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Cultural Signification through Reader’s Theatre: An Analysis of African American Girls and Their Hair

Abstract: This article explored the role of hair in Sylviane Diouf’s *Bintou’s Braids* and focused on the impact of hair as a cultural signifier on girls and the curriculum. The article examined the ability of this children’s text to address female beauty standards and suggests the use of literary techniques, such as reader’s theatre, to recognize and critically explore diverse issues among children. The work specifically: (1) deconstructs messages about hair norms, with particular emphasis on black female hair in one children’s text, and (2) transforms the selected text into a reader’s theatre script for use in elementary classrooms, suggesting an array of literary construction and usage types in children’s classroom communities to support increased literacy engagement. This article expands the body of inquiry on hair and its impact on the curriculum by examining the relationships between the cultural power of hair, literacy, performance and African American girls. The literature has established the unique responses of diverse girls to literary constructions, and several studies provide alternatives for deciphering the meaning of texts and utilizing the empowering aspect of girls through literacy. Likewise, this article qualitatively examined Diouf’s *Bintou’s Braids* for its use of various aspects of identity development such as affirmation, ritual and social responsibility. The reader’s theatre adaptation, *Little Bintou Loves Her Braids*, begins to address the current inadequacy of literary offerings in the genre.

Keywords: literacy, African American girls, reader’s theatre

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Introduction

Reader’s theater is a highly effective means of bringing young readers into intense involvement with literature . . . beyond all else, reader’s theater places literature at the very center of a shared experience. (Avi, 2009)

What better way to bring a group of African American girls together on a quest to engage them in their education than through reading and “acting out” about their hair. African American girls come to school with black hair that has a distinct history to overcome in American society. While some African Americans embrace their African heritage and view the natural traits of their hair with value, many struggle with the need to conform to European beauty norms when considering, styling and presenting their hair.

Competing mythologies around something as deceptively insignificant as hair still haunt and complicate African Americans’ self-identities and their ideals of beauty, thus revealing broad and complex social, historical, and political realities. The implications and consequences of the seemingly radical split between European standards of beauty and black people's hair become ways of building or crushing a black person's self-esteem, all based on the straightness or nappiness of an individual’s hair. (Lester, 2000)

Simon (2000) noted this classification for hair within African American society on a scale with kinky hair falling lower on the scale and straighter hair ranking higher on the scale and thus being considered superior. This taxonomy of hair was evidenced around the controversial book cover for Larbalestier’s (2009) young adult text, Liar. The publisher, Bloomsbury Children’s Books, released review copies of the text featuring a picture of a white girl with long, straight hair, although the girl in the story, Micah, is African American with short, “nappy” hair. While significant backlash from the author, as well as, criticism from internet sources and supporters of literature spurred the publisher to reissue the text with an image that more appropriately reflected the primary character, the negative message from the publisher was clearly established. The publisher’s dismal expectations for books focusing on urban/ethnic topics fueled their rejection of the author’s original idea to have the letters of the book’s title fashioned out of African-type human hair. Furthermore, the publishers used a white model on the cover, because a white image was expected to have greater appeal with the sales and marketing department’s target audience (Cornwell, 2009).

While Enekwechi and Moore (1999) minimalize the influence of literary texts to empower young girls and demystify the secrets they suggest the authors of children’s books about African American hair are revealing to the public, other
studies suggest that there is a level of significance for diversity based lessons to effectively broach culturally sensitive topics. Up until the 1990s, black hair as fodder for verbal and written publication was avoided and according to Bordo (1993) was presented prior to that time as a normalization of black culture to white standards featuring African American females with long, straight hair. Resisting the need to overtly address the topic of African American hair, particularly in children’s texts, ignores an inextricable part of the African persona that silently continues to define good and bad (Simon, 2000).

Reader’s theatre, however, provides an opportunity to utilize literacy texts to enhance engagement of the reader, especially readers who might otherwise disassociate from the content and therefore, experience reduced rates of success with reading skills. The ability of reader’s theatre to transform children’s literature into active lessons where students read/recite lines from scripts transferred from an existing text or created scripts from their original stories is tremendous. Cueva, Dignan, and Kuhnley (2012) associated reader’s theatre participants with increased knowledge acquisition, expanded comfort discussing critical yet tough issues, and greater intent to engage in positive behaviors. Reader’s theatre studies note the impact of student vocalizations and expressive movements to heighten the reader’s connection with the feelings, opinions and intentions of the texts’ characters. Since enhancing the reading skills and self-reliance of students is the essential goal of reader’s theatre, it is an ideal mechanism to provide what will be interpreted by African American female students as authentic and relevant work. Applicable and significant exchanges between students create the dynamic landscape for engagement in critical reading and writing; locating a space where the students, rather than the teachers, are central to the work as revealed in Schillinger’s (2011) research with young, diverse females using Wiki applications to study literature.

