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## Affirmation, Analysis, and Agency: Book Clubs as Spaces for Critical Conversations with Young Adolescent Women of Color

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# Affirmation, Analysis, and Agency: Book Clubs as Spaces for Critical Conversations with Young Adolescent Women of Color

Jody N. Polleck and Terrie Epstein

## **Abstract**

This paper explores how female urban adolescents of color who participated in a literacy book club during their senior year in high school understood the impact of race, class, and gender oppression on the novels' characters, themselves, and their communities. Based on transcripts from book club discussions and interviews conducted at the end of their senior year and the end of their first year of college, the authors illustrate how participants affirmed and asserted their voices; analyzed texts for racism, sexism, and classism; and promoted their own and others' growth and sense of agency as resilient young women of color.

**KEYWORDS:** Critical Literacy, Book Clubs, Urban Adolescents



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This paper explores how female urban adolescents of color, who participated in a literacy book club during their senior year in high school, understood the impact of race, class, and gender oppression on the novels' characters, themselves, and their communities. Based on transcripts from book club discussions and interviews conducted at the end of their senior year and the end of their first year of college, the authors illustrate how participants affirmed and asserted their voices; analyzed texts for racism, sexism, and classism; and promoted their own and others' growth and sense of agency as resilient young women of color.

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Books are powerful catalysts in the psyches of adolescent readers who may forge character alliances as they analyze relationships and behaviors (Rosenblatt, 1995). Through characters' experiences, students embrace or critique a myriad of scenarios during reading. If their connections with texts are strong, students may even place themselves within the text, making powerful bonds with characters and their situations (Brooks, Browne, & Hampton, 2008; Sutherland, 2005). These interactions create robust, complex reading engagements, within which adolescents learn about diverse experiences and uncover critical issues about themselves and their communities. These engagements, however, are contextualized as students construct meaning based on their cultural knowledge, background, and experiences (Brooks, 2006). Textual engagements can also be complicated or strengthened through conversations with others, particularly within book clubs (Enciso, 2007; Raphael, Florio-Ruane, & George, 2001). Through discussions, book club members express initial textual interpretations, which become springboards to examine their own, and others' experiences and communities. These analytic conversations can shape and reshape adolescent identities as they learn to trust and affirm their own voices, take risks to act in new and positive ways, and analyze the texts and their own and others' perspectives, (Twomey, 2007; Vyas, 2004; Wissman, 2011).

Recently, researchers have called for more nuanced ethnographic studies to explore how diverse students respond to diverse texts so as to better understand the relationships and intersections between culture, identity, and interpretation (Brooks, 2006; Hill, 2009; Sutherland, 2005). This study will inform instruction and extend research that has been done on book clubs as critical and transformative spaces for urban African American, Latino/a, and Asian youth (Polleck, 2010; Boston & Baxley, 2007; Brooks, 2006; Vyas, 2004). In this paper, the authors analyzed conversations of five 12th grade adolescent women of color as they participated in a yearlong book club. The goal was to extend understandings of the experiences of diverse, urban adolescent females, as a way to complicate the

dynamics of book club and its effects on identity while simultaneously revealing the negotiations and conversations that occur, particularly when interpreting literature. In doing so, the following questions were explored: How did high school seniors analyze the identities and experiences of the characters and connect those to their own lives, specifically as these connections relate to issues involving gender and race? In what ways did book club influence the participants once they graduated high school?

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Reader Response Theory and Critical Literacy**

The connection between identity and literacy is unique in that often students' identities can be influenced through the act of reading (Rosenblatt, 1995). Conversely, students' literacy engagements are influenced by their identities, in that who they are affects how they interact with different texts within different contexts (Ferdman, 1990). Literacy and identity are also both socially constructed (Moje & Luke, 2009). Typically, identity construction and literacy practices—both in and out of the classroom—are not conducted in isolation and are renegotiated based on text, context, and interactions with others. Overall, literacy and identity are fluid and interactive processes that are constantly changing, contradictory and permeable.

Reader response theory takes into account individual identities and social practices when considering literacy events. Coined by Rosenblatt, reader response theory shifts traditional textual interactions of one solitary meaning to a transaction between the author's text and the reader's interpretations of that text (Twomey, 2007). Rosenblatt theorizes that meaning occurs neither individually within the text nor the reader, but when the text and the reader transact (Fecho & Meacham, 2007). In this way, readers have agency by constructing meanings through the prism of their beliefs, cultural backgrounds, value systems, and experiences.

Several researchers have expanded Rosenblatt's work (Brooks, 2006; Twomey, 2007), theorizing that reader response should not only emphasize personal experiences but also account for the social and political dimensions of readers, texts, and context. Textual meanings are thus influenced by the reader's cultural background (Brooks, 2006) and by social interactions, sociocultural

conditions, and the contexts in which individuals engage with texts (Twomey, 2007). Furthermore, linguistic diversity and the ways in which we practice language are bound to whom and how we talk (Fecho & Meacham, 2007). Thus, students' social and cultural practices must be in the forefront of analysis when attempting to understand the complexity of literacy interpretations.

Another layer of meaning-making is the use of critical literacy, where students are encouraged "to adopt a questioning stance," whereby they "work toward changing themselves and their worlds" (McDaniel, 2004, p. 472). Educational theorists (Freire, 1986; Lalik & Oliver, 2007) argue that all places where literacy occurs are political. When readers attempt to understand and influence political dimensions of literacy spaces, they engage in critical literacy; thus, critical literacy is about transformation and social change (Gee, 2001). Jones (2006) believes that critical literacy creates spaces where students can "claim value in their experiences and critique mainstream ideals" (p. 60). Book clubs can create this context, where students discuss issues of discrimination placed on characters and their identities and communities.

