also developed the CIC curriculum, which attempted to provide students with opportunities to integrate culturally relevant literature into their learning and become familiar with a series of terms such as intersectionality, hegemony, assimilation, power, and oppression. According to Bucholtz, Casillas, & Lee (2017) these types of learning are central to students' everyday lived experiences and sense of self but are rarely if ever addressed in high school.

Ultimately, CIC was designed to be a culturally safe place where students could engage in dialogues reflect, analyze, interrogate, and respond to inequities while simultaneously grappling with tensions that they might face as they navigate their education. Throughout the course students engaged in meaningful discussions and activities that encouraged them to critically analyze the impact of culture and identity (e.g., bio poems, two voiced poems, and writing reflections). Although we realize that the context for the CIC took place during a pre-college program and not a traditional classroom, we still perceived it as an educational space, just a non-traditional one as it was designed with young women of color in mind and provided them a space to contest and resist master narratives about what it means to be a young African American woman.

Methodology

This qualitative study was part of a larger study that took place across four summers and four different cohorts of students. The larger study explored the relationship between college readiness and the cultural identity of historically underrepresented high school juniors. The data utilized in this study was collected during CIC. While students also had other writings during the course (e.g., I am poems, two voiced poems, and reflections) that were powerful, due to space constraints, we selected the manifesto assignment because it was a culminating writing assignment for the CIC, and it also appeared to be representative of the writings of African American young women across cohorts. A thematic analysis was used to analyze manifestos and coded for identity/self-definition and complex representation/tensions and intersections. We also used Dedoose, a qualitative software program to help organize codes.

The study utilized qualitative tools of member checking and triangulation in an effort to address reliability and validity. Given that data was collected during the CIC, a course that foregrounded cultural identity, member checking was often an organic process and occurred often as students engaged in daily conversation about their writings, formally and informally, with author 2, and with the instructor of the course. Participants also shared their ideas with author 2 in other formats, such as video journals/diaries, which afforded author 2 opportunities to ask clarifying questions about students' writing and ideas. Even after the program ended, young African American women would often email author 2 as in the following example:

Good morning author 2, I hope you are enjoying this beautiful Sunday. I wanted to say thank you for [a]great part of my Balfour experience. Truly I have grown as an individual just by being in your presence that week. The vocabulary words that were taught has helped me identify feelings and what was going on [in the]world around me. I especially want to thank you for putting aside time to talk to me one on one. For that I'm eternally grateful. I will remember being part of team Author 2 by a nice folder containing the Balfour manifesto and our class picture and the book you gave us. Once again thank you for everything (AAYW).

Author 2 also maintained personal reflection and observation notes documenting her interactions with the young African American female scholars. Additionally, she debriefed with author 1 almost daily to support and affirm the young women as they were becoming increasingly more aware of their own identities. It is important to also note that Bitia Zakeri, an Iranian scholar was another layer and part of the reliability and validity of our study. While she was not directly involved in data collection, she was actively engaged in the analysis and coding process of the larger data set, and she was instrumental in asking clarifying questions regarding the data analysis process.

The role of the researcher as an instrument of data collection requires the researcher to acknowledge his or her own personal experiences, values, assumptions, beliefs, and biases that can contribute to and alter how the data is interpreted (Yin, 2003). It is important to disclose that both authors identify as African American women scholars. Thus, their positionality may have had a significant influence on why students felt comfortable with the researchers during the study. We could relate to the importance of developing one's own self-awareness, self-efficacy, and motivation. We share our issues of *positionality* or the relationships between the students and ourselves by positioning ourselves within the study. Additionally, we utilized reflexive techniques of journaling as a mode of archiving, note-taking, and questioning that proved useful as the study progressed. Reflexivity is the "process of critical self-reflection on one's biases, theoretical predispositions, and preferences" (Luttrell, 2010, p. 3).

Manifesto Assignment

Manifestos were one curricular activity and a final product of the CIC. Students were provided the following prompt for the assignment:

You are to put yourself forward as a scholar and write your own personal scholar's manifesto. This is an opportunity for you to share, not only who you are, but also what you are willing to change to ensure that you continue your education and remain on a scholarly

path. This manifesto is a representation of who you are as a person and a Balfour scholar. Please take pride in your manifesto. It should also reflect the scholarly work and discussions that you have engaged throughout the Balfour program, as well as detail a clear plan of action with objectives.