The literature agrees that girls from diverse backgrounds, in particular girls from urban settings, often participate in the hegemonic practice of perceiving their literacy experience from a deficit perspective. This coupled with few opportunities to access texts relevant to their experience compounds these issues. Such findings were strengthened in DeBlase’s (2000) examination of urban girls who constructed social identities through their experiences with literary texts. Further study by Spalding and Ziff (1997) noted that despite a tendency toward literacy acquisition in girls, they still find ways to distort literacy development and accomplishment and to devalue their achievement. This manifests itself, in part, as a cultural preponderance toward orality within the African American community that is not valued in mainstream educational settings. Research exploring the literary experiences of African Americans, especially girls, highly connects the practice of speaking and reading as the means
by which African American girls best absorb and interpret literary events. Scholars who have examined this process include Fisher’s (2009) work, *Black Literate Lives: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* and Gallagher’s (2007) text, *The Theatre of Urban: Youth and Schooling in Dangerous Times* (Winn, 2010). This phenomenon is magnified by the dissonance between African American girls’ specific personal reading selections as opposed to what is typically assigned according to board approved curricula. While this demographic produces less than stellar standardized test scores in reading achievement, research supports the notion that African American girls do read, albeit material deemed inappropriate and lacking in academic rigor by many of their teachers (Mahiri, 2004; Rampey, Dion, & Donahue, 2009; Hull & Schultz, 2001; Gibson, 2010).

Reader’s theater events set the stage for capturing the concerns and interests of African American girls by introducing reading selections that overtly address the female struggle with hair and how this is intrinsically connected to identity formation in general. Creating an authentic communication event and reinforcing the social nature of reading for African American girls is essential to their ability to sustain oral reading practice and to amplify their opportunities for cooperative learning and community building that will impact achievement (Liu, 2000; Millin & Rhinehart, 1999; Tsou, 2011).

This article examines the role of hair in a selected children’s text and focuses specifically on the impact of hair as a cultural signifier on girls and the curriculum. The critique primarily focuses on the ability of one children’s text to address the issue of female beauty standards and serve as a means to more fully engage the reader in literary constructions that recognize and critically explore diverse issues among children. The article specifically: (1) deconstructs messages about hair norms, with particular emphasis on black female hair in one children’s text, and (2) transforms the selected text into a reader’s theatre script for use in elementary classrooms, suggesting an array of literary construction and usage types in children’s classroom communities to support increased literacy engagement. This article expands the body of inquiry on hair and its impact on the curriculum by examining the relationships between the cultural power of hair, literacy, performance and African American girls.

While the literature has established the importance of noting the unique responses of girls to literary constructions, the proactive methods suggested in several studies provide alternatives for deciphering the meaning of texts and utilizing the empowering aspect of girls through literacy. The following text was qualitatively examined for its contribution to the body of children’s literature related to hair and identity development. In the vein of Denzin’s (1995) work which explored the biases and assumptions found within a body of educational
research texts, this discussion examined Sylviane Diouf’s (2001) children’s text for its biases, assumptions and capabilities. In particular, Diouf’s *Bintou’s Braids* was critiqued to explore the use of black girls’ hair and the identity constructs upon which the texts are grounded. Finally, the text offers a model script suitable for use as a reader’s theatre activity with elementary level students.

**Deconstructing Sylviane Diouf’s *Bintou’s Braids***

Themes centering on various aspects of identity construction such as affirmation, rites of passage and cooperative learning and community building are all found skillfully embedded in Diouf’s text, *Bintou’s Braids*. While messages with thematic parallels are present in comparable, contemporary texts, Diouf expanded the focus on African-type hair and girls in children’s literature with a distinct focus on hair as a cultural signifier. Pride and self-esteem, defiance and conformity and social responsibility underscore the associations between hair and personal identity.