### **Context, Conversation, and Construction of Book Club**

Given that book clubs are not contextualized in isolation, this study is framed in spatial theories that examine how identities shape and are shaped by context (McCarthy & Moje, 2002). Researchers such as Kinloch (2009a) urge educators to examine relationships between location and literacy, as these constructs affect identities and literacy engagements in spaces outside of school, which "are oftentimes remarkably different from their school-based interactions" (p. 321). Informed by New Literacy Studies (NLS), spatial and literacy theorists explore the "multiplicities of literacies across various cultural and social contexts" (Kinloch, 2009b, p. 155), so as to understand how identities and interactions are shaped by the spaces in which they unfold.

Fisher (2006) defines these spaces as participatory literacy communities, where adolescents have a safe venue to explore identity, which may not be available in traditional school settings. Her research on alternative forums for literacy and identity development accounts for how power relations based on race, class, gender, and other identity markers permeate social contexts and determine which tasks are done, whose literacies are engaged, and whose voices

are valued. Book clubs are places to explore these conceptions, particularly how texts and conversations help to locate identities, create communities, and enact degrees of agency in the face of oppression (Smith, 2000).

Specifically, research has emerged about how book clubs assist young women and people of color, demonstrating how these locations operate as spaces to discuss race, class, and gender in ways that traditional classrooms often overlook or ignore (Boston & Baxley, 2007; Brooks, Browne, & Hampton, 2008; Fisher, 2006). By using texts which illuminate the experiences of people of color, book clubs and other literary spaces have enabled young women of color to explore their historical legacies and connections with people of African descent (Fisher, 2006) and find voice and self-esteem (Boston & Baxley, 2007). They also grapple with topics such as discrimination based on skin color stratification (Brooks, Browne & Hampton, 2008). Further, researchers have found that book clubs helped prepare adolescents to live in diverse societies (Raphael, Florio-Ruane, & George, 2001) and assisted Asian adolescents experiencing identity duality (Vyas, 2004).

This study expands this burgeoning research by analyzing how young women of different ethnicities engaged in discussions of literature centered on the lives of women of color within an afterschool book club. The authors examine how participants conceptualized these experiences at the end of their senior year and one year later, after they completed their first year of college. The authors highlight how the women critiqued issues of race, class, and gender within the texts, their own lives, and their communities, as well as how these critiques grew more analytical and agentic over time.

## **Methods**

### **Context and Book Club Processes**

The book club met at a small urban high school in New York City. At the time of data collection, the high school served approximately 450 students of whom 66% qualified for free lunch. In terms of ethnicity, the school hosted students who were 62% Latino, 30% African American, 4% Asian, and 3% White. Ranked by the NYC rating system as being in “good standing,” at the time of the study, the school administration provided teachers with ongoing professional development on literacy and culturally responsive, student-centered, and differentiated instruction.

The first author who facilitated these groups had been a literacy coach at the school since 2004, and during the time of data collection, served as a part-time English teacher (although she never taught the participants). During the time of this study, book clubs were not part of the English classes' curriculum; however, independent reading where students had choice in texts was part of the entire English department's classroom culture. The adolescents in this study were seniors; four participated in book club with the first author for their first three years of high school. Sessions typically took place on Thursdays after school for one hour.

The history of this book club is long and complex. The first author originally recruited students during their freshmen year, by visiting English classrooms to explain the purposes of book club. She distributed flyers and held introductory meetings after school, where over 20 students attended. The first author established four separate book clubs based on grade level. The book club on which this study is based started with one 10<sup>th</sup>-grade African American female who graduated before this study took place and four 9<sup>th</sup>-grade females who participated for four years.

During their senior year, all of the participants were 17-year old females. A brief overview of participants follows. At the time of data collection, Tia lived with her father, mother, and brother. Her father is "Panamanian and African American and speaks fluent Spanish," while her mother is African American. Tia speaks English at home. During her pre-interview, she explained, "I'm technically African American and Hispanic, but when I write the question on a test, I always put African American. And I feel bad, like maybe I should put it all. I struggle with it." Fay identified as "Black." Her mother, a teacher in Kenya, died when Fay was three years old. Fay currently lives with her brother and father who are immigrants from Trinidad. Sofia identified herself as "Hispanic," explaining that her mother is from Ecuador while her father is from Cuba. Sofia speaks Spanish at home, where she lives with her brother and parents. Joy defined herself as a "Latino artist," clarifying during her pre-interview that she most identified "with reading books." Joy is a first-generation U.S. citizen who speaks Spanish at home and lives with her Columbian mother, her sister and her son, and her Peruvian father. During the final year of book club, the participants invited Mary to join because of her love for literature. Mary, who identified herself as Chinese American and speaks Hakka at home, is also a first-generation U.S. citizen who lives with her brother, parents, and grandparents. When asked in their pre-interviews about class identification, three of the participants identified themselves as "lower class," with Fay describing herself as "poor" and Sofia as "middle class."



As in the previous three years, this study of the book club employed a student-led approach, which allowed participants to have ownership over the discussions and choice of texts (Lalik & Oliver, 2007). The first author began the sessions with asking the women about school, home, and their relationships with others. Because the participants knew each other from school, they were friends and for the most part had bonds with one another and with the first author. Except for Mary who was new to the group, the first author was knowledgeable about many of the adolescents' personal lives, as they all confided with her about many intimate issues. These relationships were strong due to the longitudinal work the first author did with these four adolescents.