Please consider the following:

- *Who you are?*
- *What are the intersections that inform your identity most?*
- *The people who have influenced you.*
- *Why you consider yourself to be a scholar*
- *Five academic goals you have for the current school year.*
- *2-3 tensions that you might face as you try to meet those goals. How you plan to accomplish your goals?*
- *How you plan to use your knowledge and resources?*
- *What are your objectives: things you plan to do once you reach your goals?*
- *Your Manifesto should be grammatically correct and free of mechanical errors. I encourage you to let someone proofread your manifesto.*

Please note: I am open to creative formats as long as you meet the requirements of your assignment.

While the manifesto is not necessarily a poem, it utilized some aspects of June Jordan's Poetry for the People (P4P) framework (Muller and the Poetry for the People Blueprint Collective, 1995) as it has an integrated educational social justice agenda that utilizes writings as an empowering critical medium to move individuals toward social transformation (Jocson, 2006, p. 130). The P4P approach utilizes writing to shape the level of sociopolitical consciousness and actions of historically marginalized populations. Poetry in the context of P4P is utilized as 1) a medium for telling the "truth," 2) reaching for maximum impact through the use of a minimal number of words, and 3) demanding utmost precision word by word (Muller and the Poetry for the People Blueprint Collective, 1995, p. 36). The scholars' manifestos were based on their lived experiences (truth), being purposeful (impact), and attentive with language (precision). The African American young women were "using their pens to fight back, writing became a vehicle to define their lives" (Muhammad, 2015, p. 227). Unfortunately, due to space constraints, we are unable to share multiple examples of students' powerful writings, but below we share four representative manifestos of African American young women. Their words portray how they were able to use their writings as a form of literacy to grapple with tensions and write their worlds (Freire, 1970).

Balfour Scholar Manifesto Examples

Manifesto #1

Mirror, mirror on the wall, who am I after all?

By: Balfour Scholar

Who am I? I used to always wonder who I was or am. When I look in the mirror I see, someone who I don't know personally, but the face looks so familiar. I look at myself as a norm. Most people look at me as a black girl, who won't exceed at her goals. I am an African American who is smart, talks correctly, and quiet. They think I am loud, ghetto, dumb, stay on the streets,

get in trouble, will get pregnant, and have a smart mouth. That is not who I am. I have goals and achievements. I want to be known as the girl who made it.

Who influences me? My parents and grandmother influence me. Even though my grandmother passed, I still look at her as my hero. My grandmother always told me to succeed and do better than what she did. Her dream was to see me walk across the stage. I consider myself as a scholar because I want to go to college, I want to succeed, and I want to achieve my goals. My 5 academic goals for the current school year are to graduate, get scholarships, get into a great college, get good grades, and go job shadowing as much as I can. Some tensions I might face, it's going to be hard to finish and someone will tell me that I can't do it. I plan to achieve my goals by staying focus and putting aside the things I don't need to worry about. I plan to use my knowledge and resources to get farther in life and to get connected with people in my career. Once I achieve my goals, I plan on going to work in my career or opening my own business.

As a conclusion, I am so proud I join the scholar program; it has helped me find myself. I understand that I can make anything happen if I put my mind to it. I know my grandmother would be so proud of what I have achieved. I am a scholar. I am who I am, and I'm blessed.

Manifesto #2

"No Words"

By: Balfour Scholar

The many tensions that pull at me.

The different parts that make my intersectionality.

Often leaves me wondering, what is my true identity.

Growing up surrounded by white.

Always fighting the same fight, Black against white, common stereotypes.

I'm black so I have to be uneducated.

Drop out of high school,

Impregnated.

Then there's the me that is a girl

Growing up facing a hard world,

I can't play football because it's too rough

But how else am I to learn how to be tough.

Working twice as hard to prove I can

But, sadly, life would be easier if I was a man.

Struggling to find myself in the dark,

Looking for an answer and following my heart.

I realize I'm gay, and now a new struggle begins.

Should I tell everyone or keep the secret and not tell my friends.

Regardless of which I choose,

This is my identity no one can walk in my shoes.

I aspire, not only to be great.

But to inspire.

It's one thing to make it in the world.

But it means nothing if I don't help other little boys and girls.

College.

