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# Oooh, It's Sooo Good!!!: Black Adolescent Females Experiencing the Delicacy of Reading

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## Oooh, It's Sooo Good!!!: Black Adolescent Females Experiencing the Delicacy of Reading

### **Abstract**

Black adolescent females have largely been neglected in the research literature on their avid reading. While Gibson (2010) explained that Black girls are often portrayed in the literature as struggling and even “remedial” readers, those Black adolescent females who are avid readers receive even less attention. The purpose of this study, then, was to investigate the voracious reading proclivities of this population in order to provide a balanced view of Black adolescent females’ reading lives. The findings of this phenomenological study indicate that these five participants go beyond loving reading; they crave it. The meaning of reading for these participants is caught up in their relationships with role models, preference for solitude while reading, and the desire for social interactions after having read texts. This study is significant because it provides a different perspective on the traditional literacy of Black adolescent females.

### **Keywords**

Black Females, Adolescents, Phenomenology, Avid Readers, Reading

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## ***Oooh, It's Sooo Good!!!:*** **Black Adolescent Females Experiencing the Delicacy of Reading**

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Black adolescent females have largely been neglected in the research literature on their avid reading. While Gibson (2010) explained that Black girls are often portrayed in the literature as struggling and even “remedial” readers, those Black adolescent females who are avid readers receive even less attention. Through the use of phenomenology, this researcher closely examined the practices, mindsets, and contexts of these avid readers, up close and personal, through their eyes and perspectives in order to understand Black adolescent female readers anew. This phenomenological study was designed to examine this population of readers by asking: In what ways do five Black adolescent females undergo and respond to reading experiences and contexts? Before answering this question, one must first unpack the problem.

Before unpacking the problem, it should be noted that throughout the findings, metaphors for enjoying food delicacies are used because the girls experienced reading as a delicacy to be enjoyed. Erykah<sup>1</sup>, a Black adolescent female I talked with in relationship to this study, and Kayla, one of the participants, repeatedly commented on a book, or book series with, “It was sooo good,” as if they had tasted a highly desired food. Erykah was the first of the Black females to catch my attention with the phrase, “It [a book series] was sooo good.” When talking about her favorite out-of-school book series, *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008), Erykah shared how she tried to persuade her family to read it or hear her talk about it because “it was sooo good.” As she described her most treasured reading experiences, her descriptions, voice inflections, and body language seemed similar to those of food connoisseurs. She was deeply steeped and in love with text beyond word description; it was similar to tasting the best food ever. Therefore, although she was not a participant, Erykah’s conversation with me when she repeatedly used the phrase, “it was sooo good,” helped launch my investigation into the meaning of reading for the other Black females in this study, one of whom, Kayla, also used the phrase. All in all, through the investigation, I found that, for these participants, reading and thinking were life-sustaining for them every bit as much as food.

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<sup>1</sup>All names included herein are pseudonyms.

## Conceptual Background

### The Problem

Although more Black adolescent females are performing better in reading, these gains have largely been unexamined. At the secondary and post-secondary levels, boys have long outperformed girls on national measures of reading performance (Cohen, White, & Cohen, 2012). Even though recent evidence indicates that this gender gap is reversing, especially for reading (Freeman, 2004), the emphasis on Black adolescent female struggling readers prevails. For example, data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) shows that 12th grade females in 2005 outperformed male students in reading by a wider margin than they did in 1992. While more Black adolescent females are performing better in reading (Cohen, White, & Cohen, 2012), many are still lagging behind their Caucasian and Asian counterparts (Gibson, 2010).

Indeed, the performance gains and gap closing made by Black adolescent females have gone largely unexamined by scholars who could examine questions about: What excites Black adolescent females about reading? How do they use reading? How important is it to relate to events and characters?

The result is an absence of evidence that examines the strengths of this population of readers. The limited evidence available suggests that the Black adolescent females who do not excel in reading are not engaged with culturally-relevant texts, interesting texts, and culturally-sensitive pedagogy (Brooks, Sekayi, Savage, Waller, & Picot, 2010; Davis, 2000; Gibson, 2010; Sutherland, 2005). If engaged, these scholars argue, Black adolescent females would enjoy reading more, do more reading, and thereby, become more proficient readers.

### Engagement and Reading

The correlation between engagement (i.e., interest and motivation) and reading comprehension has long been observed regardless of setting, participants, or methodology. Jiménez and Duke (2011), for example, using quantitative analyses, found that “even after controlling for prior knowledge, students’ actual comprehension, as measured by recall, was much higher when students were reading on a topic of interest” (as cited in Duke et al., 2011, p. 61). Finders (1997) using ethnographic methods, found that Caucasian adolescent girls engaged with texts that served as guide books for life, especially fictional texts about relationships, social memberships, and sexuality, just to name a few. These studies and many others demonstrate that engagement is closely correlated with reading comprehension for all youth.

The habits, identities, relationships, contexts, and dispositions of engaged readers have been found to follow consistent patterns. For example, Strommen and Mates (2004), found that tweens and teens who were engaged readers tended to:

- (a) ...regularly interact around books with other members of their social circle who love to read;
- (b) ...see being an active member of a community of readers as an important part of their identity;
- (c) [have] parents or other family members...explicitly prioritize reading as a recreational activity;
- (d) ...have access to plentiful, varied reading materials; and
- (e) ...love reading.

Of particular importance is the literature suggesting there is a connection between engagement and self-concept or identity.

### **Engagement in Reading and Self-Concept/Identity**

Pitcher and colleagues (2007) noted the relationship between engagement and identity. In their implementation of the Adolescent Motivation to Read Profile, which assessed adolescents' motivation to read, they noted in one of their themes discrepancies between students' views of themselves as readers in school versus out of school. In most instances, students' self-concepts as readers and their value of reading coincided with their reading choices and overall enjoyment of reading. However, there were several exceptions to this expectation. For instance, some students claimed on the survey that they never liked to read, but when interviewed, indicated that they read magazines and other material. Pitcher and colleagues (2007) suggested these incongruous findings reflected the disconnect between academic and pleasure reading.

Luttrell and Parker (2001), similarly, argued that students form their identities within and in opposition to the worlds of school, work, and family. For example, "Alice," a high school student in their study, engaged in literacy practices that were not recognized in school. She thought her enjoyment of journal and poetry writing and everyday reading materials was disconnected from the world of school. Alice's thinking was reinforced when her teacher advised her to choose a simpler poem for a project because the one she chose and loved required too much research. Thus, Alice's identity as a reader was not acknowledged, and, as a result, she was not engaged in academic reading.

Sutherland (2005) specifically commented on the identity development of Black adolescent females in relationship to culturally-relevant texts. In her study of Black adolescent females reading *The Bluest Eye* in their high school English class, she found that the girls, in their group and individual interviews with her, "constructed identities as they validated, modified, or contested the ability of others' ascriptions of identity to act as boundaries in their lives" (p. 365). In other words, the females were able to contest and construct their identities because they were able to connect with the literature. Reading literature by and/or about Black females might have been the reason that girls also take to reading these kinds of texts outside of school. Sutherland's findings, which indicate that there is a meaningful relationship between engagement in reading and positive identity formation for all students, including Black adolescent females, leads to the need for more research about motivation to read for this group. According to these authors, engagement promotes positive identity development because when Black adolescent females see themselves in literature, they become more engaged with it because they identify with it.