During the first book club meeting of the participants' senior year, the first author asked them about using a more "critical lens" when deciding on texts and interpreting novels. Initially skeptical, Sofia responded, "That sounds great—as long as it doesn't get boring—and we can still talk about our lives." The first author agreed—and the group met at a bookstore where they selected the texts for the year. The first author suggested that participants choose texts by or about women of color on the theory that such literature more likely mirrored their experiences (Au, 2009; Banks, 2007; Sutherland, 2005). The young women ventured through the bookstore and eventually voted on four novels: *Memoirs of a Geisha* (Golden, 2005), *Dirty Girls Social Club* (Valdes-Rodriguez, 2003), *Zami* (Lorde, 1982), and *God of Small Things* (Roy, 1998). See Figure 1 for summaries of the texts. Additionally, to be sure all of the young women felt comfortable with this new direction, the first author interviewed each participant about the new approach.

From October to May, book club met once a week. Routines and rituals had already been established over the past three years, and Mary fit in naturally. Each session began with time to discuss their lives, and then the group turned to the texts. Usually, one participant began with an initial emotional response such as "I can't believe what Lauren did!" or a question such as "Can we assume that stereotypes come from the majority race?" Other times the participants began with connections such as "That part reminded me of my family." The first author also asked the participants to use post-it notes to mark places in the novels where race, class, or gender was of significance to the story or connected to their experiences.

Regardless of how meetings began, the participants respectfully listened to each other and responded to a comment by asking questions or making statements of agreement or disagreement. No one raised hands nor looked to the first author for guidance; the participants led the group on their own, taking turns to ensure that every voice was heard. This is not to say the first author was silent; in fact, as will be explained later, she participated by sharing her responses, connections, and questions.

### **Roles of Researchers**

As both researchers are white, they were careful to minimize the reproduction of a “European American ‘regime of truth’” (Rogers & Fuller, 2007, p. 88). The authors recognized that because of their Whiteness, they benefit economically, psychologically, and socially from their racial status and therefore lack the experiences of oppression that young low-income women of color live with every day. The authors tried to keep the integrity of the participants’ voices throughout the manuscript. While they could not include all conversations, they selected passages that built upon and contributed to research on critical literacy. By immersing themselves in scholarship by and about people of color and engaging in conversations with one another about the data, they pushed their analyses to be reflective and grounded in theories that work against deficit models. They also sought feedback not only from scholars of color but from the participants, who once drafts were completed, had the opportunity to provide feedback. The first author had a particularly precarious role where the lines of “pedagogy and research blur” (Fecho & Meacham, 2007, p. 179). To work against her hierarchal position, she gave the participants as much discretion as possible in the selection of books and the direction of the conversations.

As a participant observer in the book club, the first author asked questions to learn more about how the women understood and problematized issues of race, class, and gender—and even shared her own experiences and opinions when asked. In this way, the first author had a complicated role—as participant, facilitator, and researcher. She conferred often with the second author, both during and after data collection, so as to reflect on her role; both authors kept analytic memos (Bogdan & Bilken, 2003). To be specific about the involvement of the first author, it is important to point to her verbal

**Figure 1:** Summary of Primary Texts

<b>Summary of Primary Texts</b>
<p><b>Dirty Girls Social Club:</b> In this novel, Alisa Valdez-Rodriguez (2003) develops the narratives of six Latinas who attended Boston University together. Post-graduation, the women work to maintain success in both love and careers. Offering multiple perspectives from each woman, Valdez-Rodriguez also reveals the complexities of female friendships.</p>
<p><b>God of Small Things:</b> Written by Arundhati Roy (1998), this novel is the story of an Indian family in the 1960s when Communism intersected with the hierarchies of the caste system. The primary characters, twins Rahel and Estha, learn painfully the consequences of forbidden love and power inequities. Roy explores, literally and symbolically, issues surrounding Marxism, race, gender, class, and voice.</p>
<p><b>Memoirs of a Geisha:</b> Written by Arthur Golden (2005), <i>Memoirs of a Geisha</i> is based on Sayuri, a young girl who is sold into a geisha house in the 1930s. This text reveals her life and struggles, particularly addressing notions of power, class, gender, and the complicated relationships between women.</p>
<p><b>Zami: A New Spelling of My Name:</b> Published in 1982, Audre Lorde tells her story through a new genre of biomythography. She details her experiences growing up in Harlem as a daughter of West Indian parents. She beautifully describes her life from child to adulthood, painfully revealing how issues surrounding race, class, homophobia, and gender affected her and her various communities of friends and family.</p>

contributions. In the initial meetings, the first author presented textual excerpts related to race, class, or gender and asked the participants why these passages might be important. For example, the first author asked, “Did you catch that line? ‘I’m just not a good Latina.’ What do you think she means?” The first author also revealed her own experiences in relation to gender and class

oppression. Hill (2009) finds this disclosure to be a critical part of discourse as a way to allow students to take risks and share difficult stories. The first author also assisted the women in co-constructing meaning of more critical language, such as the differences between race and ethnicity or the definitions of critical race theory and marginalization. Finally, through directed questions, the first author sometimes pushed the participants to think more critically about the texts, as in the following example from the final discussion of *The God of Small Things*:

**First Author:** Now that we've finished the book, what do you think the major themes are?

Tia: Maybe, power?

**Author:** So what is this [book] saying about power?

Fay: Power depends on the people.