That's my dream. To graduate, even get a Ph.D.
But to accomplish my dreams, do I need to hide my homosexuality,
The thing that defines me, an intersection,
That's part of my identity.
I have to work harder than anyone else,
To graduate, get a job, and do good for myself,
Because I'm black, a hard worker, and a girl,
Unfortunately, that's not enough in this world.
I have to change, think, and adjust my ways.
Fight this battle and get better every day
And finish strong
And I know I can't go wrong, because I'm a scholar.
Scholar, that's what they call me.
Believing in me and my ability.
To change the world. One step at a time.
To survive in this world,
Even though I'm gay, black, and a girl
I have to leave them speechless
While I show the world
And soar like a bird

Manifesto #3

Black. No brown because God carved me from the finest soil on this Earth. Smiling, because my hair shares the story of my ancestors as my naps freely, happily, wildly express my roots and sun-kissed skin. I am a lioness. I am a black queen. I am Trinity. I am a scholar. I am the future. I will not let societal norms stop me from being the exception. I will be an Honor student. I will be Top 30. I will be an IASB state award winner. I will be organized. I will succeed at the post-secondary level. With the help of family, instructors, a planner, and classmates who envision the same goals, I will be my best. I'm the hungriest I've ever been and the most driven I've ever been. I am black excellence. Yes, I am a woman. Yes, I am a minority. Yes, college is out of my financial means. But dear God I'm here. I'm here and my dreams are valid. All my life I've fought. I've fought discrimination. I've fought anxiety. I've fought my own thoughts about myself. A young black woman isn't accepted into this world of hatred and prejudice within the education system. I love the critical thoughts my mind configures. Lord knows I'm thankful for the abilities of the human mind. But I'll destroy negative thoughts before I ever let them defeat, consume, or trap me because I am a scholar, and I will succeed.

Manifesto #4

An African American girl sits in the back of the class.
Sectioned off from the world due to her past.
Her mom a father and mother to two--who dedicates her life to better theirs.

A believer of success; passion runs through her veins for a better life than the one whence she came. It's the life of a scholar that she wants to live-- to make her mother proud and pass on to her kids.

To graduate with honors, get all of her credits, study, participate and stay constant are things she wishes to accomplish, but there are walls that she must break to reach them.

Break past the wall of reservation, haters, and discrimination because she knows a better life awaits a scholar.

Determination, dedication, and her mother keeps her—a future lawyer her mom sees in her daughter's eyes.

If the girl succeeds; so, does her mother.

A strong African American single mother of two --chanting proudly for her scholar, it's her reason for life her reason for my life

I am that African American Girl sitting in the back of the class for the events that happened in the past.

A strong young black woman.

A scholar, nonetheless, but a future lawyer I will rest.

Critical Self-Awareness

Manifestos became powerful writings that illustrated the tensions that these African American young women faced. They captured their sheer resilience and resolve to succeed in spite of their challenges. It also allowed them to reposition themselves in powerful ways and create counter-narratives to master narratives informed by whiteness. Their manifestos provided a way of better understanding how “marginalized youth name and shape their social worlds—worlds that are often pathologized or hidden from public view” (Jocson, 2006, p. 131). Moreover, the young women's manifestos demonstrated how when given the opportunity Black young women not only articulate their realities and tensions but are also determined to defy stereotypes and see themselves in powerful transformative and successful ways. We utilized a thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) of each manifesto to explore African American young women's self-definition and complex representation. Through a thematic analysis, we argue that the manifestos made visible five processes that need to be acknowledged and understood in relation to the identity and educational experiences of Black youth, especially, African American young women. The African American adolescent girls in our study were multidimensional storied beings whose identities informed their lived and perceived realities. These processes include:

1. **Self-Empowerment:** Self-empowerment was demonstrated when scholars shared their lived experiences and made declarative liberating statements about their potential to excel. In her manifesto, one scholar avowed, "I'll destroy negative thoughts before I ever let them defeat, consume, or trap me because I am a scholar, and I will succeed" (see manifesto #3). This scholar knew she had the power to disrupt the narrative created by dominant cultural norms; she had the power to rewrite her story and become successful. Another scholar stated, "Believing in me and my ability. To change the world. One step at a time. To survive in this world. Even though I'm gay, black, and a girl I have to leave them speechless. While I show the world. And soar like a bird" (see manifesto #2). Scholars made declarative, liberating, and affirming statements about their futures in relation to grades, college, careers, and other goals. Empowerment is particularly salient for these young Black women

scholars; they knew that their success was paramount for themselves, their families, and their communities. The scholars engaged in acts of resistance, began to develop a Black women's consciousness, and wanted to transcend the confines of their intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, and sexuality (bell hooks, 1994; Collins, 2000). Students shared how their injustices inspired and catapulted them to work against negative identity stereotypes when it came to college-going behaviors.

