

# Research on Diversity in Youth Literature

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Volume 1

Issue 1 #OwnVoices Scholars Respond to "Mirrors,  
Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors"

Article 3

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6-1-2018

## Imagining New Hopescapes: Expanding Black Girls' Windows and Mirrors

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### Recommended Citation

Toliver, S. R. (2018) "Imagining New Hopescapes: Expanding Black Girls' Windows and Mirrors," *Research on Diversity in Youth Literature*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://sophia.stkate.edu/rdyl/vol1/iss1/3>

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More than 30 years ago, Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop (1983) conducted an exploratory case study to analyze the reading preferences of a 10-year-old Black girl named Osula. An avid reader, Osula had once enjoyed science fiction stories, but her interests changed as she eagerly searched for books that included Black girls. This modification in reading preference prompted Dr. Bishop to analyze the importance of books about Black people to Black children and to better understand what literary components appeal to Black youth as they read books about Black people. However, with such a pointed interest in stories featuring strong, Black girls, Osula's preferences constricted the number of books she would find in the early 1980s.

Bishop noted that the list of books Osula chose to bring to the interview were mostly written before 1980, an historical period in which representations of Black characters were limited or completely omitted. In a study of over 5,000 children's books, Nancy Larrick (1965) found that only 6.7% of the books included one or more Black characters. In a subsequent study, Chall et. al (1979) found that the number of books with Black characters had increased to 14.4%; however, the researchers also noted that doubling the percentage from Larrick's study still left 86% of children's books housed in an all-White world. After the increase, Bishop (1992) acknowledged a distinctive decrease in books about Black people, noting that between 1980 and 1983, approximately one percent of all children's books published included Black people. In other words, although books with Black youth characters existed, they were small in number.

With such an insignificant number of children's books featuring Black characters, it would be difficult for any child to find enough books to match their preferences, but Osula's interest in science fiction narratives and stories about Black girls further complicated the matter. Science fiction and fantasy (SFF) were rare in Black children's books, with only a few Black authors contributing to Black youth representations in the genre (Bishop, 2007). Additionally, Bishop's (1982) study of 150 contemporary realistic fiction books for Black children revealed that less than 40% of the analyzed texts featured Black female youth. In other words, at the time of Bishop's interview study with Osula, the number of books featuring Black girls was minimal, and the number of books including strong, Black girls in SFF was almost nonexistent.

From the analysis of Osula's reading preferences as well as the dearth of reading options for all Black children, Bishop (1983) considered the implications of having a body of literature in which Osula could find the representations she sought. Thus, the metaphor of mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors in children's literature was formed. Specifically, Bishop (1990) stated

that books should offer mirrors to reflect readers' multilayered and complex identities, windows to show readers real and imagined worlds, and sliding glass doors to enable readers to enter creative worlds using their imaginations. The point of the metaphor was to acknowledge the limited, small, or broken mirrors that marginalized children were often forced to look through as they searched for themselves in literature, but it was also a way to highlight the opaque or boarded windows and locked doors that formed when there were misrepresentations or omissions of specific groups.

Almost 30 years later, Bishop's metaphor continues to influence the literacy field as modern scholars analyze historical and contemporary representations of Black youth in children's literature (Brooks & McNair, 2015; Howard & Ryan, 2017; Hughes-Hassle & Cox, 2011), study Black youth responses to realistic fiction books with Black characters (Greene, 2016; Moller & Allen, 2000; Wood & Jocius, 2013), and critique the mirrors and windows available through publishing platforms (Koss, Johnson, & Martinez, 2018; Low, 2013; Patrick, 2012). However, there still remains a dearth of research about ways to bridge Osula's former love of SFF to her preference for books about strong, Black girls.

Of course, SFF featuring Black youth protagonists still exists within a niche market (Myers, 2014; Smith, 2000), but as the publishing industry has increased the number of SFF books by adult fiction authors since the early 2000s, some young adult authors have taken the opportunity to fill the void (Hood, 2009). Zetta Elliott, Maiya Williams, Nnedi Okorafor, and numerous others have used their writing prowess to imagine new hypescapes (Hamilton, 1986) in their novels as they analyze the historic past and the troubled present to determine the possibilities of Black futures and to explore the intricacies of Black imaginations. Bishop (2012) noted this possibility for change in scope and genre when she argued that the evolution of Black children's literature will not only include an examination of the past and an analysis of the present, but that it will also speculate about the future of Black people.

The purpose of this article, then, is to discuss the broadening of the mirror and window metaphor to include SFF featuring strong, Black girls. To do this, I conducted a meta-analysis of studies between 2000 and 2017 that include: (1) scholarship centering research on the representations of Black girls in fiction novels and (2) studies highlighting Black female adolescents' responses to fiction books with Black female characters. I use these studies to investigate which fiction books scholars used in their research with Black girls and what

influenced the researchers to make their book selections. I then use the information from the meta-analysis to investigate which mirrors and windows are being presented through the book selections and how publishing and awards influence and constrain these decisions. Finally, I address the need to broaden the mirrors and windows used to represent Black girlhood by venturing out of the systemic publishing cycle to find unconventional stories with strong, Black girls. To inform this analysis, I rely on the following research questions:

1. Since 2000, which fiction books have researchers used to analyze Black adolescent female representations?
2. What criteria do researchers use to select fiction books featuring Black adolescent female characters??
3. Which mirrors and windows are represented in the books researchers have used to analyze Black adolescent female representations in fiction books?