Sofia: Power is about how everybody lives regardless of what happens, regardless of who's in power.

**Author:** Who do you think has power?

Fay: Maybe the men.

Sofia: I don't think so because the women seem to be, not powerful, but very headstrong.

Fay: Yeah, but it's the father that moves Estha back. No woman made that decision.

Sofia: That's why I don't think it's men because it's just stereotyping...

As reflected in this interaction, the first author not only asked participants to explain inequities, but she encouraged them to explore why these exist. She also asked the women to connect these inequities to their own lives and communities in order to formulate their own theories about contextualized oppression.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Data came from multiple sources. While the first author met with the participants 23 times in one year, together, the researchers selected only 10 of these meetings for analysis, choosing sessions where all participants were in attendance and in which most discussions related to the books. Other data

included audio-taped interviews at the beginning and end of the year in which the participants discussed their literacy practices, communities, and understandings of race, class, and gender. The researchers also conducted audio-taped interviews with participants during the summer after their first year in college to examine the potential impact of the book club experience.

For the qualitative analysis of the transcripts, the authors used inductive and deductive coding procedures (LeCompte & Scheunsel, 1999). Before coding, the authors read through all transcripts for a holistic view of the data. They then coded broadly, based on discourse related to race, class, or gender; items were double coded when two or three codes intersected, which was often. During the next level of analysis, the authors coded discourse that centered on issues of identity, power, and agency—derived from research on critical sociocultural theory (Lewis, Enciso & Moje, 2007). An identity code was marked whenever the girls discussed their own relationship to race, gender, or class in terms of how they represented themselves. For example, Mary connected to the others when they talked about how their identities are often stereotyped, stating, “It’s the same thing. Do whatever you can, but for Asians, we have so much pride, especially the Chinese. They’ll go for ambitious stuff that seems so unworldly but yet we’ll try it anyway.” Like identity markers, power codes could occur when the girls discussed issues in the texts or within their own lives. For example, Sofia told the others, “Ladies, you have the power if you’re making your own money and you’re doing your own thing.” (This is also an example where we double-coded for both gender and class.) The power codes were then double coded, focusing on oppression and stereotypes—as these were other themes that emerged during analysis. Finally, codes of agency were marked when the girls commented on characters that resisted oppression or when they themselves discussed ways to confront or resist discrimination in their own lives. For instance, the girls retold many stories about ways in which the women in their families resist norms and create more independence. The authors also tracked the development over time of the young women’s growing and more complex understandings of their own and others’ identities and sense of agency. For the purposes of this article and its results section, the authors have focused on gender oppression, racism and stereotypes, and agency, as these codes occurred the most frequently when compared to others.

## Results

### Gendered Expectations and Oppressions

The first two sections of the results section address the first research question: How did high school seniors analyze the identities and experiences of the characters and connect those to their own lives, specifically as these connections related to issues involving gender and race?

The first book of the year the participants discussed and analyzed was *Memoirs of a Geisha*. They wanted to read this text first, as many of them had seen the movie and wanted to see how the book compared. Since the participants were women of different ethnicities, this novel was an effective starting place to discuss common issues related to gender. Before beginning, the participants discussed what they knew about Japan and geishas, with Mary providing many insights from her self-initiated study of Japanese culture. Most of the discussions that arose from the text related to women's roles in the books and in their lives. Overall, the participants held various, contradictory ideas about women's power in male-dominated societies and about women's complicity in gender oppression and the imbalances of power. During the first formal meeting of the year, the participants discussed the opening chapters of *Memoirs of a Geisha*, which provide background of the main character who grows up in a small fishing village. The first author asked the participants about their thoughts on the representation of women in these opening pages:

- Tia:** I wanted to ask about how the men are treating women. I want to start with the fisherman, Mr. Tanaka. When [Chiyo, the main character] hit her head and was bleeding and spitting up blood. *[Tia reads this passage out loud to the group.]* Wait a minute. You beat your daughter and then you bleach your boat and then you have somebody bless the boat?
- Sofia:** The boat over the daughter.
- Mary:** It's a tradition because it's hard to catch fish. It's bad luck with women. They don't want women distracting them...The [men are] very superstitious.
- Sofia:** How come superstitions get to objectify women like that?
- Mary:** It depends on how the society is set up.
- Tia:** I also marked where [Chiyo] acted like a dog around him. When he wanted her, he looked back over his shoulder to

signal her. If my boyfriend pulled some shit like that...How dare you? I'm even more mad that she followed!

**Sofia:** They're puppets.

The excerpt above revealed how book club participants analyzed women's roles, both within the context of the text and within the context of their own lives. While Mary's analysis situated gender politics within the context of Japanese society in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Tia and Sofia analyzed the text from their contemporary views of gender dynamics. Beginning with criticism of the men's treatment of the main character Sayuri, Tia and Sofia critiqued the text in relation to what they would do in similar situations. Mary took a more contextualized approach, explaining how Japanese society of the time conceptualized women and their roles. Responding to the main character's experience from historicized and contemporary viewpoints, the participants differentially evaluated her responses to male oppression, with Tia and Sofia having critiqued more broadly how sexism historically and currently affects women.

In ensuing weeks, the girls continued their analysis of sexism in the text. Specifically, they discussed the roles of the geishas in the novel—and their perceived (or actual) positions of power:

**Mary:** [Geisha] manipulate their dannas [clients] emotionally and with words. It's like with Mameha [a geisha in the text] and the Baron [her primary client]. She could convince the Baron to do otherwise.

