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“Weird Is Normal”: A Womanist Discourse Analysis of Black Girl Nerds’ Community Building

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ABSTRACT

Constructing school spaces where Black girls feel comfortable enough to be their full selves is essential in a system that consistently shows them that they do not matter. Cultivating these spaces, however, requires educators to understand that Black girls’ identities are multiple and varied, that Black girls can be anything. Still, some identity positions, such as nerdiness, are often only attributed to white youth, forcing nerdy Black girls to hide themselves in fear that their interests confirm that something within them is wrong. In this article, I use womanist discourse analysis to examine the unstructured talk of six Black girl nerds who participated in a writing workshop. In analyzing these conversations, I emphasize how the girls engaged in womanist practices of community building that honor the full spectra of their identities. Further, I argue for the cultivation of safe spaces for Black girl nerds to exist.

The life of a “nerd” typically involves a certain amount of loneliness and other social challenges. Try being a black girl on top of that. (B. Edwards, 2014, para. 1)

We’re all geeks. . . . We all love watching Harry Potter and Star Wars, and we love anime. Normally, we would have to probably hide that in school, or we embrace it and be weird. We could actually come here and talk about it and be normal. (Victoria, interview 1)

In an article titled “The Secret Fight of the Black-Girl Nerds,” B. Edwards (2014) argued that “it’s not uncommon for a young black girl who may be into comics, science fiction, horror or anime to ask herself, ‘Am I the only one? Is there something wrong with me?’” (para. 2). Black nerdy girls often wonder if and when they will find community with other Black girl nerds, and they question whether their interests confirm that something within them is inherently wrong. Edwards’s claim mirrors a quote given by Victoria, a Black middle school girl who participated in an Afrofuturist writing workshop I led in the summer of 2019. When I asked why she liked the workshop, she said it was a space where she and the other girls could talk about their interests and “be normal” rather than hiding who they were, like they had to do in school. That Victoria felt the need to silence her nerd identity concerned me, especially considering that decades ago, I was a young Black girl who also hid my nerd identity in school.

The Black Girls’ Literacies Collective (2018) champions the creation of educational “spaces that honor the inclusion of identities and perspectives that represent the full spectrum of Black girlhood and womanhood” (p. 173). Constructing these spaces, however, requires educators to understand how supposedly inclusive spaces of learning continue to resist the inclusion of Black girls’ myriad ways of being. To be clear, my research partners used numerous words to define themselves, including *geek*, *weird*, *dork*, and *nerd*. I use *nerd* as the overarching term because even though the girls used different words, they used those terms to position themselves as strange or abnormal based on their interests in science fiction, anime, fantasy, and gaming, a positioning that aligns with the dictionary definition of *nerd*. Woo (2018)

noted, however, that “definitional troubles point to the limits of focusing solely on *what* was said rather than examining the social work these statements accomplished in the immediate contexts in which they were produced” (pp. 35–36). Therefore, although I use *nerd* as the encompassing term, my goal is not to center the word but the social context created by Black girls who use these words to describe themselves.

In thinking about Victoria and the other girls in the study, my intention in this article is to explore two questions:

1. What discursive strategies do Black girls use to form nerd communities?
2. How might Black girls’ discursive practices counter traditional conceptions of who can and cannot be a nerd?

I foreground these questions to consider how the constructed whiteness and maleness of nerd identity restricts Black girl nerds from being themselves in school spaces and to centralize how Black girls push back against stereotypical depictions of nerd identity through dialogue and community formation.

The overpresence of white maleness in nerd culture

The nerd moniker has often been associated with white, cisgender, heteronormative men, erasing Black people generally and Black girls specifically from the conversation (Eglash, 2002; Stanfill, 2011). In a review of nerd depictions in popular culture, Kendall (2011) found that music videos such as Weird Al Yankovic’s “White & Nerdy” bond the nerd identity to whiteness by “invoking the hyperwhite identity of the nerd and contrasting that identity to the black identity deemed most frightening by whites: the young black ‘gangsta’ male of hip-hop culture” (p. 514). In another study, Kendall (1999) discovered that Black participants in an online community were considered white until proven otherwise, considered raceless (Fordham, 1988) until proven guilty of Blackness. Additionally, Quail (2011) argued that even though Black nerds are included in television shows, whiteness in nerd culture prevails and often denies the existence of Black nerds. For instance, the popular television show *The Big Bang Theory* centers the lives of several white, socially awkward, and scientifically brilliant men. However, even though it promotes an inclusive cast of scientists, including two white men, one white and Jewish man, and one South Asian man, the show suggests that “the more enmeshed in the world (racialized, gendered) the scientist, the less brilliant they can be” (Willey & Subramaniam, 2017, p. 21). In other words, one can be a brilliant scientist, the pinnacle of nerdiness, but if one is racialized as nonwhite or gendered as nonmale, one’s capacity for brilliance is diminished.