### **Method**

To systematically collect literature for the meta-analysis, seven academic databases were searched to retrieve articles centering research on representations of and responses to Black girls in literature. These e-databases included Academic Search Complete, EBSCOHost, Education Search Complete, ERIC, JStor, Urban Studies Abstracts, and Wiley Interscience journals. Exploration of databases was conducted using specific keywords matched to title and article content. The following terms and Boolean phrases were consistently included in the search: “Black Girls” OR “African American Girls” AND “literature,” AND “representation.” Additionally, to account for articles that may have used synonymous terms, I included “literacies,” “reading,” “education,” and “books.” Using these terms, I found more than 100 articles relating to my initial search terms, so I used exclusionary parameters to ensure that certain conditions were met.

First, because this analysis highlights the choices of researchers, articles in which students selected their own novels (Davis, 2000; Edwards, 2005; Kooy & Colarusso, 2014) and articles in which scholars observed teachers’ English classrooms (Carter, 2007; Deblase, 2003; Sutherland, 2005) were excluded. Additionally, articles were restricted to studies that focused primarily on adolescent Black girls, so articles about elementary-aged Black girls (Brooks & McNair, 2015; Jeffries & Jeffries, 2014; Yenika-Agbaw, 2014) were removed. Also, the articles had to have an explicit connection between Black girls and print literature, so scholarship about

media and digital representations (Jacobs, 2016; Muhammad & McArthur, 2015; Price-Dennis, 2016) were eliminated. Lastly, content analyses had to center Black female protagonists, and the implications of the analyses had to be connected to education. The association with education eliminated literary criticisms where the author did not discuss how a text could impact schools or the education of Black girls. By focusing on the overarching criteria, I eliminated several studies from the initial results, and twelve articles remained to be included in the analysis.

## Results

For this investigation, I do not present a comprehensive examination that summarizes and synthesizes the gamut of research on windows, mirrors and Black girl representations. Instead, I aim to use the articles I selected to undergird an argument (Maxwell, 2006) about the broadening of the windows and mirrors metaphor to include SFF with Black female protagonists. This choice of focus explicitly contrasts with Boote and Beile's (2005) recommendation that a systematic analysis requires the writer to exhaustively analyze the research problem, critique research techniques, and examine the research methods. Thus, to use the literature effectively in alignment with the purpose of this analysis, I divide the results into two sections.

In the first section, I focus on the relevant aspects of each article by only identifying certain information about the texts researchers selected, including the genre, publishing date, author, and title of the book. I then discuss the researchers' rationales for choosing the fiction books to use in their studies. In the second section, I provide an analysis of individual text features, including the age and African Diasporic group of the protagonist, the geographical location of the novel's setting, and major themes and topics in the books. I highlight each of these components to discuss which mirrors and windows are prominently displayed in the research.

### Which Fiction Books Were Chosen?

Across the twelve articles I examined, 19 different novels were used to study Black girl representations in fiction, and each of these novels were realistic in nature (see Table 1). Contemporary realistic fiction accounted for over half of the novels ( $n = 11$ ), while urban fiction ( $n = 5$ ) and historical fiction ( $n = 3$ ) were not as prominent. Additionally, researchers selected some of the same contemporary realistic novels across articles. For instance, *The Skin I'm In* was selected four times, while *The Dear One* and *Like Sisters on the Homefront* were chosen three times. In fact, novels written by Jacqueline Woodson, Rita Williams-Garcia, Sharon Flake, Nikki

Grimes, and Angela Johnson dominate the list of authors, accounting for over half of the novels researchers selected. However, no historical or urban fiction novels were selected twice, and most authors of historical fiction and all authors of urban fiction were featured in only one article.

Table 1. Research Articles and Novel Information

| Research Article                            | Novel(s) Selected   | Genre of Selected Novels          |
|---|---|-----------------------------------|
| Baxley & Boston, 2010                       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>The Skin I'm In</i> (Flake, 1998)</li> <li>● <i>Jazmin's Notebook</i> (Grimes, 1998)</li> <li>● <i>The Dear One</i> (Woodson, 1990)</li> </ul>  | Contemporary Realistic/Historical |
| Boston & Baxley, 2007                       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>The Skin I'm In</i> (Flake, 1998)</li> <li>● <i>Hush</i> (Woodson, 2002)</li> <li>● <i>Jazmin's Notebook</i> (Grimes, 1998)</li> <li>● <i>The Dear One</i> (Woodson, 1990)</li> </ul>   | Contemporary Realistic/Historical |
| Brooks, Browne, & Hampton, 2008             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>The Skin I'm In</i> (Flake, 1998)</li> </ul>  | Contemporary Realistic            |
| Brooks et. al, 2010                         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>The Skin I'm In</i> (Flake, 1998)</li> <li>● <i>Like Sisters on the Homefront</i> (Williams-Garcia, 1995)</li> <li>● <i>Maizon at Blue Hill</i> (Woodson, 1992)</li> <li>● <i>Bronx Masquerade</i> (Grimes, 2002)</li> <li>● <i>November Blues</i> (Draper, 2007)</li> </ul>  | Contemporary Realistic            |
| Gibson, 2010                                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>The Coldest Winter Ever</i> (Soulja, 1999)</li> </ul>   | Urban                             |
| Gibson, 2016                                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Supreme Clientele</i> (Antoinette, 2007)</li> </ul>   | Urban                             |
| Greene, 2016                                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Push</i> (Sapphire, 1996)</li> </ul>  | Urban                             |
| Hinton-Johnson, 2004 & Hinton-Johnson, 2005 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Like Sisters on the Homefront</i> (Williams-Garcia, 1995)</li> <li>● <i>I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This</i> (Woodson, 1994)</li> <li>● <i>Heaven</i> (Johnson, 1998)</li> <li>● <i>Toning the Sweep</i> (Johnson, 1993)</li> <li>● <i>Blue Tights</i> (Williams-Garcia, 1988)</li> <li>● <i>The Dear One</i> (Woodson, 1990)</li> </ul> | Contemporary Realistic            |
| Howard & Ryan, 2017                         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>One Crazy Summer</i> (Williams-Garcia, 2010)</li> </ul>   | Historical                        |
| Marshall, Staples, & Gibson, 2009           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Bitch</i> (King, 2006)</li> <li>● <i>Black and Ugly</i> (Styles, 2007)</li> </ul>   | Urban                             |
| Moller & Allen, 2000                        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>The Friendship</i> (Taylor, 1987)</li> </ul>  | Historical                        |

