I Am Precious/I Am Girl/I Am Black:
Intertextuality in African American Children's and Young Adult Literature

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Abstract

This study focuses on intertextuality encapsulated in African-American children's and young adult literature, utilising Gates's (1988) theorisation of an African-American literary tradition, or Signifyin(g), as its key theoretical underpinning. Whilst intertextuality has been extensively researched in adult literature, its place in children's and young adult literature has been scarce, thus leaving its theoretical stance incomplete. Through critical analyses of the following children's and young adult texts, Sapphire's (1996) *Push* and Sharon G Flake's (1998) *The Skin I'm In*, the study attempts to explain how black literary texts interact with each other, and how, through the eye of a fictional child, such an interaction is represented: how subtle and distinct it is from that portrayed in adult literature. From a Signifyin(g) theoretical standpoint, the study reveals that these children's and young adult texts, like their adult counterparts, repeat, imitate, critique and revise each other's texts, through, principally, the distinct use of black English vernacular. Though these children's and young adult texts employ both parody and pastiche as their intertextual or Signifyin(g) strategies, the former, parody, tends to be more pronounced, to encourage diversities within common themes prevalent in African-American literature, such as visibility, literacy and redemption. The study also suggests that intertextuality in children's and young adult literature needs to strike a balance between being overreferential and being adequately challenging in order not to lose its readers.

Keywords: intertextuality, Signifyin(g), children's and young adult literature, African American

บทคัดย่อ

บทความวิจัยชิ้นนี้ศึกษา 'สหบท' หรือ Intertextuality ในวรรณกรรมเด็กและเยาวชนของนักเขียน แอฟริกัน-อเมริกัน โดยใช้แนวทฤษฎีการวิเคราะห์ 'สหบท' งานวรรณกรรมแอฟริกัน-อเมริกันของเฮนรี หลุยส์ เกท จูเนียร์ ที่รู้จักกันในนาม Signifyin(g) เป็นทฤษฎีหลักเพื่อให้เห็นว่าวรรณกรรมของนักเขียนผิวสีของอเมริกานั้นมี 'สหบท' ที่เหมือนหรือแตกต่างจากวรรณกรรมทั่วไปอย่างไร และเมื่อปรากฏอยู่ในวรรณกรรมเด็กและเยาวชนนั้นนักเขียนมีกลวิธีนำเสนอ 'สหบท' ที่เหมือนหรือแตกต่างไปจากวรรณกรรมของผู้ใหญ่หรือไม่อย่างไร หนังสือวรรณกรรมเด็กและเยาวชนของนักเขียนแอฟริกัน-อเมริกันที่ผู้เขียนใช้ในการวิเคราะห์งาน วิจัยชิ้นนี้ คือ *Push* (1996) ของ แซฟไฟร์ (Sapphire) และ *The Skin I'm In* (1998) ของ ชารอน จี เฟลค (Sharon G Flake) บทความชิ้นนี้ชี้ให้เห็นว่านักเขียนผิวสีของอเมริกาได้ใช้ 'สหบท' อย่างแพร่หลาย ทั้งการเขียนล้อ (Parody) เพื่อวิพากษ์วิจารณ์งานเขียนของนักเขียนผิวสีท่านอื่น และการเขียนเลียนแบบ (Pastiche) เพื่อยกย่องและให้เกียรติงานเขียนชิ้นอื่นๆ ทั้งนี้ การเขียนล้อและการวิพากษ์วิจารณ์ หรือ Parody เพื่อให้เห็นถึงความหลากหลายทางความคิดของนักเขียนผิวสีดูจะเป็นกลวิธีหลักของวรรณกรรมเด็กและเยาวชนทั้งสองเล่มที่ใช้ในการศึกษาครั้งนี้ สำหรับ 'สหบท' ที่ปรากฏอยู่ในวรรณกรรมเด็กและเยาวชนนั้น บทความชิ้นนี้ชี้ให้เห็นว่านักเขียนต้องให้ความสมดุลระหว่างความยากง่ายของ 'สหบท' กับความท้าทายของประสบการณ์ในการอ่านของผู้อ่านทั้งที่เป็นวัยเด็กและเยาวชน