### **Black Adolescent Females' Engagement for School Achievement**

Given the positive correlation between engagement and reading comprehension, the relationship between engagement and other factors, and the connection between engagement and self-concept/identity, what does the literature indicate about the motivation for reading among Black adolescent females in particular (Luttrell & Parker, 2001; Pitcher et al., 2007;)? The most prominent pattern in the literature is that reader engagement is closely linked to the cultural content of texts (Brooks, Sekayi, Savage, Waller, & Picot, 2010; Gibson, 2010; Sutherland, 2005). If the text reflected relevant life experiences to the Black adolescent female reader, then she was more engaged.

Gibson (2010), for example, argued that "unsanctioned" literature like urban fiction, which many Black adolescent females read outside of school, could improve the academic

achievement of Black adolescent females. In contrast, Brooks, Sekayi, Savage, Waller, and Picot (2010) argued that culturally-relevant literature, which has been endorsed by organizations such as the American Library Association (ALA) and the International Reading Association (IRA), and has been sanctioned by many school districts in different parts of the United States, are better suited to improve the academic achievement of Black adolescent females. Yet other scholars (e.g., Davis, 2000) argued that culturally-relevant texts that focus on Black adolescent females' life experiences are not necessarily a key factor for improving academic achievement; instead, it is whether or not the universal themes (i.e., unconnected to race) of the female characters were relatable.

This lack of consensus about the reasons behind Black adolescent females' engagement in reading was another impetus for this study. This work not only adds to this scant body of literature, but it also puts forth the voices of these girls in a way that not only uncovers motivation for their avid reading, but also empowers them as they share this important practice that debunks stereotypical images of them as struggling readers.

Most of the previous scholars have argued for culturally-relevant texts that engage Black adolescent females in out-of-school reading to be infused in their school settings. Belzer (2002) also found that their older sisters/counterparts, Black women, initially disliked in-school reading as adolescents because the texts were not culturally-relevant, and therefore, not engaging. Furthermore, they were discontented that there was no student choice over which texts to read. When given culturally-relevant texts of their choice in a GED program, participants read more than was required.

All in all, the arguments for using culturally-relevant literature to engage Black adolescent females all bear attention because of the possible connection to their engagement with texts. Consequently, this study focused on the lived experiences of Black adolescent females who love to read. The findings illuminated the meanings of their experiences, and therefore give insight into their avid reading habits. Hopefully, this study will better inform educators about fostering the love of reading for this population.

### **Theoretical Tradition**

To better understand the theoretical, conceptual, textual, personal, educational, and practical context for a study about the out-of-school engagement of Black adolescent females, I reviewed three related areas of scholarship: Black feminist thought, Afrocentric feminist epistemology, and Critical Race Feminism. For the purposes of this study, Critical Race Feminism (CRF) was the most relevant because it aligned with the study's intentions theoretically, methodologically, and situationally. The following paragraphs outline CRF as it relates to this study.

### **Critical Race Feminism**

The origins of CRF are in legal academic scholarship, where it emphasized the legal concerns of a significant group of people – “those who are both women and members of today's racial/ethnic minorities, as well as disproportionately poor” (Wing, 2003, p. 1). It provided explanatory power for how these women managed multiple identities in current society and for the challenges they faced living at the “intersectionality” of life as women of color.

Critical Race Feminists also use controversial narrative or storytelling techniques as a method to counteract the dominant discourse (Berry, 2010; Wing, 2003). This method is a perfect complement to phenomenology. My goal was to get at the girls' stories about their reading lives.

Important in CRF is also critical race praxis. Adherents to CRF believe that they are responsible for acting to alleviate the pain and despondency of their sisters. It is not enough to theorize about CRF; one must also put beliefs to action (Berry, 2010; Wing, 2003). Giving my participants a voice in sharing their reading experiences and appreciating their contributions was my way of enacting a critical race praxis. Again, I valued their stories by indicating the importance of their accounts to them during the interviews. I also offered to recommend books and help them in their academic endeavors beyond the data collection if they wanted the assistance. By demonstrating my sincere interest in them and their stories, I believe my interactions with the girls enriched their lives.

Nevertheless, Critical Race Feminists' are also knowledgeable about the possibility of essentialism, which is evident in Critical Race Theory and feminism (Berry, 2010). However, this knowledge about essentialism makes us more sensitive to the possibility of this practice in our research. It is important to avoid essentialism because even within a race, there are differences. The possibility was important as I considered my identity as a Black female reader as I made meaning out of the stories of my participants. I did not want to tell their story only from the lens of my own experiences with reading. As a Black female literacy education researcher, it is important to me to get balanced views of the literacy capabilities of marginalized populations in the scholarly world. So often, there is a focus on the negative aspects of our lives, so it is critical to me to share some of the positive aspects of our existence not only to enlighten some readers but to also uplift my fellow fighters for justice.

However, CRF reminded me to examine my pre-understandings about reading with those understandings of the participants. This checking was done from both my stance and theirs, recurrently, until I could come to truthful, sound, and insightful meanings of their reading experiences.

## **Methods**

Given the argument formed in the preceding pages, the gap-filling research question for this study was: What is the nature of the experience of reading like for Black adolescent females who enjoy reading? To deeply examine and construct answers to this question from the lived experiences of Black adolescent females who enjoyed reading, phenomenology was used as the methodological means for collecting, analyzing, and representing their experiences (Van Manen, 1990).

### **Participant Selection**

Prior to participant selection, I secured approval from the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects to conduct this study. The participants for this study were comprised of five Black adolescent females from two Midwestern cities in the United States; two attended an affluent suburban high school and the other three attended an urban high school. Only five females were selected in order to allow for close examination of a few detailed, unpacked stories (Van Manen, 1990). These participants also came from two similar contexts, and I wanted to retain that continuity. I chose two different school settings with the initial intention of comparing any possible urban and suburban influences. After collecting the data, however, I decided that the similarities outweighed the differences. For this study, I used criterion sampling (Creswell, 2007) in order to establish that all participants experienced the phenomenon. I also chose to work with high school students (ages 16 - 18) instead of middle school students (ages 13 - 15) because of their increased ability to recall and think aloud with me about their love of reading.

I recruited the participants from the urban school by connecting with an English teacher in the area that I had worked with collaboratively five years earlier. This teacher knew her students well, and she allowed me to meet and explain my study to the participants near the end of the school day. All but two of the Black female students consented to participate in the study after giving it careful thought and consulting with their parent/guardian/case manager. One of the females who declined ended up leaving the school soon after our introduction, and the other young female did not get back to me in time to participate. The fact that nearly all of the Black adolescent females met my requirement of loving to read is mostly due to this urban teacher knowing and caring about her students deeply, meaning, she cared about their reading and other interests in and out of school. Prior to gauging the participants' love of reading through interviews, this teacher's input was extremely helpful. After the teacher recommended them, I also talked with these girls outside of the teacher's classroom, and briefly asked them about their love of reading.