The rationales scholars used in their selection of novels varied, but each researcher selected books with Black female characters written by Black female authors. Two scholars (Gibson, 2016; Greene, 2016) allowed students to choose their books. Other researchers selected the books for analysis and highlighted books with realistic and relatable Black girls. For instance, Hinton-Johnson (2005) selected books that depicted Black girls combating negative beliefs about their physical appearance. Baxley & Boston (2010) used *Jazmin's Notebook*, *The Skin I'm In*, and *The Dear One* because the novels featured positive Black female protagonists to which Black female readers could relate. The authors of another study (Boston and Baxley, 2007) chose *Jazmin's Notebook*, *The Skin I'm In*, and *Hush* because each text “introduces a positive Black female protagonist and provides critical insight for readers about identity, self-esteem and self-worth, life choices, race and racism, family, and religion” (p. 569).

Although all scholars searched for books with Black female representation, however, some showed a preference for award-winning texts. For instance, in searching for a book that represented their participants, Moller and Allen (2000) chose to use *The Friendship* in their study. Their selection was based on the book's readability, length, and depth, but they also mentioned that the book was award-winning even though they did not define which awards the novel received. Likewise, Hinton-Johnson (2004) mentioned the award-winning nature of the books in her study, but she did not provide a list of honors and awards. Howard and Ryan (2017), however, chose to conduct a content analysis on *One Crazy Summer*, and one of their main reasons for selecting the book was its status as a Coretta Scott King Award winner.

Similarly, Brooks, Browne, and Hampton (2008) chose to analyze *The Skin I'm In* because of its realistic portrayal of colorism, but the researchers also mentioned that the novel received numerous accolades, including a Coretta Scott King Award and a Best Book Award for Young Adults from the American Library Association (ALA). In a later study, Brooks, Sekayi, Savage, Waller, and Picot (2010) conducted content analyses of five novels portraying the heterogeneity of Black girlhood. Their selection criteria included books that were published after 1990, listed as options on school-based reading lists, and included representations of Black pre/teen girls in contemporary, realistic urban settings, and they also noted that each novel received literary awards, such as the Coretta Scott King Award and the ALA Best Book Award for Young Adults. Books were also included on the New York Public Library's “Books for the Teen Age” list (now “Stuff for the Teen Age.”)

However, researchers did not limit their choices to fiction novels that earned major library association awards. For example, Gibson (2010) presented *The Coldest Winter Ever* as an exemplar of urban fiction because the novel is credited with the reinvigoration of the genre, and she also discussed the ability of the text to assist Black girls in disrupting dominant literary traditions. Likewise, Marshall, Staples, and Gibson (2009) selected *Bitch* and *Black and Ugly* because they provided spaces for critical analysis, and they also noted that both novels had become popular enough to warrant sequels, and *Black and Ugly* remained on Essence magazine's bestseller list for several months.

Essentially, the books researchers used to analyze Black girl representations in fiction consist of realistic portrayals principally housed within contemporary and historical narratives. These works are mostly chosen because they include various representations of Black girlhood as well as Black female cultural experiences. Specifically, researchers selected books that contained themes that focused on familial relationships, body positivity, race and racism, stereotypical images, and Black female identities. However, even though the researchers selected these texts for a range of reasons, the representation of Black girlhood is often written from the perspective of a few, elite authors who are widely recognized as shown through the numerous awards received from large library associations.

In fact, 12 of the 14 contemporary and historical fiction books selected by researchers have received ALA awards, with 10 books receiving a Coretta Scott King Award or Honor and two books (*Hush* and *Maizon at Blue Hill*) receiving a Best Book Award for Young Adults. The remaining novels in the contemporary and realistic fiction category did not receive any awards, but *The Dear One* is Jacqueline Woodson's first young adult novel, and *Blue Tights* is Rita Williams-Garcia's first novel, so both were written before either author gained prominence. Lesser known authors, particularly those who are writing urban fiction, have not received the same accolades, and they represent only a small number of the books on this list.

These results suggest a privileging of mimetic fiction written by specific authors and approved by a specific library organization. Of course, the authors are prolific because their stories provide complex and nuanced representations of Black girlhood and Black culture. Moreover, library awards, such as the Coretta Scott King Award, do a tremendous job of highlighting diverse books written by Black authors. Still, it is essential to determine which mirrors and windows are created within these specific parameters. Therefore, in the following



section, I will summarize information pertaining to the protagonist, setting, and plot to identify which mirrors and windows are shown in the books researchers have used to analyze Black female adolescent representations in fiction books.

