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“Just, at least, try to understand”: Culturally situated reader response and curriculum curation for Black girls

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ABSTRACT

Studies centralizing youth responses to literature have changed the landscape of literacy classrooms and continue to shape literature instruction. Still, there is limited scholarship that explores the intricate ways in which Black girls respond to literature which inhibits curricular possibilities for Black girls in literacy spaces. Considering the dearth of research on Black girls’ reading responses, this article builds on the theoretical foundations of Culturally Situated Reader Response and the Black Girl Literacies Framework to ground the following research questions: (1) What culturally situated positions did Black girls assume as they transacted with a speculative short story? and (2) In what ways do Black girls’ responses highlight the complexity of Black girls’ reading response practices? In centralizing these questions and theoretical framings, the author highlights how Black girls’ incisive responses to a literary text suggest the need for educators and researchers to expand how we consider culture in our pedagogical and curricular decisions, particularly related to Black girls’ literature engagement.

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Over 20 years ago, Galda and Beach (2000) noted the importance of culture to the act of reading, including how students often “draw on their own experiences as persons acquiring social practices constituting identities and competence in lived worlds to interpret characters’ own development as participants in text worlds” (p. 68). In other words, readers often pull from their societal and cultural understandings to better comprehend the characters and conflicts present in literary texts. Several scholars have explored adolescent readers’ sociocultural responses to literature (see Brooks, 2006; Nero, 2017; Shin, 2019; Spring, 2018 as examples). But even though studies centralizing how youth respond to literature have “changed the landscape of English and literature classrooms” and “continue to shape much of middle and secondary literature instruction” (Park, 2012, p. 192), there are few

studies that centralize how Black girls respond to literary texts (Koonce, 2017; Muhammad & Haddix, 2016). Additionally, while there are studies on how Black girls engage in literacy practices such as storytelling, writing, speaking, engaging in digital communication, and creating multimodal text (Henry, 1998; Lewis Ellison & Qiu, 2023; McArthur & Muhammad, 2017; Player et al, 2023; Toliver, 2023), Black girls have been “historically left out of engagements with literature” (Greene, 2021, p. 22).

The limited research on Black girls’ reading responses presents an obstacle for literacy researchers and curriculum creators. Reader response enables students to engage with the text and with each other, so making space for students’ responses to reading in everyday classroom practice can increase both reading comprehension and textual engagement (Woodruff & Griffin, 2017). Additionally, as Rosenblatt (1938) argued, “anything we call a literary experience gains significance and force from the way in which the stimuli present in the literary work interact with the mind and emotions of a particular reader” (p. 35). Said another way, if teachers do not understand the reader, then it is impossible to build curriculum that significantly attends to the special qualities of their individual experiences. Black girls deserve to have educational experiences that are devised with their academic success, identity development, critical consciousness, and joy in mind (Price-Dennis & Muhammad, 2021). But if Black girls are consistently erased from reader response scholarship, then the educators responsible for cultivating a critical and inclusive literacy learning environment and curating effective curricular experiences will flounder, as a focus on each reader and their individual and social reading experiences are paramount to the creation of effective literacy pedagogy.

Considering the dearth of scholarship on Black girls’ reading response practices, the purpose of this article is to examine how five Black middle school girls utilized aspects of culturally situated reader response to discuss and critique a speculative short story and how Black girls’ incisive responses to a literary text suggest the need for educators and researchers to expand how we consider culture in our pedagogical and curricular decisions, particularly related to how we engage in text selection. To centralize the research purpose, this article considers the following research questions:

1. What culturally situated positions did Black girls assume as they transacted with a speculative short story?
2. In what ways do Black girls’ responses highlight the complexity of Black girls’ reading response practices?

I begin this analysis by reviewing scholarship on Black girls and their responses to literature. I use this review as a foundation to discuss the

importance of centering Black girls' culturally situated reading responses and to foreground specific cultural components as essential to their literacy backgrounds. I then provide a conceptual framework that links culturally situated reader response (Brooks & Browne, 2012) to the Black Girl Literacies Framework (Muhammad & Haddix, 2016) to pinpoint the intricacy of Black girls' cultural reading lives that are tied to their histories, identities, and political/critical sensibilities. Next, considering the Black feminist underpinnings inherent in the conceptual framework, I showcase the findings as a Black feminist mosaic (Evans-Winters, 2019). In doing so, I creatively represent the girls' interactions as direct responses to text, rather than situating the findings as bounded, detached themes. Last, I provide several curricular considerations and detail how literacy researchers and teachers might consider the range and complexity of cultural positions that are possible for Black girl readers.

Literature review

Curating curriculum for Black girls

According to López López and Nikey (2021), curriculum curation requires a “talent for choosing objects, creative expressions in their own right, remixing culture, particular aesthetics, purposeful selection, [and] close consultation with peers and culture remixers...” (p. 236). It compels educators to develop the aptitude for selecting texts (broadly construed), activities, and pedagogical strategies that attend to the needs of students on individual and collective levels. Although critical in all learning spaces, curriculum curation is not easy, especially in connection to the curatorial work required to create learning spaces that are welcoming for Black girls. As Nyachae (2016) argued, designing curriculum for Black girls is a complicated endeavor, as there are varying and broad arguments about what should or should not be included in Black girls' learning spaces, and there is difficulty centering blackness and Black herstories in a pedagogical world confined by individuality, conformity, and antiblackness. Still, even amidst complications, several scholars have made recommendations that detail specific acts that must be considered when curating curriculum for Black girls.

