

BLACK NERDS' PLEASURE READING CHOICES: RACE, REPRESENTATION AND
PROSOCIAL SKILLS

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ABSTRACT

Not much is known about what African Canadian Black youth read for pleasure. The subject of this study is a group of young people who belong to the Black nerd subculture (aka Blerds) of urban Toronto. The participants are between 16 and 25 years of age and identify as predominantly working class. Research conducted with this group reveals that graphic novels, fan fiction, traditional comics and webcomics are their main reading choices. Participatory research is used to understand how these texts are read and their implications for race, representation and prosocial skills and values.

Although there are common threads among all Blerds, this study adopts and adapts youth subcultural theory and intersectional theory to understand the unique interest, sense of belonging, morals and values of Blerds in the specific location of urban Toronto. Since research on the Blerd subculture is limited, the study's findings provide insights into the Blerd culture and Black youth's perspectives about living in multiracial, multicultural Toronto.

Key Words: Blerds, Comics, Graphic Novels, Manga, Afrofuturism, Cosplay, Participatory Research

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INTRODUCTION

The world in which contemporary North American Black youth exist has impacted their lives in multiple ways. Globalization and advanced communication technologies, including the internet, have affected temporal and spatial barriers, ideas, information and products within international and local borders. The speed and frequency of communication have intensified relationships across cultures (Jenkins 2006; Mackey 2007). Cross-cultural exchanges promote other cultures and alternative perspectives and representations that do not align with North American values and mores, and these social changes have implications for identity formation and the way young people engage with material culture. The multiplicity of phenomena described above ultimately affects childhood experiences, particularly when social contexts are considered (Montgomery 2009; Wells 2015). Despite all these changes, discrimination based on race, class and gender continues to shape the socially constructed reality of Black youth; and abject experiences such as state violence, barriers to opportunities, invisibility and exclusion have implications for meaningful participation in society. Black youth are highly visible in a world that criminalizes Blackness and invisible in a world that marginalizes them.

Blerds

At the core of this study are ten Canadian youth with Caribbean and African Canadian backgrounds. Eight identify as male and two as female, with the majority mainly identifying as working class. What they also have in common is that all participate in the Black nerd (Blerd) subculture. Blerds is a term that has been gaining popularity in North America in recent years (Alexander 2020; Bradley 2021). Blerds participate in various aspects of white youth culture that fall outside of what is commonly regarded as “cool”. They can be found in predominantly Black spaces, and they have a prolific presence in online forums and on social media platforms

including YouTube, Instagram and Twitter. According to Avery Alexander (2020), the Blerd subculture evolved in the 2000s as a reflection of Black nerds' love of various aspects of white nerd culture that was fun and interesting to them. The formation of groups that self-identify as Blerds was also a response to the exclusionary and gatekeeping tactics of white nerds who were resisting an evolving nerd culture that was becoming more inclusive and accessible to various peoples of colour, genders, sexualities and abilities. As members of the Black population, Blerds are often overlooked in popular culture, particularly in Canada. They have been navigating this world, creating unique spaces in which they can express themselves, be accepted, and reimagine, reconfigure, and repurpose material culture to suit a Black reality.

Black nerds unsettle the myth of a monolithic Blackness. In an American imagination that has historically stereotyped Black people as alternately ignorant and emotional or sexualized and cool, the nerd—smart and cerebral, unsexy and decidedly uncool—creates cognitive dissonance. Not only do Black nerds confound racist stereotypes, they also pierce the protective orthodoxy of Blackness passed down in the United States across generations. (Bradley 2021)

Blerds see themselves beyond the narrow confines of Blackness and often express diverse opinions and perspectives on issues that affect Black youth. They challenge Black popular culture, including codes and signifiers that inform performances of Blackness, by offering a more intersectional interpretation of what it means to be Black. For example, Blerds challenge Black masculinity, using personas that contrast with stylish hip-hop visions in popular culture. This exploration of multiple identities has led to increased participation in cosplay¹ cultures and

¹ Cosplay, a popular hobby that involves dressing up as a fan favorite fictional character, is not exclusive to anime but has a massive presence within the cosplay community. It is not unusual to see groups of cosplayers at any anime convention.

comic conventions² (comic-con). These Blerds, which include groups such as Blerd.com, TheBlerdGurl and TheNerdsOfColor, have infiltrated the nerd space, which was traditionally considered white (Alexander 2020; Bradley 2021; Bucholtz 2001; Gillota 2013; Kendall 1999).

For this project, Blerds are viewed from the context of youth subcultures (Bennett 1999; Hodkinson 2007). Sara Bragg and Mary Jane Kehily (2013) note that “youth subcultures frequently seek to define themselves as being against the culture that exists around them and particularly against values associated with the parental home” (179). In other words, subcultural³ groups may appear to be operating on the margins or fringes of society. These Blerds may therefore adopt values and norms which challenge common understandings by dominant groups on what it means to be a racialized youth (Bennett 1999; Hirji 2010). This study examines the strategies Blerds have developed to overcome and challenge exclusion and systemic barriers (Eposito & Romano 2016); as a consequence, understanding how young people use various texts for inspiration and strength is worth academic inquiry. Of significance to our understanding of these participants is the effects of intersectionality. I use the concept of intersectionality developed by Kimberle Crenshaw (1991) “to denote the various ways in which race, class, and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of Blackness” (1244). Intersectionality has its strengths as a method of analysis that incorporates race, gender and class theories while obviating the need to treat them as separate categories of analysis. Crenshaw’s argument is useful and suggests that the politicization of race and intersectionality may leave the issues of

² Comic conventions (comic-cons) are events that celebrates nerd culture by providing space to trade and talk about comics and other media inspired by comics or that have comic book traits, such as superheroes, science fiction, and horror. They also feature shows with cult followings and others that are not mainstream culture.

³ “Subculture” refers to particular groups of young people identifiable by their distinctive style. Youth subcultures typically have common interests that distinguish them from other social groups and young people (Beazley 2003; Hebdige 1979; Thornton 1997). O’Sullivan (1994) views these identifiable distinctions in subcultural groups as responses to problems encountered through age in terms of generational status, constraints resulting from subordination, and lack of control. These elements are further amplified by inequalities emanating from a social class operating in education, work, and leisure.

one oppressed group invisible or underserved. However, one of the challenges with analyzing Blerds is that our broad understanding of intersectionality obscures their presence as a subgroup in the Black community. It may be a case where Blerds' experiences of race, class, and gender are not analogous to Black youth experiences who do not identify as Blerds. This definition of intersectionality therefore implies a totalizing theory that may impose limits on the heterogeneity or diversity of Blerds' lived experiences.

Self-Reflexivity

The Blerd participants in this study reveal they read mostly comics and graphic novels, including manga and anime texts, webcomics and fanfiction. Their favorite genres are science fiction, fantasy, action, superheroes, mystery and real-life drama. Most, however, indicate they are not reading Young Adult (YA) novels that are being written for Black youth and are available through traditional channels. This study unpacks the implications of these findings, and explores why Blerds find pleasure in the texts they read, why they are meaningful as sources of inspiration and imagination, and how they influence young people within the Blerd subculture in digital and non-digital spaces in Toronto.

My interest in adopting this study comes from my childhood as a self-identifying nerd who grew up on *Star Trek*, *Lost in Space*, *Doctor Who* and other science fiction and fantasy TV shows. I was curious to see if young people today had similar experiences with the texts they consume for pleasure. Consequently, when the opportunity presented itself to study this topic as a Children, Childhood and Youth scholar in graduate studies, I was pleasantly surprised and excited to discover writers such as Nnedi Okorafor, Nalo Hopkinson, Zetta Elliot, N.K. Jemisin, Tomi Adeyemi and Angie Thomas. The content in their novels valorizes the Black presence,

something I never experienced in abundance as a child growing up on a predominantly Black, Caribbean island.

I never owned a Black doll. The dolls I received as a child were white with blond, brunette or red hair. It never occurred to me to reject them because I grew up around female relatives who viewed whiteness as aspirational, due to their upbringing in the 1950s and 1960s when colonial rule and values prevailed in most Commonwealth countries. Many of the teachers I had in high school in the mid to late 1970s were white expatriates from England. However, the representational pendulum shifted in the sixth form when Ms. Scafe, a Black English teacher arrived to be our English literature instructor. Among other authors, she taught us to appreciate T.S. Elliot, Shakespeare, George Orwell, V.S. Naipaul, Chinua Achebe and J.D. Salinger. Ms. Scafe was 25 years old and the first Black feminist in our young lives. She was our role model. While teaching a primarily white and British curriculum, her contextual conversations were centred on our identities as Black girls. She taught us to see ourselves as worthy and able to do whatever we set our minds to – and we believed her. She encouraged us not to think of societal constraints such as gender and skin colour, and she taught us to question the system – to push back. Ms. Scafe gave me permission to be me, to accept myself fully. Ms. Scafe was who I wanted to be when I grew up. At a class reunion we were asked who the most influential person in our lives was. Among the group of former classmates were lawyers, doctors and corporate executives. “Ms. Scafe!” we all said at once.

Books saved me. They kept my company, and they introduced me to the cultures of people who do not look like me. In later years, what became apparent is that representation matters, whether it is a fictional character like Shuri⁴ in *Black Panther* or an actual person such

⁴ *Shuri* in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. She first appears in the 2018 film *Black Panther* where she is depicted as a technological genius who designs the outfits and weapons for her brother T'Challa/Black Panther.

as Ms. Scafe. Children and youth constantly construct understandings and meanings about race as they interact with others who look different in terms of cultures, ethnicities and skin color (Husband 2012). Science fiction and fantasy texts instill an unending curiosity to consider the what-ifs of this world. Children and youth rely on their imagination and role models to manifest their dreams. The ability to escape and create with one's imagination can be transformative. I became a graduate student and scholar of Children's Studies because I believed Ms. Scafe's mantra: I can be more even if it only starts with the imagination. This memory of the joy and excitement from reading books as a child and as a young adult led me to explore what Black youth are reading today. It is thrilling to see another generation of Black youth reimagine what their world could look like and to see that science fiction continues to play as significant a role in this reimagining as it did for me.

It is even more exhilarating to see the material now available to contemporary Black youth in films such as *Black Panther*.

The film's ability to imagine a futuristic and alternative uncolonized Africa provides audiences with positive portrayals of Africa beyond stereotypes of civil warfare and violence, disease, famine, and other social ills. It also left Black moviegoers feeling a sense of pride and connection to a Pan-African identity.

(Strong and. Chaplin, 58)

A reimagining of the Black subject in popular culture is a theme that permeates this study, as it explores the reading choices of Blerds, what is available and not available to them, and what attracts them. Researcher Ramdarshan Bold (2018) notes that historically, traditional English language YA fiction and children's literature have rarely, if ever, included a main character who is racialized, LGBTQI, or disabled. Several researchers have demonstrated that,

despite expansion in the categories of YA fiction into other media and genres,⁵ diversification in protagonists and writers is still lagging. For example, in the United Kingdom, 90% of the best-selling YA titles from 2006 to 2016 featured white, able-bodied, cis-gendered and heterosexual main characters (Ramdarshan Bold 2018; Shuttie 2020). Children's book authors have shown a similar lack of diversity in the United States (Charles 2017; Elliott 2010). According to the Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC)⁶ 2011 survey, racial minorities have not traditionally experienced widespread coverage in YA literature. CCBC statistics in America reveal that out of an estimated 5,000 children's books published in 2011, only 300 were about Africans/African Americans, American Indians, Asian Pacific/Asian Pacific Americans and Latinos. This was actually an improvement over the CCBC report in 1985 showing Black authors and illustrators publishing only 18 books. The above findings highlight deficits in multicultural publishing trends in comparison to the ever-increasing numbers of racial minority and racially-mixed persons in the United States. Hence, the impact of this lack of diversity and reimagining requires exploration to see how it has affected the direction Black youth have turned to find pleasure, meaning, representation and identity.

Academic research on Black youth reading interests for pleasure is limited. A literature review of past research reveals minimal focus on the effects of intersectionality on racialized young people's reading for pleasure choices. Analysis of the studies shows limited information on the voices of young Black people in the diaspora that specifically address their consumption of YA literature and their recreational reading interests regarding YA Black texts. In recent years, the availability of Black YA literary texts has increased as Black writers enter the market

⁵ Other media and genres, include graphic novels/manga, light novels, fantasy, mystery fiction, romance novels, and even subcategories such as cyberpunk, techno-thrillers, and contemporary Christian fiction.

⁶ See Regina Sierra Carter, "YA Literature: The Inside and Cover Story." *The Journal of Research on Libraries and Young Adults*, vol. 3, 2013.

and attempt to give a voice to racialized youth. Black YA literary texts offer alternate ways to view the world based on the imagination of writers who locate their work within a postcolonial frame that looks at the aftermath of colonialism on the lives of previously colonized peoples. I am informed by ideas that focus on the impact of postcolonialism on African and Caribbean immigrants. The work of post-colonial scholars Stuart Hall et al. (2013) is critical to my analysis in subsequent chapters. My study looks at the connection, impact and emergence of new communication technology and formats of representation on the internet and other online platforms in the lives of Blerds. Postcolonial theory informed by the cultural studies movement in the United Kingdom (UK) is therefore significant. A postcolonial lens illuminates marginalization, embraces multiplicity, problematizes and disrupts hegemony. A postcolonial framework also provides opportunities for Black subjects to recognize themselves and the diversity that exists in the spaces they share with others. By making space for multiple views of the child, Black YA writers recognize that notions of childhood are not constructed in one way but through multifaceted cultural landscapes that are often unaccounted for in hegemonic identity classifications (James & Prout 2012; Kilderry et al. 2004; Montgomery 2004). Consequentially, racialized youth identity formation is influenced by multiple sources, including home, school, dominant group narratives, and influences from popular culture.⁷ Racial stereotypes are particularly impactful in the Global North, where Black youth are faced with the limiting view of a national identity that is both homogenizing and exclusionary in specific populations.

⁷ According to John Storey (2015) there were many attempts to assign a definitive description of popular culture. In its simplest form, popular culture is culture that is favoured by many people. Some define it as “mass produced commercial culture, whereas high culture is the result of an individual act of creation” (6). This division between popular and high culture may change may shift and blurr over time with societal changes. The designation popular culture was originally intended to relegate things to a status inferior to high culture, thereby positing an opposition between the enduring, elite culture of museums and the ephemeral, everyday or mundane culture of the streets.

Canadian researcher Vivian Howard (2011) examined the motivators for recreational and pleasure reading in the lives of 68 twelve to fifteen-year-old youth in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Within this group, 70% of participants identified as female and 30% male. Howard's findings reveal that youths' reading choices and motivations are influenced by several factors, including parental support, parental education, and social class. Howard's findings also show that advertisements and promotions influence young people's choices for reading pleasure, in that they often read what is trending. Choices were limited in terms of diverse reading selections with little risk taking or experimentation. One could therefore infer that a significant amount of YA literature sales, including genre selection, are driven by marketing and distribution networks. G. Kylene Beers' (1996) research with youth in America, and Agnes Nieuwenhuizen's (2001) research with youth in Australia reveal similar findings regarding young people's reading choices and motivations. Both Beers (1996) and Nieuwenhuizen (2001) identify correlations between avid readers and social class, parental education, preschool exposure to books, peer groups, and freedom of choice. These existing research studies do not, however, consider the impact of intersectionality i.e., race, social class, and gender. Blerds in my research study are predominantly working-class, and parents are not engaged in directing their reading choices, which is influenced mainly by peers and online forums. Ongoing research on fan creativity, online communities and participatory culture by various disciplines such as humanities, social sciences, education, and media studies emphasize the importance of current and emerging trends in young people's relationships with material culture and identity formation. Theoretical and empirical analyses on trans-cultural flows of symbolic and material objects provide insights and new ways of looking at the impact of material culture and consumption practices. Media studies researcher Henry Jenkins' (2006) work on fan cultures establishes a significant body of work that

seeks to understand the interplay between the media industries and their consumers (Elizabeth Ebony Thomas 2019).