To recruit the participants from the affluent suburban school, I solicited the help of a colleague who allowed me to interview her daughter who in turn shared the study topic with a friend, who also shared the information with her friend. However, I did use exclusionary parameters in determining participants for the data analysis. To explain, if the interview responses did not lend themselves to the development of phenomenological meanings in terms of telling complete stories or anecdotes, I excluded the Black adolescent female as a participant in the data analysis since the stories were not present to analyze.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

**Interviews.** The primary source of data was "conversational" interviews, and I followed procedures consistent with phenomenology in order to encourage participants to tell "personal life stories" (Van Manen, 1990, pp. 66-67). I asked questions during my three interviews with participants that lent themselves to having participants tell stories, anecdotes, and examples in rich, concrete detail. The interviews lasted about an hour each usually in a private room at the public library. From these narratives, I was able to later develop richer meanings of the phenomenon of loving to read.

In the interviews, I asked two different types of questions: in-school reading and out-of-school reading. By asking about these two reading environments, I captured a rounded picture of the girls as readers. I was interested in seeing whether their love of reading would remain the same regardless of the in- or out-of-school context.

For the first interview, I asked about their favorite book, essay, poem, or other written text. I wanted to know what they enjoyed about it, if the experience made them want to read more of that type of book or books in general (or other texts), if anyone had an impact on their love of reading, if they conversed about it with their friends, and other evolving questions from their previous responses. For the second interview, I inquired about their in-school reading experiences. I asked if they had a favorite book or other written text from school and if they had similar connections as they did with the out-of-school texts. I went through those initial first-interview questions again, if applicable, in this in-school reading interview, but also explored aspects involved in their like or dislike of in-school reading and how these aspects differed from what constituted meaningful reading out-of-school.

In sum, I looked for some experiences that demonstrated their love of reading. I also wanted to understand how these experiences played into their identity and impacted their peer relationships. Also important during the interview was to probe the participants into how they used reading, the reasons they read, and how the characters (if there were any) stayed with them after they had read the text. Finally, I wanted to know the differences in their love of reading when it came to in- and out-of-school texts.

**Home visit.** Getting the full picture of my participants' reading lives required more than interviews, so I visited their homes after the first two interviews to see their reading environments<sup>2</sup>, and asked what they liked most about it, how they prepared to read when there, how they felt in that environment, and if they would change something about it, what would that be, along with follow-up questions. Seeing their reading environment opened up a different, important dimension of their reading lives. The home visit was the last stage in the data collection process (Van Manen, 1990).

The data I collected included notes on reading inventory, audio recording of the participants explaining how their reading environment made them feel or how it made it more conducive for reading, and audio recording on the reading life of parents and siblings and how that influenced their love of reading.

**Activity.** During one of the interviews, I asked the participants to bring two artifacts that depicted their love of reading and to come prepared to tell me why these artifacts were important to them. Then I invited them to tell a story about the artifact and its connection with their reading experiences (e.g., tell me about a time when you read and lost track of time and missed dinner or a sport). This artifact, like the home visit, gave a richer perspective of their reading lives. Van Manen (1990) also explained using art (e.g., painting, music, film, sculpture) and literary sources (e.g., poetry, stories, plays) as textual resources for phenomenological writing, so I asked the participants to similarly bring artifacts to give a more comprehensive view of their reading proclivities.

**Data analysis.** In my analysis of the interviews, I used hermeneutic phenomenology (Van Manen, 1990). The process involved listening to audio recordings of the girls' interviews multiple times and taking notes. I listened for ways in which they used reading, the reasons they read, for what purposes they read, and how the characters (if there were any) stayed with them after they had read the text, and so on. The analysis involved highlighting interesting statements, and taking marginal notes (Van Manen, 1990). This highlighting and note taking served as precursors for the development of themes. In the hermeneutic, iterative process, I developed themes by using my dialogue with the text described above as listening for the reasons they read, etc. while concurrently applying the theoretical framework, CRF, where I noted instances where their race and gender affected their views of reading and of the particular book at hand. I also used the discussions about the artifacts, during the home visit, as examples to substantiate the themes. For example, one of the participants, shared a children's book of African American folktales as an artifact, and talked about it in relation to her mother's influence on her reading. This artifact supported the first theme on the impact of role models. Next, the themes were carefully written in sentences, which told a story that explicitly explained the essence of the event while using beautiful prose. The entire thematic statement, then, was written artistically while maintaining the integrity of the experience.

In order to ensure rigor and trustworthiness, I received feedback from a colleague, astute and published in phenomenology, on my interview questions, methodological choices (e.g., home visits, focusing on out-of-school reading), and the development of themes. He asked probing questions and compared my thematic development to the quotes. His expertise was invaluable in the research process.

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<sup>2</sup> These participants read books at every opportunity, so they really had a number of reading environments. However, they had special places at home, their consistent dwelling, where they enjoyed reading.

## Findings

### Background for Themes

Three themes emerged from the data. I will focus in particular on out-of-school reading because these experiences had the more rich and nuanced textures that lent themselves more easily to phenomenological study. It seemed as if out-of-school reading was more pleasurable than in-school reading for these participants because their loved ones' and peers' presentation of reading as a pleasurable and beneficial activity made their own experiences of reading more meaningful. More specifically, and in line with the food metaphor, their loved ones and peers introduced the experience of reading as one to enjoy and delight in, one that is good for them in terms of bettering themselves academically and preparing them for economically-enhancing and fulfilling careers. In their efforts to introduce the benefits of reading, their loved ones seemed to especially stress that reading would make their lives more beautiful.

On the other hand, while their high school English teachers seemed to also want them to enjoy school-mandated or suggested novels, they often introduced them as something to be analyzed through the use of literary devices. While the girls mostly enjoyed their in-school books, they preferred to get lost in the story of a novel without also having to analyze it for these literary elements. In other words, they wanted to lose themselves in the book and relish the story and characters rather than a purely disembodied analysis of the book. So while Kayla continued to use and adapt an in-school book analysis sheet for *Fried Green Tomatoes*, a book she said she would read in her own time, this action was not consistent with her overall preference for out-of-school books. In fact, when asked if it was common for students to like what they read outside of school more than inside, she stated, "Uhm hm, because they're not forced to read it. I mean outside of school you pick what you want to read. Inside of school, you're told what you're supposed to read, and I mean there's this thing where you want to rebel against the school, and also the books they pick are super old." Being forced to read was about as pleasurable, in most cases, as being force fed. Food is more than nutrition, and reading is more than literary analysis. In both cases, soulfulness is exactly what is at stake, and what is needed.

Hence, for the purposes of this study, I chose to focus on the only experience that we might truly call reading: Black adolescent girls' engagement with out-of-school texts, and in particular, as we shall next see, plot-driven novels.