The construction of the white male nerd also constrains nerd research in education. Bucholtz (1999, 2001) found that white nerds use knowledge as symbolic capital, associating positive identity with those who use a superstandard and hypercorrect orientation and associating language and negative identity traits with those who use colloquial language and slang. She suggested that white nerds opt for a sophisticated, formal, “white” register that distances itself from Blackness. Mendick and Francis (2012) shed light on the racist positioning of Black youth as too cool or not intelligent enough to be nerds. Mendick and Francis surmised that nerd culture is raced and gendered “with capital arguably accruing more easily to the White middle-class male” (p. 20). Both Bishop et al. (2004) and Kinney (1993) mentioned that Black students attended the schools in which their nerd studies were conducted, but data explicitly highlighting Black youth were not explored. Currie et al. (2006) acknowledged the racial diversity of the participants in their study on female nerds, and although the participants included white, Chinese Canadian, Jewish, First Nations/white, and Latina students, no Black girls were included. In each of these studies, then, Black youth were overlooked while white youth were consistently embraced as the center of nerd identity. More specifically, Black girls were completely disregarded.

Black fans, nerd spaces

Although representation in media and research has been dismal, Wanzo (2015) argued that “despite their invisibility in fan studies, African Americans are often hypervisible examples of fandom” (para. 1.6). That is, Black nerds and fans may seem invisible to others but are always there, extremely

noticeable within the larger sphere of fan culture because of their desire to consume, appreciate, and participate in certain popular culture texts. For example, T. D. Walker (2019) acknowledged Black Twitter's engagement in narrative insertion, or the use of intertextual connections to create new products, to build Black communal networks around Marvel's *Black Panther*. Florini (2019) stated that even though fandom is constructed as white, it assumes a significant role in Black communities as Black nerds, or Blerds, cultivate fan spaces that resist white nerdiness. Her argument is represented through the existence of a parallel Black fan space, Dem Thrones, to participate in *Game of Thrones* fandom. Thomas and Stornaiuolo (2019) showcased how Black fans restory white texts that have historically ignored the existence of Black life by presenting how Black female Harry Potter fans recast Hermione as Black. These studies highlight the numerous ways Black fans challenge the whiteness associated with nerd identity, but also highlight the mental labor Black folks endure to be accepted in a community that believes they do not belong.

Bucholtz (1999) argued that “nerdiness, like all identities, is a contested domain in which speakers struggle both over control of shared values . . . and over control of identity itself” (p. 220). The essence of nerdiness in research suggests that the engagements, practices, and stances of nerdiness are steeped in whiteness to the detriment and derision of Blackness, thereby controlling who can be a nerd (white males) and who cannot (everyone else). Even as Black fandom consistently operates to dismantle the whiteness of nerdiness, Black people are still forced to the margins of the identity category, as they are asked to cultivate, insert, and recontextualize rather than simply being allowed to exist. However, the Black girls in this study identified as nerds, so it is important to consider the discursive strategies they use to define themselves, create community, and celebrate nerdiness even when society says they cannot.

Womanism in education research

A. Walker (1983) coined the term *womanism* and defined it as a word based on the Black colloquial term *womanish*, which refers to the courageous, knowledge-seeking, and willful behavior of young Black women. Since Walker's coining of the term *womanism*, many researchers have defined and redefined womanist thought. For instance, Ogunyemi (1985) acknowledged that “black womanism is a philosophy that celebrates black roots, the ideals of black life, while giving a balanced presentation of black womandom” (p. 72). Hudson-Weems (2001) defined womanism as a family-centered philosophy that centers race, class, and gender; uplifts racial empowerment; and foregrounds Black women's activism. Cannon (1995) considered womanism “a critical, methodological framework for challenging inherited traditions for their collusion with androcentric patriarchy as well as a catalyst in overcoming oppressive situations through revolutionary acts of rebellion” (p. 27). Womanist definitions abound, but Phillips (2006) collated the descriptions and created five principal characteristics. Specifically, she argued that womanism challenges all forms of oppression, centralizes everyday people and everyday life, rejects rigid ideology, embraces the commonweal, and recognizes the importance of social activism.

Although Phillips (2006) focused on broad characteristics and methods of womanism, Floyd-Thomas (2006) used the definitions to create a list of tenets centering womanists' epistemological stance. The first, radical subjectivity, highlights how Black women dare to legitimate their existence by claiming their voices in the face of dominance. Traditional communalism is informed by Black women's methods of nurturing and supporting one another through the creation and preservation of relational bonds. Redemptive self-love centers the numerous ways Black women and girls celebrate and love their whole selves in a world that attempts to break them into pieces digestible enough for white consumption. Critical engagement provides a “perspectival corrective to those people, ideologies, movements, and institutions that hold a one-dimensional analysis of oppression” (Floyd-Thomas, 2006, p. 208). Of course, Floyd-Thomas's work is situated within religious studies, and she created these tenets with spirituality in mind, but they also are essential in the broader academic world

because rather than looking outward at all the criteria used to *define* womanism, her tenets specifically emphasize how Black women *practice* womanism. Thus, she provided a means to more deeply center womanist performativity in Black women's everyday lives.