For instance, Jacobs (2016) advocated for the inclusion of Black feminist frameworks that allow space for positive racial and gendered identity development as well as critical media pedagogies that make space for Black girls to speak back to negative constructions of Black girlhood. Similarly, Nunn (2018) suggested that educators teach social justice and activism, demonstrate critical thinking in relation to popular culture and media, provide lessons in Black histories, encourage Black girls to

discuss and critique their ideas about race and gender, and offer positive images of Black women and girls. Brown (2013) encouraged educators to choose curricular content that challenges binaries (e.g., written vs. oral; good vs. bad; secular vs. sacred; traditional vs. innovative), attends to the complexities of Black girlhood, affirms Black girls' lives, and breaks intellectual traditions in order to expand what is possible in Black girl curricular spaces. Comparably, Turner and Griffin (2020) proposed the creation of curriculum that prepares Black girls for life beyond the classroom, explores future possibilities for their lives, and makes space for curricular co-creation with Black girls. Collectively, these scholars recognize that Black girls have historically fallen through the cracks in curriculum research (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010) and that there is "limited investment in the specific future of Black girls and inadequate representations [of Black girls] in the general school curriculum" (Nunn, 2018, p. 244). So, they counter curricular ambivalence by highlighting specific pedagogical and curricular moves that might assist educators in focalizing this oft-ignored population of students.

Highlighting the recommendations provided by these scholars is paramount because, despite efforts to create meaningful learning experiences for Black girls, "educators and their curricular materials often show a greater degree of illiteracy to the racial and cultural wealth [of] Black female students" (Young et al., 2018, p. 104). That is, even though scholars have provided curricular recommendations and even though there are several educators adept at curating curriculum for Black girls, much work still needs to be done to ensure that Black girls are able to engage in curricular and pedagogical processes that center their culturally specific needs. Black girls need curricula that center their identities, make space for their creativity and self-expression, and allow them to critique traditional constructions of what it means to be Black and girl in the contemporary social milieu. They need teachers who understand that building curriculum with Black girls in mind cannot be summed up in a checklist or handbook because Black girls' identities are vast. They need educators who have a talent for choosing curricular content that allows for creative expression, includes nuanced cultural esthetics, and engages their specific needs in dynamic ways. Additionally, Black girls require curricular curators who "ask what works *for whom*—as opposed to simply what works" and who create programming "that respect[s] the diversities of girlhoods existent among Black girls" (Nyachae & Ohito, 2023, p. 765). In other words, Black girls need curators who take the time to consider the multifaceted nature of Black girlhood and construct curriculum that attends to Black girls' individual and collective needs. As education scholarship has failed to give adequate attention to Black girls' responses to literature, literacy

educators and researchers as well as curriculum developers are missing an opportunity to become the curriculum curators that Black girls deserve.

Black girls' responses to literature

Over the past 20 years, there have been minimal studies that highlight Black girls' sociocultural responses to literature (Muhammad & Haddix, 2016). Noticeably, most of these studies were conducted in out-of-school contexts. Brooks et al. (2008) facilitated an after-school book club where participants discussed various cultural issues through their responses to realistic and historical fiction. Centering the concept of colorism through the reading of Sharon Flake's *The Skin I'm In*, the researchers found that utilizing stories that disrupt race and gender-based oppression helped the girls speak back to larger systems of injustice. In a later study, Brooks et al. (2022) found that some books, in this case *Hush* by Jacqueline Woodson, can open space for Black girls to engage in deep conversations about their own life experiences and to grapple with difficult concepts, like racism and police brutality. Greene's (2016) out-of-school book club study showcased how Black girls used literature to uplift realistic representations and disrupt misrepresentations of themselves. Using *Push* by Sapphire as the grounding text, Greene found that narrow ideas about literature conceptualized in schools created a gap between home and school literacy practices. Gibson (2016) found a similar disconnect between in-school and out-of-school reading in her study of Black girls reading and responding to street literature. The girls in the study made strong connections to the novel's protagonist, but they also deconstructed the protagonists' actions and motivations, engaging in critical literacy practices that connected their personal stories and larger narratives about Black girlhood. Gibson's study challenged educators to validate the multiple stories and genres Black girls read and consider the numerous ways they engage in reading, both collaboratively and individually.

While most research on Black girls' reader responses were conducted out of school, there are a few that took place within a school context. As examples, DeBlase (2003) observed 11 eighth-grade girls (two were Black) in an English I classroom to explore how they reacted to gendered literary narratives in the texts they were assigned in class. Unfortunately, even though larger sociopolitical aims often influenced their initial responses, many of the girls were not granted the opportunity to fully connect the text to their lives as their attempts were often thwarted by the teacher. Similarly, Sutherland's (2005) research focalized Black girls' responses to a literary text in their English class. Through an analysis of conversations surrounding a textual exAmbertion of *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison, Sutherland found that the novel allowed the girls the chance to talk about

their own histories and confront tensions with their ascribed and pre-scribed identities within and outside of school. Carter (2007) explored the reading responses of two Black girls in a high school British literature course who were assigned “My Mistress’ Eyes” by William Shakespeare. Again, the focus was centralized on how they responded to race and gender in the text. Again, the teacher was ill-prepared to consider Black girls’ specific cultural experiences. The girls often responded to the teacher with silence when she asked specific questions about their reading interpretations, but they explained to the researcher that it was often difficult to negotiate their critical responses to harmful texts, especially those that equate ugliness to blackness.

Across each of these studies, scholars point to the significance and necessity of exploring Black girls’ responses to text, but there is a dearth of scholarship available to tease out the nuances required to better understand the vastness of Black girls’ reading practices which limits the curricular possibilities available to Black girls in literacy classrooms. Sutherland (2005) argued that there is “no conclusion that ‘Black girls experience X, Y, and Z; therefore, a teacher should do A, B, and C’” (p. 399). So, curriculum curation requires more than identity verification. Instead, it requires an increased consideration of the nuanced possibilities of Black girlhood and a deep knowledge of the complexities of Black girls’ cultural existence. Thus, to gain a better understanding of the complexities of Black girls’ reading experiences, more scholarship is needed on how Black girls respond to the literature with which they engage.

Conceptual framework

In this section, I present a conceptual framework that combines Culturally Situated Reader Response (Brooks & Browne, 2012) and the Black Girl Literacies Framework (Muhammad & Haddix, 2016) to highlight the complexity of Black girls’ culturally positioned reading practices.