### Grounding and Organization of Findings

Throughout the findings, the themes focus on the lifeworld existentials of time and social interactions because of their pronounced appearance in the data. The lifeworld existential of time means exploring whom the girls are as people in relationship with time, especially as it relates to the busyness of a typical North American teenager's life. Focusing on time is the direct result of the girls' constant referral to it in their responses to my questions. In addition to time, social interactions around books made the reading experience more meaningful. Although reading a novel was an enjoyable solitary act, they also longed to share this experience with a caring other.

In order to elucidate the meaning of reading for these girls, the findings are organized into three themes, which flow in a temporal sequence—reflecting the temporal nature of the lived experience. The themes are the following:

- 1) Role models including, but not limited to, loved ones, educators, librarians, and book characters have an indelible influence on adolescents' affections for reading.
- 2) While reading a captivating book, we are so immersed into the action of the plot that passing time is irrelevant.
- 3) Developing and searching for companionship is essential for those wanting to share their passion for reading fascinating texts.

This temporal process described above flows first from the participants being introduced to reading and how that initial experience with reading was meaningful. In theme two, the girls were engrossed in the act of reading and wanted complete solitude, but as will be elucidated in theme three, they desired to share their reading experiences with peers and/or loved ones.

The findings section is structurally organized using the following format: a thematic sentence description; examples from the interviews, artifacts, and/or home visits to support and unpack the theme; and an interpretation of the examples. As mentioned in the introduction, metaphors for enjoying food delicacies are used throughout this section because the girls experienced reading as a delicacy to be enjoyed. The girls had a soulful gustatory relationship to reading—it was an act not only of bodily, but soulful, sustenance. While at times this is a relationship of slow and easy digestion, there are other moments where an inner hunger overwhelms these girls, and they devour plot, if not binge.

The food metaphor breaks down, however, in theme two that discusses how the time it takes to read a book becomes irrelevant to the girls. Instead of savoring each word, they raced through books and got “caught up” in the story anxiously wanting to know what happened next. It is at this time that their starvation for the story is different from the descriptions in other themes where they take their time in choosing excellent books to read (theme one) or partake in or wanting to share their experience of reading/ “eating” a book “sooo good” because they wanted their peers and loved ones to have that same experience just as other loved ones introduced this pastime of reading to them (theme three).

### **Rationale for Food Metaphor**

An example of this comparison to highly desired food comes from Erykah, the Black girl I talked with in relationship to this study, and Kayla, one of the participants, who repeatedly commented on a book, or book series with, “It was sooo good,” as if they had been starving for a good story that satisfies, and subsequently, read a book that was not only just good, but exceptional, similar to having a highly desired meal. Unlike most people who are ravenously hungry and grab for any and everything to satisfy their appetite, these participants were particular about choosing books that were engaging and captivating. As connoisseurs of good books, they were not satisfied with “eating” like ravenous people who eat whatever they can grab; rather, they sought gratification and soulful sustenance, choosing books based upon the book’s ability to draw them in. It was awe-inspiring to see these girls love, even obsess, over stories, because it was a picture rarely documented in academic literature. Loving to read is more than just a score; it is a way of life for these girls – part of their living, eating, and breathing.

To further explain, if I could continue Erykah’s or Kayla’s statement, “It’s sooo good,” I would add, “It’s sooo good, I can hardly stand it. I can’t even put into words how it is so good.” Their excitement while saying those words indicated that particular books were so good that, at the moment, it was hard to elucidate with words how or why it was so good. Although the statement “it was sooo good” was their initial description, they were later able to unpack that statement in our talks or interviews. The books were good for several reasons, including,

but not limited to, imagery, a portrayal of various points of view, dynamic characters, and vivid descriptions that evoke feelings such as compassion and outrage toward characters. The participants had become experts at what makes a book good. Their investigations included consulting peers, loved ones, and teachers; reading particular reviews on YouTube; reading the first chapters of a book; and even following the attractiveness of book covers into what made a book good for them. In short, the phrase, “It’s sooo good,” means more than the surface-level expectation of a delectable book, it stems from a deep hunger, even starvation, for rich stories, and it ends with a deeper satisfaction that is particular to these Black adolescent girls, which will be discussed throughout the themes and discussion.

### **Thematic Expositions**

*Theme One: Role models including, but not limited to, loved ones, educators, librarians, and book characters have an indelible influence on adolescents’ affections for reading.*

In our search for phenomenological meaning, it is important to study the life existential of social interactions. Before sharing their thoughts about books with others, the girls first had powerful connections with role models who encouraged them to take up reading. Their loved ones, educators, and/or librarians played a major role in the girls trying out books to see if they liked them. This tasting of books took on a life of its own as they found that the books were amazing, and something to be treasured as one cherishes good food that provides nourishing sustenance. The ways in which their role models, including a few schoolteachers and librarians, introduced books as something to take pleasure in took precedence over the didactic strategies (e.g., emphasizing literary elements for analysis) other teachers used to engage students in books. It was the presentation of books as an enjoyable, fulfilling activity that influenced these girls to try reading and experience it in a more meaningful way.

Again, the promptings to read from those role models started the impetus for their love of reading. Once they determined that reading was good, they decided to take hold of these reading experiences and make them a pastime that they also wanted others to try. In other words, role models became the influencers and communicators of the value of reading, so the girls wanted to share this same gift with loved ones and peers who had yet to taste the succulent words in well-written books. In addition to sharing with nonreaders, the participants also wanted camaraderie with peers who loved reading as much as they did. Consequently, the social aspects of reading for these Black adolescent girls are tied up in two ways. First, it is tied to their affections for their role models who encouraged them to try reading as something to enjoy, and second, the meaning of reading is caught up in their consequent desire to share their love of reading with others, as will be discussed in theme three.

In the beginning of her reading journey, Alexandra’s role models – her mother, teachers, and a school librarian – developed rapport with her and she in turn admired and respected them, which led to her often taking their advice and following their example. Because of her admiration for most teachers and a school librarian, she happily accepted their book suggestions, and found most of them fascinating, including her favorite book series, *The Hunger Games*.

Before her encounter with school role models, however, Alexandra’s mother primarily influenced her to read voraciously and to make African and African American texts an important part of her reading selections. According to Alexandra, her mother instilled pride in her for African and African American history, literature, and culture. Alexandra also recalled growing up with her mother reading her and her brother African American children’s stories in the book, *The People Could Fly: American Black Folktales*, told by Virginia Hamilton

(1993). She shared that this experience helped instill a sense of self-worth by seeing her value in an acculturating childhood book. Her mother's prodding to appreciate her race and culture, herself really, is a treasured experience for Alexandra, one that introduced her to the love of reading.