Scholars have utilized womanism in studies centering Black women educators (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2005; McArthur & Lane, 2019; Watson, 2018), female undergraduates of color (Jain & Turner, 2011; Rodriguez, 2017), and curriculum (Morton, 2016; Nyachae & Ohito, 2019), but education research centering how Black girls practice womanism has been limited. Still, womanism has theoretical, methodological, and practical implications for scholarship with Black girls (Lindsay-Dennis, 2015) and provides a unique onto-epistemological frame to examine the particularities of Black girls as a social and cultural group. Specifically, womanism provides a framework that uplifts rebellious curiosity; recognizes oppression based on race, gender, and sexuality; promotes self-love and community; and allows space for tension (Nyachae & Ohito, 2019). In a study centering how Black girls form community and promote self-love in an identity category overburdened by whiteness and maleness, a womanist frame is essential.

Method

This article draws from a larger narrative inquiry project that examined how Black girls used storytelling to discuss, critique, and subvert experiences with social (in)justice. For this article, I focused on the girls' conversations. Many nerd studies have focused on language as a tool for the production and maintenance of nerd communities, so everyday conversations are prime spaces to explore how Black girls produce and maintain nerd communities.

Research context: at the kitchen table

The writing workshop took place at the Harbor, a nonprofit writing program housed in a library in the Southeastern United States. For several years, I worked with the organization to enhance the inclusion of speculative fiction writing across their programs, which allowed me to see how youth used the genre to discuss their social justice concerns and imagine equitable futures. As a former Black girl who lacked these programs growing up, I wanted to build a specific writing program for Black girls, so I created a summer writing workshop that encouraged Black middle school girls to examine their lives, communities, and worlds as inspiration for the creation of an Afrofuturist short story.

I strategically use the kitchen table metaphor to situate the research context because it “represents . . . an inclusive space for Black girls and women to come together, to be seen, to be heard, and to just be” (Haddix et al., 2016, p. 380) and offers an approach that is harmonious, uniting, and sustaining (Edwards et al., 2016). During the workshop, the girls and I talked about storytelling and story writing, but we also used the workshop as a place to come together and talk broadly about our interests, allowing space for our nerd identities to be heard and seen. Throughout each of our conversations, we could “come and go, agree or disagree, take turns talking or speak all at once, and laugh, shout, complain, or counsel—even be present in silence” (Phillips, 2006, p. xxvii). We could share our truths, find community, and learn from one another in a casual communal space.

Research partners

I use the term *research partners* because womanism necessitates the positioning of Black girls as specialists of their sociopolitical location (McArthur & Lane, 2019) and because it is imperative to practice inclusivity and mutuality in this work. Womanism centralizes “Black women's ability to create, re-member, nurture, protect, sustain, and liberate communities which are marked and measured not by those outside of one's own community but by the acts of inclusivity, mutuality,

Table 1 Research partners' demographic information.

Research Partner	Age	Pronouns	Commentary
Amber	14	She/her	"I'm dorky, but then at the same time, I don't like to be a dork sometimes. So, I really . . . I would say I'm kind of athletic."
Avenae'J	13	She/her	"I think <i>nerd</i> is a good word. To me, <i>nerd</i> is a compliment. If you call me a nerd, I'm going to be like, 'Thank you. You're so sweet.'"
Bailey	13	She/her	"I don't talk to people. I don't like talking to people. I'm kind of weird, especially with people I don't know . . . but we [other girls] got used to each other. We can just talk about random stuff at random times and just go on forever."
Talyn	13	She/her	"I'm not someone too important, but people know I exist. . . . I think I'm a weirdo."
Terrah	13	She/her	"I kind of just like . . . I go with my weird, nerdy, geeky, like 'reading and writing and then not afraid to be loud and make a lot of jokes' kind of personality."
Victoria	14	She/her	"We're all geeks, first of all. We love a lot of stuff people would say are uncool nowadays. Like, we all love watching Harry Potter and Star Wars, and we love anime. Normally, we would have to probably hide that in school or embrace it and be weird."

reciprocity, and self-care practiced within it" (Floyd-Thomas, 2006, p. 78). Using *partners* to describe the girls who participated in this research suggests their position as active, rather than passive, contributors in this research.

For this study, I recruited six people who self-identified as Black girls. Of course, gender is fluid and changes based on time, location, and context, so although I utilize the identification categories they used at the time of this study, I acknowledge that categories can and do change. Demographic information and commentary about weirdness, nerdiness, or geekiness are included in Table 1. I include the girls' words to show how they used language to position themselves within the nerd community.