คำสำคัญ สหบท Signifyin(g), วรรณกรรมเด็กและเยาวชน, แอฟริกัน-อเมริกัน

1. Introduction

> Until then I had thought each book spoke of things, human or divine, that lie outside of books. Now I realized that not infrequently books speak of books: it is as if they speak among themselves.
>
> —Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose* (2014, p. 306)

> A text is all the words that are in it, and not only those words, but the other words that precede it, haunt it, and are echoed in it.
>
> —A S Byatt, *On Histories and Stories* (2000, p. 46)

Claireece Precious Jones or "Precious", as she is better known in the novel, is an illiterate, obese, dark-skinned protagonist of Sapphire's (1996) *Push*. Precious loathes herself for being "so stupid, so ugly, worth nuffin" (p.34), and, having been made part of a racialised landscape, she is led to believe that her existence is nothing but a "vampire sucking the system's blood. Ugly black grease to be wiped away, punish, kilt, changed, finded a job for" (p.31). However, after having been exposed to some influential black cultural icons through class readings and literacy, Precious's sense of self is gradually and firmly established, as distinctly reflected in her poetry, "I am Precious/I am girl/I am black" (Sapphire, 1996, p.77). The arduous and, at times, painful journey through literacy has not only helped her define her very own definition, but also led her, eventually, to self-love, visibility and liberation, "One thing I say about Farrakhan and Alice Walker they help me like being black. I wish I wasn't fat but I am. Maybe one day I like that too, who knows" (Sapphire, 1996, p. 96).

Intertextually, Precious's words of self-affirmation cited above clearly echo or remind attentive and experienced readers of Celie's voice of growing confidence uttered towards the end of Alice Walker's (2004) *The Color Purple*, "I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook, a voice say to everything listening. But I'm here" (p. 187). The very same utterance of self-love also gets reinterpreted and reiterated by another African-American children's and young adult author, Sharon G Flake, in her 1998's *The Skin I'm In*, through her 13-year-old protagonist Maleeka Madison, "I am not ugly. I am not stupid. I am Maleeka Madison, and, yeah, I'm black, real black, and if you don't like me, too bad 'cause black is the skin I'm in" (p. 167). It is evidently Sapphire's and Flake's conscious and deliberate attempts to 'signify' upon other black texts or black authors, particularly Walker's (2004) *The Color Purple* and Morrison's

(1999) *The Bluest Eye*, both as a critique of as well as an act of homage to their black literary antecedents. The term Signifyin(g), coined by a renowned African-American scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr (1988) in his groundbreaking study of African American literary criticism *The Signifying Monkey*, is what has been generally known within literary and linguistics circles as intertextuality. Whilst the focus of these two fictional texts is to capture the life of young African Americans caught in a racial tide and harmed by self-inflicted psychological mutilations, through their first-person narratives, the authors, whether consciously or unconsciously, resort to intertextuality or Signifyin(g), essentially letting their texts interact with other (black) texts, thus adding both range and depth to their works.

Utilising Gates's theorisation of African-American literary tradition or Signifyin(g), this study attempts to explain how black texts interact with each other, and how, through the reading of Sapphire's (1996) *Push* and Flake's (1998) *The Skin I'm In*, such an interaction is represented or treated in African-American children's and young adult literature: how subtle and distinct it is from that portrayed in adult literature.