### Which Black Girls are Represented?

Each book on the list is a realistic, coming-of-age narrative that emphasizes the physical and psychological growth of the main character, but the novels share more than the presence of Black female protagonists and the theme of maturation (Table 2). Thirteen of the 19 novels are set in the northeastern part of the United States, with nine of those books taking place in the state of New York. The remaining novels have settings in the Midwest (3), the South (1), the Mountain Region (1), and an undetermined urban locale (1). Actually, 14 novels were set in modern urban areas, with one book (*The Dear One*) placed in a suburb, and two books (*I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This* and *Toning the Sweep*) set in rural locations. The other novels were set in a fictional area (i.e. Heaven, OH), or they were set too far in the past to be considered contemporarily urban (i.e. Mississippi in 1933).

Across the novels, the characters possessed similar physical and developmental traits. For instance, every book featured an African American protagonist. Additionally, although one book does not define the exact ages of the characters, more than half of the protagonists (n = 12) were between the ages of 12 and 15, with four books representing the late stages of adolescence (16-22) and two books depicting early adolescence (9-11). Coincidentally, the one story set in the southern region of the United States is within the category of historical fiction, focusing on a racist incident between a store owner and a Black man. Also, three of the four books representing older adolescents are within the urban fiction genre, and all four of the books include topics such as teen pregnancy, abuse, racism, and criminal activity.

Table 2. Literature Elements of Chosen Novels

| Novel                      | Grade Level | Name/Age of Protagonist       | Geographical Location | Themes/Topics   |
|----------------------------|-------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------|---|
| <i>The Skin I'm In</i>     | 6-12        | Maleeka, African American, 13 | Northeast, USA        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Confidence and self-esteem</li> <li>● Dealing with colorism</li> <li>● Bullying</li> </ul> |
| <i>The Dear One</i>        | 6-8         | Afeni, African American, 12   | Seton, PA             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Friendship</li> <li>● Teen pregnancy</li> </ul>  |
| <i>Like Sisters on the</i> | 9-12        | Gayle, African American, 14   | South Jamaica,        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Familial relationships</li> <li>● Intergenerational relationships</li> </ul>               |

|  |       |  |                                 |   |
|--|-------|--|---------------------------------|---|
| <i>Homefront</i>                       |       |  | Queens in New York City         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Friendship</li> <li>● Teen pregnancy</li> </ul>  |
| <i>I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This</i> | 6-8   | Marie, African American, 12                                | Chauncey, OH                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Familial Relationships</li> <li>● Friendship</li> <li>● Abuse</li> <li>● Death, grief, loss</li> </ul>           |
| <i>Blue Tights</i>                     | 9-12  | Joyce, African American, 15                                | Queens, NY                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Confidence and self-esteem</li> <li>● Racism</li> </ul>  |
| <i>Toning the Sweep</i>                | 6-12  | Emily, African American, 14                                | Cleveland, OH & Little Rock, CA | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Familial relationships</li> <li>● Intergenerational relationships</li> <li>● Discrimination</li> </ul>           |
| <i>Heaven</i>                          | 6-12  | Marley, African American, 14                               | Heaven, OH                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Familial relationships</li> <li>● Adoption</li> </ul>  |
| <i>Maizon at Blue Hill</i>             | 6-8   | Maizon Singh, African American, 12                         | Brooklyn, NY & Canterbury, CT   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Racism and isolation</li> <li>● Assimilation</li> <li>● Classism</li> </ul>                                      |
| <i>Hush</i>                            | 6-8   | Toswiah Green/ Evie Thomas, African American, 12           | Denver, CO                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Familial relationships</li> <li>● Friendship</li> <li>● Racism (police brutality)</li> </ul>                     |
| <i>Bronx Masquerade</i>                | 6-12  | Many African American teens                                | the Bronx, NY                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Familial relationships</li> <li>● Friendship</li> <li>● Self-esteem and self-love</li> </ul>                     |
| <i>November Blues</i>                  | 9-12  | November, African American, 16                             | Unclear, Urban Locale           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Familial relationships</li> <li>● Teen pregnancy</li> <li>● Coping with death</li> </ul>                         |
| <i>Push</i>                            | Adult | Claireece, African American, 16                            | Harlem, NY                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Hope and determination</li> <li>● Incest</li> <li>● Molestation</li> <li>● Child Abuse</li> <li>● HIV</li> </ul> |
| <i>The Coldest Winter Ever</i>         | Adult | Winter, African American, 13 at the beginning of the novel | Brooklyn, NY Long Island, NY    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Hedonism</li> <li>● Incarceration</li> <li>● Teen sexuality</li> <li>● Finding positive role models</li> </ul>   |
| <i>Bitch</i>                           | Adult | Precious, African American, 15 +                           | New York                        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Familial relationships</li> <li>● Materialism</li> <li>● Defining one's femininity</li> </ul>                    |
| <i>Black and Ugly</i>                  | Adult | Parade, African American, 22                               | Hyattsville, MD                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Self-love and self-respect</li> <li>● Colorism</li> <li>● Sexuality</li> </ul>                                   |
| <i>Supreme Clientele</i>               | Adult | Zya, African American, 17                                  | Harlem, NY                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Physical and mental abuse</li> <li>● Depictions of life in the hood</li> <li>● Gender roles</li> </ul>           |

|                          |      |                                |                                     |   |
|--------------------------|------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---|
| <i>Jazmin's Notebook</i> | 9-12 | Jazmin, African American, 14   | Washington Heights, NY<br>1960s     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Familial relationships</li> <li>● Racism</li> <li>● Alcohol abuse</li> <li>● Finding one's home/place</li> </ul> |
| <i>The Friendship</i>    | 3-5  | Cassie, African American, 9    | Mississippi<br>1933                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Friendship</li> <li>● Racism</li> <li>● Civil Rights</li> </ul>  |
| <i>One Crazy Summer</i>  | 3-8  | Delphine, African American, 11 | Brooklyn, NY<br>Oakland, CA<br>1968 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Familial relationships</li> <li>● Civil Rights</li> <li>● Childhood activism</li> </ul>                          |