Culturally situated reader response

Reader response theory is a transactional theory that recognizes reading as a process of dialogue between the reader, the text, and the author. Although there are several scholars who centralize the text or the author over the reader, Rosenblatt’s (1964, 1994) theory explicitly focuses on the reader. She argued “that it is not the words but the individual reader who has acquired the associations with them, and who pays attention to these associations or shuts them out of awareness” (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 72). So, the reader decides what meanings they will realize in any reading event. Rosenblatt (1993) is also cognizant of social influences, such as a reader’s

memories, preoccupations, sense of values, and aspirations, that affect a reader's relationship with the text. Each of these points presumes the vast importance of the background information a reader brings to the reading experience. Unless readers have identical personhoods, identical experiences, and identical lives, then there can be no identical reading, thus allowing for varying interpretations that all have merit as long as the interpretation is not completely contradicted by the text. The reliance on background and personal experience does not negate the social experience, however. Rosenblatt (1994) noted that even though readers have their own interpretations guided by the text, "we may help one another attend to the words, phrases, images, [and] scenes, that we have overlooked or slighted" and revise our interpretations (p. 146). By exploring the importance of background knowledge and by acknowledging the social aspect of reading, Rosenblatt (1994) suggests that one's culture, identity dynamics, and surroundings all affect how readers engage with a piece of text.

Brooks and Browne (2012) use Rosenblatt's theoretical grounding and add increased depth, as they realized few reader response theorists "appreciably grapple with the myriad cultural influences (values, practices, experiences, etc.) affecting both readers and authors, and the ways in which these influence meaning making" (p. 77). That is, instead of teasing out the vast possibilities inherent in culture (including but not limited to race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age, geographical location, etc.), many reader response theorists only superficially attend to culture. Due to the lack of cultural awareness, the scholars argued that a culturally situated reader response is essential. Drawing on bell hooks (1990) theory of homeplace, Brooks and Browne (2012) suggest that culturally situated reader response must attend to the reader's cultural position which includes the supporting positions of community, ethnic group, peers, and family. Considering their grounded approach to theory creation, they provided evidence to suggest that as readers engage with text, they identify themselves in culturally specific ways in connection to their reading experiences. For example, while reading *The Watson's Go to Birmingham* by Christopher Paul Curtis, the young Black readers in their study assumed ethnic group positions when they used "we" in reference to the characters and themselves; took on community positions when connecting the book's urban setting to their geographical locations as urban residents; engaged in peer positioning when they aligned their responses with their reading peers; and activated family positioning when they situated themselves as familial members. Many of the examples overlapped, but it was clear that there were multiple positions students assumed as they read the text. Thus, in each example, culture was not cursorily acknowledged, as multiple facets were shown to consistently affect a readers' textual experiences.

Only a few scholars have utilized Brooks and Browne's (2012) theory to better understand the reading response practices of Black youth (see Gardener, 2017; Jones, 2020; Scullin, 2020 as examples), so there is ample room to highlight the intricate details inherent within culturally situated reader response. For the purposes of this study, one such detail is Brooks and Browne's (2012) contention that each of the supporting cultural positions "cannot be fully grasped without taking into account the cultural milieu embedded in particular stories. For example, a book with a strong family theme...has been shown to compel participants to more often respond from a Family rather than an Ethnic Group positioning" (p. 78). That is, readers may display specific cultural positions depending on the overarching themes in a text. And yet, this aspect is currently underexplored. Ultimately, the specific ways in which Black girls' textual transactions result in certain cultural positioning is underexamined. This article, however, centers Black middle school girls' reading responses and explores how they take on various cultural positionings as they collaboratively read a speculative short story.

Black Girl Literacies Framework

Created by Muhammad and Haddix (2016) through an extensive literature review of studies focalizing research on Black girls' literacy practices, the Black Girl Literacies Framework (BGLF) is a conceptual schema undergirded by Black feminist theories (Collins, 2000; Cooper, 1988) and composed of six components that are critical for Black girl literacy study. The six components assume that Black girl literacies are: (1) multiple; (2) tied to identities; (3) historical; (4) collaborative; (5) intellectual; and (6) political/critical. Black girl literacies are multiple in that they are always engaged in several, layered literacy practices, including reading, writing, speaking, dancing, telling stories, listening, dancing, singing, rapping, and joking among a host of other ways to decode and apply knowledge (Richardson, 2003). They use these multiple ways of knowing to learn more about themselves and others and to shape and reshape how they see and engage with the world (tied to identities). Black girls' literacies are also deeply connected to Black histories and Black ancestral ways of being and knowing (historical), and they advance these literacies by working together, rather than attempting to understand the world alone (collaborative). The goal of Black girl literacies, then, is to enhance current and attain new knowledge (intellectual), but also to make sense of power, inequality, and oppression with the aim of moving toward liberation (critical/political). Collectively, these traits suggest Black girl literacies are "multi-dimensional, multi-layered, nuanced, and complex" (Price-Dennis & Muhammad, 2021, p. 2).

The BGLF and culturally situated reader response work together to highlight Black girls' unique ways of meaning making, especially those directly

connected to their cultural positioning. Moreover, combining the two conceptual ideas makes possible the analysis of which literacies Black girl readers employ as they assume certain cultural positions. To illustrate, Black girls who assume an ethnic group position while reading might rely upon their identity-related, historical, and intellectual literacies. Black girls who engage the peer position may utilize their collaborative, intellectual, and historical literacies. Also, Black girls who take on a community position could draw upon their historical, collaborative, and political/critical literacy practices. There are many possibilities to explore, thus a focus on Black girls' nuanced and complex reading response practices is essential, as there are myriad potential literacy and cultural positioning combinations that could influence the reading event. Without a specific focus on Black girls' multifaceted reading responses, however, education research fails to appropriately account for the complex cultural positions Black girls occupy and how those positions are mediated between Black girls and the texts they read.

