In Our Own Words: A Cultural-Historical Activity Theoretical Approach to

Understanding Resistance within African American Autobiographies

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my parents, for their constant love and support.

Abstract

Guided by the beliefs that stories are cultural and historical formations, and that the stories one tells about oneself are inherently valuable information sources, this study examined the genre of autobiographies written by African Americans, paying particular attention to aspects of resistance, experimentation, and aspirations toward changing the status quo. The data were twenty-eight (28) narratives, evenly divided among the following three categories: autobiographies that represent "classic" African American literature, autobiographies written for audiences of young readers, and autobiographies written by youth.

Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (Engeström, 1987) was the primary theoretical framework that supported this study. The theory was also used as methodology, in that it facilitated an analysis of the stories from the vantage point of components of the activity system, including mediating tools, object, community, division of labor, and rules. In addition, Activity Theory afforded an analysis of both local and distal-level action, and the contradictions and/or tensions that wound themselves through the texts. The study included the close analysis of three focal texts: *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (by Harriet Jacobs), *Childtimes* (by Eloise Greenfield and Lessie Jones Little), and *Signed, the President* (by Kenneth Phillips).

Findings showed that the writers employed resistance in many and varied ways, including the re-naming of personas within a book in order to avoid discovery, the evasion of the editorial process in order to fully control one's own story, and the inclusion of the voices of typically silenced individuals as a form of subversion. The

study is relevant to educators who seek to complement their curricula with outstanding narrative nonfiction, especially those educators concerned with the experience of African Americans, from the late 18th-century to the present day. The study also is an example of the use of Activity Theory as methodology applied to the analysis of important autobiographical literature.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Research

People are a part of their time. They are affected, during the time that they live, by the things that happen in their world. Big things and small things. A war, an invention such as radio or television, a birthday party, a kiss. All of these experiences help to shape people, and they, in turn, help to shape the present and the future. If we could know more about our ancestors, about the experiences they had when they were children, and after they had grown up, too, we would then know much more about what has shaped us and our world. (Greenfield and Little, 1979, "Landscape," n.p.)

Introduction

Greenfield and Little's quote above resonates with me, because I believe that knowing about the past should be more than knowing about a few key historical figures' lives. I believe the hum-drum, day-to-day lives of those who came before are interesting, and important, to tease apart, and that doing so may help us become better stewards of our contemporary scene. Greenfield and Little's book is a multi-generational family memoir. It is studied and discussed at length in later chapters of this dissertation, but for now, I use it as a gloss for introducing the central concept of my scholarly work at hand. Almost as if I've etched notches in my own African American ancestral family tree, my research study explores various autobiographies across a continuum of historical times, and within the present-day. As well, because reflections on the past and present are incomplete without a contemplation of the future, my research study also explores autobiographical literature written by young people, as well as autobiographies written for young readers.

I have chosen to make literature the centerpiece of my study because of my deep appreciation for stories as complete, complex packages for delivering knowledge and evoking response. It has been written that "stories educate us about ourselves and others;

they capture our attention on a very personal level, and entice us to see, know, desire, imagine, construct, and become more than what we currently are" (Fowler, 2006; Harvey, 1994). This potential of stories to be a generative force is what I find captivating. The many life stories, or autobiographies, that are analyzed herein are meant to offer a nuanced portrait of the African American experience, while also probing into ways in which African Americans have used resistance within the literature we have produced. While this study may attract readers across many fields, I particularly hope that those concerned with the classroom lives of urban, K-12 public school students will find this scholarly endeavor insightful. As I argue in the next section, the power of stories to instruct and/or inspire young people, especially youth of color, is something that should be given utmost attention, especially since the broad narrative of the future will be written by them.

Specifically, this study aims to confront concepts that reside in three distinct domains of literature: (1) autobiographies considered to be in the African American historical literary tradition; (2) autobiographies by African American writers which are intended for young readers, or those books which are otherwise considered to be "young adult literature" or "children's literature"; (3) autobiographies which have been written by then-teen-aged, African American participants in a non-profit writing group, the Neighborhood Story Project[1]. The three-pronged analysis of this study covers a wide berth within the overarching field of African American literature, but is not so wide as to be impracticable. The three fields of study are immensely important of their own accord; taken together, though, they represent a pact which frames history, and the present, in a

unique new way. Importantly, the triad of literature also tells counternarratives, contests the status quo, and opposes norms through storytelling. In what follows, I dwell on each of the three literary categories, and detail my reasons for including them as the major components of this study.

My rationale for including autobiographies which are representative of a classic African American literary tradition is that before one can look ahead one must first look back to the past. Though this phrase may seem hackneyed to some, it is a core tenet of African diasporic thinking, and is encapsulated by the idea of Sankofa, an Akan word which translates to "go back to fetch it." The larger meaning of Sankofa suggests that Africans and African Americans should "return to the source for inspiration and direction for the future" (Gammage, 2005). Edwards and colleagues write similarly about the significance of the ideology: "The symbol is relevant to both Africans and African Americans today, in that it is useful for us to look back to our history as a basis for creating the kind of unity we need to go forward with knowledge and strength" (Edwards et al., 2010, p. xii). To complement these definitions and explanations of the idea, a brief discussion of the relevance of Sankofa within my own life narrative is appropriate. I grew up hearing Sankofa referenced at many ceremonies and celebrations, and depending on the crowd, I still hear a few calls to "look back" at the beginning of events. These same events may have also begun with "Ashe," a word that is imbued with the power of calling forth the spirit of the ancestors to witness what is taking place. Asante and Mazuma (2005) denote that "Ashe" is "an encompassing energy" which "flows through and envelops the entire hierarchy of beings" including "the ancestral dead…and the entire

natural world" (p. 428). What I know about African diasporic ideologies is not recited

here as an academic exercise, but rather, I have opened this presentation of my research

with a discussion of Sankofa and Ashe, because as I write this I am "looking back" upon

the many scholars in whose footsteps I follow, and I acknowledge that the weight of

history in the African American literary tradition is one that must be handled delicately

and with respect.

As an African American woman, I have crafted this research study from an emic

perspective, and while I have of course included many strands of thought from the

mainstream arena of education research, I have also deliberately co-mingled African

diasporic ideologies within the pages of this volume, so that my work not only discusses,

but also imbues, certain portions of the African American experience. In addition, I have

deliberately chosen to highlight the *cultural* and *historical* elements of the literature in

this study. In fact, Cultural-Historical Activity Theory, or CHAT, (Lee, 2007; Engeström

et al., 1999; Roth & Lee, 2007), forms both the theoretical framework of my study, in

addition to it being the method of analysis. Chapter 2 (which includes my discussion of

the theoretical framework that supports this inquiry) and Chapter 3 (in which the method

and research design will be detailed) serve as the forums for my extensive presentation of

CHAT, as it relates to this study. For now, however, it suffices to include an idea held by

Tillman (2002), which supports my inclusion of historical, classic, African American

literature as one of the three major strands of this study. Tillman wrote,

> W.E.B. DuBois (1973), Anna Julia Cooper (1892/1988), and Carter G. Woodson
>
> (1933/1977) believed that plans for advancing the education of Black people

should be predicated on understanding the *cultural and historical contexts* of their

lives and that attempts to portray Black people and Black culture(s) by persons

who have limited knowledge of Black life leads to inaccurate generalizations. (p.

4; my italics)

Tillman's assertion, which DuBois, Cooper, and Woodson—each in their own period of

history—made the same kinds of cautions about "plans for advancing the education of

Black people," serves to expose the legacy of thought around the need to properly

historicize research endeavors that include, or are about, diasporic peoples.

Before I shift to a rationale detailing my selection of autobiographies within the

second category of young adult and children's literature, I thought it fitting to first

provide a definition of key terms pertaining to the first category of texts, beginning with

the meaning of the classic African American literary tradition. For the purposes of this

study, I will refer to "classic autobiographical texts" as those published before 1985. I

fully acknowledge that this represents an enormous span of time, ranging from early

slave narratives published in 1789, such as Olaudah Equiano's, to books that survey the

Black Arts movement and Black Nationalism, such as Amiri Baraka's 1984 text.

However, the rationale I provide in Chapter 3 supports my assertion of what is "classic"

among African American autobiographical literature.

Finally, I am using the definition of *culture* that refers to "a dynamic system of

social values, cognitive codes, behavioral standards, worldviews, and beliefs used to give

order and meaning to our lives as well as the lives of others" (Delgado-Gaitan & Trueba,

1991). In this sense, I am avoiding the fallacy of referring to culture as a static

commodity. As well, Erickson's (2010) denotation of culture is relevant. Erickson wrote, "Culture is in us and all around us, just as the air we breathe. In its scope and distribution it is personal, familial, communal, institutional, societal, and global" (p. 35). Throughout this volume I have kept in mind that culture is not experienced as a universal constant by people who share the same race, and I have tried to avoid making assumptions or generalizations about the cultural worlds people occupy. However there most certainly are blanket elements of African American culture that can be globalized, and my use of "African American culture" is meant to hark back to exactly those elements.

I now turn to the second category of literature in this work, and explain my rationale for including it as one of the major strands of this research study. The domain of African American children's and young adult literature has been studied extensively, and its worth has been made clear by scholars many times over (Johnson-Feelings, 1996; Bishop, 2007; Brooks & McNair, 2008; Anatol, 2011). The field is especially valuable, and requires even more research, because of the current state of public education in the United States. A typical urban classroom is warped because of gross cultural mismatches between students and teachers, resulting many times in white, female, and middle-class teachers operating with a set of cultural practices and assumptions that differs drastically from the cultural knowledge espoused by the majority of their students, who are African American, Hispanic, or Latino, and who are from poor or working class families. Heath's work (1983; 2012), for example, demonstrates some of the differences in language use, and cultural assumptions in classrooms inhabited by teachers and students

from separate races, socio-economic classes, and neighborhoods. Ballenger (1999) also described cultural misunderstandings that occurred in her classroom of Haitian pre-schoolers, and the process by which she examined her own worldview as a white woman and as a master teacher. Descriptive statistics will help paint the picture of the imbalances that currently exist within K-12 schools:
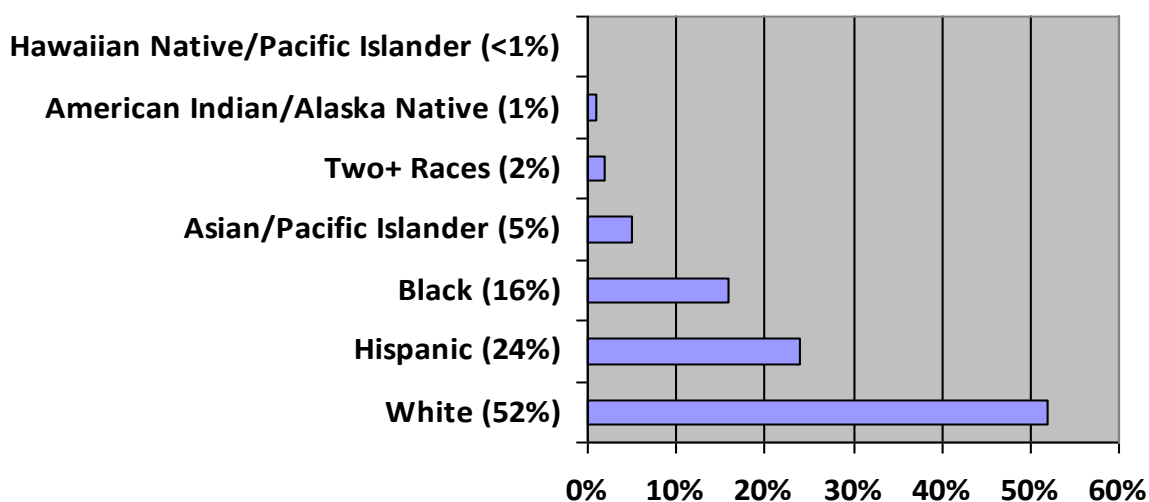
Figure 1.1. 2010-2011 Total national enrollment of elementary and high school students by race/ethnicity.

(Data Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD), "State Nonfiscal Public Elementary/Secondary Education Survey", 2010-11, v.1a.)

Figure 1 above clearly displays that white students make up just over 50% of the student population in K-12 schools, and that students classified as Hispanic or black combined, represent approximately 40% of the student population. (Complete tallies of student enrollment by race are available in a note to this chapter[2].) The data above are salient, because according to National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), in 2001,

90% of the National Educational Association (the largest teachers union in the country) teachers were white, almost all female, and most were raised in the middle class.

I want to be clear that I am not suggesting that the mere presence of white teachers in classrooms nearly half-way filled by students of color is inherently problematic. My argument is that there is a tendency of people who enjoy living in the dominant culture to assume that everyone else also shares their worldview, and their way of operating in daily life. However, the privileges afforded to the dominant culture are exclusive, and both dominant and non-dominant groups would benefit from being made more aware of tacit cultural codes and the resulting transmissions of power that occur in classrooms (Delpit, 1995/2006). Delpit suggested that putting our beliefs "on hold" for a moment "is the only way to learn what it might feel like to be someone else and the only way to start the [silenced] dialogue" about educating other people's children (p. 47).

Further imbalances exist, specifically regarding children's and young adult literature selections that are created by, or which include depictions of, people of non-white backgrounds. In this example, it is possible to implicate the mainstream publishing industry for the dearth of titles that reflect the lived experiences of people of color. Bear with a numerical explanation of the lack of diversity in literature for young people, for a deeper understanding of the imbalance.

The Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) received approximately 3,400 books in 2011. Of those,

- 300 books had significant content about the experiences of people of color
- 123 books had significant African or African American content

- 79 books were by black authors and/or illustrators

- 28 books featured American Indian themes, topics, or characters

- 12 were created by American Indian authors and/or illustrators

- 91 had significant Asian/Pacific or Asian/Pacific American content

- 76 books were created by authors and/or illustrators of Asian/Pacific heritage

- 58 books had significant Latino content

- 52 books were created by Latino authors and/or illustrators.

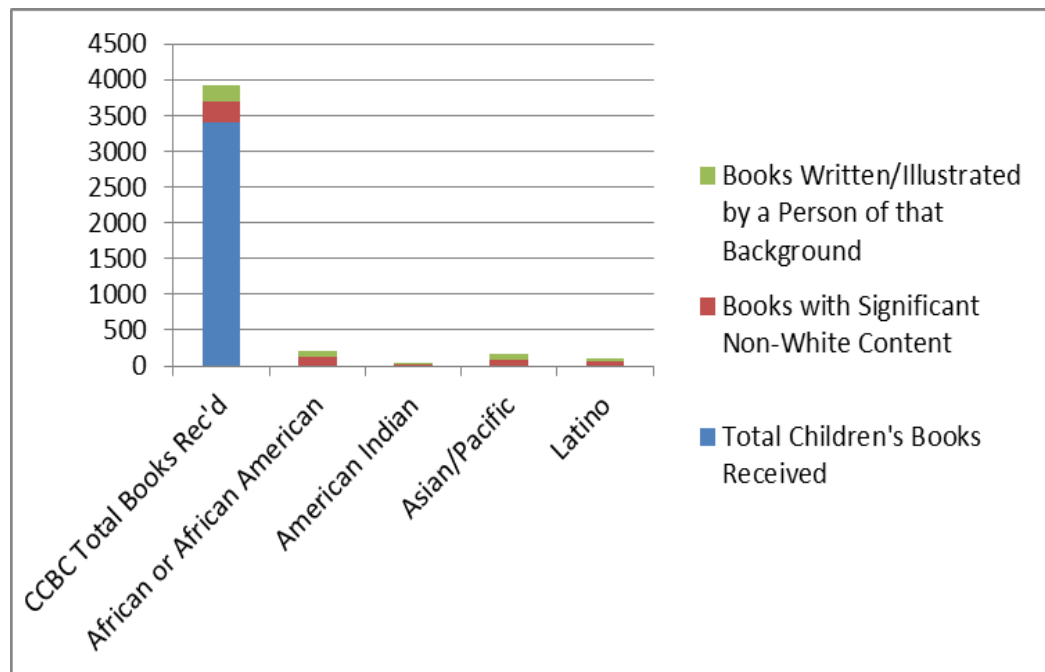Or, a visual representation of the same ratios may also be helpful:

Figure 1.2. Ratio of books received about and by people of color at the
Cooperative Children's Books Center in 2011.

Although there are many more than 3,400 books for young people published each

year, the CCBC's statistics above can be generalized to the broader sample. The numbers

are so few that one must be tenacious about locating high quality, African American literature for young people. This study includes several such books, and offers an innovative perspective into the field. In addition, I hope that educators may find this work to be complementary to curricular suggestions outlined by the Common Core State Standards Initiative, a new national push for college and career readiness by high school completion.

Literature read by young people should reflect the diverse realities of the world we live in; if it doesn't, one is liable to repeat the same offences described earlier, by Delpit (1995/2006), Ballenger (1999), and others. Hazel Rochman, a children's and young adult literature critic, stated "If you read only what mirrors your view of yourself, you get locked in" (1993, p. 11). Likewise, the wise protagonist of Jacqueline Woodson's novel-in-verse, *Locomotion*, expressed a similar thought, writing "Maybe it's true that if you're white you can't see all the whiteness around you" (2003a, p. 13). Literature has the potential to unlock a reader, and it can remove the blinders we wear that prevent us from seeing reality. Exposing young readers to high quality, diverse literature, and having conversations about it, can start the process of dispelling stereotypes, a process the Nigerian novelist Adichie (2010) details in her TEDs lecture which presents the damage that stereotypes or "single stories" create.

Finally, the need for an extended research endeavor concerning African American literature for young people has been echoed by many other scholars who have made the following assertions. Bothello and Rudman (2009) have stated that "critical multicultural analysis" of children's literature should be aimed to engender conversations about ways

in which literature can be used to "resocialize" people and to construct a socially just society (p. xiv). Nodelman and Reimer (2003) discussed the problem of literature that presents a false, homogenous perspective of the world, and they wrote that this creates a "narrow band of normality" for young readers. To disrupt this falsehood, they argued that culturally-rich literature which represents an array of peoples should always be used in classrooms and with young people. Lastly, Nancy Larrick's 1965 complaint about the "all-white world of children's books" has been echoed by Bishop (2007) and several others who aspire to use literature to present to children a true picture of the diverse faces of humanity, and especially the many ways of being African American.

I have included literature written by young people as the third category of autobiographical texts in this work. Inner-city African-American youth who can call themselves published authors, whose titles are a click away on Amazon.com, and whose books are safely kept on the shelves of local and national libraries, are a rare breed. My goal here is not merely to celebrate their feat, but more importantly, to subject their work to the same rigorous analysis as every other literary work within this study.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to reveal ways in which my ancestral and fellow contemporary African American writers placed their life stories in conversation with each other, and to contemplate the cultural and historical significance of the texts that serve as their legacy. The research questions listed below detail specific aims of this study:

Research Question #1: Because the African-American literary tradition typically contains elements of resistance, experimentation, or aspirations toward changing the status quo, in what ways do those elements function within the sample of texts?

Research Question #2: From the standpoint of Cultural-Historical Activity Theory, in what ways does analysis of the above elements help to understand the mediating artifacts in the protagonist's life history? How do aspects of the activity system—including both local and distal level action—relate to how the text is represented?

Conclusion

Current debates in popular media (Mosle, 2012) hinge on the question of what young people should read, so that they may be as prepared as possible for the literacy and critical thinking demands of post-secondary schooling, and for their entry into the workforce. Literature that serves as *mirrors* to African American students whose cultural experiences are too seldom represented in what is sanctioned as the "official" curriculum of U.S. schools (Apple, 1990) is direly needed, but so is literature that may serve as *windows*, enriching students' knowledge bases and enlivening their curiosity about and compassion for others whose lives are different from their own (Bishop, 1990; Galda, 1980; Galda, 1998).

In the next chapter, I present the theoretical framework that supports this study, and I also provide a review of related literature. Cultural-Historical Activity Theory is discussed as a guiding theoretical framework, as is Rosenblatt's (1978/1994) transactional theory of literature which explores the "potentialities" that lie dormant

within texts. Rosenblatt's theory, especially, will make clear what I have earlier referred

to as the generative power of stories.

Chapter 2: Review of Related Literature

We could have also told them of a poor, blighted young creature, shut up
*in a **living grave** for years, to avoid the tortures that would be inflicted*
upon her, if she ventured to come out and look on the face of her departed friend.
(Jacobs, 1861, p. 122, my emphasis)

Introduction

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl is Harriet Jacobs' 1861 autobiography; it is

believed by scholars to be the only self-written record of life experienced by an African-

American woman during slavery (Yellin, 2004). The line above refers to the "living

grave" which Harriet occupied for nearly seven years in secrecy after her escape from the

cruelties of her master on a North Carolina plantation. She was shut up in a tiny crawl

space beneath the roof of an addition to her grandmother's house while her master was

relentless in his search for her. Harriet was both free and entrapped at the same time.

While her heart's desire for true freedom was steeled by the voices of her children who

played below, her limbs weakened, and her muscles atrophied from disuse in the cramped

space.

I highlighted the above, because Jacobs' life inside her "cell" represents one of

the most vivid examples of a contradiction of all of the stories that I encountered for this

study. Contradictions are central to cultural-historical activity theory, the major

theoretical framework that shaped my approach to this research, and thus, I opened this

chapter with a brief reflection on the real-life "logical incongruities"—as Merriam-

Webster calls them—that are present within one of the autobiographical texts. Cultural-

historical activity theory derives from the early-20th century Russian scholar Vygotsky,

and was later influenced by Leont'ev. Engeström's work (1987; 1996a; 1996b; 1999a;

1999b; 2009) has shaped the theoretical tradition during present times, and was summarized in the following way: "his approach features how contradictions are at the heart of human activity and invites inquiry into how, in the past, these have been resolved through practices and how, in the future, they may be addressed anew" (Blackler, 2009, p. 27). The relevance of the theoretical framework to the work at hand is detailed below, as is a discussion of how it has been applied to practice, which is another core tenet that can be traced back to the roots of the theory.

In addition to cultural-historical activity theory, Rosenblatt's transactional theory of reading (1965/1995, 1978/1995, 2005) is an important component of the theoretical framework I construct in this chapter. At the heart of transactional theory is Rosenblatt's belief in "the power of literature to develop capacity for feeling, for responding imaginatively to the thoughts and behavior of others" (1965/1995, p. 227). Earlier, I remarked on the potential of stories to play active, rather than passive, roles in the lives of readers, and this is an echo of Rosenblatt's scholarship on the topic. Transactional theory also shapes my understanding of myself as a reader, or put differently, as the prism through which nearly thirty African American, autobiographical figures' lives has been refracted and given meaning in this study. Rosenblatt's in-depth explications of "the reader," "the text," and the meaning (what she calls "the poem") are critical to this literature-based study.

Next, an additional supporting theoretical framework addresses interpretations of African American literature. Gates' literary criticism theory of the signifying monkey (1988) is "a theory of criticism that is inscribed within the black vernacular tradition and

that in turn informs the shape of the Afro-American literary tradition" (1988, p. xix).

Gates has written that it is the "double-voiced" tradition within literature from the

African American experience that is the center of the signifying monkey theory. I have

identified in what follows that the idea of two voices in one body, as posited by Gates,

and the metaphor of the activity system as a "multivoiced formation," and the

connotation of history as a "reorchestration of the multiple voices" that form our past

(Engestrom, 1999a, p. 32), are each theories that shaped my thinking about this study.

While the first half of this chapter focuses on the above elements which comprise

my theoretical framework, the second half of the chapter situates my study within the

extant literature in the field.

Theoretical Framework

As I have stated, my outline for the below is as follows: First, I provide an

overview of cultural-historical activity theory (hereinafter referred to as CHAT). In my

overview, I discuss the origins of the theory, present its internal components and

definitions of terms, and review its application within research contexts. Next, I discuss

transactional theory, which frames my theme of stories. Third, I analyze an African

American literary theory perspective.

Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT)

CHAT is one of several sociocultural approaches within the field of literacy

research. The umbrella term "sociocultural" is meant to suggest that such things as social

class, power dynamics, de facto social codes, and other related entities, are critical to the

construction of one's identity as a *literate* individual. This viewpoint is closely

connected with Street (1984/1995), who pivoted the direction of the field by contrasting his own definitions of literacy with those who viewed the phenomenon in only "technical" terms and dissociated it completely from social factors. Street's belief in an "ideological" model of literacy can be summarized in the following way: "the acquisition of literacy involves challenges to the dominant discourse…, shifts in what constitutes the agenda of proper literacy…, and struggles for power and positioning…. In this sense then, literacy practices are saturated with ideology" (Street, 1993, p. 9). In fascinating ways, the thirty protagonists—including Harriet—whose life stories shaped this study prove true that what is meant by "being literate" differs according to shifts in social context, timeframe, gender norms, and other factors.   Although Street's ideas followed Vygotsky's chronologically, I discuss next how Vygotsky's notion of historicizing actions actually presages the sociocultural perspective of literacy.

The underlying theoretical assumptions of this study are rooted in the work of the developmental psychologist, Lev Vygotsky, whose own work was based upon Marxist principles (Graham, 1972). Vygotsky (1978) was chiefly focused on "practical intelligence" and language development in young children, but it is his notions about the role that history plays in our actions which have placed him as the leader of what has come to be known as the "historical approach" (Scribner, 1985; Engeström, 1999a), a discussion of which follows.

Scribner (1985) related that Vygotsky formulated two complementary notions about the role of history in shaping human behavior. The first notion postulates that historical, rather than biological, processes explain the "laws of development" in

psychology, and that "human cultural history" is what situates higher mental processes (Scribner, 1985, pp. 123-124). These beliefs are encapsulated under Vygotsky's term *general history*. The second idea is collectively referred to as *individual history*, and is concerned with Vygotsky's interest in an individual's propensity to grow and change according to "natural processes," such as perception, and according to what he calls "cultural processes," such as the acquisition of language (Scribner, 1985, p. 124). The historical approach which Vygotsky put forth was intended by him to be a constitutive factor of theories of mediated action, known now as activity systems. While some adherents of CHAT (Lee, 2007) do focus a great deal on historicity, Engeström (1999a) argued that they are few and far between, leaving the "third-generation"[3] of activity theoretical research weak in some aspects.

Specifically, Engeström complained that although it is good that activity theory on the whole is refashioning itself and "transcending its own origins," most empirical research conducted under the umbrella of activity theory has neglected to apply historicity, or "concrete historical analysis of the activities under investigation," a trait which, to repeat, is foundational to the framework (Engeström, 1999a, p. 25). The length of the following quote underscores its importance to this conversation:

> An activity system is by definition a multivoiced formation. An expansive cycle is a reorchestration of those voices, of the different viewpoints and approaches of the various participants. Historicity in this perspective means identifying the past cycles of the activity system. The reorchestration of the multiple voices is dramatically facilitated when the different voices are seen against their historical

background as layers in a pool of complementary competencies within the activity

system. (Engeström, 199a, p. 35)

With the above language that describes the role of history within activity systems, it is

inevitable to briefly call forth almost identical sentiments, as espoused by Bourdieu

(habitus), by Bakhtin (heteroglossia), and by Lefebvre (spatial histories). Doing so

demonstrates that the preoccupation with history in social theories, itself, can also be

historicized.

Bourdieu believed that history manifests itself corporeally, and that our bodies are

the sites of inscription of past experiences (Bourdieu, 1992). The scholar termed this

habitus, and argued that all of our actions are predisposed, based upon the histories that

have produced us. In a similar way, Bakhtin's (1935/1981) concept of heteroglossia

focused on the way that our speech has been pre-formed by that which has been spoken

in the past. Bakhtin wrote about ways in which we "assimilate" others' already spoken

discourse, and also anticipate discourse not yet spoken. Brief statements from the thinker

illustrate the meaning: "The word in language is half someone else's" and "every

utterance contains within it a trace of other utterances, both in the past in the future."

Lastly, Lefebvre's (1974/1991) writings about spatial theory contain his ruminations

about the histories of a space, or "the uncertain traces left by events" and the "deposits"

from society on a space (p. 110).

In a similar way to Engeström's (1999a) insistence that history be afforded more

attention within the scholarly work of activity theorists, so too does Cole (1996) contend

that a greater focus on culture should be afforded to studies of mediated action. Cole

(1996) created a cultural-mediational model of activity systems.

Turning now to a more detailed explanation of the activity system, it is important

to note that the elements I have previously discussed—social class, power, general and

individual histories, and so forth—indeed play key roles within activity systems. As

Engeström wrote, CHAT is an approach "that can dialectically link the individual and the

social structure" (1999a, p. 19), and it is for this reason, and a wealth of others, that

CHAT served as the theoretical backdrop—and method—of my analyses. Figure 2.1

depicts Engeström's popular model of mediated action. In the model, at least six

components (*tools*, *subject*, *object*, *rules*, *community*, and *division of labor*) connect with

and influence each other, and together they shape the *outcome* of the activity system.

Additionally, other macro-level components (*production*, *consumption*, *distribution*, and

exchange) have been overlaid onto the model. The intention of blending so-called local

factors with broader, distal level forces is to create a system that is dynamic, rather than

static, and to saturate any analysis of individual activity with reflections about

sociocultural factors, and vice versa.

For clarity, it is necessary to define each component of Engeström's model. *Tools*

were conceptualized by Vygotsky to be the "conductor of human influence on the object

of activity" and "a means by which human external activity is aimed at mastering, and

triumphing over, nature" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 55). Marx's consideration of "working

tools" is similar: he wrote that man "uses the mechanical, physical, and chemical

properties of objects so as to make them act as forces that affect other objects in order to

fulfill his personal goals" (as cited in Vygotsky, 1978, p. 54). Within CHAT, I think of

tools (or *means*) as being both immaterial as well as physical items, and in some cases

artifacts (any documents, or items created by a subject) shares a space with *tools* on the

activity triangle.
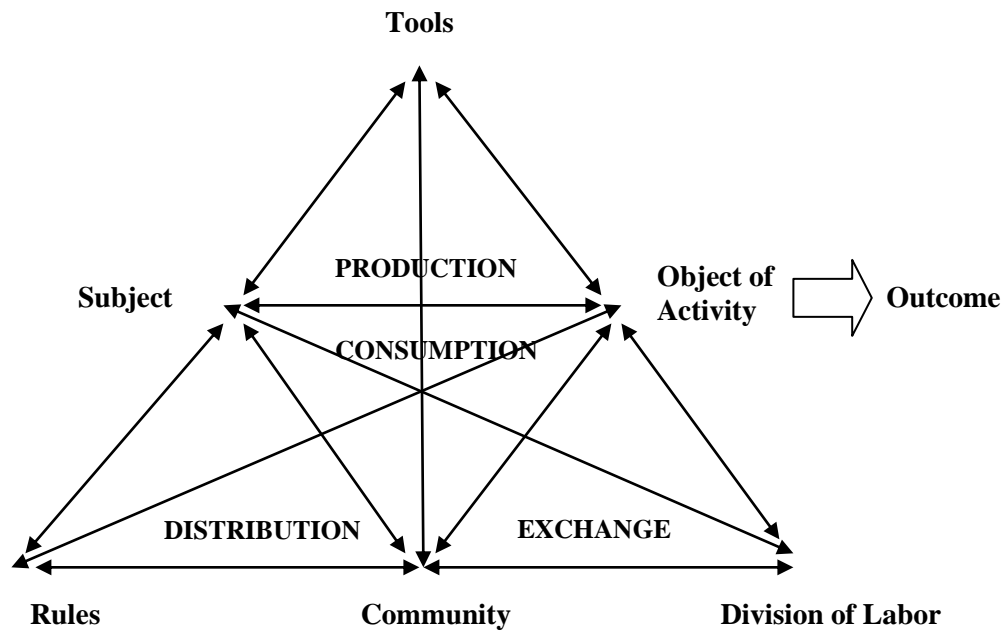
Figure 2.1. Engeström's model of mediated action.

The term *subject* is defined as the bearer of activity, and can refer to an animate or

inanimate individual entity or collective (Lektorsky, 2009). Lektorsky argued that a

subject has "its own aims, interests, memory, and norms," and is "the unity of

consciousness, the unity of an individual biography, and the center of making decisions,"

and is therefore inherently situated in cultural and social contexts (2009, pp. 81-82).

I conceive of *object* as the purpose of, or motivations behind, a subject's actions

within an activity system. Engeström (1999b) referred to *object* as "a project under construction, moving from potential raw material to a meaningful shape and to a result or outcome" (p. 65). Engeström also noted that once a goal has been satisfied, a new object is then created, which is then accompanied by new actions.

Activity systems are governed by norms, values, and conventions, which are referred to as *rules*.

A *community* is defined as a grouping of participants who relate to the same object, perhaps in different ways. Lave and Wegner (1991) theorized that one learns what it means to be a member of a community by apprenticing, or by participating in "situated" activities in which one "learns by doing," rather than by observing. Lave and Wenger's term "community of practice" refers not to a "well-defined, identifiable group, or socially visible boundaries," but refers instead to "participation in an activity system about which participants share understandings concerning what they are doing and what that means in their lives and for their communities" (p. 98).

Within the community there exists *division of labor*, which means that each participant of the activity system enacts different roles and responsibilities toward achieving the identified goal.

The final four elements of Engeström's activity triangle, *production*, *consumption*, *distribution*, and *exchange*, are so inter-related that I have discussed the terms together, rather than separately. The four elements are strongly situated in Marx's philosophies put forth in his work *Grundrisse* (1858/1973), and are therefore angled toward addressing social structures—especially the possibility of radical social change.