In addition to similar protagonist ages and narrative locations, common themes are also present across the books. For example, as staples in coming-of-age narratives, the preservation of hope and the building of self-confidence are present in each of the books. Specifically, as the protagonists mature, they are confronted with conflicts, ranging from recognizing their inner and outer beauty to combating violence and abuse. However, instead of letting their former actions or the actions of others dictate their futures, the protagonists strive to maintain hope in the presence of dejection. They make the decision to believe in themselves, which increases the level of confidence they have by the end of the novel. The result is that the protagonists grow from their experiences and become more aware of themselves and more aware of the people who exist in the world around them.

Familial relationships also dominate the list of thematic elements, as the protagonists learn to appreciate the differences amongst their family members and respect the decisions their family members make. There are also explicit emphases on positive and negative mother-daughter relationships as well intergenerational bonds created between generations of Black women. An example of this is in *Toning the Sweep*, as Emily learns about the history of her family and comes to understand her relatives through stories told by her grandmother. Additionally, in *One Crazy Summer*, Delphine realizes that although she may not agree with her mother's decisions, she can respect her dedication to the Black Panther's cause. Ultimately, protagonists in these narratives learn to either embrace or reject the actions of their mothers, and they also pull closer to elders within and outside of their communities to build bonds beyond their maternal links.

As the protagonists examine their familial relationships, they also analyze their friendships. For instance, Marie and Lena form a bond across class and racial boundaries to the

initial detriment of their family and peers in *I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This*. The analysis of friendship is also prominent in *November Blues* where November and Jericho build a strained friendship as they both combat grief due to the death of a friend. Broadly, the protagonists in the novels on the list find friends in unexpected places, learn to understand others who may be different from them, and remove friends who no longer have a place in their lives.

Although positive themes were often present, however, the novels also emphasize elements of racism, violence, and abuse. For example, every historical novel contains an element of racism; however, discrimination is not limited to overt violence, for it also comes in the form of microaggressions and overt tensions founded on prejudice against a protagonist's appearance. Specifically, both Parade from *Black and Ugly* and Maleeka from *The Skin I'm In* combat colorism as they work to dismantle internal and external discrimination based on the dark hue of their skin. Similarly, Joyce from *Blue Tights* has to find her place within a dance culture that excludes young Black women, especially those with fuller figures. Essentially, the Black girls in many of the novels experience discriminatory practices based on their racial and gendered identities.

Thus, based on the characters, themes, and locations of the novels included in the research selected for this meta-analysis, particular representations of Black girlhood are formed. According to these texts, Black girls are all African American, and although they may live in suburbs and rural areas, they mostly live in urban cities in the northeast. Additionally, Black girls between the ages of 12 and 15 are still learning who they are and figuring out their place in the world, but once they become older adolescents, they exhibit adverse behaviors, including teen pregnancy, violence, abuse, criminal activity, and materiality. Regardless of age, however, Black girls form tight bonds with their family members and friends as they navigate hostile worlds that discriminate against them based on their race and/or gender. These results suggest that Black girls possess similar identities across geographic, economic, relational, and behavioral traits; however, although Black girls may share common experiences as referenced by the selected books, Black girls are not monoliths.

Of course, this is a broad and generalized description of the texts; yet, the number of books with similar themes as well as the large percentage of narratives highlighting urban locations, northeastern states, and Black girls between the ages of 12 and 15 could provide a constricted view of what a Black girl is and who a Black girl can be. Specifically, these results

suggest that the mirrors of Black girlhood are narrowed because they exclude Black girls from across the African Diaspora, confine Black girls to certain geographical regions, and limit the representation of older adolescents to stories centered around harsh, urban existences. The findings also suggest that the windows into Black girlhood are opaque because the exclusion of multiple representations of Black girlhood creates a slender opening through which to view the intricate and complex experiences of Black girls.

### **Who Are the Influencers?**

The realistic depictions of Black girlhood present within these texts provide examples of the lived experiences of numerous Black girls, from the portrayal of loving families and difficult home lives to harsh renderings of inequality and oppression. Nevertheless, confining Black girls to texts that fit within the current metanarratives created by these stories excludes Black girls who do not see their mirrors within this narrow view of Black girlhood. These stories also alienate girls who would rather have a break from the “bombardment of racial tensions” (Koonce, 2017, p. 891) and girls like Osula who wish to read SFF. However, the researchers’ rationales for book selection as well as the publishing dates of the selected novels centralize a larger issue that creates constraints in the representation of Black girls in fiction: the publishing of diverse books.

As mentioned previously, Bishop (1992) acknowledged the dearth of literature for Black girls in the early 1980s, but sadly, the numbers have not changed much in the last few decades. In the articles analyzed for the meta-analysis, all of the researchers chose novels with Black female protagonists that were written by Black authors, but only one of the books they chose were written within the last decade. Additionally, various books were used multiple times across articles, suggesting the limited number of books available to be used in research. More than likely, this restricted number of available texts stems from the paucity of children’s literature written by Black authors in the last thirty years.