My black girl nerd identity

As I position the girls within a nerd space, I must also position myself within this context. My first negative experience with speculative fiction fandom occurred when I was about 6 years old and living near a US Air Force base in Omaha, Nebraska. I was invited to the superhero-themed birthday party of one of my best friends, and I decided I would dress up as Wonder Woman from the DC Comics universe. Of course, my mother would not let me wear the actual costume because it lacked modesty, so I wore a shirt with a screen-printed picture of Wonder Woman's body on it. The problem was that her body was white and mine Black. The problem was that Black girls were restricted from DC Comics fandom. I will never forget how the kids made me feel, telling me I could not be one of my favorite heroes because her racial identity did not mirror my own. I did not know of any Black superheroes, though. Black people did not get to traverse the lands of the fantastic. We just had to make do with the real one.

At the time, I felt isolated from those who enjoyed similar texts. I felt like my identity as Black and girl restricted my access to nerd spaces. I hardly ever saw Black people in futuristic or fantastic worlds. I never saw Black people playing table games such as Dungeons & Dragons. I never saw a Black Wonder Woman. That childhood memory seeped into my being, causing me to read speculative books, watch anime and speculative film, and engage in speculative fandom in private spaces, but never out loud. As an adult, I often wonder how my life would have changed if I had found a Black girl nerd community when I was young. I wonder how my world would have expanded if I had figured out that my interests were not as weird as they appeared to be.

Data collection

For the larger project, data sources included audio-recorded group discussions and interviews, writing artifacts, researcher journal entries, and field notes. All the data could add to conversations about how the girls positioned themselves, but I sequestered the group conversations for this article to determine how the girls used conversation to construct themselves as a collective of Black girl nerds, rather than individual fans.

Data analysis

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is a method of analyzing text and talk that examines the structures, strategies, and consequences of dominant discourse while also showcasing how minoritized speakers resist hegemonic discourse practices (Van Dijk, 1995; Wodak, 2001). Although CDA is political because of its stance on uncovering power and inequality, Cameron (1998) argued that CDA “is one of those broadly progressive projects whose founders and dominant figures are nevertheless all straight white men” (p. 969). Lazar (2005, 2007) coined the term *feminist critical discourse analysis*, a method that explicitly highlights the critical examination of women’s text and talk located within a system of patriarchy. She surmised that feminist CDA was essential for three reasons: (1) Traditional CDA lacks a specific gendered lens, (2) traditional CDA fails to center women’s contributions to the method, and (3) the use of the word *feminist* provides a means for women to name themselves and find kinship within the discourse analysis community.

Similar to the need for feminist CDA, it is important to analyze how Black women and girls, who exist at multiple junctions of oppression, resist structures created to subjugate them. As Phillips (2006) argued, the “unique set of circumstances, created by the convergence of racism, sexism, and poverty, has yielded certain forms of consciousness and repertoires of skills that any and all occupying such a position ostensibly would have developed” (p. xli). Traditional and feminist CDA, although useful in some instances, lack a specific lens to center Black women and girls’ consciousness and repertoire of skills. Thus, I offer *womanist discourse analysis* (WDA) as a means to analyze the discursive practices of Black women and girls.

Doing WDA

Phillips (2006) noted that womanism centers everyday people, everyday life, and everyday talk and that womanist dialogue “permits negotiation, reveals standpoint, realizes existential equality, and shapes social reality” (p. xxvii). Based on these ideals, phase one of the analysis required me to read the workshop transcripts, searching for places where the girls engaged in everyday talk to negotiate their identities, discuss their perspectives on the world, and share common experiences that shaped their social reality. In my initial data readings, I noticed that the girls predominantly engaged in everyday talk during our unstructured time: before and after the workshop, during transition, and during breakfast or lunch. I chose to focus on unstructured conversations because these were the vernacular spaces unencumbered by my focus on the research project, where the girls focused not on story writing but on one another. Once located, I isolated the unstructured dialogue from the larger data corpus to engage in a more detailed analysis.

In phase two, I looked for conversational codes that aligned with aspects of kitchen table talk. I noted when the girls chose to participate in conversation; when they agreed or disagreed; when they took turns to speak, spoke all at once, or remained silent; and when they laughed, shouted, complained, or counseled one another (Dillard, 2021; Phillips, 2006). For example, the following conversation occurred during a break:

Victoria: Is it weird that I want to watch the new Dora movie?

Amber: Same.

Avenae’J: It’s not weird.

Victoria: I want to watch that so bad. My mom—me and my mom are like fangirling over the new Dora movie.

Avenae’J: I want to see how much they mess up.

Talyn: It actually seems kind of good, but the backpack doesn’t talk.

Amber: The backpack doesn’t talk?