2. Review of Primary Texts

The two main African-American Children's and young adult literary texts selected for this study are: Sharon G Flake's (1998) *The Skin I'm In* and Sapphire's (1996) *Push*. These children's and young adult texts, all through this study, are set against key examples of adult works, particularly Alice Walker's (2004) *The Color Purple* and Toni Morrison's (1999) *The Bluest Eye*. The purpose of my inclusion of these adult texts is to use them not only as catalysts or pointers for discussion, but also as literary precursors or antecedents of the selected texts, particularly in relation to the notion of intertextuality or Signifyin(g).

As a contemporary African-American *Bildungsroman*, or a novel of formation, Sapphire's (1996) *Push* tells the story of Precious, an obese, dark-skinned, illiterate 16-year-old girl who is constantly abused by her mother and expelled from school after her second pregnancy by her own father. Whilst most *Bildungsroman* novels typically employ a third person viewpoint (Amoko, 2009), *Push* resorts to the first person, making the novel closer to an autobiography or 'life writing', allowing Precious, therefore, to recount her harsh reality from an authorial position. Through a first-person viewpoint, the novel traces the protagonist's educational, moral, psychological, and social journey from invisibility to liberation and empowerment. As one of the main themes in *Push* is teens and literacy, a number of studies coming out of education,

therefore, focus on this topic. Although the term literacy covers a wide range of learning experience, most studies conducted, however, focus on reading and writing only (e.g. Lewis, 2011; Stapleton, 2004; Clark & Medina, 2000). As for literary studies, *Push* has been investigated through different angles. Dancu (2010) compares the film version of *Push* with *Boyz n the Hood* using film theories and Cathy Caruth's reading of traumatic experiences as her frameworks; Harkins (2007) and Donaldson (2005) explore the issue of incest and how it has always been a silent/silenced part in the US culture. To my knowledge, the only study looking at intertextuality or Signifyin(g) is done by Michlin (2006). However, as the focus of her study is to explore the protagonist's ultimate self-empowerment through the use of narrative, intertextuality or Signifyin(g) is treated only peripherally.

Flake's (1998) *The Skin I'm In* narrates the life of Maleeka Madison, a middle school girl burdened with the issue of low self-esteem as a result of having darker skin, and her journey to an ultimate self-acceptance and empowerment. The only critical study done on this book is by Brooks, Browne and Hampton (2008), focusing on the issue of *colourism*, also known as *intra-racial racism*, which refers to discrimination within the black community against those with darker skin and more African features. No critical literary studies regarding intertextuality or Signifyin(g) have been done on this book. Whilst intertextuality on adult literary books has been extensively carried out, it is scarce in children's and young adult literature. It is this study's attempt, through the reading of Sapphire's (1996) *Push* and Flake's (1998) *The Skin I'm In*, to fill out this theoretical void.

3. Intertextuality and *Signifyin(g)*

Not only is it currently common in literary discourse (Wilkie-Stibbs, 2005), intertextuality, as a type of literary allusions, is also inevitable and boundless (Orr, 2003). Originally coined by Julia Kristeva (1980) in her seminal work 'Word, dialogue and novel', which is translated in *Desire in Language*, intertextuality is defined as "a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another" (Kristeva, 1980, p. 66). With its theoretical underpinning rooted in the work of Mikhail Bakhtin (1981, 1984), particularly his 'dialogism', intertextuality sees all texts and their meanings never as isolated entities but dialogic and intertextually dependent, a plurality of voices, embodying a diversity of positions, or what is known in Bakhtin's terms as 'double-voiced'—"The word in language is half someone else's (…) it exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions:

it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one's own" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 293). It is perhaps this very idea that prompted Roland Barthes (1977) to radically pronounce the death of the author, suggesting that readers should be free from "the traditional power and authority of the figure of the 'author,' who was now 'dead'" (Allen, 2000, p. 4). Typically, intertextuaity can be classified into three main groups: texts of quotation, texts of imitation, and genre texts (Wilkie-Stibbs, 2005). Whilst texts of quotation directly take words from other texts, texts of imitation, as suggested by Wilkie-Stibbs, "Paraphrase, 'translate' and supplant the original to liberate their readers from an over-invested admiration in great writers of the past" (p. 132). As for genre texts, readers recognise identifiable patterns and literary conventions, which lead them to search for the like texts.