Although studies on Black youth and their participation in music cultures and subcultures are prolific (Broder 2006; Condry 2006, 2001; Mcleod 2013), inadequate research on Black youth and their reading habits contributes to the overall discourse about Black youth as reluctant readers or non-readers. These assumptions challenge meaningful discussions and our understanding of Black youth's interests and engagement with material culture. Data from my research shows that participants have many interesting and creative reading choices. To address the gap in research, I examine these choices and show how representation, race, prosocial skills and values are reflected in their choices. My interest in this research topic stems from my belief that Black youth and their relationship with popular culture reflect the concerns and challenges they face daily, including discrimination, exclusion and stereotyping based on race, social class, and gender. Many critical texts offer insightful commentary on the life experiences of Black youth. However, they do so with a narrow concentration – e.g., genre studies, gender, or pedagogical practices – or with a singular focus on a particular topic. An examination of the impact on young people or youth culture is also limited from the standpoint that we are not hearing young people's voices and opinions. In reviewing research conducted with young adults around racial discourses, findings illuminate the importance of researching young people to understand their engagement with popular material culture.

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative participatory research design, meaning that “the people whose lives are being studied should be involved in defining the research questions and take an active part in both collecting and analysing the data” (Beazley and Ennew 191). However, it is

nearly impossible to conduct participatory research in its purest sense because researchers invariably set the main questions and research design. Nonetheless, academics conduct participatory research to understand and challenge problems participants are facing (Alderson and Morrow 2011). Ideally, this research should lead to action and change; hence incorporating participants' views is crucial (Ennew and Plateau 2004). Participatory research is a fundamental and valuable methodology in our quest for answers to understand phenomena. A phenomenological approach suggests that intersectional variables like race, class, gender, culture, and history are critical dimensions of Black youth's lives. A phenomenological approach also challenges us to consider how cultural and historical biases may mediate our study of particular groups of people (Creswell and Creswell 2018; Greig et al. 2013).

This study views participants as competent social actors who are experts in their lives, and who communicate this information with freedom of expression in accordance with articles 12 and 13 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Alderson and Morrow 2011). The research design incorporates a rights-based approach. Participatory methods include focus groups, semi-structured interviews, surveys, interviews and questionnaires – both in-person and online. Multiple methods mediate the unequal power dynamics between adult and youth which may skew results. Multiple methods compensate for young people's evolving capacities, for example, different types of activities may provide a more comprehensive understanding of the young person's experiences. A qualitative approach uses participatory methods to develop a deep understanding and gather detailed descriptions of the lives and experiences of young people. The ensuing approach makes it possible for young people as co-researchers to be involved and participate throughout the entire research process. Adherence to Ethical guidelines uphold principles that emphasise participants' rights, respect for persons, the

promotion of welfare, and avoidance of harm (Ann Farrell 2005). Ethical considerations around working with young people, such as informed consent, confidentiality, transparency about the project, adult/youth binaries, benefits, and risks (Alderson and Morrow 2011), have been duly communicated to the participants.

Chapter Summaries

In chapter one, I address the study's methodology, including my positionality as it relates to the research, since it is vital in understanding how I am implicated in the direction of the proposed work. The purpose of the study is described, as well as the theoretical orientation, including social construction theory, which addresses the ways in which individuals create meaning through social interactions and contact with material objects, including material cultures like books, films and toys. Intersectional theory plays a crucial role in understanding the intertwining of race, class, gender, sexuality, age, ability, and other aspects of identity. These markers of identity are considered mutually constitutive when they intersect, overlap and cross paths in the lived experiences of racialized youth. Youth subcultural theory is significant to this study on Blerds. Drawing on the works of Harriot Beazley (2003) and Dick Hebdige (2011) the study sheds light on what it means when marginalized young people develop new identities in order to establish a sense of their place in society, solidarity, and resistance to pressures of invisibility and effacement by dominant groups. This chapter also outlines recruitment methods and ethical considerations that are essential in conducting research with young people. Chapter 2 discusses my findings on what participants read in a mixture of digital and non-digital material, with their primary reading source for pleasure being online. They predominantly read comics, fan fiction and graphic novels and are heavily involved in participatory culture such as cosplay. Their love of science fiction and fantasy, superhero comics, and the dominant position of reading

manga and watching anime (television series based on manga stories) is also highlighted. In chapter 3, I develop my analysis of the findings around Blerds' alternative reading sources and interests. The importance of fan fiction, webcomics, graphic novels, cosplay, and DC and Marvel comics play in participants' lives pertaining to race, representation, and prosocial skills and values are unpacked. The uniqueness and creativity of this space, the fun and entertainment, the freedom of imagination, and inclusivity are also presented and analyzed. The advantages and challenges in accessing Black texts that are aspirational and the role of Afrofuturism are also addressed.

In chapter 4, I analyze the dominance of manga and anime in Blerds' reading choices for pleasure. The evolution of manga as a preferred reading choice for Blerds is briefly examined, as well as the role marketing plays in their preferences. I theorize on the probable impact this dominance is having and will continue to have on race, representation, prosocial skills and values. My conclusion is outlined in chapter 5 where I theorize a probable future in which academic inquiry should consider focusing on the importance of current trends in graphic novels and aspirational contemporary and classic YA texts as a part of the corpus in curriculum design, in order to normalize Black content for young people.

CHAPTER 1

Theory And Methodology

Introduction

Analysis of past research reveals limited information on the voices of young Black people in the diaspora that explicitly addresses their recreational reading interests. This study focuses on Canadian Black youth who participate in the Black nerd subculture known as Blerds. As a subculture, participants reveal they read mainly comics, webcomics, fan fiction, graphic novels, and Japanese manga and anime texts. In addition to unpacking the implications of these findings, the study examines how texts are read and how they influence young people within the urban Toronto Blerd subculture. This project explores the impact of Young Adult (YA) texts on young readers' identity formation and socio-cultural awareness by drawing on ideas from social constructionism and youth-subcultural, as well as intersectional theories, with particular emphasis on diverse childhoods.⁸

Social Construction

There are many lenses through which experiences are perceived because of the role of power and social construction in our understanding of reality (Greig et al. 2013; Mertens 2007). Hence, it seems appropriate to view social constructivism as an underpinning theoretical frame in this study to support my endeavor to understand the social world of Blerds in the diaspora. "Social constructivism is a belief that individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work" (Creswell & Creswell 8). Social constructivists focus on specific contexts for

⁸ Diverse Childhoods — Historically, children and youth studies saw differences in these childhoods with respect to the Minority World (North American and European cultures) versus the Majority World (non-Western cultures). However, recent scholarship suggests that rather than assigning essential frameworks to Minority and Majority Worlds cultures, we look carefully at the expectations and lived experiences of different social classes; races, religions, ethnic groups, gender, and sexual orientation. This approach demonstrates that childhood as a category is not universal. The difference between children and adults in a given culture or society cannot only be read from biological differences (Balagopalan 2008, Bruhm and Hurley 2004, Chakraborty 2016, Saldanha 2002, Wells 2015).

historical and cultural settings. James et al. (2012) adopt a child-centric approach and view young people as competent social actors who are experts in their own lives and capable of influencing their environment and being affected by it in turn; while sociologist Alan Prout (2011) encourages us to look beyond the construction of the universal child - the simplistic notion of the child/adult binary that is constructed in the economically developed societies of the North - embracing instead an expanded understanding of childhood and youth. Prout notes that “the proportion of children living in ‘non-standard’ family situations was reaching a size when they could no longer be seen as mere aberrations from the normative picture” (5). Consequently, Prout recommends a closer look at transnational mobility and cultural globalization linked to new development and communication networks. To Prout, “each of these entailed new diversities in the child population found in many particular localities, as new people, new things and new information were embedded and found their local niche” (5). The Blerds in my study are an example of such diversities. This notion of young people from diverse backgrounds as social actors with abilities to influence and be influenced by their environment is an ongoing tenet in children and youth studies. Research literature often overlooks children’s and youth’s agency and capabilities (James 2007). Research in children’s and young adults’ worlds is frequently mediated by adult-focused perspectives and thus omits the perspective of young people. By engaging in participatory research with young people, I take care that the research allows for and makes space for multiple views of young people by recognizing that notions of childhood are not constructed in one way. Rather, childhood is experienced through multifaceted cultural landscapes that are often unaccounted for in hegemonic identity categories or stereotypes (Alderson and Morrow 2011; Darbyshire et al. 2005; Kilderry et al. 2004).

In the Majority World or Global South, children are sometimes placed in challenging circumstances including civil wars and poverty, hence the contextual circumstances in children's and young people's lives should be taken into account in discourses about children and youth. The United Nation Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) defines individuals from birth to 18 years of age as children, and it constructs an idealized childhood model predicated on Western societies' understanding of childhood that includes innocence and protection from adult worries and responsibilities. In multiple regions, however, including the Caribbean and Africa, an individual over the age of 18 may not necessarily be considered an adult if they lack the economic resources and capacity for financial independence (Evans and Davies, 1997; Twum-Danso, 2008). Conversely, children under 18 may be gainfully employed and contribute significantly to the household's disposable income and may also assume the role of primary caregiver of adult family members (Payne, 2012). The homogeneous figure of the child in human rights discourse does not reflect the diversity of the material experiences of children and young people, their differences in age, culture or economic circumstances. The universal child and child rights discourse is dependent on the dominance of Western conceptualizations of the child. Hence, the universalism, blurring of the lines between adult and child, and cultural relativity of the UNCRC have made it difficult for some non-Western cultures in the Global South to fully embrace the scope and operations of the articles of the UNCRC within their particular nation states (Jefferess, 2002). There is also the question of the age of consent in a Canadian context. For ethics clearance, young people over the age of 16 can legally give their consent to participate in research without parental consent. The issue of informed consent is approached differently with young adults and teenagers under the age of consent where parental approval is required. Some of the participants in this study are constructed as teenagers (legally children), others are

young adults. However, to compensate for the ambiguity in these two socially and legally constructed categories, I am guided by the ethical protocols mandated by the *Tri-Council Policy Statement on Research Involving Human Participants* (TCPS) which strongly encourages that the fundamental values of care, and the prevention of harm guide our actions as researchers.

Being a member of the immigrant community and a Black female scholar, I know my subject position may give me an insider/outsider perspective. I am also aware that the African Canadian community is somewhat closed and suspicious of outsiders, making this project even more illuminating and essential. Completing an earlier study around Black girls and doll play in Toronto was my first entry into studying the broader community of peoples of African descent (Seow 2019). I see my engagement with marginalized communities as an opportunity to give Black youth what they need. In this case, a space or platform where they can be heard and express their opinions about important matters in their lives. Acknowledging that my interpretations and meanings may arise from my personal, cultural and historical experiences mediates the potential bias of this study. Self-awareness and self-reflexivity help me avoid making this dissertation into a document that reflects my desired outcomes. As primary researcher, I am cognizant that participants' backgrounds shape their decisions and how they interpret and articulate what is happening to them (Greig et al. 2013). Therefore, I rely as much as possible on the participants' views of their particular situations. Social constructivism states that knowledge comes from all sources; therefore, inductive research methods that employ open-ended questions are used in this study to explore Black youth's social world and a corresponding relationship with material culture, while honoring the experience of individuals' varying realities along with relevant historical and cultural factors. Of relevance, then, are their interactions with other individuals and material objects in their environments, which is the focus of this research

study (Trevors et al. 2012; Mertens 2007). Social constructivism holds that people construct meaning in their lives according to their social context. Racialized people belong to some of the most marginalized communities in Canada. Evaluating participants' perspectives and historical and cultural backgrounds affords a more nuanced understanding of the opinions they express.

The above-mentioned perspectives work well with the research question that seeks to understand how Black youth interpret their experiences during their social interactions and encounters with material cultures, such as texts and images, including books, comics, webcomics and graphic novels, as the project is specifically looking at aspects of popular culture that participants choose for pleasure. For example, I researched Black Canadian girls and female youths' experiences with doll play and its impact on identity formation. My qualitative research findings reveal doll play is critical in developing young Black girls' gender, race, and class identities (Seow 2019). Material culture is an important element of social reality and as a consequence, this study focuses not just on the texts themselves, but rather on the meanings of those objects to participants (Bernstein 2011). The data for this study consists of participants' understandings of their experiential and perceptual world as expressed in open discussions, semi-structured interviews, and questionnaires.

Intersectionality: Race, Gender and Class

Intersectional theory shows that within intersectional frameworks, race, class, gender, sexuality, age, ability, and other variables of identity may overlap. As a consequence, some people may experience these variables of identity simultaneously that are also constitutive of each other (Crenshaw 1991). Drawing on the premise of intersectional theory, this study is viewed through multiple lenses of race, class, and gender. Because of the pivotal role that race plays in the lives of Black youth, I also draw on Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic's (2012)

work on critical race theory which falls under the overarching umbrella of intersectionality. Their work focuses on race and how it is embedded in society, how privilege works, and the discrimination that people of colour face.

Poverty in racialized communities impacts the resources and services that young people can access. In 2018, University of Toronto Professor David Hulchanski published a report on demographic trends in Toronto spanning 1991-2016. Hulchanski identifies a new socio-spatial order with stronger divisions and greater inequality with respect to housing, income and education. The 25-year trend analysis shows increases in income inequality of 56%, increases in income polarization of 47%, increases in racial segregation of visible minorities by 14% and Black segregation by 21%. The information also reveals significant labour and housing market discrimination. Hulchanski's findings demonstrate how lack of funding in more impoverished communities may result in fewer resources such as schools, adequately stocked libraries, or extracurricular community outreach programs for racialized young people. The report also speaks to the lack of access to resources, including programs that promote cultural identity and anti-racist mentorship programs that educate young people about their rights and the issue of racial injustices. Social and economic disparities, therefore, translated to an imbalance of power. Hulchanski concedes that systemic racism is typically hidden within race-neutral approaches that do not account for the different experiences that racialized and marginalized groups face. Research conducted by Terry Husband (2012) and Carl E. James (2019; 2012) reveal that stereotypes of young Black males impact opportunities and ways they are treated in society including school settings. My previous research with Black girls and doll play in 2019 reveals similar issues concerning females, as I explored the racial and cultural meanings of dolls in

young people's everyday lives and how doll play is complicated by racist and classist representations of racial and gendered norms (Seow 2019).

Subcultural Theory

My examination of Black nerds as a subcultural group is informed by the works of Harriot Beazley (2003) and ideas from subcultural theory that arose out of the UK's cultural studies movement in the 1970s, including the work of Dick Hebdige (2011). Beazley's theoretical and methodological approaches involve extensive fieldwork with street children and youth in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. Beazley's study includes a detailed analysis of the street children and youth's social worlds and offers insights into the effects of globalization on young people's lives. Her methods include informal interviews, participant observations on the street, participatory action research activities, including role playing drama improvisations, spontaneous drawings and mental maps drawn by the children. Beazley uses youth subculture theory to effectively map the organizing principles and survival strategies of Tikyan street children as they struggle to overcome marginalization and rejection by mainstream society. The Tikyan subculture has its own identity, style, rules of engagement, code of ethics, social hierarchies and disciplinary apparatus, effectively ensuring conformity. Beazley's research reveals a clear separation between male and female roles and the use of space. It also shows that Tikyan youth purposefully and strategically organize themselves into subcultural groups to maintain social and cultural normalcy and to gain protection in an adult world. Beazley's work is vital to understanding diverse childhoods as it is situated outside the EuroWestern conceptualizations of the global child. She frames her research within the context of racialized children and youth life worlds in the Majority World. Beazley's project also emphasizes a nuanced understanding of the inequities that occur in place-based childhoods (Abebe and Ofosu-Kusi 2016; Nxumalo and

Cedillo 2017). Her use of participatory child-centred methodologies that are embedded with the discourses of children's rights has greatly influenced how I conducted my research study with Blerds, which is also foregrounded by the underlying principles of the UNCRC as well as the recognition that young people are researchers and subject matter experts of their own lives.

Hebdige's (2011) analysis of subcultures⁹ is based upon the complex relationship which is deemed to exist between dominant and subordinate social classes, between generations, and between those who conform and those who do not. Subcultural members devise ways to disrupt their ideological and generational oppression and thereby create spaces for themselves. I see Blerds in a similar vein as Hebdige's groups. Although earlier studies of youth subculture in the late 1960s and 1970s by the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), of which Hebdige is a member, are still considered foundational in the field of youth subculture studies, they are often criticized for having a male focus that elided the pivotal effects of intersectionality on gender, class, and race (McRobbie and Garber 1976). Subcultural studies is also confronted by post-subcultural scholars such as David Muggleton (2002) who argues that the effects of globalization and its concomitant increases in disposable income and consumption have created opportunities for young people to become the target of marketing and culture industries. Muggleton identifies four distinct features for the ideal post-subcultural type. This includes absence of collectivist ideas, no recognition of conventional division such as class divisions, and transient or short lived attachment to subcultural styles. Lastly, post-subcultural groups celebrate styles, fashion and the presence of the media as opposed to forms of political activism. Hence, the focus is on self-identity, individual style and consumption. As a result, post-subcultural theorists such as Paul Hodkinson (2007) believe that, alongside the decline of traditional

⁹ According to Andy Furlong (2013) subcultures are generally defined as social groups with shared patterns of consumption and who express similar identities through aspects like personal style and taste.

elements of belonging such as class and community, this expansion in the role of consumption has rendered young people's already uncertain transitions increasingly characterized by individualized tastes and multiple identities, thereby creating less stable subcultural group identities than the ones identified by CCCS in the 1970s. Youth culture as a space is often associated with and expressed through the ways young people create generational differences with distinct styles of dress, behavior, and recreational activities. How youth subculture is navigated by marginalized Black youth is also a question that this project addresses (Ansell 2005; Beazley 2003; Hebdige 2011).