2. ***Double Consciousness/Intersections/Tensions:*** This process involved scholars writing about their authentic selves and challenging stigmatized identities. Often, they sought recognition for new identities and deconstructed restrictive social categories (Ginwright, Noguera, & Cammarota, 2006, p. 23). One scholar wrote in her manifesto: "Struggling to find myself in the dark, looking for an answer, and following my heart. I realize I'm gay, and now a new struggle begins. Should I tell everyone or keep the secret and not tell my friends" (see manifesto #2). This same scholar discussed how she as a Black girl is often stereotyped as "uneducated" and someone who will eventually be "impregnated." Her manifesto makes visible intersections but also tensions based on how others perceive her. Crenshaw's (1989) seminal work described the ways in which race and gender identities intersect and uniquely shape one's experiences in education. Scholars began to explore intersectionality by understanding that identities interacted on multiple and often simultaneous levels, contributing to systematic social inequality. Furthermore, scholars began to articulate the trauma and social injustices that they faced as they navigated various identity intersections. One scholar demonstrates this tension in her manifesto, she writes "An African American girl sits in the back of the class. Sectioned off from the world due to her past" (see manifesto #4). Manifestos often illustrated that young African Americans were aware of past notions of race and gender informed their identity, and these stigmatized perceptions continue to exist to this day.
3. ***Negotiations:*** This process made visible how scholars negotiated tensions and how they worked hard to combat stereotypes by connecting to family, friends, and/or community. Scholars shared how stereotypes existed both inside and outside of the classroom and how they could be malicious or unintentionally hurtful. One scholar wrote, "My grandmother always told me to succeed and do better than what she did" (see manifesto #1). For this scholar, her elder provided wisdom, motivation, and support to excel despite the societal oppression. Another wrote, "A strong African American single mother of two—chanting proudly for her scholar, it's her reason for life her reason for my life" (see manifesto #4). These examples demonstrate where youth find support and encouragement to deal with tensions. Notably, all mention family as a source of inspiration, a catalyst to aspire for more.
4. ***Legacy/ Paying Forward:*** The process of legacy and paying it forward acknowledged a sense of legacy and cultural connectedness as well as a sense of responsibility to blaze a better trail for those who might have similar plights. Scholars acknowledged something beyond themselves. One scholar wrote: "I aspire, not only to be great. But to inspire. It's one thing to make it in the world. But it means nothing if I don't help other little boys and girls" (see manifesto #2). This example speaks to the desire to become a social change agent. She recognizes knowledge is power and understands the potential impact it could

have on her community. Another scholar affirmed, “I plan to use my knowledge and resources to get farther in life and to get connected with people in my career. Once I achieve my goals, I plan on going to work in my career or opening my own business” (see manifesto #1). She viewed education as a fundamental component to progress professionally.

- 5. *Black Identity Development:*** This process is awareness and affirmation of one’s identity. Identity formation is extremely important in the developmental experiences of students of color as they transition to postsecondary education. One scholar affirmed, “Black. No brown because God carved me from the finest soil on this Earth. Smiling, because my hair shares the story of my ancestors as my naps freely, happily, wildly express my roots and sun-kissed skin. I am a lioness. I am a Black queen” (see manifesto #3). The scholars had a space to have courageous conversations and challenging dialogues about race, which in turn allowed them to reflect, grow, and hopefully transform. For some race was a salient identity and they were constantly aware of this identity on a daily basis. Another scholar declared, “I am an African American who is smart, talks correctly, and quiet. They think I am loud, ghetto, dumb, stay on the streets, get in trouble, will get pregnant, and have a smart mouth. That is not who I am. I have goals and achievements. I want to be known as the girl who made it” (see manifesto #1). Race was a key anchor for students and impacted how they perceived themselves and others. Robinson and Biran (2004) emphasized, “identity is what anchors a person to a cultural reality, and it is what helps to maintain a focus that motivates academic success” (p. 51). Students valued their racial identity; they began to develop a sense of purpose and reinforced their motivation to excel in environments.

Closing Thoughts: The Power to Strive

Our work with these rising high school seniors aligns with the work of scholars such as Muhammad (2012), Jocson (2006), Kirkland (2008), and Fisher (2007) and further illustrates the impact of providing opportunities for “powerful” writing and purposefully integrating students’ cultures and identities into the curriculum. When students are provided spaces to explore their identities, they begin to raise their consciousness about issues in their lives and in the lives of others. When students understand their identities and intersectionalities, they become better scholars by enhancing self-awareness, self-efficacy, and motivation.