Sekayi’s (1997) investigation associated healthy identity formation among adolescent girls with the ability of literacy events and schooling activities to assist female students critique such issues as body image and community expectations against societal norms. Inherent in affirming oneself is the act of critically acknowledging all perceived realities and building up from what some might aesthetically consider ground zero. In the context of hair, African American girls must come to terms and acknowledge what they are working with, even if embedded within that act is the deficit perspective that sometimes accompanies all things black. Diouf opens this text with Bintou gazing into a reflecting pool of water and acknowledging her hair situation: “My hair is short and fuzzy. My hair is plain and silly. All I have is four little tufts on my head.” Initially, Bintou’s confession appears to be one laced with lament about her shortcomings in comparison to a Eurocentric hair standard. The deficit nature of her words such as “short”, “plain” and “all I have” fill the brief description with signs of lack. However, she immediately counters the negative aspects of her hair by suggesting the benefits of what her hair has to offer: “Sometimes I dream that little birds make their nest in my hair. It would be such a nice place for babies to rest. There, they would sleep and they would sing.” Bintou quickly affirms herself and negates the shortcomings of her hair by suggesting how soft, peaceful and desirable it would be for wonderful, little birds to inhabit that head of hair she has. In concert with the personal affirmation, Bintou is not fully accepting the state of her hair, because she longs to have braids. The very first
line in the book is: “My name is Bintou and I want braids.” Bintou’s hair is knotted in small tufts, but she affirms herself while continuing her quest for what she perceives as improvement. This early section of the book demonstrates the strength and resilience in a girl as young as Bintou to understand her condition, focus on the positive aspects of her condition, and remain hopeful in her dreams because despite her fond dream of birds: “. . . most of the time, I dream of braids. Long braids with gold coins and seashells.” The affirmation of African hair continues as Bintou states: “My sister Fatou has braids and she looks pretty. When she bends over me, the beads in her braids touch my cheek.”

Bintou begins to cry and her sister responds to Bintou’s request that long braids will make her pretty. Rites of passage themes emerge in the text when Fatou informs Bintou that: “Little girls can’t have braids. Tomorrow I’ll cornrow your hair.” Bintou returns to her deficit space and replies, “That’s all I ever get.” Bintou decides to ask Grandma Soukeye, who has come to the village for the baby brother’s baptism, why little girls cannot have braids. Grandma imparts generational wisdom regarding rites of passage as well as cooperative learning to Bintou: “A long time ago there was a girl named Coumba who thought only about how pretty she was. Everyone envied her and Coumba became vain and selfish. It was then that the mothers decided that little girls would not be allowed to have braids, so that they would only make friends, play and learn. From then on, Coumba got cornrows.” Grandma lovingly strokes Bintou’s hair while sharing the tradition of this ritual and the social responsibility rooted within it as she continues, “Now, little Bintou, when you’re older, it’s fine to want to look your best and show everybody that you have become a young woman. But you are still just a girl. You will get braids when it is time.” Bintou continues to nurture her dreams and focus on her transformation: “When I sleep that night, I dream that I’m old. I dream that I’m sixteen and I have braids with gold coins and seashells. And when I turn my head, the sun follows me. I shine like a queen.” Sprague and Keeling (2000) argued that language and literacy skills are bolstered for girls who view themselves as successful individuals in literary texts and utilize the characters as role models. This research provides substantial support for including literature that encourages girls to meet the challenges of peer pressure and strengthens their confidence and self-esteem.

Hair is a complex, cultural symbol overflowing with varied connotation dependent upon the audience of interpreters, as noted by Leach (1976) in his examination of public cultural symbols. He suggested, along with Obeyesekere (1984), that hair consciously motivates individuals or groups by communicating an individual’s identity within the public sphere. The highly complex life experiences of females innately construct hair as a public cultural symbol that defines
socially accepted ritual while simultaneously expressing defiance against those norms.