Critics of the post-subcultural viewpoint see it as theoretically loose with no alternative analytical and empirical tools for the study of youth culture. They also argue that post-subcultural theorists have adopted a naïve approach in their theorizations of young people's response to culture industry's influence on their consumption choices (Hesmondhalgh 2012). Post-subcultural theorists are further criticized for not being able to adequately account for the persistent social and economic inequalities that have affected consumption choices and identity formation of particular groups, or of those who have remained stable in their self-representations (Bennett 2011). I argue that Blerd subculture groups may represent a hybrid of traditional youth subculture and post-subculture youth. The liminal position of Caribbean and African Canadian youth may place them somewhere in the middle in that they may also fit post-subcultural definitions of multiple and fluid identities that change with their circumstances (Bennett 2011; Hodkinson 2007; Hesmondhalgh 2012; Muggleton 2002). On the other hand, they may also be affected by subcultural discourses of economic and social alienation based on class, race, gender and sexuality (Crenshaw 1991; Delgado & Stefancic 2012; Hall 1990; Hebdige 2011; Ibrahim 1999; Mensah 2010; Seat 2003; Sibley 1995; Yon 1995). Black youth are a marginalized group

who navigate spaces of exclusion to participate in society. Like Beazley's participants, Blerds in this study develop unique skills and strategies such as repurposing and appropriating non-Black cultures to fulfill their needs as rights-bearing citizens.

Methodology

Role of the Researcher

In qualitative research, the role of the researcher is to identify personal values, assumptions and biases at the outset of the study so that their contribution to the research can be valuable and insightful. Working in the social welfare field for many years with unique, high-risk children and youth, including racialized individuals, while pursuing a doctorate, may influence my perceptions. This research is predicated on a collaborative relationship between the researcher and participants, as this type of relationship aims to develop trust while simultaneously empowering the participant to be active in the process of knowledge creation.

Because of my previous work experience with this population, certain biases may be brought to the study. To counter unacknowledged biases, I am informed by Orla McGarry (2015) "that youth research requires a deep comprehension of the power dynamics that are inherent to any research setting" (341). Moreover, it is not the responsibility of the research to overcome these power imbalances. Instead, the researcher "must come to understand their 'between-ness', and relationality, co-dependence and constitutive force" (McGarry, 341). It is the researcher's job to be aware of these fluctuating power dynamics and lessen the negative impact wherever possible. Following this essential objective, my positionality—being a racialized adult female at university—afforded me a privileged relationship in the sense that Black participants may feel comfortable opening to me. Yet, I am reminded that the power differential between myself and my participant remains a tangible reality with respect to class, education and the power to shape

the narrative of the findings. I am automatically positioned in a place of privilege with a unique insider/outsider status based on my class, race, and gender. Ultimately, it is not enough to treat my conversations with participants as quoted opinions or individual truths but to treat them as complicated situational politics and “shifting scripts of racial talk” mediated by my presence (Pollock 47). The possibility of the researcher’s bias becomes an important issue in the project, particularly in the context of validation and reliability of data; a fundamental principle to consider during the data collecting and analyzing phase of the study. Therefore, during the actual research, it was integral for me to recognize the embedded and unconscious power dynamics such as my role as an adult and researcher who has worked in the field of social services for several years. Consequently, there is an implicit insider privilege and social power in the research context. It was therefore necessary to make the necessary adjustments through a combination of self-reflexivity and interpersonal relationship building, which empowered participants to be confident collaborators. The issue of racism is a sensitive subject to young people who have had numerous experiences of discrimination because of their race, so to ensure bias was eliminated as much as possible, all outlooks on the topic are acknowledged, including those that speak against what this study is attempting to advocate.

At the time of conducting this study, limited research was available that specifically targeted Black children and youth motivators and recreational reading interests. Analyses in most scholarly articles and research with young people have focused on variables that influence young people’s choices, such as social class, exposure to the library at an early age, parental education, peer influence, popular trends and personal autonomy (Agosto et al. 2003; Kylene Beers 1996; Frey & Fisher 2004; Gavigan 2011; Larrick 1965; Nieuwenhuizen 2001; Rawson 2011). What is missing from previous research findings are in-depth explorations of the effects of

intersectionality—namely race, class, and gender—on Black youth’s reading choices and engagement with Black YA Literature. My study uses an intersectional approach in order to understand the intertwining and overlapping effects of social variables that impact Black youth life worlds.

The study adopts a rights-based approach that adheres to the underpinning principles of the UNCRC in accordance with Articles 12 and 13: the right to express their opinions and the more general right to freedom of expression along with qualitative participatory research methods. Participatory research methods focus on conducting research with the participants whose life world and meaningful actions are under study. In this context participatory research ameliorates power dynamics, preconceived notions and interpretation of situations and strategies (Bergold and Thomas 2012). A qualitative research approach seeks to explore and understand the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. Participatory research comprises a range of methodological approaches and techniques specifically designed to give the participant autonomy in handing power from the researcher to the research participant. Data is typically collected at mutually agreed locations. Data analysis inductively builds from particular to general themes. From these steps, the researcher makes meaning from the data collected (Greig et al. 2013; Creswell and Creswell 2018). A qualitative approach focuses on individual meaning and the importance of rendering the complexity of a situation.

Participants and Methods

The ten participants reside in locations across Toronto and identify as working and middle class, and their parents are first-generation immigrants from Africa and the Caribbean. Their ages range between 16 and 25 years, thus encompassing both child and youth categories; so the terms are often used interchangeably.

Table 1: Participants Demographic Information

PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION					
Participant				Parent(s)	Participant
Pseudonym	Age	Gender	City	Ethnicity	Birth Country
Frank	16	M	Toronto	African	Canada
Rick	21	M	Toronto	Caribbean	Canada
Mary	16	F	Toronto	African	Canada
Joe	21	M	Toronto	Caribbean	Canada
Carol	22	F	Toronto	Caribbean	Canada
Tom	16	M	Toronto	Caribbean	Canada
Ben	25	M	Toronto	Caribbean	Canada
Steve	18	M	Toronto	Caribbean	Canada
Joshua	16	M	Toronto	Caribbean	Canada
Don	25	M	Toronto	Caribbean	Canada

Recruiting methods were mostly snowballing, i.e., word of mouth. The participants were then spoken to directly and asked if they would be interested in taking part in the research project. Participants were considered appropriate for the research because of their age and the fact that this project required them to recall their experiences with texts they have read. Thus, it was crucial that they were old enough to remember those experiences and critically reflect on them. Also, due to the sensitivity of the topic that would be discussed, it was important that they felt

comfortable talking about them. They were provided with a thorough explanation of the research objectives, goals, risks, benefits and structure through an information leaflet. Prior to the study, participants completed a consent form that explained the procedure in detail in terms of the questions and the goals of the study. I explained what was expected of them in order to remove any confusion and to also let them know that they have autonomy throughout the study and could withdraw without any restrictions at any time. Any questions regarding the study were directed to me, and if necessary, they could reach out to my supervisor. Overall, in order to incorporate a child-centric approach, I hypothesized that to understand the experiences of Black youth it would be best to use young people as participants and treat them as experts in their own experiences, as opposed to learning from adults what they thought were the motivators for Black youth reading choices. An inclusion/exclusion criterion for this study was added to narrow the scope of the project, specifically because the objective of this study was to examine Black youth motivation and recreational reading interests with respect to Black YA Literature. All ten participants took part in at least one of the fifteen sessions that were completed.

Table 2: Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young Adults must identify as avid readers or Blerds • Must identify as Black or racialized • Must be 16 years of age or older • Must reside in Ontario • Can identify as any gender • Must be English speaking • The experiences described by the individual must be personal and through their own perspective 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Under 16 years of age • Reside outside Ontario • Do not identify as Black or racialized

Multiple Methods

The value of using multiple methods is to capture a broad understanding of participants' perceptions and experiences rather than relying on a single method. Multiple methods ameliorate the issue of participants' varying capacities to reveal their ideas and experiences. The ultimate goal is to provide data deemed authentic and credible by potential stakeholders including educators, writers, publishers, young people and families, thus the importance of triangulating my data with multiple methods (Ennew 2009). The majority of the research was conducted through interviews and online questionnaires. My data collection was supplemented by participants' artwork. I conducted open-ended discussions and interviews with participants from December 2019 to September 2020. The project reverted to virtual settings in Zoom, Skype and Facetime beginning March 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and public health measures to control infections. Conversations were recorded and edited for clarity. One-on-one interviews allowed participants to feel more comfortable to share personal memories and experiences. Originally, the use of focus groups had been included in the methodology, with the intention that

the participants would get a chance to hear each other's experiences and elaborate on their own. However, after conducting one-on-one interviews, it was evident that there was a great risk that emotional discomfort could arise when discussing sensitive topics in a group setting. Participants seemed to feel more comfortable sharing their experience with only the researcher, as opposed to a group of people they had not previously met.

I used online questionnaires with a mixture of open ended and closed questions to gain concrete information about participants' likes and dislikes, including which types of books they like to read. Participants shared fan art and handmade cosplay costumes. During data collection, I focused on getting an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences grounded in a social constructivist framework, hence I employed multiple qualitative methods, including interviews, visual art expressions, qualitative questionnaires and open-ended discussions. Qualitative methods enable the voice of the participants to be heard and reduce the imposition of fixed hypotheses, which often cause the participants' perspectives to be overlooked (Grieg et al. 2013; James 2007). Because individual experiences may involve very difficult and personal situations, critical race theory provides a necessary lens to problematize Black youth experiences. Building a trusting relationship in a short time was crucial during my study (Bushin 2007). Hence, one-to-one sessions seemed to be the most appropriate strategy for this study because the research question revolved around hearing the emotional perspectives of individuals who have lived through situations in which their race and gender have been factors with respect to their personal safety, societal exclusion and access to opportunities.

Ethics

There are risks inherent in conducting a research study with a small group. Participants run the risk of being identified by others or of gaining access to each others' confidential

information. Participants may reveal information and later regret it or wish to withdraw certain statements. Due to the small number of participants, confidentiality may be compromised. Even when informants' names are anonymized in written work, other participants in small groups may easily decode characters in activities in which they have participated or observed, resulting in deductive disclosure. Others may be able to identify the source and context of the information. A collection of visual material like screenshots and video can easily reveal identities that may compromise anonymity. In online spaces, names may still be visible in chat windows or elsewhere, and need to be blurred or moved out of view.

To mitigate the risks identified above, I am guided by the ethical protocols mandated by the *Tri-Council Policy Statement on Research Involving Human Participants (TCPS)*. The study also utilized Ann Farrell's (2005) "ethical principlism" (5) approach which involves the application of the universal rights of the child with specific focus on the individual rights, respect for person, the promotion of welfare and avoidance of harm (Bushin 2007). Transparency was crucial in establishing trust and rapport. The purpose of the project was explained to participants via a Plain Language Statement that described the purpose, goals, activities and objectives of the project. Written informed consent forms were given to all parties, requesting their participation and permission to use their images. Pseudonyms were used to protect confidentiality. An online version of the informed consent form was made available to participants. Self-reflexivity about a number of ethical issues including the adult/youth binary and my own subject position as an adult researcher and member of a visible minority were identified as mediating factors. These perceived problems were alleviated in part through the use of multiple participatory methods that accommodated young peoples' evolving capacities and biases.

Upholding the confidentiality and anonymity of participants is central to good ethical

practices. As primary researcher, awareness is essential on my part with respect to unanticipated consequences if participants' identities and activities are revealed. The guarantee of full anonymity is challenging, despite best efforts to conceal or alter identifying information such as names, personal information, description of locations, time of events and addresses. As a researcher, I am cognizant that each item of data must be carefully examined and handled appropriately according to circumstances, such as the potential consequences and risks of what I see and hear in my capacity as researcher. It is within this context that the principle of refraining from revealing informants' identities in published work is important. Hence the strategy of changing not only individual and group names, but also of altering details such as place and time of events to accord informants' anonymity, and mitigate the risk of participants being held accountable for inadvertently disclosing personal data such as names and or location which may impact other members of this small group.

With respect to online communications including interviews, I am informed by the recommendation of Tom Boellstorff et al. (2012) regarding anonymizing collective identities, since being able to identify a group often makes it easy to identify individuals in the group. It may be challenging to consistently maintain anonymity within a group such as Blerds; therefore, self-awareness is critical in discussing sensitive events in the community contexts in which they occurred. Pseudonyms that are relatively transparent within a small focus group can become counterproductive. As a researcher, I am mindful of internal anonymity among members and the fact that they may continue to have relations with each other after the project ends. Identity-revealing details and personal information not relevant to the study were omitted or altered to avoid repercussions within the group. In online spaces, anonymizing extends to screen names and online locations, which are important aspects of identity and social life (Paccagnella 1997).

Boellstorff et al. (2012) note that in some virtual worlds, researchers should anonymize faces, screen names and places as well. Where applicable, I requested that participants change settings to hide names and other identifying information in the user interface.

Coding and Data Analysis

As primary researcher I drew on multiple sources of qualitative data to interpret the research question on how Black YA texts are read, and how they influence young people within the Blerd subculture in relation to identity formation and agency. I incorporated a multi-method process (Ennew 2009) which provided verbal, observational and visual means of conducting research; e.g., field observations, semi-structured interviews, visual art expressions, and open-ended discussions. Data collected through semi-structured interviews in person and via Skype, Zoom, Facetime and questionnaires were logged. Interviews were transcribed, reviewed and organized into codes and themes found from all available data sources used. Drawing on Johnny Saldana's (2016) coding guide for qualitative researchers, I examined data from transcripts and interpreted themes and patterns including participants' meanings about the problems or issues at hand.

I utilized first and second cycle coding in order to obtain greater understanding of Black youth engagement with Black material culture. I set out to establish emotional and value meaning of the phenomenon from the views of participants (Creswell 2018; Saldana 2016). Focus was placed on Black youth's recreational reading experiences and interests in Black YA Literature. During the data analysis process, I followed a series of steps to properly collect the necessary information. Step 1 involved organizing and preparing the data for analysis (Creswell 2018; Saldana 2016; Tracy 2012). The second step involved reading the data in order to reflect on what the individuals reveal. After thoroughly reading through the transcripts, I initiated the

technique of pre-coding before the coding process could begin. Pre-coding involved highlighting participants' quotes that qualified as "codable moments" (Saldana 20). The initial coding is the process of organizing the data by chunks and writing a word representing a category in the margin. This means addressing the transcribed text data, segmenting sentences into categories, and labelling those categories with a term (Creswell 2018; Saldana 2016; Tracy 2012).

The method of first-cycle coding chosen for this study is Affective, which describes qualities of human experience by acknowledging and naming those experiences. Under this category, Emotion and Value coding were utilized with respect to the research questions on what Black youth are reading, how Black YA texts are read by racialized youth, and how they influence young people with respect to identity formation and agency (Saldana 2016). These experiences I included under the Emotion category and the significance that the experience had in their lives I included under Value coding. Emotion coding labels feelings participants may have experienced, and Value coding describes participants' values, attitudes, and beliefs (Saldana 2016). Expected and Surprised codes reveal additional data. Expected codes describe what the researcher expects to find based on literature and common sense. Surprise codes describe what was not anticipated before the study began (Saldana 2016). The fourth step in the data analysis process involved the creation of themes which comprised detailed information about the individual's experiences and reading activities. Step 5 involved descriptions and themes organized in the findings report in Chapter 2.