Victoria: Yeah . . . the backpack doesn’t talk, Boots doesn’t talk, the map doesn’t talk.

Terrah: Here’s the thing about it: I don’t mind it, like it doesn’t seem like it’s going to be a bad movie. . . . I just think it’s an unnecessary movie, like it does not need to be a movie.

In my detailed micro-analysis, I marked when Victoria posed a question, inviting the other members to confirm or deny her interest. I noted that Amber agreed with Victoria and that Avenae’J showed her acceptance of Victoria’s choices by letting her know her interests were not weird. I also wrote that Talyn and Terrah participated by complaining about the movie’s possibilities, whereas Bailey chose to remain silent throughout this conversation. I conducted a similar micro-analysis of each isolated conversation to discern how the girls’ talk mirrored womanist discourse practices.

In the last phase, I connected the internal nerd context cultivated and maintained within the workshop to conversations about nerd identity in the larger research sphere. Rather than focusing on how whiteness constricted the girls’ nerd identities, I centered the womanist ideal of resistance by focusing on the girls’ power. I examined their talk for how they countered who can be a nerd and how they fortified their Black girl nerdiness through conversation. I investigated the data for places where they uplifted one another by applauding their nerdiness. I looked for places where the girls embraced both colloquial speech and slang to create their Black girl nerd community, a stance that differed from the white nerds in Bucholtz’s (1999, 2001) studies. For instance, considering the same conversation shown above, I made note of how Victoria used the word *weird* in her question, which aligned with research focusing on the separation of nerdiness from coolness. I also noted how she connected to fandom by stating that she and her mother are fangirling over the movie and how she and the other girls attempted to prove their fan knowledge by listing a specific detail the movie trailer inaccurately depicts. Additionally, I wrote that the conversations connect to the womanist tenet of redemptive self-love and traditional communalism. Each of the girls used their words to show solidarity, letting Victoria know that her interests were communally shared. The girls shared in redemptive self-love by celebrating their whole selves, allowing space for a love of a movie that some might consider weird for a middle school-age Black girl.

I detail my analytic process to show that although traditional CDA could be useful in locating structures of power within the girls’ conversations, and even though feminist CDA could be useful for examining the girls’ positions as gendered individuals, WDA enabled me to specifically focalize Black girls’ knowledge and the historical ways Black women and girls speak to one another. Their unique positions in society as Black, girl, and nerd impact how they experience the world, so it was necessary to use a method that focused on their unique experiences. WDA allowed me to center Black girls’ talk, showcasing how they participated in a process of knowledge production that is vital for their own flourishing (Floyd-Thomas, 2006).

Findings

Because my goal in this article is to center the discursive strategies Black girls use to form nerd communities and how their discursive practices counter traditional conceptions of who can and cannot be a nerd, I group my findings under two themed subheadings: “Am I the Only One?” and “Acting a Color.” Under each subheading, I offer examples from the girls’ conversations, highlighting how their

dialogue mimicked womanist practices. Following the Findings section, I discuss how the girls' engagement in traditional communalism and critical engagement highlights a commitment to radical subjectivity and redemptive self-love and connect these findings to larger conversations about Black girl nerds.

Am I the only one?

Before the workshop, most of the girls were strangers. Avenae'J and Talyn attended the same middle school, but the other girls were not connected in any way. Harbor's middle school program did not have a central meeting location, as teaching artists would travel to individual schools to conduct workshops. Thus, the girls were connected through their participation in Harbor programming but were separated by their school sites. Because the girls came from schools across the city, I anticipated some hesitation in conversation, but the girls immediately began to form community. During lunch in our first recorded session, the following conversation took place:

Talyn: Am I the only one who notices that the only good book . . . the only movie adaptation of a book is Harry Potter?

Terrah: They did decent. The Harry Potter movies weren't actually awful. They were decent. There are some parts that should've been in it.

Amber: At least it was accurate.

Terrah: They kept it faithful enough to the book to where people who read the books and then kind of watch the movies could get it.

Victoria: They were accurate, but I think the only one that was on point . . . like the only one that was really accurate was *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. That's the only one that made sense to me . . . cuz in the movie . . . the cake . . . they did that exactly right.

Talyn: They kept it faithful enough to the book to where—

Avenae'J: I saw the Percy Jackson movie before I read the book. I realized how bad it was compared to the book. So much differences.

Terrah: I watched the movie, and even the movie without reading the book is bad. That movie's just awful.

Avenae'J: Like, Athena's daughter was the one that noticed it. Annabeth was the one who noticed—

Terrah: Annabeth was supposed to be blonde and have gray eyes.

Amber: And she did not. I did not like that. I saw an interview with the people who play the characters. And then they asked, um, the guy who plays as Percy Jackson, they ask him what does *blue* mean to him. He said what does blue have to do with the movie. I got so mad. Blue has to do everything with that.

Victoria: Blue is everything. . . . It makes no sense . . . no sense!