Therefore, the element of *production* is meant to yield change; and multiple thinkers have noted that activity itself results in transformation (Vygotsky, 1978; Engeström, 1987; Engeström, 1999; Roth, 2004). In fact, Roth (2004) characterized *production* as a "driver of change" (p. 5), within the intricate activity system.

Once production occurs, *distribution* is possible. Distribution occurs when other participants gain access to the artifacts created by a subject, or when other participants experience the outcome of the activity. This is linked with social structures, as evidenced by Foucault's (1980) discussion of urban planning and the deliberate marginalization of people who possess the least amounts of power. Moje (2004) presented Foucault's theory of distribution by writing that, "certain strategies and tactics are employed to distribute different kinds of bodies to different kinds of spaces and that it is no coincidence that those who are marginalized are distributed to spaces with minimal or problematic resources" (p. 18). In this sense then, *distribution* is as much related to the destiny of subjects and participants themselves as it relates to the flow of the artifacts produced by them (Roth, 2004; Engestrom, 1987).

Bourdieu's idea of "capital" can be used to present Engeström's element of *exchange*. Bourdieu remarked that "[c]apital is accumulated labor" which can be re-appropriated as social energy (1986, p. 241). It is this transfer of labor into wealth, or a transfer of time into cultural knowledge, or the transfer of power into other affordances, and so forth, that characterizes the concepts of economic, social, and cultural capital, and thus *exchange*. Yet, capital is not built without a cost: Bourdieu wrote, "In accordance with a principle which is the equivalent of the principle of the conservation of energy,

profits in one area are necessarily paid for by costs in another" (1986, p. 253). Within the activity system, exchange occurs routinely as energy is dispersed into many different directions.

Marx (1858/1973) wrote that *consumption* is also immediately production (p. 90). To explain, Marx went on to write that "Consumption produces production in a double way, (1) because a product becomes a real product only by being consumed; … (2) because consumption creates the need for *new* production" (p. 91).

To conclude, production, distribution, exchange, and consumption—like the other six elements of Engeström's activity triangle—cannot be isolated, but must be described in terms of each other, and in so doing, the potential for transformation, change, and newness is made evident. Marx's discussion below highlights the interdependence of the elements:

> Production creates the objects that correspond to the given needs; distribution divides them up according to social laws; exchange further parcels out the already divided shares in accord with individual needs; and finally, in consumption, the product steps outside this social movement and becomes a direct object and servant of individual need, and satisfies it in being consumed. (Marx, 1858/1973, p. 89)

In summary, the activity system is fundamentally geared toward change, and it achieves this through the knotty relationships among the six basic components, and the four components that are overlaid onto the system via Marx's contributions.

To return to Vygotsky's original theories of mediated action, which preceded Engeström's creation of the model depicted in Figure 2.1, we can see that even at the start, CHAT was conceived with an impetus toward change and transformation. In articulating the meaning of "mediated action," Vygotsky noted that, in the case of an individual's action of responding to a stimulus, the individual modifies the stimulus itself. This meaning delves much deeper than typical misunderstandings of the term, in which significance is placed on the "tool" or "sign" that is an instrument of action, rather than on the change that has taken place (Vygotsky, 1978). Thus, CHAT is inherently dynamic, "expansive" (Engeström, 1987), and change-oriented (Vygotsky, 1978), because in the process of individual activity, the system itself is transformed.

I began this chapter reflecting on Harriet Jacobs, an African American slave born in North Carolina whose life story contains many seemingly incompatible truths, or contradictions. I return now to this dilemma. Within an individual's life story—but more importantly, within the activity system that describes a subject's pursuit of a goal, which is embedded in historical and cultural truths—there are inevitable contradictions. Roth (2004) has written that such contradictions are internal to the activity system, and are the drivers of change within subjects (p. 5). Engeström (1987) outlined four kinds of contradictions that are relevant to this discussion: There are primary contradictions, which exist within the elements of the activity system; secondary contradictions exist between the elements of the activity system; tertiary contradictions are between the old and the new; quaternary contradictions exist between activity systems (Virkkunen, 2009, p. 151). There are a number of scholars who constructed studies around, or theorized

about, the idea of contradictions within systems of activity. These include Il'enkov

(1977), Tikhomirov and Klochko (1979) who built an entire study to understand reader's

"levels of processing" when readers detect contradictions at an unconscious level, but not

at a conscious level, and Amory (2010) who noted that there are "hidden ideological

contradictions" within educational technology practice and theory (p. 69). Finally, Gates

(1988) referred to the writer Ralph Ellison's remark about the "cruel contradiction

implicit in the art form" of jazz, because "the jazzman must lose his identity even as he

finds it," as the jazzman flips back and forth between the group's harmony and his own

individual riffs (p. vii). The theme of the dueling struggles within activity systems is

pertinent to Jacobs', and every other autobiography that was analyzed for this study.

According to the original efforts of Vygotsky and his contemporaries, activity

theory is intrinsically linked to practice-based settings. My choice to use CHAT as the

framework for understanding and tool for analyzing literary texts, then, was not the result

of neglectful thinking. My placement of CHAT within the literary milieu of this study

was conscious. The tangled lives of each protagonist as depicted inside the written texts

was the site of research, just as a hair salon in a small Iowa town was the site of Major's

(2003) study which analyzed interactional systems of activity, and a 10th/11th grade

classroom which used digital media as tools was the site of Lewis' and Causey's (In

press) study of critical engagement.

Many other researchers in addition to those named above have sought to

understand real problems in the world through the lens of CHAT. Sannino, Daniels, and

Gutierréz (2009) wrote that "the triangular representation is a direct result of the

researcher's dialogue with practice" (p. 12). Recent practical applications of activity theory are sprawling in the scope of topics addressed. It would be impossible—and unnecessary—for me to characterize the entire scope of practical settings to which CHAT has been applied. However, I offer a few brief snapshots of its recent use:

Nummijoki and Engeström (2010) studied ways in which the elderly can attain more agency in co-configuring arrangements of their at-home care, rather than the current one-sided approach that dictates their care, that is currently taken up in Helsinki, Finland. They discussed that in order for the elderly and at-home health providers to "co-configure" better solutions, the two groups needed to establish shared objects of activity. Roth (2009) wrote what he called an ethnography of a fish hatchery in a Canadian village, and used CHAT in order to display "sensuous aspects of human activity," including emotion and morality among the workers, and argued for the more steady integration of these elements into the model of the activity system. Gallagher and Carlisle (2010) situated their work within the history of the Catholic-Protestant religious disputes in Northern Ireland, and the kind of discourses which are taken up around schooling as a result.

While many more examples of CHAT in use typify it as a Euro-centric concept, there are few examples of its application to African American cultural phenomena. Lee (2003) used CHAT to understand the African American Vernacular English put to use in a high school class' conversations about Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Her study used a cultural modeling framework (D'Andrade, 1987; Lee, 1993). Lee and Majors (2003)

used cultural modeling to understand systems of guided participation within the activity system of an entirely African American Language Arts classroom in a low achieving high school. Lee and Ball (2005) used CHAT to "filter through normative assumptions about literacy learning" among both teachers and students in low income and ethnic communities (p. 101). (Importantly, CHAT was used as both a theoretical framework and data analysis technique in the study by Lee and Ball (2005).) Parsons (2008) drew from CHAT—as well as other theories—to create a model based on the positionality of African Americans in the United States, in her argument to rethink science education research involving African Americans. Lastly, Johnson (2007; 2011) conceptualized CHAT as a "culturally sensitive framework" through which to understand caring as a moral dimension of black educators.   The small number of studies that position CHAT as a guiding theory, or as a way of analyzing the lived experiences of African Americans adds even more importance to my own study, and to the future research I plan to take up in this vein.

With the wealth of research than intersects digital technology with CHAT (Nardi, 1996; Tikhomirov, 1999), research that uses CHAT to underscore the importance of connecting in-school and out-of-school cultural learning practices (Moll, 1990; Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003; Majors, 2003), research that centers on learning and teaching in schools (Roth, 2004; Roth & Tobin, 2002; Engeström, Engeström, & Suntio, 2002; O'Brien, Beach, & Scharber, 2007), and many more domains of research I have omitted, it is evident that the potential for CHAT to expand into the domain of African American literary analysis is great.

With the foregoing, I set the foundation for this study in the arena of CHAT, and I summarized the dense body of research literature that grounds itself in Engström's (1987), and in other derivative work. Next, I fully describe the theory that accounts for the ways in which readers, texts, and contexts transact.

Transactional Theory

Transactional theory was put forward by Rosenblatt (1978/1995, 1965/1995, 2005) to account for the meaning-making process which readers initiate with texts. Transactional theory counters beliefs held by the New Critics, who insisted that literary works be interpreted as autonomous entities (Rosenblatt, 1978/1995, p. 102). The theorist wrote "The reader acts on the text….The text acts on the reader….The relation between reader and text is not linear, it is a situation, an event at a particular time and place in which each element conditions the other" (1978/1995, p. 16). In this way, Rosenblatt identified three components of the theory—the reader, the text, and the sociocultural context of the reading activity—and the way in which they overlap and influence each other in the meaning making process. What I referred to earlier as "the poem" is another component of transactional theory: "the poem" is defined as the event in which the reader and the text ignite a response. Figure 2.2 below reflects the "complex social nexus" (Rosenblatt, 1978/1995, p, 20) that makes the act of reading possible, with the additional component "others" representing figures such as the author of the text, or alternate players in the reading event.
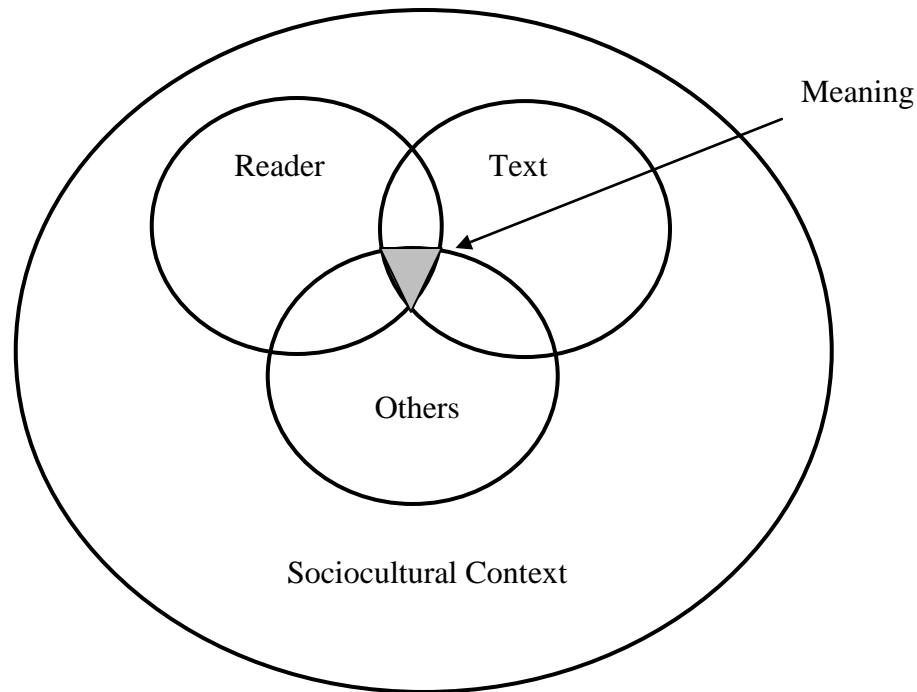
Figure 2.2. A visual representation of Rosenblatt's transactional theory of reading.

As a brief aside, there are other reading theorists who have posited very similar models of reading to the one Rosenblatt posited. The RAND Reading Study Group (Snow, 2002) defined reading comprehension as "the process of simultaneously *extracting* and *constructing* meaning;" they detailed that comprehension is constituted by "the reader," "the text," and "the activity" superimposed against a "sociocultural context." The distinction here is that while Rosenblatt referred to the "poem" as the product of the those combined variables, an entity which can be as broad as any conceivable way in which one could "respond" to a text, the RAND Reading Study Group considered a much more positivistic outcome of the model—that is, whether

comprehension was achieved or not. Both models cast "the reader" as active participants in the reading process.

In addition to the model of reading depicted in Figure 2.2, Rosenblatt made an additional, significant insight which left its impression on the field, and within this study. Namely, Rosenblatt's writing about "stance" is valuable to the theoretical framework I have shaped. The scholar distinguished between an efferent and an aesthetic stance which readers adopt. In an efferent stance, readers primarily focus on the information they can take away from the reading event (paying homage to the Latin root *effere*, to carry away), and are "interested only in what the words point to" (p. 24) rather than being interested in the senses they evoke. An extreme example of reading from an efferent stance, which Rosenblatt provided, is a mother reading the label of a bottle to find the antidote to a poisonous substance her child has just consumed (1978/1995, p. 24).

In an aesthetic stance, readers focus on the "lived through" experience they are creating with the text; their interest is the "associations, feelings, attitudes, and ideas" that are aroused within themselves (p. 25). The aesthetic stance is also defined by a vicarious experience of "living in the world of the work" during the reading process (p. 68). An extreme example of an aesthetic stance is a reader who is engrossed in an adventure story in which the full cast of characters is caught in a fiery explosion just at the moment the reader's phone rings, to which she somberly answers the call "They all died…," as if she is vicariously participating in the high-octane story world. Although I have just defined the two stances separately, in Rosenblatt's theory of transactional reading, efferent and aesthetic stances do not exist as binaries, but as a continuum—readers usually operate

with a blend of both stances at once as they shift back and forth along the continuum.

Additionally, I would be remiss if I did not state that categories such as nonfiction or

fiction are not equated with stance, but rather, stance is determined by the reader.

Rosenblatt summarized her perspectives on stance with the following:

> All reading is carried on in a matrix of experienced meaning: efferent reading
>
> gives attention primarily to the referent alone; aesthetic reading places the
>
> experienced meaning in the full light of awareness and involves the selective
>
> process of creating a work of art. (1978/1995, p. 75)

The word *matrix* in the quote above sufficiently expresses what I have stated about the

constant blending together of the two stances at once. Next, I describe the relationship of

transactional theory to my research, and I survey the scholarly literature concerning

transactional theory, including its application in research contexts.

In Chapter 3, I assert that because of the qualitative nature of this study, it was

important for me to be explicit about the role I played in the study design and

autobiographical activity analyses. Transactional theory legitimated my decision to

weave together critiques of mediated action, contradictions, and other analyses of the

texts' activity systems with my own narration of my reading experiences. Furthermore,

Rosenblatt's scholarship (1965/1995, 1978/1995, 2005) allowed me to grapple with a

theme of this study, which is the influence of stories in educative spaces. To explain,

Rosenblatt wrote a great deal about the "human experience" of literature ranking above—

but nonetheless inseparable from—the "formal elements" (1965/1995). She wrote, "The

reader seeks to participate in another's vision—to reap knowledge of the world, to fathom

the resources of the human spirit, to gain insights that will make his own life more comprehensible" (1965/1995, p. 7). Her scholarship denoted that when readers make themselves vulnerable by adopting an aesthetic stance toward reading, there is the potential for them to grow in both outward- and inward-reaching ways. They grow outwardly by deepening the compassion they hold toward others; internally, readers of this ilk deepen their own self-awareness. This effect is not dissimilar from the metaphor that relates good children's literature to "mirrors" that reflect back pieces of one's own identity, and "windows" that show readers new ways of looking at the world (Bishop, 1990; Galda, 1980; Galda, 1998).

Rosenblatt continued her theorizing about the value of stories to the lives of young people by considering the way in which vicarious experiences through literature allow a young person to, in effect, try on a new identity, or practice problem-solving, while the consequences of doing so are null.

> We can live different kinds of lives; we can anticipate future periods in our own life; we can participate in different social settings; we can try out solutions to personal problems…. Literature may thus offer us a means of carrying on some of the trial-and-error experimentation that might be disastrous in real life.
>
> (Rosenblatt, 1965/1995, p. 190)

Such vicarious experimentation was an especially fitting implication for my study, since the topic broadly surveys African American life narratives. The autobiographical texts within my study span from depictions of slave trading on the Gold Coast of Africa, to the life of a children's book artist on a tiny island in Maine, and from a woman who

overcame muteness to become a gifted orator and linguist, to a teenager who explores her

Honduran heritage in her new home of New Orleans. Transactional theory, as guided by

Rosenblatt (1965/1995, 1978/1995, 2005) was a well-chosen component of the

theoretical framework of this study, because it gave me the space to react to the

significance of the stories as an academic researcher whose spiritual ancestors can be

traced back to the Gold Coast, as an adult whose childhood was enhanced by the artistry

and relevance of African American children's book illustrators, as a connoisseur of

literature, and as a native New Orleanian, among a surplus of other identity markers.

There are others who have pondered the role that stories play on our sensibilities.

Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997), for example, created a methodology called

"portraiture," small fragments of which I wove into the techniques I describe in the next

chapter. "Portraiture" uses "life drawings," or narratives, as the end product of the

research process. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis used stories as methodology in order to

"blur boundaries of aesthetics and empiricism in an effort to capture the complexity,

dynamics, and subtlety of human experience and organizational life" (1997, p. xv). Cole

(1989), a psychiatrist, wrote about "the call of stories" and his use of literature and poetry

in his instruction of medical school students. He wrote that in the case of some students,

their preoccupation with death and pathology, due to the consequences of their medical

school training, was shifted by the stories they read in his course "Literature and

Medicine" at Harvard Medical School. Students contemplated moral and ethical

questions of medicine through discussions about literature, in a way that caused them to

have a "lived-through" (Rosenblatt, 1965/1995) experience with the stories. Finally, in

other instructional domains, such as home economics education, stories also provide a compelling form of reflection, such as Gentzler's (2012) historicization of the profession of home economics through an assortment of stories about the past motivations of the field. Lastly, Bruner (1986) referred to the "narrative mode" of the mind, a way of thinking that is fueled by stories, drama, and history; Bruner made such reference by contrasting logical modes of thinking which are normally the terrain of cognitive scientists. These examples speak back to my choice of narratives as the sole resource for answering the research questions I posed, as well as my selection of the components of the theoretical framework that guided my inquiry.

Transactional theory, as well as other theories about the way people interpret and interact with literature, have been put to use in various research contexts. Galda's (1983) piece reviewed the empirical and theoretical research within the field of "response to literature," and concluded that extant research proved that "readers of all ages engage in active transactions with literary texts," that "various aspects of a text may influence response," and that "the context in which the response is generated influences the ways in which readers respond" (pp. 2-3). Beach (1993) sought out to present the "wide range of attitudes toward and assumptions about" the way reader-response occurs (p. 2). In his text, Beach categorized many different reader-response theorists into separate groups called "textual," "experiential," "psychological," "social," and "cultural." Beach placed the theories posited by Rosenblatt into his "experiential" category, because of the proclivity of transactional theory to place great importance on a reader's process of experiencing the text (Beach, 1993, p. 49). A piece by Sipe (1999) was motivated by the

question "What types of approaches do researchers employ, and what theoretical lenses do they use to analyze and interpret children's rich responses?" (p. 120). Within his review of research (1999), and within his larger work (2008), Sipe also discussed other contributing factors to the way children respond to literature.

Some of the alternative theories of reader-response which Galda (1983), Beach (1993), and Sipe (1999; 2008) enumerated were as follows, briefly: Benton (1983; 1992) theorized about the "secondary world" that exists in limbo between the text and reader. Britton (1984; 1993) believed that readers adopt a "spectator" (emotionally engaged) or a "participant" (detached) stance toward reading. Iser (1978) suggested that reading is a recursive process, in which a reader continually revises his or her expectations. Langer (1995) considered ways in which a reader enters and "steps out of" the story world. While there has been other research (Many & Cox, 1992; Marinez & Roser, 1991) about reader-response theories, I find it most fitting to linger for a moment longer on the topic of critiques of transactional theory in instructional settings, since my study bears implications within classrooms and other teaching environments.

Cai and Traw (1997) and Lewis (2000) discussed that practitioners who misunderstand, or who have been taught shallow versions of Rosenblatt's theories (1965/1995, 1978/1995, 2005) too often conflate the aesthetic stance with personal response. Lewis (2000) wrote that the result of this phenomenon is practitioners who solicit readers only to personally identify with the text, and that those readers miss opportunities to interpret texts, and they also fail to apply social and political constructs (Lewis, 1998; Lewis, 2001) to the literature they engage with. Lewis imagined a more

nuanced pedagogy, which adheres more faithfully to the complexities Rosenblatt set forth in her writing, which would inspire "a view that melds the personal, pleasurable, and critical" under the purview of an "aesthetic response" (Lewis, 2000, p. 257). The way I applied transactional theory to the data analysis techniques I used in this study was exceedingly attentive to the historical, cultural, social, and political dimensions of the activity systems of the texts, which evoked a "lived-through" response in me. Those awarenesses are evident within Chapters 4 and 5 of this dissertation.

Signifyin(g)

Gates' (1988) concept of Signifying Monkey is a theory of African American literary criticism. It is based in the rhetoric of African American vernacular discourse, which, Gates posits, is characterized by a two-ness, or a double-voiced system of representation. The theory overlays "Signifyin(g)"—meaning the use of black vernacular linguistic tropes—onto "signification," which is the Anglo linguist Saussure's term that denotes "the meaning a term conveys" (Gates, 1998, p. 46). With this overlay, Gates achieves a "homonymic pun" in his representation of the theory that helps create an understanding of how African Americans use language that "Signifies upon both formal language use and its conventions, conventions established, at least officially, by middle-class white people" (p. 47). Making evident ways in which African Americans use resistance through language is a key feature of Gates' (1988) concept of Signifying Monkey, which is why it is germane to this study that is investigating resistance to social norms.

Gates (1988) turned to an observation from Frederick Douglass to help illustrate his meaning of African Americans Signifyin(g) on standard (white) literacy practices:

> [The slaves] would compose and sing as they went along, consulting neither time nor tune. The thought that came up, came out—if not in the *word*, in the *sound*;-- and as frequently in the one as in the other…they would sing, as a chorus, to words which to many seem *unmeaning jargon*, but which, nevertheless, were *full of meaning* to themselves" (p. 67).

This exemplifies the use of cunning, and the history of African Americans to employ subversive literacy practices for self-preservation, a history that is represented many times over in the data sources of this study.

Finally, DuBois' (1903/2003) concept of "double-consciousness" underscores the twin theme that guides Gates' (1988) theory of signifying. DuBois posited that blacks in American necessarily hold two different perspectives of ourselves at once: we view ourselves from our own perspective, and we also view ourselves from a perspective of how white people interpret us. DuBois elucidated that "It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (1903/2003, p. 5). Thus, embedded within the stories that African Americans narrate is a two-pronged vantage point of interpretation, or—as in Gates' (1988) theory— a constant shifting back and forth between one's own blackness, and an awareness of the significance of one's blackness in a country dominated by whites.

Related Literature

Next, I review related literature in the domains of (1) research into autobiography within the African American literary tradition; (2) past and contemporary research related to African Americans in children's literature.

Research into Autobiography within the African American Literary Tradition

If autobiographies are self-portraits, then Gwaltney's (1993) anthropological "self-portrait of Black America" is a fitting opening to this literature review. What Gwaltney achieved using anthropologic methodologies, and what this study achieved using CHAT as a means of analysis, are similar. Gwaltney conducted "field work" in Black America, and concluded,

> An internally derived, representative impression of core black culture can serve as an anthropological link between private pain, indigenous communal expression, and the national marketplace of issues and ideas. These people not only know the troubles they've seen, but have profound insight into the meaning of those vicissitudes. (p. xxvi)

Explicitly linking individual autobiographical tales to their larger meaning is the purpose of this study. Since the study at hand has been preceded by other forays into autobiographical African American literature, it was my responsibility to situate this study within extant scholarship on the topic.

African American autobiography is not only a cultural artifact, it is also an embodiment of cultural practices. Sankofa teaches that remembering the past is

interlaced with what it means to be an African American. To this end, Gates (1991) posited that,

> *remembering* is one of the cardinal virtues emphasized by the culture itself—from subtle narrative devices such as repetition of line and rhythm…to more public pageant mores of commemoration…. African Americans have been overtly concerned with what Toni Morrison has described in an apt phrase as 'rememory,' the systematic remembrance of things past. (p. 6)

Life narratives preserved through writing help contemporary audiences to go back and reflect on times past. They allow current readers to remember from whence we came, and to take this knowledge forward in shaping what is yet to come.

Past scholarship into African American autobiography acknowledges that the impact of the tradition lies as much with the stories told by "ordinary" people, as it does with those told by well-known public figures. Therefore, this study included a mix of both kinds of writers. Boyd (2000) prefaced his anthology of African American life narratives by reflecting that, "it is the coterie of unknown informants who are the most essential to the completion of this tapestry of black autobiography," ordinary folk who contrast with the "famous who have the time and wherewithal to write an autobiography" (2000, p. 6). Gates (1991) echoed this by similarly writing, "the potency of black autobiography is hardly restricted to the realm of high culture" (p. 5). In support of these perspectives, Gwaltney's anthropological self-portrait was peopled by "Afro-Americans who are working members of stable families" (1993, xxii).

Researchers identified the shifting purposes of African American autobiography, namely, the shift from the genre as a mode of resistance, to the use of the genre as a way of searching out one's identity. For example, Andrews (1986) expressed that the genre "answered a felt need for a rhetorical mode that would conduct the battle against racism and slavery on grounds other than those already occupied by pro-and antislavery polemics" (p. 5). While this was undeniably true, Butterfield (1974) noted that starting in the second half of the twentieth century, there was a "pervasive, anguished groping for identity, that is no longer provided by the categories of the fugitive slave in resistance to the tyrannical slaveholders and their system" (p. 93). Nevertheless, the concept of resistance among black writers persists as an inviting research topic, as there are still profound ways in which resistance is enacted within our contemporary culture, and within current autobiographies, many instances of which—and causes of—this study investigates.

As Gates (1988) showed, African American literary traditions are rife with elements of resistance and innovation. Fisher's (2008) piece affirmed this, and Fisher's discussion of the way that black literature shaped her own life furthers my claim that culturally-rich literature is impactful and can play a role in pushing a reader toward self-actualization. Fisher examined the "history of literate practices of African people" in the United States, beginning with the secret schools and literary societies of Reconstruction (p. 13). A literate practice put to use during that historical era was what Fisher referred to as "ethno-biography," or an autobiography for people who are unable to write. Sojourner Truth, born as Isabella Bomfree, is said to have used such a method in the "writing" of

her autobiography, which is one of the texts that informed this study. Fisher contended

that "Truth's use of speech to organize others challenges traditional notions of what it

means to be a writer," since Truth was well known as a traveling speaker, touting

"moralistic" causes (2008, p. 21). Furthermore, Fisher cited Peterson (1995), who

claimed that "Truth was still able to make use of the technologies of writing even though

she was not able to participate in the practice of writing in the traditional sense."

Franklin (1995) encapsulated the significance of the genre of autobiography to the

African American culture in the following passage: "Providing personal accounts of

what freedom meant and how it could be achieved, the autobiography allowed African-

American intellectuals to use their personal experience as a mirror to reflect the larger

social and political context for black America." Indeed, the social and political context

for African Americans cannot be conveyed without expressing some aspects of resistance

and innovation.

There is a small group of books which explored African American women writers

who wrote their own life narratives: Braxton (2006) explored the significance of black

women autobiographers, including Maya Angelou, Harriet Jacobs, among others. Moody

(2001) focused her work on ways in which "early black holy women autobiographers

document their refusal to be silenced or to be silent," an inquiry that is closely linked to

my own desire to focus on resistance within the texts. Lastly, Neumann and Peterson

(1997) construed the topic slightly differently, and in their edited volume several

essayists—including some black women scholars in the academy—pondered their own

autobiographies and their influence on the field of education research.

Although the research literature concerning African American children's literature, in some sense, might be subsumed under "African American literature," I conceive of the two as separate domains, and therefore discuss them separately within this literature review. I formed this belief because the purposes, format, and distribution of the two types of literature are different, and thus I find the resulting scholarly pursuits to also be separated. I now turn to the related literature concerning African American children's literature.

Scholarly Conversations about African American Children's Literature

Because of my belief in historicizing the theoretical frameworks and topics that helped construct this study, I begin my survey of research on African American children's literature with a look into scholarship that also views the field from a historical viewpoint. MacCann (1998) inquired into characteristics of African Americans in books for (white) young readers published from as early as 1830 to the start of the 20th century. MacCann approached the study as a literary historian, and showed countless examples of ways in which white supremacy inflected the books for young people that were published within that time period. The stifling circumstances of slavery, as well as the illegality of teaching slaves to write, meant that African Americans consuming or producing any version of what we now know as children's literature was beyond the scope of reason. MacCann discussed literature written by abolitionists that contained antislavery sentiments, for example Lydia Marie Child's story "Jumbo and Zairie," first published in 1831. The story is based on the true story of two children of an African prince who were captured and made to suffer The Middle Passage, then live on a plantation before being

purchased and returned to Africa. While the story is progressive for its time in some ways, MacCann related other ways in which Child's story contains contradictory messaging (such as the virtuous slaveholder), and thus could have been damaging. MacCann discussed other books for young readers which contain depictions of African Americans during slavery times, such as *The Child's Anti-Slavery Book: Containing a Few Words about American Slave Children and Stories of Slave Life*, published in 1859, which made religious invocations against slavery. Similar to MacCann, Martin (2004) began her research of "milestones" of African American children's picture books with the stereotyped characters that appeared in books during the mid- to late 19th century, including "The Little Black Sambo," and racist alphabet books and picturebooks. Additionally, Broderick (1973) wrote about the myth of "the happy slave" which was perpetuated by children's books of that era.

The influence of W.E.B. Du Bois' *The Brownies' Book Magazine* on the landscape of African American children's publishing in the 1920s was the subject of research taken up by Johnson (1990), Johnson-Feelings (1996), and Martin (2004). Johnson (1990) characterized her research as "a series of close readings of a highly selective group of texts" (p. 11). Among her research aims, Johnson (1990) hoped to highlight alternate forms of black children's literature, as well as to discuss the dynamics of the publishing industry in early efforts such as those by DuBois and his collaborator. Among the seven objectives of *The Brownies Book Magazine* was "To make colored children realize that being "colored" is a normal beautiful thing," (Martin, 2004, p. 39), which, with the swap of a word or two could be mistaken for the motives of present day

individuals, nearly a century later. To satisfy any curiosities, the full list of objectives from DuBois' 1920s project is listed in Note 4.

In the 1960s and 1970s, scholars conducted research that dealt alternatingly with the "invisibility" of African Americans in children's books and with the kinds of images that books portrayed when we were included. Larrick, a former president of the International Reading Association, began a 1965 *New York Times* article with the voice of a black child who inquired about the literature she was being exposed to, asking "Why are they always white children?" Larrick's study used descriptive statistics in order to make assertions about what she called "the all-white world of children's books," a label that became a meme throughout subsequent research in the field (1965). The numbers in Larrick's study showed that of 5,206 children's books published within the three-year span that preceded the publication of the article, only 349 books included one or more black characters. She went on to assess the quality of the books, and analyzed the problematic images they depicted, calling some of the books "objectionable."

Broderick (1973) created a larger study in a vein similar to Larrick's, and although she did not disclose what techniques she used in the research process, Broderick analyzed images of African Americans in children's literature from 1827 to 1967. They were not positive, leading Broderick to write in her preface "There is little to be happy about in the following chapters" (p. viii). Chall and colleagues (1979) presented a more thorough research study as a rejoinder to Larrick's piece. Chall and others intended their study to be compared with Larrick's, so they used the same data source and approach as Larrick had, for learning the characteristics of books published between 1973 and 1975.

The team discovered that the "percent of books with one or more Black characters in text or illustrations doubled" from ten years earlier. But even that amount of growth still meant that there were disproportionate numbers of books published that told of the African American experience to our numbers in the population at the time. Chall and others concluded the study by raising questions about the depiction of other "minority groups," as well as whether "children like to read about ethnic groups."

Work by Stanford and Amin (1978) did not police the images within books for young people, but instead, it touted the importance of using "Black literature in today's high schools." Stanford, a white teacher in a majority black high school, and Amin, a black teacher at a different high school, collaborated in their instructive volume, which included suggested curriculum guides for using many genres of African American literature as teaching materials. Their book listed many goals and objectives for what they called black literature courses, including that students will be led toward apprehending "reactions of both blacks and whites to racism, and understanding which reactions lead to positive change and which do not" (Stanford & Amin, 1978, p. 14). The authors' section on autobiography was of special note to me.

In the 1980s, the scholarship in the field was enhanced by two important contributions from Sims (1982; 1983). Sims' book *Shadow and Substance* (1982) surveyed 150 contemporary realistic fiction books about African Americans from 1965 – 1979. Sims sorted the books and created the following categories: "melting pot books" in which only the illustrations—and no other elements of the book—reflected black characters; "socially conscious books," which were intended mainly for non-African

American readers; and "culturally conscious fiction" in which "elements in the text, not just the pictures, make it clear that the book consciously seeks to depict a fictional Afro American life experience" (Sims, 1982, p. 49).