The manifesto is one example of an innovative curricular assignment that illustrates how to support the literacy learning of African American young women and facilitate critical reflection about themselves and their society. The manifesto also serves as one curricular example for teachers that can provide students with powerful and meaningful ways to engage in writing. Words have the power to educate and transform not only our students but for us as well. Words can challenge our understanding of “other,” our classrooms, spaces in which we reside, and also make visible hidden spaces of privilege that we occupy.

We acknowledge that some educators may refuse to facilitate such curricular engagements and/or engage topics of race or identity for multiple reasons, such as personal reluctance or discomfort; the perception that such issues are irrelevant to course topics; or the view that such engagements would violate the goal of value-neutrality (Love, Gaynor, & Blessett, 2016). In reflection, we realize that even as African American women scholars who are not strangers to the challenges that these young women faced, such curricular engagements were critical.

Manifestos provided us with information that was invaluable in understanding and supporting African American young women. It made visible their sense of critical self-awareness and five processes that helped us better understand how they negotiate their identities in relation to power, oppression, and privilege as they navigate their education.

Moreover, we also realize that in many ways what we are sharing is not necessarily new. Throughout our article, we cite scholars whose scholarship has facilitated multiple conversations about the “unique struggles” and experiences of African Americans and Black young women in the U.S. educational system (Evans-Winters, 2011; Lane, 2017; Muhammad & Dixon, 2008); however, our findings suggest that until teacher education programs, classroom teachers, educational administrators, policymakers, and educational researchers begin to fully understand the consequences of inequitable curricula and practices grounded in racist ideologies on Black youth, particularly African American young women, there will continue to be a need to study and make visible African American young women’s experiences in hopes of filling knowledge gaps and dismantling and revisioning these historically oppressive educational spaces. It is in the spirit of a manifesto, we also assert that to dismantle, revise, and reassess teacher education programs, classroom, and curriculum, we must be committed to achieving the following:

- Teacher education programs (T.E.P.) must build capacity to meaningfully teach and apprentice pre-service teachers around issues of equity and inclusion, particularly what it means to be critically self-aware, as well as how to engage in ongoing reflective and valuation of curricular practices to ensure equity, inclusion, and learning for all students, especially those from historically marginalized communities.
- T.E.P.’s must propel and require teachers to develop proficiency and competency in listening to the silences, the nuanced ways that African American young women negotiate their identities (see Carter, 2001) and assessing not only how and if they are hearing the voices of African American young women, but also if their curriculum silences and/or supports them.
- T.E.P.’s must model experiences that provide pre-service teachers with opportunities to think and engage curriculum in innovative ways beyond traditional formats.
- Classroom teachers and educational administrators must engage and listen to historically marginalized communities and fearlessly educate themselves about their unique challenges.
- Classroom teachers and educational administrators must creatively advocate and innovate to create spaces within their curriculum and schools that allow African American young women the power to strive. Specifically, they must provide them opportunities as Freire (1970) notes, to “write the[ir] world” in ways that run counter to dominant perspectives and reposition themselves in powerful and resilient ways.
- Educational researchers must continue to build on the work of Black scholars and Black feminists and generate scholarship that foregrounds the perspective and experiences of African American and Black young women.

Our work illustrates that developing curricular opportunities creates transformative spaces for young African American girls to speak their truths. The students understood their manifestos in “a new light: as creative and innovative rather than ‘wrong,’ as a powerful symbol of family and community belonging rather than as a marginalized practice” (Bucholtz, Casillas, & Lee, 2017, p. 55). Equally important, this experience expanded our understanding of the impact of developing and supporting intentional spaces that encouraged African American young women to

explore their identities. We argue that curricular engagements like manifestos can begin to fill knowledge gaps and expand the cultural understandings of practices of future educators as well as educational researchers. It is imperative in an increasingly diverse and ever-changing world that the curriculum in today's classrooms go beyond standardized test prep and traditional essays that are often driven by policies like *No Child Left Behind* and *Race to the Top*. Unfortunately, while these types of policies may be well-intentioned, they are often implemented in ways that further marginalize and disenfranchise African American young women and students of color (Howard, 2015). We argue that including writing opportunities such as manifestos are crucial components of an equitable and inclusive curriculum because they demonstrate how literacy can be utilized to make visible that which is often hidden, and "create new realities" that expand students' and teachers' perspectives.

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