Terrah: Blue is literally everything. The second movie, [*Percy Jackson:*] *Sea of Monsters*, is even worse. It's not even [*The*] *Sea of Monsters*. It's like they're trying to put the entire rest of the series into this second movie, and I'm like, What are you guys doing?

In this conversation, Talyn began by questioning whether she was the only one who noticed that Harry Potter is the only good book-to-film adaptation. By starting her query with "Am I the only one who . . ." she invited the others to form a bond through their interest in the accurate transfer of books to film. Terrah, Amber, and Victoria affirmed Talyn by confirming her initial inquiry and noting the film's accuracy in relation to the novels. After the affirmations, Talyn began to speak again, but Avenae'J interrupted by providing a nonexample through Percy Jackson. Taking the cue, Amber proceeded by authorizing Avenae'J's words, and Terrah followed suit by further explaining the

nonexample. Although the conversation shifted from Harry Potter to Percy Jackson, the girls consistently focused on the need for accuracy, and they highlighted their disapproval of films that fail to honor the source material.

The girls “share[d] a common heritage and contextual language” (Floyd-Thomas, 2006, p. 78) that allowed them to form relational bonds, and this is shown by how they talked about shared texts without the need for in-depth description and confirmed the film’s accuracy without further explanation. They just knew. Avenae’J further affirmed Talyn by providing a nonexample, and even when the specific example was changed from Harry Potter to Percy Jackson, the girls maintained this bond, using language only a fan of the story would understand. Particularly, Amber noted the importance of *blue* to Percy Jackson and was incensed that the actor playing Percy did not understand the color’s significance. Terrah confirmed Amber’s anger by stating that blue is “literally everything,” and Victoria corroborated by saying that failing to understand blue’s significance makes no sense. As a group who understands the story, they knew that blue is Percy Jackson’s favorite color and a running joke throughout the series. The girls were able to build community through a shared love of fantasy books and shared anger over the inaccurate portrayal of events and characters in the films.

In our later workshops, I often interviewed one girl while the other girls talked and wrote together. The following conversation occurred during the sixth workshop meeting when Victoria and I were out of the room talking about her speculative fiction story:

Talyn: There is a gaming camp. I went there, but I couldn’t go anywhere [else] cuz it was expensive, but I want to go again cuz it was fun.

Bailey: If I knew about this—my mom probably knew. She probably didn’t tell me cuz she knew I would’ve wanted to go.

Avenae’J: I like gaming, but I’m not good at it. . . . I’m just really not good at it, so I can’t go to one [a gaming camp] cause it will just be me, and everyone will be like, “You know what? Forget it. I’ll do it. You’re a horrible player.” That’s just—I just imagine people thinking I’m a horrible player.

Terrah: We can play Minecraft together!

Talyn: We can play Smash together, Avenae’J!

Bailey: Yeah, we can all play Minecraft together!

Amber: We can play Minecraft. I’m *good* at Minecraft.

Avenae’J: I’m good at Minecraft. I find all the crap. I don’t know what they’re exactly called. Like I find all like diamond—the diamond stuff like really quickly.

Bailey: I can’t find any diamonds, sooooo—

Terrah: We can create our own video gaming club where we play Minecraft.

In this conversation, Talyn shared that she used to attend a gaming camp. Bailey pulled on this thread and highlighted her interest in attending a similar gaming camp, although she said her mom might be against her attendance. Avenae’J said that although she would be interested in going to a gaming camp, she did not see herself as good enough to go. If she decided to go, she would be alone. To uplift their community member, Terrah, Talyn, and Bailey told Avenae’J that they can play together, and Terrah presented the possible creation of their own video gaming club. The creation of a gaming group as a community-building method is essential, as gatekeeping often prevents access to fandom spaces. Nerd hierarchies are gendered and racialized (Eglash, 2002), so much so that “women’s interest in a historically geeky topic can seemingly devalue it” (Reagle, 2015, p. 2865), and the presence of Black people creates an ideological conundrum. However, rather than center the gatekeeping nature of fandom, the girls ensured the collective well-being of all members by planning to form a new community that would exist outside the traditional confines of gaming camps that might be antagonistic to one of their community members.

In both conversations, the girls showcased the womanist practice of traditional communalism as they affirmed, nurtured, protected, and sustained the members of their Black girl nerd community. They claimed space for themselves within a place that historically has refused their participation, by engaging in contextual language and suggesting the formation of an alternative gaming group. They refused gatekeeping culture that polices who can and cannot identify themselves as gamers, as readers, as movie lovers. Even though the girls often entered the conversation in different ways—by agreeing, providing nonexamples, and connecting tangentially to topics—they consistently welcomed one another’s entry points, thereby opening space to create a community optimized for the participation of all members.