Method

Reading context

In the summer of 2019, I conducted a speculative writing workshop study that took place every weekend for 2 months at a nonprofit educational center located in a library in the southeast United States. The workshop design followed the BGLF and suggestions for Black girl curricular curation to assist the girls in writing their own speculative narratives. Particularly, I consistently used Black women's writing as literary mentor texts, model textual examples that assisted the girls in learning more about plot, character, conflict, theme, setting, and other features of fictional writing (Johnson & Sullivan, 2020; Muhammad, 2012). These examples included excerpts from *The Jumbies* by Tracey Baptiste, *Akata Witch* and *Binti* by Nnedi Okorafor, *Parable of the Sower* by Octavia Butler, *Orleans* by Sherri Smith, and *Mother of the Sea* by Zetta Elliott. The only full-text mentor we read together was "Sera" by Nicola Yoon, the focal story in this study. By including Black mentor texts written by Black women about Black girls, I followed Nunn's (2018) suggestion to curate curriculum that attends to Black histories and offer positive images of Black girls and women.

In addition to connecting to Black people's historical use of literary mentors, I regularly highlighted the communal and collaborative nature of Black literacy practices (McHenry, 2002; Royer, 1994) to build a Black girl-focused curricular space. For instance, as we wrote, the girls would ask each other questions to see if their writing "sounded right" or propose a story idea to see if it made sense in the context of their larger stories. Also, rather than reading excerpts individually, we engaged in communal

read alouds (Toliver, 2020). As we read together, the girls would sometimes interrupt the reader to provide storied connections to and nuanced critiques of the text. Sometimes, that connection would turn into a longer discussion, and other times, the speaker would just share something in that moment before returning to the text. In making space for their conversations and critiques, I followed Brown’s (2013) suggestion to break traditional expectations in curricular spaces (i.e., individualism and silence) and Jacobs’ (2016) recommendation to accentuate Black girls’ unique knowledge. This was the context for the reading of the speculative short story.

Reading partners

I recruited six Black middle school girls to participate in the writing workshop, but on the day of our communal read aloud, only five girls (Amber, Avenae’J, Talyn, Terrah, and Victoria) verbally participated in conversation while Bailey, who was often an observer rather than a verbal contributor, chose to remain silent, listen to the others talk, and engage the group nonverbally through gesture. This action was common for Bailey, as she self-identified as “one of the most quiet people” in her school (interview 1) and, when I asked about her perceived strengths and weaknesses, she stated that one of her weaknesses was that she disliked talking to people (interview 4). Although she did not participate with her words, I include Bailey as a reading partner because participation does not always have to resemble traditional forms of discussion. Her non-verbal cues were also important to the general conversation.

In Table 1, I include each of the girls’ names, ages, grades, and pronouns. Of course, I understand that identity is a fluid construct that may change over time, but at the time of this study, each research partner self-identified as a Black girl in middle school.

Text selection and description

Each short story excerpt selected for the study was chosen based on the girls’ interests. For example, in discussing setting, the girls noted that they enjoyed stories that began with some form of action or suspense because

Table 1. Research partner information.

Name	Age	Grade	Pronoun
Amber	14	8	She/Her
Avenae’J	13	8	She/Her
Bailey	13	8	She/Her
Talyn	13	8	She/Her
Terrah	13	8	She/Her
Victoria	14	8	She/Her

it allowed them to become absorbed in the possibilities of the text. Because of this, on the day we discussed setting as a group, I brought in the first couple of pages from *Orleans* by Sherri Smith, as the author presents a dramatic scene filled with tension and chaos. We used this excerpt to talk about the writing process and why the author might have started the story with hurricanes, death, destruction, and isolation. We then predicted what this setting might mean for the rest of the story. We engaged in similar processes to discuss conflict, theme, character, and plot.

Because the goal was for the girls to write their own speculative short stories, I also wanted to ensure that there was time to read a full short story during the workshop. Throughout the workshop, the girls had discussed a love for Greek gods, horror and fantasy elements, and stories written by Nicola Yoon. I searched for short stories that aligned with their interests, and although there were several that included Greek gods, horror tropes, and fantasy elements, only one story, “Sera,” an entry the young adult literature anthology *Because You Love to Hate Me: 13 Tales of Villainy* (Quealy-Gainer, 2018), met all criteria and was written by Yoon.

“Sera” is a text in which Yoon was challenged with writing a fictional narrative that included a “gender-swapped God of War” (Shelly, 2017) as the protagonist. In the text, Yoon tells the story of a young girl (Sera) is born into a family that includes a mother (Kareena Thomas), father (Patrick Thomas), and older sister (Callie). As soon as Sera is born, there is a strain on the family. Patrick and Kareena consistently argue which eventually leads to divorce, and Callie becomes quiet and fearful instead of the happy boastful child she used to be. As Sera gets older, odd and violent occurrences begin to happen around her. On the playground or at the preschool, the boys around Sera would fight. A male teacher slapped a child at the school. A stalker who attempts to harm Kareena, Callie, and Sera as they were walking home from the park, ends up turning his knife on himself. Each of these instances makes Kareena fearful of her child, resulting in her disregarding Sera in favor of her more palatable daughter. Eventually, Sera understands that she might be the problem and attempts to diminish herself. As she does so, Callie gets stronger and the mother seems happier, but Sera is miserable. In the end, Sera can deny herself no longer, and she embraces who she is as the God of War. She understands that she is not the problem, as the real issue is the hatred and violence that people already have in their hearts. Her presence brings out the viciousness, but it was already there, lurking behind the masks people wear to become acceptable in society.