Sims' study (1983) gave voice to a wise ten-year-old black girl, Osula, by capturing her responses to children's literature about "Afro-Americans." Osula responded to Camille Yarbrough's 1979 picturebook *Cornrows*, by saying "…the thing that really got me in that book was that I used to wear my hair like that. Like in a basket cornrow. When I went to my uncle's wedding I wore my hair like that" (Sims, 1983, p. 24). Sims used the child's identification with the text as grist for her arguments about the need for literature that serves as a "mirror" to young people. Sims also made social and political commentaries by stating,

> …the exclusion of Afro-Americans from literature, or the inclusion of negative
> stereotypes and subtle racism is harmful to Black and White children alike. Black
> children are denied their basic humanity and human dignity, and White children
> are fed the poison of racism and presented a false picture of the world and their
> place in it. (Sims, 1983, p. 21)

As the scholarly conversation about African American children's publishing wound through the 1980s, MacCann and Woodard (1985) focused on racist aspects of books for young African American readers. In MacCann's and Woodard's collection of essays, studies, and book reviews, the renowned author for adolescents, Walter Dean Myers, wrote against the idea that race was no longer a factor that should be attended to in children's and young adult literature. Myers wrote,

Good literature for my children is literature that includes them and the way they live. It does not exclude them by omitting people of their color, thereby giving them the impression that they are less valid. It does not exclude them by relegating them to a life style made meaningless by stereotype…. It upholds and gives special place to their humanity. (Myers, 1985, p. 225)

In more recent years, the scholarship around black books has pivoted backward, to reflect on what was important in the past, and to ponder whether the same ideas are worth discussing. The historical tracing of African Americans in children's literature provided by Bishop (2007) is an example of this. The text shifts into a discussion of the past research in the field into a current context, as does Bishop's (2012) retrospective article.

Brooks and McNair (2008) also examined the current state of research on African Americans in children's literature, and gave practical suggestions on evaluating the books for excellence. Brooks and McNair's inclusion of information for librarians, teachers, and others concerned with selecting good books for young readers framed their book as a resource educators may turn to in order to enhance pre-packaged curriculum.

Brooks and McNair's (2009) research synthesis is also valuable: the authors synthesized the body of textual and reader response research within the field of African American children's literature over several decades. They generated three themes based on the findings: (1) literature as contested terrain, (2) literature as cultural artifact, and (3) literature as art. The authors used a four-stage iterative process of analysis to arrive at their findings.

Critical Race Theory has been employed in some studies concerning the topic at hand, because the study authors were expressly focused on uncovering the workings of racism through their inquiries: Brooks (2009) used Critical Race Theory to analyze three themes within a historical fiction novel by Mildred Taylor, while also using her article to address ways to purposefully incorporate African American young adult fiction within classrooms. McNair (2008) put to use Critical Race Theory and descriptive statistics in her study which looked at the rates of inclusion of books by writers of color in two of Scholastic's book clubs. Finally, Barker (2010) used Critical Race Theory while exploring two African America historical fiction novels. Barker posed the question "how do the books frame anti-racist identifications for readers of all races?"

Other work has sought to understand key themes throughout "classic" African American children's books, for example McNair's (2010) piece which posed three broad categories of the sub-genre: universal experiences from an African American perspective, breakthrough books, and literary innovations.

Lastly, there has been a thread of discussions about cultural authenticity in African American children's literature. This was marked by Woodson's (2003b) piece which asks "Who can tell my story?" In her piece, she argued that the African American experience is not singular, but multiple, and that there should be a broad range of books available to young readers that represent our intra-cultural diversity, and which do so accurately (p. 45). Rountree (2008) also questioned "ethnic authenticity" and acculturation in one of Woodson's novels. The danger of "single stories" of a culture

portrayed through books for young readers is also noted by Nigerian novelist Adichie (2010), which I made reference to in Chapter 1.

Finally, although I cannot call the following work "scholarly" or "research" I felt that the many annotated bibliographies of African American children's literature in the trade market deserve brief mention in this literature review. In a similar way to the creative publishing outlet of *The Brownies Book Magazine*, I have observed that lists of good books that young African American readers would enjoy are wedged into the back of books and articles on related subjects, and a few are published as stand-alone books. These lists are sought-after and coveted by those concerned with the topic. I believe it to be evidence of the still disproportionate numbers of books published about the African American experience for young readers, which statistics given in Chapter 1 confirmed.

Conclusion

The individual affordances of CHAT, transactional theory, and Signifyin(g) are amplified when combined to form the theoretical framework of this study. I argued that CHAT makes space for the discussion of contradictions within research endeavors, as well as "expansive," new insights for dealing with real problems in the real world (Engeström, 1987). I contended that transactional theory allowed me to include myself within the collective, possessive title phrase of this study, "In our own words." This study was shaped by the intellectual work of twenty-eight writers, interpreted through my own words, reflections, and understandings. The review of related literature that I presented helped make the argument that there is a need for research that inquires into

resistance in autobiographical writing across many facets of the African American

experience. I next explain how this research was carried out.

Chapter 3: Design and Methodology

One writes out of one thing only—one's own experience. Everything depends on how relentlessly one forces from this experience the last drop, sweet or bitter, it can possibly give. This is the only real concern of the artist, to recreate out of the disorder of life that which is art. (Baldwin, 1990)

Introduction

This study was built on the premise that literature is an invaluable archive of the past, and by engaging with excellent literature and creating critical spaces around books, our way of thinking about the present and the future are positively changed. The focal point of the study is autobiographies written by African American figures. Foregrounding the historical and cultural influences on the texts under analysis ensured that the macro-level forces which produced, constrained, or otherwise influenced each life narrative were given due respect. As well, the historical-cultural framework I used allowed me to set a precedent for future research endeavors into biographical, African-American literature written in three contexts: literature that represents "classic" African American autobiographies, autobiographies written for children or young adults, and autobiographies written by young writers within a community writing program.

In Chapter 2, I described cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) as the major theoretical framework that supports this study. While CHAT is without question appropriate for use in a theoretical role in my study, it is also a fitting methodology, as I explain in the following pages. Along with my discussion of methodology, I also consider the topics of sampling, data analysis, validity, and my role as researcher.

Research Design

Every decision I made while carrying out this study was judged against the two research questions posed below:

Research Question #1: Because the African-American literary tradition typically contains elements of resistance, experimentation, or aspirations toward changing the status quo, in what ways do those elements exist within the sample of texts?

Research Question #2: From the standpoint of Cultural-Historical Activity Theory, in what ways does analysis of the above elements help to understand the mediating artifacts in the protagonist's life history? How do aspects of the activity system—including both local and distal level action—relate to how the text is represented?

This qualitative study stands on the principles of constructivism. As such, I subscribe to a relativist ontology, and I assert that truth is socially constructed. I hold a subjectivist epistemology, which represents the idea that knowledge holders and knowledge have an interlocked relationship, and that new knowledge is the "literal creation" of the knowledge-seeking process. Lastly, I am in accord with a hermeneutic methodology, in which the research process is iterative, and in which findings are jointly constructed by all involved. (Guba & Lincoln, 1989)

With the above paragraph, I have offered the typical, requisite explanation of the guiding philosophy of most qualitative studies: I have acknowledged Guba and Lincoln (1989), Denzin and Lincoln (2003, 2005), and others, who have ushered the way for researchers to construct solid inquiries in naturalistic settings, researchers who allow the data to "emerge" before posing hypotheses. However, I also hold additional assumptions about qualitative research which have shaped the design of the study.

I hold a philosophical assumption which is that knowledge is partial and can never be complete. My assumption that knowledge is always partial derives from Ellsworth's (1989) conclusions from a study of critical dialogues in a college course she led. Ellsworth referenced the "silence of the unknowable" (p. 321) as an ever-present condition of humanity, upon which varying histories, perspectives, and sets of knowledge have been inscribed, sometimes without our consciousness. Rather than view these "unknowables," or "partialities" negatively, Ellsworth suggested that the research community instead embrace the things that can never be known, or never fully known, because they are also impactful to our work (p. 321). Such a claim about "partial knowledge" is not related to the internal validity of this study, but has only to do only with my recognition that the stories people tell about who they are may be influenced by a past that is inaccessible, and unknown, by both the story-teller and by me as both researcher and reader.

The research design of this study has also been influenced by an alternative methodological approach to social science research, "portraiture," which was introduced by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997). "Portraiture" is a methodology in which the lines between art and science are blurred, and in which the researcher attempts to portray the truest story of the object of inquiry by rendering "life drawings," or narratives, as the end-product (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997; Lightfoot, 2005). Examples of its use include six portraits of "good" high schools in large urban cities and in the suburbs (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983), a book in which *respect* was positioned as the subject of inquiry (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2000), and a collection of portraits of African American

"bourgeoisie" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1994). While I did not wholeheartedly apply the "portraiture" methodology to this study, I did select bits and pieces of the tradition which I felt were most complementary to my own work. This bricolage-style is in keeping with the flexibility and openness of qualitative research[5] (Levi-Strauss, 1966; Patton, 2002; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

There are three aspects of "portraiture" which I adopted into the theoretical and methodological structure of my own study. First, the idea of "studying up," or using research endeavors to explore the finest examples of a thing, rather than using research to pathologize, to point out failures, or to linger on what is "broken," jibes with my selection of nearly thirty, excellent texts which are outstanding representations of their genre. Second, "portaiture" acknowledges that in seeking the most authentic portrayal of an object of study, one must "document the beautiful/ugly experiences," or the contradictions that are bound up with our humanity (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005, p. 9). Lawrence-Lightfoot (2005) propounded that "the portraitist hopes to be able to capture the raw hurt and the pleasure of her or his protagonists and works to embroider paradoxical themes into the inquiry and narrative" (p. 10). This aspect of paradoxes blends well with what I have already identified as a central tenet of CHAT—contradictions, which, by their nature, instigate transformation within activity systems. Third, "portaiture" is an exceedingly reflexive methodology: in the telling of another's story one's own story is also revealed. I constructed this study with reflexivity in mind, so that my own meaning-making process with the literature I "transact" with is evident, in addition to making evident my own brief autobiographical reminiscences.

Role of Researcher

I selected the quote from Baldwin (1990) which opens this chapter, "One writes out of one thing only—one's own experience….," because I felt it was germane to not only the content which is the centerpiece of the study, but also to the design and methodology I chose. My way of constructing the study was inherently unique and personal. The writing that I did to complete this document was indeed littered with sweet and bitter moments, just as the autobiographies I read and analyzed were themselves idiomatic, creative, and at times emotional. To riff on the research methodology of "portraiture," put forth by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997), I fashioned this study as a kind of tripartite collage of stories from three meaningful areas within the African American literary and educative sphere. The collage of stories rests on a backdrop of historical, cultural, and social critique, which I described in Chapter 2, but what I present in this section is my role as the artist, as the agent who created this beautiful assemblage of ideas, techniques, analyses, and conclusions, which together form a complete study.

My Story

I think of all of the moments that have led to the present moment as linking together in an upward-moving spiral. I view "my story" not necessarily linearly, but as an iterative cycle in which a constellation of experiences, people, places, ideas, hopes, and more, have pooled, all the while pulsing and expanding toward greater heights. To present my entire autobiographical summary would be too tedious for these pages; instead, I present below two different angles from which one could understand how I came to be the author of this study.

Angle One: I am an African American scholar. On Christmas Eve, 1999, a FedEx truck pulled up in front of my childhood home, and delivered a package to me, with a Washington, D.C. return address. The package was from Howard University, "the mecca," and it contained my first college acceptance letter, and a notice that I'd received a Hilltop Scholarship. The only other college I'd applied to was Xavier University of Louisiana, which was the alma mater of my mother, uncle, grandmother, grandfather, and great-aunt. My choice to attend Howard wasn't difficult. I'd always joked about wanting to go "far, far, away" for college, and staying in New Orleans for Xavier didn't interest me. The two schools I applied to weren't arbitrary—my older brother went to Howard two years prior to me on a baseball scholarship, and so I was familiar with the school, and I applied to Xavier to satisfy my mother's request to do so. Importantly, I had no choice to apply to a Primarily White Institution (PWI) for college. The reason wasn't that anyone was concerned about whether I'd be offered admission, the reason was only that my parents insisted I attend "a black school," or a Historically Black College or University (HBCU) for undergraduate study. With my mother's side of the family so full of Xavierites, and with my father's nearly forty-year teaching career at a different HBCU, Southern University at New Orleans, my parents personally knew the value of being educated at an institution that was dedicated to the instruction of African Americans. When I was at Howard, I felt like I was being nursed into becoming the scholar that I am now, whose work uses African American literature to illuminate specific tendencies which can be extrapolated to broader audiences.

My life as an African American scholar didn't begin at Howard though, and it has been fueled in many ways since. One of the defining moments of my early years in figuring out what it means to be "young, gifted, and Black" (Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003) occurred at McMain Magnet Secondary School in my senior year, during which time I was the president of the National Senior Honor Society at the school. One of the co-advisers of the student group was also teaching the social studies course I was taking at the time. I was dismayed when she handed back an essay that I wrote, with a note in the margins for me to "use my own words," with a failing grade scrawled on the top of the paper. She'd circled words which she felt were above my vocabulary threshold, and she was wrong. I was especially astonished at this, because a few months prior, my English teacher photocopied an essay that I had written about Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream*, and she anonymously circulated the copies to the entire class, then discussed it as an example of good writing. I knew that being African American and being smart were as natural a pair as anything, but at McMain, I learned that spending all of my energy to prove this to random doubters would leave little room for me to be myself.

In more recent years, I have reflected—alongside peers at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, the University of Minnesota, and the National Holmes Scholars Program—about what it means to call myself a black scholar. I remember finagling my way inside an empty Memorial Hall at Harvard, during a recruitment weekend for admitted students of color the spring before my studies there began. As I took in the scene of the prestigious, historic hall, I remember being overwhelmed by a deep sense of

gratitude for every other African American scholar who came before me, and who made it possible for me to stand there that day. I carry this sense with me daily, that it is only due to the strivings of others—some of whose names I will never know—that my own pursuits are possible.

Angle Two: I am a daddy's girl. I am a middle child, sandwiched between two brothers who are two years older and two years younger than I am. I grew up in, and still have, a close-knit family, in which every member has a strong, positive relationship with every other member. I learned equally from my mother and father the values that I currently embody. My father has taught me how to stain furniture, and how to cook. I have often thought that his skill at teaching me various carpentry tricks, and other information, must certainly be an offshoot of his career as a college mathematics professor. Once I got a classroom of my own, as a graduate instructor of a children's literature course for undergraduates, I relished being able to trade "war stories" and often went to him for advice, to vent, or to brag on my students. Of all of my family members, I may be most like my father, with our calm, reflective disposition, but I also no doubt have affinities that mirror my mother, whose career as a clinical psychologist leads her to ask "…and what did you learn from that?" after I recount a difficult or unexpected situation. Although I may never reach her level of enthusiasm for shopping and bargain-hunting, there are innumerable ways that I have grown to view the world as she does. She has taught me what sisterhood means, not in the biological sense, but in the sense of opening up one's life to others, and living together in a "village" rather than in isolation. I believe that much of my creativity, independence, and openness to new experiences is

rooted in the family upbringing I had, and this certainly affects my viewpoints as the creator of this research study.

With these two perspectives on my own life history, I have clarified what aims I had toward examining the stories that others have narrated. My own story is undeniably significant in understanding the role I play as researcher and as reader. Patton (2002, p. 66) offered a heuristic of "triangulated inquiry," which is represented in Figure 3.1.

Those studied (Participants): How do they know what they know? What shapes and has shaped their worldview? How do they perceive me? Why? How do I know? How do I perceive them?

Those receiving the study (audience): How do they make sense of what I give them? What perspectives do they bring to the findings I offer? How do they perceive me? How do I perceive them?

Myself (as qualitative inquirer): What do I know? How do I know what I know? What shapes and has shaped my perspective? With what voice do I share my perspective? What do I do with what I have found?

Figure 3.1. Patton's heuristic for "triangulated inquiry."

I knew that for this study to be successful, there was a great degree of self-awareness on my part that I needed to make explicit, but that I also needed to consider the "participants," or in my case the creators of the data sources I used, and finally I needed to consider my relationship to yourselves—those who are the beneficiaries, or "audience" of this study (Patton, 2002). The issue of reflexivity has been studied by Finlay and Gough (2003), Lincoln and Guba (2003), Finlay (1998), and Hertz (1997). On the whole,

the question of reflexivity in qualitative research is a recognition of the "human as

instrument" (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, as cited in Lincoln & Guba, 2003). Put differently,

it demands that "we interrogate each of our selves regarding the ways in which research

efforts are shaped and staged around the binaries, contradictions, and paradoxes that form

our own lives" (Lincoln & Guba, 2003, p. 283). Each of the two angles of my story

above, and the many other angles, or "identities," that I possess, in fact contain colliding

truths, as is the case for everyone who participates in humanity. The messiness which

Lincoln and Guba (2003) claims we sort through as researchers who attempt to account

for their subjectivities is real. Thus, a third perspective on my life narrative, one which

makes transparent the conflicts, might be aptly titled "The colliding truths of my story."

Sampling

The sampling procedures I devised followed what Patton (2002) referred to as

"purposeful sampling." I deliberately placed the texts that I found to be of the greatest

insight into my sample. This strategy is also represented under other names, such as

"purposeful selection" (Light et al., 1990, p. 53), "purposive sampling" (Shadish, et al.,

2002; Morse, 2004), "criterion-based selection" (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993), and

"judgment sampling" (Bernard, 2000, p. 176). The following statement by sociologists

Schatzman and Strauss (1973) suggests that the strategy has a long history that spans

many fields of study. They wrote that "selective sampling" is "shaped by the time the

researcher has available to him, by his framework, by his starting and developing

interests, and by any restrictions placed upon his observations by his hosts" (Schatzman

& Strauss, 1973, p. 39). Coyne (1997) provided a disambiguation of "purposeful

sampling" and "theoretical sampling," which has applications in grounded theory, and in so doing, Coyne concluded that "all sampling in qualitative research is purposeful sampling" because the needs of the study dictate the choices the researcher makes in selecting the sample (p. 629).

Each of the autobiographical texts in my study were chosen according to the following general guidelines: First, I excluded the picturebook format from my sample, because of obvious differences in structure, which would have necessitated different methods of analysis. Second, the literary work must have been originally written in the English language. (With this criterion, I hoped to avoid any complications that translation may have presented.) In addition to these broad criteria, I also applied specific criteria detailed below for the selection of autobiographical texts, according to each of the three categories of analysis.

For the first category of "classic" African American literature, I selected books written between 1800 and 1985. What can be called "classic" is, of course, a relative term and open to interpretation, but I chose this wide parameter to display the spectrum of texts that were created prior to the present-day. To structure my selection process, I scanned anthologies of African American literature for autobiographies that fit my criteria. Specifically, I consulted *Cornerstones: An Anthology of African American Literature* (Donalson, 1996), *Bearing Witness: Selections from African American Autobiography in the Twentieth Century* (Gates, 1991), *Autobiography of a People: Three Centuries of History Told by Those Who Lived It* (Herb, 2000), and *The Concise Oxford Companion to African American Literature* (Andrews, Foster, & Harris, 2001).

Each of these four sources were edited by experts in the field, and were published by

respected presses. I considered the sources to be authoritative, and put together, they

served as a kind of benchmark for the publication and distribution of the stories I sought

out. Table 3.1 below shows that the ten "classic" texts I chose to represent the genre

have a strong presence within anthologies, and other authoritative sources.

Subject	*Cornerstones* **(Donalson, 1996)**	*Bearing Witness* **(Gates, 1991)***	*Autobiography of a People* **(Herb, 2000)**	*Oxford Companion* **(Andrews, et al., 2001)**
Equiano	✔	(n/a)	✔	✔
Jacobs	✔	(n/a)	✔	✔
Douglass	^	(n/a)	✔	✔
Truth	^	(n/a)	✔	✔
Washington	✔		✔	✔
Hurston	^	✔	✔	✔
DuBois	^	✔	✔	✔
Angelou	✔	✔	✔	✔
Baldwin	^	✔		✔
Baraka	^	✔		✔

* Only those life narratives published in the twentieth century were featured in this source.

^ This symbol denotes that while the subject's autobiographical text was not included in the source, other material from the subject was included (such as the transcript of a speech, an essay, or fictional works written by the subject).

Table 3.1. Justification of my selection of ten classic African American autobiographies.

For the second category of data sources, which consists of autobiographies in the field of children's and young adult literature written by African American writers, I used many overlapping techniques to create a list of nine titles. As it turned out, the list actually encompasses the entirety of books published in this category, rather than it being a representative sample of the category. The paucity of books in this category is discussed further in Chapter 5.

To begin, I used my knowledge of the field to select five books, which were *Childtimes* by Eloise Greenfield and Lessie Jones Little[6], Rosa Parks' self-titled autobiography, Walter Dean Myers' memoir *Bad Boys*, Ruby Bridges' book *Through My Eyes*, and the recent memoir for young adults by Condoleeza Rice. I then used Amazon.com as a search tool. I entered the title and author of known books that matched my criteria separately, and viewed the list of similar books which Amazon.com generated for each selection. I also used the search term "African American autobiography" within the Children's Literature section of Amazon.com. Next, I sleuthed through the back list of several major children's publishing houses which were searchable online, and spoke to one small press by telephone. I made inquiries to a handful of librarians with expertise in children's and young adult literature, and African American literature. Specifically, I corresponded with librarians from the Cooperative Children's Book Center at the University of Wisconsin—Madison (M. Lindgren, personal communication, September 24, 2012), Hennepin County library system (name unknown, personal communication, September 24, 2012), Givens Collection of African American Literature at the University of Minnesota—Twin Cities (C. Marcus, personal communication, February 27, 2013),

and I attempted to contact the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture of the New York Public Library system (personal communication, February 27, 2013).

Through these techniques, I located four more books, which were autobiographies by children's book author Julius Lester, illustrator Ashley Bryan, Geoffrey Canada's "personal history" which is a young adult version of his memoir, and a book by Carolyn Maull McKinstry which depicts her experiences during the civil rights movement. The triangulated measures I used to confect the second category of books for analysis added strength to my data sampling procedures (Patton, 2002, p. 247). I chose to include one "crossover" book—McKinstry's autobiography—which has equal appeal to both older and younger readers. I based this decision in Galda, Sipe, Liang, and Cullinan's (2013) definition of "literature for children and adolescents" which encompasses "books that children and adolescents enjoy *and have made their own*" (p. 8, my emphasis).

For the third category of books I analyzed, I chose the nine books which were published by young, African American writers who were participants of a community writing program, the Neighborhood Story Project. All of the books within this category are available to the public, accessible via normal trade outlets. In 2005, four young writers published their life narratives: Ebony Bolding, Jana Dennis, Waukesha Jackson, and Ashley Nelson. In 2010, there were a total of five autobiographical texts published by Susan Stephanie Henry, Kareem Kennedy, Kenneth Phillips, a jointly published book by Daron Crawford and Sam Russell, and a jointly published book by Arlet Wylie and Sam Wylie.

The Neighborhood Story Project is a non-profit organization led by Abram Himelstein and Rachel Breunlin, two white, former high school teachers who both left their jobs at the most troubled school[7] in New Orleans to build the community writing organization Neighborhood Story Project together. The nine young writers were former students of Himelstein and Breunlin, in a writing course they taught at John McDonogh High School. The students self-selected to continue their writing at the community center, and those who persevered are the nine who ended up with published books. The non-profit is funded through a variety of partnerships, including a primary linkage with the University of New Orleans, and through grant funds from state and city arts councils, and private foundations.

I do not have a connection with the Neighborhood Story Project outside of a deep interest in the work that is carried out there. As I described in an earlier note to Chapter 1, I came across the published books only by happenstance, and I used the books as teaching material when I tutored adults in a community library setting in New York City, paying special attention to the way that the writers used mundane events from their daily lives as topics for writing. I reached out to Himelstein and Breunlin as I contemplated possibilities for this dissertation study, and met with both during December 2011.

Thus, with the foregoing, I have explicated my selection of the twenty-eight autobiographical texts which shape this study. These initial text selections—which preceded my selection of focal texts within each category—are listed in Table 3.2. Patton (2002) has admitted that there is no set number to be followed regarding an ideal sample size in qualitative research studies (p. 244). My choice to analyze ten books within the

first and second categories, and nine in the third category was arbitrary, but it ensured

that I covered ample ground in the landscape of traditional African American literature,

and ensured that the full suite of autobiographies published for young readers would be

given attention in this study, as well as the entirety of books published by young people

at the Neighborhood Story Project. The range of stories I included allowed me to make

pertinent within-group distinctions, adding nuance to the conclusions I drew in the end. I

was also careful to limit my selections to a manageable number, both for the sake of time

and for the clarity of my reporting of findings.

It should be noted that some of the books within my sample are no longer in print,

which makes them inaccessible to some of my readership; but I opted to include those

texts anyway, due to their availability in libraries, and the ease with which the publishing

industry can commission reprints, via print-on-demand technology, or by other means. A

final point about the selection of data sources for this study is the flexibility of naming

conventions for what I have generally referred to as "autobiography." It is true that the

genre of memoir is sometimes considered to be fiction, because of it being based on

memory rather than truth. It is also true that some books published as autobiographies

may contain as many imagined realities as any book of fiction. The blurry parameters

around these labels is intriguing. Egan (2011) considered the implications of deception

and imposture within the genre of autobiography. She wrote that autobiographical

imposture is "a serious disconnect between the author as a person alive in the world, pre-

text, before any story emerges, and the written life…Imposture, in other words, is not

fiction and is not even the fictionalizing of stories based on truth" (Egan, 2011, p. 3).

Autobiographies in the Tradition of Classic African American Literature
The Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself (1789/2004)
Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass (1845)
Narrative of Sojourner Truth (1850)
Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, by Harriet Jacobs (1861)
Up from Slavery, by Booker T. Washington (1912)
Dust Tracks on a Road, by Zora Neale Hurston (1942)
The Autobiography of W.E.B. DuBois: A Soliloquy on Viewing My Life from the Last Decade of its First Century (1968)
I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, by Maya Angelou (1969)
No Name in the Street, by James Baldwin (1972/2007)
The Autobiography of Leroi Jones, by Amiri Baraka (1984/1997)
Autobiographies for Young Readers
Childtimes: A Three-Generation Memoir, by Eloise Greenfield & Lessie Jones Little (1979)
Rosa Parks: My Story, by Rosa Parks and Jim Haskins (1992)
Through My Eyes, by Ruby Bridges (1999)
Bad Boy: A Memoir, by Walter Dean Myers (2001)
On Writing for Children and Other People, by Julius Lester (2004)
Ashley Bryan: Words to My Life's Song (2009)
Fist Stick Knife Gun: A Personal History of Violence, by Geoffrey Canada (2010)
While the World Watched: A Birmingham Bombing Survivor Comes of Age During the Civil Rights Movement, Carolyn Maull McKinstry & Denise George (2011)
Condoleeza Rice: A Memoir of My Extraordinary, Ordinary Family and Me (2012)
Autobiographies by Young Writers in an Organized Community Context
Before & After N. Dorgenois, by Ebony Bolding (2005)
Palmyra Street, by Jana Dennis (2005)
What Would the World be Without Women: Stories from the Ninth Ward, by Waukesha Jackson (2005)
The Combination, by Ashley Nelson (2005)
Beyond the Bricks, by Daron Crawford and Pernell Russell (2009)
From My Mother's House of Beauty, by Susan Stephanie Henry (2009)
Aunt Alice Vs. Bob Marley: My Education in New Orleans, by Kareem Kennedy (2009)
Signed, the President, by Kenneth Phillips (2009)
Between Piety and Desire, by Arlet Wylie and Sam Wylie (2009)

Table 3.2. Initial text selections.

In this sense, a writer who is an imposture is akin to a swindler, or one who purposefully deceives readers into believing a falsehood.

While Egan's thinking may exist on one end of a continuum, there are other ways of considering truth and falsehood within autobiography and memoir. Aciman's (2013) recent *New York Times* opinion piece put forward the idea that "we can have many pasts, just as we can have several identities at the same time." Aciman continued that the "version" of the past which gets captured in writing is always a valid one, because it emanates from our mind, which inevitably reconfigures, rearranges, obscures, or reinvents the past, just as it does reality. Aciman's claim is that memoir writing therefore has more to do with the "molding" of stories, rather than a weave of deceit. Yet, for the sake of remaining on the topic of research design and analysis techniques, I reserve further discussion of the quandaries brought up by truth and falsehood within the autobiographical genre, and proceed to a discussion of the data that fueled this study.

Data Sources

The full data set of my study consists of twenty-eight books identified above as "initial texts" in Table 3.2. Of those, three books were selected as "focal texts" listed in Table 3.3. I gave a thorough explanation above as to my selection procedures for the initial texts. My selection procedures for the three focal texts were less intricate: I chose one book in each category which I felt had the greatest potential for answering my research questions. To recapitulate, I deliberately arranged to study "what cases I could learn the most from" (Patton, 2002, p. 233), using purposeful selection as the means, both at the initial and focal stages of sampling.

Books from Classic African American Literature	Books for Young Readers	Books from a Community Youth Writing Program
Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (Jacobs)	*Childtimes* (Greenfield & Little)	*Signed, the President* (Phillips)

Table 3.3. Focal text selections.

Since Research Question #1 asks about the elements of resistance, experimentation, and aspirations toward changing the status quo typically found within the African American literary tradition, and since Research Question #2 asks about ways in which cultural-historical activity theory can be mapped onto the preceding elements, it was fitting that the data sources I used be exclusively African American literature. Adding any other kinds of data to this study would have been extraneous, a hindrance to my efforts, and ultimately not germane to my research focus.

Data Analysis

I read each initial text once, and took careful notes during my reading process. My notes were handwritten, on a yellow notepad, and they consisted of lines in the books I planned to revisit, or which I found especially relevant to the themes of this study. An example of which is a line from Frederick Douglass' text that I copied into my notepad: "…I would at times feel that learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing. It had given me a view of my wretched condition, without the remedy" (p. 24). Next to that quote, I wrote PARADOX in the margin, because of Douglass's framing of reading as a tease. I wrote similar codes alongside other quotes, such as RULE or NORMS, DIVISION OF LABOR, INTERTEXT, OBJECT or PURPOSE, ESCAPE, IDENTITY, HISTORY, and many other

codes. My handwritten notes varied in length. For Ashley Bryan's 56-page illustrated book, I took one page of notes; Booker T. Washington's 166-page text yielded six pages of notes. In addition to keeping track of quotes and codes, I also jotted on my notepad my own reflections, such as when, on my fifth page of notes on Zora Neale Hurston's autobiography, I wrote "There is a turn in this book when the jokes are no longer for entertainment, but contemplation about race, religion."

After the reading and note-taking were completed, I then wrote a short summary of the twenty-eight narratives, included here as Appendix A. However this did not constitute any level of analysis; it was done for the perusal of readers of this study, as well as a way of helping me to organize my thoughts about the books in a streamlined manner.

My analysis of the autobiographical tales took place in three stages. The first stage of data analysis occurred in the form of my writing an activity analysis of each of the initial texts—with the exception of the three focal texts—which resulted in twenty-five analyses. These twenty-five books were analyzed using cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT), as posited by Engeström (1987), as an analytical tool.

In each activity analysis of the twenty-five texts, I considered how the elements of the activity triangle (tools, subject, object, rules, community, division of labor) and additional elements (production, consumption, distribution, exchange) interacted with each other within the literary work, operating on both local and distal levels. I used the cultural and historical backdrop of the literary work as an additional topic. To guide this

process, I used my definitions of the components of Engeström's model of mediated

action, given in Chapter 2, to formulate the following reflective questions:

- In order to identify *tools* within the activity system, I asked myself *What conduits serve as the external influencers on the individual's ability to reach a goal?*

- In order to establish the *subject*, I asked myself *Which entity is the agent of action?*

- To pinpoint the *object* of activity, I asked myself *Based upon a subject's actions, what goal(s) is it pursuing?*

- To determine the *rules*, I asked myself *What implied or explicit standards for behavior govern the community?*

- To define *community* within an activity system, I asked myself *In what ways do participants' goals, motivations, and actions overlap, mirror, or conflict?*

- To understand *division of labor*, I asked myself *In what ways do different participants of the community pursue the object of activity differently, according to their roles and responsibilities?*

In addition to the above, I was also attentive to my own reactions to the story, and I

included evidence of what Rosenblatt (1978/1994) would have called a "lived through"

experience with the text in each activity analysis I produced. Doing so allowed me to be

explicit about my role as researcher—not only as the agent who designed this study, but

also as the instrument through which analyses were made. By including my own

thoughts about and reactions to the mediated action that unfolded in the stories, I

positioned myself as a consumer of the activity systems I analyzed.

To write the analyses, in some cases I created a list of the activity components, and matched examples from the story that were relevant, in order to begin the writing process. In other cases, I began the writing process by fixating on a particular issue within the text, then worked outward from that point in order to address the components of the activity system. To illustrate this stage of analysis, I draw from my writing process of the activity analysis of Olaudah Equiano's narrative. I began by considering *identity* because Equiano's shifting identity affiliations seemed to be a prominent theme within the book. I consulted my handwritten notes, and returned to the book, to gather other ideas about how the book exemplifies mediated action, within an activity system, and how the local-level activity of Equiano's life as a seaman was actually controlled by the distal-level forces of colonialism. The activity analyses of the initial texts (minus the three focal texts) comprise Appendix C.