Acting a color

Fordham and Ogbu (1986) asserted that Black students, in an effort to achieve Black loyalty, often reject attitudes and behaviors socially and culturally deemed white. In their nonexhaustive list of unacceptable Black activities, Fordham and Ogbu included the following: speaking Standard American English, listening to white music, spending lots of time in the library, getting good grades, being on time, and reading and writing poetry. They argued that these actions are traditionally defined as activities for white youth and considered inappropriate for Black youth, lest those Black students lose fictive kinship in Black spaces. However, the girls did not believe in “acting white.” Specifically, during the seventh workshop after a discussion about our individual identities, the following exchange occurred:

Amber: I think about my race most of the time because a lot of people . . . they say, like, “Oh, you act white.” How do I act white?

Avenae’J: How do you act a color? You act like paper . . . Just go . . .

Talyn: Someone said that to me one time, and I was like, “OK, . . . you act orange.”

Terrah: You act blue!

Amber said she thinks about her Blackness a lot because people tell her she acts white. Instead of agreeing with them, however, she said there is no way to act white. Avenae’J, Talyn, and Terrah affirmed Amber’s statement by asking how someone can act a color, and they each created a nonsense example to outline how others sound when they tell Black girls their interests are akin to whiteness. The girls rejected the list of “unacceptable” behaviors to acknowledge that Black girls can do anything they want to do and like whatever they want to like.

In later workshop sessions, the girls often conversed about their music interests because they listened to music as they wrote. Because listening to white music was on Fordham and Ogbu’s (1986) list of “acting white,” I examined examples of the girls’ music discussions to acknowledge how they pushed back against this construction. The first conversation took place during the sixth workshop while I was interviewing Terrah in the next room. Within this discussion, the girls commented on their love of Billie Eilish, a Grammy Award-winning American singer-songwriter of pop music (Torres, 2020). Their focus on Eilish is important because the music industry often constructs R&B and hip-hop as Black and pop music as white (Leight, 2020).

Avenae’J: Her [Billie Eilish] music makes people feel.

Victoria: Her music makes me feel in a good mood . . . like not depression.

Amber: She makes me want to sit in front of a fan and talk to myself. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. That’s just how I feel.

Victoria: She makes me want to sit in front of a fan with a cover and just get cozy and just listen to music. . . . What’s your favorite Billie Eilish song?

Avenae’J: “Ocean Eyes.” I don’t know why I love that song so much . . .

Talyn: Uh, 9-1-1.

Bailey: “Copycat.”

Avenae’J: Oh, that’s a good one.

Amber: “Bad Guy.”

Talyn: This is my favorite song actually . . .

Victoria: My favorite Billy Eilish song—I have two actually. One of my favorites is “I Love You,” and then the other one is “When the Party’s Over.”

As a white girl categorized as a pop singer, Billie Eilish’s fan base would presumably be white female listeners, but the Black girls in this study said her music makes them feel, uplifts them, and gives them comfort. They connected over the fact that they all have a favorite Eilish song. Like their conversations about gaming and book-to-film adaptations, they bolstered their community through shared interest but also provided a counterbalance to those who claim that listening to certain artists is akin to acting white.

During the eighth workshop, Victoria, Terra, and Amber had the following conversation about K-pop while others were on a bathroom break. K-pop is a genre of pop music that originated in South Korea but has been welcomed by music fans in the United States. K-pop is not white music because K-pop artists predominantly record in Korean rather than catering to white US audiences (Sherman, 2020). Still, as pop music is considered white and as K-pop has been a toxic space for Black fans (Sonder, 2020), a love of K-pop could also be considered “acting white.”

Victoria: Are you listening to K-pop?

Terrah: I might be . . .

Victoria: I was listening to that!

Terrah: I heard it! You listened to “DNA,” and then you listened [to] “Idol.”

Amber: The only song that I listen to—well, the only—well, actually, I listened to two K-pop groups.

Terrah: Who?

Amber: Blackpink, and half the time I’m forced to listen to BTS.

Terrah: BTS is good. Blackpink is good. TXT is good.

Victoria: I was listening to, um, “DNA,” and then I listened to “Idol.” So, I thought the—I thought either Blackpink would come up or someone else or EXID. . . . No, . . . it was Hyun-a “Lip & Hip.” Um, I don’t like that song.

Like the conversation around Billie Eilish, the girls connected through their love of K-pop, but Terrah’s hesitancy to confirm her listening choice suggested that she was gauging the safety of sharing her musical tastes. Victoria provided security for Terrah by saying that she, too, was listening to K-pop. Victoria even named the song titles to show Terrah how familiar she was with the music. Once safety was confirmed, the girls openly talked about their favorite K-pop groups.