Data generation

Data from the larger study included transcribed audio recordings of group sessions and individual interviews, research partner-produced

artifacts, video recordings of group sessions, journal entries, curriculum materials, and field notes. For this study, I isolated the transcribed audio recordings that accompanied the reading of “Sera” by Nicola Yoon as well as any audio or video recording in which the girls mentioned the story (*via* plot, character, etc.) after our reading session ended. I sequestered the reading event because it was the only complete story we read during the writing workshop and because this was the only reading experience in which we were attending to the whole of the story, not focalizing our responses on specific story elements (e.g., character building, setting construction, creating conflict, etc.). I included conversations post-reading event that mentioned the short story to note where and how the story was brought up in conversation outside of the initial reading experience. Lastly, as reader response theory is a transaction between reader and text, I included the text as data because, while the reader is transacting with the text, the text is also transacting with the reader.

Data analysis: Black feminist mosaic

Evans-Winters (2019) noted that research centering Black women and girls often engages with numerous texts (broadly construed). These texts can be stories, poems, songs, discussions, movements, etc. but no matter the medium, these texts “become the makeup of our mosaic” (p. 24). By definition, a mosaic is a picture or pattern that is created by placing small or irregular pieces of material together. It is a style of decorative composite art that uses precise layering to build on the unique quality of each individual piece. Because a mosaic requires that each smaller piece (or tesserae) connects to another to make up the larger image, data in a Black Feminist mosaic cannot be broken apart into individual themes or separated into distinct sections. For the mosaic to truly come together, it is imperative to maintain the connective tissue that brings the pieces together so that further interpretation is possible. Due to the need to keep all the pieces together rather than separating them in themes or some other bounded form, the mosaicism of Black feminist research requires the use of alternative forms to data representation, forms that are “creative and culturally congruent with Black women’s ways of sharing experience and conveying messages” (p. 25). In essence, Black feminist mosaics require the use of imagination, play, and story in the sharing of research data. Considering the Black feminist underpinnings of both the BGLF and Culturally Situated Reader Response alongside Black women’s curriculum curation recommendations to highlight Black women and girls’ ways of being and knowing, I chose to analyze the data and represent the findings using the method of Black Feminist Mosaic.

Viewing the data as tesserae, I first prepped my materials: the transcribed audio recordings, the short story, and the conversational pieces. I then read the short story while listening to the transcript and watching the video, pausing my reading when the girls stopped to speak on some topic outside of the story, but connected to it (e.g., feelings and thoughts about character actions, commentary on plot events, connections to personal or communal life). This assisted me in considering what moments in the story resulted in responses from the girls. Next, I read and reread the transcripts, which allowed me to more fully realize the multi-layered conversations the girls were having. In this part of the analysis, I noticed similar words and phrases the girls consistently mentioned. As an example, in the story, Sera's mother says that something about her is "wrong." The girls consistently used this word after that narrative moment to talk to each other about Sera's actions as well as the actions of the mother. Lastly, I read the text alone without the girls' commentary to consider how themes in the text might have compelled the girls to respond in particular ways. In this space of analysis, I noticed strong familial themes *via* the heavy centralization of mother and daughters as well as compelling community themes through the story's deep focus on girlhood and stereotypes of "proper" female positioning in urban spaces. I also noticed a lack of connections to ethnic group positioning, as race and ethnicity are never mentioned throughout the story. Across each analytic process, I was able to attune to the transactions between the text and reader. In the first, I was able to see how the text transacted with the reader, as I was able to notice which textual elements resulted in responses from the girls (e.g., characterization of gender roles). In the second, I was able to pinpoint the types of responses the girls employed as well as how they responded to each other throughout the reading event (e.g., discussions of mother-daughter relationships). In the last, I was able to consider the text on its own and what details the text might convey to readers (e.g., themes related to family and community).

After prepping the data, I wanted to create a complex mosaic of the reading event utilizing a poetic form. I considered this mosaic construction because Rosenblatt (1994) argues that "what each reader makes of the text is...the poem" (p. 105). As I was transacting with/reading with the pieces of the mosaic, I first sought to take this quote literally by constructing the tesserae into an actual poem. However, I found it difficult to assemble the mosaic into this form because I could not justify breaking the girls' words or the storied text into extremely small phrases, especially considering the intricate layering required of a Black feminist mosaic. Thus, I broadened my scope and sketched a design that mirrored a traditional call-and-response pattern. Call-and-response is a Black literacy practice in which a sound or gesture is executed and then a reaction occurs in reply (Richards-Greaves, 2016). As Sale (1992) contended,

call-and-response is an esthetic practice that is “interactive, process-oriented, and concerned with innovation, rather than mimetic, product-oriented, or static. Call-and-response patterns provide a basic model that depends and thrives upon audience performance and improvisation, which work together to ensure that the art will be meaningful or functional to the community” (para. 4). As reader response is a transaction where the text and reader call and respond to each other, this pattern best suited the construction of the mosaic. Additionally, as Black literacy practices undergirded this study *via* the BGLF and through my facilitation of the writing workshop, this esthetic practice best aligned with my overall approach to the research.

Once the sketch was in place, I configured the smaller pieces of text into the pattern to make a composite whole that showed the overarching connections between the short story and Black girls’ reading responses. Of course, as the mosaic is connected, rather than broken into themes, it allows space for more interpretation, messiness, and possibility. It is not rigidly constructed in ways that leave no room for alternate opinion. Evans-Winters (2019) noted, however, that “the mosaic of Black feminism brings forth an esthetically distinct alternative to widely accepted notions of how knowledge production and acquisition should transpire in qualitative inquiry and analysis” (p. 15). In its presentation of an unbounded composite narrative rather than an outlining of constrained themes, a Black feminist mosaic challenges notions of how knowledge production and presentation should transpire in qualitative research. It creates a transaction between text and reader, and thus, it is open to interpretation.

Findings

In this section I present the mosaic, which includes narrative moments from the reading event, conversations initiated by the girls, and text from the short story. Collectively, these bound data pieces resulted in a creative call and response narrative that showcases how the girls read and responded to the short story, “Sera” by Nicola Yoon.