The next day Bintou has been unsuccessful at defying the social norms of her village and still has her four little tufts of hair, but other rituals and rites of passage along with cooperative learning and community building events pull her away from her hair obsession and back to the larger issues of life. The baptism occurs for her baby brother, and a feast of lamb, rice and papayas is served. All the older girls and women are in attendance and ritual events lose their flair as Bintou sees all the fancy, adorned, braided hairstyles that the older females wear. The older women tell Bintou that they wear their hair in these particular styles to honor the ancestors they never knew who wore their hair in similar ways. Bintou also encounters the larger, global community of black girls and their hair when a neighbor, Mariama, who studies in the city, and her friend, Terry, from America visit the village. Terry has “braids that reach down to her waist” and when asked by Bintou if little girls in America have braids Terry responds: “Many do. And they put colorful barrettes on each braid.” Bintou again compares herself to the American girls and imagines that they are prettier than she. She reminds herself that, “All I have is four little tufts of hair on my head and I am sad,” but she is quickly transformed from her state of despondency when she walked to the beach and sees two village boys drowning near their sinking boat. Bintou quickly runs through the brush, disassembling her neatly tufted hair, and calls for a rescue team. The belief that the human condition is tightly coupled with individuals’ ability to understand and support democratic ideals was explored in Temple’s (1993) research, which suggested that children could learn social responsibility through the use of their literacy events. When Bintou returns, she is praised by everyone in the village for her brave and wise decision and is promised a reward of whatever she would like. Bintou’s sister, Fatou readily replies, “She wants braids.” “Then braids you shall have,” her mother responds. As Bintou rests that night, her dreams return and this time she has braids and colorful birds nestled in her hair. The next morning, Bintou squeezes her eyes closed and Grandma carefully styles her hair and tells her, “You’re a special little girl and your hair will be special, too.” She is afraid that it will be cornrows again, but when she opens her eyes, she has beautiful, colorful birds nestled in her hair just like in her dreams. The text closes with Bintou feeling victorious and strong: “I am Bintou. My hair is black and shiny. My hair is soft and pretty. I am the girl with birds in her hair. The sun follows me and I’m happy.”

Continued study of specific methods for disrupting the undesirable effects of traditional literature revealed a minority of texts suitable for African American girls that are randomly chosen by teachers for use in classrooms (Marsh, 2000;
Renold, 2000; Walker & Foote, 2000). These studies continued to build upon earlier work that established a link between literacy and gender issues and noted such benefits as young girls viewing powerful, female protagonists who exhibit positive and independent behavior as role models. Furthermore, these texts offer more alternatives to customary literary choices and can inspire educators to be more cognizant of the effect of the hidden curriculum and the racial and gender biases imbedded therein.

Reader’s theatre: scripting Bintou’s Braids

Reader’s Theatre is a staged reading of literature that emphasizes the importance of text by using limited action, suggested characterization, no costumes, and no props. Sometimes called minimalist theatre, it is a dramatic form, originally developed for performing in theatrical settings, in which participants read from scripts taken directly from a literary work. (Poe, 2010)

While curriculum support abounds regarding the use of reader’s theatre in all levels of K-12 education, few if any examples of reader’s theatre scripts based on the limited body of African American literature for elementary level readers exists. Pre-populated web sites offer useful tips for educators to incorporate transformed text scripts from a more traditional list of popular children’s stories, yet no literature overtly focusing on diverse experiences of children appeared on the lists/sites reviewed (Reader’s Theatre Scripts, 2012; Reader’s Theatre Scripts and Plays, 2012). Two African American focused reader’s theatre scripts written in 2005 for use at the middle or secondary level were located and are readily accessible (Quinn, 2005; Satchell, 2005). Likewise, there is a body of literature from 2010 to 2011 examining the impact of identity construction on the educational experiences of African American girls during adolescence and high school years, however, much less work exists in the area of pre-adolescence (Brown, 2011; Brooks, Sekayi, Savage, Waller, & Picot, 2010; Hall & Brown-Thirston, 2011; Townsend, Jones, Neilands, & Jackson, 2010). Aside from Buddington’s (2000) Clark and Clark-styled (1947) doll study titled, “Barbie.com and Racial Identity,” and the research of Belgrave, Chase-Vaughn, Gray, Addison, and Cherry (2000) exploring “The Effectiveness of a Culture- and Gender-Specific Intervention” on increasing resiliency among African American girls, the body of knowledge exploring identity formation among pre-adolescent African American girls is limited. Jones and Cooper (2005) examined the impact of play and the role of media outlets in determining culturally appropriate speech and behavior patterns that do not always translate well for students of color when performed in
educational environments. The study noted the importance of media materials and less structured, performative events as dominant socializing spaces for children’s identity development. It is critical for media images that are encountered and performative events, such as play, that are executed by African American children to be those with which home and school cultures both acknowledge and appreciate. The following reader’s theatre adaptation of Bintou’s Braids begins to address this inadequate arena of literary offerings.