During my home visit, Alexandra explained that she loved those stories and showed me this book. She also excitedly talked about her mother's trip to Africa the previous summer, and how her mother was eager to share her experiences from the mother country with her children. Alexandra consistently and proudly spoke about her mother's influence on her tendency to subconsciously choose books by or about African Americans. However, Alexandra preferred only those books that did not possess overt images of racism, which will be explained later. Nevertheless, Alexandra's mother made her reading experiences a cultural one where Alexandra took pride in learning about her race and culture. This pride and love in African and African American culture encapsulated their close mother-daughter relationship around reading, and made the experience of it even more meaningful for Alexandra because her mother, who serves as her role model, was the stimulus for her favorite pastime. In fact, Alexandra stated:

A lot of it, it definitely comes from my mom. Uhm, she works for the Office of Multicultural Awareness which deals with a lot of cultural things that go on at ... and she's also just huge on African American culture. Like stuff all around our house. She went to Africa this summer. You know, she always talks about it. She would come to my old school. She would do Black History month for my school and and just always interested me. Always talked about, you know, our ancestors being slaves, uhm, stories like that. So that's something that comes from my mom, started off there...

As her role model, Alexandra's mother did indeed play an important role in Alexandra's love of and choices for reading.

Similar to Alexandra, the meaning of reading for Taylor is connected to her close relationship with her mother. In my interview with Taylor, she indicated that although her mother dislikes reading, she knew that avidly reading could open social and economic doors for her daughters, so when Taylor was a young child, her mother signed her up for a reading program. Through this program, the leaders would send books to their house, and her mother encouraged her to read those books, which Taylor did. Taylor also mentioned being involved in library reading programs in later summers where they were given a list of books that adolescents could read, and her mother "encouraged [her] to do that in the summer instead of just like laying around, being lazy in the summer." In this way, Taylor, like Alexandra, wanted to please her role model, her mother, when she first tasted reading to see if it was worthwhile. Furthermore, Taylor and her mother cared about being different from others who were "lazy in the summer" and did not read. Instead, Taylor wanted to be admired for her reading and resulting scholarly productivity during her summers so that she would gain admiration from teachers and future employers or clients as a result of avid reading. In this way, she cared about what people outside her immediate circle thought about her reading or what reading produced for her. Therefore, the meaning of reading for most of these girls meant not only pleasing their role models but also those in their schools and communities.

In contrast to Alexandra, however, Taylor also has an older sister who had a smaller, but significant impact on Taylor's love of reading, for she, too, is an avid reader. Taylor shared:

And then also with my sister, you know, she was always bringing home like big bags of books from the library...I know she really liked [the] *Harry Potter*

series, and she'd always talk about how good that was. And I personally could never get into *Harry Potter* but seeing how much she loved the books, I think that had some influence on me. Oh, maybe I could find a book that I love as much as she loves that series.

In Taylor's case, she did not necessarily want to please her sister; instead, she was emulating her. Taylor wanted the joy and satisfaction she saw her sister experiencing with reading, so that is why she tried it for herself. Taylor's admiration and desire to emulate her sister is also evident in the following response:

I know there are certain things about her that I look up to and definitely, I think reading is, her love of reading is definitely one of them. I think seeing her read instead of like doing, being out and doing other things that other people her age would do that might get them in trouble, I think is definitely something I look up to.

Although Taylor credits her mother as the primary influence and genesis for her love of reading, her sister serves as a model and friend in reading also, for Taylor holds elaborate conversations on books with her sister more than her mother and father, which will be expounded upon in theme three.

In line with Alexandra and Taylor, Sydney also credited her parents for fostering her love for reading. She shared that her mother reads as much as she does, which involved for Sydney, reading around five or six two hundred-plus page books a week. I witnessed her mother happily reading from her Nook in a corner of a restaurant where Sydney and I held our first interview. When commenting on her mother's reading habits, Sydney stated, "And so like I've gotten used to seeing her reading, and I always used to think, 'I wonder what she's reading about. And I wonder if I can read as much as she can, things like that.' So I had started reading, and then, I've just been kind of flying through books now." So like Taylor, Sydney wanted to experience the excitement her mother seemed to have for reading, and as a result of trying it, she is completely absorbed in it now.

Sydney's father also had a powerful influence on her love of reading. To explain, Sydney and her father enjoyed comic books. She noted:

Yeah. He – when he was younger, he used to read a lot of comic books and things like superheroes, like Marvel superheroes and DC superheroes. And like he kind of introduced me to, like, the world of Marvel and DC, and I got so interested in that, that's what I, that's when I started reading comic books and a lot of graphic novels. Things like that. And for a while, that was all I would ever read. And I would get through them in like maybe five or ten minutes, right after I got them from the library, so I would have to get a lot of them at one time.

Sydney's father not only introduced her to the world of comic books and superheroes, but he also encouraged her to read "chapter books" or novels. Sydney stated that he wanted her to "enhance her vocabulary... and "broaden [her] horizons other than just graphic novels all the time." Although Sydney has an older sister who influenced her to read the *Twilight* series, she credited her parents as the impetus for her love of reading because her sister was extremely busy in extracurricular activities, and she "really never saw her with a bunch of books." Similar to Alexandra and Taylor, the meaning of reading is found in Sydney's relationship with her role models, her parents. This admiration for their parents and other loved ones led these

participants to wanting to see for themselves why reading was so important and enjoyable. They wanted to taste and see.

Unlike the rest of the participants, Gabrielle primarily came to love reading through the role model in the form of a character. To explain, she needed an escape from the harsh realities of her foster care life, so the character Harry Potter served as someone with whom she could relate. To explain, she related to Harry in powerful ways because he was also a mistreated orphan. She found comfort, solace, and communion with Harry because of her circumstances, and in the instance of Harry's letter from the Hogwarts, she found hope that she could also receive a similar letter and escape from her negative circumstances.

Before foster care, however, Gabrielle noted that her grandmother loved to give her books, so she had a significant impact on Gabrielle's reading because she appreciated the love and care from family members since she did not have it in later years. Reading in this context for Gabrielle, then, also meant having a role model, especially a family member, who cared about her wellbeing, which included excelling in reading. For Gabrielle, reading served to remind her of good times with her grandmother and an escape from tough times for most of her life.

One hero or role model that Gabrielle talked about was the character, Harry Potter. His trials and triumphs as an orphan gave her strength and hope for a brighter future. While she wanted to please her grandmother and make her proud with her reading, she later wanted to experience freedom from mean foster parents like her role model, Harry Potter. Indeed, she desired to escape her terrible circumstances in order to really experience life to the fullest – to have a vibrant, liberating life. In fact, she credited reading, including her reading of the *Harry Potter* series, for literally saving her life. She expressed this belief in our following conversation:

G. It [reading] makes me feel good. There was a lot of times when I would just want to crap out, but I never did.

R. What does it mean, "to crap out"?

G. To like, just give up, to let go. And I just never did. Reading kept me grounded, which is something I really like, makes me grateful that I didn't just crap out.

R. I don't want to have you go back to bad memories –

G. That's okay, it's fine.

R. But I wanted to ask you, when you talk about crapping out, giving up, letting go, what would that have looked like for you?

G. Well, for one, I wouldn't still be in school. I'd probably be homeless right now. Or maybe been not living, 'cause I've had those thoughts, too.