The second stage of data analysis allowed me to respond to the first research question, making explicit ways in which resistance functioned within the initial texts. I segmented the data according to the three categories of classic literature, children's/young adult literature, and literature written by young writers, and I conducted within-group comparisons. I looked again at the codes I'd written previously, and I used them to cluster similar themes that related to the subversion of a normative entity, the defiance of accepting the status quo, experimentation as a means of pushing back against the norm, and other such themes. An example of this is the code ESCAPE I jotted while reading three of the teenaged writers' books, as they'd each given unique ways they hoped to temporarily, or permanently, leave their current reality. I briefly elaborated on

the significance of those themes, and gave examples from the texts in the second stage of data analysis, findings of which are given in Chapter 4.

The third and final stage of data analysis concerned the three focal texts. I re-read each book, and made more notes about how they specifically addressed, disconfirmed, or pushed up against Research Question #1 and Research Question #2. Findings from the third stage of data analysis are also given in Chapter 4.

It is important to clarify that in each of the three stages above, the units of analysis were the activity systems and not the autobiographical figures. Engeström wrote, "rather than the socially mediated individual being taken as the basic unit of analysis, the historically located activity system should be the fundamental unit" (as cited in Blakler, 2009, p. 29). For this reason, in addition to my diligence to answer the research questions I posed, I equated each literary text with one activity system, and I referred to the components of the activity systems with literary terminology. An example of this is the "characters" within teenaged Jana Dennis' autobiography, namely her mother, the leader of her family's Mardi Gras Indian club, and a new next door neighbor, who each assume different "roles and responsibilities" in achieving the goal or "object" which the protagonist, Jana, identifies in her book, which is to get to know the people who live on Palmyra Street better.

Validity

The question of how closely this study can approximate sound answers to research questions should be addressed. While the issue of validity in qualitative research has been debated by many (Lincoln & Guba, 2003; Howe & Eisenhart, 1990;

Kvale, 1989; Scheurich, 1996), there is no consensus as to how—or even whether—the issue should be approached by researchers. Lincoln and Guba (2003) posed what they viewed to be the primary concern with validity in qualitative studies: "Are we interpretively rigorous? Can our concreated constructions be trusted to provide some purchase on some important human phenomenon?" (p. 275). My response to this line of questioning, as it relates to the study at hand, is that because phenomena concerning the African American experience are told "in our own words," a phrase that I adopted both as the title of this study and as a way of thinking about the careful study design and rigorous methodology, the study can be trusted as a reliable answer to the research questions posed.

Conclusion

What I referred to earlier as a tripartite collage of stories is the jewel of this study. In the preceding pages, I addressed exactly how it came to be created, and the important role I played in the design of it, as well as short reminiscences on my own life story. The blending of research techniques from Lawrence-Lightfoot's and Davis' (1997) portraiture methodology with Engeström's (1987) theory and analytical tool, CHAT, with applications of Rosenblatt's (1978/1995) transactional theory, resulted in an artistically improvised blend of techniques that was precisely suited for responding to the two research questions I set out to answer.

My preparation for conducting the research study I devised was the sum total of the knowledge, skills, and experiences I gained while I was a student in the Ph.D. program in the Curriculum & Instruction Department of the University of Minnesota—

Twin Cities, and during the year I earned my master's degree from the Language and

Literacy program of the Harvard Graduate School of Education. I was primed for this

work as an undergraduate at Howard University, studying African American literature as

an English major. Specifically, the research projects which I supported as an assistant,

opportunities for data analysis and presentation, coursework, teaching, and service,

uniquely contributed to my ability to defend the warrants I have set forth in this study.

There is an additional aspect to discuss related to my qualification to carry out this study:

during the early stages of planning, I conducted a pilot study toward a research question

that only traced the shadow of my current research questions. In the pilot study, I

described some of the characteristics of autobiographies and memoirs written by African

Americans in the progressive black intellectual tradition and in the tradition of prison

memoirs. An extremely condensed write-up of the pilot study and my findings is

available in Appendix B.

Without further delay, in the next chapter I present the findings of the analysis of

the three-pronged suite of stories.

Chapter 4: Findings

My analyses of selected autobiographies from African American authors, using CHAT, revealed many ways in which the writers used their books to contend with social and structural norms. I present the findings below, beginning with a restatement of my guiding research questions. Condensed summaries of each text are listed in Appendix A. Findings that comprise Stage 1 of Data Analysis, which include a discussion of the mediating artifacts that comprise the activity systems of the texts, are listed in Appendix C.

STAGE 2 OF DATA ANALYSIS

Research Question #1: Because the African-American literary tradition typically contains elements of resistance, experimentation, or aspirations toward changing the status quo, in what ways do those elements function within the sample of texts?

Category 1:
Elements of resistance, experimentation, or aspirations toward changing the status quo in "classic" African American autobiographies.

Theme 1

Among the sample texts, there were many instances in which writers made <u>direct appeals to political figures</u> in an attempt to bring about legislative changes in favor of more humane and morally just treatment of blacks. The following examples of such appeals are aspirations toward changing the status quo.

> Equiano's text included many examples in which he implored readers—assumingly those with political clout—to abolish slavery. One example is his letter to the Queen of England, on behalf of "my African brethren" that reads in

part "… Yet I do not solicit your royal pity for my own distress; my sufferings, although numerous, are in a measure forgotten. I supplicate your Majesty's compassion for millions of my African countrymen, who groan under the lash of tyranny in the West Indies. The oppression and cruelty exercised to the unhappy negroes there, have at length reached the British legislature, and they are now deliberating on its redress; even several persons of property in slaves in the West Indies, have petitioned parliament against its continuance, sensible that it is as impolitic as it is unjust—and what is inhuman must ever be unwise" (1789/2004, pp. 379-380).

Baldwin's epilogue begins "This book has been much delayed by trials, assassinations, funerals, and despair. Nor is the American crisis, which is part of a global, historical crisis, likely to resolve itself soon. An old world is dying, and a new one, kicking in the belly of its mother, time, announces that it is ready to be born" (1972/2007, p. 196).

Washington's (1901) speaking circuit served as his platform for making political appeals. His 1895 Atlanta Exposition address was his most famous such appeal.

Jacobs's dramatic scenarios were meant to appeal to the emotions of those with political clout: "Could you have seen that mother clinging to her child, when they fastened the irons upon his wrists; could you have heard her heart-rending groans, and seen her bloodshot eyes wander wildly from face to face, vainly pleading for mercy; could you have witnessed that scene as I saw it, you would exclaim, *Slavery is damnable!*" (1861, p. 23).

Theme 2

Texts within the data set depicted the subversive practice of becoming literate:

Douglass (1845) wrote, "The idea of as to how I might learn to write was suggested to me by being in Durgin and Bailey's ship-yard, and frequently seeing the ship carpenters…write on the timber the name of that part of the ship for which it was intended….When a piece was for the starboard side, it would be marked thus—"S."…I soon learned the names of these letters, and for what they were intended…. I immediately commenced copying them, and in a short time was able to make the four letters named" (pp. 25-26).   Douglass also created an innovative way to receive writing "lessons," by boasting of his writing skills to another individual who actually knew more than he knew, and learning from the corrections they gave.

Douglass learned how to spell by "writing in the spaces left in Master Thomas'

> copy-book, copying what he had written" in the discarded books (1845, p. 25).

> Washington (1901) became educated at Hampton Institute, where he was not accepted as a student but instead worked there as a janitor, until he gained the respect of administrators.

Theme 3

Three examples showed black characters owning things and amassing <u>financial equity</u>.

> Jacobs' explained about her grandmother baking crackers so she could later sell them: "after working hard all day for her mistress, she began her midnight bakings….The business proved to be profitable; and each year she laid by a little, which was saved for a fund to purchase her children" (1861, p. 9).

> In the span of one book, Washington (1901) rises from slavery to becoming the financier of an institution of higher learning. Washington traveled the country, and eventually the world, collecting financial contributions and pledges for Tuskegee and Hampton.

> Hurston's (1942) father, as well as Angelou's (1969) grandmother, owned the general store in their respective communities, which was the center of commerce, socializing, and news.

Theme 4

Among the sample texts, there was a <u>pattern of authors re-naming characters</u>—or themselves—for the protection of those individuals upon publication of the book. This trend shows that the use of names within so-called classic African American autobiographies was often an opportunity for subversion. Examples of which are as follows:

> Douglass changed names as he adopted different identities in his life: "The name given me by my mother was, 'Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey.' I,

however, had dispensed with the two middle names long before I left Maryland…I started from Baltimore bearing the name of 'Stanley.' When I got to New York, I again changed my name to 'Frederick Johnson,' and thought that would be the last name change. But when I got to New Bedford, I found it necessary again to change my name….From that time until now I have been called 'Frederick Douglass'" (1845, p. 66).

Jacobs (1861) re-named the characters of her story, as well as herself, in order to maintain her safety and that of her loved ones.

Known by readers of his autobiography as Olaudah Equiano, the figure was alternatively known as Gustavus Vassa by some. Editors of my edition of the autobiography explained that an officer of the British Royal Navy "changed Equiano's name" to Vassa to honor a "Swedish king and freedom fighter" (1789/2004, p. xxiii).

In Angelou's (1969) case, re-naming was not done by herself, but was attempted by a white woman who chose to call her "Mary" because "Margaret" was too long, yet Angelou insisted that she be called her real name, because "every person I knew had a hellish horror of being 'called out of his name'" (p. 91).

Baraka renamed himself in accordance with a new political affiliation. "It was Heesham who gave me the name Ameer Barakat (the Blessed Prince)….Later, under Karenga's influence, I changed my name to Amiri, Bantuizing or Swahilizing the first name and the pronunciation of the last name as well….The name change seemed fitting to me. Not just the flattery of being approached by these people, especially Heesham, and not just the meaning of the name Blessed Prince, but the idea that I was now literally being changed into a blacker being. I was discarding my 'slave name' and embracing blackness" (1984/1997, p. 376).

Theme 5

Four writers <u>took routes around the traditional publishing process</u> in order to get their stories told in the manner in which they desired.

It is stated in an editor's note to Jacobs' autobiography (1861) that two white abolitionists, Amy Post and Lydia Marie Child, were largely responsible for bringing Jacob's book to fruition (p. vi). As were other writers of slave narratives, Jacobs was endeared to abolitionists, and benefited from the inroads Post and Child could make to get her book published and widely distributed.

While leading the NAACP, DuBois (1968) was responsible for the publication of *The Crisis* magazine, a forum for political thought and activism, as well as the

Brownies Book, which he created "to furnish a little magazine for young children" (p. 270). These publications were defiant acts, in that they opened up new spaces for the representation of African Americans in print, especially The *Brownies Book*, which was for many children and parents, their first encounter with what is now known as "African American children's literature."

My edition of Baraka's autobiography (1984/1997) includes a note from the publisher, Lawrence Hill Books, explaining that when the book was first published, the original publisher "made substantial cuts to the text of the original manuscript. This new Lawrence Hill Books edition has reinstated all the excised material under the careful direction of the author." It seems as if Baraka subverted typical norms around the publishing process in order to publish his book in the manner in which he saw fit, nearly 500 pages of it.

Although Truth (1850) did not know how to read or write, she "published" her autobiography by narrating the events of her life to an individual who could.

Theme 6

Writers of books in this data set often <u>critiqued the hegemony</u> they witnessed within their social, economic, and cultural spheres. In some instances, the writers gave commentary on specific individuals who were responsible for colluding in their own demise (Gramsci, 1971); in other instances, the social structures in place that encouraged such collusion were instead the subjects of commentary.

Baldwin (1972/2007) explained to a friend his opposition to the Vietnam War, saying that it was in effect "aiding the slave master to enslave yet more millions of dark people" (p. 19). His friend, a mailman, felt that he had "made it" in life, because of his job, family, and ownership of property, yet Baldwin believed his friend to be unaware of the "cataclysm" of injustice that surrounded him, which ignorance made the friendship untenable for Baldwin.

Hurston (1942) addressed the issue of racist jokes which—regardless that the jokes were intended to disparage black people—were popular among blacks: "I found the Negro, and always the blackest Negro, being made the butt of all jokes, particularly black women" (p. 184); "I listened to this talk and became more and more confused. If it was so honorable and glorious to be black, why was it the yellow-skinned people among us had so much prestige? ... Were Negroes the great heroes I heard about from the platform, or were they the ridiculous monkeys of every-day talk?" (p. 185).

Washington gave examples of what he viewed as foolish financial habits among blacks during Reconstruction. One such example describes household visits Washington made as he traveled through Alabama "examining into the actual life of the people" (p. 53) and spreading word about the yet-to-come Tuskegee Institute. Washington remembered, "on one occasion when I went into one of these cabins for dinner, when I sat down to the table for a meal with the four members of the family, I noticed that there were five of us at the table, there was but one fork for the five of us to use….In the opposite corner of that same cabin was an organ for which the people told me they were paying sixty dollars in monthly installments. One fork, and a sixty-dollar organ!" (1901, p. 54).

DuBois complained, "I have discovered that a large and powerful portion of the educated and well-to-do Negroes are refusing to forge forward in social leadership of anyone, even their own people, but are eager to fight social medicine for sick whites or sicker Negroes; are opposing trade unionism not only for white labor but for the far more helpless black worker; are willing to get 'rich quick' not simply by shady business enterprise, but even by organized gambling and the 'dope' racket" (1968, p. 393).

Theme 7

Three writers used experimental approaches to autobiography by <u>including folktales and poetry within their books</u>. These alternate methods of telling one's story had the effect of re-defining what the genre is, according to the preferences of each writer.

Equiano interspersed his narrative with European canonical poetry, as in the case of an adaptation of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, which supports his exhortations against slavery: "No peace is given/To us enslav'd, but custody severe; And stripes and arbitrary punishment/Inflicted—What peace can we return?" (1789/2004, p. 165).

Hurston's (1942) chapter entitled "Research" in her autobiography gives the sense that her book is as much a collection of folklore as it is her own life narrative. Bits and pieces of folklore are given a platform in Hurston's book, as in the following song she learned is popular among "killers": "I'm going to make me a graveyard of my own,/I'm going to make me a graveyard of my own,/Oh, carried me down on de smoky road,/Brought me back on de coolin' board,/But I'm going to make me a graveyard of my own" (p. 146).

DuBois (1968) included poetry in his autobiography to punctuate his feelings on a particular subject, as in the following poem which he likened to his feelings about his unexpected forced retirement from Atlanta University: "A word from the poet Sara Teasdale expressed my mood: 'When I can look life in the eyes,/Grow calm and very coldly wise,/Life will have given me the Truth/And taken in exchange—my youth'" (p. 324).

Summary of Themes Across Category 1:

Texts in this category showed that the use of experimentation such as re-naming oneself for protection and subversive practices such as learning to read and write when doing so was illegal, and other versions of contesting social norms, were actually life-saving devices during the time of slavery. The traditional publishing process created obstacles for four writers, and they creatively evaded the boundaries set up by the institution of book publishing in order to ensure their stories could be distributed to wide audiences, in the manner in which they desired. In one case, this even included the blurring of orality with written storytelling. Four writers in this category used social critique to make visible to readers ways in which fellow African Americans were actually complicit in—and not resistant toward—social norms and racist structures. Finally, the use of autobiography as a political mechanism was evident in the findings across the breadth of history.

Category 2:

Elements of resistance, experimentation, or aspirations toward changing the status quo in autobiographies by African Americans for an audience of young readers.

Theme 1

Several texts within this data set depicted the <u>same historical era from differing,</u> <u>first-hand perspectives</u>. The authors' personal experience of the historical era acted in many cases as kinds of counterstories to mainstream versions of history.

The Civil Rights era was addressed differently by four different authors. Bridges (1999) wrote about the moment "it all made sense to me," when she realized near the end of her first-grade year that "everything had happened because I was black" (p. 50), referring to the forced integration of William Frantz Elementary School in New Orleans in 1960. Bridges confessed that up until that moment "I knew nothing about racism or integration," (p. 50) even though her attendance at the school incited daily fury and protests.
Parks (1992), who was an adult when Bridges experienced her historical moment in Civil Rights, provided her counter narrative to popular, incorrect portrayals of her role in history. Parks wrote, "People always say that I didn't give up my seat because I was tired, but that isn't true. I was not tired physically, or no more than I usually was at the end of a working day. I was not old, although some people have an image of me as being old then. I was forty-two. No, the only tired I was, was tired of giving in" (p. 116).
Rice (2012) remembered how her family had "found a way to live normally in highly abnormal circumstances" (p. 86), during the Civil Rights struggle in Birmingham, and shared her personal connections with two of the girls who perished in the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing. Rice also spoke back to "the narrative that the middle classes who would eventually benefit disproportionately from desegregation had little to do to actually bring it about" (p. 92). Rice's parents did not march in Birmingham's many demonstrations, and Rice herself was forbidden from participating in the Birmingham Children's Crusade of 1963. But she explained that "the story of the choices that people made is far more complex than the caricature that neatly separates those who marched from those who didn't" (pp. 92-93).
McKinstry's (2011) experience of the Civil Rights movement was also in Birmingham, and it hinges around the day Sixteenth Street Baptist Church was bombed and McKinstry's four friends were killed. Her book tells an alternative story of the historical era by focusing on the after-effects of racist violence on a young person's mental well-being, when the era is most often discussed in terms of social and political gains as the result of a collective struggle.
The Great Depression was a subject across books written by Greenfield and Little (1979) and Bryan (2009). Greenfield discussed her Daddy leaving home to "make

a way" for her family by going North "looking for safety, for justice, for freedom, for work, looking for a good life" in 1929 (pp. 126-127). Bryan reminisced that "During the Depression, children often made their own toys. They made soap-box wagons with old carriage wheels, scooters with boards and skates," and he and his sister made patchwork vests together, and also made and sold colorful kites (p. 24).

Theme 2

Two of the books in the data set portrayed <u>identity affiliations that lie outside of the African American race and culture</u>.

Walter Dean Myers was raised by Florence Dean, a white, second-generation German woman, and Herbert Myers, a black man (2001).

Lester discussed his deep sense of connection to his white, German great-grandfather Adolph, who was a Jewish prayer leader. Lester converted to Judaism from Christianity earlier in life, and when he later learned of Adolph's story, he sensed that Adolph was his "spiritual ancestor" (2004, p. 69). Lester also wrote about feeling simultaneously like an insider and outsider while he sang prayers as a cantor for his temple's High Holy Days.

Theme 3

In some cases, writers used their <u>books as teaching tools</u>, giving lessons to young readers on how to evade traps that often snare urban black youth.

Canada's book includes several didactic interludes, in which he addresses readers directly. One such interlude is as follows:
"When someone points a gun in your direction but doesn't want to shoot you in particular, you should
A. Run into the nearest building.
B. Yell and scream while you run away.
C. Stand still.
D. Hit the ground.
Most kids that I know get this question wrong. They usually chose B. or C. I learned the right answer from Melvin: Hit the ground" (2010, p. 85).

An additional way Canada (2010) gives lessons through his book is via an Epilogue which begins "America has long had a love affair with violence and guns" (p. 121) and which concludes with "There are resources everywhere to help you become part of the solution, to take action" (p. 124).

McKinstry (2011) used her book to "teach" about God's love and the power of forgiveness. The ending of her book takes an evangelical tone, as McKinstry shares that she was given a new chance at life through forgiveness, and that we should strive to see each other "with God's eyes" (p. 276), looking first at what is good in a person.

Lester (2004) asserted that literature should not be approached "as if it were a cipher to be decoded" but that conversations about literature should begin with "What was your response to the book?" (p. 101). Lester also instructed readers that "if we do not remember well the past—known and unknown—the future will be born in anger" (p. 71).

Theme 4

Several writers used <u>meta-language about reading, writing, and storytelling</u>. The purpose of this meta-language varied: in some cases it seemed to function as way of suggesting to readers new possibilities for interacting more deeply with literature; in other cases is was part of a discussion of family life, in that storytelling was once a popular practice among families. In some ways, this theme nudges against the status quo, by inspiring young readers to adopt new literacy practices.

Myers (2001) wrote extensively about his finding a sanctuary in books, while other parts of his reality collapsed around him. Myers was more comfortable "alone in my room with a book" than in any other situation (p. 67), and shared that "Books are often touted by librarians as vehicles to carry you far away. I most often saw them as a way of hiding one self in the other. What I had to hide was the self who was a reader, who loved poetry" (p. 126).

Myers (2001) also discussed his early years as a writer, during which time his "writings from day to day were nearly incomprehensible even hours after I had finished them" (p. 148). Myers reflected that "Putting marks on paper is always only a part of the writing process. The other part is looking at those marks and applying the judgment needed to ensure that the narrative that flies by your mind's eye will be recognizable to an independent reader" (pp. 147-148).

Much of Lester's book (2004) focused on the mechanics of "story" and how stories foster connections across humanity. An example of the meta-language

Lester used is as follows: "The mystery and miracle of a book lies in its embodiment of a solitary voice penetrating time and space to go beyond time and space and alight for a moment in that place within each of us that is also beyond time and space" (p. 32). He also wrote "Through story we seek to know ourselves and we seek to be known. Thus we become joined with others" (p. 51).

Bryan (2009) wrote about publishing his very first book in kindergarten, stating that he was the author, illustrator, binder, and distributor. As an adult, Bryan wanted to "get the spirit of the oral tradition" into a writing project, and so he "practiced reading aloud from the Black American poets, from Paul Laurence Dunbar to Langston Hughes to Nikki Giovanni" and then "retold the African tales using the good ideas from poetry" in his writing (p. 49).

In Greenfield and Little's text (1979), her mother Lessie remembered that "Mama really knew how to tell a story. She could make it sound as if it really happened. She would have us sitting in chairs around her, and she'd read to us and tell us stories and recite poems. Pretty poems. And sad poems, too, sometimes" (p. 72).

Theme 5

Two writers used their books to sort through ideas about <u>what it means to be a black man</u>. Their writing about masculinity both exposes and confronts the social norms they felt pressured to perform.

Myers wrote, "Being a man also seemed to mean something different in Harlem from what it meant in the rest of the world. I understood being man as having some sort of power. In Harlem that power was expressed in muscle, in being someone who wouldn't take any nonsense or who was good at athletics…. I didn't see anybody talking about being a poet, or short-story writer, as a career. Nor did I see anybody defining a real man as somebody who paid a lot of attention to books" (2001, p. 176).

Canada (2010) wrote "…everyone, and I mean everyone, had to prove he could beat other boys his age. Union Avenue, like most other inner-city neighborhoods, had a clear pecking order within the groups as well as among them when it came to violence" (p. 39). "It was often the job of the older boys to 'make us tough' so we wouldn't become victims once we left the block" (p. 43). "… [A] threat to one's 'manhood' couldn't go unanswered," which made boys fight even when they had no hope of winning (p. 102).

Theme 6

One writer discussed using resistance in order to preserve the integrity of his

writing, during the book publishing process.

> In his manuscript entitled *Look Out, Whitey! Black Power's Gon' Get Your Mama*,
> Lester (2004) used the voice of an "angry young black redefining American
> history by looking at it though the experiences of those who had suffered that
> history" (p. 92). His editor was "horrified" and told Lester to "do something"
> about the book's tone, and title. To preserve the message he intended to convey,
> Lester "stood up, stuck out my hand, and asked him for the manuscript back" (p.
> 93). The book was later published by a different press with no revisions.

Theme 7

Two writers included several primary source documents in their books. This had

an effect of (re)presenting historical events from a personalized perspective, a perspective

that surely gets overlooked in current-day discussions around history.

> Bridges' book (1999) included many snippets from newspapers, especially the
> New York Times. One snippet reads as follows: "Five Negro girls are scheduled
> to enter the first grades of two white schools here [New Orleans] Monday. This
> would mark the first step toward integration below the college level in any of the
> five resisting states of the Deep South. They are South Carolina, Georgia,
> Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana" (p. 14).

> McKinstry (2011) used quotes from Civil Rights leaders—drawing heavily from
> Martin Luther King, Jr.—to open her chapters, in addition to using many chapter
> interludes which consisted of the full text of various primary source documents.
> One such interlude was "From Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Eulogy Speech After the
> Sixteenth Street Baptist Church Bombing," as well as King's "Letter from
> Birmingham Jail." The book closes with "Sample Jim Crow Laws," which
> included such notions as "It shall be unlawful for any amateur white baseball
> team to play on any vacant lot or baseball diamond within two blocks of a
> playground devoted to the Negro race" and vice versa (p. 287).

Theme 8

Many writers within this category reported using <u>alternative pathways to pursue</u>

<u>an education,</u> often as acts of contestation of the narrow, racist, routes to being educated

that were *de jure* or *de facto* at the time of the writers' life.

Because of his race, Bryan (2009) was denied entry into the art institute he wanted to attend after high school, despite that the interviewer said his was the "best portfolio that he had seen" (p. 21). Bryan later gained entry into the Cooper Union School of Art and Engineering, and he described the three-part drawing, architecture, and sculpture entry exam: "When completed, we set our exam responses in a tray with our names and addresses. The trays were placed on the platform of the Great Hall and we left. Since the evaluators literally did not see us, there was no way to determine the race of the applicants" (p. 21).
Myers (2001) developed a habit of skipping school because it was a "disaster," and formed his own kind of curriculum instead, through novels. He wrote that he would leave home and wander into Central Park, and climb a tree. "I could sit there for hours reading, the world passing below pretending to be real, me above doing the same thing" (p. 151).
Bridges (1999) was escorted to the first grade by U.S. federal marshals, when in 1960, New Orleans Public Schools were mandated to be integrated. Three other black children integrated a different school the same year. Bridges spent much of that year as the only student in her classroom, because white families withdrew their children from the school, to defy integration laws.
In the aftermath of the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling that separate but equal schooling was unconstitutional, Parks (1992) attended a ten-day workshop with "a lot of activist people" at Highlander Folk School, entitled "Racial Desegregation: Implementing the Supreme Court Decision" (p. 101).   The school was created with the idea that "people could solve their own problems with the right kind of guidance" and when Parks attended, the intent was "to train future leaders so they could go back home and work for change using what they had learned at the school" (p. 103).
Rice (2012) was made to sit out of school for a year, after her kindergarten year, because her birthday fell a few weeks after her Birmingham school system's cutoff for first graders. Rather than repeating kindergarten and starting the following year behind her peers, Rice's mother decided to take a year's leave from her job as a teacher to prepare Rice for the school system's exam for second graders, allowing her to be promoted with her original class. Later, as a high

schooler, Rice and her parents worked out a plan for her to combine her senior year in high school with her freshman year in college.

Rice (2012) also discussed the legacy of alternative pathways to education in her family history, which involved her paternal grandfather using "white guilt" to solicit funds from whites for his own school, and "going door-to-door in the poor neighborhoods around him and impress upon parents the importance of sending their kids to college" (p. 21). Her grandfather would "make arrangements" with colleges for the students to attend, and he even recruited young, black teachers from HBCUs on behalf of the colleges.

Summary of Themes Across Category 2:

The children's and young adult literature that comprised Category 2 included the use of books as explicit teaching tools. The didactic approaches taken up by Canada (2010), McKinstry (2011), and Lester (2004), served to contest standard practices. Four writers in this category used a great deal of meta-language about reading, writing, and creating books, perhaps as a way of inspiring readers. Since all of the authors lived during the time of the Civil Rights Movement, many writers discussed the direct impact that *de facto* and *de jure* schooling practices had on their lives, and they shared ways in which they sought out alternative pathways to education. This theme yielded the highest number of examples among the books in this data set.

Category 3:

Elements of resistance, experimentation, or aspirations toward changing the status quo in autobiographies by young, African American writers in a community writing project.

Theme 1

Some of the teenaged writers made explicit statements about <u>resisting typical</u>

<u>labels associated with being a black, urban youth</u>.

Pernell's writing (2009) addressed this most directly. On the second page, in the "Introduction" which was written along with his co-writer, Daron (2009), Pernell wrote "I'm not your average black boy. I'm different" (p. 2). Pernell went on to discuss that "some dudes" wear baggy clothes, which he isn't interested in, and that most males his age believe that dancing at parties should only be done by young ladies. But Pernell's writing, along with several photograph sequences in the book, demonstrate that dancing is a way in which Pernell has chosen to push back against, or resist, typical assumptions made by both his peers, and by the dominant culture. In the "Introduction" Pernell explained why he dances and belongs to an all-male dance crew that performs at parties and throughout the neighborhood: "It's just something that makes me happy" (p. 2).
A second example of Pernell's (2009) resistance to the norm is the way in which he adopts skateboard culture, when skateboarding is typically considered to be a hobby in which suburban white males participate. Pernell also designs his own fashions with scissors and paint, which is an apparent component of the life of a serious skateboarder.
For Arlet (2009), her family's being "different" served as the motivation for her writing. In the final pages of her book (co-written with her brother Sam), Arlet wrote that "I thought it was the same for everybody, but a lot of what we do is different from everybody else. To me, that's what made me want to write the book even more" (p. 108). This example shows that Arlet is aware of the status quo for families in the same demographic as hers, yet she is deliberately dis-associating her family from the typical associations that go along with the status quo. Ways in which Arlet showed her family is "different" are as follows: In an interview with Arlet's mother Emelda, her mother reflected, "It's a pattern in our family. You basically had no friends because your family members were your friends" (p. 14). Arlet echoed this by discussing that she and her siblings could not hangout with neighborhood kids, but instead had to stay inside and play with each other. Arlet wrote about the fun she and her siblings created together and concluded that, "These games are very precious to me because of the uniqueness, oddity, and originality of them. That is why I wanted to share them with the world" (p. 22).
Other ways in which Arlet's family (2009) defied the norm were more implied rather than explicit. Arlet and Sam's Belizean father owned the home in which they lived, and rented out space for a convenience store run from the first-floor level of the family's house, while most other families in the neighborhood were not homeowners.

Theme 2

Some of the writers grapple with stifling <u>norms around masculinity</u>.

> In the "Introduction" to Kenneth's book (2009), he wrote "I've looked at how young men have been loved and nurtured in my community, but also sometimes boxed in by ideas about what men are supposed to be" (p. 1). Kenneth's pursuit of this theme in his book is an attempt to dispute with heteronormative ideologies, and an attempt to understand ways in which his own self-described "anger management problems" are actually resistive reactions to feeling "boxed in." Kenneth wrote "Punk, sissy, fag, you name it, Keith and I heard it all before, but I didn't take nothing from nobody" (p. 15), and so Kenneth constantly fought in order to resist those negative labels. Kenneth also wrote "'Men don't act like that.' I've heard that a million times. I hate when people say boys aren't supposed to cry, jump rope, or do hair….Men are supposed to talk to each other about football…. I don't like football. I'm tough, but I'm not the type to walk around acting big and bad" (p. 41).
>
> Pernell's joining an all-male dance crew, which they re-named the Fly Guys, counters typical gender norms. Pernell wrote about a relative of his, Melvin, who is "conflicted about dancing. When I come around sometimes [Melvin]'ll say the way I dress looks gay, but when we're alone he tells me, 'I want to dress like you.' When I dance in public he makes fun of me and says, 'Ya fag!' and starts laughing. But when we get by ourselves he will say, 'Show me how you do that'" (2009, p. 124).

Theme 3

The writers resisted narrow portrayals of the black experience by showing

<u>exemplars of intellectualism and literary excellence</u>.

> Kareem (2009) referred to Brother Rob as one of the few teachers at John Mac "who could actually display authority and teach at the same time" (p. 58). In his interview with Kareem, Brother Rob talked about his process toward self-actualization as stemming from his years at Grambling State University, during which time he was surrounded "with so many Black minds who were intelligent, who had a thirst for knowledge" and that "when you have a sense of self, you become anchored" (p. 58). Brother Rob discussed that "his favorite historian to teach to the students" (p. 61) is John Henrick Clark, whose knowledge outpaced his own teachers', and who eventually created what would later be known as "African American Studies."

> Kenneth's (2009) aunt Loren published and edited a magazine about New Orleans' "bounce" music; she circulated the magazine to primarily local outlets, and gained renown as a bounce music expert not only within New Orleans, but also on national and international scenes. The creation and management of *Da R.U.D.E.* magazine was built upon a foundation of literary excellence. Kenneth shared, "I would compare myself to Loren as far as education goes. We both love to read, write, and we both like good conversation" (p. 75).

Theme 4

First-hand reflections about <u>what it was like to be the child of a drug-addicted mother or father</u> were nuanced and complex among the books in this category. Together, these reflections serve to dispel essentialist thinking.

> Kesha (2005) wrote "I have moved so many places growing up backwards and forwards from my grandma's house. I call myself a nomad because I have never had a stable place to live. My mother didn't make it too stable for me…." (p. 15). Kesha interviewed her mother, asking her questions such as "How do you think we felt when you left for days?" to which her mother replied "I knew you all were hurt. I knew after being gone for just maybe two hours that two hours was too long away" (p. 32). Kesha's mother said that the drugs helped "block away all my problems," including depression (p. 30). Kesha reflected that "I was only fifteen years old and had seen many things I shouldn't have" (p. 25).

> Daron (2009) grew up with a mother, father figure, maternal grandmother, and uncle who sold drugs. Daron interviewed his mother, Melvina, and asked what effect her hustling had on the family. Melvina answered "I may be wrong, but we kept nothing from our kids…. It's better living, you know. I think seeing your parents go through that made y'all a little stronger and wiser." Daron replied "…that was what y'all needed to do to help the family out and times were hard. I mean, I couldn't ask for, you know, a better parent than I have" (p. 25). Daron wrote a short piece entitled "Growing up with Drugs," which included several insights which are as follows: "Growing up in a house where drugs were sold wasn't as bad as you think it would be"; "My brother, my sister, and I never got mad because we know that they were selling drugs to support us"; and he included a memory of the police rushing in "with their big guns and bright flashlights, demanding everyone to get on the floor" (p. 26).