Little Bintou Loves Her Braids

Adapted for reader’s theater from Bintou’s Braids, Diouf, 2001

Genre: African/African-American girls and hair
Culture: African/African-American
Themes: Hair, Maturity, Culture
Grade Levels: Kindergarten-2nd Grade
Roles: 8+
Time: 7–10 minutes

Roles: Narrator 1, Narrator 2, Bintou, Fatou, Grandma, Aunt, Mommy, Mary
Note: Narrator(s) can be split into multiple parts and played by more than two people.

Narrator 1: In a small African village lived a little girl named Bintou. She was a smart and pretty little girl.

Narrator 2: One bright summer day she looks at her reflection in the stream and touches her hair as she says,

Bintou: I want braids! My hair is short and fuzzy. My hair is plain and silly. All I have is four little tufts on my head.

Narrator 1: Bintou walks away from the stream, daydreaming about her hair.

Narrator 2: She thinks about what she likes about her hair.

Bintou: Sometimes, I dream that little birds make their nest in my hair. It would be such a nice place for babies to rest. There, they would sleep and sing!

Narrator 1: At times she wishes she could change her hair.

Bintou: Most of the time, I dream of braids. Long braids with gold coins and seashells.

Narrator 2: Bintou’s sister Fatou then sneaks up behind her and bends down to cover Bintou’s eyes with her hands.
Narrator 1: She lets the beads from her long braids fall against Bintou’s cheek, and says,

Fatou: Guess who?

Bintou: Fatou!

Narrator 2: Fatou laughs as they turn and look at each other.

Fatou: How did you know it was me?

Bintou: Your beads touched my cheek.

Narrator 1: Bintou pauses for a minute and begins to cry.

Narrator 2: Fatou hugs Bintou and says,

Fatou: Bintou, why are you crying?

Bintou: I want to be pretty like you. I want to have long braids.

Fatou: Little girls can’t have long braids. Tomorrow I’ll cornrow your hair.

Bintou: That’s all I ever get – cornrows.

Narrator 1: Fatou gives Bintou’s hand a squeeze and walks away as Bintou sees her Grandma.

Narrator 2: Grandma knows everything so Bintou decides to ask her some questions.

Narrator 1: Grandma tells Bintou that old people know so much because they have lived such a long time and learned more than anybody else.

Narrator 2: Bintou turns to her Grandma and asks,

Bintou: Grandma, why can’t little girls have braids?

Narrator 1: Grandma plays with Bintou’s hair as she answers her question.

Grandma: A long time ago, there was a young girl named Cocoa who thought only about how pretty she was. Since then mothers decided that little girls would not have braids, so that they would only make friends, play and learn.

Bintou: What happened to Cocoa then Grandma?

Grandma: From then on, Cocoa got cornrows.

Narrator 2: Grandma then looks at Bintou and says,

Grandma: When you’re older, it’s fine to want to look your best and show everybody that you have become a young woman. But now you are still just a girl. You will get braids when it is time.
Narrator 1: Bintou looks at her Grandma and thinks about what she has said. She knows that her Grandma is wise.

Narrator 2: Grandma gives Bintou a tight hug before she walks away. Bintou talks to herself about her hair.

Bintou: Every night I dream that I’m sixteen and have braids with gold coins and seashells. When I turn my head, the sun follows me and I shine like a queen. But when I wake up and look in the mirror, I am still Bintou with four little tufts on my head.

Narrator 1: Bintou is sad that she is not old enough to have braids.

Narrator 2: She looks around in the village and sees many of her friends and family.

Narrator 1: Fatou has put oil on her scalp between her braids to make it shine.

Narrator 2: Bintou decides to ask the women about their braids and why they wear them the way they do.

Narrator 1: She walks up to her aunt and says,

Bintou: Why do you wear your braids with gold coins on your forehead?

Aunt: It’s to show the children how the great-grandmothers you never knew wore their hair.

Bintou: Auntie, how long does it take to finish your braids?

Aunt: It took three days, Bintou.

Narrator 2: Bintou touches her Aunt’s braids and looks at them.

Narrator 1: She tries to count them but there are too many.

Bintou: They are so pretty.

Narrator 2: Bintou’s Aunt smiles. Bintou then sees her friend Mary and walks over to her.

Narrator 1: Mary is not from Africa. She has an accent that is different from Bintou and the people in her village. Bintou says,

Bintou: What country are you from Mary?

Mary: I come from America, Bintou.