Within the African-American literary tradition, intertextuality or what Gates (1988) terms Signifyin(g) "is a metaphor for textual revision" (p. 88), which is historically considered the most distinct characteristic of African American literature. In her critical study of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and *Jazz*, Martha Cutter (2000) states that "to keep stories alive and in memory, they must be told and retold, the story must go on and on to survive" (p. 62). As a result, sharing, reading, repeating, imitating, critiquing and revising each other's texts, as well as texts of the western tradition (Baillie, 2011), whether as a parody or pastiche, is an intertextual or 'Signifyin(g)' practice commonly observed in black literature, "If black writers read each other, they also revise each other's texts" (Gates, 1988, p. 124). And it is principally done or manifested itself through the distinctly observable use of black English vernacular, which, as suggested by Graham Allen (2000) in *Intertextuality*, "Historically has been turned into 'non-speech' by Eurocentric, white cultural values" (p. 168). The act of Signifyin(g), therefore, argues Allen (2000), "Opens up supposedly closed, unquestionable significations (relations between signifiers and signifieds) to a host of associated meanings any monological view of language would wish to efface" (p. 167). Through the use of the black vernacular, asserts Gates (1988), the result is a long tradition of a two-toned literary heritage, or, in Bakhtinian frame, 'double-voiced': "These texts speak in standard Romance or Germanic languages and literary structures, but almost always speak with a distinct and resonant accent, an accent that Signifies (upon) the various black vernacular literary traditions" (xxiii). Not only do authors repeat, imitate, critique and revise each other's texts, such common practice, for some, is also performed on their own texts, such as Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and *Jazz*, and J M Coetzee's *Slow Man* and *Foe* (Cutter, 2000; Pellow, 2009). In her critical analysis of Morrison's *Beloved*

and *Jazz*, Cutter (2000) suggests that "In *Jazz*, Beloved becomes a physical presence (rather than only a ghost), but she also becomes an intertexual prompt to the attentive reader to trace and retrace her footsteps" (p. 67).

As the focus children's and young adult texts for this study are intertextually rooted within the African American literary tradition, with an aim, as will be shown below, to share, repeat, imitate, critique and revise other black texts through their distinct use of black English vernacular, particularly Sapphire's (1996) *Push*, the term Signifyin(g) is, therefore, better-suited and adopted for the main discussion of this study. Also, as the literary texts analysed by Gates (1988) in his theorisation of Signifyin(g) are mainly adult texts (e.g. Walker's *The Color Purple*, Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*, Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, etc.), extending its analysis to literary texts written for children and young adults would certainly yield a more complete picture of African American literature, thus strengthening its theoretical stance.

4. Black Texts and *Signifyin(g)*

Gates's (1988) critical study of Zora Neale Hurston's (2007) *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as a 'speakerly text', and Alice Walker's (2004) *The Color Purple* as 'rewriting the speakerly', is a testament to the pivotal role black vernacular has played in the African American literary tradition. 'Speakerly', by Gates's definition, is the way the speaking black voice or black vernacular is honoured or privileged in a black text through a written form, distinguishing it from a 'writerly' or narrator's voice, which is typically represented through standard English. Hurston's (2007) *Their Eyes Were Watching God* captures both speakerly and writerly voices, at times blending the two together as the protagonist Janie Crawford is gaining her independence and liberation, yielding, as Gates (1988) argues, "A hybrid character (…) who is neither the novel's protagonist nor the text's disembodied narrator, but a blend of both, and emergent and merging moment of consciousness" (xxvi). In *The Color Purple*, Walker (2004) rewrites Hurston's 'speakerly text' by turning the speaking black voice into an epistolary format, thus making it written rather than spoken. Celie's self-affirmation, therefore, is gained through the act of writing. As suggested by Gates (1988), while Janie, a protagonist of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, speaks herself into being, "Celie, in her letters, writes herself into being" (p. 243). It is perhaps justified, therefore, to place Sapphire's (1996) *Push* as a direct descendant of Walker's (2004) *The Color Purple*. Like Celie, Precious, too, writes herself into being. And since the act of writing, although only in part, is also adopted by Flake as a form of liberation