Conclusion

In summary, the methodology of my study incorporated informed consent, confidentiality, creative freedom, qualitative methods and structures that set out to give

participants flexibility and some control over topics for discussion and materials that were used (Grieg et al. 2007; James 2007). Overall, I conducted ten interviews with participants with the intent of obtaining firsthand accounts of the choices and strategies employed by Black youth as they engaged with material culture for pleasure. I utilized aspects of Ennew's (2009) recommendations on conducting research with young people which stipulate that young people should be given a voice that allows them to participate. This links the process to the children's rights agenda in accordance with Articles 12 and 13 of the UNCRC, freedom of speech and the right to express their opinions.

Limitations arose from the small sample size of ten participants, which impacted the efficacy of the analysis. I was also unable to find personal experiences told from the perspectives of individuals who identified as LGBTQI. A larger sample size from a diverse location would have introduced variables based on geography, culture, ethnicity, genders, sexuality, social, and socio-economic diversity. Participants were limited to specific areas in Toronto, and most participants are youth, rather than the UNCRC defined "children." All categories and themes were coded by me—the primary researcher. As a consequence, mediation of the results based on the small size of the project should be duly noted. Because of my previous work with this population, certain biases may be brought to this study. Although every effort was made to ensure objectivity, they may shape my interpretations of the data collected during the study process, leading me to lean toward specific themes and actively look for evidence to support my position. The limitations of the study make room for future research, with the prospect of studying a larger group of Black youth from multiple provinces, including all genders and sexualities, who are culturally, socially, and economically diverse. This research would reveal

information on trends and perspectives that are impacted by race and other less obvious social realities.

CHAPTER 2

Reading to Escape and Imagine other Possibilities

This chapter argues the significant role that comics and graphic novels play in participants' pleasure reading choices along with their engagement in the large online community of fans and independent creators that have emerged in this digital era. My research findings reveal four main things about these Blerds. They read a mixture of digital and non-digital material for pleasure, with their primary source being digital. They mainly read Marvel¹⁰ and DC¹¹ comics, webcomics and graphic novels, including Japanese manga graphic novels. They read a variety of genres, but fantasy and science fiction are the predominant choices. Participants enjoy participatory cultures such as cosplay, fan fiction and fan art in which members from local and international locations find ways to engage and share their creations with each other.

The importance of comics in all forms to the Blerds in my study cannot be overstated. Comics are sequential visual art, each frame of comics occupying a different space. A comic book is a magazine or bound book that contains comics. According to Scott McCloud (1993) "comics are juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (9). Comics also features word balloons and sometimes thought balloons. The sequential images delineated by panels are surrounded by lines called panel borders. Other optional elements of comics may include certain kinds of characters, such as animals or licensed characters. Comic books are read in the same

¹⁰ Marvel Comics is the brand name and primary imprint of Marvel Worldwide Inc., formerly Marvel Publishing, Inc. and Marvel Comics Group, a publisher of American comic books and related media. In 2009, The Walt Disney Company acquired Marvel Entertainment, Marvel Worldwide's parent company.

¹¹ DC Comics, Inc. is an American comic book publisher and the flagship unit of DC Entertainment, a subsidiary of the Warner Bros.

way as written language, starting with the upper left corner of a page, and reading across to the right before reading down to the next row. A webcomic is a comic that is published primarily online. Webcomics are created with the internet as the intended medium. Webcomics are unique in that not all screens are the same size and easily adaptable to devices such as smartphones and tablets. There is also the added benefit of interactive and multimedia features including animation and sound. Manga comics are read right to left, beginning at the top right hand corner of the page and moving to the left. Graphic novels differ from comics in that they are long form comics. They combine text and images to tell a complete story in book form. Christopher Murray (2011) notes that the graphic novel is usually taken to mean a long comic narrative, published in hardback or paperback with serious literary themes and sophisticated artwork.

Traditional comics and graphic novels such as DC and Marvel remain popular among Blerds, but these are often read online, with hardcopies prized for their collectability. Kathy Short (2018) in her research findings, notes that despite the popularity of reading online, respondents still purchased printed copies so they could revisit a favourite comic. Twenty-five-year-old Don, for example, is a significant collector and was quick to display his collection.

Don: Comics is my main source to read. Yeah, comics, comics, comics, and probably my most read thing of all of them is what I keep up with the most.

I read the main two comic companies: Marvel and mostly DC Comics, like, you know, *Superman*, *Wonder Woman*, *Flash*, all that.



Figure 1: Wolverine from Don's Collection. Photo by Janet Seow, 2020.

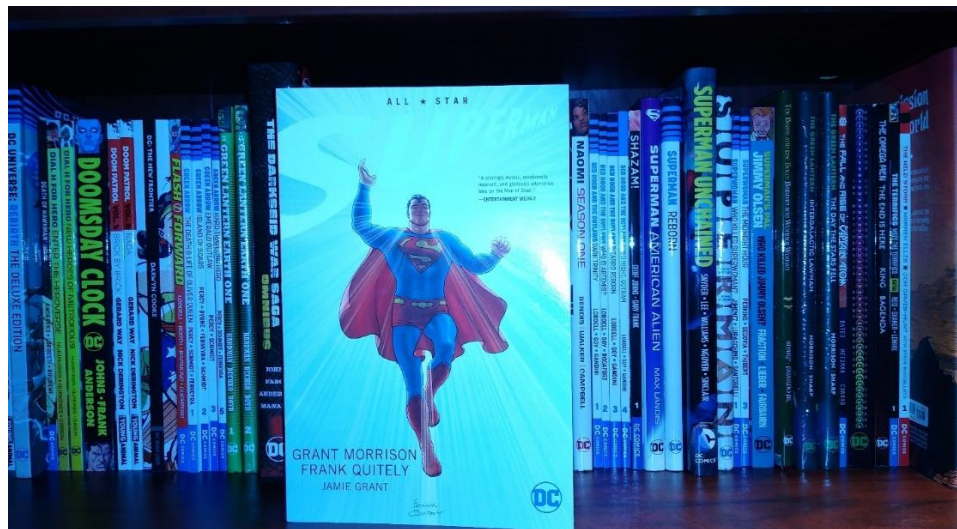


Figure 2: Superman from Don's Collection. Photo by Janet Seow, 2020.

Digital Comics

What enthusiastic collectors such as Don will not deny, however, is the reality that most Blerds have shifted their focus to reading online comics. This list includes webcomics, fan fiction, and graphic novels - including Japanese manga and North American graphic novels. These are primarily accessed through apps, social media platforms, online newsletters, and international and local websites such as Naver.com, Webtoon.com, and Wattpad. The cost

effectiveness, convenience, and ease of access to online reading material make them highly appealing to Blerds. Don outlines one strategy used by marketers, which keeps readers engaged:

Don: There's like a magazine in Japan that releases weekly. And they have issues of manga called *Shōnen Jump*. And then they have English localizations that are free for like a week. Each week they come out. So I read those *Shōnen Jump* manga, I read them currently online temporarily, for like, three weeks after they released them on their app. After that, you have to pay money.

For Don, the downside of having to read quickly is easily balanced by the fact that he can read as much as he wants for free. This is in large part what has made webcomics so appealing to Blerds. Webcomics, also referred to as online or Internet comics can be found on Webtoons.com and other websites specializing in webcomics. While many are published exclusively on the web, others are published in magazines and newspapers or as comic books. Webcomics can be compared to self-published print comics because anyone with an Internet connection can publish their own. Twenty-five-year-old Ben likes webcomics, graphic novels, comics, and fan art. He is also a content creator with aspirations of becoming a successful entrepreneur.

Janet: Do you read webcomics?

Ben: Yes.

Janet: Do you have a favorite?

Ben: No, not in particular. But there's lots of ones.

Janet: Do you create webcomics?

Ben: I also make a small webcomic myself. Just about high fantasy acts and sort of stuff. Yeah.

Janet: Do you publish online?

Ben: Yes.

Ben claims there is a lot of freedom online and that the attraction to fan art and webcomics by fans lies in the freedom to explore topics that are not sanctioned by mainstream, which is driven by sales.

Ben: I guess it's just because it's like, because web comics are basically anyone can make them. You get like a variety of different stories. A lot of the times they play on what's out there already. But sometimes you get like, cool, different things. That's why I like web comics.

For Ben, webcomic stories are also intriguing because it gives him the opportunity to explore human stories with dialogue and art: "I like it when it's someone's personal story." Ben describes his webcomic as follows:

Ben: It started looking very, like the stereotypical white hero who is like blond hair. The Dark one has dark hair and dark eyes. But eventually I want it to be like, one of the themes was like, you don't have to be what you appear to be. This conceptual idea is like they look like ...the stereotypes that you see but as it goes on they are more than that.



Figure 3: Examples from Ben's Webcomic. Photo by Janet Seow, 2020.

Ben explains that his webcomic's drawings are depicting two protagonists with a story concept in which he experiments with light and dark perceptions by challenging the stereotypes of good and evil. With light and shadow and sharp edges, he emotes the tensions that exist when someone loses control of their identity. He explores various themes with existential questions such as what happens to good people when privilege is removed, and what happens when the line between good and evil is blurred.

Ben's examinations are not far removed from the Black and white binary in society, and they could be a metaphor for the struggle that racialized people encounter because of their

appearance. Evil in his webcomic is hidden in the blond character who is normalized as good and pure by a casual observer. The dark hair protagonist is assumed to be evil because of her dark hair, a trope for the villain in stories. The black and white format of manga avoids the need for skin color so Ben is able to remove himself and explore his concerns around the issues of being judged for one's appearance. His preoccupation with existential questions such as what evil looks like and what motivates people to do bad things, reveals his concerns about his own safety and future.

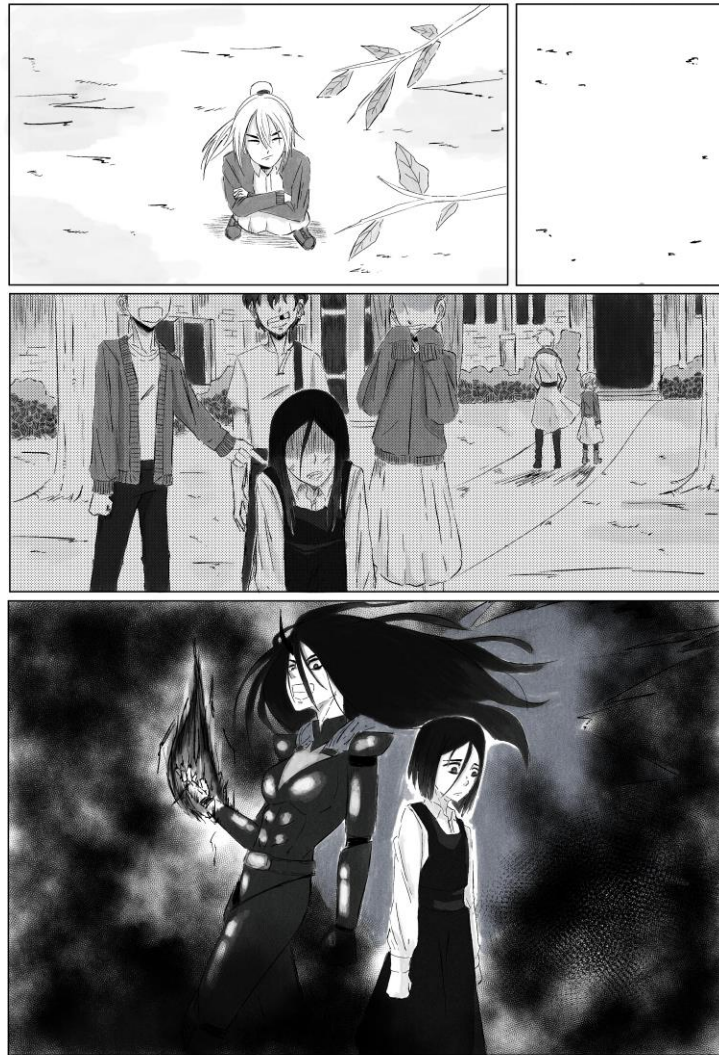


Figure 4: Examples from Ben's webcomic. Photo by Janet Seow, 2020.

Whilst Ben is involved in the world of webcomics as producer and user, twenty-two-year-old Carol looks more to webtoons for her online reading. The terms webtoons and webcomics are often used interchangeably by participants. The difference is derived from the layout. A webcomic chapter takes place over several pages, while webtoons are one long vertical strip.

Carol: Webtoons are kind of like manga online with Naver, the app. Naver runs an app called Webtoon. My favorite webtoon is called *Yumi Cells* and it's really just about a girl who works at an office, and she falls in love with the guy who works in the marketing department and then the cells in her brain, who all have characters, and so you'll always have cutaways of the love cell or the hungry cell. Cells are having dialogues with each other and trying to do the right thing or do whatever, etc., etc. And they're always at war with each other, and the largest cell in the brain is her hunger. She loves to eat.

Carol desires a carefree existence and sees webcomics as fun and lighthearted reading that allows her to use her imagination and escape the stressors of work and study. She makes the choice of stepping into the fictional universe of *Yumi Cells* and is transported to another world where her imaginary persona is accepted, far removed from her current reality. Carol is attracted to fictional human stories that depict the everyday lived experiences of ordinary people, such as falling in love. *Yumi Cells* also makes science interesting and fun and reveals how the Japanese creators are not afraid to experiment with unusual and interesting ideas. According to Carol, the story pushes the boundaries that would not necessarily make it in the West as a conceptual idea.

Graphic Novels

As is already evident from the various comments by the participants, graphic novels, including those published in North America and Japanese manga, are the most widely read format among the survey group. The graphic novel is a format, not a genre, that includes fiction and non-fiction. Participants use the terms graphic novels and comics interchangeably during discussions, though as indicated before, the graphic novel is a long form comic. The main categories of graphic novels are manga, superhero stories, personal narratives, autobiographical stories, and non-fiction. Manga, the Japanese word commonly used for all comic books or graphic novels published in Japan, has a specific style that is recognizable by its artwork and literary tropes. It is read from top to bottom and right to left in keeping with the traditional Japanese reading pattern. Reading from top to bottom works really well on cell phones because the reader can easily scroll, which adds to the popularity of manga. Manga adaptations in television series or films are called anime, and they follow manga's artistic style, except they are in color rather than black and white. A series will typically run for twenty-six episodes per season. Manga and anime have a wide range of genres, all of which have loyal fan communities. Marvel, DC, and Darkhorse predominantly publish superhero graphic novels. Titles include *Superman*, *Spiderman*, and *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*. Participants' favorite graphic novels are *Saga* (North American), *Naruto*, *My Hero Academia*, *Fullmetal Alchemist*, *Attack on Titan*, *Black Clover*, *Demon Slayer*, and *Promised Neverland*. The majority are manga graphic novels with anime series.

Joe, a twenty-two-year-old university student, likes to read manga graphic novels:

Joe: As far as reading goes, probably a large chunk is manga, like 40%.

Janet: What are your favorite titles in manga?

Joe: There's one called ... the English title is *My Hero Academia*. The story is about a boy who aspired to be the number one hero in a world where everyone has a power or known as "quirk" and heroes are commonplace and considered a profession. *Demon Slayer* is a big one. It's a manga series. The story is about a boy named Tanjiro. All but his sister are killed by demons one night. Tanjiro goes on to join the demon slayers in hopes to defeat the demons and hopefully find a cure for his sister.

Eighteen-year-old Steve, another university student, also expresses his love for manga:

Steve: I do read manga—*Naruto*¹² and *Bleach*¹³ and *Fullmetal Alchemist* and *Attack on Titan*.¹⁴ Also, the books that I read would be like *Aragon*, *Young Samurai*, and *The Seekers*.

Janet: Which ones are your favorite?

Steve: I would say the manga, which would be the Japanese ones, because they have anime adaptations. I also like to watch, so those would be my favorites, but my favorite book in general would be *Aragon*.

The popularity of graphic novels with Blerds is closely connected to the vast array of storylines and diverse genres that are available. "Graphic novels develop deeper story arcs and characters, thus reading more like a novel than a weekly comic strip often centered on action"

¹² *Naruto* – An evil fox demon that terrorized the village was defeated and sealed within a new born baby boy named Naruto. As this boy grows up, he is ostracized by the village. Determined to earn the respect of everyone, he strives to become the best ninja (this world's military) and become the Hokage (the village leader).

¹³ *Bleach* – Available both as manga and anime. *Bleach* is about Kurosaki Ichigo, a high school student who becomes a soul reaper and fights evil spirits.