Bishop (2007) documented the dismally low number of children’s books written by and about Black people between 1985 and 2001, finding that Black authors wrote no more than 2.2% of children’s books within the time frame. According to the Cooperative Children’s Book Center (CCBC), the low number of books written by and about Black people between 2002 and 2017 are equally reprehensible. Currently, no more than 3.5% of the total number of children’s books are written by Black authors and feature Black characters (Table 3), suggesting that the number

of books written by and about Black people have yet to maintain the double-digit percentage discussed by Chall et al. (1979). These statistics are representative of literature in all genres and publishing formats, and they include books for children, tweens, and young adults. They also combine books with male and female characters. So, the numbers would be exponentially smaller when considering the availability of books within each leveled category and across gender groups. Thus, the collection from which the scholars could select novels for their research was exceptionally small.

Table 3. CCBC Statistics for Books Written by and about Black People 2002-2017

|      | <b>Est. Total Number of Children's Books</b> | <b>Number of Books about Black People</b> | <b>Percentage of Books about Black People</b> | <b>Number of Books by Black Authors about Black People</b> | <b>Percentage of Books by Black Authors about Black People</b> |
|------|--|---|---|--|--|
| 2017 | 3,700  | 340                                       | 9.1%  | 122  | 3.3%   |
| 2016 | 3,400  | 287                                       | 8.4%  | 94   | 2.8%   |
| 2015 | 3,400  | 270                                       | 7.9%  | 108  | 3.2%   |
| 2014 | 3,500  | 181                                       | 5.1%  | 85   | 2.4%   |
| 2013 | 3,200  | 94  | 2.9%  | 69   | 2.2%   |
| 2012 | 3,600  | 119                                       | 3.3%  | 69   | 1.9%   |
| 2011 | 3,400  | 123                                       | 3.6%  | 79   | 2.3%   |
| 2010 | 3,400  | 156                                       | 4.6%  | 102  | 3.0%   |
| 2009 | 3,000  | 157                                       | 5.2%  | 83   | 2.8%   |
| 2008 | 3,000  | 172                                       | 5.7%  | 83   | 2.8%   |
| 2007 | 3,000  | 150                                       | 5.0%  | 77   | 2.6%   |
| 2006 | 3,000  | 153                                       | 5.1%  | 87   | 2.9%   |
| 2005 | 2,800  | 149                                       | 5.3%  | 75   | 2.7%   |
| 2004 | 2,800  | 143                                       | 5.1%  | 99   | 3.5%   |
| 2003 | 3,200  | 171                                       | 5.3%  | 79   | 2.5%   |
| 2002 | 3,150  | 166                                       | 5.3%  | 69   | 2.2%   |

\* percentages calculated by author

Consequently, the small number of books published by and about Black people limits the number of books that are analyzed to determine various awards, including the Coretta Scott King Award. The award is given to African American authors and illustrators who publish books in the United States and whose work portrays “some aspect of the Black experience, past, present, or future” (American Library Association, 2018, p. 4). However, the Coretta Scott King Award can honor only a few books per year, and the award is given to authors who write books featuring both Black boys and Black girls across grade levels. Based on the CCBC statistics, the

total number of books that are eligible each year to receive the award is small, with book totals between 69 and 122 for the last sixteen years. Thus, within an already small number of books written about Black people, an even smaller number of books and authors can and will be awarded. Therefore, the books that researchers could select using this list are greatly limited not only by the availability of the books, but also by the specific protagonists the researchers sought for their studies.

However, the dismal CCBC numbers do more than statistically represent the dearth of Black children's fiction. They also speak to a narrowed publishing arena that dictates which stories are published in the first place. Specifically, Lee and Low's 2015 Diversity Baseline Survey of 8 review journals and 34 publishers across North America found that the publishing industry is almost 80% White, while Black people make up only 4% of the publishing population (Low, 2016). These numbers include executive staff and book reviewers as well as the editorial, sales, and marketing departments, suggesting that the people who make the decisions as to what and who gets published are overwhelmingly White. In other words, a White publishing industry makes most of the major decisions about which books written by and about Black people will be highly publicized and gain prominence in awards and school circles.

The publishing industry's preference for certain mirrors and windows is shown in the researchers' choices, as the contemporary and historical fiction books selected are published widely, reviewed in industry journals, and included on school reading lists. Alternatively, the urban fiction novels are largely ignored on awards lists, in research articles, and in school spaces. In fact, with the exception of *Push* and *The Coldest Winter Ever*, the urban fiction novels selected by researchers were either self-published or distributed through small, independent publishers. This portrays a publishing bias, where many minoritized authors are forced to publish through smaller presses because the larger distributors often deem the work of un-established authors as unsuitable or lacking in quality, terms that suggest publishers are only interested in conventional, safe material that is easy to distribute and sell (Elliott, 2016; Hill, 1998; Ireland, 2016). Thus, publishers' preferences for specific stories limit the publishing opportunities for non-conventional narratives, forcing Black authors of alternative literature to distribute their texts via self-publishing or small, independent publishers.

These preferences explain why urban fiction is limited in the scholars' selections, and it also assists in clarifying the erasure of SFF books in the research used for this meta-analysis.