> Ashley wrote about her deceased mother: "I remember what she was like before she would smoke the drugs. She was a mother, a mother with all the love that a

mother who didn't use would have. Drugs changed her. Every time she was high, drugs made my mother forget she loved us so she did things that she normally wouldn't. But I forgave and loved her even if she forgot she loved me. The way I saw it was, 'That high woman isn't my mom.' The woman deep down inside her is, and that's who I loved" (2005, p. 10).

Kareem (2009) described his mom as "hyper and full of information" and "when you're talking to her, you can't keep up with everything she's saying" (p. 92). He also stated that she's a "good listener, a smart reader of people, and has a good intellect" (p. 92). Kareem wrote that their conversations are so good sometimes that it surprises him that "she keeps doing what she's doing" (p. 92). Kareem interviewed his mother, Marlene, who told him that regarding her drug use, "the pain has outweighed the pleasure for me" (p. 92). Marlene said that she feels rejected by her nine children, and that "I might not love myself, but I do love my children" (p. 94).

Theme 5

The teen writers wrote about <u>inventing new realities</u> to fulfill a desire to break away, or escape, from their circumstance.

Kenneth (2009) reflected about how his family's forced exile from New Orleans during the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina "really got my traveling train started." Kenneth had never traveled outside the city, and within a few years he'd traveled to and lived in many places up and down the Gulf Coast, Houston, and Memphis. He wrote "Being in these new places with new people, I began to picture myself living other places—Barcelona, London, Honduras, somewhere in West Africa. I'd go anywhere.… I was comfortable where I was, but now I want to keep traveling. I think I could have another home in the world" (p. 61).

Ashley (2005) wrote that "freestyling"—or rapping without pre-written lyrics— "helps you escape the life that bothers you and imagine a new one" (p. 94). Ashley also wrote about another way of escaping her circumstance: "Sometimes I wish I could sleep forever because the dream world is so much easier than the real world" (p. 116).

Sam daydreams about how he can get away from the "mayhem" of his block on St. Claude Ave.: "Some days—almost everyday—I imagine what it would be like if I could win the power-ball and move away from that environment. Sometimes I wish I could just find a suitcase full of hundred dollar bills. I'd buy a big house in the country where the next neighbor is a half a mile away. I'd have a big pool

in my backyard and a two-car garage built on the side of my house. It would be just me, my wife, and two or three kids. That would be the perfect life for me. My money would be in the bank and half invested in Wal-Mart stores" (2009, p. 31).

Theme 6

Writers used creativity to include the <u>voices of typically-silenced individuals</u>

within their book. This resulted in the subversion of normal publishing parameters.

During an unannounced visit, Daron told his incarcerated uncle Derry "You got a major role in my book, and I need your own words to help the book be a success" (2009, p. 147). Guards would not allow Daron's tape recorder into the visiting area, so he had no way of capturing Derry's interview responses. Daron gave his print out of interview questions to Derry, and Derry later hand-wrote his answers, and then mailed the sheets to Daron from jail. What is included in Daron's book are three pages of scanned images of Derry's handwritten responses, along with images of the front and back of the envelope addressed from the correctional facility, and a list of the interview questions.

Ashley (2005) interviewed the "legend" of her hood, an "original gangsta" named Poppee, who admitted "I didn't take a heed to things 'til after I done 8.5 years between two times in jail" (p. 58). Also, Sam (2009) included in his book an interview with a fifteen-year old drug dealer who told Sam he'd sell anywhere, even to "little children, it doesn't matter" (p. 33). For better or worse, these two characters which Ashley and Sam wove into their stories were outside the norm of characters whose voices would typically be included in books.

Theme 7

<u>Naming conventions</u> throughout the third category of texts exemplified aspects of

experimentation. These conventions included the use of nicknames, aliases, and even the

re-naming of characters that played certain roles.

Daron preferred to be called "Money"; Pernell goes by "Doo," and he commented that *Pernell* "makes people think about lawyers and judges" and that he got "both names from my father" (2009, p. 2). Arlet remembered a neighborhood friend

whom people called "Lemon," and said "I've never known his real name. We used to play with him all the time saying his real name was Le'Mon, a French name" (2009, p. 41). Sam wrote a few pages about a friend of his named Mario, but who because of his big feet adopted the moniker "Ninth Ward Foots." Kesha interviewed a neighbor, Evella Pierre, but Evella is better known by the nickname "Ms. Coochie," given to her by her father, who when he lived in Germany would ask "How is my Coochie Coo?" (p. 67). Evella said "I like that more than I like my real name. My children always tell me, 'Ma, that's not your name. Your name is Evella.' But when someone asks I say, 'Coochie'" (2005, p. 67).

In some cases, names were used to identify a group identity. Daron, his father figure, and a small group of friends called themselves "Fresh Stars" to signify that their "crew" was always outfitted in the latest fashions. Pernell's dance crew felt that their original name "Geek Kids" sounded too childish, so they renamed themselves "Fly Guys" (2009). Ebony wrote about the "Bayou Road Boys" which was a clique that included her brother, and about ten other friends who "all grew up together and still hang out on Bayou Road" (p. 30). Ebony wrote "When I say Bayou Road Boys you might think of a gang or something like that, but they aren't troublemakers" (2005, p. 30).

Daron's father figure, named Roderick Gordon, used the alias "Chevy Earnhard" to refer to himself (2009).

In two instances, the name of the employee at the neighborhood store was re-assigned by community members. Ashley (2005) wrote about the owner of Busy Bee store in her neighborhood, whom everyone called "Mike." But in her interview, Ashley learned that the man's name is Fadi Abu Ali, and he said "but sometimes people call me Mike because it's easier for them to say" (p. 42). Jana (2005) wrote about her neighborhood grocery store, Rose Grocery, where the customers call each employee "Rose." Jana and her book editor Rachel interviewed an employee, Hien Pham:

> Rachel: The customers call everyone Rose?
> Hien: Yeah, because it's easier instead of calling our name. The name Rose is actually the name of my youngest sister. And so the store is her name. Most of my customers know my real name.
> Rachel: Do they still call you Rose?
> Hien: Yeah, I don't really care. I think it's easier to call Rose. It's easier to them: 'Rose.' (pp. 64-65)

Theme 8

Several writers in this category used <u>social critique</u> within their autobiographies as a way of pushing back against the status quo. Their critiques sometimes directly confronted—or sometimes only hinted at—higher level structural inequalities that impacted their lives.

Ashley wrote a short piece entitled "What gets you put in jail in da hood" (2005, p. 66). Ashley's point was that anything and everything could result in getting put in jail in her neighborhood, because rather than protecting people, the police treated people like "prisoners in our own community." She gave an imagined scenario of a police officer inquiring why a resident is outside: "So you say, 'I am just minding my own business, officer.' Ding, ding, ding: wrong answer. You get whooped, and then you go to jail" (p. 67).
Ebony wrote about a white woman who passed along the sidewalk with her dog while Ebony interviewed the new owner of her former home, a white man. The woman strolling by talked about the danger of the neighborhood, which Ebony disagreed with: "She says that when you're living in this neighborhood make sure you have bars on your windows and big dogs in your house. From my point of view you don't need all of that. When we stayed on North Dorgenois no one ever broke in our house. We never had any problem" (2005, p. 71).
Ashley's poem "Answer Me" is also critical of those who perpetuate structural inequalities. Ashley broadly refers to this group as "they," an unspecified, greed-driven grouping. An excerpt of the poem exemplifies this: "They told us to go to school and our skills will enhance/Then they pushed us to the world where we didn't stand a chance/So they threw us some food stamps and told us we could spend em/Then locked us in the ghetto but we couldn't live up in it" (2005, p. 62).
Daron and Pernell pondered about the racial segregation that was created as a result of the construction of the housing projects in which they lived: <u>Daron</u>: We didn't know too much about racism and all that at first.   <u>Pernell</u>: We were small! Hearing about the government separating people when they built the projects, that's stupid. It's like they didn't want people to get along. If they were living in a mixed neighborhood, they should have left it like that.   <u>Daron</u>: Maybe they did it like that cause the white people didn't like the black people and the black people didn't like the white people. (2009, p. 7)

Kenneth also reflected about segregation, writing "I always thought the project was made for black people… I've learned since that I was right. The St. Bernard was created by the Housing Authority of New Orleans as a segregated black project. That's why there was only one white lady living there" (2009, p. 61).

Kareem (2009) attended John F. Kennedy High School for the two weeks that preceded Hurricane Katrina in the fall of 2005. He pointed out the contradiction that Kennedy High School was "named after the president who helped promote civil rights, but [the school] was still segregated" (p. 53). Not only was Kennedy all-black and under-resourced, but Kareem related that the school was unofficially divided internally as well, according to different cliques from various sections of New Orleans.

Theme 9

Some of the writers <u>contested negative portrayals of their school</u>, John McDonogh High School, or "John Mac."

Ebony wrote, "People don't know the real John Mac. John Mac isn't all that bad, but when someone does have a fight, the next thing you know the news people are filming the camera trying to make us look bad. Yup, they be putting us on beam when they show us on the news and you know they just tell their side of the story" (2005, p. 41).

Susan, who dreamed of opening her own beauty salon, participated in the cosmetology program at John Mac. Her interview with her teacher Mrs. Richardson was meant to reveal Mrs. Richardson's "story of how she got involved with doing hair and how she started this department that has been such a good opportunity for people at my school" (2009, p. 75).

Daron interviewed his friend Domonique and asked her "The way that people talk about how bad John Mac is, is it really that bad?" To which she replied "No, it's really not that bad. We learn here. Well, I learn and the people who are in my classrooms learn. It's just like everything that happens at John Mac, they're so quick to put it on the news. Any other school, they keep it to themselves" (2009, pp. 111-112).

Theme 10

As the teen writers articulated the object of their book, or the <u>goal they hoped their writing would achieve</u>, they signaled elements of resistance, experimentation, and/or aspirations toward changing the status quo.

Toward the very end of Daron and Pernell's co-written book, Pernell wrote "I don't want to forget the St. Bernard [housing development], but I don't want to be stuck in the past. I'm just trying to find my light at the end of the tunnel—hopefully through school and this book" (2009, p. 180).
Daron wrote about being able to control his own story: "Writing stories, like rapping, became a way of expressing ourselves. The more I wrote, the more I realized we're losing all these people to violence. It really put a shock in our hearts. We didn't want to be the next ones in the newspaper. We didn't want to be a topic in somebody else's story" (2009, p. 3).
The goal of Ashley's book was to include a combination of both good and bad aspects of the housing project in which she grew up. Her goal was also to help readers understand their own situations better. She wrote "Ya know what? If you feel me, figure out your own combination and unlock the world" (2005, p. 8).
Kareem discussed what led him to write: "I had always been fascinated by literature. Growing up, I kept my nose in novels, newspapers, and textbooks because I liked getting to know other people's lives. Walking in the shoes of characters through places, events, and history eased my mind. I realized the influence writing had on an individual's growth and development" (2009, p. 5).

Summary of Themes Across Category 3:

Books written by African American, urban young writers contained the highest number of examples of resistance, as compared to the other two categories of books. The theme that contained the highest number of examples was a cluster that showed ways in which social critique figured prominently within the texts. The books included a theme of literary excellence and intellectualism, which had the effect of contesting narrow

assumptions about the people who played important roles in the lives of the writers.

Finally, a theme in this category of books showed the writers explicitly pushing back

against normative expectations by introducing themselves to readers as "different."

Summary of Findings of Research Question #1.

Findings above reveal a total of twenty-five themes of resistance,

experimentation, aspirations toward changing the status quo, and contesting norms,

across the three categories of data. In Category 1, there were seven themes, and twenty-

six examples of the above; in Category 2, there were eight themes, and twenty-seven

examples from the texts; in Category 3, there were ten themes and thirty-four examples

of resistance, and other features. Issues relating to what it means to be a black male were

present within both Category 2 and 3. The second theme in Category 1 of the subversive

practice of becoming literate was, in a sense, echoed by the fourth theme in Category 2,

which entailed the use of meta-language about reading, writing, and storytelling by

authors of children's and young adult literature. The fifth theme in Category 1—classic

authors taking routes around the traditional publishing process—was also mirrored in

Category 2 (theme 6) and Category 3 (theme 6). Authors in Category 1 who included

folktales and poetry within their books (theme 7) were similar to authors in Category 2

(theme 7) who used primary source documents to enhance their autobiographical

narratives. Authors in Category 3 who devised alternate naming conventions (theme 7)

employed similar practices as authors in Category 1 (theme 4). Lastly, in all three

categories, writers reported the purpose of their writing was an attempt to change the

status quo, and they used social critique toward that end.

STAGE 3 OF DATA ANALYSIS

To address ways in which the activity system within the texts operate, and to form an understanding of how the writers' use of resistance, experimentation, or pushing back against the status quo is represented in the data, I selected three focal texts, analyses of which yielded the following findings. The focal texts used to answer Research Question #2 were *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, by Harriett Jacobs (1861); *Childtimes*, by Eloise Greenfield and Lessie Jones Little (1979); and *Signed, the President*, by Kenneth Phillips (2009). The remaining CHAT analyses for the non-focal books are listed in Appendix C.

Research Question #2: From the standpoint of Cultural-Historical Activity Theory, in what ways does analysis of elements of resistance, experimentation, or aspirations toward changing the status quo help to understand the mediating artifacts in the protagonist's life history? How do aspects of the activity system—including both local and distal level action—relate to how the text is represented?

Intertwining the stories of Harriet, Pattie, Lessie, Eloise, and Kenneth allowed me to view the three books as constructs of different cultural-historical activity systems, while at the same time seeking out what is similar about the stories the books tell. It is remarkable that together, the three books capture the entire breadth of the African American experience in the United States. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* tells Harriet Jacob's story, who was born in 1813 in Edenton, North Carolina, on a plantation, and who eventually—but only after a wretched seven years spent in secrecy in her grandmother's attic—escaped North, and later became free. *Childtimes* is a "three-

generation memoir" which starts with Pattie Frances Ridley Jones (born in 1884) reminiscing about her "childtime," or her childhood, in Parmele, North Carolina—about sixty miles south west of the plantation on which Harriet lived. Lessie Blanche Jones Little, Pattie's daughter, was born in 1906, and lived during the Depression. Lessie gave birth to Eloise Glynn Little Greenfield in 1929, who participated in the Great Migration, eventually moving North to Washington, D.C., and who became a well-loved children's book author. *Signed, the President*, is the story of Kenneth Phillips, who was born close to the year 1990, and who, about seventeen years after his birth, wrote about family life in New Orleans, fun times, and violence. Kenneth's family suffered through Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath, and after being exiled they sought new housing, since the government-funded complex they'd previously called home was slated to be demolished.

On the surface, the grouping of books may seem like an invitation to chronicle the historical, social, and political distance they cover. Yet despite a span of nearly 150 years between the publication of Harriet's and Kenneth's books, there are some tenets that remain the same. The five protagonists keep at the center of their life stories the "problem" of being black in a country that uses institutionalized mechanisms of oppression which have shape-shifted over the decades. As Baldwin wrote, "to be born black in America is an immediate, a mortal challenge" (1972/2007, p. 129), and this notion is relevant to the narratives told by each of the five protagonists of the focal texts. I now wind through my analysis of the activity systems at work within the three texts.

Objects and Reasons for Writing

Harriet Jacob's narrative is perhaps one of the most gripping books I have ever experienced. Her writing is captivating, and because I know her writing tells a story that is true, I found myself humbled that she could have suffered in her "living grave" for as long as she did, in pursuit of her unwavering goal. There is a distinction between the goal of Linda Brent—the name of Harriet's fictional protagonist who depicts Harriet herself—and the goal of Harriet as the writer. To distinguish, the *object* of the book (Harriet's reasons for writing) was continually made clear through many explicit statements: "I have not written my experiences in order to attract attention to myself….But I do earnestly desire to arouse the women of the North to a realizing sense of the condition of two millions of women at the South, still in bondage, suffering what I suffered, and most of them far worse" (p. 2); "I want to add my testimony to that of abler pens to convince the people of the Free States what slavery really is" (p. 2); "I do it to kindle a flame of compassion" (p. 28). However, the goal that Linda pursues through the narrative is freedom for herself and her children. In the doubled personas of Harriet and Linda, and in their paired objects and motives, there may be a version of Signifyin(g) (Gates, 1988) at play here. While Harriet represents a standard, that is, her use of white, abolitionist publishing systems to make her cause known, she has employed "Linda," a persona who thrives in deceit, trickery, and other African American vernacular tropes in order to operate within the narrative. Together, Harriet and the persona of Linda evoke deep responses in readers, as they did in my own case.

Eloise, along with her mother and grandmother, share the same *object* in *Childtimes* (1979). Their goal for writing was to expose "black people struggling, not

just to stay alive, but to live, to give of their talents, whether many or few" (n.p.). They

use their book to show how, "Through all of their pain and grief, and even their mistakes,

black people have kept on going, had some good times, given a lot of love to one another,

and never stopped trying to help their children get on board the freedom train" (n.p.).

Childtimes is a book that I had always been interested in, yet had not fully read until this

study came about. My interest was sparked because of its concept of a "three-generation

memoir" which is unique, and because of the broad stretches of history its characters

witness. Another reason for my interest in the book is that it had been written by Eloise

Greenfield. Her book of poetry *Honey, I Love*, with is sepia-toned illustrations of black

girls with afro puffs, is a prominent childhood memory of mine. I remember when I

discovered a copy of the book in a give-away bin at Scholastic, my first job after college.

I was elated because my original copy had been washed away when Hurricane Katrina's

floodwaters stole my family's first-floor possessions. When I read *Childtimes* cover to

cover, I wondered why I'd waited so long.

    The cover of Kenneth's book shows Kenneth in photographs in four different

poses, dressed in a white shirt, black tie and jacket, stud earrings in both ears, and thick-

framed black glasses used as a prop. I'd read his book once, before this study was carried

out, using a piece of his writing for a class assignment in Critical Discourse Analysis.

What Kenneth aimed to achieve by writing the book, or the *object*, can be explained with

the following: "With no one in the Project it felt like a big responsibility to tell the stories

of what we lost and what we have held onto," referring to the post-Katrina emptiness of

the St. Bernard Project (p. 1). He also wrote "I needed to figure out how to write about

my history, but also what was going on in my life since Katrina. I wasn't sure who I was anymore. I just felt angry" (p. 1). On the verso page opposing the Table of Contents is a full-bleed photograph of a much younger-looking Kenneth than his cover images, standing at a fence alongside the St. Bernard Project. If I read the photograph right, the street that is back-dropped in the photograph is the route I take to my grandmother's home. Her home and the edge of the project are about a block away, although the neighborhoods look distinctively different.

Division of Labor

Kenneth's text has a handful of contributors who have different roles and responsibilities toward achieving the goal of the book. To start, there are the six interview subjects whose voices help tell the story that Kenneth aims to relate. Terrence and Kimani are Kenneth's older and younger brothers, respectively. His two grandmothers are interviewed, as is his aunt Loren, and his mother Lynette. There is also the role that the editors of the book series play, Rachel Breunlin and Abram Himelstein. It is unknown by me the degree of editorial changes that were made by Rachel or Abram. In a section called "NSP Afterword" (for Neighborhood Story Project), it is stated that "Rachel taught interviewing and ethnography—how to de-familiarize yourself with your surroundings and connect your personal stories to the larger cultures of New Orleans. Abram taught writing styles" (p. 111).

While Kenneth's book allows other participants of the activity community to help narrate his story, the three women of *Childtimes* tell their own story, individually. Pattie, Lessie, and Eloise each take on a "part" of the book, which consists of three parts, and

they become the protagonist in their own narrative. Their voices do not intermingle. Jerry Pinkey's black-and-white illustrations of what the lumber mill at Parmele may have looked like also plays a role that works toward the women's reasons for writing. There are also old, black-and-white photographs included in the book that play a similar role. Lastly, it is unknown to me the details of the shared or individual labor that penned the interludes between Part I and Part II, entitled "Landscape," and an opening section entitled "Procession."

Earlier, I theorized about the dual contributions of Harriet and the persona of Linda in reaching the purpose of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. In addition to that, the story was bookended with three white Northern validators of the text. They were the editor Lydia Marie Child, the abolitionist and friend of Harriet's Amy Post, and a "highly respectable colored citizen of Boston" George M. Lowther. Child, Post, and Lowther played a role in adding credibility to Harriet's story, by lending their names and brief opinions to the pages of the book.

Community and Social Positioning

The community that occupied Linda's world was sharply divided between slaves and slave holders. These two groups had conflicting ambitions, opposing values, and dichotomous social rankings. Slaves on the plantation were viewed as "no more, in the sight of their masters, than the cotton they plant, or the horses they tend" (p. 11), according to Harriet. Slave holders were viewed as hypocrites. Within these sharp divides, there were some slaves who obtained higher social rankings than others, and there were some slave holders who also scaled up or down the social scale. Harriet wrote

that "when northerners go to the south" they are proverbially the hardest masters, because they exceed the wrongdoings their southern colleagues practice. Harriet also wrote about the ignorance of some slaves, in particular one who "thought that America was governed by a Queen, to whom the President was subordinate" (p. 40). Harriet had the luxury of being at the very top of social positioning among slaves, because of her fair skin, and her literate practices. Because of this, she was almost never subject to difficult outdoor labor; instead she looked after the children of her master, indoors. Of course, this affordance came with its punishment, as her close proximity to "Dr. Flint" (Harriet's fake name for her master) caused him to take a sexual interest in her. Suffice it to say, simply existing within the *community* as a slave was abysmal, with few perks to be had across any social rankings.

The *community* of *Childtimes* mostly consisted of "kinsfolk" or the relatives shown in the "Family Tree" image that precedes Part I of the book. "Procession" expresses that "we are just three" of the "sisters and brothers and aunts and uncles and nephews and nieces and cousins" who together form a procession that "stretches long and wide" (n.p.).

In *Signed, the President*, Kenneth expressed that he thinks of himself as "The President" sometimes, when he bosses his younger brother. Kenneth believes himself to be at the top position within the *community* of his book's activity system, as evidenced by his statement "I've always said I wanted to be my own boss, and writing a book is sort of like being that—no one is telling you what to say" (p. 1). The autonomy he feels in choosing how the story gets told positions him at the highest level of social positioning,

above other participants, for the most part. There is one moment where his rank may be challenged by the character Aunt Loren. Kenneth's interviews with other characters were largely driven by Kenneth, with an even balance of turn-taking, for the most part. Yet, in Kenneth's interview with Aunt Loren, turn-taking is decreased, and she steers the interview in some places. An example is when Aunt Loren asked/instructed "Can you pause that for a second?" referring to Kenneth's tape recorder, so that she could make a phone call for a quick fact-check on what she'd been talking about. She also coached Kenneth during the interview, saying "The follow-up questions are always anything that you're interested in hearing, or that you think someone else is interested in hearing. You can't be afraid to ask a question…" to which he replied "I can't think of anything right now. I'll just listen" (p. 78). In this example, Kenneth momentarily stepped down from his presidency, allowing Aunt Loren to become a temporary leader of the interview process.

Rules and Norms of Behavior

Pattie, Lessie, and Eloise signaled that the *norms* that guided behavior within the activity system of their text were decided according to gender. Eloise wrote about "Chores," which her mama and grandma also had to do. Eloise wrote about the kind of work that men in her family took up, namely sharecropping, working on the old car, and working odd jobs at stores. Males in Eloise's section of their book were depicted as workers, and family providers. Eloise's daddy went North to "make a way for us," she wrote, "looking for safety, for justice, for freedom, for work, looking for a good job" (pp. 126-127).

In Kenneth's narrative, gender norms were similarly relevant. In fact, *rules* around what men should and shouldn't do, how they should act, and what's "gay" created one of the major tensions in the book. In Kenneth's experience, these *rules* were internalized by many members of his neighborhood, and by some members of his family. Kenneth operates outside the realm of the expected norms, which is a strategy he uses to contest the norm, but which also causes what should be loving relationships to be painful ones. Kenneth wrote that "I've looked at how young men have been loved and nurtured in my community, but also sometimes boxed in by ideas about what men are supposed to be" (p. 1). He also wrote "I hate it when people say you're going to hell if you're gay. I feel like people should be able to love who they want to love….It's hard to find people in my life who are open minded" (p. 99). Kenneth wrote about a falling out he had with his father, who expected his son to adhere to heteronormative ideologies.

The *rules* of Harriet's text included some of the general truths about slavery: "we slave-children…could not expect to be happy. We must be good" (p,.19). The idea of "God's providence" (p. 24) worked throughout the text, to explain why good things happened to certain characters. As far as bad things happening to good characters, this was explained by "cruelty is contagious in uncivilized communities" (p. 42), or by statements simply that there is no end to the depths of cruelty of whites toward blacks in the South. Other *rules* were based in the law, such as, "The reader probably knows that no promise or writing given to a slave is legally binding; for, according to Southern laws, a slave, *being* property, can *hold* no property" (p. 9).

Tools or Means of Obtaining the Object

One of the most fascinating elements of Harriet's book was the way in which *tools* were put to use. Letters were often used as tools throughout the text. After two or three trips to New York to look for Linda, who'd escaped, Dr. Flint became suspicious that Linda was hiding in the vicinity of the plantation. Fearing for her life, Linda asked a friend Peter to purchase a *New York Herald* newspaper for her, so that in her attic she could read it and get some street names and addresses in Boston and New York. Linda then wrote two letters, one to her grandmother, and one to her former master Dr. Flint, under the pretense that she was writing from New York, and living in Boston. She post-dated the letters, and solicited Peter's help in passing the letters North, until they reached New York, where they were to be postmarked and mailed back South. Dr. Flint then also used the letter as a *means* to manipulate, and lie to Linda's grandmother. As Linda stated: "I resolved to match my cunning against his cunning" (p. 106).

Reading and writing was used as a *tool* in other places of the text. Although Linda's son Benny knew how to read, her daughter Ellen did not. When living in Boston, Linda taught Ellen the alphabet, and worked with her a bit before sending her to school, so that she wouldn't be embarrassed.

Pattie used memory as the primary *tool* with which she used to reach the book's goal. In a direct address to readers, she wrote "Yours is now, you're living your childtime right this minute, but I've to go way, way back to remember mine" (p. 7).

In Kenneth's book, *tools* were the six interviews he conducted so that elders could tell the family history he sought to understand, the vignettes Kenneth wrote that helped

him express his feelings on various subjects, as well as photographs that depicted

members of the book's *community* and the St. Bernard Projects.

Subject and Identity Affiliations

Kenneth thought of himself as a smart young man, in terms of the *identity affiliation* that he placed upon himself with the line "I would compare myself to Loren as far as education goes. We both love to read, write, and we both like good conversation" (p. 75).   Yet, although Kenneth identifies himself as smart, and although readers are privy to the nuances of the protagonist's identity, outsiders to the activity system of the book may assign Kenneth the blanket label of being an urban, black adolescent male.

In some places in Harriet's text, Linda is referred to as a mulatto woman, since her father was white, regarding her *identity affiliation*. Also, the father of Linda's children was white, and in one place in the text, Benny and Ellen (the fictitious names of Harriet's children) are referred to as white children. Linda most likely received as an *exchange* for her light skin and "dark hair that inclined to curl; but it can be made straight" (p. 82), less of the physical labor that other slaves endured. Linda served her mistress in the house, and was reminded of that many times by Dr. Flint, in his letters to her, in which he begged her to return South. Her lighter skin might have made her a target for Jenny, a slave who nearly revealed Linda's hiding place in the early days after her escape.

Production, Consumption, Distribution, and Exchange

The far-away forces that influence the protagonists' lives—or the distal-level action—are the focus of this section. The activity system of Kenneth's book provides

opportunities for discussing the *distribution* of people as a consequence of Hurricane

Katrina. The fourteen-day flood that occurred in New Orleans after the breech of a levee

meant to contain neighboring waterways had an indescribably destructive force to both

lives and property. Kenneth tells of escaping through high water with his grandmother

onto an interstate overpass, and waiting there for further assistance. As the reality settled

in that most parts of New Orleans would be uninhabitable for months, while the

destruction was cleared and while services were restored, citizens took up temporary

residence in Houston, Memphis, Atlanta, Baton Rouge, and innumerable other cities

around the country. In the activity system of Kenneth's book, other participants had

similarly been *distributed* and dispersed away from each other during their period of

exile.

The *production* that operated within the activity system of Kenneth's book can

also be discussed in terms of the economic and social forces that put into production the

downturn of the St. Bernard Project, which at one point had been considered a desirable

place to live. At times, Kenneth's reflections about his childhood sound similar to what

Harriet, and others shared, that they didn't know they were poor because of the love and

positivity that permeated their lives—until a particular moment in which they came to see

their reality as outsiders did. A *Times: Special Report* magazine cover entitled

"American Tragedy" that showed Kenneth's relatives negotiating a wheelchair through

high floodwaters was a moment in the text in which outside understandings of what

Kenneth's world was like was given focus. Upon viewing his Aunt Sadie pushing his

great grandma through four feet of water on the cover of a national periodical, his

reaction was that

> I was shocked. My mouth stood open for a couple of minutes. My grandma
>
> started to cry, and she gave her mother a hug. Maybe millions of people saw this
>
> picture and thought it really was an American tragedy. For my family, the
>
> separation during the evacuation was hard, but the bigger tragedies came before
>
> and after the storm,

referring to the violent deaths of loved ones (p. 70).

With the above example, DuBois' (1903/2003) concept of "double-

consciousness" is exemplified, in that Kenneth gained a two-fold perspective of his life—

through the vantage point of his own eyes, *and* through the eyes of "millions of people"

who presumably did not share his cultural understandings. Kenneth's reflections about

the "American Tragedy" image also exemplifies Gates' (1988) theory of Signifyin(g).

The dual meanings embedded within "American Tragedy" speak different truths to

different audiences: Whereas *Times* readers who hail from the dominant culture likely

looked upon the image with pity, it was a moment of joy for Kenneth's family. As well,

whereas the majority of readers likely viewed the hurricane and its aftermath as tragic,

Kenneth had to struggle with "bigger tragedies," such as when his uncle was gunned

down in the street, and other tragedies that were just as horrifying, if not more so, than

the flood.

The lives of Eloise, Lessie, and Pattie, can also be considered to have been

distributed according to the hand of history. The Great Migration led Lessie to Norfolk,

and Eloise to Washington, D.C., when the family lineage was begun in Bertie County, North Carolina. Economic forces were responsible for this, as the lumber mill that once made Parmele a thriving source of commerce, and which had been owned by two white men, eventually shut down, and created a void in the local job market.

Lastly, the distal-level forces that created the life conditions which Harriet endured were colonial traces of slavery, and the capitalist-fueled plantation owners. The *exchange* that occurred within the activity system of Harriet's book, in addition to the benefits of her lighter skin, is that her close ties with white abolitionists acted as a kind of capital which Harriet *exchanged* for the publication and distribution of her book.

Summary of Findings of Research Question #2.

As the findings above show, the data sources of this study, when analyzed from both an up-close and a more distanced perspective, create a deep understanding of autobiographical narratives, and the social factors that operate within them.   Each of the three focal texts are resistant to norms, and are out of compliance with larger social structures: Jacobs (1861) wrote her book in order to appeal to the sensibilities of whites with power to put an end to slavery; Greenfield and Little (1979) contested what a memoir can be by including three narrators; Kenneth's (2009) identity as an urban, black adolescent male necessarily makes his act of authorship a contestation of prevailing norms. The three books link together in a way that considers the culture and history of African Americans as one that is pushed forward, or backward, by each succeeding generation. Further discussion of the historical forces upon the texts, as well as a discussion of the texts as contradictory documents, follows in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5: Discussion

…literature and history are merely stories seeking to help us understand who we are, where we have been, and where we might go. (Lester, 2004, p. 44)

Summary of the Study

Over the course of several months, I read twenty-eight autobiographies by African American writers which I'd previously divided into three categories: classic African American literature, books published for children and/or young adults, and autobiographies written by youth writers who participated in an organized community writing program. I took notes while I read about my responses to the texts, using components of CHAT as themes that guided my thinking. After the reading and note-taking process, I selected three focal texts which I thought would best inform the guiding questions of this study. I analyzed the data in a three-stage process: I wrote an "activity analysis" of the non-focal books using the concepts of cultural-historical activity theory as a methodological guide; I clustered themes within the notes I'd made, in order to address how the writers used resistance within their books; I wrote about activity theory and resistance within the focal texts on a deeper level. Findings were varied and revealed many innovative ways in which resistance was used in the books, including through naming conventions, within the publishing process, and through social critique, to name a few brief examples. These examples are compelling, given the way that interacting with literature across both an aesthetic and efferent stance at once results in social critique *and* personal connections to the literature (Rosenblatt, 1965/1995, 1978/1995, 2005; Lewis, 1998, 2000, 2001), and given the way that what is contained within the covers of a book has the power to generate new ways of thinking about oneself and the world, to refer

back to the *mirrors* and *windows* motif (Bishop, 1990; Galda, 1980; Galda, 1998).

Further discussion of the meaning of this study follows.