**Tia:** I don't care about all the talking she does, how sweet and whatever; Mameha can't control men. Especially after what happened to Sayuri [the main character] in the house [when Baron attacked her]. [Mameha] knew what would happen. The Baron was like, "Are you just gonna sit there and disappoint me all evening?" I was so mad.

**Sofia:** I was thinking that's not as degrading. Just like she said, you can control what you get in your life as a geisha.

**Tia:** No, that's the whole idea. She can't do anything! The wife. Women have no power...All she can do is fuss, and at the end of the day, he can walk out the room and go to another.

In this conversation, the participants engaged in a complex view of gender dynamics. They discussed the kinds of power geisha actually had and how women could use power in both negative and positive ways. Their level of analysis also demonstrated complexity related to the amount of agency women in general can exert and women geishas in the context of story could exert.

This critical analysis of women's power in the text then immediately turned to the participants' lived experiences, when Sofia said, "The geishas' situation is not much different than the women in the U.S. during this same time." She explained that women's "jobs" were to attract men to marry: "We were just the bread makers." Tia agreed, explaining that her grandmother warned her of men bearing gifts, which could be taken away as easily as they were given. Because of her grandmother's philosophy, Tia greatly respected her decisions:

She's not afraid to let a guy take care of her, but she works, always had her own car, always had her own money, always did her own thing. She's never been afraid to have a guy take care of her, but she's never allowed herself to be stuck in a position where she was depending on a guy.

Joy expressed similar admiration for her mother who also worked: "She always pays for everything...that's what it means to be a woman." In all of these cases, the participants demonstrated their shared personal connections with the novel—speaking back to the text and connecting to the geishas' experiences. Like Sutherland's (2005) research on Black girls, the participants broke boundaries and ascribed identities of what it means to be "woman," renegotiating their sense of self, particularly in how that has been articulated through the women in their lives. Simultaneously, they critically co-constructed their own theories on gender and what it means to be a woman with power.

During another discussion, towards the end of the novel, the first author asked the participants to discuss how gender intersected with class, asking, "Do you think that women back then gained power when they got money through the men they married?"

**Sofia:** No, I think they're more subjugated.

**Joy:** They're more constricted.



**Sofia:** They lose power.

**Tia:** You have the power if you're making your own money, and you're doing your own thing. That's where the power comes in.

This critique allowed the participants to think about the intersections of power, class, and gender. They recognized that women today have more power than women did before them, yet they also expressed ambivalence about how much power women today really hold. Mary said she felt that contemporary women live in a “man’s society,” yet could still become whatever they wanted. To do so, however, “women need to use their rights.” The problem, according to Mary, is that many women are fearful of asserting themselves: “Women are too afraid to use their rights because they’re afraid men will overpower them. Women can become whatever they want. It’s just that women are too scared to invoke their rights.” She also blamed women for using femininity so men would help them get what they want: “As a girl growing up to become a woman, I am in a man’s society. I’m always gonna be oppressed. I’m weak, defenseless. I need a man’s help. I’m supposed to be feminine with myself, no matter what.” Mary’s comments represent both traditional and empowered views of women’s potential in contemporary society.

Tia, however, disagreed with Mary’s analysis of women’s complicity in inequality and referred to history as the reason for women’s current position: “Throughout history, women haven’t had the same opportunities as men... Even though it’s a lot better, we’re still not completely there.” Sofia also contested Mary’s comments: “If I want to do something, I’ll do it. I don’t have reason to be afraid.” At the same time, she admitted to enjoying “the whole chivalry thing...I like it when a guy opens the door for me...We want to be strong and sometimes we want to be treated delicately so who’s contradicting themselves? Is it the men? Or is it us?” Tia concurred: “We contradict ourselves. We want to be all-American women...I can be whatever I want to be, just like a man. But then: ‘Oops, cut myself. I broke a nail. Can someone hug me?’”

The viewpoints here contrast with one another, displaying participants’ different ideologies, gendered theories, and value systems. These differences illuminate that the book club became a critical forum, where participants of different ethnicities, families, and experiences shared contested ways of viewing

gendered constructions and resistance to sexism and imbalances of power. While the participants shared gendered knowledge of oppression (Brooks, 2006), their views about resistance and their analyses of agency diverged. The relationships built among participants over time enabled them to share widely different, even competing, views of gender, agency and resistance in a safe yet critically thoughtful venue.

### **Stereotypes and Internalized Racism**

Coined by Sofia as “The Latina *Sex in the City*,” the second novel the book club read was *The Dirty Girls Social Club*. In discussing the text, the participants explored issues of race, ethnicity, and racism. In the first meeting about this novel, Sofia expressed her anger with the author’s depiction of the Latina characters, calling her representations “way over the top.” The other participants agreed. Sofia elaborated,

My problem with the book is that they emphasize the Latina way too much. They’re like, ‘I’m Latina. I lived in the slums. People don’t have it this way, and I conquered it all.’ I’m like, really? You have every right to feel proud, but know that there are a lot of people like you. I was mad.

Sofia also criticized the stereotype of the “passionate Latina woman,” especially when the character Sara, a mother and wife, stayed with her husband despite his abuse.

Sofia’s critique, as a Latina analyzing another Latinas’ representations, calls to question the issue of “authenticity” in texts (Brooks, 2006). While some readers may see the authenticity of the author’s voice, this was not the case for Sofia. Instead, Sofia saw the Latina’s characterization as stereotypical and something to be refuted. While in previous conversations about *Memoirs of a Geisha*, the women analyzed the plot and characters, now they were starting to evaluate and critique the author’s perspective, demonstrating the growing complexities of their analyses.