and empowerment for her thirteen-year-old protagonist, it is fair to say that Flake's (1998) *The Skin I'm In* is also an homage to Walker's text. It is the act of writing, of re-authoring their own reality, *in their own black tongue*, as these young female characters push themselves towards literacy and visibility, that their sense of self and liberation and empowerment is gained. Walker, Sapphire and Flake opt for the act of writing, be it epistolary, confessional or diary, as a narrative form to fictionally portray their protagonists' journeys from invisibility to liberation and literacy.

"Things going good in my life, almost like *The Color Purple*" (Sapphire, 1996, p. 82), states Precious. As she finds herself empowered through her testimonial writing and literacy, Precious has begun to believe in fairy tales, "Ms Rain say one of the critcizsm of *The Color Purple* is it have fairy tale ending. I would say, well shit like that can be true. Life can work out for the best sometimes" (p. 83). However, as the novel approaches its conclusion, the tie that binds *Push* intertextually with *The Color Purple* gets severed. It is at this point that Sapphire's text becomes a critique of Walker's writing, not just a work of pastiche, accordingly putting *Push* on a path unexplored by its antecedent. The news of her biological father's death of AIDS brought to her by her abusive mother has turned Precious's world upside down, depriving her of 'a fairy tale ending' as that enjoyed by Celie. Fearing that her and her son might be infected, Precious turns to Alice Walker and *The Color Purple* for comfort and strength, only to find out that there is no escape from the past, that the damage cannot be undone, that even Alice Walker, whose picture is now hung on her wall, can no longer come to her rescue, "But she can't help me now? Where my *Color Purple*?" (Sapphire, 1996, p. 87). In his analysis of Walker's rewriting of Hurston's speakerly text, Gates (1988) states that Walker resorts to pastiche, or what he refers to as 'unmotivated Signifyin(g)' or 'the absence of a negative critique', indicating that her rewriting is intended mainly to celebrate rather than mock its predecessor as that typically done in parody. It espouses, states Gates (1988), "Unity and resemblance rather than critique and difference" (xxvii), it is "loving acts of bonding rather than ritual slaying" (xxviii). Taking Gates's theoretical positioning, the ending of *Push*, then, should be classified as 'motivated Signifyin(g)', as it parodies or critiques *The Color Purple*'s 'fairy tale ending' or what Michlin (2006) calls "its mapping out of escapism in an exoticized Africa, its eventual watering down of pain and conflict" (p. 181), setting *Push* on a different path from its precursor, thus, as suggested by Donaldson (2005), making it a novel of stark realism rather than a fantasy of escape. It is apparent that the act of writing, as the author of *Push* seems to

suggest, does not necessarily mean that all the past wounds will be undone and that one will always emerge unscathed, the kind of 'eventual-watering-down-of-pain-and-conflict' ending experienced by Celie, for Precious is, in the end, HIV positive. Writing can, however, as insinuated by the character of Ms Rain, Precious's teacher at an alternative black school *Each One Teach One*, equip one with a sense of redemption and self-affirmation, a tool to survive, however unkind the circumstances, "Writing could be the boat carry you to the other side (…) telling your story git you over that river" (Sapphire, 1996, p. 97).