¹⁴ *Attack on Titan* – In this world, the last of humanity lives in a walled city. Outside the walls are giant humanoid monsters, Titans, that seem only to have one purpose—to eat humans. One day, a giant colossal Titan destroys one of the wall's gates, letting in the Titans. On this day, protagonist Eren Yeager's life changes forever. Other main characters are Armin Arlet and Mikasa Ackerman.

(Knight 2018). Most are fast paced with a lot of action and fight scenes. Participants are also attracted to the technical aspects and beauty of the artwork which convey so many layers of what is going on. In addition, Short (2018) notes that a significant amount of graphic novels depict difficult social issues with a high level of complexity as in *Drowned City: Hurricane Katrina and New Orleans* by Don Brown's (2017) that tells the story of the monumental scale of destruction and tragic losses meted out by Hurricane Katrina in 2005. *March: Book Three* by John Lewis and Andrew Aydin et al. (2016) is an autobiographical graphic novel on the life of African American congressman John Lewis. The novel depicts poignant events around the bombing of the Birmingham Baptist church along with the violence and tensions during the civil rights movements during the 1960s. These examples highlight the high levels of literacy and competency demonstrated by participants as they discuss the sociopolitical, and cultural meanings embedded in the texts they read for pleasure.

Participatory Culture

Out of this online pleasure reading has emerged what is called a participatory culture; a phenomenon that articulates the centrality of fans' influence on aspects of popular culture (Jenkins 2006). According to Henry Jenkins (1992), participatory culture is described as a complex, multidimensional phenomenon, inviting many forms of participation and levels of engagement. Participatory culture allows free expression of artistic talent and civic engagement. In the process, everyone becomes a producer and user (Jenkins 1992). Users also establish informal social connections with others by sharing their creations, which may involve fan fiction or fan art. According to Ebony Elizabeth Thomas (2019) the social connectedness and proliferation of multimedia tools that exist in online spaces today have become more profound in "digitally intimate virtual communities [that] have their own ever-evolving rules, norms, and

assumptions about meaning-making processes, authorship, and composing” (3). Participants like Ben frequently refer to the relatively uncensored freedom online that may include creations by fans.

Fan Fiction

Fan fiction is fictional writing by a fan who uses unauthorized copyrighted characters or intellectual property from original creators. Fan fiction represents alternative creative expressions that allow fans to consume and produce other works through non-traditional channels that are not regulated or censored by mainstream media with respect to marketing and distribution. According to Rebecca W. Black (2009), fan fiction is:

A unique form of writing in which fans base their stories on the characters and plotlines of existing media and popular culture. When creating fan fiction, fans extend storylines, create new narrative threads, develop romantic relationships between characters, and focus on the lives of undeveloped characters from various media. (398)

Henry Jenkins (1992) describes fan fictions as cultural productions by groups of individuals and fans who construct alternate identities and “artifacts from resources borrowed from already circulating texts” (3). This could take the form of retelling a story or introducing an alternative perspective or outcome. Scholar Stephenie Burt (2017) provides a number of reasons why fan fiction should be viewed as a serious and worthwhile pursuit by the fandom. Burt also theorizes why fan fiction is becoming increasingly mainstream and in some instances acts as free advertisement for publishers of source data. Burt emphasizes fan fiction as a space that facilitates artistic freedom, critique of source material, expression of identity, common goals and tastes without institutional validation or reward. Sixteen-year-old Mary explains it this way:

Mary: I watch a lot and I would read fan fictions.

Janet: Can you tell me about fan fiction?

Mary: They can be really well produced comics, like pictures and everything. Or it could just be stories made on blog sites or Wattpad. You know, all those kinds of things. But essentially, they're just stories that come from a fandom. For example, if you're an extremely curious *Supergirl* fan, and you wanted to see Sam end up with someone else. Yeah, like someone would write a story about that perspective and then they would publish it. And then he would almost sort of like just use the characters that already exist and put their own spin to it. And so that's why it's like a fan made a fictional account of the stuff so it's not like Canon or anything. And sometimes they get so popular that they even become spin-offs. I think that happened for *Star Trek*. Some episodes in *Star Trek* were fan fictions that kind of became popular.

Ease of access and the informality of communication make this an ideal space to find and share interesting and creative ideas about texts that fans, including Blerds, enjoy. Fans are not passive bystanders. Divisions such as cultural, social and racial marginalization are less meaningful to producers and consumers of fan fiction. Mary points out that, "People would draw comic versions or anime versions, or manga versions of, like, manga that already existed, and they would put their own spin... on the stories." This freedom to interact with products opens up opportunities to promote a range of interpretations, experience a variety of cultures and experiment with identities including gender relations – aspects which Blerds generally find appealing.

Fan fiction can be found on various websites devoted to fan fiction subculture, including FanFiction.net, Wattpad, AO3, and Commaful.com. Information communication technologies have provided increased opportunities for fans from across the globe to meet, share, discuss, and develop their textual innovations in online archives and informal writing communities. Jenkins (1992) notes that the size of fan fiction culture is difficult to quantify because of its “fluid boundaries” and “geographic disbursement and underground status” (3). The fluidity of boundaries is reflected in the intercultural influences on fans. Language barriers would be overcome by fans from different cultures translating stories on YouTube.

Mary: I guess, the culture of webtoons. When I didn't really understand, like, back when I got into them, they were all in Korean. They weren't translated into English. So for me to understand what was going on, some people would translate things on like, YouTube, and I'd be able to find out what this culture was based off of. YouTubers who would just do, like, info on things.

The informality of participatory culture allows fans such as Mary to avoid the restriction and filtering of content by mainstream culture. It also appears to play a significant role in the lives of young people who are seeking more answers and involvement in society.

Fan Art

Fan art is created by fans of fiction based on a character from a series or other aspects of that work, including but not limited to books and movies. Fan art is not commissioned or endorsed by the original creators of the work from which it is conceived. Working outside the regulated systems allows fans to explore their own talents, favorite series and characters beyond what the original source offered, frequently giving it a new perspective. Ben, for example, envisions a career as an anime artist.

Janet: The fan art that you do, what do they represent?

Ben: I guess my interest is for cool looking characters. A bunch of genres, really the stuff that I like—lots of anime, some live action, some comic book stuff as well. It's just whatever interests me at the time.

Ben: For me, it was always more about the technique and the inspiration, the more technical side of things instead of drawing your favorite character.



Figure 5: Drawings of Ben's manga and anime fan art. Photos by Janet Seow, 2020.

Black youth like Ben are creating Japanese-inspired works such as webcomic and fan art. Ben is contemplating becoming a content creator as a serious career option. His love of the art form has inspired him. He frequently alludes to the importance of the artwork as a major part of the enjoyment of the art form.

Ben: Fan art for me, it's just like, like big media stuff like, comics, manga, TV, live action cartoon, otherwise movies.

A huge part of Ben's enjoyment is that fan art encompasses the entire spectrum of all the areas he is interested in. But underlining it is the freedom to move characters in and out of novelty situations without impunity. This problematizes marginalization and exclusion of certain groups

from participating in society; a form of social activism in a space that is not monitored or censored by mainstream gatekeepers.

Unlike Ben, Carol sees the artwork as integral to the pleasure she derives from the texts she chooses with respect to gender and aesthetics. She is acutely aware of the reinforcement of hegemonic gendered categories by identifying how market positioning and branding lead the consumer to particular texts based on gender cues (Kronsell 2005). The aesthetics of the art form embrace a variety of graphic techniques ranging from the Disneyesque styles, the precision hard lines of the action and fight scenes from *Shōnen Jump* (boys' manga) to the softness of the *Shojo* (girls' manga). Carol is partial to *Shojo* styles and describes how manga leans heavily on visual cues and elements that add textures to the stories:

Carol: Yeah, I think there are some shows that I wouldn't watch because they're not beautiful. I mean, you know who the show is geared towards based on how the artwork looks. And so, I will be naturally attracted to the show that has very soft lines and very beautiful colors and just beautiful scenery and shows that make the food look nice and things like that. But yeah, I think the artwork is important to capture the audience. And people know what to look out for as well, because when you see the ones with the rounded lines and the very chubby looking characters, this is probably like *Beyblade* or *Ben Hogan* or some kind of children's show. But then if you see the very sharp, sharp line and you're like, 'Okay, it's probably something for young boys or not young boys, but like older boys and stuff like that.' So, I would usually know what I would like and what I would not like based off the art as well.

Interestingly, Carol's assessment of the gendered packaging of manga seems matter of fact, suggesting that *Shōnen Jump* and *Shojo* stories are institutionalized and normalized for these Blerds. Her feedback implies an awareness that there is manga for every taste, gender, age, group including special interests, and may cover multiple genres. Johnson-Woods (2010) confirms Carol's point and notes that classifications of *Shōnen* and *Shojo* deliberately target male and female consumers and markets with respect to gender. Angela Drummond-Mathews (2010) notes that since its inception, *Shōnen Jump* has evolved from action-oriented stories geared toward boys to stories which now include strong female characters and relationships elements with the signature action adventures. This has resulted in a broader readership including all genders. Carol's recognition of the ideological implication with respect to representation and identity formation speaks to the potential of and desire for experimentation with fan art in different scenarios as a form of agency. The desire to manifest new and inclusive realities unsettles static boundaries around what is possible in their social worlds.

Cosplay

It is not surprising that some Blerds are engaged in cosplay, as it displays similar characteristics to participatory culture. Cosplay, short for costume play, is best known as a hobby that involves dressing up as a fan favorite fictional character from manga, anime, DC and Marvel comics, video games, and pop music bands (Pierson-Smith 2013). This hobby is not exclusive to anime characters, but it has a massive presence within the community. Cosplayers are not only fans of products that are created; they recreate products and embody the identity of the anime characters they are passionate about. Both participatory culture and cosplay are made up of fans of the culture who delve in the reification of insider authenticity, i.e., success and acceptance

with members of the subculture are achieved when observers identify the character in the role play performance.

Theresa Winge's (2006) research explores the historical background of costume play and how it became one of the most extensive fandom youth cultures worldwide. According to Winge, cosplay fans believe the cosplay subculture originated in North America in the 19th century. However, it was not until the tradition was introduced in Japan in the mid-1980s that the cosplay subculture phenomenon began to flourish, with youth and adults participating enthusiastically. Winge posits that the most crucial contribution to cosplay is Japanese anime and manga, and that Japanese youth standardized and commercialized cosplay culture into a mass market. Now, cosplay as a phenomenon spans the globe. Ito and Crutcher (2014) support Winge's findings and note that cosplay, as a youth subculture, has morphed into one of Japan's most extensive mass entertainment cultures. Ito and Crutcher also observe that the diversity of cosplay suggests a deep connection to the traditions of cosplay as a performative art form. Carol is reflective of this in some sense. She indicates that she made costumes when she was younger and created an anime club in high school to introduce other students to the fandom. She saw this as a way to alleviate the stress of schoolwork and build a community of common interests:

Carol: I started the anime club at my school. And we would just watch anime, but I think it was good that it was an after-school club. I don't think it needs to be integrated into the learning. I think there needs to be a good balance between learning and relaxation. But I think that's how you can supplement learning by making relaxing things actually relaxing and not turning it into like a school material.

Carol's active involvement in cosplay could be viewed from the perspective of play as performance. She embodies her Kurigumi characters to externalize a lighter side to life that is free of worries. Her role play could also be interpreted as a form of self-actualization and validation, as fellow cosplayers admire her handmade outfits and express their appreciation for her craftsmanship and attention to details. She also gains community with persons who have a shared love for costume play— all of which are important to Blerds, who are often marginalized.

Science Fiction and Fantasy

In addition to the fact that Blerds are heavily invested in comics and graphic novels as their pleasure reading, is the discovery that their favourite genres are science fiction, fantasy, mystery, action and superhero, with fantasy and science fiction being the most popular. For these Blerds, the science fiction genre is intertwined with fantasy, with the participants often using the terms interchangeably. Fantasy is frequently described as a genre of speculative fiction set in a fictional universe, inspired by myth and folklore. Annie Nuegebauer (2014) states that “speculative fiction is any fiction in which the “laws” of that world (explicit or implied) are different [from] ours” (1). In other words, speculative fiction is defined as a broad literary genre encompassing any fiction with supernatural or futuristic elements (Suvin 1979). Twenty-one-year-old Rick and Joe had this to say.

Rick: I like comics. A lot of comics I read are kind of fantasy because I like sci-fi, that kind of thing.

Joe: I mainly read fantasy or sci fi fiction in terms of books and then I guess that applies to graphic novels as well. The comics and such I read those regularly.

Perhaps at the heart of the attraction to science fiction and fantasy by these Blerds is the ability to reimagine and rework what is taken for granted by dominant groups with respect to a

social reality that is racially stratified. The freedom to imagine that you can be a hero for a career is liberating and reduces the stress from marginalization. Science fiction and fantasy seem to lead participants away from reality into imaginative worlds. The stories that they describe take place on Mars or an imagined alternate universe, reflecting their desire for change and escape.

Traditional comics such as *Superman*, who came from another planet because a technological catastrophe destroyed his home planet, and *Green Lantern* which details the activities of an intergalactic police force, are science fiction and widely read by these Blerds who identify with the protagonists who save humanity from evil. Non-traditional comics such as webtoons and webcomics and North American versions of graphic novels that use science fiction tropes are evident in popular titles such as *Attack on Titan* which takes place on Mars. *Fullmetal Alchemist's* storyline references an alternate universe, *Saga* contains stories around intergalactic wars in space and multi-cultural species engaging in complicated relationships, and *Yumi Cells* uses the science in biology to create sentient cells who collaborate for best outcomes.

Participants' desire for newness and escape is not far removed from Darko Suvin's (1979) description of science fiction as "a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment" (375). In other words, science fiction's inherent strangeness or newness encourages the reader to think about or question the present by stimulating the imagination with expansion in vision. Put in the context of these participants, science fiction can make readers use their imagination to discover a world of their own and create new things. Joe demonstrates an astute understanding of the conventions of science fiction in *Fullmetal Alchemist*.

Joe: *Fullmetal Alchemist* is an alternate reality with alchemy as the leading form of science, where the rules of the world revolve around a concept of equivalent exchange. In order to gain a thing, something of equal value must be given in exchange. Edward Elric and his little brother attempt to bring their mother back from the dead with alchemy, but Edward loses parts of his body instead, and his little brother loses his body completely. The rest of the story is mostly about them trying to get their bodies back.

This series reveals how science fiction and fantasy stimulate Joe's and other Blerd's imagination by providing alternative ways to understand their reality. They learn important prosocial skills "to gain a thing, something of equal value must be given up." In other words, to earn something of great value, sacrifices will have to be made and lessons will be learnt. Science fiction and fantasy provide the lens through which Blerds can think about their current reality and learn important life lessons. They are inspired to recreate the world they hope for and activate generative futures with good deeds.

Afrofuturism

Science fiction and Afrofuturism are often intertwined in the comics and graphic novels read by Blerds. Alondra Nelson (2002) sees Afrofuturism as "sci-fi imagery, futurist themes, and technological innovation in the African diaspora," which is presented in "original narratives of identity, technology, and the future" (9). The literary works of Afrofuturism are grounded in Afrocentrism and may include aspects of science fiction and fantasy with influences from technology, myth forms, magic realism, spirituality, indigenous, ethical and social ideas, and historical construction of the African past. Afrofuturism texts are similar to conventional science fiction and fantasy texts. They focus on elevating Black people in roles that are aspirational and

emphasize their humanity. They attempt to give young people a voice. They promote inclusivity and project racialized people into the future with positive outcomes. At the core, they are about the recognition and reimagining of oppressive pasts and a meditation on power and its ability to shape human consciousness. For the Blerds in the study, Afrofuturism is an academic term with which most were not very familiar, though they were engaged in watching and reading:

Ben: I didn't really know what it is. I mean, I have an idea, but it's not something that is on my radar. Yeah, it's not something that I've delved into.

Carol: Like an image comes to mind, but I don't really know exactly what that is. I don't know. Futurism, like sci-fi?

Eighteen-year-old Steve did recognize the term, which is not surprising given that he is a film student in university.

Janet: Do you know what Afrofuturism is?

Steve: Yes, I do. Afrofuturism is essentially just basically like the future of African Americans in terms of reading. It's like looking at the protagonists of different aspects of literature and having them in a Black light so we can see portrayals of ourselves as in a more positive light than the media currently does.