What also makes this book club unique is that because the women are all of different ethnicities, they responded to representations of race in varying ways. Whereas Tia, Joy, and Sofia were offended by the author’s portrayals, Fay thought the text’s exploration of race was more nuanced. Perhaps because her

own mother was African, Fay connected to the scene where a Nigerian man spoke about racism in the U.S. as opposed to that in Africa:

[The author] uses [his] standpoint to bring out something...[The author] addresses race throughout the book. In the beginning when [the character] Lauren was talking, [the author] was not going into [racism] much...but then she got deeper. That's why she threw in an African, because why would you stick a European in there to talk about race?

In these instances, it is evident the different stances the participants took when reacting to race due to complexities of their own identities and the way in which they connected to the text. While the author of *Dirty Girls Social Club* angered Sofia, Fay was relieved and grateful that she offered an African perspective to complicate racism. These interactions are integral to not only voice their interpretations about race and ethnicity but to hear other cultural viewpoints so they can renegotiate their initial interpretations.

Internalized racism was another topic that arose in discussions of *The Dirty Girls Social Club*. In subsequent meetings, participants recounted several instances where they thought characters were going through “identity crises” or participating in “self-hatred.” The connections they made with the Latina characters created parallel-text story lines (Brooks, 2006), where they identified with the characters’ experiences. For example, Tia made a connection between the internalized racism of one character in the book to a woman with whom she worked. Tia explained that Gloria, a Dominican teenager, never referred to herself as black, despite her dark skin. As an adolescent of African and Panamanian descent, who also calls her skin color “dark,” Tia found Gloria’s denial of her blackness insulting:

I want to say to her, ‘You’re black! Don’t talk about black people when you’re black!’ She’s my complexion! We can break down to the Triangle Trade because slaves stopped there. Just because you speak another language doesn’t mean that you’re not black...Some of the comments you make are unnecessary and you should feel offended by them yourself.

Tia was not afraid to raise the sensitive issue of colorism or inter- and intra-racial discrimination based on skin color stratification (Brooks, Browne, & Hampton, 2008; Sutherland, 2005). Connecting skin color discrimination to the

historical legacy of slavery, Tia confronted issues of self-hatred among people of color who negate or ignore aspects of their ethnic heritages.

The first author often pushed the group to explore why the cultural representations they embraced, negotiated, and/or contested existed so that they would go beyond their personal stories and move towards analyzing race and ethnicity critically. When prompted by the first author to explain why Gloria might have acted as she did, Tia responded,

I guess it is because she's dark. She's not light...the difference between how you see yourself and how other people see you is when you look in the mirror. You are constantly judging yourself, comparing yourself to what's ideally beautiful. What's on TV, in magazines, that's not human. That's scrawny and scary.

In this instance, Tia analyzed the political and social contexts in which racial and gender ascriptions of beauty affect women of color. As relationships among the participants built over time and with strategic questioning by the first author, the book club became a safe space for the women to critique the origins and differentiated forms of racism, using these understandings to maintain positive perspectives on their identities and experiences as women of color.

### **Anxiety, Amelioration, and Agency**

The final two sections of results address the second research question: In what ways did book club influence the participants once they graduated high school?

During the last meeting of the year, the first author took the participants out to lunch to celebrate their work. The discussion quickly turned to their assumptions, expectations, and anxieties about attending college where the contexts would be much different than their high school. Joy and Fay both expressed anxiety about the racism they may face. About to attend a small liberal arts college, Joy revealed, "I'm really scared about it. I'm not going to lie." Fay agreed, "I'm going to Miami. I'm black and it will be all Cuban there." Tia and Sofia, however, thought that the race relations would play out differently. Tia described her future:

I'm going to a historically black college. I'm going to be dealing with black people all day long. Our opinions may be the same, our opinions may be different. But at the end of the day, we're all black, so race is never going to be an issue.

Sofia ended the conversation with encouragement to the others: "You have to put what everybody else thinks aside. It's about you. If you feel like what other people think is going to affect how you feel about yourself, then that's when it becomes a problem."

One year later, at the end of their first year of college, the first author interviewed the participants again. Mary completed her first year at a design school, finishing with a 3.4 GPA. She majored in computer art and worked at a local museum part-time. Because she did not go away to college, Mary said acts of discrimination had not altered; however, she was concerned that her literature classes offered no texts by or about women or people of color. To compensate, Mary had been reading books by a Chinese American author, Anchee Min, whom the first author recommended. Mary said she found these texts important as a way to identify with her own culture and history.

Tia attended a historically black college, where she found that contrary to her initial expectations, she dealt with issues of colorism and racial prejudice. She said she disliked the "pettiness" of her classmates' remarks related to beauty:

It was hard for me. I had to deal with black people from all different types of backgrounds from all different places. It gets down to my hair is lighter than yours; I have more money than you. I'm light-skinned, you're dark-skinned.

When the first author asked how she resisted these acts, Tia echoed Sophia's advice from one year before:

I just pay it no attention. I look at people like they're dumb and people are afraid to talk to me because they think that I'm snooty but I'm not. I just think it's stupid to have an argument about someone's hair being better than yours...What relevance is that?

Tia also credited her high school experiences for deciding to create her own all-female book club where she continued her critical work.