Discussion

By engaging in the stories of Equiano, Frederick, Isabella, Harriet, Booker, Zora, W.E.B., Maya, Jimmy, Amiri, Pattie, Lessie, Eloise, Rosa, Ruby, Walter, Julius, Ashley, Geoffrey, Carolyn, Condi, Ebony, Jana, Kesha, Ashley, Daron, Pernell, Susan, Kareem, Kenneth, Arlet, and Sam—(*Ashe*)—I understood that each of their lives was shaped by individual circumstances, and that their idiosyncrasies, skills, family histories, time and place of their birth, and a constellation of other factors, account for the shape and trajectory of their lives. Yet I also saw how the indelible marks of history and cultural patterns show up in their individual stories, and bind them together into a larger narrative. The writer Eudora Welty wrote that in the particular we find the universal (2002), and Julius Lester wrote "That is the paradox: the universality of the stories is revealed if the voice in the stories is specific. The only way to the universal is through the particular" (2004, p. 122). Thus, the unique details and sometimes humdrum happenings within the set of books I read have a greater meaning; together they are greater than the sum of their parts. Yet another paradox that bears significance here is that, despite the above, which can be thought of as a metaphor of the individual stories as twine braided together in sections to form a larger rope (Scarborough, 2001), there were also threads that deviated from the larger, universal, storyline. Some findings from this study did not fit neatly with the others, and so, keeping in mind a jazz-like, improvisational research design, I also

included in this discussion "riffs" or deviant results that did not reconcile themselves with the others.

The genre of autobiography necessarily requires a discussion about projection, or the instance of individuals mapping their own misperceptions, hopes, or fears, that they hold about their own lives in reality onto the story they tell about themselves in print. It is sometimes difficult to see a true mirror image of one's own self, and for various reasons, the image that one interprets can actually be distortions of what is true. Literary theorists refer to this as an "unreliable narrator," defined as "a narrator who, for some reason, cannot or does not fully comprehend the world about him or her and whose conclusions and judgments the reader thus mistrusts" (Murfin & Ray, 1998, p. 413). In autobiography though, unreliable narration is not used by the author as a literary device. Rather, when an autobiographical narrator falsely portrays what his or her own life was like, or others', it is a symptom of the author's humanity. It is impossible to know if Zora was as dexterous as she tells us she was, while she navigated through strange towns and backwoods collecting folklore, or if that description was how Zora hoped other people viewed her. We can expect that some scholars may spend careers fact-checking autobiographical depictions, and while I wrote earlier about literary deception, or authors who swindle readers by lying (Egan, 2011), I am more interested in the projections that happen unknowingly, that both the autobiographer and reader conspire to believe. The effects of these "unknowns" may be negligible or they may be significant; regardless, they require acknowledgement (Ellsworth, 1989). Thus, my earlier discussion about

Ellsworth's framing of the "silence of the unknowable" rang true as I pondered the broader meaning of this study (p. 321).

Historical Viewpoints

The universal truths, and greater significance, that this study reveals are grounded in the history of African Americans in the United States. I first need to historicize the themes that clustered in the findings, and which were the focus of the preceding chapter.

The historical forces of colonization are at the origin of all stories by and about African Americans. Fanon (1952/2008) tells of being unaware of one's colonization, and that the colonized then find it desirable to look, act, and think more and more like the colonizer, when this only leads one more deeply into being oppressed. Fanon's theories can be applied to the texts in the data set, spanning across the three categories. For example, Equiano's (1789/2004) plight of serving as a merchant mariner who crisscrossed the Atlantic dozens of times in his life was engendered by colonization. Colonization was so powerful, in fact, that although he was born and grew up in West Africa, he adopted an identity as a British man by his adulthood. Equiano had bought into the false beliefs about Africans that he was taught by Britons, and in fact agreed to participate in a "humanitarian" program devised by the British to colonize the country of Sierra Leone with Afro-Britons, black Canadians, and West Africans. The perplexing contradiction of this, however, is that Equiano used the opening pages of his own narrative to discuss the cultural practices that his own people adhered to. His opening pages served to humanize his West African countrymen, yet Equiano was led to believe

that other Africans were "uncivilized." The effects of colonization today are evidenced in hegemony, when some autobiographical narrators either pushed back against—or participated in—the social class structures intended to maintain their plight as "oppressed," lower-class, and economically powerless people.

But the historical forces of colonization are not limited to lower-class African Americans, nor to people who view themselves as oppressed, which Equiano did not view himself as oppressed since he no longer had to suffer physical torture as a slave. It extends across the class structure, and the data show two striking examples of this. Condoleeza Rice's father sometimes told her that "The tragedy of slavery had given us the chance to live in the freest and most prosperous country on Earth" (2012, p. 137). Similarly, Washington expressed that "Ever since I have been old enough to think for myself, I have entertained the idea that, notwithstanding the cruel wrongs inflicted upon us, the black man got nearly as much out of slavery as the white man did" (1901, p. 8). These examples reify the theory set forth by Fanon. The statement made by Rice's father presumes that the traces of slavery are now erased, and that there are not currently other legal, institutionalized, and racist mechanisms sanctioned by the government to continue the oppression of African Americans and other groups, an example of which is the condition of public schools, like John Mac, that are allowed to exist in poor neighborhoods.

The statement made by Rice's father, which implies his solidarity with the United States capitalist structure that allowed him to become "prosperous," also hints at the historical causes of the current social and economic gulf that exists between middle-class

and lower-class African Americans. Evidence of the wide gap can be found in the stories

of the teenaged writers, whose families hadn't yet enjoyed prosperity, and many of whom

reported not feeling very free just walking down the street, because their very presence

makes them look suspicious to police. I admit that I am a participant in this cultural

divide: Some of the stories told by the youth writers educated me in certain practices and

beliefs that I had been unaware of. Similarly, the middle-class privileges that I enjoyed

as a youth in New Orleans, such as membership in the so-called black elite social club

Jack and Jill of America, Inc.—the same club to which Carolyn McKinstry's (2011)

four friends killed in the Birmingham church bombing belonged—were presumably also

entirely foreign to the worlds of the New Orleans writers whose parents worked jobs as

hotel maids, or who struggled to get by. I am open to learning how I might productively

resist the perpetuation of this, which to be clear is not an attempt on my part to shun any

of my own investments of privilege, nor the hard-fought successes of the generations that

formed me, but to instead seek ways of reconciling, or bridging, the histories and

collusion of oppression of our people with pathways forward.

While on the topic of the New Orleans writers, it is necessary for me to historicize

other issues. An abundance of working-class and lower-class African American families

in New Orleans rent, rather than own, their home, or (prior to Hurricane Katrina) resided

in public housing. Whereas generations before saw high numbers of working class

African Americans enjoying home ownership, current families largely do not.   The result

is an entrenchment into poverty. Goetz (2013) explained that the current trend in large

urban centers, including New Orleans, is to dismantle and literally demolish public

housing, making way instead for housing more suitable to middle-class dwellers, but leaving too few alternatives for the poor. In his book, Kenneth mourned over the St. Bernard projects which was demolished by the city after Hurricane Katrina, but knew that he had to move forward, not backward.

Along with problems concerning housing, poverty breeds drug culture (or vice versa). The findings that I discussed in the preceding chapter showed the dismantling of an essentialist storyline by the presentation of multiple ways of growing up as the child of a drug-addicted parent. The crack cocaine epidemic tore through Black America in the 1980s. Over time, this resulted in dramatic numbers of African American men filling jail cells, which is discussed by Alexander (2010/2012) as "America's latest caste system" (p. xiii). The crack cocaine epidemic in Black America did not escape my own family. I remember as a teenager watching the six o'clock news, and being utterly startled that the name and picture of a relative who occupied a high-visibility job was plastered across the screen, exposing an addiction that I had known nothing about. The resources and support that my family could lend to help were vastly different from the realities of the youth writers, especially Pernell's, whose grandmother died at the hands of gun violence, ostensibly because of a drug deal (2009).

Lastly, the history of public schooling in New Orleans, including an explanation of how John Mac got to be a low-status school, is pertinent to the findings of this study. New Orleans Public Schools defied the 1954 Supreme Court ruling against "separate but equal" schools and it wasn't until 1960, because of a federal mandate, that the first elementary schools were actually integrated. Ruby Bridges' book (1999) tells this

history, chronicling the year that she and three other African American girls integrated

two elementary schools. White families, in turn, pulled their children from the schools

and moved to the suburbs. Over the course of time, as "white flight" persisted, schools

became segregated once again, as in the example I gave in an earlier chapter of Kareem's

remark about the irony of John F. Kennedy High School being "segregated" (2009). This

history was also discussed by a character in Jana's autobiography (2005), a neighbor

who'd traced the historical reason of why their neighborhood school was unpopular with

and unfit for students.

　　　Next, there are also histories that impact the data set of books published as

children's/young adult literature. The publishing industry was historically controlled by

white, Jewish men, evidence of which is still seen today when viewing the executive

leadership of high caliber children's publishing companies. The middle rungs in the

industry are largely populated by well-educated, white, middle-class females. These are

the arbiters of what children's and young adult books go to press, and eventually fall into

the hands of a young reader. I will not recapitulate information I already provided about

the dearth of books that are by, or which represent, the experiences of African Americans

or other people of color. Instead, it is the history of the industry that I wished to point

out. This collides with my own childhood in the following way: It was important for my

mother to share books with me as a child that featured brown-skinned characters, in order

to support my formation of a positive self-concept. It wasn't until I was much older that I

discovered she had used a crayon to resist the outputs of a publishing industry that did not

include nor represent large numbers of African Americans. My mother had used a brown

crayon to enhance the books' illustrations, making them more reflective of our own family portraits.

To conclude this section on the historical viewpoints relevant to the findings I presented, I give another metaphor: From my vantage point, I understand the history of African Americans as a spiral, made up of the cycles of generations. When I read Booker T. Washington's autobiography (1901), the story of a man born into slavery, but who seeks out an education during Reconstruction, and who eventually becomes a teacher, then a university president, I am in awe of the social distance he traveled in the span of one lifetime. Others traversed a similar path, such as Harriet Jacobs, and Frederick Douglass, and I view all of their lives as the broadest arc on the spiral, because where they ended is far from where they began. Then, there are generations that narrow the spiral, and they trace the same shape as the generation before. A mother who has a high school education and who grew up in a low-income public housing complex and whose child grows up in the same complex and who struggles to graduate from high school is one such example of this. Next, there is a generation, some of whom are friends, family, and acquaintances of mine, who seem to make even fewer strides than had the generation that immediately precedes us in the same number of years. They shorten the distance across the spiral. For some, despite precedents of high achievement, they have been lax with higher education pursuits, or they favor hourly-wage jobs that require few skills. This pattern makes me wonder if we are not reversing the momentum of progress set in motion by historical African American generations.

CHAT: Contradictions

The next section uses CHAT to understand ways in which contradictions operate within the spiral that links the texts in the data set. The three focal texts which were analyzed in Chapter 4 are next discussed in terms of the contradictions that were present either within, or between, activity components.

Eloise (1979) participates in the Great Migration, which is a signal of both change and resistance within the text. Because her family could no longer sustain itself in Parmele, her family sought a different region in which to live. Eloise's father left to "make a way" for the family (p. 126), and this shows that the character of her father displayed a strong sense of agency. Rather than accepting the family's plight that there wasn't enough income, he moved the family North.

Once in her new home of Washington, D.C., Eloise felt that "I lived in a different place, a different Washington…." than the one where the White House was located (p. 145). This feeling was created by segregation, further explained by the following:

> There were a lot of things we couldn't do and places we couldn't go. Washington was a city for white people. But inside that city was another city. It didn't have a name and it wasn't all in one area, but it was where black people lived. (1979, p. 149)

The contradiction here is that although Eloise's family journeyed North for better opportunities, Washington presented new challenges that the family hadn't before faced in Parmele.

The contradictions that existed within the activity system of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* are many, some of which were noted in previous chapters. An additional contradiction lies between two activity components: The *tools* of literacy practices that Linda used, such as letter writing, were in opposition to her *subject* orientation as a slave. Linda used the same literacy practices that were meant to keep her enslaved in order to achieve her *object*, which was freedom for her and her children.

Finally, the role Kenneth plays as "the President" of his book's activity system *community* is at odds with the *identity affiliation* assigned to him by outsiders, that is, his status as an urban, black adolescent male, because this label connotes powerlessness and marginalization by dominant social forces. For some, these two activity elements are incompatible, which is why Kenneth's book is itself an example of resistance to the status quo. His book directly addresses the "mortal danger" of blackness that Baldwin (1972/1997) referred to, and my analysis of it revealed the remote mechanisms that created and which sustain that threat.

Complying to the Norm

Just as the books show resistance, some of them also show characters who gravitate toward negative, unproductive, and harmful behaviors. These are findings that do not fit within other themes of resistance, experimentation, or aspirations toward change.

Some youth writers saw violence as an inevitable part of their lives. Many accepted "hustling" or selling drugs as a kind of part-time (or in some cases full-time) job which good people sometimes turned to in order to earn money. Canada's book (2010)

especially, and Myers' book (2001), provide the perspective of men who once lived by "street codes" but who are no longer bound by the violent rules of the South Bronx and Harlem. This makes Canada's narrative no-less real or gritty, nor does it make Myers' text any less dramatic. Both writers' point is that they are lucky to be alive; when readers become aware of the accomplishments of Canada in his adult life as an education pioneer, and the prominence Myers gained as an award-winning author, it becomes clear that one life is immensely valuable, and can have a positive ripple effect on untold numbers of others. But when I read some of the autobiographies by the young writers, especially Ashley's book (2005), and Pernell's (2009), it is evident that Canada's directives for living a life free of gun violence haven't yet made their way to young people who could benefit from hearing the message. With every young person who feels that being armed is "as natural as breathing," the spiral of our people cinches closer together—it contracts and shuts out growth rather than expands onto new possibilities.

In multiple places in Stage 2 of Data Analysis, findings showed that literacy practices around books and stories had the power of broadening the possibilities available to an autobiographical figure. To return to a theme I referenced earlier, the generative power of stories is real, and can shift the momentum of our spiral toward dramatic progress again. This claim is warranted by the findings, which I will briefly recapitulate: Equiano (1789/2004) used the story of his life as a political plea for the more just treatment of his "sable brethren" among white audiences who held authority (Category 1, theme 1); Hurston (1942) took issue with popular stories being told by and about blacks at the time, and used the format of counter-storytelling to reveal the folly of jokes told at

the expense of blacks (Category 1, theme 6); Lester (2004) posited that books can be used to "remember well the past" so that the future will be handled responsibly by young readers (Category 2, theme 3); Myers (2001) wrote about the years he spent perched in a tree, reading, and how that time allowed him to come to grips with traits about his own self, rather than being carried "far away" by the story (Category 2, theme 4); Daron and Pernell (2009) viewed their joint story as a "light at the end of the tunnel" in what may have been a bleak reality (Category 3, theme 10); and finally, Kareem (2009) discussed that literature contributed to his "growth and development" because he got to live vicariously through characters who were not like him (Category 3, theme 10).

Evidence given above of the power of stories to play active, rather than passive, roles in the lives of individuals is not all of one accord. Just as in every other aspect of this study, there are conflicting truths to be noted. Stories are discussed above as both an object of consumption in addition to an object of production. Above, some consumers and producers of stories noted internal growth as the exchange they received for participating in the literacy act, while others noted externally-motivated goals they achieved as a result of engaging with literature. The findings are untidy, but they are also real, and important.

Limitations

Although I worked diligently to shape this study into a sound piece of scholarship that can be enjoyed and applied across several contexts, there were limitations that were impossible to avoid.

The authors who wrote life narratives that became "classic" African American literature were at the highest rungs of their social ladders. Even those who experienced slavery, such as Jacobs, Washington, Truth, Equiano, and Douglass, benefitted from being literate (or in Truth's case from approximating literacy). They had the resources and the social, economic, and cultural capital, to publish and distribute their autobiographies to a wide readership. Because of this, the first category of data may tell *one* version of how writers within their social strata used resistance, and other versions of resistance which were employed by less well networked writers may be muted by this study. To remedy this, future research endeavors could use oral histories as data sources, which would entail the life stories of those individuals who lacked the purchase needed to document their lives in a book, but who may have contested norms and the status quo in their own way.

By contrast, data in the third category of books may over-represent youth whose families are at the lowest levels of the United States class system. The third category of data does not paint a general picture of African American, urban youth writers, but instead it tells of youth who live in poverty, in some cases deep, generational poverty, *and* who are African American, urban youth writers. The social conditions that were patterns in the third data set included the consequences of poverty, such as the high use of public housing, and two instances of children being assigned to state supervision. The reason this is relevant is that, without the guidance and resources of the writing program staff, their life stories would not have been disseminated in the manner in which they are currently shared with the world. As I stated earlier, the books they published are just a

click away at online book retailers. Had autobiographies from other kinds of African American, urban, youth writers—namely those from middle-class families—been integrated into the data of this study, there may have been alternate uses of resistance that could have been revealed.

Also, had a narrower focus of texts within the category of classic African American literature been applied, rather than the broad set of publishing parameters I used, the data may have revealed more nuanced findings.

I had the benefit of meeting in person three authors of books within the second category of data analysis (Myers, Bridges, and Bryan), and I attended a lecture given by a fourth (Canada). During the summer of 2002, as a component of a fellowship program at Scholastic, I attended a small roundtable with both Myers and Bridges (separately), in which the topic of conversation was their memoir that was at the time recently published. I interacted with Bryan at the Langston Hughes Children's Literature Festival in 2002, and I attended a lecture given by Canada about his life story, in 2010. It is possible that my exposure to the autobiographical figures—beyond my experience of reading their book—may have influenced my thinking about their life story in ways that are unaccounted for within the narratives themselves. This uneven level of exposure to the authors could potentially be viewed as a limitation to this study.

Lastly, there were some autobiographical figures who wrote many consecutive autobiographies, yet I decided to limit the sample to include only one book per figure, which may be perceived as a limitation to this study. For example, I could have read and included findings from all six autobiographies which DuBois wrote, and I could have

done the same for the seven life narratives Angelou wrote, and for the three which

Douglass wrote. It is possible that my choice to select only one book per figure might be

construed as a limitation; however, the overrepresentation of data that would have

resulted might have created an even larger drawback.

Implications for Research

This study was an innovative way to understand, and trouble, the black experience

in the United States, as depicted in a select number of autobiographies by African

American writers from the late 1700s which told of the Middle Passage, to the present-

day, in which teens tell of their triumphs and struggles. Stories from three distinct

populations are at the center of this research inquiry. I also demonstrated how my own

story is inseparable from both the content and process of this endeavor.

The research at hand features an "expansive" view of CHAT as a way of inquiring

into written texts, rather than its use normally to understand change and contradiction

within the actions of live beings. This study also represents a shift in the research to seek

out contradictions and unresolved problems rather than to use research to formulate tidy

resolutions to phenomena. This way is more closely aligned with reality and with the

tendency of human nature to exist within "logical incongruities"—like the presence of a

black boy born in West Virginia but raised in Harlem by a German mother and an

illiterate father, who ditches high school to read canonical novels, and who grows up to

be a prolific writer for young adults.

The approach taken in this study is also culturally sensitive and culturally

specific, references to two of Tillman's (2002) cautions about the proclivity of education

research to clumsily handle cultural elements of the research process, and the trend of current researchers to target broad "populations of color," or "minorities" without being specific about which cultural groups they intend to impact (p. 3).

Implications for Pedagogy

I included in Chapter 1 stark statistics that quantified the cultural "mismatch" between teachers and students in the United States education system. This study may benefit teachers, serving the purpose of educating white, middle-class, mainstream teachers about the indelible role of history on the stories that African Americans tell, helping them to understand, as Lester wrote "who we are, where we have been, and where we might go" (2004, p.44). By focusing on literary demonstrations of resistance, they may begin to appreciate ways in which African American youth embody those same resistant behaviors within classrooms and cultivate new ways of responding to their students (Pyscher & Lozenski, 2013).

Common Core State Standards (CCSS) suggests titles of books according to grade level and topic, and an educator looking to enhance his or her curricula may turn to any of the outstanding twenty-eight book choices this study presents. In fact, educators would be encouraged to look to other sources than CCSS for lists that actually include books for young readers across many levels of intra-cultural diversity, since the current suggestions of books given are only "tokenly" diverse. Also, Mosle (2012) argued for the increased use of narrative nonfiction as instructional material to supplement CCSS-suggested texts, and the book titles provided in this study would be fine complements. Importantly, this study would not only provide a list of outstanding titles to an educator,

but would make explicit *how* the examples of African American autobiographical literature operate internally, how they speak with split tongues to African American and mainstream audiences (Gates, 1988), and how they simultaneously exemplify resistance to the status quo as well as depict hegemonic behavior.

In addition to using the literature within this study, educators have also been presented with a model for cultivating young writers, as in the eleven writers who published their life stories through the Neighborhood Story Project (NSP) community writing program. NSP's structure for teaching young people ethnographic techniques, equipping them with digital cameras and a voice recorder, setting them out to interview loved ones, then having them write the stories they learned for authentic audiences could certainly be replicated. Scholars have documented the use of writing to cultivate critical frames of mind and engagement in urban, African American youth and in other youth of color, especially in non-school-based settings through poetry (Jocson, 2008), play-writing (Winn, 2011; Mahiri & Sablo, 1996), and in what Morrell calls "community-based critical research" (Morrell, 2008; Kinloch, 2010).

The literature within this study has the potential to engage readers who are motivated by books whose characters resemble them, as well as by books whose characters' life experiences are vastly different from their own experiences. Lastly, the cultural and historical focus of this study adds a unique approach that links with educators' curriculum ideas around family history and neighborhood mapping projects in which students trace back through time the cultural histories of their neighborhood,

focusing equally on the activities that are at eye-level and on the remote structural forces that shaped them.

Conclusion

Reading the twenty-eight life stories of this study was a significant undertaking. I hope to never forget them, nor have I thought about my own life story in the same way since. My analysis of resistance within the texts caused me to think about ways in which I comply to norms that it may not be in my best interest to submit to. In addition, this study caused me to think about ways in which the resistance I do display, in some cases, is actually a disservice to me. To conclude, I return to Greenfield and Little's *Childtimes*, with the quote, "Kinsfolk touching across the centuries, walking with one hand clasping the hands of those who have gone before, the other hand reaching back for those who will come after" (1979, n.p.). Once again, Greenfield and Little make space for the past, present, and future, whose stories are told by all of us, in our own words.

Notes

1. My interest in the stories told by the youth writers of the Neighborhood Story

    Project (NSP) began around 2008, when I was working at Scholastic and also

    volunteering as an adult literacy tutor at New York Public Library's Centers for

    Reading and Writing. NSP is located in the 7th ward of New Orleans, La., my

    hometown, and I was lucky to have a co-worker at Scholastic stumble upon one

    of the books and introduce me to the series. There are nine (9) published NSP

    autobiographies by young, African-American writers, who each began their book-

    making process in high school. The first suite of five (5) books was published in

    2005; the second suite of four (4) books came in 2009. More about the program

    will be discussed in Chapter 3. See also the program website,

    www.neighborhoodstoryproject.org.

2.

2010-2011 Total National Enrollment of Elementary and High School Students by Race/Ethnicity

Race/Ethnicity	National Total
White	25,908,529
Hispanic	11,875,401
Black	7,923,962
Asian or Pacific Islander	2,298,639
Two or More Races	1,163,456
American Indian or Alaska Native	607,722
Hawaiian Native/Pacific Islander	198,591

Note: These data were compiled from a NCES output report which tallied students' race/ethnicity by state.

(U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD), "State Nonfiscal Public Elementary/Secondary Education Survey", 2010-11, v.1a. Retrieved January 16, 2013, from http://nces.ed.gov/ccd/elsi/)

3.   The segmentation of activity theories into "generations" is done according to the following: 1st generation—Vygotsky's concept of mediated action; 2nd generation—Leont'ev's activity system; 3rd generation—Engestrom' multiple, interacting activity systems "focused on a partially shared object" (Engestrom, 1996b).

4.   According to Martin (2004, p. 39), the seven objectives of *The Brownies Book Magazine* are as follows:

1. To make colored children realize that being "colored" is a normal beautiful thing;

2. To make them familiar with the history and achievements of the Negro race;

3. To make them know that other colored children have grown into beautiful, useful and famous persons;

4. To teach them a delicate code of honor and action in their relations with white children;

5. To turn their little hurts and resentments into emulation, ambition and love of their own homes and companions;

6. To point out the best amusements and joys and worthwhile things of life;

7. To inspire them to prepare for definite occupations and duties with a broad spirit of sacrifice.

5. "Jazz" is a metaphor which has sometimes been applied to qualitative research (Dance et al., 2010; Dixson, 2005; Oldfather & West, 1994), and I think of this usage as similar to bricolage. The piece by Dance and colleagues envisions a space in which qualitative designs are shaped by Latino, African American, and Ojibwe community research participants' input and reciprocity as much, if not more, than by the academy. Dance and colleagues compare "ethnography as a science" versus ethnography as "jazz-like art" (p. 346), and the latter is based upon acquired wisdom from "cultural intuition."

6. An epilogue to *Childtimes* points out that Pattie Ridley Jones, Greenfield's grandmother, was deceased at the time of publication, but had written a manuscript of life stories. Thus, only Greenfield and her mother (Little) are listed as co-authors on the book's cover, in the three-generation memoir.

7. For added perspective on John McDonogh High School, see *Blackboard Wars*, a television show debuted by Oprah Winfrey's OWN Network, which uses the tagline "One of the most dangerous schools in America." Although I have not personally viewed the show, it is an episodic, hard core reality series, in which the fragile worlds of the students, teachers, and administrators is given harsh light by OWN's cameras. At the time of the taping, the school is in its first year of transitioning from the Orleans Parish Recovery school district to a charter

operation led by a California company. "John Mac" is a low-status school populated by African American students, many of whom live in the same neighborhood as the school. The school has been beleaguered by violence, among many other difficulties.

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Appendix A:
Summaries of Texts

Autobiographies from the Tradition of Classic African American Literature (in

order of publication year):

The Life of Olaudah Equiano: The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah

Equiano, or Gustavas Vassa, the African. Written by Himself **(1789/2004)**

Equiano was kidnapped as a child, along with his sister, from their home in

Guinea, West Africa. Leading up to and during his journey across the Middle Passage,

he often hoped for and expected death, but he survived the journey, as well as several

years of life as a slave in the West Indies.   Equiano also served on various ships that

conducted business in ports around the world, and he became a literate, skilled seamen,

and eventually purchased his freedom. Equiano self-identified as an Englishman, and

became a prominent poet and anti-slavery proponent. The high point of Equiano's life

was his conversion to Christianity, and his invigorated faith in Christ. (406 pp.)

Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass **(1845)**

Born to a white father and a slave mother, of whom he has no strong memory,

Frederick Douglass retells "how a slave was made a man" in his narrative. The book

dwells on opposites, and the contrast between slavery and freedom is of central focus.

Douglass tells the chronology of his life, marked by being sold from one slave master to

another, each with their own evils. Douglass discusses his involvement and leadership in

the abolitionist movement, and critiques the empire of slavery as well as religious

hypocrisy among white men. (76 pp.)

Narrative of Sojourner Truth (1850)

In her third-person autobiographical tale, Sojourner Truth weaves together many vignettes that capture what her early life was like as a slave, and the period after she obtained freedom, which Truth devoted to moralistic causes. Truth was closely involved with the social reform movement, and was a travelling preacher toward this cause. (74 pp.)

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (1861)

In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet Jacobs wrote about herself under the name Linda Brent, to protect her identity upon publication of the book in 1861. In the book, Linda grew up as a mulatto orphan on a plantation in North Carolina, and she served a cruel and perverted master, Mr. Flint. At the age of fifteen, Linda became the subject of harassment and molestation at the hands of Mr. Flint, and his harassment of her never stopped, even when she thought she'd found safety in the North. Linda escaped at the age of twenty-one, hiding in a swamp, under the floorboards and in a storage room of a white friend's home, and eventually, inside a tiny crawl space between the roof and the ceiling of an addition to her grandmother's house, where she lived for almost seven years in secrecy while her two children—unwittingly—played below. Linda eventually escaped to New York, then Boston, and after living as a free woman for several years was nearly entrapped by the Fugitive Slave Law, until her sympathetic white mistress purchased her freedom. (167 pp.)

***Up from Slavery*, by Booker T. Washington (1901)**

The story Booker T. Washington tells in his autobiography spans his life as a slave during childhood to his rise to becoming the leader of Tuskegee Institute. In his youth, the Emancipation Proclamation was declared, and Washington first took up mining, then traveled to the Hampton Institute, where he worked as a janitor before becoming a student, then teacher, there. At Tuskegee, Washington enlisted students to take up a trade in addition to their studies, and he oversaw the construction of the school. Washington traveled the country to solicit donations for the school, and became a sought-after orator. Throughout the text, Washington often takes a conciliatory approach toward whites for their role in slavery, and he draws sharp contrasts between educated and non-educated blacks. (166 pp.)

***Dust Tracks on a Road*, by Zora Neale Hurston (1942)**

Zora Neale Hurston is a folklorist, who chose to write her own life story as a series of meanderings from Eatonville, Fla., to New York City, down to the Caribbean, and beyond. Her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, is marked by Hurston's inventive language (e.g., "I've been in Sorrow's kitchen and licked out all the pots" p. 227) and humor. The book also contains bits of folklore, "Negro songs," and stories that she collected along her travels. (308 pp.)

***The Autobiography of W.E.B. DuBois: A Soliloquy on Viewing My Life from the Last Decade of Its First Century* (1968)**

DuBois' autobiography represents ninety years of his experiences, and acts not only as a chronicle of his long, fecund life as a black intellectual, but also acts as a kind

of encyclopedia of the "race developments throughout the world" (p. 125) and especially

in the United States. The 1968 book is DuBois' fifth installment in his series of

autobiographies; in it he provides great detail on his youth and education, as well as his

leadership of Atlanta University and the NAACP, in addition to his role as an

international advocate for peace, and his lifelong pursuit to understand and forge

solutions to the "Negro problem" in America. (448 pp.)

***I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, by Maya Angelou (1969)**

As the first of several autobiographies by Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird

Sings* tells of Angelou's childhood in Stamps, Arkansas, under the care of her maternal

grandmother, and with her playmate and beloved younger brother, Bailey. She and

Bailey were later sent to live with their mother and paternal grandmother in St. Louis,

which is where Angelou was molested and raped at eight years old by her mother's

boyfriend. Angelou healed from the rape, and the subsequent murder of the rapist, by

becoming mute, believing that her voice had caused the death. The sister and brother

returned to Stamps, where Angelou found solace in books, and her imagination. In her

adolescence—and living once again with her mother now in California—Angelou

experimented with sex and became a mother at age fourteen. (246 pp.)

***No Name in the Street*, by James Baldwin (1972/2007)**

The book is Baldwin's personal testimony about what it was like to live as a black

man in the United States and throughout Europe from the 1940s to the late 1960s. His

narrative is punctuated by the assassinations of Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr.,

Medgar Evers, and Black Panther Bobby Hutton, men who like himself, used their life to

understand—and reconfigure—structural inequality in the United States. Throughout the book, Baldwin discusses his journey as a writer and advocate.   Baldwin uses the book as a forum for both autobiography and political commentary, addressing issues such as race and power. (197 pp.)

The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones, by Amiri Baraka (1984/1997)

In his autobiography, readers are witnesses to the identity transformations undergone by a man born as Everett Leroy Jones, but whose persona becomes Amiri Baraka by the close of the book. Baraka wrote his life story as an exhaustive chronology which includes his childhood in New York and New Jersey, the years he spent at Howard University, his interpretations of classism among African Americans, his life in the Air Force, his "extended adolescence" on the bohemian literary scene in New York City, his role as a founder of the Black Arts movement, and finally his tribulations as a militant Black Nationalist. (465 pp.)

Autobiographies Considered to be Children's/Young Adult Literature (in order of publication year):

Childtimes: A Three-Generation Memoir, by Eloise Greenfield and Lessie Jones Little (1979)

Pattie Ridley Jones lived at the turn of the century, near what became the busy lumber mill town of Parmele, North Carolina. Pattie was the mother of Lessie Jones Little, who grew up when there was only sawdust left behind from the mills that by that time were defunct. Lessie gave birth to Eloise Little Greenfield, who came of age during the Great Depression, and who eventually migrated north to Washington, D.C. The

overlapping stories of the three generations of women in this book are back dropped

against nearly a century of history and change in the United States. (179 pp.)

***Rosa Parks: My Story* (1992)**

In her autobiography, Parks details the many instances throughout her life in

which she refused to comply with racist and prejudiced modes of behavior which white

people expected of her. She grew up in Pine Level, Alabama, and later moved to

Montgomery, where she worked as a seamstress and also as the secretary for the local

NAACP leader. As his secretary, Parks kept detailed records of racist incidents and laws

long before her own path-breaking action against segregation. (192 pp.)

***Through My Eyes*, Ruby Bridges (1999)**

In her memoir, Bridges describes the circumstances surrounding her first-grade

year at William Frantz Elementary School in 1960, a year in which she made history by

integrating the school, at the behest of racist political figures and community members.

The memoir is told partly by those who played a role in her historic integration of the

New Orleans Public School, including her teacher, a child psychiatrist, and others.

Sepia-toned photographs of the time period also help to portray Bridges' brave year in

Through My Eyes. (56 pp.)