Lisa Yaszek (2006) points out that initially, Afrofuturism was not a genre but a critical response to the work of African American writers and artists. The rise in popularity of Afrofuturism meant that other Black creative artists read and responded to Afrofuturism as a cultural movement in writing and subsequently labelled their writing as Afrofuturist literature. Such classifications were also driven by market forces as opposed to the congruence between theoretical/academic discourse and creative productions. Afrofuturism now falls under a broad umbrella that may not necessary resemble the original scholarly preoccupation of Afrofuturism.

What is promoted and published as Afrofuturism is to a large extent mediated by publishers and book sellers. This influence also permeates the relationship between scholars, artists and consumers of cultural productions labelled Afrofuturism. These books by Black authors are usually located in the niche sections of bookstores devoted to African American literature, under a subheading of Afrofuturism, as opposed to general science fiction section. What is clear though, is that whether or not the material is labelled Science Fiction, Fantasy, or Afrofuturism does not really matter to most of these Blerds. They enjoy it for the action, superheroes, and the freedom to imagine.

Conclusion

Though participants' textual choices for reading pleasure are similar, their reasons for individual choices are varied and very informative. They require exploration and analysis, which is done in a later chapter. As previously indicated, technology, including the internet, has made information readily available in real-time. Temporal and spatial barriers have been subsumed, and geography is no longer a deterrent for access to information. New opportunities for cultural and cross-cultural engagement are common. Alternative reading materials and mediums have broadened the audience and content. Global fans have access to an enormous repertory of goods and services in the form of texts. Hence, young people are embracing products from various cultures, including American, Japanese, and Korean. In order to participate in and consume texts from other youth cultures, some of which are outside of Black culture, Black youth have created their own unique spaces such as Black cosplay and Blerd subcultures. Understanding how these multiple texts, including transcultural media products, impact them in terms of race, representation and prosocial skills will be critical in understanding Blerds in Toronto.

CHAPTER 3

Analysis of Blerds' Alternative Reading Sources for Pleasure

The survey results conducted with Blerds in Toronto show that their reading choices reflect an eclectic mix of interests with a significant emphasis on digital and non-digital comics and graphic novels. Fantasy and science fiction are the predominant genres being read, and participatory culture is a significant component of their choices. This chapter sets out to examine the uniqueness and creativity of these alternate reading sources—the fun and entertainment, the freedom of imagination, and the inclusivity. The study analyzes how and why participants engage with their favorite texts with respect to representation, race and prosocial skills, in order to challenge and navigate the exclusion and marginalization imposed by society.

Online Reading

Margaret Mackey (2007), in a longitudinal study of young people and media use, notes: “Young people have grown up in a world where they take textual developments and changes for granted. Their habits and preferences are established amidst a welter of new choices” (4). This “welter of new choices” includes online comics, graphic novels, fan fiction and fan art. Carol, a participant in my study, declares, “There’s so much; there’s always a new thing coming, always, always. Always something more.” While there is the view that young people are no longer reading as much as previous generations, my study suggests that it is not so much that they are not reading, rather, the change lies in *what* many are reading for pleasure. Dr. Jean M. Twenge (2017), author of *iGen*, states:

Compared with previous generations, teens in the 2010s spent more time online and less time with traditional media such as books, magazines and television.

Time on digital media has displaced time once spent enjoying a book or watching TV.

In my study, I discover that ease of access and cost effectiveness are among the reasons why Blerds choose to read online rather than engage with traditional media. Don, for example, keeps abreast of his favorite series by using the short window of time to read for free.

Don: Yeah, I buy like one or two [comics]. But for the most part, I like the long running ones with like hundreds of chapters. I just read them online. On the app. Because you have three weeks to read them. And before they go, I just keep reading.

This marketing strategy ensures a captive audience. Series like these can run for very long periods and are popular especially when fans identify with a favorite superhero character and the story takes place in a world they like. Online reading facilitates a wide variety of books in different formats and Don's engagement is guaranteed as he is given the opportunity to indulge in an activity that gives him pleasure and access, with very little financial obligation.

Online reading for pleasure is also appealing because, as the participants in my study reveal, they receive timely and pertinent information online around upcoming events and texts. Eighteen-year-old Steve, for example, is interested in cosplay and easily accesses information online about it:

Janet: Where do you get information on cosplay?

Steve: Mostly online. Like Instagram, Snapchat. People just be dressing up and then just post in as their favourite characters.

Sixteen-year-old Mary gets her information and recommendations from websites and message boards:

Mary: But if you just search ... Naver. In Korea? Yeah, I'm in an association that I don't quite understand. But I know that I used to have a chat messaging system that Naver.com ran that when I would, like, use the Japan site. So they're kind of like related in some way. So if you just search Naver Webtoon and Google, you'll be able to read a couple.

This ease of access to information communication technologies (ICT) is both exhilarating and challenging. As Arjun Appadurai (1996) puts it, technology and mass media provide extensive opportunities for participating in a "mass-mediated imaginary that frequently transcends national space" (6). This issue raises questions even while we celebrate the possibilities of such a global reach. Naver Co., Ltd, for example, is South Korea's largest web search engine and a global ICT brand that provides various services including the digital comics platform Naver Webtoon.

Young people like Mary may experience positive benefits such as a wide cross section of interesting stories and exposure to other young people who have similar reading interests. Global exposure expands her understanding of the world outside of the diaspora. On the other hand, the fact that at the age of 16 Mary can access this site, even though acknowledging she does not fully understand everything on it, and chat directly with people from around the world, could be an area of concern with issues such as internet safety, as there is no oversight with the groups or individuals with which she is interacting. Rebecca W. Black (2009) accurately captures this dynamic:

As youth increasingly turn toward such spaces as sites for communication, socialization, and self-representation, it is crucial that we, as researchers and educators, attend to the ways in which new media and ICTs may be influencing modern configurations of imagination, creativity, and communication in order to

best support, extend, or constructively offer critique on both the positive and questionable aspects of such configurations. (423)

Therefore, it is understandable that Mary would enjoy the advantages of having freedom of self-expression in a space that is not censored or monitored by mainstream culture, but as Black points out, there are “questionable aspects” to such “configurations” because the very aspect that makes access appealing - lack of oversight - is what can make it problematic for young people with limited supervision.

Participatory Culture

Black’s (2009) reference to the way “modern configurations of imagination, creativity and communication” (398) are being influenced can be seen in the world of participatory culture, which includes fan fiction and fan art, areas in which the Blerds in this study are actively engaged. As outlined before, fan fiction is developed from existing works to depict alternative perspectives. Fan art is artwork created by fans of a beloved series or character. In his extensive research on participatory culture, Jenkins (1992; 2006) draws on de Certeau’s notion of “poaching” to describe how fans, rather than acting as passive consumers, actively appropriate mass media as a resource for their own personal and social exchanges. Mary, a reader of fan fiction, gives an example of the versatility and creative freedom with the fan as producer and consumer:

Mary: I was just on Twitter the other day and someone literally made a manga webtoon about double dutching¹⁵ girls, and it’s in Japanese. But he’s an English writer. So he loves anime and manga, but he did it. He wrote his own, or she, I don’t know who it was. Twitter’s sort of anonymous. But he or she wrote their

¹⁵ “Double Dutching” is a skipping rope game that Black children play.

own manga about double dutching girls. Yeah, it's basically kind of the underground movement that people want to see in media, I guess. Nowadays, they want to see representation.

Mary is excited by the various aspects of participatory culture: the anonymity, the freedom to create, the experimentation. As Jenkins (1992) puts it, fans are creative agents who are “undaunted by traditional conceptions of literary and intellectual property” and who “raid mass culture, claiming its materials for their own use, reworking them as the basis for their own cultural creations and social interactions” (18). Experimentation with language and other representational resources creates a pastiche-like product that adds newness to an old topic. It also encourages young people to develop cosmopolitan or hybrid identities that cross multiple cultures via transnational social connections (Appadurai 1996).

Appadurai (1996) and Jenkins (2006) argue that producers with copyright materials do not have ultimate control over the consumer's narrative, products or identity formation. Fan fiction provides an opportunity for marginalized and invisible groups to have a voice and influence how they are represented. Blerds are one such group, and they play an active role in interpreting and recontextualizing material culture. For example, Mary points out how multiple perspectives and inclusivity regarding race, gender, and sexuality enable individuals to see the humanity in others and themselves:

Mary: I think maybe the people who do the fan fictions might be more concerned about racial representation in a sense ..., like maybe their characters meeting someone who's a person of color or like transgender like things. There's a lot of fan fictions about characters who had chemistry, and homosexual chemistry in a show that never really gets explored. And so, people will write fan fiction about it

in terms of representation. But I haven't really noticed. I guess maybe like more of a Black community searching up fan fictions. I think if there's like an underrepresented group that does like to gravitate towards fan fictions, they would probably be like the gay community. But I feel like the gay community sort of uses fan fictions as an even greater outlet than the rest of us. Because they're like, 'Oh, this is what we wish we would have seen in terms of the love lines and the story lines.' And then so they just sort of write that anyway.

Mary's outlook is influenced by a broader understanding of society that challenges the passive consumer role by highlighting how the diversity in perspective and storytelling in the alternative and independent fan fiction and comic scene offers real opportunities to learn about what motivates readers (Hudson 2015). Creativity and experimentations with marginalized groups are more likely to be found in the realm of fan fiction, which provides experiences and representations of real life. Mary astutely observes that fan fiction also provides a safe space for gender expression and more accurate representations of lived experiences of members of the LGBTQI community that are not necessarily available in mainstream culture (Jenkins 2006). Fan fiction and other aspects of participatory culture facilitate agency, imagination, independence, inclusion of marginalized groups, and gender expression. By challenging the status quo, such as notions of good writing and adherence to genres and conventions, fan fiction moves the marginalized from the periphery to a place where they can be accurately represented and have a voice. It is my belief that this reworking of the artifact shows young people's agency, creativity, and ability to challenge the status quo on matters such as representation. By actively engaging in

accurate depictions of themselves, marginalized groups are shaping their reality by becoming the architects of their future.

Cosplay

Costume play is another important activity in Blerd subculture that is closely aligned with participatory culture. Cosplay is a popular hobby that involves dressing up in themed costumes and assuming the personae of characters from manga and anime, DC and Marvel comics, video games, and pop music bands. This hobby is not exclusively about anime characters but has a large presence within that community. Groups of cosplayers are usually seen at all anime conventions. There are Blerds like Carol who make their own costumes and participate in cosplay conventions.

Carol: I used to like get things together and then I guess I was more on the lighthearted side because I would just wear like a Kigurumi¹⁶... like a little bear, really cool kitten in the Kigurumi for that,...I never really saw anime or those characters as inspiring or anything. Instead, those are cute, it looks like a cute life... anime has been a way to just unwind and just relax and just, like use my imagination to be like, oh, what's it like on the other side of the world and ... the things that they find fun.

¹⁶ Kigurumi originated in Japan, and the word means something like "wearing stuffed toy."



Figure 5: Carol's Handmade Costume of a Kirugumi Anime- Photos by Janet Seow

For Carol, participating in the various aspects of cosplay is primarily a form of relaxation which she admits she did when she was younger, but has not made a costume since 2013.

Carol: It's just like a relaxing show. When I was in high school, I used anime as a way of just like imagining something more relaxing.

Carol's attitude to cosplay is not unique. Suzanne Scott (2015) notes that cosplay is practiced as a hobby for most fans who have adopted a relaxed attitude and view cosplay as entertainment. In other research, Rahman et al. (2012) note that cosplay can bring a pleasant experience and self-satisfaction to young people. Through this role-playing activity, participants can satisfy their fantasy, temporarily break away from reality and transform themselves into imaginary worlds. For others, however, cosplay is a much more serious activity. Anne Pierson Smith (2013) explains:

Donning of costume takes on a dual function, on the one hand, expressing a visibly communicated difference from other non-Cosplayers, whilst at the same time signaling group identity as the member of a variously costumed neo-style tribe ... In expressing this duality of meaning embodied in the process and

product of dressing up, and in presenting the costumed self in public, the Cosplayer inhabits a parallel universe with other documented subcultural narratives (Hebdige 1979) by expressing both their individual and collective identities and ideologies through the material change of appearance. This corporeal duality is a consistent theme as the Cosplayer is both integrated into an imaginary world, and is separated from an everyday reality, whereby the players co-create fantasy worlds by putting on costumes as the ultimate expression of their collective and individual creative imaginations. (78)

Winge's (2006) research on cosplay cultures in Japan and North America highlights how cosplay provides teenagers with a "social structure" composed of social interactions, environments, and experiences (74). Pierson-Smith's (2013) ethnographic research with cosplayers in Japan explores the development of cosplay culture in Asia. During interviews with Pierson-Smith, one respondent explained the motivations and meaning behind their cosplay activities:

When I put on my costume, I feel like I look very different from everyone else around me and it makes me feel stronger. I also like the way that people look at me and notice me. It's good to have admirers. And when I wear the costume with my cosplay friends at the convention or party, I feel happy just relaxing, having fun, and sharing everything with my cosplay family. (77)

Rachel Leng's (2014) research reveals the importance of costume play to aid identity development. Through cosplay, players transform themselves into their favorite characters by wearing makeup and costumes that connect them to a theme of emotional significance. Players create exotic characters and environments with innovative storylines. Cosplayers experience a

different self through the dressing-up process. They can play warriors, heroes, maids, and other characters, even a gender different from their own, which is part of the fun cosplay brings to players. Cosplayers get a sense of belonging from the dress code and find their identity and agency (Winge 2019). They are satisfied and proud of their costume-making ability and the positive feedback they get from like-minded individuals. According to Nicolle Lamerichs (2011), some young people cannot express their thoughts freely due to the pressure of social and family environments. Role-playing provides them with a platform to express themselves and their inner thoughts. Lamerichs (2011) contends that cosplayers validate their own identities with the fan community i.e., they can develop an imagined identity in a safe space through cosplay.

Despite opportunities for change and expansion in interpretive capacities and imagination, marginalized youth response to this freedom in artistic expression is limited and they are often forced to navigate the system in creative ways to entertain themselves and have their voices heard. This is the position that Steve finds himself in. He indicates that he does not perform at cosplay conventions, but he does enjoy the visual displays of the artform online.

Steve: Yes, I do like to see when Comic Con and Anime North come on. People would go and be dressing up and cosplaying as their favorite characters. I do follow that.

But he goes on to point out the frustrations and limitations for Black youth:

Steve: It's ... difficult [to engage in cosplay] because there are very limited characters that people that are Black can portray because there aren't that many Black characters in the media that are in like a positive light that you can portray and then there's the challenge that if people do portray the characters that are not

their ethnicity, then their people would have problems and say “Oh, you can't be that character because of your skin color which causes tension.”

The scarcity of credible Black role models underscores the reasons why these Blerds explore other cultural spaces for interesting characters and fun things that break the monotony of stereotypes that are not reflective of the diversity within Black culture.

Black Cosplay

Despite Lamerich's (2011) contention that cosplay gives young people the opportunity to explore their identities and thoughts because there is no prejudice or discrimination in role-playing, it is clear that Blerds like Steve see a different side of the cosplay community. Very little has been written about Black cosplayers who have appropriated the cosplay youth culture. There is a distinction between the ubiquitous white nerd and Blerds who tend to reside in spaces of otherness, and are distinguished from white nerds by virtue of their absence from white nerd culture and “cool Black spaces” (Bradley 2021). Columnist Avery Alexander (2020), writing about Blerds, notes:

These people existed outside the all-too-common ‘cool Black guy’ stereotype, and their nerdiness would often be perceived by other Black people as them pretending to be white or assimilating into white culture.

Alexander explains that despite the opening of and increased access to nerd culture, Blerds encounter racism and exclusion from the gatekeepers.

In the cosplay community people will often criticize cosplayers of color—primarily brown-skinned ones—telling them they are “too dark” for a character. I myself have received quite a few comments on my cosplays that smartly point out, “That character isn't Black,” or “You're too dark to cosplay her.” I'm the

lightest Black cosplayer I know. My dark-skinned sisters and brothers have it even worse than me. (Alexander 2020)

In response to these exclusionary tactics, Black nerds, who also have similar overlapping interests as their white counterparts, have begun to create their own cosplay communities that are accepting of racialized cosplayers who are not considered normative (Cottrell 2017).