Particularly, in reference to the dearth of SFF books with characters of color, Myers (2014) coined the phrase, “the apartheid of literature,” in which characters of color are “limited to the townships of occasional historical books that concern themselves with the legacies of civil rights and slavery but are never given a pass card to traverse the lands of adventure, curiosity, imagination or personal growth” (para. 7). In his argument, he acknowledges that the publishing industry makes statements about the intent to diversify the books they distribute, but he also notes that children of color are often left out of the imaginative arena, meaning that the level of diversity is limited to conventional, realistic portrayals. These sentiments were echoed by author Zetta Elliott (2012) in her presentation about the focus of Black trauma in children’s books, and it was also reflected in Justina Ireland’s (2016) commentary on the anti-Blackness within publishing spaces for Black SFF writers.

Essentially, the publishing industry decides which books are published and publicized and those books are submitted as award contenders and reviewed in various journals. Educators use the awards and the journal reviews to justify classroom and library purchases, and researchers use the reviews and awards to validate the use of specific books in their studies. Then, publishing houses use school purchasing power and award lists to publish similar books that will be read and purchased widely. It’s a systemic cycle that affects every literacy stakeholder involved, and it excludes any reader whose choices may not align with conventional, realistic stories. Those who choose to go against the cycle, like researchers who choose urban fiction or readers who like SFF, must rely on other methods to select their novels, for the publishing industry does not endorse the texts as often as those that are situated within contemporary and historical fiction.

### **Imagining New Hopescapes Through SFF**

Hamilton (1986) defined the hopescape as a space for authors to portray the community, culture, history, and tradition of Black people as parallel, rather than beneath the larger American culture. To create this hopescape, she believed it was important for authors to imaginatively use their language and ideas to portray the humanity of Black people so that all people could be reminded “to care who these black people are, where they come from, how they dream, how they hunger, [and] what they want” (p. 17). Yet, her call for authors to highlight Black people in their writing was not directly aligned with a pragmatic retelling of the past or a realistic portrayal of the present. Instead, she called for a triad of perspectives – the known, the remembered, and the



imagined (Hamilton, 1987). That is, she knew that the stories used to portray the multifaceted nature of Black existence could not be relegated to one point of view or one literary genre.

To depict the hopescape, Hamilton consistently combined past, present, and future into her stories. She brought magic and scientific innovation into a world that was lacking in imagination, and she used her fantastic tales to focalize various aspects of Black history and Black life in America, the painful memories and the triumphant victories. Of course, Hamilton was one of the few Black SFF writers at the time, and she was one of the only writers publishing imaginative novels that placed Black adolescent female characters in leading roles (Bishop, 2007). In this regard, Hamilton is a pioneer in the Black SFF field. However, the limited publishing opportunities for Black authors of fantastic stories has ensured that Black girls have had insufficient access to the hopescape Hamilton was trying to cultivate.

In numerous ways, the publishing industry acts as a gatekeeper (Hill, 1998) that determines which mirrors are used to reflect Black girlhood and which windows are available for others to see various representations of Black girl experiences. This affects not only what literature teachers use in their classrooms and what books libraries include on their shelves, but it also affects which books researchers select in their analyses of diverse youth literature, including the examination of Black girl representations. Particularly, if the publishers and review journals are not endorsing specific genres, and if they continue the systemic cycle by highlighting narrowed views of Black girlhood, then it will remain difficult for literacy stakeholders, including researchers, teachers, parents, and students to find unconventional books.

Of course, the apartheid of literature restricts which stories are readily available for analysis and inclusion, especially when it comes to SFF texts, but representations of Black girls in SFF have greatly increased since the time of Bishop's initial study. Thus, to assist in breaking the systemic cycle that privileges contemporary realistic and historical fiction, I include a chart with a list of SFF texts written by Black female authors that feature Black female protagonists (Table 4). Some of the books have won awards, such as the Andre Norton Award for Young Adult Science Fiction, the Locus Award for Best Young Adult Book, and the Golden Duck Award for Excellence in Children's Science Fiction Literature. However, many of them have not received awards, as they are still relegated to the margins of publishing and lack the publicity that other novels have. Still, it is a starting point for parents, teachers, scholars, and Black girls, like Osula, who want to read or analyze SFF stories with Black female characters.

Table 4. Black Female Authors of SFF featuring Black Female Protagonists

|  |   |  |
|--|---|--|
| <b>Tomi Adeyemi</b><br><i>Children of Blood and Bone</i> | <b>Kheryn Callender</b><br><i>Hurricane Child</i>           | <b>Wendy Raven McNair</b><br><i>Asleep</i>                                   |
| <b>AC Arthur</b><br><i>Manifest</i>                      | <b>Dhonielle Clayton</b><br><i>The Belles</i>               | <b>Marilyn Nelson &amp; T. Hegamin</b><br><i>Pemba's Song: A Ghost Story</i> |
| <b>Tyra Banks</b><br><i>Modelland</i>                    | <b>Zetta Elliott</b><br><i>A Wish After Midnight</i>        | <b>Kelbian Noel</b><br><i>Roots</i>  |
| <b>Tracey Baptiste</b><br><i>The Jumbies</i>             | <b>Virginia Hamilton</b><br><i>Justice and Her Brothers</i> | <b>Nnedi Okorafor</b><br><i>Akata Witch</i>                                  |
| <b>Aiyana Bey</b><br><i>Children of the Light</i>        | <b>Micheline Hess</b><br><i>Malice in Ovenland</i>          | <b>Jewell Parker Rhodes</b><br><i>Ninth Ward</i>                             |
| <b>Malorie Blackman</b><br><i>Noughts and Crosses</i>    | <b>Nalo Hopkinson</b><br><i>The Chaos</i>                   | <b>Dia Reeves</b><br><i>Bleeding Violet</i>                                  |
| <b>Sharolyn Brown</b><br><i>The Heaviness of Knowing</i> | <b>Justina Ireland</b><br><i>Dread Nation</i>               | <b>Sherri Smith</b><br><i>Orleans</i>  |
| <b>Octavia Butler</b><br><i>Parable of the Sower</i>     | <b>Alaya Dawn Johnson</b><br><i>The Summer Prince</i>       | <b>Nicole Y. Walters</b><br><i>Charis: Journey to Pandora's Jar</i>          |
| <b>Constance Burriss</b><br><i>Black Beauty</i>          | <b>Alicia McCalla</b><br><i>Breaking Free</i>               | <b>Andrea Rose Washington</b><br><i>Adalithiel</i>                           |