***Bad Boy: A Memoir*, by Walter Dean Myers (2001)**

Myers' memoir explores his childhood and teenage years in Harlem, a place he

says was "alive with music…and full of colors and smells that filled my senses and made

my heart beat faster" (p. 7). He was physically active and strong, and he accepted the

title of being a "bad boy" which a teacher gave him. During his coming-of-age years,

Myers tried to understand what it meant to be a man, and wrestled with his deepening appreciation for books and writing, while growing more distant from his financially-strapped parents. (214 pp.)

***On Writing for Children and Other People*, by Julius Lester (2004)**

Lester's contemplative autobiography is his effort to understand who he is, and how he became a writer. Dwelling on the stories of his great-grandfather and great-grandmother, a white German man and an ex-slave, Lester describes the way "Generations abide within us" (p. 56), and Lester makes connections between his great-grandfather's identity as a Jewish prayer leader to his own turn to Judaism. The book is philosophical, and enforces the idea that "story" is not only at the center of his career as a writer, but that stories shape all of our lives, and our pasts, and that there is a duty to shepherd the stories of our ancestors into the future. (159 pp.)

***Ashley Bryan: Words to My Life's Song* (2009)**

Award-winning children's book illustrator Ashley Bryan invites readers to "walk with me on this Maine island where I now live as I tell my story" (p. 2). Readers journey along the shore, and observe the treasures of Cranberry Island through photographs, while at the same time they are treated to the story of Bryan's life as an artist. (58 pp.)

***Fist Stick Knife Gun: A Personal History of Violence*, by Geoffrey Canada (2010)**

Canada's memories of coming-of-age in the South Bronx are rendered in Jamar Nicholas' black and white sequential art in *Fist Stick Knife Gun*. The duo relate an environment in which "the rules," or street codes, meant that young black boys existed in a pecking order of toughness, and subscribed to increasingly more dangerous forms of

violence either for survival or for defending one's reputation. At times in the book,

Canada provides didactic interludes meant to sway new generations away from the

violence that nearly took his life decades ago. (124 pp.)

***While the World Watched: A Birmingham Bombing Survivor Comes of Age During the Civil Rights Movement*, by Carolyn Maull McKinstry (2011)**

McKinstry writes that she was born "halfway in and halfway out" of the most

turbulent times in the struggle for civil rights. The bombing of the Sixteenth Street

Baptist Church—the church in which she grew up and served as a youth leader—opens

the book, and is revealed as the cause for her struggle with depression in adulthood.

Excerpts of primary source documents, including many from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.,

illustrate civic and political reactions to the bombing. McKinstry uses a religious tone in

her narrations of the second half of the book, concluding with statements about the need

to forgive and to seek peace. (320 pp.)

***Condoleeza Rice: A Memoir of My Extraordinary, Ordinary Family and Me* (2012)**

Growing up as an only child in a middle-class black family, Rice was taught at a

young age that she could be anything she wanted to be, even president of the United

States. Although she never reached the rank of president, her book chronicles the

pathway from her childhood in Birmingham, to her years in Denver, where she

completed her senior year in high school and freshman year in college at the same time,

to Stanford as a young professor, and finally to Washington, D.C. as a Soviet policy

advisor to President George H.W. Bush. Rice's close relationship with her parents is the

backdrop of her narrative, and Rice's explanations of the many sacrifices her parents

made in order to support her schooling and extra-curricular activities help readers understand the broader context from which she emerged. (319 pp.)

Autobiographies Written by Young Writers (in order of publication year):

Before and After N. Dorgenois, **by Ebony Bolding (2005)**

Bolding segments her life story according to when her family lived on North Johnson Street, when they moved to N. Dorgenois Street, and then moved to Dumaine Street. Bolding's interviews with neighbors reveal a spectrum of identities, beliefs, and practices. The trend among the interviews is a growing number of white neighbors from "very, very suburban" places (p. 51), some of whom believe that "when you're living in this neighborhood make sure you have bars on your windows and big dogs in your house" (p. 71). Bolding relates positive relationships with her family members, especially her mother, and writes "Most teenagers are not as close to their mother as I am" (p. 15). (75 pp.)

Palmyra Street, **by Jana Dennis (2005)**

Reflecting on the positive upbringing she experienced thanks to a loving and hardworking mother, Dennis wrote "My soul was never hungry, my feet were never bare, my clothes never needed washing, and my family was never homeless" (p. 2). Dennis commented that her family are "backbones for each other," and those close bonds show through Dennis' text, which highlights the time when her family joined an Indian tribe, and the time when her family moved all of their belongings to a new house one block away. *Palmyra Street* also features the eclectic blend of neighbors' backgrounds and livelihoods. (87 pp.)

***What Would the World Be Without Women: Stories from the 9th Ward*, by Waukesha (Kesha) Jackson (2005)**

In her book, Jackson interviews the four women who comprise the Resident Council of her housing development, she interviews a neighbor who talks about her family and how her role in a second line club has grown, and she interviews patrons of a local barroom. The interview of greatest importance in the book is Jackson's conversation with her mother, whom Jackson feels she has been "with and without," because of an addiction. (87 pp.)

***The Combination*, by Ashley Nelson (2005)**

Nelson tells her personal story by using the Lafitte public housing development as the geographic focal point. She "wanted to include stories that showed that Lafitte is a combination of both good and bad" (p. 8). The outcome is a book that celebrates Mardi Gras traditions, and other small joys such as twenty-five cent frozen cups (a sweet treat), as well as a book that discusses ubiquitous violence, police harassment, and codes of behavior in the "hood." (121 pp.)

***Between Piety and Desire*, by Arlet and Sam Wylie (2005)**

Arlet and Sam Wylie co-narrate the story of what it was like to grow up among four other siblings, and other children who were taken in by their parents, in a home in the ninth-ward of New Orleans, on St. Claude Ave. The two take turns interviewing neighbors, buddies, and family friends, each of whom has a unique perspective about what it takes to make it within—or beyond—their block. At many times in the book, Arlet tells about her family being "different" from others because of the unconditional

love she felt from her mother, and her parents' insistence that she and her siblings create fun activities inside of the home (rather than on the block). Sam and Arlet try to understand their Belizean father's contradictory behavior of remaining present within their home, yet being emotionally detached from the family, and abusive toward their mother. (111 pp.)

From My Mother's House of Beauty, by Susan Stephanie Henry (2009)

Reared in Honduras, Henry moved to New Orleans as young teenager. In her book, she remembers the reaction of classmates to her accent, and she remembers learning to answer the question "Where are you from?" by calling out the name of her New Orleans neighborhood rather than by saying _La Ceiba_, the Honduran village she'd just left. A theme in the book is change, since Hurricane Katrina forces Henry's family to transition to life in Houston, before relocating to New Orleans, and since Henry's mother transitions from being reliable and supportive to being unstable due to depression, causing Henry's father to take primary responsibility for her and her brother, when he hadn't done so before. (119 pp.)

Aunt Alice vs. Bob Marley: My Education in New Orleans, by Kareem Kennedy (2009)

Largely raised by his Aunt Alice, Kennedy also credits Bob Marley, Martin Luther King, Jr., and other figures as playing a role in shaping his identity. Kennedy describes his life as a student in New Orleans Public Schools, then in a Houston school during a short exile imposed by Hurricane Katrina, and back to New Orleans where he completed high school and continued on to a community college. Kennedy also writes

about being the victim of a drive-by shooting, his experiences as an AmeriCorps creative writing teacher, and his strained relationship with his mother. (101 pp.)

Signed, the President, by Kenneth Phillips (2009)

Phillips wove together interviews of "six of the people [he's] closest to in the world" with stories he wrote about his own life in *Signed, the President*. His interview subjects were his brothers, his grandmothers, an aunt, and his mother; the transcripts reveal much about Phillips' family history, and his own life story. Topics in the book include Phillips' "anger management problems," gender norms, and losses caused by violence and by Hurricane Katrina. (113 pp.)

Beyond the Bricks, by Daron Crawford and Pernell Russell (2009)

The life stories of Crawford and Russell blend together in *Beyond the Bricks*, a book that shows readers how the projects, also known as "the bricks," are like a "village" in which everybody knows everyone else. Among other family stories, Crawford writes about his mother, who sold drugs to make a living, as her own mother had done before. Crawford also shares highlights like his excitement over getting a job at a fast food restaurant and the formation of his crew, the Fresh Stars, who sported the latest fashion designs at every party. Russell also writes about his crew, Fly Guys, who came up with the hottest dances to New Orleans' local "bounce" music, as well as writing about his skateboarding hobby. Russell declares "I'm not your average black boy. I'm different" (p. 2) and is looking to find a way forward through school and his book (p. 180). (189 pp.)

Appendix B:
Pilot Study

November 20, 2012

Research Question:
Within the focal texts, what are the characteristics of autobiographies/memoirs written by African Americans in the progressive black intellectual tradition, and in the tradition of prison memoirs?

Focal Texts and Descriptions:
hooks, bell. (1996). *Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood*. New York: Henry Holt.
> In a collection of vignettes, hooks paints the story of her life as a child. hooks remembers what it felt like to be black in the racist and segregated South. She remembers the rigid ways girls and boys were taught to enact their gender, and the awkwardness she felt was inescapable. But more than anything, hooks remembers the comfort of books, and how they helped her become who she is.

West, Cornell. (2009). *Brother West: Living and Loving Out Loud, A Memoir*. Carlsbad, CA: SmileyBooks.
> The prolific Cornel West tells his life narrative, which includes his earning historic professorships at Princeton, Yale, Harvard, and Union Theological Seminary, and becoming one of the most recognizable public black intellectuals on the scene. West tells his life story, which has intertwining themes of his deeply rooted belief in Christianity, his appreciation for funky music, and his quest to engender more love in the world on a daily basis.

bandele, asha. (1999). *The Prisoner's Wife: A Memoir*. New York: Washington Square Press.
> The literary tradition of "prison memoir" gets remixed when bandele, a poet and volunteer at a prison, tells of the "love story" between her and a man she met and later married while he was doing a sentence of 20 years to life. In bandele's journey closer to Rashid, she also confronts hidden, painful secrets of her past.

Betts, R. Dwayne. (2008). *A Question of Freedom: A Memoir of Learning, Survival, and Coming of Age in Prison*. New York: Avery.
> Sixteen-year-old honors student Dwayne changed the course of his life when he held a gun for the first time and carjacked a man, with a friend, outside of a DC-area mall. The eight years he spent in prison are chronicled in his book, as is Dwayne's never-ending pursuit of his own education, from a GED, to a graduate degree.

Initial Discussion of Select Themes/Trends Across My Reading Notes:

- memoir vs. fiction vs. nonfiction: Almost all of my focal texts had "memoir" within the subtitle, but the authors took much different story-telling approaches, and this caused me to think about the loose category of "memoir" and why that is so. For example, bell hooks explained in a foreword that her book is "autobiography as truth and myth—as poetic witness" (p. xiv). While this blurring of reality and dreams jibes with my own understanding of *memoir*, I was fascinated with the author's note present in Cornel West's book, which has a subtitle of "Living and Loving Out Loud, A Memoir." The author's note reads: "This is a work of nonfiction. Conversations have been reconstructed to the best of my recollection." West's book seems to me more of an autobiography than a memoir—it details the major events in West's life in sequence, often with factual details like dates, the names of conferences and cities. I am perplexed at why it would have been subtitled *a memoir*, especially given that the author's note characterizes the book as "nonfiction."

- faith & religion: Faith and religion were threaded through each of the books in the pilot study. It became a point of contention between asha and her new husband, it became a new identity for Betts, it was the topic of a few vignettes in hook's book, and for West, faith and religion were central to his life story.

- books & reading: With the exception of *The Prisoner's Wife*, the topic of books and reading was central to the narratives. West wrote that reading was like oxygen for him. For hooks, books made her feel "less alone" and soothed the lingering sadness of her girlhood. Betts reported reading so many books one year he couldn't count them, because they transported him from the tiny cell he occupied for so long.

- moments of transformation: West's calling to life as an academic as a transformative moment; bandele's realization that "the moment your life changes course forever" may not be the dramatic scene that would make for a good story, but could be the tiny, forgotten moments that led to those circumstances in the first place; Bett's statements: He "carved his life into a moment he couldn't escape from" (p. 208)

- being free vs. being unfree: West repeatedly referenced himself as a "free Black man," which may have had both historical (enslavement) and contemporary (incarceration) undertones. West wrote about psychic bondage versus freedom: "So there is a sense in which a wise and courageous person can be free with a life sentence in prison, just as others can be unfree walking the streets of New York City" (p. 89). Several other examples on this topic from Betts, and bandele.

- intertextuality: There were some unexpected moments in which the four texts referenced each other. For example, Betts described recommending *The*

Prisoner's Wife to fellow inmates, who loved the book, but who ultimately concluded that bandele and Rashid's story was a "fairytale" and extremely unlikely to ever happen to them. West made repeated references to the scholarly contributions of bell hooks, especially her thoughts about black feminism, and their impact on his own growth as a broad minded thinker.

- point-of-view: At times in hook's story, she slips between first person and third person to describe the memories of her childhood. She accounts for doing so in her foreword by writing: "We look back as if we are standing at a distance. Examining life retrospectively we are there and not there, watching and watched" (p. xiv-xv). When bandele becomes pregnant, she refers to herself in the plural, *we*. West also occasionally refers to his autobiographical self as *we*.

Further Discussion: In a condensed way, I have described some of the characteristics of autobiographies/memoirs written by African Americans in the progressive black intellectual tradition, and in the tradition of prison memoirs. That is not to suggest that there aren't other issues that have surfaced, or are unresolved. For example, the issue of what books are called memoirs and what that term means is as yet unresolved in my mind.

Significance & Other Insights: What the above characteristics tell us is that the story of the black experience in the United States, according to four people who live it daily, is one that is marked by both a strong resistance to the *status quo*, across several facets, as well as it being one that includes many unifying trends or themes.

By conducting the pilot study with only one Research Question, and four texts, I have witnessed the wealth of data that the texts provide, and it is possible that other data (such as author interviews) would generate an overwhelming amount of information. I also felt that numerical data analysis techniques, such as a Likert scale, were unrealistic in practice, because of the difficulty in ranking aspects of a text, given that one is vastly different from the other.

Appendix C:
Stage 1 of Data Analysis
Analyses of the Autobiographical Activity Systems of Non-Focal Texts

CATEGORY 1

Text: ***The Life of Olaudah Equiano: The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavas Vassa, the African, Written by Himself* (1789)**

Equiano's close relationships with many privileged white men, and his education, likely led him to select an *identity affiliation* of an Englishman rather than a Caribbean (a place he lived in as a slave then traveled to only for business as an adult) or an African (since he was just a child when snatched away by kidnappers to be sold as cargo on a ship). There were many times throughout the narrative that the protagonist referred to "my sable brethren" (p. 33) to represent his solidarity with other slaves who were persecuted in exactly the same ways as he had been. The text contains several examples of Equiano's push to infuse more humanity into slavery; as well, his political appeals to end slavery reveal that the protagonist had a strong *sense of agency*. The protagonist may have believed that he was able to achieve that which he put his mind to, and near the end of the narrative it may be possible that Equiano's faith in Christ afforded him an even stronger sense of agency.

In total, the *object* of the autobiography seems to be to re-purpose the genre of slave narrative into a political proposition. It seems that what the author hopes to gain from writing the story of his life is increased compassion for depraved members of the "sable brethren" and more importantly, political action on the part of lawmakers to outlaw slavery.

The *outcome* of the autobiography is that readers now understand the irony of a black man being "free" during the era of the slave trade. Some examples illustrate this point: First, even though Equiano obtained the forty pounds sterling required to purchase his freedom, he was still at the whim of his ship captain; second, Equiano made it plain that which he would and would not endure as a "free" man "…I would sooner die like a free man, than suffer myself to be scourged by the hands of ruffians, and my blood drawn like a slave" (p. 222).

The ways in which the author achieved the *objects* and *outcomes* of the narrative can be explained by the *means or tools* that are evident throughout the text. For example, becoming literate was a tool used by the protagonist in order to make progress, and to achieve the goal the text was intended to serve. The protagonist's literacy was mentioned in the text many times. Equiano was tutored by Mrs. Guerin in London, a relative of his master, and became skilled at reading and writing by working with her.

The *rules* that shape the autobiography are the racial laws and norms that reigned in the late 18th century in England, and the Americas. Being "free" as a black man did not yield equality to whites, which perhaps Equiano thought it would: "I who had been a slave in the morning, trembling at the will of another, now became my own master, and completely free," which was a description of his thoughts on the day he paid the forty pounds sterling debt (p. 215). Yet, although there was no longer a master over Equiano, he constantly needed to seek the friendship and assistance of white people in order for him to continue his path toward progress. This was a tacit racial norm within the text, that blacks who are free and "good" can sometimes rely on kind white people for aid.

Exchange: Equiano escaped the tortures of some ship masters because of his friendships with well-respected white men. In these cases, he received mercy as a kind of capital for his reputation, an example of which was an instance when a white man tried to flog Equiano unjustly: "I them immediately sent for Dr. Brady, who was known to be an honest and worthy man; and on his coming to my assistance they let me go" (p. 253).

Division of labor: Within the activity system of the text, the author, Olaudah Equiano, does the vast majority of the telling of his narrative. The editor of my copy of the text, Joanna Brooks, also does some telling, such as in the "historical introduction" and in the end-of-chapter notes.

Distribution: There were at least nine editions of the narrative published since the first edition was printed in 1789. The Library of Congress catalog shows 26 different listings that include the title "Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano," published by different publishers, and they contain at least one book in the picturebook format for young readers.

Those who were the *producers* of action within the novel were white political figures, both in the United States and England. It was their decisions that made slave holding legal, which Equiano used his book to protest. *Consumers* of the benefits of the transatlantic slave trade were property owners, for whom Equiano worked.

Text: *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* **(1845)**

The *subject* of the activity system of Douglass' novel is Douglass, who used different names over the course of his life. The protagonist is depicted as a man who is an independent and visionary thinker, who believed he was destined for greatness, and a man who is willing to defend himself against the violence of slave masters, which was unusual. For example, Douglass contested a punishment, saying "If he laid the weight of his hand upon me, it should be blow for blow," (p. 62). The protagonist is also depicted as a man who uses innovative means to make progress; for example, Douglass uses Master Thomas' discarded spelling notebook to learn proper handwriting by copying the words in the margin.

Community members are the various slave masters that tormented Douglass throughout his life. The slave masters each have unique identities, but are all depicted as evil, with varying amounts of intellect, "skill" at being a slaveholder, and different amounts of wealth. Slaves were *community members* as well. Douglass commented about slaves who were "ignorant" for believing that a root could give them safety from a slave master (p. 41). He also referred to one slave who was "wise" (Sandy). Douglass referred to slaves as "brutes," as people who lived in "mental darkness" (p. 49) because they were prohibited from reading, and he called contented slaves "thoughtless," (p. 58) because that was what the slaveholder needed for success.

The primary *motivation* on the part of Douglass was to shift his identity affiliation from being in bondage to being free. Douglass stated that this motivation was inspired by Mr. Auld's refusal to let Mrs. Auld continue to teach him to read—he gathered that

because Mr. Auld was so vehemently opposed to it that it must be important, and a key to freedom. About this seed for his motivation, he wrote "These words [Mr. Auld's objections] sank deep into my heart, stirred up sentiments within… and called into existence an entirely new train of thought… From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom," (p. 20). At many times throughout the novel, Douglass wrote about his "increased desire to be free" (p. 58) as a motivator for planning his escape to freedom, and it is possible that his reason for teaching other slaves to read was his way of also leading them to want to be free, and giving them the *means*.

The *values* that the protagonist cultivates in the novel include a strong sense of self-preservation, in a setting in which the life of a black slave was considered disposable.

A motto that Douglass lived by, and which might be considered a *rule* throughout the novel is "Trust no one!" (p. 64). Another *rule* that governed the activity system of the novel is that slavery is designed to dehumanize, and make men "brutes" but that slavery is also an escapable system, and one that can be dismantled, which was Douglass' aim.

The *object* of Douglass' narrative was (according to the Dover edition editors) to prove to whites that his eloquence with language is not a fraud. According to the editors, the point of the book was to disprove whites who believed that Douglass wasn't skilled enough with language to tell his own life story. Another object was also to "[throw] light on the American slave system, and [hasten] the glad day of deliverance to the millions of my brethren in bonds" (p. 76).

Douglass was aware that those who might *consume* his story could be in a position to do harm to those who still serve slave masters—he displayed his awareness of this by omitting the names of some of the characters, and broadly describing their locations, for their own protection. He was aware that his book might be *consumed* by pro-slavery whites, anti-slavery whites, and by free and enslaved blacks. Because of this broad readership, he wrote that he deems "it proper to make known my intention not to state all the facts connected to the transaction [of becoming free]" because "such a statement would most undoubtedly induce greater vigilance on the part of slaveholders than has existed heretofore among them; which would, of course, be the means of guarding a door whereby some dear brother bondsman might escape his galling chains" (p. 59). This broad base of *consumers* of his text seems to have caused Douglass to omit pivotal moments of his life history.

The *outcome* of the text may be Douglass' establishment as a qualified (and eloquent) writer of his own life story in the eyes of whites who'd doubted him. The *outcome* may also be inspiration on the part of blacks still serving masters, and an understanding of how to also obtain freedom. The text's *outcome* is an increased understanding among whites of the horrors of slavery.

Text: *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* **(1850)**

The element of *production* is an important one concerning the activity system of Truth's book (1850). Truth did not write the novel herself, but rather, she told her story to Olive Gilbert, a white abolitionist friend, because Truth lack reading and writing skills, but nonetheless excelled at oral literacy. The book breaks typical norms of what constitutes autobiography, because of the unique manner in which it was *produced*.

Truth is the *subject* of the activity system of her text, which was written in third person. Her name shifts from Isabella Bomfree to Sojourner Truth early in the book. Truth viewed herself as superior to others, because of her steadfast commitment to abolitionism and moral teachings. For example, Truth remarked, "For few, perhaps, have ever possessed the power and inclination, in the same degree, at one and the same time, to labor as [Truth] has done, both day and night, for so long a period of time," (p. 74). She also viewed herself as occupying the identity affiliations of being a mother, a humorist, and a traveling preacher.

The *goal* of Truth's autobiography was to use her life experiences to further the cause of abolitionism. She achieved this by creating a narrative which is written as a several vignettes with short explanatory titles (e.g., "It is often darkest before dawn") to highlight various scenes and injustices in her life story. As a *tool*, Truth uses language that likens the treatment of blacks to "beasts": "…that gigantic inconsistency, that inherited has it among slaveholders, of expecting a willing and intelligent obedience from the slave, because he is a MAN—at the same time…. he is considered to be little more or little less than a beast" (p. 2).

In the activity system, *division of labor* exists in that Truth and Gilbert share the role of author. Truth used orality to tell her story, and Gilbert used writing technologies to tell Truth's story.

Text: Up from Slavery, by Booker T. Washington (1901)

Subject: Over the course of his autobiography, Washington (1901) holds various subject positions. He was born a slave, then was free after Reconstruction, worked as a miner, took on the role of student, then teacher, and eventually played the role of a university president, then politician. Washington describes the origins of his passion for schooling: "The picture of several dozen boys and girls in a schoolroom engaged in study made a deep impression upon me, and I had the feeling that to get into a schoolhouse and study in this way would be about the same as getting into paradise" (p. 4).

Object: Washington related that the *object* of his writing is to join the ranks of other men who'd left a record of their lives for posterity. He wrote, "Years ago I resolved that because I had no ancestry myself I would leave a record of which my children would be proud and which might encourage them to still higher effort" (p. 17). The *object* of his autobiography is also to chronicle his rocky pathway toward success. An aphorism which Washington included in his book typifies this: "Success is not defined by position reached, but by obstacles overcome" (p. 19).

Tools: Among his recounting of history, Washington's placement of primary source documents, such as the transcripts of his speeches, newspaper reports, and correspondence, within his autobiography serves as a *tool* toward achieving the book's *object.*

Division of Labor: Washington is the primary character who works toward achieving the books' object.

Rules: Washington made several references to "Providence" in order to account for circumstances, and this acts as a *rule* within the text. "Providence" as a *rule* implies that God's will is ultimately in control and there is little that man actually does to control his fate. This can be contrasted, however, with Washington's directives to blacks to "cast down your bucket where you are" (p. 106), imploring blacks to stop making excuses for their current condition and to take charge of their own economic future.

Text: *Dust Tracks on a Road*, by Zora Neale Hurston (1942)

One of Zora's strongest *tools* toward achieving her goal through the text was language, especially similes and metaphors. Zora used these structures throughout her writing at every turn such as, "I felt as timid as an egg without a shell" (p. 154), and "He was dragging around like a stepped-on worm" (p. 98). However, these expressive examples of language were not only used as a method of narrating the events of her life story, they also comprised the content of her life itself. There were several examples in the text, in which imaginative uses of language were the main event of the episodes of her life. One example is an episode in which Zora carried out an imaginary love affair with the president of her school in Jacksonville.

Identity affiliation: Zora viewed herself as smart, and as a tomboy, which made her different from how she felt others wanted her to act. She espoused different identities in different places. For example, Zora was self-aware of her "carefully accented Barnardese" during her early research endeavors, and of how this stiff use of language yielded minuscule results, such as when she asked, "Pardon me, but do you know any folk tales or folk songs?" (p. 144). It positioned her as an outsider to the cultures she wanted to understand in her anthropological work.

As I read *Dust Tracks on a Road*, I felt as if the narrator had the *object* of entertaining readers with the anthropological "data" that she'd collected on different groups, like Polk County, and on those characters that strongly influenced her as a young person. In many ways it seemed as if she'd been training as an "anthropologist" while quietly observing lewd joked told on "the porch" in front of Joe Clarke's store. She

collected stories for all of her life, even taking care to make the event of her birth an entertaining spectacle.

Zora's life as reported in her autobiography did not follow the typical *rules* or conventions for a black woman living in the United States at the time of her writing. For example, racism has a negligible presence in the events of her life story. Maya Angelou, who wrote the foreword to my edition of the book, raised the concern that "Hurston, who claimed to have been born in 1901, but whose records show her birth year was a decade earlier, most certainly lived through the race riots and other atrocities of her time. However, she does not mention even one unpleasant racial incident in *Dust Tracks on a Road*" (p. x). Almost as if Zora anticipated some of this line of critique, she wrote: "I have no lurid tales to tell or racial discrimination at Barnard" (p. 139). She seems to both acknowledge and dismiss whatever *rules* were set in place for her as a black woman in the south.

Humor may have yielded an *exchange* for social positioning. For example, when being questioned about her age by Miss M, she laughed along with (and possibly at) the young white woman, and was given the job as a result. Within the activity element of *exchange*, Zora's commentary about capitalism is relevant. While she worked as a manicurist in a black-owned barbershop in DC which had a white clientele, a black man entered the shop and asked for a haircut, to which the owner denied his request. Zora said that she'd also hoped the man would leave, for fear of the whites in the barbershop refusing to patronize the shop if the black man were given service. She waffled about the moment being "righteous" while at the same time it could have threatened her livelihood.

In the end, she concluded that "There is always something fiendish and loathsome about a person who threatens to deprive you of your way of making a living" (p. 136).

I sensed a turn in the book midway through, when the jokes and bits of folklore that Zora presents are no longer meant to "entertain" readers as much as they are meant to foster introspection. For example, she wrote about being "confused" by jokes that used the character of a stupid monkey to represent Negroes: "Weren't Negroes the smartest people on earth, or something like that?" (p. 182).

Dust Tracks on a Road shows a protagonist who both evades and critiques *rules* about race in society. Its *object* of entertainment, toward the end, takes on the tone of social critique, and Zora exposes the hegemony that she sees around her through "jokes" and the same expressive and imaginative language she used to relate the events of her life as a youth.

Text: *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, by Maya Angelou (1969)

Angelou steers the activity system of her autobiography by recounting childhood memories in vivid detail. The memories that revolved around her muteness, during which time she felt she "had to achieve perfect personal silence" (p. 73) are related with as much candor as Angelou's memories working at her grandmother's store in Stamps, Arkansas. The *object* of Angelou's book is to tell the story of her formative years, years that were not smooth, but which nevertheless helped to shape Angelou into the prolific figure that she grew into.

Community members of Angelou's book include her grandmother, her uncle, her mother, her brother and best friend Bailey, and her mother's boyfriend, among other characters. These community members help the reader understand Angelou's character with more depth through the stories Angelou tells about her experiences with and her perceptions of the characters. Yet Angelou always remains the community member who carries the largest share of labor toward achieving the book's object.

Tools used by the protagonist to achieve the book's object include the use of descriptive vignettes, such as Angelou's series of lies and false personas she employed to get her first job as a trolley conductor in San Francisco. A *rule* which Angelou points out within the text is "Life is going to give you just what you put into it. Put your whole heart in everything you do, and pray, then you wait" (p. 228). The book is sprinkled with similar precepts, which Angelou uses to punctuate the drama of her young life.

Text: *The Autobiography of W.E.B. DuBois: A Soliloquy on Viewing My Life from the Last Decade of Its First Century* (1969)

The *object* of DuBois' text is clearly articulated after his assertions about his belief in communism, and his thinking that "private ownership of capital and free enterprise are leading the world to disaster" (1969, p. 57). DuBois wrote that, although posterity will make the final answer, his purpose for writing his "Soliloquy" was to contribute to the understanding of "What has been my life and work and of what meaning to mankind?" (p. 58). After this assertion about his goal for writing, the next chapter begins, "I was born by a golden river and in the shadow of two great hills" (p. 61), and from this point, I understood that DuBois intended for the book to cover the granular aspects of his life—not only the moments which caused him to ascend to becoming a leader of African Americans in the mid-twentieth century.

The *subject* of the activity system of the text was DuBois, who wrote about the evolution of his identity affiliations once he left his childhood home in Massachusetts, and enrolled in Fisk University—in the south, which had entirely different racial norms than in the north: "A new loyalty and allegiance replaced my Americanism: henceforward I was a Negro" (1969, p. 108). DuBois was indeed a Negro, and became known as a prominent leader of African Americans, and a champion of race causes. He also discussed more shifts in his identity affiliation after his tenure as the president of the NAACP, during which time he felt the tensions between his past identity as president, and his new role as a consultant to the NAACP. Because he no longer maintained his past identity affiliation, he grappled with having to accept a new role, after the climax of his career had passed.

DuBois achieved the *object* of the text by using the *tool* of "Soliloquy." To explain, the literary work which DuBois presents to readers is 448 pages of his own reflections, achievements, childhood memories, political positions, race theories, research agendas, and so on. The activity system was *produced* by DuBois' meandering writings about all of the nearly ninety years of his life. As well, the autobiographical figure was himself shaped into the persona of a prominent race leader by his schooling. To illustrate this, the author reflected that "my excellent public school training landed me in the sophomore class, an unheard of thing, especially for a lad of 17 when my college mates averaged five to ten years older" (p. 108).

A contradiction exists within the activity system of the text, which is the competing goals of DuBois' persona as a public figure and his private, family persona. He wrote, "But my main work was out in the world and not at home" (p. 281), regarding the difficulties he faced between marriage and his intellectual pursuits.

Division of labor within this activity system is represented by DuBois bearing all of the work in achieving the *object* of the text. His choice to use the word "Soliloquy," for example, underscores the fact that he viewed the text as an independently-produced artifact, and not a shared endeavor. As a result, the c*ommunity* of the activity system is minimal. DuBois and the book publisher were the primary community members, while canonical poets, excerpts of whose poems DuBois occasionally included, can also be viewed as community members of the activity system of the text.

Finally, DuBois is careful to highlight the extraordinary *distribution* that his intellectual endeavors yielded. He pointed out that "Fifteen times I have crossed the

Atlantic and once the Pacific. I have seen the world" (p. 53). His litany of sociological

research concerning the Philadelphia Negro, and the adoption of resulting ideas, also

speak to the enormous influence of DuBois' efforts, across a broad *distribution*.

Text: *No Name in the Street*, by James Baldwin (1972)

Baldwin (1972) is a complex *subject* in his autobiography *No Name in the Street*.
He refused to accept the identity affiliation of being an "American," because to do so
would imply citizenship and rights and protections under the law, which he feels are
denied to him as a black man. Baldwin characterizes himself as being informed among
the uninformed, being misunderstood by the media and by the public, and as being
famous, but also normal.

The *object* of his book, and of his life's work, is to de-colonize the black man in
the United States. Baldwin achieves this by using various *tools*, including historicity, and
syllogisms. Specifically, he gives historical perspectives about race in the United States
and in the world, speaking for example about the "lie" of the "pretended humanism" of
Western nations (p. 85). He also imparts his own logic to readers, in an effort to
convince them of their current colonization, such as his descriptions of he and his then-
girlfriend, who was white, taking separate pathways and riding on separate subway cars
to the same party, to evade harassment by police, although the streets on which they
walked were "the streets of the free and the brave" (p.108).

The *community* which exists in the activity system of *No Name in the Street*
consists of Baldwin the protagonist, and his publisher. The *community* of the text also
includes the opposing abstract entities of the "subdued" and "the subduer," whom
Baldwin both sympathizes with and reviles. Baldwin especially chastises characters who
are not aware that they are a part of the "subdued" group, and who participate in ensuring
their place among the "subdued" is unchanged.