The mom is the conflict: A Black feminist mosaic

The reading begins, an account of now, the present moment. There is silence as I open the story with a gruesome scene. Men, beating each other, using viciousness to end each other’s lives. A girl, marching down the street. Not walking. Marching, as if leading the violent men to war. I pause.

Avenae’J: This sounds scary, but like feminist scary.

Amber reads: *Kareena felt a moment of hope. Maybe she wasn’t all alone. Maybe all second children were—what word to use, what word? ... Once, someone came close to expressing what Kareena herself was feeling...*

“Compared to my first, my second kid has a nasty temperament,” she’d said. Had that mom used the word “nasty”? That might be Kareena’s word... Not only was her second child different. She was somehow wrong. (p. 325)

Talyn: That’s rude!

Terrah: You’re wrong, second child!

Talyn: Go back

Avenae’J: I think at 4 years, she can’t exactly go back there.

Toliver: Yea, but imagine, like, your mom saying that about you... you’re wrong... you’re 4

Terrah: I don’t even think she was 4. She was 3 years old and 2 months. You’re wrong.

Talyn: She comes out, and she’s just holding the baby and says, you’re wrong. What? You want to put her back?

Bailey watches the other girls converse and laughs at Talyn’s joke.

Avenae’J reads: *For her birthday, Sera wanted guns and soldiers and swords. She preferred the ones that looked real. Patrick wanted to indulge her, but Kareena did not. Instead, she bought her bright plush dolls with too-big eyes. Sera built forts with pillows, used her Barbie car as a tank, called in air strikes with her walkie-talkie, sent those dolls to war.* (p. 326)

Talyn: I mean... what type of neglective (sic) mother does this?!

Terrah: Like, no. You don’t get your toys. You get Barbies. That poor child.

Talyn: My mom did do that to me. I was so pissed.

Terrah: I didn’t play with very many toys. I had little pet shops. Little pet shops with little animals. Those were my toys.

Amber: I just had cars and dolls.

Avenae’J continues: *Kareena was the kind of mother who tried not to yell. She was careful to explain her reasoning when denying something or the other. She never told her girls that they were bad, just that they had bad behavior. She almost never yelled. But she wanted to yell now... What she wanted most of all was to put Sera down and pick Callie up and run. Sera would be all right.* (p. 327)

Terrah: Oh my gosh! Maybe she’s the wrong one. I don’t think Sera’s the wrong one here. What the heck! What an awful mom!

Talyn: I told you she was a bad mother! She’s neglectful... You can’t put your personality on your child, Karen!

Terrah: She’s an awful mom. She just wants to pick up Callie and run.

Victoria: Keep Reading. We gotta see what happens next!

Bailey puts her head down toward the text, ready for Avenae’J to begin again.

Avenae’J reads again: *She screamed as Sera ran toward him, and Callie screamed, and Kareena could not think what to do.* (p. 328)

Bailey opens her eyes wide and covers her mouth.

Terrah: Ummm... get your child?!

Amber: Get. Your. child!

Talyn: I still don't like the mother. She's a bad person.

Victoria reads: *Kareena didn't love Sera as she should. Not as much as she loved Callie. She tried to, but she didn't. And Sera knew it. (p. 331)*

Collective: Wooooooooooooow!

Talyn: I don't like these people.

Bailey shakes her head side-to-side in agreement.

Terrah: I don't like these people, either!

Victoria continues: *Having a second child had been Kareena's idea. She'd always pictured herself as a mother of two children—sisters. They would play princess dress-up and go away to summer camp and share... (p. 331)*

Talyn: Wait. This is why they failed because she's having this idea of what a child... what children should be, and that is not how you be a parent. You should not expect your children to be something before they're even born. You should not plan out life for your children like that because they have their own mind!

Terrah: You should just have a child, and let it be whatever it wants!

Talyn: It's not a good way to parent their children.

Avenae'J: My sister and I are kind of like this, except it's kind of like we don't... we hate princess and dress up. Well, I hate it. She likes it, and I don't, and then she's too young to go to summer camp.

Bailey turns her head to each person as they speak, giving her full attention.

Terrah: Me and my sister used to be like that a long time ago, but that was like back when we lived in Nebraska, which we moved to Illinois before I was in third, so...

Talyn: See, it would've been better for this mom is to not do that in the first place, not to have imagined the scenario of all this happiness because life is a gamble. You do something, and it either works or not. It's like, it's like a board game.

Terrah: It's like Dungeons and Dragons

Talyn: It's like Monopoly... It's like Life, the game. It's... that is how life is. It is completely random.

Terrah: It's completely by chance.

Avenae'J: You should try to understand your child, not just like... "Oh I just want to love her"... just, at least, try to understand, well, like not understand... at least think about like... Don't buy her barbies if she wanted something before that. Buy her what she wants...

Talyn: Don't force your children to do something that they don't want to do... She would be a better child!

Terrah: [Kareena] didn't even care. She didn't try run after the child. She just watched her leave!

Bailey looks at Terrah and giggles.

Avenae'J: Like seriously!

Terrah: And she was like “she wanted to pick up Callie and run!”

Avenae’J: To be honest, she was right. Sera was going to be all right. I’m saying, she was going to be all right, but she’s still a horrible mother.

Victoria begins where she left off: ... *secrets and have crushes on the same boy and cry together and be the maids of honor at each other’s weddings and love each other, love each other, love each other. Callie needed a playmate, a sister.* (p. 331)

Terrah: What if the child was a boy?!

Talyn: What if she never had a daughter?

Terrah finishes the story. She narrates how Sera gets sick and how Callie and Kareena agree that her sickness, her death, might be better than her existence. But Sera does not die. It is Callie. The mother screams. A switched point of view, so Sera, not Kareena, can tell her story. Terrah reads how Sera knows she is unloved, understands how her mother prizes Callie over her, is cognizant of the ways she brings anger and violence to the world. Terrah ominously reads the story of how Sera’s sickness is a result of her hiding herself, is a consequence of trying to be someone she is not. The story ends with the opening scene: violence and chaos in a world of men. Sera is Ares, the god of war.