Whilst *Push*'s ending is considered, according to Gates's theoretical positioning, a 'motivated Signifyin(g)', as it parodies or critiques the fairy-tale ending of *The Color Purple*, *The Skin I'm In*'s ending is rather 'unmotivated' or absent of a negative critique, "I am not ugly. I am not stupid. I am Maleeka Madison, and, yeah, I'm black, real black, and if you don't like me, too bad 'cause black is the skin I'm in" (p. 167). Flake's writing, like Walker's, is intended to celebrate rather than mock its predecessor, as a result, giving her young protagonist, Maleeka, the type of ending enjoyed by Cilie.

"I was left back when I was twelve because I had a baby for my fahver" (Sapphire, 1996, p. 3), *Push*'s opening line, intertextually, is also a reiteration or reinterpretation of Toni Morrison's (1999) *The Bluest Eye*, "It was because Pecola was having her father's baby that the marigolds did not grow" (p. 4). As I have mentioned earlier, *Push* is a critique of and homage to, or, in other words, 'signifies' upon both *The Color Purple* and *The Bluest Eye*. Whilst these novels are, in Gates's (1988) terms, 'speakerly texts', giving the speaking black voice a written life, dealing with themes fundamentally permeating African American literature, such as invisibility, redemption, literacy and empowerment, their narrative structures are distinctly different, resulting in their protagonists' paradoxical outcomes: failure and success, invisibility and liberation, self-denigration and affirmation. Told from the first-person viewpoint, together with the act of writing and the ability to re-author their own reality, both Precious and Celie are mentally equipped with the tool needed to pull themselves through, to shatter the silence, which ultimately leads them to redemption and liberation. Pecola of *The Bluest Eye*, on the other hand, does not own her own narrative. She is caught in Claudia's, another child narrator, as well as the omniscient narrative voice, leaving her own voice, as well as her existence, unheard, silenced. Structurally, as suggested by Morrison in its afterword of the 1999's publication of *The Bluest Eye*, the novel silences the child, "The victim (Pecola) does not have the vocabulary to understand the violence or its context (…) She is not *seen* by herself until

she hallucinates a self" (Morrison, 1999, pp. 170-171, italics in original). By giving their main characters control over their own voices, genuinely told in their own black tongues, Walker, Sapphire, Flake avoid the same pitfall faced by Pecola, and by so doing, are able to structurally construct black female characters, young and old, that are strong, independent, visible, empowered and liberated. As suggested by Michel Foucault (1990) in *The History of Sexuality*, a testimony or a sexual confession as that found in Precious's and Celie's narratives helps shatter the silence and empower the confessor; it also possesses the power to potentially change the dominant discourse (Foucault, 1990). Unlike Celie and Precious and Maleeka, Pecola is not equipped with any tool to shatter the silence, *she is not seen by herself until she hallucinates a self*. Her doom is, therefore, inescapable, "It's too late. At least, on my edge of the town, among the garbage and the sunflowers of my town, it's much, much, much too late" (Morrison, 1999, p. 164). Morrison's portrayal of young, ill-fated Pecola reflects what it is like to grow up in a racist society where your own reflection is perversely distorted by the dominant discourse, where the majoritarian story is unfairly made your story, until you ultimately succumb to defeat rather than triumph.

As previously mentioned, literacy is one of the recurring themes prevalent in most African-American literary texts. This very topic, however, is treated differently by African-American authors. Whilst Morrison's (1999) *The Bluest Eye* puts no trust in the school system, treating it as a racist institution, and casts the teacher as oppressor, Sapphire's and Flake's concept of literacy and formal schooling, particularly alternative black schools depicted in their texts, is that of a possibility to move forward and become visible and empowered. Both also view teachers, Miss Rain and Miss Saunders, respectively, as figures that can bring about positive change, which is different from Morrison's negative view of the teacher captured in *The Bluest Eye*. This very positive view, intertextually, allows both Sapphire and Flake, as suggested by Michlin (2006), "to revise the defeatism of *The Bluest Eye*, without losing its charge against the class-based and racially oppressive public school" (pp. 181-182). Through the lens of Gates's Signifyin(g), therefore, both *Push* and *The Skin I'm In* are a critique of, rather than an homage to, their precursor *The Bluest Eye*.