The books included on this list cover the gamut of SFF texts, including alien invasion (*The Heaviness of Knowing*), mythology (*Charis: Journey to Pandora's Jar*), time travel (*A Wish After Midnight*), dystopian (*The Belles*), horror (*The Jumbies*), and Afrofuturism (*Orleans*). These books also are written in various formats from comics (*Malice in Ovenland*) to lengthy novels (*Bleeding Violet*). Some of the authors of these novels, like Octavia Butler and Nalo Hopkinson, were publishing SFF before the new millenium, while others, like Tomi Adeyemi and Dhonielle Clayton debuted their first single-authored young adult novels this year. The list also includes authors who have received contracts from large presses, like AC Arthur and Alaya Dawn Johnson, as well as self and indie published authors, like Alicia McCalla, Wendy Raven McNair, and Kelbian Noel.

Moreover, the books on this list include Black female characters who live in diverse geographical locations and who represent Black girlhood across the African Diaspora. Specifically, there are representations of Black girlhood in Canada (*The Chaos*), Nigeria (*Akata Witch*), the United States (*Ninth Ward*), Brazil (*The Summer Prince*), and St. Thomas of the US Virgin Islands (*Hurricane Child*). These characters ranged in age to include protagonists who are early adolescents (*Justice and Her Brothers*), middle adolescents (*Pemba's Song*), and late adolescents (*Adalithiel*). Also, each of the narratives listed includes topics similar to those within the realistic fiction novels selected by the researchers. For instance, they contain topics such as intergenerational relationships (*Children of Blood and Bone*), racism (*Noughts and Crosses*), coming-of-age (*Parable of the Sower*), family relationships (*Children of the Light*), stereotypes (*Modelland*), violence (*Dread Nation*), and body positivity (*Black Beauty*).

The difference is that the authors presented in this list find ways to blend the perspectives discussed by Hamilton as part of the hopescape. They use the imagined as a place to embed the known and the remembered, instead of confining the hopescape to the narrow lens of the past or present. They find ways to “embrace the fantastic while also embracing intact family units, intergenerational support and relationships, and gifted and talented protagonists who can take on the world without carrying it on their shoulders” (Hood, 2009, p. 85). In other words, these authors present another mirror in which Black girls can see themselves and additional windows through which others can see representations of Black girlhood. Through their books, the authors imagine new hopescapes, ones that differ from the safe, conventional literature beloved by publishers.

Of course, this list is not exhaustive, as there are more SFF books with Black female characters written by Black male authors as well as authors of other races. Additionally, there are numerous SFF books that are classified as adult literature that could be added to this list, and there are more self-published authors whose works may not be as easily accessible. However, in an arena where publishing is limited to conventional narratives, and in a time where SFF featuring strong, Black girls is relegated to the margins, it is essential to have a place to start.

### **Conclusion**

With the growth of books featuring Black female protagonists, literacy stakeholders have the additional responsibility to broaden their book selections because Black girls need more than one type of reflection and more than one window to look through. Particularly, Black girls need

access to stories depicting racism, prejudice, and realism alongside narratives that portray hope, imagination, and diverse futures. Ensuring that Black girls have access to stories within each group and that other adolescents have access to varied representations of Black girlhood subverts narrowed ideas about who a Black girl is, where a Black girl can live, and who a Black girl can become. Instead, youth will be able to see books with content specifically created for Black girls, books that represent Black girls as part of the “mainstream,” books where Black girls are naturally existing with people of various cultural backgrounds, and books where Black girls are the heroes, flying spaceships, and slaying dragons.

Because Black girl identities are multiple, intricate, and complex (Muhammad & Haddix, 2016), all literacy stakeholders “must reorient our methodologies to account for the uncommon, the unknowable, [and] the illegible, [and] embrace the paradoxical, the troubling, the world-breaking” (Moore, 2017, p. 113). That is, publishers, library organizations, students, parents, teachers, and researchers must be willing to include texts that move beyond “what is” and “what has been” to allow for texts that highlight “what if” or “what can be.” It will take more work because the publishing industry greatly determines what books are available, but it is a necessary task to ensure that every Black girl can find her mirror in books, no matter what genre she prefers.

Myers (2014) noted that the boundaries imposed upon the imaginations of children of color force them to limit their dreams to what they can perceive. They are stuck in a box perfectly outlined to specific proportions designated by the major presses who publish the books, and the nails to close the box are hammered shut by the systemic cycle in which all literacy stakeholders take part. However, imagining new hopescapes requires the imagination to be unlocked. It requires that Black girls are given the chance to color outside the lines and create new representations of Black girlhood. It ensures that Black girls are able to imagine what they want from the world and work to create new ways to make their dreams a reality, rather than being forced to use the tools that the realistic world provides. If literacy stakeholders work to break the cycle, one day, Black girls like Osula who love to read SFF books and books about strong Black girls will be able to have both of their preferences recognized.

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