The *rules* that govern the activity system of the book have to do with power structures that have historical lineages. For example, Baldwin wrote, "It is power, not justice, which keeps rearranging the map" (p. 44). He also wrote that "When power translates itself into tyranny, it means that the principles on which that power depended, and which were its justification, are bankrupt" (p. 89). Baldwin uses power as a proxy for understanding race, and the plight of the black man in the United States.

The *division of labor* within the text's activity system is such that Baldwin bears the primary responsibility of reaching the goal of de-colonizing the black man in the United States. As previously stated, Baldwin gives strong commentary against other black characters in the book who do not also share his interest in understanding or exposing the dynamics between the "subdued" and "the subduer," as in the instance in which Baldwin became angry at a childhood friend who was satisfied at his career as a mailman, or his disgust at the sight of a black man who happily strode into a segregated restaurant's section for blacks.

Aspects of *production* include the fruits of Baldwin's career, including numerous books, plays, lectures, consultancies on movies, and so on. The protagonist *produced* these artifacts in his effort to achieve the *object* of both the book and his life.

The protagonist comments on the aspect of *exchange*, suggesting that "People pay for what they do, and still more, for what they have allowed themselves to become" (p. 55). The use of the word "pay" implies the presence of a consequence for one's actions, or a karmic way of thinking.

Individuals who *consumed* Baldwin's products viewed him to be an "integrationist." Finally, *distribution* was evident in the broad dispersion of claims Baldwin made about race and power, in the United States, in Paris, and in other parts of the world to which he travelled.

Text: The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones, by Amiri Baraka (1984/1997)

Object: Baraka's autobiography is written from a 20,000-feet perspective. He seeks to understand how "the whys of any life propel it, the hows it forms and means, we want to know why we got to here, why we was here…" (p. 15). Baraka intended to make clear how "Childhood is like a mist in so many ways. A mist in which a you is moving to become another you" (p. 23), as well as to make clear how his adult life was molded into what it turned out to be.

Tools: The *tools* employed within the text include experimental language (e.g., "as this book out and *inlines,*" p. xii, my emphasis) and some poetry and language play in the early pages of the book (e.g., "we were not laid back, we were held back. Black," p. 16). Other *tools* used were exhaustive recounting of the events of Baraka's life, from his childhood to his emergence as a leader of the Black Arts Movement.

Division of Labor: A note from the publisher gives insight into the division of labor of my edition of the book. The note expresses that a previous edition was published with several omissions and revisions which Baraka had not agreed to, and that my edition of the book was published in its entirety, without having been edited. This note suggests that Baraka—almost single handedly—bore the responsibility of reaching the object of the book.

Rules: Baraka frequently referenced what he called a "black brown yellow white phenomenon" (p. 99)—or put differently, class dynamics within the black community. Baraka sensed this class differential most acutely at Howard University, and was always

attuned to this un-spoken "rule" of life within the black community, that is, a hierarchy

among blacks according to skin color, which was commonly used as a proxy for class.

CATEGORY 2

Text: *Rosa Parks: My Story* (1992)

Parks' text (1992) constantly brings in an analysis of broader-level action which orchestrates the activity system. Because she lived in Pine Level, Alabama, during a time in which there were no "civil rights" (p. 29), she developed a keen awareness of problems concerning race, and a growing intolerance to being treated like a second-class citizen by peers or by figures of authority. She wrote, "By the time I was six, I was old enough to realize that we were actually not free" (p. 30). This information contradicts popular versions of Parks' persona as a woman who mindlessly sat down on a bus one December afternoon, and happened to spark a social movement as a result. Throughout her text, Parks maintains an awareness of how she views her own life story, and how others have been taught to understand her story. Because of this conflict, the *object* of Parks' book is to portray her own life story in her own words. Parks is the *subject* of activity system, because she propels the books action forward.

The *tools* used were photographs that depicted the time frame and her loved ones. As well, Parks' reflections about the past, with the benefit of the distance that time creates, were *tools* that worked to achieve the *object* of telling Park's story in her own words.

The books' *community* consisted of Parks, her co-writer Jim Haskins, and the publisher. The *division of labor* between Parks and Haskins is unknown by me, but it is certain that Parks enjoys a higher positioning within the activity system than any of the other community members or book characters.

Text: *Through My Eyes*, by Ruby Bridges (1999)

Bridges' memoir *Through My Eyes* (1999) sheds light on the year she integrated William Frantz Elementary School in New Orleans. Her year as a 1st grader is depicted in the illustrated book which Ruby, the *subject* of the activity system, narrates from her perspective as an adult. Ruby describes her own identity as a child, spending the summer in Mississippi with her grandparents while her parents stayed behind in New Orleans. At that time, she recounted that she was "happier than at any other time of my life" (p. 6). During her first grade year, Ruby describes her position as a *subject* who was unaware that the turmoil that swirled around her had to do with racism.

The *object* of the book is clearly stated by Ruby in the preface of her book: "By writing this book, I recall how integration looked to me then, when I was six and limited to my own small world. However, as an adult, I wanted to fill in some of the blanks about what was a serious racial crisis in the American South" (p. 5). The *object* is achieved through a varied set of *community members* who triangulate Ruby's narrations by also giving their own perspectives about the role that Ruby played in integrating Frantz school, and adding context about the significance of the act. These *community members* include Harry Belafonte, Ruby's teacher, John Steinbeck, and Dr. Robert Coles, among others. Together, they support the goal that Ruby chose for her book. *Division of labor* among the community members is de-centered, in that Ruby's narrations are almost always complemented by other community members' reflections on the same page, or excerpts from primary source documents.

Tools within the activity system include sepia-toned photographs of Ruby's childhood, and the settings of her school and New Orleans. Photographs that depicted angry crowds outside of her school, while young Ruby was escorted by federal marshals, is one such example of a *tool* that was employed. Excerpts from primary sources, such as the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* newspaper, were also used as tools to help portray the issues of integration and racism during that historical time.

Text: *Bad Boy: A Memoir*, by Walter Dean Myers (2001)

Myers (2001) reflected that as a teenager he "had never sat down and said 'Let me think about being black,'" (p. 179). He rejected his identity as a black person, and—not taking up an identity as a white person—decided instead to "identify myself as an intellectual," believing momentarily that race didn't matter (p. 179). However, this subject positioning was temporary, as was his momentary identity affiliation as a Harlem thug. The more permanent role of Myers as a writer, reader, and as a person who thrives pondering ideas about the world, was only beginning to take shape within the memoir that chronicles Myers' life as a teenager.

The *object* he attempts to pursue with the book is to use his experiences as a young person as a model for contemporary young readers. Myers is explicit about pointing out the bad choices he made, and tries his best to explain how he came to be known as a "bad boy" by a teacher—a title which he accepted during those years. But Myers also takes care to discuss his blossoming literary imagination in great detail, possibly to hold up his first experiences with writing in a journal, or reading canonical literature on his own, as a model for other young readers who are looking for "mirrors" of other African Americans whose lifeblood is reading, writing, and imagining.

A *tool* which Myers uses is humor, in order to add levity to dramatic scenes, and perhaps also to endear his character to contemporary young readers who might view him as more authentic after reading descriptions of his classmate's "little snot bubbles" which expanded and contracted with his breathing (p. 30).

History and culture figure prominently within the memoir. The book begins with the line "Each of us is born with a history already in place" (2001, p. 1), which prefaces Myers' thorough overview of his family tree early in the book. At many instances throughout the book, Myers seems to reflect that his future has already been outlined for him, and that surely he'd get a job that required physical labor, since every other working black man in Harlem had a job like that, almost always pushing garment racks in midtown Manhattan. Yet, in a sense, Myers obviates the "history already in place" for him, and escapes the fate of becoming a laborer by pursuing the precarious path of becoming an intellectual.

Text: *On Writing for Children and Other* People, by Julius Lester (2004)

Lester (2004) identifies the *object* or goal of his book, which is that "We need to share our stories because in so doing we hope to be understood, and being understood we are no longer so alone," which is on the back dust jacket of his book. The novel clearly details Lester's quest not to be "so alone," in that he searches endlessly for the grave of his paternal great-grandfather, Adolph, who was a white German man, to whom Lester feels a very strong spiritual connection. An additional *object* of the book is Lester's pursuit to understand "how and why I became a writer" (p. 16).

The *rules* which Lester identifies include the need to remember one's ancestors, or as he puts it, to shepherd the bones of one's lineage into the future. Lester posits that stories are necessary and impactful ways in which one can shepherd "the bones," and that we are "comprised of stories" (p. 73). Lester repeatedly references these two dictums, which govern the structure of his text.

Regarding the *subject* of the activity system, Lester portrays himself as simultaneously occupying contradictory identity affiliations. He is African American, yet he converted to Judaism as an adult, and became a prayer leader at his temple. His father, however, is a Christian minister, and Lester grew up as a Christian. The author is aware of these conflicting identity affiliations.

The *community* of the text consists of Lester as the writer. Other characters, such as various publishers and book editors, and characters within Lester's family tree, also contribute to the text. Although Lester discusses his willingness to let editors shape his work, Lester maintains dominance within the *division of labor* activity element.

The *tools* used within the book include various historical images that depict landscapes such as cotton fields, or Central American children. This may relate to Lester's assertion that he wants to "learn to see" (p. 15) rather than only looking at things. This may explain the inclusion of the images within the text.

Text: *Ashley Bryan: Words to My Life's Song*, with photographs by Bill McGuinness (2009)

Viewing *Ashley Bryan: Words to My Life's Song* as an artifact of a cultural-historical activity system results in a variety of insights which follow. First, the *subject* of the activity system is Ashley Bryan, the lean, gray-haired, impressively productive, children's book illustrator who is both the protagonist, narrator, and illustrator, of the book. Though other participants are involved in the activity system, the story follows the arc of Bryan's life, and is told by him. Other participants of the activity *community* created by the book are the photographer Bill McGuinness, whose panoramas and close-up shots of Cranberry Island, Maine, feature the horizon, the curve of the coastline, low-lying clouds, a foggy pond, and other scenes from the island. McGuinness is credited for his work on the title page, copyright page, on a page entitled "Notes on the images," and on the inside back flap of the dustjacket. Readers are also participants of the activity community. They are indirectly welcomed into the book by Bryan in the second opening of the book by the line "Walk with me on this Maine island where I now live as I tell my story" (p. 2). Readers are addressed directly in the second to last opening of the book with the line, "It's evening. I've enjoyed walking the island with you, telling my story…." (p. 55).   The publisher of the book, which includes the role of the editor who wrote the copy of the front inside flap, as well, is a participant that factors into the activity system. Finally the back dust jacket includes several more participants into the activity community of the autobiography: nine prominent children's book authors and illustrators lavish praise on the book and on Bryan, and the impact the nine statements have is to validate the book as being good enough to buy, or read.

The *rules* of the activity system included the blending of different formats to tell a story. This can be seen in the combination of text and art that together make the book greater than the sum of its parts. As well, the book operates by blending aurality and lyrics, which is reflected in the title. Bryan stated that

> To get the spirit of the oral tradition for my writing, I practiced reading aloud from the Black American poets… I then retold the African tales using the good ideas from poetry in my writing. I hoped this would open the ear to the sound of the voice in the printed word, so that even when reading my stories silently, readers would hear the voice of a storyteller. (p. 49)

The historical antecedents of what Bryan is suggesting is the oral tradition within the African American culture.

The *object* Bryan sets forth to achieve through the literary work is to tell how he became an artist. He does this by using the *tools* of photographs, illustration, and storytelling—which he roots in the sound of the language first—all of which shape the book, a colorful and lively portrayal of his life story.

Text: *Fist Stick Knife Gun: A Personal History of Violence*, **by Geoffrey Canada, illustrations by Jamar Nicholas (2010)**

The graphic novel version of Canada's memoir operates with the *object* of reducing gun violence among urban youth in the United States. To this end, Canada included an epilogue to the book, which states "Today there are many young people around this country who have known nothing but war and studied hard. It's time to do something while we still have time" (p. 118), which is a riff on the spiritual "Ain't gonna study war no more."

Community members within the activity system of Canada's book include the protagonist, Canada, as a youth living in the South Bronx, who is the *subject* of the book. Additional members of the activity *community* are the illustrator Jamar Nicholas, and the book's publisher. They each appear to share the goal of reducing gun violence with the book. Although it is Canada's memoir on which the graphic novel is based, Nicholas plays the larger role in achieving the goal of the book, because of his illustrations. That is to say, *division of labor* is not evenly balanced in the book, instead, the illustrator takes up the larger share of work rather than the autobiographical figure himself.

The protagonist makes a point to simultaneously expose the *rules* of life as an African American teenager in the South Bronx—or the "pecking order" (p. 39) of violence as he called it—and to portray those *rules* as the orchestrators of a dicey chance at survival. One such *rule* was "that if you fought an opponent, and could prove it by having witnesses, you didn't have to fight that person again at the command of the older boys" (p. 39). Another *rule* was that "the order changed some as boys won or lost fights, but by and large the same boys remained on top. New boys who came on the block had

to be placed in the pecking order" (p. 39). *Fist Stick Knife Gun* was fraught with similar *rules* about the block, gender, levels of violence, defense of one's reputation, and so on.

Canada and Nicholas achieve the book's goal by using the *tool* of the graphic novel format, which exposes the emotion that young Canada felt as he pretended not to be affected by the violence that surrounded him. As well, Canada uses direct address as a *tool* in order to capture and maintain the reader's attention, such as in his interlude that is formatted like a pop-quiz, which reads in part: "When someone points a gun in your direction but doesn't want to shoot you in particular, you should (A.) run into the nearest building; (B.) yell and scream while you run away; (C.) stand still; (D.) hit the ground" (p. 85). Canada relates his life story with the benefit of hindsight, in that he currently understands the cultural and historical forces that made it seem as if arming himself with a knife, and then a gun, was necessary to walk around in his neighborhood during his youth.

Text: *While the World Watched: A Birmingham Bombing Survivor Comes of Age During the Civil Rights Movement*, **by Carolyn Maull McKinstry and Denise George (2011)**

McKinstry's book (2011) is a personal testimony about how the evil act of the Birmingham Baptist Church bombing had permeated and threatened to destroy her life. The book unfolds chronologically, from the day prior to the bombing, when McKinstry "starched and ironed" her white Sunday dress before going to bed (p. 2). The next morning, as a youth leader at the church, she fielded a phone call that only warned "three minutes," yet she took no action, because she felt the call was a prank, and couldn't even begin to imagine what awaited. After the devastation of the bombing, McKinstry explained that no one asked "Carolyn, are you okay?" and her family life proceeded as usual, with her parents carefully avoiding mentioning the names *Addie Mae*, *Carol Denise, Carole*, or *Cynthia,* nor the two other young African Americans killed on September 15, 1963. The four girls had been her friends, and were gone, yet Carolyn had no way to heal from the loss, let alone begin to understand why she was spared that morning.

Engëstrom's (1987) activity system helps me to understand the mechanisms of McKinstry's book:

Subject: The protagonist, McKinstry, was the primary agent which moved the plot forward. At the opening of the book, the subject is sixteen, and at the end of the book, the subject was an adult figure with children, who'd accepted harsh lessons in life. McKinstry does not represent herself as an especially agentic person—much of her depression and turmoil later in life felt inescapable to her, and other characters (such as

the church bombers) determined the outcome of her life, rather than McKinstry doing so throughout most of the text. At the end of the book, McKinstry represents herself as an evangelical Christian for whom forgiveness provided freedom from the weight of alcoholism and depression. She calls in readers to also adopt her new identity affiliation.

Object: The goal of McKinstry's book is give readers the charge "it's time to stop watching" people hurting other people (p. 285). She positions her book as a call to action, and a call to begin healing.

Tools: McKinstry's personal, at times painful, memories she shares about how seemingly everyone around her kept silent about the evil bombing is a *tool* in the activity system of the text. Her raw reflections are used as grist for her argument that silence around unjust acts has compounding negative impacts. McKinstry also uses primary source documents as a tool to shed light on the historical context of the Civil Rights Movement.

Community: Community members within McKinstry's text include her co-author, Denise George. It is unknown by me how much George and McKinstry balanced the *division of labor* to achieve the book's purpose. Other community members include authors of primary source documents, especially Martin Luther King, Jr., who was frequently quoted at chapter beginnings and chapter interludes. The publisher, Tyndale House, is also a member of the community of the activity system of the text, which deserves mention here. Tyndale House is a Christian book publisher. To this end, the publisher's role in assisting the *object* of the text is not coincidental, but seems to be a deliberate partnership on the part of both the book publisher and autobiographical figure.

Text: *Condoleeza Rice: A Memoir of My Extraordinary, Ordinary Family and Me (2012)*

The *subject* of Rice's memoir (2012) is herself, depicted as a well-loved, only child in a middle-class Birmingham family. Rice tells her family history, which includes a lineage of educators, college-educated individuals, and a grandfather who made it his aim to enroll young African Americans into college, on the paternal side of her family tree. Rice frames her family as one for whom education is of utmost importance; this tenet turns out to be a principle of her own life as a high school and college student, graduate student, and ultimately professor and university administrator. Regarding the topic of education, Rice stated that her parents were "convinced that education was a kind of armor shielding me against everything—even the deep racism in Birmingham and across America" (p. 6).

The *object* of the text is to portray Rice as a product of her two parents, who are a "blessing" (n.p.), and who went to exceptional measures to provide various opportunities for her, some of which shaped her into her adult persona.

Tools used throughout the text include the sharing of family stories, such as the $13,000 loan her parents took out to buy her a grand piano while she was young. Rice shared that "I had a crush on Bach" and felt fully immersed into cultures that would otherwise have remained foreign to her without her parents' continued sacrifices.

A *rule* that is repeated often in the text is the belief that African Americans had to be "twice as good" as whites to succeed (p. 48). Rice also repeated her family mantra that there are "no excuses" and "there is no place for victims" (p. 49) in her household. An example of Rice carrying out some of the family's rules is the grueling schedule she

maintained in high school, which consisted of early morning ice skating lessons, a jam-packed school day, then piano lessons in the evening.

Community members in the activity system of the text included Rice and the book publisher. Rice bears the primary *division of labor* in reaching the object she set forth for her book.

CATEGORY 3

Text: *Palmyra Street*, by Jana Dennis (2005)

Jana's *goal* for writing her book *Palmyra Street* (2005) was to present the diverse faces of her neighborhood, and in doing so, Jana also describes herself and her family. Her goal for writing was made explicit, as demonstrated in Jana's statement that "That's very important to know the kind of people you're around" (p. 35). Jana called her family "backbones for one another" and wrote about a very close bond among her family (p. 6). She recounted that "My soul was never hungry, my feet were never bare, my clothes never needed washing…" (p. 7) in order to express that her parents provided for all of her basic needs, while enriching her life in the process.

Regarding the *subject* of the book, Jana highlighted that the times she and her family masked as Mardi Gras Indians, she took on a different persona. She explained "I'm not acting like me. I'm acting like an Indian" (p. 23) when she's wearing her Indian costume. There are *rules* to being an Indian: "See, anybody can make a suit, but you've got to know how to play the game," (p. 32) which means that there are codes that go along with being an Indian, which need to be learned. This reference to knowing "how to play the game" harkens the distant social forces that influence the way Jana behaves in her own skin, as well as under the guise of her Indian costume. The dual awareness of being both herself and Indian, at the same time, exemplifies DuBois' (1903/2003) concept of "double consciousness." Jana's brief mention of the "game" that she has learned reveals not only the day-to-day activities that Jana participates in on Palmyra Street, but also the hidden, higher-level forces that she navigates through.

Division of labor was made explicit during instances which Jana narrated that "Rachel and I interviewed Hien Pham," a clerk in a local convenience store, or a different interview subject (p. 62). Rachel is the co-founder of the community writing program. Also, Abram, the other co-founder, assisted with the interview of Jana's next door neighbor. But for the most part, Jana takes control of leading the book's plot, as in the instance she narrated "In this interview, we learn how he got to Palmyra Street from Puerto Rico," as a way of framing her next interview of a neighbor for readers (p. 67).

By walking her readers through Palmyra Street, Jana gives witness to her family's tight bonds and exposes the varied lives of her neighbors.

Text: *What Would the World be Without Women: Stories from the 9th Ward*, by Waukesha (Kesha) Jackson (2005)

Kesha is emphatic about the *goal* she hopes to pursue in her book: "In this book, I'm going to look at my relationship with women in my family and how they cope with life and struggles" (2005, p. 8). She does so, and admits that she had a "fear of talking about my life" (p.7) prior to the book project, which she overcame.

Community members include women in Kesha's family, and women in Kesha's neighborhood, which comprise two sections of the book. Kesha's grandmother, aunt and uncle, and her mother are interviewed in the first section. The second section of the book contains interviews with neighbors and family friends. The character with the lowest social positioning is Kesha's mother, who struggles with a drug addiction, and who was unavailable to Kesha as a maternal figure. The character of Kesha's mother is often spoken about by other characters, especially Kesha's grandmother, rather than Kesha's mother representing her own story.

Kesha explained, "I call myself a nomad because I have never had a stable place to live" (p. 15). She lived in a total of seven homes throughout the course of the book. She also reflected that "I was only fifteen years old and had seen many things I shouldn't have" (p. 25), which denotes her awareness that her experience as a youth did not match up with normative youth culture, because of the social forces that weighed upon her life.

Text: *Between Piety and Desire*, by Arlet and Sam Wylie (2005)

Arlet articulated her reason for co-writing a book with her brother toward the end of the novel. She expressed that the *object* of the text was to characterize her family's background and lifestyle as "different" from the norm:

I thought it was just a way of life. I thought it was the same for everybody, but a lot of what we do is different from everybody else. To me, that's what made me want to write the book even more. (2005, p. 108)

As one of the two *subjects* of the activity system, ways in which Arlet viewed herself as "different" stem first from her father's Belizean heritage. That her father owns the home in which the family lives—and rents the first floor to a family who runs a convenience store—is a monumental aspect of difference from Arlet's peers. Sam, the second *subject* of the book, added stories about the close bonds he shared with Arlet and their older sister, and the fun they had together as a family.

The two *subjects*, Arlet and Sam, equally divide the *division of labor* of the book. They do this by selecting different interview subjects, and providing differing vignettes to enhance the book. Arlet's voice is slightly more prominent in the text, because of the direct addresses she occasionally gives to readers, for example she readies readers for the transcript of her interview with her mother by stating "Before I heard her speak to the church, I didn't prepare myself, but hopefully you will. The interview starts now" (p. 68). With this directive, Arlet entices readers into her story.

Tools consisted of various interviews, photographs, and re-tellings of their family story. In the process of relating their family story, Arlet and Sam also provide social

critique about the phenomena that surround them. Arlet wrote, for example, that "I didn't think of any drug as a moral problem, I thought of it as being addictive, because I see the effect it has on people I'm close to or see around" (p. 57). Sam also questioned an interviewee with "How could you make your block better," asking a peer to take up a critical lens about their surroundings (p. 47).

Text: *Before & After N. Dorgenois*, **by Ebony Bolding (2005)**

Bolding states "In this book, I am going to explore my experiences in the Sixth Ward" (2005, p. 9.), which is a clear statement of the *object* of the book, or the goal she set forth during the writing process. Bolding explains the *division of labor* of the book with the same amount of clarity as the above example in the Acknowledgements section of the book: "Thanks to Rachel for editing interviews and Abram for helping me take photographs" (n.p.). At times, Rachel and Abram insert themselves into interviews for clarifications and re-directions. *Community members* of the text include Ebony's neighbors and friends and family.

The major tension of the text is that the social positioning of Ebony's family as renters makes them vulnerable to the whims of landlords. For example, the home on N. Dorgenois which Ebony so enjoyed was sold by the landlord to a white man who needed to live in New Orleans off-and-on because of his involvement with the local film industry. When Ebony returned to the place she'd known as home to interview the new owner, he told of break-ins, and a passer-by affirmed violence and burglaries in the neighborhood, which Ebony and her family had never experienced during the several years they lived there.

An additional aspect of note regarding the activity system of Ebony's text is the way she uses direct addresses to readers, as in "Pretend you're a new student and I will take you on a tour" (p. 40), while she gives the lay of the land of her school. In this example, Ebony takes the reins as the leader of the activity system of the text, directing readers to participate in her imagined tour.

Text: *The Combination*, by Ashley Nelson (2005)

Subject: The subject of the activity system of *The Combination* (2005) is Ashley, a proud resident of the Lafitte public housing projects in New Orleans. Ashley embodies contradictory values, such as her statement "Love is what we need in this world" (p. 36) and her subsequent statements about street violence which she feels is acceptable. As a subject, Ashley also represents the concept of "double-consciousness," which is evidenced by her statement to readers "When you read this book don't feel sorry for me because I don't need it" (p. 8), almost as if she is anticipating swells of pity among her readership.

Community: Members of the community of the activity system in *The Combination* include the members of the residential council of her housing project, which is a small team of women leaders. One of the leaders tells the protagonist "We're glad that you all are doing this because we want to tell the stories. If we don't tell the story, how the kids going to know what went on?" (p. 97). Other members of the book's *community* include her family members, and neighborhood friends and acquaintances.

Object: The *object* of Ashley's book is to tell stories for posterity, paying equal attention to the good and bad parts of her neighborhood.

Tools: *Tools* used within the activity system of the text include poetry ("Dear Lord, answer my prayer, answer my prayer, answer me," p. 62), reflective vignettes such as "frozen cups" in which Ashley recounts the best desserts in the world (p. 46), and interviews, such as the interviews with the women of the residential council, and with a restaurant owner.

Rules: Several *rules* which govern life in the Lafitte are referenced in Ashley's book. Notable "rules" are as follows: "Living in the hood you gain lots of friends. You also lose just as many" (p. 63). In a section called "The rules we live by," Ashley explains that "…it's self-explanatory. If you kill you somebody, they got people that might be lookin to kill you….It's intense on the outside looking in, but to me was a normal way of life" (p. 59).

Division of Labor: Ashley is the leader of the book's activity system, and is primarily in control of achieving the *object*. At times, though, others' voices—such as the women of the Lafitte Residential Council—share the work in achieving the book's *object* of telling stories for posterity.

Text: *Beyond the Bricks*, by Daron Crawford and Pernell Russell (2009)

Daron and Pernell's co-authored book (2009) reflects an activity system with two *subjects.* Pernell described his identity affiliation as outside the norm, by writing in the introduction "I'm not your average black boy" (p. 2). Pernell's identity affiliations are also marked by his skateboarding skills and outfits, and his joining a dance "crew" that performs at parties. Pernell discusses having multiple personas, especially "Doo Neno," whom he "turns into" when he's mad (p. 172). Doo Neno arms himself for protection in the streets, and when he wants to try to avenge the death of a loved one. Doo Neno is a version of his other nickname used by family and friends, Doo. Daron's identity is that of an aspiring musician, and a fashion maven who formed his own crew, the Fresh Stars.

At times, there are contradictions within the plot, because although Daron appears to be complicit in perpetuating some negative aspects of his circumstances, he also tries to resist in certain ways and to make his resistance explicit to others. This can be understood by recounting two different passages. First, Daron shared that his mother and father figure were "selling drugs to support us" (p. 26), and assured his mother that she was doing what she had to do by hustling. Here, he seems to be accepting the norm, which has a destructive effect upon the lives of his family members, and which creates a broad, sustained entrenchment into poverty, among other ills. Yet on the topic of guns, Daron recognizes that it's a "lose/lose" situation (p. 139). In fact, Daron attempts to convince Pernell of this by stating to him that

So many young people want to be gangstas. They feel like they have something

to prove, like they want to make a name for themselves and thuggin is the only

way to do it. But I bet you got people who claim to be gangstas, but really be

inside writing. (p. 139)

But Pernell expressed that "When you have a gun you feel like, 'All right, I have a little

something to protect myself'" (p. 139).

Daron and Pernell's *object*, or goal of the text, is to "talk directly to young

people" (p. 3) and to give testimony about their lives in the "bricks" (projects) so that

others like them will know that others have been through the same thing as they have (p.

3), and to give readers a "light at the end of the tunnel" (p. 180). The *tools* used to

achieve the object include interview transcripts from people who are important to the

teens, scanned images of handwritten letters and postcards, and photographs. Also, in

order to separate the efforts of the two *subjects*, there is a narrow black strip along the

edge of the pages in which Pernell takes control of the book.

The *community* of the activity system of the text consists of Daron, Pernell, their

loved ones and friends whose voices are included through interviews, the book editors,

and photographers. Daron and Pernell equally *divide the labor* by taking turns to tell

their life stories. At times, the authors join together, as in the Introduction, and as in the

preface to the "Protection" section of the book. Also, at times, the authors explicitly

historicize the actions that are taking place around them, as in their joint discussion about

why the projects are segregated. Pernell reflected, "Hearing about the government

separating people when they built the projects, that's stupid. It's like they didn't want

people to get along. If they were living in a mixed neighborhood, they should've left it

like that" (p. 7).

The element of *exchange* was also an aspect of the activity system of the text. The character Melvina, Daron's mother, reflected on the *exchange* she received as a result of Hurricane Katrina and her forced exile from New Orleans:

> I would say Katrina was a blessing. I mean, not to all people… But for me, coming from the Calliope [projects] and being able to be somewhere else and look back on the way we were living. Being on the inside, I don't think I would ever notice, but being on the outside I could see pretty much what it is—drugs, violence, all in this little square. (p. 75)

By blending the stories of the two authors, and by including such lucid reflections as the above, as well as sometimes hegemonic thinking such as Pernell's preference for guns, *Beyond the Bricks* shows that there is no neat activity system, but rather one that operates with contradictions and struggle, which is reflective of the authors' humanity.

Text: *Aunt Alice vs. Bob Marley: My Education in New Orleans*, **by Kareem Kennedy (2009)**

Kareem (2009) admits that he is "fascinated" by literature. He created his book because he shared that "I want to tell the stories that haven't been told. Through my eyes you'll get a taste of New Orleans its moments of triumph and despair" (p. 3) which is depicted in Kareem's handwriting on lined paper in a poem entitled "The Message: Young, Black & Positive." This, then, is the *goal* which Kareem set out to pursue through his book.

The book walks readers through the various stages of Kareem's life in New Orleans Public Schools. The *tools* used in the book include scanned images of artifacts such as his fourth grade report card (p. 34), photographs of the personas he interviews, photographs of his schools and neighborhood. An additional *tool* used in the book is the recurring theme of a marble composition book, on which Kareem's handwriting appears, as in the above example.

Kareem represents himself as a *subject* whose identity has shifted over the course of his schooling life. He begins the book sharing how marijuana "became a part of my lifestyle, and I sought out the Jamaican subculture of Rastafarianism" (p. 5). He grew his hair into dreadlocks, and developed an appreciation for Bob Marley's music. But after a drug arrest and a stint in jail, Kareem decided he needed "to make some pragmatic changes," an idea that was confirmed when both the cops and his boss told him that a haircut would make him less vulnerable to searches and presumptions of drugs (p. 7). The *subject* of the literary work also undergoes shifts in identity, such as when he viewed himself as a college student while enrolled in a community college in New Orleans. He

also came to view himself as a teacher, rather than a student, when he became involved with a writing program through AmeriCorps, which made him a kind of ambassador of writing methods used at the Neighborhood Story Project among younger writers.

The *community* of the activity system of the book included Kareem, as well as the subjects of his interviews, such as his mother, Kareem's Social Studies teacher, the leader of AmeriCorps, and others. Community members also share the book's goal of wanting to tell the stories that haven't been told before. *Division of labor* exists among community members in the following way: Kareem plays the largest role among other community members in achieving the goal of the book. He remarks that the work wasn't easy, and that "my family stories were harder to write" (p. 8) than the stories about scenes from his neighborhood.

Finally, Kareem's book comments frequently on social and political aspects, which represent the distal-level action of the activity system. The protagonist exposes the irony of segregation in a school named after a president who was sympathetic to civil rights causes; he comments about how John McDonogh "had been ridiculed as an under achieving and low performing school" that was to be taken over by the state (p. 56); and he stepped back from individual stories and exposed the broader "cycle of abuse in my family and how I could break that cycle" (p. 79).

Text: *From My Mother's House of Beauty*, by Susan Stephanie Henry (2009)

"We are a mixture of Spanish, English, French, Indian, and African. But what does this mean? And how do I explain it to people in New Orleans?" asks Susan at the very beginning of her book (2009, p. 1). This statement reflects the *object*, or goal, of her autobiography, which is to better understand her blended heritage and to put it in context with her new identity affiliation as a New Orleanian. The question posted above also hints at Susan's identities as the *subject* of the narrative. She is from Honduras, and even though she spoke English there, she was placed in English as a Second Language classes at school, positioning her as a linguistic outsider within her new environment.

The *community* of the text include her grandmother, her father and mother, younger brother, her cosmetology teacher, a university professor and Honduran-New Orleanian expert, and others. Susan plays the primary role in reaching the book's goal, and input from the above members of the *community* are equally balanced throughout the book.

In the following example, Susan shows an instance in which she exerts control over the book's activity system, such as when she asked an uncle a question, then re-asks him when he failed to answer, with "You didn't say how old you were" (p. 67). She also told her uncle "You don't have to answer that now, because I got questions for you" when he began to veer off track (p. 68). In these examples, Susan acts as the leader of the book's action.

A *rule* that is discussed within Susan's book is "class codes" (p. 36), or the tacit knowledge previous generations had regarding the status of different families, and the invisible borders a young person needed to learn to navigate.