Narrator 2: Bintou is curious about little girls in America, she asks,
Bintou: Mary, do the little girls in America have braids?

Mary: Many do. And they put colorful barrettes on each braid.

Bintou: They must look pretty, the girls in your country.

Narrator 1: Mary laughs and shakes her head. The beads on her braids sound like rain.

Narrator 2: This makes Bintou sad. She thinks about the women’s long braids in her village and in America.

Bintou: All I have is four little tufts of hair and I am sad.

Narrator 1: Bintou walks to the beach as she always does when she wants to be alone.

Narrator 2: It is quiet and makes it easy for Bintou to hear the waves and the wind.

Narrator 1: Before Bintou has a chance to sit down, she hears screams.

Narrator 2: Two boys are waving and shouting. Their canoe is sinking. Bintou runs to get some fishermen to help.

Narrator 1: Bintou could take the easy path back to the village, but she knows it would be faster to take a shortcut through the bushes. She shouts,

Bintou: Two boys are drowning! Two boys are drowning!

Narrator 2: Fishermen run past Bintou and push a canoe to the water. They paddle out fast to reach the boys and rescue them.

Narrator 1: When Bintou returns to the village, everyone gathers around her.

Narrator 2: Her mother calls out to her,

Mommy: Bintou, you are a smart little girl. If you had taken the good path, you would have arrived too late. You have saved these boys lives.

Narrator 1: Bintou is proud of herself. She smiles a big smile.

Mommy: We shall reward you. Tell us what you would like.

Narrator 2: Fatou knows what Bintou wants so she answers Mommy for her, Fatou: She wants braids.

Narrator 1: Mommy runs her fingers through Bintou’s hair and says,

Mommy: Then braids you shall have.
Narrator 2: Bintou daydreams again. She sees a little girl sitting in a tree. Yellow and blue birds are sitting in her hair.

Narrator 1: Her hair is so pretty that everyone has gathered under the tree, smiling at her.

Narrator 2: The sun shines on the birds’ feathers and Bintou’s pretty hair.

Narrator 1: The next morning, Grandma calls Bintou to her room. She tells her to sit on the floor between her legs.

Narrator 2: She rubs oil on Bintou’s hair and whispers,
Grandma: You are a special girl and your hair will be special too.
Bintou: I thought Auntie was going to braid my hair.
Grandma: Hush, now. Relax Bintou.

Narrator 1: Bintou feels Grandma’s fingers in her hair. It feels like she is doing cornrows.

Narrator 2: Bintou holds tears back. She doesn’t want to look in the mirror and see the same four tufts in her head.

Narrator 1: Grandma holds out a mirror and tells her,
Grandma: Open your eyes, little Bintou.

Narrator 2: Bintou slowly takes the mirror and opens her eyes. She sees yellow and blue birds in her hair.

Narrator 1: She doesn’t see a plain girl with four little tufts on her head anymore.

Narrator 2: She sees a girl with pretty hair.
Bintou: My hair is black and shiny. My hair is soft and pretty. I am the girl with birds in her hair. The sun follows me and I am happy.

**Implications and conclusion**

Diversity research on girls and literacy converges around the theoretical notion that unique opportunities such as reader’s theatre create effective and supportive pedagogy for African American girls. As girls explore and create literary events, socio-cultural representations about African and female identities emerge and those representations are translated into how girls understand the
greater social order. McKenna (2000) found metaphor useful in the development of literacy skills and, in particular, noted how hair as a gendered, cultural signifier, effectively connects female students to experiences within texts that they interpret and create.

This work argued for alternative methodologies specifically geared to support African American girls in the areas of literacy construction at this critical stage of interpreting written texts about hair, gender and power. Diouf’s contribution has set a standard among children’s texts that moves children’s literacy in the direction that research has shown is preferred for particular populations of readers. Furthermore, this text’s exploration of moral development through the messages about affirmation, rites of passage and ritual, as well as social responsibility themes yields a more effective use of literacy for all readers.

This inquiry contends that applicable literacy usage and performance in children’s classrooms has the capacity to transform individuals and their communities. It offers literary constructs as an effective tool to buttress the literacy skills of African American girls. Producing children’s literature and literacy events that challenge the limitations of traditional offerings is the essential task to effectively address the needs of African American girls. Educators assuming this charge will find their practices acknowledging the fundamental needs of this often underserved population in American classrooms.

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