R. Wow.

G. But I never really went through with it.

As Gabrielle said, reading kept her grounded and safe. She started reading for the escape, and perhaps unbeknownst to her, to be like her role-model character, Harry Potter. Escaping through reading was one aspect of her life she could control during that period of her life, but now that she is on her own, she simply loves to read as a pleasurable activity.

For all of these girls, loving to read meant gaining the love, attention, camaraderie, and support from loved ones, educators, and librarians, or in Gabrielle's case, book characters like Harry Potter. Whether they were attempting to please a parent, follow in the footsteps of an older sibling or cousin, or finding solace through a character's similar experiences, the meaning of reading for these girls meant trying to emulate and/or please a role model. As a result of this emulation and placation, they tasted books and found they were indeed good.

*Theme Two: While reading a captivating book, we are so immersed into the action of the plot that passing time is irrelevant.*

Another important aspect of phenomenology is the lifeworld existential of time. All of the participants talked about getting so involved in a book that they became carefree, distracted, and oblivious to time. In other words, they created a space where time in their books mattered more than the time in the actual world. This use of time was precious, especially since most of them led busy lives filled with sports, dramatic arts, public speaking, singing engagements, and so on. Similar to the beat of their busy lives, they sometimes read quickly to obtain more details of what happened next in the plot. While it could be argued that the participants were not fully absorbing the intricacies of the books, I beg to differ. In my conversations with them, I perceived that they fully enjoyed every morsel of the plot; their insatiable appetite for the next event in the story just made it difficult to put down their fascinating books.

Some of the evidence of the girls' complete captivation with books and poems involved not hearing parents calling them to do chores, missing what a teacher was saying (for those girls who read personal texts in class), ignoring text messages and phone calls, and locking doors. In fact, Alexandra explained:

Well, during – well, when I read the first book [from *The Hunger Games* series; Collins, 2008], I was in my room for like two days straight, and that's when I finished the book in two days. But uhm – you know, take my food upstairs, finish reading. Go downstairs, clean the kitchen, run back upstairs. But, you know, when anybody... would text me, I'd be like, 'I can't talk right now. You know, I'm trying to finish this book.' I don't know why I was so – well, I definitely know why I was – I just wanted to finish the books so bad because I wanted to get through it but – because I loved reading, and I wanted to know ***what happened next*** [emphasis added]. But like just isolated myself from everybody, from everything. Uhm, so yeah. I was ***so caught up in the books, so caught up***. Uhm, I just enjoyed them. I loved them.

This mesmerizing experience due to a powerful book is evident in Alexandra's inability to do almost anything except read (with the exception of texting a response to friends informing them that she was busy reading). Passing external time was insignificant because she was completely immersed in the plot and time within *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008), and because of this immersion, Alexandra consumed physical food quickly so that she could delight in the delicacy of the book further. Also notice how she said she "wanted to know what happened next" (see bolded italics) as her reason for reading through the book quickly. She wanted to know what happened next in order to remain in the complete spell of satisfying immersion in the story. In fact, this wanting to know what happened next was her reason for "wanting to get through it." Savoring each word where time stood still in the plot was not the point – she was simply interested in the evolving chronology of the story. Alexandra enjoyed the plot so much that she could not wait for the next piece of action. Unlike racing through events as a teenager just trying to get a task completed without necessarily enjoying it, racing through reading for Alexandra meant getting "caught up" in the lives and happenings of the characters, taking in the dramatic events they experienced and their reactions to those circumstances. All of the participants were plot-driven, that is, they did not take the time to taste every ingredient of the plot, seemingly because they desired the overall story. As mentioned earlier, focusing on the lives of the characters and the overall plotline was an escape

from the in-school practice of literary analysis and an even more tangible escape from their challenging personal and troubling racial struggles.

Alexandra's captivation is also evident when she did not accept text messages. This ignoring of text messages is important because Alexandra brought her iPhone as one of her artifacts for an interview where she was asked to bring something that depicted her love of reading. She stated that she used her phone quite often for reading texts, e-mails, and Facebook statuses. Alexandra thought that the phone was fitting to bring in because people read from it every day, throughout the day, so to ignore her phone while reading *The Hunger Games* series (Collins, 2008) was to put emphasis on the importance of not only her captivation, but also the importance of traditional print text.

Alexandra was not the only participant whose experience with reading was all consuming. Taylor also talked about reading an out-of-school book at every opportunity, even at school. She stated:

When I really get into the book, I read it every chance I get. As soon as I finish my homework, instead of hopping on the computer, I'll read; or when we have down time in class, I'll read; or whenever the teacher's not actively teaching, and I'm done with my work, I'll read. And I'll just, I'll read it as much as I can. And then I'll, I'll go home and just read, sit on my bed and just read for hours, if I really like the book and get into it.

Like Alexandra, Taylor chose reading a book over technological tools because it is something she enjoys. Her practice of consistently reading books for pleasure had become a part of her daily life. Unlike Alexandra, however, Taylor took advantage of every opportunity to read her favorite personal books, even during school. She savored every free moment to partake in the joy of reading.

Like Alexandra and Taylor, Kayla also explained being consumed with reading and time being an inconsequential factor in reading an excellent book. In fact, Kayla shared staying up all night until 5:00 a.m. reading the first book of the series, *Vampire Academy*, only to get to a cliffhanger at the end of the book. So in order to obtain peace, she went online and read the next two chapters of the next book in the series in order to get the resolution of that plot. Only then did she find contentment. Like Alexandra, she cared about what happened to the characters more than she cared about sleep. Her complete immersion in the plot is best described in her own words. She stated:

When I get really into a book, like you can't even talk to me, like you can be talking to me, and screaming at me, and I won't even listen to you. I will just be into the book. The other day I stayed up until 5 o'clock in the morning reading a book because I really wanted to know how it ended, but then they left like a cliffhanger in the end, 'cause there was another book that came after it, so I was like, "I read all that time to get a cliffhanger?!" I was really mad. So I searched out the book online, and started reading the first two chapters, but the questions/the cliffhanger they left the answer in the first two chapters, so I was like, "Okay, good." So then, I could actually sleep, 'cause like if I have questions in my mind that aren't answered, I can't sleep.

Notice how Kayla was mad when she got to a cliffhanger in *Vampire Academy*. She was angry because she cared about the characters, and like Alexandra, wanted to know what happened next. Not getting the resolution to the characters' dilemmas frustrated her, so she felt compelled to research the next book in the series to get the answer, and therefore, find contentment. Just

like Alexandra, Kayla was “caught up” (see Alexandra’s previous quote) in the lives of the characters, and this assertion is evident when she stated that was “so into the book” supporting this theme that external demands on her time were insignificant and mostly ignored. She literally absorbed the captivating plot of *Vampire Academy* like a sponge taking in every piece of the action, ignoring outside interruptions and only living in the ever-evolving time of the series.