This gatekeeping leads nerds of color to try to form our own community, a place where we won't be discriminated against for our interests and where we combine our love for anime and fandom with our culture. (Alexander 2020)

This love of anime by Black fans goes beyond small pockets of individuals in the diaspora. Celebrities such as *Black Panther's* Michael B. Jordan started a clothing line inspired by his love of the anime and manga genres. To overcome systemic barriers, avid cosplayer, Hilton George, created Blerdcon in 2017 as a gathering place for Blerds to realize their dreams as cosplayers and embrace their nerdiness in nonjudgmental and inclusive spaces (Cottrell 2017). Blerdcon 2017 was the first geek convention of its kind that focused on highlighting people of colour, LGBTQI, women, and those with disabilities who are active in anime, comics, gaming, and science fiction. Blerdcon's mission statement promotes intersectionality and acceptance in the nerd community. In an interview, Hilton George describes his cosplay experience as follows:

Some people are reluctant to cosplay characters outside of their race, or skin tone. I simply cosplay characters I like and can embody in some new way. Now, I am fully aware that as a Black man, I am far less likely than a woman to hear negative remarks or insults on the con floor. So I know how bad it can get, even if I'm not the one feeling the worst of it. (Cottrell 2017)

The discriminatory undertones in cosplay may explain why other participants in my study seem reluctant to admit how much they enjoy cosplay, i.e., the freedom to realize multiple identities, including gender and sexual orientation (Cottrell 2017). It is in this realm that we see Black youth agency as they navigate the uneven terrain of racial inequality to forge their own unique spaces for Black cosplay. However, as they engage in subversive actions, opportunities like Blerdcon provides hope and a space for freedom and could also become a site of resistance as Black youth navigate the oppressive social climate that has engulfed Black lives during the last few years. In 2017, Blerdcon had 1,700 participants. The 2020 convention was postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but the expected turnout was estimated between 3,000 to 4,000 people (Alexander 2020).

The formation of Blerdcon is an example of how Blerds repurpose and challenge normative systems to ensure participation. Blerds often challenge Black popular culture, including codes and signifiers that inform performances of Blackness. They redefine Blackness by offering a more fluid interpretation of what it means to be Black by demonstrating their ability to organize and advocate for their rights as constituent citizens and perform different identities in cosplay. By appropriating Japanese culture, Black youth are creating alternative Black spaces that enable them to express creativity, individual and multiple identities in ways that fulfill their needs while rejecting deterministic stereotypes. To this subcultural group, cosplay provides a lens for discussing topics such as gender identities which are otherwise tricky to approach. It depoliticizes public issues, making them seem less daunting. It also provides a forum to respond to the world in which they live. Membership in cosplay subculture distinguishes Blerds like Carol from adults and other groups of young people in society, allowing Blerds to assert their individual identity (Bragg and Kehily 2013).

Graphic Novels

For many Blerds, graphic novels provide another form of escape from the harsh reality of their world. The graphic novel is a format, not a genre, and can be fiction or non-fiction. Graphic novels come in the form of “a single, continuous narrative, or are sometimes a collection of short stories like an anthology” (Knight 2018). Major types of graphic novels include manga, superhero stories, personal narratives/autobiographical stories and non-fiction. Graphic novels often use science fiction and fantasy tropes to enhance storylines. Several participants express their ability to escape their reality through DC, Marvel, anime and manga graphic novels, by using their imagination. For Frank who reads and watches most of his texts on his devices, imagination and fantasy replace the real (see Ramassubramanian & Kornfield 2012). Immersion in a manga universe allows him to imagine alternate identities in which he is able-bodied and respected as a superhero.

Janet: Tell me about your comic book.

Frank: It’s about humans that are born with superpowers, heroes and villains. For a career you can be a hero. The main character in the story is about a boy who was born without superpowers and it’s rare. And then he really wants to be a superhero and he has his idol that’s the number one hero in the world. Nobody wants to be like him, so he goes to a school, like the best school in the area, for superheroes, but he has no powers. And then one day he comes across his favourite superhero and he [the superhero] gives him his power. It’s hard because the power damages your body a lot. So he trains to sustain the powers.

Frank is describing the manga series, *Demon Slayer*. The story is about a boy named Tanjiro who lives in the mountain with his family. One night all, including his sister, are mysteriously killed

by demons. Tanjiro discovers his surviving sister has been turned into a demon, but despite this, has enough of her humanity to not attack him. Tanjiro goes on a quest to destroy the demons and find a cure for his sister. Sixteen-year-old Frank is 6 feet 3 inches tall and was born with an identifying characteristic. He covers his prosthetic arm under his hoodie while he is being interviewed. At the commencement of the interview, Frank seems shy and moody. However, when the conversation veers toward his comics and graphic novels, Frank becomes animated and begins to smile more frequently. He describes the impact of *Demon Slayer*:

Frank: You know, sometimes you wish you can have special powers, you know? Sometimes you should have special powers and be able to do those type of things they can.

Janet: What is it about these stories that you like?

Frank: They're interesting to me. They have abilities that humans don't normally have. So, sometimes you wonder ... what if you have ... if you can do stuff like that? Yeah.

Frank escapes his disability and controls his life by imagining a different outcome. He enjoys the adventures that Tanjiro experiences as well and hopes to emulate the moral values that the hero demonstrates in his community. The impact of graphic novels on Blerds like Frank is significant, and as a subcultural group Blerds have embraced graphic novels to the extent that participants not only engage for entertainment but reveal connections to stories about morality and good versus evil. The heroes are aspirational, and the stories offer an escape from the everyday realities of Black youth.

Janet: So, what is it about this character that really appeals to you?

Frank: Well, he really strives to be his best and to be like his idol.

Janet: What do you take from this story for yourself?

Frank: Well, the motive is to always be good. Whenever he sees people, there is always a smile on his face. So whenever he saves people, they know that they can trust him.

For Frank, imagination and fantasy compensate for reality (Ramasubramanian & Kornfield 2012). *Demon Slayer* allows him to imagine alternate identities in which he is not disabled and is respected as a superhero. Imagination introduces multiple identities, experimentation, and perspectives that critique or offer alternatives to traditional social structures and possible futures. This is the result of the use of science fiction, which, according to Suvin (1979), introduces the strange and new to disrupt traditional ways of viewing issues in society. Delany (2012) sees science fiction as a writing convention that encourages the reader to think and ask questions about the real world. Alexander J. Dumas Brickler IV (2018) sees parallels between the armoured bodies in science fiction anime and notions of the inhumanity of Black bodies in what he describes as “Black mecha,”¹⁷ an enhanced, invincible Black body. Brickler (2018) writes, “Certain science fiction anime series might present landscapes dominated by armoured bodies, black mecha motifs directly address hybridized somatics with themes of blackness, history and black masculinity” (71). The fantasy of escape both physically and psychologically from reality albeit in an armoured body, resonates with Black youth. Brickler’s quote is particularly relevant as the majority of the participants in this study are Black males. Imagination offers relief to Black males like Frank from the fear of an uncertain future, excessive violence and premature

¹⁷ Susan J. Napier identifies “mecha” as science fiction subgenre typically associated with the media of anime (television shows) and manga (graphic novels). What Napier identifies as “armoured bodies” in Japanese mecha texts frequently involves fighting robotic exoskeletons or fused technologized somatics such as cyborgs (86). The characters with these mechanical and/or cybernetic enhancements are typically male. Like its Japanese conceptual antecedent, Black mecha in science fiction texts employs “armoured bodies,” but as a motif of fusion that focuses on Black somatics.

death, an ever-present threat. Frank's being differently abled makes him vulnerable to the precarity of Black existence.

Another participant, Ben, describes *Saga*, one of his favourite graphic novels, in a way that shows how it incorporates many elements that may be instructional for Black youth:

Ben: Based on the drawings, you can infer that they're not necessarily white or Black or whatever, because one of them has horns, one of them has wings. But there are characters that look a certain way. And there are some people who are green, some are blue. And I think that's probably the point of the story to like show that these people are different, but the same.

It is perfectly understandable why this graphic novel has such an appeal to racialized youth like Ben. The visual images of difference and layered story telling capture the complexities of living in multiracial and multicultural settings while trying to find a sense of belonging. Hazel's presence resonates with Ben because he sees aspects of himself in her as her parents desperately try to keep her from being killed by opposing factions who view her as disruptive to the order of things. *Saga* could be viewed as symbolic for a multicultural, multiracial society in which stories are embracing cross-species interactions. Ben identifies as multiracial and sees himself crossing boundaries like the character Hazel, who has become a harmonious unifying symbol for peace in *Saga*. For Black youth like Ben, understanding, and more importantly, getting society to understand that they are "different but the same," is critical to their self-confidence and sense of belonging in spaces that are often hostile to their presence, and future survival.

The main protagonists in the novel, Alana and Marko, are husband and wife from opposite sides of warring galactic factions, but memories of who or what started the wars are unclear. Because the couple's daughter, Hazel, is a hybrid of the two races, they had to flee from

authorities from both sides who do not want their betrayal known. As a new species, Hazel symbolizes an imagined future where peace prevails between warring factions, making it a fan favorite among Black youth who are imagining a more peaceful future for themselves. *Saga* also deals with themes and motifs such as sexuality, understanding different people, growing up, and learning about one's origins and history, which make this North American graphic novel successful with Blerds like Ben. It attempts to show the humanity in everyone. The writer maintains a captive audience with characters such as a hybrid species in Hazel, a robot prince, Upster and Doff, the gay fish journalists, an alligator butler, a cyclops novelist, botanical drug dealers, planet babies, dark dogs, abortion cowboy owls and much more. These outlandish and sometimes banal characters are cast in ways that reflect real human issues including their successes, failures, joy, hopefulness, pain and loss. These elements make *Saga* exciting, unpredictable and engaging.

The world building is also exceptionally good. The writers create a universe with multiple civilizations and species that are experiencing different levels of evolution. Beautiful artwork with vivid imaginative images accompany poignant stories that bring the universe to life. Smart dialogue introduces humour with a contemporary feel that young adults can relate to. Long form storytelling that spans many years is a signature feature. Uncensored graphic details with explicit sexual content are not uncommon. *Saga* is fearless in its willingness to talk about anything, which is what young people want.

Ben: It [*Saga*] deals with a lot of stuff, which is not common for lots of stories that are really hyper focused for how like good of a type story it is, it's very broad and the ideas that it brings into it. So like the sexual is like one aspect is interesting, but it's also like, you know, morality in being a good parent, being a

good person and all that stuff. And there's like a bunch of different characters from different places.

Perhaps at the heart of the series is the diversity of human existence it portrays and the unpredictability of life itself such as a beloved character dying. *Saga* presents characters that are realistic and believable in their vulnerability and imperfections. All of the above themes resonate with these Blerds who reside in multicultural communities that are experiencing similar challenges including racial hierarchy, oppression, poverty, unemployment, relationship issues, state violence and state surveillance. It is not surprising therefore that this graphic novel is very popular with young people, Blerds included. Written by Brian K. Vaughn and Fiona Staples in 2012, *Saga* became a New York Times best-seller, selling 70,000 copies and winning numerous prestigious awards including the 2013 Hugo award for the best graphic story. Since the novel's debut, Diamond Book Distributors has published 50 issues and eight volumes. It was the best-selling graphic novel in 2016, as it continues to resonate with young people.

Science Fiction and Fantasy

It is not surprising that the graphic novel *Saga* made good use of science fiction and fantasy because it is one of the techniques used in comics and graphic novels that appeals to Blerds. Science fiction deals primarily with the impact of actual or imagined science on individuals or a society. Fantasy may occur on another planet or in another dimension of this world and magic and witchcraft are sometimes involved. The terms science fiction and fantasy are used interchangeably by the participants. Both genres appeal to them for the same reasons: they are aspirational in the sense that they present stories with adventures and heart warming human stories that speak to the hopes and dreams of marginalized groups. In addition, the heroes are ordinary individuals who are given opportunities to become heroes. Science fiction and

fantasy offer a form of escape from everyday reality and have a superhero who triumphs over evil. Spider-Man and Superman are two of the most popular superheroes for the Blerds in this study. They typify the role science fiction and fantasy play in the lives of many Black youths. Both superheroes are outsiders with unique qualities and backstories to which participants can relate. Superman is recognized as an alien from Krypton who seeks to fulfill the American Dream (Woodall 2010), while Spider-Man is a regular young adult who tries to do the right thing despite numerous setbacks.

Ben describes Spider-Man as follows:

Ben: He's like a troubled guy who's always just trying to do the right thing. But, you know, life always gets in the way, sort of thing. Yeah, Spider-Man's a lot like that. It's partly why I like Spider-Man. Yeah, he always tries to do the right thing, even though life always messes things up for him, and it's always a struggle between doing the right thing or doing what he wants. And it always conflicts, right? And it would be easier for him just to stop being Spider-Man and live his life, you know. But he always feels the need to be the hero, right? And save the day, do the right thing.

Ben's comments resonate with a lot of young people who are struggling to find their place in society. Spider-Man as a Marvel comics superhero is aspirational because he makes it okay to not have all the right answers. For Ben, Spider-Man's portrayal as a regular guy makes the character more accessible to ordinary folks like himself. In a YouTube interview, Stan Lee was once asked why Spider-Man has been the flagship for the Marvel franchise.¹⁸ He explains that

¹⁸ Stan Lee, "Creating Spider-Man – The Everyman Superhero." www.youtube.com/watch?v=e9byf6fAac0

minorities connect with Spider-Man because they could relate to his challenges. Peter Parker, Spider-Man's alter ego, has many layers to him that appeal to ordinary folks. He struggles financially, and his parents passed away. People can connect with that. He tries to balance his newfound superhero life while striving to complete his education, and he is failing. His relationships with friends and the one he is trying to have with a girlfriend fall to pieces because he is being pulled in so many directions. Many persons can relate to that experience. His ambition is to provide a better life for himself and his family. Most individuals – regardless of race, class or gender – have similar ambitions.

A crucial feature of Spider-Man's story is that a mask hides his face. This invisibility makes him accessible to racialized youth who can imagine themselves behind the mask. In this regard, race is obscured. In his book *Comic Book Culture: Fanboys and True Believers*, Matthew J. Pustz (1999) theorizes that the enduring attraction children and young people have for comic book superheroes is predicated on the fact that readers make a very "direct identification" with masked avengers (27). The symbolism of a mask is important to racialized young people. It ensures anonymity or a means to superimpose an imagined persona onto someone like Spider-Man. This is significant in a society where racialized children and youth struggle with a sense of belonging. Otherness is replaced with the ability to "imagine that their ... everyday existence was merely a lie, hiding a heroic, powerful interior," just as Clark Kent's glasses hide his role as Superman (Pustz 27). They can imagine growing up to be as powerful as Superman or Spider-Man and still see themselves in the state of becoming an ideal person with high moral values as their stated goal. Researcher Esther Jones (2020) notes, "Reading science fiction and fantasy can help readers make sense of the world ... exposure to outside-the-box creative stories may expand their ability to engage reality based on science." Indeed, creative and aspirational storytelling is a

gateway to the imagination that gives young people hope and encouragement to create a different future. We cannot have a just and equitable society unless we can imagine one.

Superman, the other comic book hero from DC comics, operates in a similar manner to Spider-Man. Joe explains his fascination with Superman as follows:

Joe: My favorite superhero is Superman just because he's Superman. Yeah, he's like the embodiment of, you know, the ultimate good guy—hope and optimism.

All that is just the kind of hero I like to read about, you know, the kind of things I like to aspire, I guess.

Superman's backstory reveals parents on an alien planet, facing a rapidly approaching cataclysmic disaster, saving their only son by sending him into space in a capsule preprogrammed to find the closest planet that could sustain life. The craft lands in a remote location in a midwestern American state where farmers Jonathan and Martha Kent find and raise the child as their own. Kal-El becomes Clark Kent, an all-American boy, his alien origins hidden from the world. At the onset of puberty, Kent confronts his heritage, including superhuman strength, x-ray vision, defying gravity, and impenetrable skin. As an adult, his exceptional abilities are camouflaged by the persona of a socially awkward, mild-mannered journalist (also see Waid 2004, 2005). Superman, Kent's alter ego, is faster than a speeding bullet and more powerful than a locomotive. The Man of Steel is the ultimate symbol of truth, justice, and hope (Woodall 69-70). These are admirable features that Ben sees in Superman as aspirational and the moral code that he wishes to emulate.

Ben: Superman ... came to earth. He could be a God and take over, but instead he chooses to be a good man or a good person and save the world instead.