5. Intertextuality and Children's and Young Adult Literature

In an introduction to their book on intertextuality, Judith Still and Michael Worton (1990) states simply that "supplementary references are a cloying excess, cutting the reader's appetite, and hence paradoxically impoverishing rather than enriching the reader's feast" (p. 21), which is perhaps applicable to such intertextually demanding work as Junot Diaz's (2008)*The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Intertextually, Diaz's Pulitzer Prize winning book is so challenging that readers are constantly inundated with "significant amounts of untranslated Spanish, continual references to often obscure sci-fi/fantasy culture, and a crash course in the worst of twentieth-century Dominican (and American) history" (O'Brien, 2012, p. 75). What Still and Worton (1990) have in mind is perhaps the 'appetite and feast' of sophisticated or 'adult' readers who are equipped with enough backgrounds to tackle demanding texts without being linguistically, historically, and, in particular, 'intertextually' marginalised. But what about child readers whose systems of knowledge, as suggested by Wilkie-Stibbs (2008), are "delimited by their temporal immaturity and inexperience?" (p. 52)

In her attempt to shed light on intertextuality in children's literature, Wilkie-Stibbs (2005) asserts that, on a writer/reader axis, intertextuality creates "an imbalanced power relationship" (p. 131), mainly because adults write for each other, but children do not. As a result, children are made or treated as "the powerless recipients of what adults choose to write for them and, *de facto*, children's literature an intertextual sub-genre of adult literature" (Wilkie-Stibbs, 2005, p. 131, italics in original). She also states the writer/reader relationship is imbalanced because "children's intersubjective knowledge cannot be assured" (p. 131), which, all in all, makes intertextuality rather 'special' and obviously a 'challenge' in children's and young adult literature.

This power imbalance, together with the lack of intersubjective knowledge, is perhaps the reason why books, particularly for younger readers, tend to be *overreferential* in order not to lose their readers. In Jacqueline Woodson's (2007) *Feathers*, for instance, historical information is embedded as part of the narrative to help child readers grasp its intended meaning, "Mama said we could make-believe it was named for Leotyne Price, the black opera singer, but it's really named for Major Price, the white major from a long time ago" (p. 18). Or the way Sapphire (1996) subtly furnishes her narrative with names of influential black figures, "One thing I say about Farrakhan and Alice Walker they help me like being black" (p. 96), to help readers get a bigger picture of black literary and non-literary heritage. As *Feathers* is intended for younger readers, it is perhaps vital that certain pieces of historical information, or

so-called intertextual gap fillings, are needed to help younger readers follow its demanding content, which is political and social changes and the direct aftermath of desegregated America in the seventies. These intertextual gap fillings, the black opera singer, the white major from a long time ago, including name dropping in Sapphire's *Push*, can help guide young readers through the book's challenging narrative, be it historical, cultural or linguistic and arm them with sufficient information to understand the text. The point, as suggested by Wilkie-Stibbs (2005), is that a balance needs to be made between being overreferential and being adequately challenging. The former is done in order not to lose the readers, as in the case of children's literature, and the latter is to challenge and allow older readers an opportunity to activate their intertextual knowledge.

6. Final Words

Whilst literary characters such as Precious and Maleeka Madison, thematically, have been set up to challenge the American racialised landscape, through the use of intertextuality or Signifyin(g), these children's and young adult texts also reveal a common yet significant practice routinely observed in an African-American literary tradition: an imitation, a revision, and, particularly in this study, a critique that black authors perform on each other's texts. Through the theoretical lens of Signifyin(g), as shown in this study, some fundamentally prevalent themes—visibility, redemption, literacy and empowerment—are maintained. As for literary texts written for children and young adults, however, this study suggests that the balance needs to be made between being overreferential and being adequately challenging so that the readers are retained and, at the same time, challenged.

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