While these last two participants did not address time in the same manner, their responses demonstrated that it was still a significant factor in their reading. For example, Sydney explained that when she reads an enchanting book, she “guess[es] it’s kind of like jumping into a different world really. Like you’re kind of escaping reality for a little while when you’re in a book. Like when you’re really in a book.” For Sydney, “jumping into a different portal” represented being able to have control over some aspect of time in her life where she mostly lacked control in other areas because of schoolwork and other responsibilities. Escaping her reality, which could be tiring given her busy adolescent life, provided her the opportunity to enter the world of the characters and enjoy their realities as a break from her own. Time, therefore, is represented by the “escape” she experienced while reading a book that really lured her into the storyline. Similarly, Gabrielle described an escape, though for her it was a literal one.

As mentioned earlier, Gabrielle spent years in foster care where some of the foster care parents were mean and insensitive. So to escape her environment, Gabrielle often hid under the covers or tables from her siblings and caregivers, so that she could fully escape her reality and “jump into the portal,” like the one Sydney mentioned. Gabrielle stated, “Yeah, I always had to be under stuff, because, even now, when I read – when I lived over, before I moved, I would read under the kitchen table with all the chairs pushed in – I don’t know why, I just read under stuff. It’s kinda weird. And now I live by myself, and I read under the cover. Even though I don’t have to . . .” Again, Gabrielle’s relationship with time was to escape from it through reading. At the time of this study, she was living on her own as a high school senior, so she no longer needed a literal escape and lifesaver. During our interviews, Gabrielle shared, she just reads because she loves it.

All of these girls described their love of reading as if it satisfied a never-ending ravenous appetite for books. Many also described an escape from the realities of the present time. Although some of the girls seemed to race through novels, they were actually anxious to delight in the next part of the plot. The fact that they enjoyed the “escape” from their present realities also supports the assertion that racing through reading means getting involved, absorbed really, in the lives and happenings of the characters, taking in the dramatic events they experienced and their reactions to those circumstances as a way to take a hiatus from their overly occupied lives. Truly, reading quickly does not mean that they were not taking the time to take in and enjoy the story; on the contrary, it means that they enjoyed it so much that they could not get enough of it. They wanted more and more of it in order to fill their appetites for interesting plotlines. In fact, they seemed to immerse themselves in the novel as an inside observer taking in the action. Consequently, time stood still for them, and they loved every moment of delectable reading.

*Theme Three: Developing and searching for companionship is essential for those wanting to share their passion for reading fascinating texts.*

Just as in theme one, the participants’ responses for theme three hinged on the lifeworld existential of social interactions when it came to interacting and discussing books with others. This interaction was just as important as the enjoyable solitary experience of reading, which was discussed in theme one. Without social interaction, they were sometimes despondent and

lonely, but with it, they were overjoyed and connected with others who would listen to or share their fascination with reading. The etymology for the word *companions*, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (2013), comes from the Latin derivative of **com-** together + **pānis** bread. Literally, the term means, then, those with whom we share bread. This explanation fits the context of this study, for although the girls wanted solitude while reading, they longed for companionship or social interaction around their reading interests. They wanted their peers and/or loved ones to join in their excitement for the story. The girls wanted others to hear about, or better yet, share their affection for reading. In essence, companionship for these girls meant giving part of themselves through sharing their affection for reading (like the sharing of bread) with those they admired or desired to impress.

Furthermore, the participants craved to be a part of a community of readers. This assertion is based upon the interview data, which indicated that the girls' desire for a community of readers was met with either loneliness or communal bliss. Some of these adolescents expressed elation when they were able to share their love of reading with other peers – Black and other races alike – while other participants seemed lonely and discouraged over their lack of companionship. Alexandra expressed this latter sentiment, and was the most vocal and downcast of the participants as she described her sparse relationships with other Black adolescent females. However, her lack of companionship may be due to the lack of Black adolescent female avid readers in her school context, or it may be due to her not venturing out to find girls who shared her interests. Of all the participants, she was the busiest as a high-achieving student athlete, and might not have had or taken opportunities to meet more Black female peers.

Regardless of the reason, she was still feeling the negative effects of not experiencing kinship with Black female readers, and this aspect of her reading experience bothered her. She explained:

But uhm – so obviously, you know – and I knew – a lot of my friends, I'll hear them [Black adolescent females] all the time, like "Oh, I hate reading. I hate reading this, hate this book," and you know I'll be on the other end like, "I like that book." So it's like – so then you don't kind of want to – I don't know. Well, I mean, I'm not one to care if somebody doesn't agree with my opinion. So I mean I'll say, "Yeah, I liked the book," but you know I can't go in and say, you know – because a lot of them are kind of hard-headed sometimes. But uhm – all right. I've seen – they're kind of hard-headed, so when you give them your opinion on something, they'll just kind of brush it off like, "Oh, okay." You know, they don't want to have a debate with you. They're just like, "Oh." I don't know. It's just like they don't have that passion for – I mean, you don't even have to have a passion, a loving desire to read, to be able to, you know, have a conversation about it. But they don't even want to do that.

This excerpt directly shows Alexandra's desire to have debates and conversations with peers, but she is disappointed that her peers, especially Black females, will not engage in debates, which she feels can be done even if one does not love reading. Lacking a community of readers seemed to affect Alexandra more acutely than the other participants, and perhaps even the mainstream population, because she perceived reading and academic life as one of being ostracized by her peers (Black and White) for "acting White," as she mentioned later in that interview.

Unlike Alexandra, Sydney enjoyed a vibrant group of avid readers from various racial and cultural backgrounds, Black females included. She described treasured experiences debating and conversing about various plotlines with readers like her. Sydney explained, "The

pleasure I get from discussing and debating books is seeing what another person's opinion might be of this plotline or this character or the author. And seeing if maybe we share the same opinion or if we have different opinions..." When asked the reasons she found this companionship enjoyable, she stated, "It's enjoyable because I'm happy to see someone else who shares my love of reading, so I'd like to maybe see if we can have like discussions like this a lot. If we maybe end up reading the same book again and maybe develop a friendship over this kind of thing." She added later that friendships had formed around reading frequently.

In commenting specifically on what it is like to be part of a community of readers, Sydney stated:

It feels really good because I feel like I'm not just this, like I don't feel as weird when I might just sit in the lunchroom or something, or I might sit in the lunchroom, just reading a book instead of maybe talking to a lot of people. Or if I'm just in class and we have free time, instead of going over to talk to my friends, I decide to finish whatever book I was reading. So I don't feel, it doesn't feel as weird to me, when I see that I know there are other people who also do the same thing.

In contrast with Alexandra, Sydney found companions, which included Black females, so she did not feel weird or strange because of her insatiable appetite for reading. The other participants fell within these polarized experiences of Alexandra and Sydney when it came to finding camaraderie through reading.