Like Tia, Sofia was surprised by the racial dynamics at the college she attended. She said that she considered joining the Latino Student Organization to connect with her culture, but felt she didn't fit in. "The problem I have with it," she explained, "is that it only dedicates itself to three Latin cultures: Puerto Rican, Dominican, Mexican." Sofia felt disappointed at the lack of opportunity to learn about her Ecuadorian and Cuban cultures. In response to feelings of isolation, Sofia also started a book club, eager, she said, to recreate "the trust and friendship" she had in high school. She also said she was careful not to select books that reinforced Latino/a stereotypes so that participants gained broader views of Latino/as' experiences and perspectives.

Additionally, Sofia said she struggled with sexism. While she was confident about her high GPA, she felt uncomfortable as one of the few women who majored in math. Despite the discrimination she received from peers and professors, she continued to resist:

I'm pursuing it like I would anything else. I'm not looking for someone to accept me as a female or as anything other than someone who enjoys math and wants to do it. I would assume that if someone can see my dedication, and someone can see me strive for it, then they won't care that I'm a female because I can do it just as well as a man.

This reflection provides repeating glimmers of the critical responses to racism and sexism and articulated ways of resisting that discrimination.

Fay's racial and gender consciousness also expanded when she went to college in Miami. For the first time, she started using the African name her mother gave her and learned Swahili because she said:

I wanted to become more connected to myself. I feel like I'm a whole new person! I always tell people I'm Kenyan. I'm a Trinidadian...I just want to be a little more connected to who I am, even if I can't necessarily know exactly who that [Kenyan] side of my family is.

She added that reading *Zami* (Lorde, 1982) helped in this exploration, explaining, "I like the power of her words."

While Fay felt confident about changing her name and learning about her African roots, she said she was dealing with much more racism than she had experienced up North. In interacting with her peers, she explained, "I'm from the City but the South is a whole different country. They look at people from

the East and they're like, 'You think you're better.'" In fact, this is one of the reasons why she joined a book club in college but later quit because she could not connect to the other students who did not seem to grapple with identity issues like she was. Further, she said she experienced intense institutional racism within her school and her job:

I don't think the South is a good place to live if you're black...When you go into a store, they go hard. They follow you...I was working at the mall and most of the time when you're black, they think you're Haitian or Southern. When they heard me speak, they were dumbfounded like they never heard anyone speak like me before. It made me laugh, but then it made me feel weird.

Fay also discussed how racism manifested itself in other ways:

I find that especially people who are educated like superiors or elders, they have this pity for you...the way they speak to you...I didn't need that. I didn't need you to help me do anything. I just want to show you who I am...I feel like people make these hierarchies based on fear.

Unfortunately, Fay said she had no place in which to articulate her frustrations—and spoke of returning north, as the South and its “racism everywhere” were too difficult. She also said she missed the support system of her friends, the book club, and her father. Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) address the notion of shifting, specifically for African American women who respond and cope with various types of discrimination. Fay used shifting language, explaining how she is currently dealing with the combined oppressions of sexism and racism:

It's not easy being a woman. It is not easy being a person of color and young at the same time in America. I love that I have to prove myself in certain cases but sometimes it's like come on...but I say the hell with you...I speak my mind and I'm not disrespectful but I will definitely make things known. I do it in the most dignified way possible. I won't quit on anything...I started this, let me finish...I want to just say I tried. I have nothing to prove to anybody but myself.

Like Sofia and Tia, Fay developed a language of resistance and agency, where she articulated ways in which she confronts discrimination. While again it is not

conclusive if this is directly attributed to book club, this forum did allow the participants a space in which to voice their struggles and enact movements of empowerment.

Joy also went to college in an area where she felt different racially and economically. As a Latina, she said she felt comfortable at the college itself (as she lived in an international dormitory) but did not feel comfortable in the surrounding community. Because of this, Joy planned to start her own book club and join the Latina sorority in the fall. She saw these actions as means to becoming a stronger woman:

When I was in high school, except for book club, the girls weren't—I mean they were smart but the way they carried themselves, the way they said things were off. Then I got to college: the girls are smart, they're in control, they're answering questions, they're volunteering, they're putting out information. These women are going to be someone in the world. I'm going to be watching them on TV; I'm gonna hear about them in the news. You can tell: these women are powerful, strong, and I like that; I like that a lot.

### **Book Club as Critical, Agentive Space**

In addition to asking the participants about their college experiences, the first author asked them to reflect on the significance of book club. All unanimously agreed that book club was a critical forum that was safe, allowing them to address issues that were important to them. Sofia stated, “We were comfortable and confided in each other.” Fay and Joy both said they became less shy and learned to participate more. Sofia and Mary found the book club to be “empowering” because participants listened and responded thoughtfully to what they said. Mary explained, “It was a time that I could release my own energy and just talk and not be worried about being judged.” Tia remarked that the book club “felt like family: we talked about issues of race, class, and gender but if we had a problem, we could talk about it. We still had that space.”

Additionally, everyone said the collective nature and bonding was one of the most rewarding aspects of book club. Joy explained:

It opened me up and helped because Tia or Sofia would talk about things. Now I've actually thought about them, especially with stuff I've been going through. I think, they did this and they taught me. We had



that time together. I loved it...I formed good friendships...I miss them a lot.

The participants also credited book club with having become more self-reflective and analytic, skills they said they profited from in college. They learned to analyze beliefs and actions of other people in their lives, especially as they related to issues of race, class, and gender. Fay stated, “[Those] books that are based on cultures give you a sense of what’s out there in the world.” Sofia expressed similar notions, explaining, that book club “lets you release feelings of oppression. You feel something within yourself, and you wanna get out and do something different...be open to all perspectives, even though you may disagree...you might change someone’s perspective.” Tia also said she learned how to analyze texts more critically, talk about personal and social issues, explore multiple perspectives, and reflect on characters’ behaviors in making her own decisions and choices: “Book club was part of the reason I was who I was. It helped me deal with situations. Reading certain things, analyzing and relating to books, remembering those books while I was in college, and relating real life to what happened in the book.”