Talyn: But what would happen if [Kareena] nurtured her daughter?

Terrah: She didn’t like her.

Talyn: What if the mom, instead of like denying who her daughter is, actually kind of went, “Ok, I’m going to buy you these toys?”

Terrah: What if she embraced it... I wonder if instead of war, she’d become peace?

Avenae’J: How they were talking about how they want her to be normal... Maybe this is like the type of world where it’s like everyone’s supposed to be normal, and if you’re not the no one likes you.

Talyn: Well, there is no norm in this world.

Avenae’J: That’s what I’m saying. In this world, in this thing, everyone in this place wants everyone to be normal or the same. And so... When Sera is not normal, when Sera is Sera, no one likes her, especially not the person who gave birth to her.

Terrah: The mom is the conflict.

Bailey nods vigorously.

Discussion

Throughout the communal reading of the story, the girls paid attention to elements of characterization, attending to the characters’ speech, actions, thoughts, and relationships with other characters, but they gave dedicated attention to the relationship between Sera and her mother. They were angered that a mother would call her child “wrong” before the young

person had a chance to grow up. They were upset that Kareena would refuse to understand her child's wants and needs. They were incensed that Sera's mother attempted to plan Sera's life before she ever made it into the world. These responses were in direct conversation with the girls' ideas about their own mothers. In interviews, several of the girls noted that they considered their mothers to be heroes or friends, and others discussed their mother's kindness and advocacy. For instance, in an individual interview after the conclusion of the writing workshop, Amber stated that her mother is "the best person in the entire world" and that although she loves Marvel, she considered her "mom a stronger hero than most of the people on the Avengers." Likewise, Avenae'J said, "My mother, she is a very smart, independent, and beautiful woman. She is my hero. She does everything. She works two jobs just to make sure that we have stuff. She'll not eat just so that we're able to eat." Terrah noted that her mother was kind and creative, and even if they "argue quite a bit, [they] still love each other." Comparably, Victoria mentioned that her mom "lets me make my own choices...and she's like my best friend, but at the same time she's like the mom when I need her to be." Their mothers were not perfect, but they were described as people who at least tried to get to know their children and protect them from harm.

By connecting their reading of the mother and daughter characters in the text to their own experiences as Black daughters, the girls assumed a family position. As Brooks and Browne (2012) argued, when readers connected to the familial aspects of culture, they situated themselves "as members of families and assumed certain roles and perspectives from this point of view" (pp. 81–82). Although minimally discussed in literacy education research, mothers play a powerful role in Black girls' socio-emotional and political-cultural development and are essential to the transmission of intergenerational knowledge that would assist their daughters in surviving, and possibly thriving, in a violent world. Black mothers help their daughters learn how to persevere, speak up for themselves, engage in self-definition and self-appraisal, and take pride in who they are and who they might become (Everet et al., 2016; Ridolfo et al., 2013). They attempt to socialize their daughters to be independent, willful, and resourceful, and they also try to teach their daughters how to survive in a white, patriarchal world built on antiblackness and misogynoir (Bailey & Trudy, 2018; Baxley & Boston, 2014; Collins, 1987). Ultimately, Black mothers engage in a politicized ethic of care, a sociopolitical and emotional practice that assists them in intellectually and psychologically preparing their daughters to engage in a world that was not made for them (McArthur & Lane, 2019).

Considering the cultural significance of mothers and mothering in Black girls' lives, the girls' centralization of the mother-daughter

relationship in “Sera” and their assumption of a more familial positioning becomes clear. Kareena moved against her daughter in ways that misaligned with the girls’ understandings of and experiences with the Black cultural foundation of mothering. Specifically, Kareena did not make room for her child to grow; she did not become the hero that Sera needed; and she treated Sera with contempt instead of love. Therefore, in this reading, the girls tapped into this familial cultural component and assumed the position of Black daughters who were trying to better understand why the mother responded to her child in these negative ways. Because the author did not include everything they needed to understand Kareena’s motivations or Sera’s feelings, they inserted their own personal and cultural understandings of mother-daughter relationships to help them make sense of the text.

Naturally, as this was a communal read-aloud experience, the girls built on each other’s responses, helping each other deepen understandings of certain words, phrases, and scenes (Rosenblatt, 1994). Except for the first response event, each time there was a pause in the reading to pursue conversation, the girls listened to one another and “supported readings that constructed multiple hypotheses and considered varying viewpoints about what was read” (Brooks & Browne, 2012, p. 82) to help each other make sense of the text. As an example, after the reading of the story concluded, Talyn posed an important question: What if Kareena nurtured instead of shunned her daughter? Terrah and Avenae’J took up this question, considering what might have happened to Sera in other familial circumstances. Of course, they will never know how the story might have changed, but they built on one another’s words to reach the conclusion that Kareena was the conflict and extend a hypothesis that if she would have decided to love Sera for who she was, then maybe Sera would be a god of peace instead of a god of war.

Essentially, the girls used “common shared experiences as the basis for interpretation [and] used adolescent-friendly examples...to explain their literary interpretations” (Baxley & Boston, 2014, p. 82). They gave examples from their own lives by discussing their relationships with parents and siblings, highlighted games they played with other peers (e.g., Monopoly, Dungeons & Dragons, Life), and shared personal feelings about growing up (i.e., becoming one’s own person outside of parental and societal expectation). Even Bailey, who chose not to speak or read aloud throughout the reading event, nonverbally shared her experiences with the other girls. She nodded her head in agreement, gave her full attention to each girl as they spoke, laughed at the other girls’ jokes, and silently followed along as her groupmates read the text. Her actions suggest that she was participating in the reading event and building community even though words never left her lips. By attending to the

words of their peers, responding to each other both verbally and non-verbally, and considering alternate and aligned orientations toward the narrative, the girls assumed a peer position. They shared their experiences and interpretations with each other to foster intertextual relationships between the group and the text, and they positioned themselves above the narrative and alongside each other to take on new, collective understandings of the story.