Gabrielle's need for companionship is slightly similar to Alexandra because she desired opportunities to share stories with others, but believed those opportunities were rare. However, she had one companion who shared her same passion for reading the *Harry Potter* series. Gabrielle told how they used to talk about it all the time, and although at the time of the study she was eighteen and he was nineteen, they continued their discussions about the *Harry Potter* series. She explained that "it just excites [her]" to talk about books with others. In addition to this friend, she also enjoyed opportunities to talk about books with teachers. Explaining her experience talking with a teacher about the book *Catch-22*, she stated that she "guess[ed] it was just another person [she] could talk to about something that [she] like[d] to do." In response to the question about why she got excited about talking to other people about books, she said, "It's so rare that when it happens, I can just babble on and on." Gabrielle can talk incessantly about books, but similar to Alexandra, she found those opportunities hard to come by.

All in all, sharing their thoughts and feelings about books were a crucial part of these girls' reading experiences. Without this final aspect in their temporal reading process, the act of reading was still enjoyable, but it was not as fulfilling. Their sharing practices affirmed or troubled their sense of self in regard to personhood and race. While many of the girls had a connection with other Black communal or familial peers who affirmed their self-worth by placing importance on these girls' love of reading, Alexandra, while confident and sure of herself, was discontent with not being able to connect with others, especially those in her own race, about her love of reading. For all of the participants, then, companionship was a vital, necessary part of the reading experience.

## Discussion

This study is significant because it has the potential to help us reexamine our images of Black adolescent girls as avid readers. Scholarship indicates that researchers are examining methods to appeal to Black adolescent females' reading proclivities in regard to culturally-relevant books, universal-themed books, and urban fiction, for example (Brooks et al., 2010;

Davis, 2000). However, little work has been done to examine Black adolescent females who are already avid readers. The participants' stories herein give another needed truthful and positive dimension of the complex lived experiences of Black adolescent females. In other words, it fills a void in the literature on the voracious reading proclivities of Black adolescent females.

As I worked through my analysis, I wondered why these girls, while particular in their book choices, were so hungry and ready to consume their carefully chosen books quickly. In reviewing the interviews, I gathered one of the primary reasons behind their hunger was a need to escape from the disturbing realities of racial conflicts and tough circumstances in their lives, and in some books. Consequently, they were starving for books that did not have overly "harsh" (as the participant Alexandra termed it) racial tones, or even no signs of racial issues at all. This preference may exist because they deal with this reality every day in their interactions with those who do not understand or take time to understand who they are in terms of their thoughts and feelings about themselves, their families, their communities, and their world, simply because they are Black. These girls also wanted a break from the many novels in school that focused on race. Kayla noticed race in almost every book chosen by her school, but she perceived that these books were chosen so that they could learn lessons on the importance of equality. While she recognized the importance of learning these lessons, she preferred more genre variety in the school's book selections because, at the end of the day, the constant bombardment of racial tensions in books was getting old.

Because they were bombarded with negative, depressing images of racial inequality day in and day out, they hungered for a reprieve from these realities and preferred more light-hearted books as Kayla often stated. The girls just needed this temporary diversion in order to find hope that their lives could indeed be better – that they would not have to face such overt racism and could overcome difficult circumstances like the characters they admired. Reading also gave them a sense of control in their lives. To explain, reading provided a diversion from racial conflicts in life and in novels, so they were able to control the amount of information on race that they wanted when choosing books. This agency is something that society does not provide them.

Kayla was not the only participant to hold these sentiments, for Alexandra, a very interested reader of African and African American books, also preferred books without "overly harsh" racist events. While the other participants did not point to uneasiness with books with highly racist language and characters, their proclivity for fantasy and adventure novels over African American novels shows that they also preferred more "light-hearted" books. In fact, Taylor and Sydney stated that they did not understand why the Black experience could not be more integrated with other races' experiences in books. They did not understand, in Taylor's words, "why it had to be separate." Their thinking further supports my assertion that they were more interested in books that provided an escape than books that were focused almost solely on race.

Consequently, after the girls discovered that books provided a reprieve from their busy, trying, and racially-challenged lives, they craved for more and more for books to alleviate their despondency of past and current racial and life-confining conditions. They wanted a place to just "be" – be themselves and an active observer of someone else's life. Perhaps they were also learning how to deal or cope with their own personal hardships aside from race, as is most obvious with Gabrielle, the participant who received poor foster care. These considerations serve as a call to educators and caregivers to revisit their conversations on race in society, media, and books for all students/children so that Black girls and other minorities are not alienated from reading, that is, not enjoying the reading experience.

The participants' stories, in line with Critical Race Feminism (CRF) and phenomenology, show us the importance of the narrative (Berry, 2010; Van Manen, 1990;

Wing, 2003). Listening to them is important in order to know the context of their development as Black adolescent female readers who appreciated their role model influencers and desired to share their passion for reading with peers and loved ones. Making their stories important to their exposure to teaching and learning experiences also centers, rather than marginalizes, their personhood (Berry, 2010).

Furthermore, this study demonstrates that whatever it is that these girls do with books in school does not count as enjoyable reading. The same richness of the experience is simply not present there. Because the introduction and focus of reading books in school was often on literary analysis, these Black girls were not as excited and engaged in reading as they were out of school. The presentation of reading by their peers and loved ones made the enterprise of reading more appealing and worth trying out or tasting reading for pleasure for themselves. This difference in the way reading novels is presented is worth noting for parents and educators who care to foster the love of reading for their students. This research also calls for educators to more critically investigate the reading interests of their students and to provide books that foster the love of reading for students. In an age of accountability, it is also important for educators to participate in policy discussions to advocate for students who want variety in their reading selections. Often, the literary canon limits topics of interest for students, so this advocacy is key. Last, but not least, I urge scholars to take up this discussion of avid reading among marginalized populations and to consider how to balance discussions of ability for these groups.

In sum, the meaning of the reading experience for these girls is caught up in their relationships with their role models, the escape from their busy and challenging adolescent lives, and their relationships with peers and/or loved ones as they shared their reading experiences. The importance of social interactions and time, the life existentials that surfaced in the data, were crucial to loving reading for these girls. The importance of social interactions first surfaced in the admiration they had for their role models who introduced the joy of reading through modeling and discussing the personal, academic, social, and academic benefits that could be found in this pastime. In terms of time, while reading, these girls were mostly oblivious to it, and only cared for the story as a means of escape, as previously mentioned. The end of their temporal process of reading goes back to the importance of social interactions, for similar to their role models, they wanted to introduce and share these benefits of reading with others they cared about personally and/or wanted to please or impress. Searching for friends during this third phase was perhaps most important because the girls wanted, more than sharing the benefits of reading, to experience companionship with those who understood their interest and passion for reading – a pastime which made their lives more soulful and beautiful.

However, this study did have some limitations. For example, the students came from schools with vastly different socioeconomic standings in the area. The small number of participants also limits the generalizability of the findings. However, I believe that generalizability is not the major premise of qualitative research. Instead, qualitative research gives context to a phenomenon instead of reducing it to numbers.

Finally, this study provides a different perspective on the traditional literacy of Black adolescent girls. Many research articles focus on how they struggle with reading and the solutions to helping improve their reading comprehension. Society's assumptions about Black girls' reading confine them, and this study shows that these girls are enjoying reading despite the stereotypes. Narrowing in on this aspect provides a liberating instead of a confining view of Black girls and traditional literacy.

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