As evidenced by the participants’ words, the book club had a significant and ongoing effect on their critical intellect and identity. All of the women continued to read novels about women of color and/or started book clubs in college as means to explore racial/ethnic and gender dynamics in political and personal contexts. In college, they extended their analyses of racism and sexism, articulating more subtle and nuanced understandings. They recognized the book club as having provided a safe space for sharing their feelings, experiences, and perspectives. Overall, the young women articulated the transformative effects of book club on their college experiences, enabling them to exert some agency and control in their intellectual and identity development.

### **Discussion**

Analyses of transcripts from the book club sessions and interviews provided some powerful implications about the promise of critical literacy for the positive identity, agentic, and academic development of young adolescent women of color. Book clubs facilitated by a mentor or teacher committed to critical literacy can promote analytical reading and provide a space for adolescents to fashion and refashion their racialized and gendered identities by dissecting the contours and contexts of racism, classism, and sexism. Providing these opportunities can enable students to affirm and negotiate their own culturally complex identities and analyze various forms of oppression. Ultimately, book club promoted resilience to resist physical, emotional, and

social acts of discrimination and develop agency (Smith, 2000). Furthermore, the personal connections the women developed to each other, the texts, and the facilitator were significant, especially considering the longitudinal effects they revealed in their interviews.

Because of the small number of participants, the book club setting offered a unique space in which students could engage in difficult conversations. These spaces—spaces outside mandated curricula or standardized tests—act as a forum where students can participate in self-definition and collaborative meaning-making of texts, identities, and communities (Wissman, 2011). Thus, the creation of more intimate forums within and beyond schools is vital for the intellectual, literacy, and identity development of young people of color (Fisher, 2006). Further, the unique aspect of this study was the participants' mixed ethnic identities. In their discourses across ethnicities, the women discussed how variations in the particularities of racist ideologies played out across racial and ethnic lines. Simultaneously, they constructed commonalities in their experiences and shared critical approaches for agency and resistance. The experiences of these women obviously were diverse. However, creating opportunities for women of different ethnicities to share knowledge about the nature and effects of racism and sexism may assist women in attaining greater agency in confronting these issues (Sutherland, 2005).

This study is also unique in that it examined the longitudinal effects of book club on their college experiences. As evidenced from the interviews, the book club played a significant role in college. Many initiated their own book clubs and/or participated in other extra-curricular experiences where they could share their everyday struggles against oppression. Thus, these kinds of alternative forums may serve as a critical pathway to promote college retention for students of color. Research into the opportunities for and obstacles to student spaces and organizations both before and during college, as well as the experiences and outcomes of such spaces, should be an ongoing and fruitful area for future research in adolescent literacy (Knight, Norton, Bentley, & Dixon, 2004).

Additionally, this study has critical implications for ways to reconstruct secondary classrooms. Although many literacy educators may not be able to

reproduce intimate locations such as book club with the same level of self-disclosure, teachers must begin to create safer, more relevant classrooms for students of color. Reflecting on and using students' cultures when engaging in literacy practices is a first step (Au, 2009; Optiz, 1998). Like Brooks (2006), the participants not only felt validated in reading texts about their own cultures, but they also used these texts to confront racism and sexism in their own lives. Conversely, we want to provide multiethnic texts that allow students to question constructions that do not align with their own viewpoints, values, and beliefs. Thus, the authors see a critical need for diverse texts to reveal the multiple constructions and acts of resistance to complicate various forms of oppression. In this way, conversations are not just a way to find commonalities but also challenge ideologies to produce new understandings of the texts and our communities. Given the power of these conversations, the authors argue in favor of shifting the focus of literacy practices to include more sociopolitical inquiry, where students analyze and evaluate the socio-political orientations of texts. Finally, the book club demonstrated the power of allowing for more personal connections in the classroom. In response to Hill's (2009) notions of wounded healing and storytelling, the authors believe that critical work can happen when students are allowed a space in which to reveal their struggles as they connect and intersect with the texts that are studied in the classroom. Thus, educators need to put the same emphasis and focus on interpretation, critical analysis, and storytelling as they inform each other equally in increasing the meaning-making processes.

To conclude, while several studies have demonstrated the significance of critical literacy spaces for youth, this study contributes to the literature by illustrating the positive long-term impact of these experiences. All the participants commented on significance of the experience in sharpening their analytical literacy skills and giving them the confidence to participate in or create literacy and/or cultural spaces which enabled them to collaborate with other young women in college. While the participants' growing maturity and new environments undoubtedly contributed to their analytic skills and assertiveness, their experiences as book club members also influenced the development of positive racial and gender identities. As a result of their participation in book club, the participants gained stronger collective voices; learned to analyze racial, class, and gender relations in more complex ways; and exhibited greater agency in college. By documenting the experiences of committed and resilient young

women of color, researchers can inform academic communities about working towards the redistribution of power, where students and texts are transformed through re-contextualizing where and what transactions occur (Fecho & Meacham, 2007). In other words, book clubs can be a place where we “create pathways for social change and inclusion” (Twomey, 2007, p. 406), pathways to increase our support for alternative critical spaces for diverse youth that can ultimately transform literacy practices within our schools and communities.

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