Interestingly, although the girls undertook some culturally situated positions, they did not adopt ethnic group or community positions in relation to their reading. They never discussed their social locations as Black and girl in connection to the text or mentioned race as a salient detail in the story (ethnic positioning), and they never talked about the geographical location of the narrative (community positioning). Of course, race was a hidden construct in the short story, as the author never refers to the characters' racial identities, but even as the girls assumed a familial position and connected their mother-daughter relationships to Sera and Kareena's, there was no point in the discussion in which their identities as Black girls was noted. The pronoun "I" was mostly used to discuss their individual feelings about the text, not to make explicit connections between the text and their lives as Black girls. Additionally, even though the story takes place in the urban metropolis of Los Angeles, the girls did not mention associations to setting or location in their responses to text. Brooks and Browne (2012) contended that "the Community position can be seen as the children use urbanized understandings to compare character image and persona with realities of their own community" (p. 81). Although the girls used their understandings of mother-daughter relationships to compare character traits and actions with the realities of their own mother-daughter relationships, the connection between the urbanized area of Los Angeles and their own positions as residents of an urbanized location was not significant to the girls during this reading.

In assuming familial and community positions but avoiding community and ethnic positioning throughout the reading event, the girls showcased the complexity of Black girls' literacy practices. First, their responses to literature indicate the nuanced ways in which Black girls' reading practices are tied to their identities. Namely, identity cannot be solely relegated to one aspect of their personhoods. As previously mentioned, the girls did not assume ethnic (racial) positions in their discussion of "Sera"; instead, they prioritized their identities as daughters and their characteristics as individuals who want to be seen for who they are, not for who the world or their parents want them to be. Black girls want to see representations of themselves in the books they read (Muhammad & Haddix, 2016), but the depictions they seek go beyond just their racialized or even gendered experiences.

In addition to nuances in identity, the girls' responses align with the BGLF in that their literacy practices are multiple, collaborative, intellectual, and political/critical. As they read, they discussed and debated the content, told jokes and stories to each other, used their bodies to showcase connection and attention to the reading and to the conversation, and listened to each other as readers and meaning-making collaborators (multiple). They worked together to create shared meaning of the text (collaborative), and they used those reading partnerships to better make sense of the mother-daughter relationship in the narrative (intellectual) and to consider how daughters sometimes experience oppression because mothers (or parents) refuse to understand their children as individuals (critical/political). Thus, the girls' reading responses were nuanced, multi-layered, and multi-faceted.

Across this literacy event, then, the girls' culturally situated reading responses highlight the complexity of identity and culture in Black girls' lives which directly influences how Black girls experience reading events. The girls used peer positioning to build from each other's knowledge and interrogate storied events. They also engaged in familial positioning to individually and collectively consider how mothering is essential for Black girls to survive, and possibly thrive, in a violent world. They considered their own relationships with their mothers and used those connections to better understand the narrative. In this way, Black girls' textual connections moved beyond a specific focus on race or gender toward a larger conceptualization of culture in Black girls' lives. These connections greatly influenced how they engaged with text.

Curricular implications and conclusions

Literacy researchers and English educators do not have a deep understanding of Black girls' literacy lives, especially in connection to reading response scholarship (Greene, 2021; Price-Dennis & Muhammad, 2021). This lack of concentration on Black girls' reading responses results in misinterpretations of what Black girls' need in their reading experiences and misinformation that confines Black girls to monolithic reading experiences. However, Black girls' reading practices exist on a complex continuum, where different girls will assume different cultural positions across reading experiences. In this study, Black girls attended to familial and peer positioning and foregrounded their experiences as daughters and young people. In other studies, Black girls might centralize ethnic group or community positioning, highlighting their experiences as racialized young people in the world or their social and geographical locations. Black girl readers are not monolithic, so curriculum curators must consider a broader conception of Black culture, generally, and of Black girlhood, specifically.

In fact, the variance with which Black girls might read and interact with text suggests the need for teachers and researcher in literacy studies and beyond to further analyze how Black girls engage with text in culturally situated ways. It suggests the need to realize “that intersections of social positions matter differently for different individuals, at different times, and in different contexts” (Sutherland, 2005, p. 369), so educators cannot solely rely on Black girls racial and gender locations to create curriculum for them, as this may ignore other prominent cultural components that matter in Black girls’ lives (e.g., family, peers, community, personal interests). Thus, when curating curriculum with Black girls in mind, we must ask ourselves:

1. Did I select this text/activity/pedagogical strategy to only highlight one possible positioning response (i.e., ethnic positioning)?
2. Do my curricular choices make space for Black girls to operationalize multiple positioning possibilities?
3. Do my pedagogical strategies make room for readers to only respond traditionally (e.g., writing and speaking), or are their spaces for other types of response (i.e., nonverbal practices)?
4. Have I deeply grappled with “the myriad cultural influences (values, practices, experiences, etc.)” affecting Black girls “and the ways in which these influence meaning making” (Brooks & Browne, 2012, p. 77)?

Each of these questions are essential in our curation of curriculum because the reading responses of Black girls will differ depending on their personhoods, their contexts, their histories, their lives. If we are to truly understand the complexity of Black girls’ literacies, then it is imperative that we understand the expansiveness of Black girls’ existence. They are Black, girl, daughter, sibling, nerd, dancer, athlete, singer, gamer, artist, photographer, writer, friend, student. They are so much more. Maybe, we should just, at least, try to understand the multi-faceted existence of Black girls’ reading experiences because if we continue to overlook the complexity of Black girls’ lives, we will never fully grasp the intricacy of their genius. We will never become the curriculum curators that Black girls deserve.

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Notes on contributor

S. R. Toliver is an assistant professor of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Informed by her love of science fiction and fantasy texts

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