Through their talk, the girls challenged notions of acting white, or acting a color, because they know and embrace their Black identity while also embracing a love of pop music. They refused to reject music they like just because society has constructed pop music as a genre for white consumption. Their love for various pop groups helped them sustain fictive kinship in the workshop space. Even beyond the music examples, throughout the workshop, the girls showcased a love for Broadway shows, science fiction and fantasy stories, getting good grades, and story writing, all while embracing their Blackness. In doing so, they provided a “perspectival corrective to those people, ideologies, movements, and institutions that hold a one-dimensional analysis of oppression” (Floyd-Thomas, 2006,

p. 208). The girls showed that whatever Black girls do, whether that be gushing over a new pop star or reading fantastic literature, their behavior is a facet of Black identity. They are not “acting white”; they are just being themselves.

Discussion

The girls’ talk foregrounded an engagement in womanist practices even if the exact label was never used. They engaged in traditional communalism by using their conversations to engage in practices of solidarity that supported the interests of each member. The girls showed mutuality by honoring the ideas and discussions of their community and collectively attending to the needs and questions of individual group members. The group employed critical engagement through their belief that Black girls “hold the standard and normative measure for true liberation” (Floyd-Thomas, 2006, p. 208). They know they are Black girls who enjoy activities that societal gatekeepers deem white, but the girls also know that within the workshop space, they set the standard for what a Black girl can like and who a Black girl can be. They set a norm for liberation that allows space for Black nerdy girls to thrive in community together.

Collectively, the discussions also highlighted the womanist practices of radical subjectivity and redemptive self-love. Throughout their conversations, the girls challenged the restriction of perceived options for Black girl identities, revealing truths that enable readers to examine unspoken and unwritten beliefs and expectations that attempt to narrowly define Black girlhood (Cannon, 2006). The girls defied limitations on their identity by mutually engaging in discursive practices that called into question traditional conceptions of who can and cannot be a nerd. Further, the girls engaged in redemptive self-love by giving themselves permission to find joy in their nerdiness. They focused on activities and interests that brought them joy, and rather than hiding them, they discussed their interests proudly. The girls engaged in acts of resistance, countering the idea that certain activities are connected to whiteness, honoring the fact that their interests have and always will be attached to their Black girlhood. Through verbal exchanges, the girls affirmed one another’s voices and subsequently affirmed who they were as Black girls who happen to be nerds.

The openness with which the girls shared their interests within the workshop is possible in schools, but it requires educators to challenge preconceived ideas about who can and cannot be nerds. It requires educators to engage in womanist practices to make classrooms safe places for Black girl nerds to openly exist. It requires the creation of healing and resistance spaces that counter the isolation Black girls often feel in schools (Kelley, 2020). Particularly, educators must make space for Black girl nerds to form relational bonds with other nerds (e.g., centering speculative fiction and manga as critical class texts, discussing and dismantling nerd stereotypes as a classroom community). Also, if other nerds are not represented in the classroom, we must make space for communities to form across varied contexts (e.g., sci-fi sister circles, anime clubs, gender-inclusive gaming clubs). We, as educators, must personally engage with content outside of the classroom (e.g., science fiction books, fantasy films, and various art forms centering Black nerdy girls) to ensure that we are not acting as the gatekeepers of fandom and nerd identity. We must make space for Black girls’ radical subjectivity to thrive by providing multiple opportunities for Black girls to name and rename themselves. We must celebrate Black girlhood in all of its forms and affirm Black girls whose interests counter stereotypical portrayals of Black girlhood.

These activities should not be radical, but they are because affirming Black girls who identify as nerds goes against normative constructions of nerdiness. It goes against clichéd ideas that make Black girls feel as if they are weird or abnormal due to their interests in nerdy concepts. Educators must ensure that Black nerdy girls are given space to just exist, especially because Black girls consistently receive messages about who they are, who they can be, and how they must act (Richardson, 2013). We must ensure that Black girl nerds do not feel forced to hide themselves in spaces that should be open to their varied identities. We must ensure that Black girls never feel like they are the only one, like there is something wrong with them, just because dominant society refuses to acknowledge the expansiveness of Black girlhood. We must ensure that all Black girls know our classrooms are spaces open to their interests, whatever they may be.

Conclusion

Bucholtz (2001) claimed that nerds are “racially marked precisely because individuals refuse to engage in cultural practices that originate across racialized lines and instead construct their identities by cleaving closely to the symbolic resources of an extreme whiteness” (p. 85). The girls in this study, however, embraced their cultural ways of being and knowing and refused to cleave themselves to constructions of whiteness. In fact, they mocked those who attempted to force whiteness upon them because of their interests. In the workshop space, being a Black girl nerd who loved pop music, gaming, and science fiction and fantasy literature was not peculiar; it was standard. It was an everyday aspect of Black girl existence. It is our job as researchers and educators to ensure that this commonplace aspect of Black girl identity is welcomed as part of the full spectrum of Black girlhood so decades from now, when Victoria is working with other Black girl nerds, she will never have to hear them say that accepting themselves is weird.

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