Drawing on Woodall's (2010) study of superheroes and racial portrayals in comics, one could also infer that despite Clark Kent's extraordinary abilities, it appears as if he prefers to remain a faceless member of the population. He hides his "otherness," which is the experience of many immigrant youths as aliens struggling with a sense of belonging and constantly facing the pressure to assimilate in the host country or suffer exclusion or invisibility (Seat 2002; Yon 1995). Challenges around the concept of fitting in and the realities of inclusion and acceptance seem to haunt some of the study's participants. So does an understanding of their place in a society that does not recognize their presence. The poignancy of their invisibility is amplified in the books they read for entertainment and images they see of themselves in the media. It is a reminder of Steve's frustration with the lack of positive Black roles in the media for him to role play. A reminder that racial marginalization or race as an organizing factor is an ever-present dynamic when imagining and engaging racialized childhoods.

In discussions with the participants, each reveal they had to overcome personal obstacles during their childhood to arrive at an understanding of their place in society. School, home, and interactions with popular and material culture function as emotional and physical spaces where participants experience otherness. In these spaces, racialized youth such as these participants seem to have developed an understanding of the limitations placed on racialized youth. Conflicted feelings of not belonging and difficulties in conforming to societal expectations leave Black youth in a constant state of anxiety and stress. Participants in the study are primarily second-generation immigrants who reside in the diaspora (predominantly Black communities). Their liminal positions of straddling two worlds give them a unique insider/outsider position. Superman becomes an instructional text for young immigrants invested in these stories. It

teaches them skills to succeed as North American citizens—prosocial skills,¹⁹ fitting into the larger society, and assimilating and hiding their otherness. Not surprisingly then, this science fiction/fantasy comic continues to be hugely popular among Blerds.

Afrofuturism

Afrofuturism is often intertwined in science fiction and fantasy, though it is not always recognized by the participants. Young Adult Afrofuturism authors attempt to give young people a voice. Through counter storytelling, they seek to change the single story that dominates expressions of Black childhood as a place of violence, poverty, despair, and neglect (Bernstein 2011; Elliot 2013; Imarisha & Brown 2015). YA writers such as NK Jemisin, Nalo Hopkinson, Nnedi Okorafor and Ta-Nehisi Coates continue to experiment with alternative ways to inspire and change stereotypes of Black subjects as objects of despair and victims. They promote inclusivity and project racialized people into the future with positive outcomes. These stories are often told from the point of view of the Black character (Imarisha and Brown 2015).

Afrofuturism as a writing convention is grounded in Afrocentrism and may include aspects of science fiction²⁰ and fantasy²¹ with influences from technology, magic realism, spirituality, indigenous, ethical, social ideas and historical reconstruction of the African past (Yaszek 2006). The term Afrofuturism was coined by cultural critic Mark Dery (1994) as a reference to “speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture” (180). Advocating the

¹⁹ Pro-social skills reflect kindness, empathy, attending skills, concern for others, teamwork, good communication and community engagement.

²⁰ Darko Suvin describes Science Fiction as “a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment” (Suvin 375). Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr. (1991) elaborates further on the idea of an alternative to the empirical environment when he describes science fiction as attending to the “gap that lies between the conceivability of future transformations and the possibility of their actualization” (387).

²¹ Fantasy is inimical to the empirical world and its laws (375-376).

right of futurity for the Black community, Dery claims: “African-American voices have other stories to tell about culture, technology, and things to come” (182). Since Dery’s article in 1994, numerous YA texts have been produced with an Afrofuturistic philosophical approach. Stories labelled as Afrofuturism are grounded in Black subjectivity with elements of science fiction, fantasy and history.

Afrofuturism YA texts only differ from conventional science fiction and fantasy texts in that they focus on elevating Black people in roles that are aspirational and emphasize their humanity. Of note in this study, however, is that although participants are drawn to science fiction and fantasy, they do not intentionally seek out Black superheroes, nor Afrofuturistic texts, as part of their pleasure reading resource. They are not overly focused on reading works that are creating a new, futuristic world for Blacks with positive outcomes.

Joe: I have grown up in very, I guess mainly, white areas. I understand representation, but to me it’s never been like a thing because, even like the Black superheroes, I am mixed ... race is not important to me. I look more at the character themselves, more than just beyond what they look like. And to me, it’s not like I actively don’t look for it. It’s never been the most important part of something for me. They’re what they look like. To me, it’s more about their character more than anything else.

For the participants, race is not a determining factor in their choices. Instead, original and exciting storylines, in addition to the moral and ethical values of the characters are more likely to influence their choices. Interestingly, however, when they do find aspects of Afrofuturism in the works they are reading, they are delighted.

Carol: As you were explaining what Afrofuturism was, I was like, ‘Oh my gosh, it’s literally a show that I’m watching now, is my favorite show, is called *Carole and Tuesday*. Because this anime is about these two girls on Mars, and one of them runs away. Tuesday runs away to become a singer, basically. And they have a whole bunch of idols and stuff, it’s just a series about trying to make it big in the music world by being very small singers, but it has that added twist of like taking place on Mars. That just makes it so much more interesting. And so Carole, the Black girl, is the piano player and she like, you know, goes through a whole bunch of jobs, but she looks a lot like me. Yeah, so it’s a good one. So I’m captivated by that one. I like musical animes, but especially those kinds of imaginative futuristic ones. And so the perfect show for me right now is *Carole and Tuesday*.

Carol sees the show as being perfect for her because she can connect with a character of her skin tone: “she looks a lot like me.” It is interesting to see how much having someone who looks like her in a show that she watches, delights Carol. She subconsciously enjoyed it, even though she could not discern what made this particular anime so enjoyable. Carol’s statement reinforces representation as important to Black youth self-concept and shows that stories which highlight Black subjects in strong roles that promote good prosocial skills including hard work, community leadership, empathy, kindness, honesty, teamwork, and communication will always engage their interests. Seeing images of themselves portrayed in the future on Mars or in a reimagined past (i.e., Afrofuturistic stories) is appealing. Rick expands this further:

Rick: I think that representation in media is ...important for anyone. You don't think about it when you are growing up. You don't necessarily think about representation in media until you see yourself in media. And then you become aware of like, 'Oh, why am I being represented this way?' So I think that it's so important to have characters of different races and different stuff with different personalities and from different backgrounds, different socio-economic statuses; because if you only pay attention to a certain place like say, oh, all the characters that you've seen from this particular group only come from one area or only have one goal or always have a particular objective or a story, can be very limiting. But when you have people or say a character who is an expert, similar race, like when you think about multiple characters who are different and bring a variety of perspectives to the story and they were this kind of person and they like to do this, or their mannerisms were a particular way ... how they relate to the main character. When you have diversity deliberately, you don't have a singular view of how one character can look and act in the same story.

Rick makes a telling point about not thinking about representation in media when you are growing up, and only until you see yourself in media and start to question why you are represented that way. It is a further connection with the struggle Steve had with cosplay, where now that he wants to role play characters, he is recognizing the absence of positive Black role models in the media.

Blerds like Rick, Steve and Carol are wanting to see themselves in media, even if they do not immediately realize it. They are looking for more dynamic characterization where they can see the nuance to an individual or storyline. Stories in which the complexity of humans is

revealed as more than skin colour but as unique individuals with complicated personalities that are shaped by experiences, not just from the diaspora but from other non-Black cultures as well. Rick critiques depictions of the one dimensional or flatness of Black people in literature that is not written for Black people who are seeking affirming experiences. To Rick, the Black and white binary does not capture the many different cultures, ethnicities, and perspectives that exist in the world. Rick describes a novel that he thinks fits the description of Afrofuturism:

Rick: There was this one book that really made an impression on me. It's called Homegoing. I can't remember the author, but these two girls went through different experiences from hundreds of years ago to now. I guess you could call it Afrofuturism because most of it was either like 50 years, 100 years, hundreds of years in the past.

Janet: It's a contemporary story that does time travel?

Rick: It is kind of like time travel but it follows like a family tree as two people are separated. It's a fictional story, but follows events that you'd imagine seeing. It was easily my favourite book I read in 2018

Janet: What was it about that particular book that you found so fascinating?

Rick: Because of its originality. People's lives start in villages in Africa and then you are introduced to the slave trade then it followed their lives and shows how slavery affected them. When they came to America and they followed another story of their descendants. And then when they were freed from slavery, it shows them living in the city and the lives of their children. The story went back to their roots to contemporary society showing the journey, like five separate people's lives in this one family tree.

Janet: So does it give you a deeper understanding of the Black experience?

Rick: Yeah, because it shows how certain things have been affected in a kind of a linear journey over a long period of time. It touches on a lot of different themes from like both sides and with different worldviews ... the events between all the characters gave like this big picture, holistic view of everything.

Rick's engagement and enjoyment of *Homegoing* can be attributed in part to the writer's success in couching the slave experience in contemporary settings in a way that brings the past to life. Rick is able to access the experience from multiple perspectives which give him contextual understanding of the racial hierarchy and patriarchy that have shaped North American society. The opportunity to be introspective about his own subject position as a Black man in North America makes the book even more meaningful. Rick immediately recognizes and sees the value of Afrofuturism as a way to humanize the Black experience.

The success of *Carole and Tuesday* and *Homegoing* with Carol and Rick are important indicators. Statements such as "It's my favorite show", "It's a good one", "The perfect show for me", "It really made an impression," and "It was easily my favorite book" tell their own story. Yet Carol and Rick did not recognise that they were Afrofuturistic works until it was pointed out to them. The initial confusion was partly due to unfamiliarity with a term predominantly used in academic circles. These two texts are a small fraction of what is available under Afrofuturism. However, the lack of support and exposure of Afrofuturism result in a situation where the works of Black YA Afrofuturism writers have not gained as much traction with the targeted Black population including my participants, in the way anime and manga have impacted them. Although Afrofuturism began as a scholarly theory of African American science fiction and a critical response to the works of African American writers and artists (Anderson and Jones 2017;

Womack 2013; Yaszek 2006), over the years the term Afrofuturism has become a catch-all phrase for various works by Black creatives (Anderson and Jones 2017; Elia 2014). Given how racism affects cultural productivity, including decisions around marketing and publishing, African American literature and music in specific genres have now been relegated to niche markets and sections in bookstores as a subcategory called Afrofuturism, as opposed to the broader descriptions of science fiction and fantasy. Afrofuturism is now a designated cultural and ethnic product. This outcome has implications for who gets access and how the consumer reads it for meaning. It also likely has had some bearing on why these Blerds did not really connect with the term during interviews.

Interest in Afrofuturism has increased since the box office success of the 2018 movie *Black Panther*, an Afrofuturism film with an imagined history of Black people in Africa. Wedded to this franchise are games and graphic novels. Novelist and *Black Panther* graphic novel writer Nnedi Okorafor describes her work as Africanfuturism because it centres on African culture that is evolving and survives the future (Päivi Väättänen 2019). Okorafor's current *Black Panther* graphic novels are *Long Live the King*, *Shuri*, and *Wakanda Forever*. All three are futuristic, with Africa presented positively and Black females and males projected in vital leadership roles.

Conclusion

In general, Afrofuturist writers are creating strong, racialized protagonists in complex plots that do not fit the typical imagining of the Black subject. These stories offer the reader alternative perspectives on race, gender, sexuality, class, and young people's participation rights in all aspects of their own lives. Despite these factors, *Black Panther* graphic novels are not mentioned as favorites. Participants are mainly attracted to the wide variety of original stories

from manga and anime, which do not necessarily emphasize Black characters in critical roles. The reasons for this as well as the ways race and identity are influenced require further exploration. The impact of evolving communication technologies on Black youth in today's world is profound. They navigate multinational and multicultural spaces that were not available to previous generations, exposing themselves to media from across the world, in particular Japan and South Korea. The basis of their reading choices for pleasure is no different from other generations who sought escape from their reality or looked for role models and heroes they could aspire to. These participants are attracted to comic heroes because they, too, are interested in good vs. evil and beating the odds. Ease of access and ease of participation have allowed these Blerds who primarily read online, the freedom to explore other role models who demonstrate exemplary prosocial skills including empathy, kindness, concern for family and community members, teamwork, and leadership.

However, they have turned to Japanese youth culture as a significant source to fulfill their needs because few spaces offer aspirational Black role models. This situation can be attributed to established marketing and publishing structures and requires examination. What impact this limitation has on Black youth identity is to be discussed, especially given the role models that many are currently drawn to. That some of the participants in this study have indicated that they desire more and better representation and are able to separate their pleasure from the racial politics in the comics, manga and anime they consume show their intelligence and discernment as consumers. Their advanced literacy levels are revealed in their discussions; in particular, their ability to read and understand the sub texts of race that is embedded in what is considered harmless entertainment.

CHAPTER 4

The Impact of Manga and Anime on Toronto's Black Youth Perceptions of Race and Representation

During the 2020 U.S. Open Tennis Championship, Black Japanese tennis player Naomi Osaka wore seven different face masks with the names of Black men and women killed due to police brutality and racial discrimination in North America. Later, in a television commercial, she is shown preparing for a tennis match, stretching and watching the countdown clock before walking toward the court and showing us the phrase “Silence is violence” spelled out in beads across her braids. In an article entitled “Naomi Osaka’s Braided Hairstyle Speaks Louder Than Words,” Sydney Clarke (2020) writes, “the video captures her self-awareness and the power she holds to fight for equality for Black people.” The article further states: “Osaka reminds us that there is power in Black hair. Not only is it beautiful, but when it takes up space—much like our voices—it is impossible to deny its presence.” Following Osaka’s victory in February 2021 at the Australian Open Tennis Championship, she sported a new, seemingly anime-inspired hairstyle. She wrote on her Instagram post: “Sakura could never ... lol,” referencing a popular character from *Naruto*, a Japanese manga series (Flanagan 2021).

The intertwining and/or overlapping of Black material culture and Japanese cultural productions are captured in Naomi Osaka. She is very popular worldwide, particularly in Japan and among Blacks in America, where she has lived for most of her life. Her dominance in the sport and her position as a role model for racialized youth capture the attention of her millions of followers. She has willingly embraced this celebrity status and all of the mental health stresses that come with it, as she has taken on the role of a bi-racial social justice activist since the BLM protest movement in 2020. That she is a fan of anime and manga is not surprising, given her

Japanese heritage. Moreover, her reference to the manga series and the response by her followers shows how popular manga is among Blacks in North America. The overt admiration for Japanese anime and manga by Black celebrities, including athletes, musicians, and actors,²² cannot help but encourage Black fans to explore the art form. This encourages us to examine the factors influencing the participants' adoration of Japanese anime and manga and its impact, if any, on Black youth identity formation.

Dominance of Manga and Anime

According to a report by The NDP Group²³ - a global information company - manga is currently one of the fastest-growing areas of comic books and graphic narrative fiction. Retail trade book sales in the manga subcategory grew 16 percent between January 1 and May 11, 2019. Other manga series also show higher sales numbers. The report also states that sales in the United States are primarily driven by younger consumers. In 2016 and 2017, 76% of manga buyers were between 13 and 29 years of age, and 56% were males. Currently, anime, which is the animated or cartoon versions of manga novels, is gaining momentum across the globe exponentially, as products integrate with various related markets through astute product placement strategies. The global anime market size was valued at US\$20.47 billion in 2018.²⁴ Anime is translated into more than 30 languages (Anime News Network, 2005). Anime content is usually distributed through streaming services, DVDs, TV, movies, music and pachinko

²² The hip-hop industry has influenced the popularization and internationalization of manga and anime in the Americas for decades. Celebrity rappers such as Kanye West and RZA of the Wu-Tang Clan have highlighted anime's influences in their work (Barder 2018). RZA is credited with the soundtrack composition for the 2009 anime *Afro Samurai: Resurrection* (Thill 2009). Rapper Megan Thee Stallion publicly acknowledges her adoration for *My Hero Academia* (Mackey 2007). Michael B Jordan started a clothing line inspired by his love for anime.

²³ <https://www.npd.com/wps/portal/npd/us/news/press-releases/2019/sales-of-manga-books-are-on-the-rise-in-the-united-states-the-npd-group-says/>

²⁴ www.grandviewresearch.com/industry-analysis/anime-market

machines, among other means.²⁵ With a fan base for anime in the country of its origin and across the globe, the market continues to grow. The Blerds in my study reflect this trend:

Joe: As far as reading goes, probably a large chunk is manga, like 40%.

Steve: The books I read are mainly by Japanese artists. So that's my position ... I really like manga and anime. So that's what I read and I watch.

Black consumers have long been enthralled with Japanese youth culture, which has resulted in various cross-cultural mixes (Mackey 2007). Earlier research on the relationship between American youth, Japanese youth culture and hip hop by cultural studies scholars such as Broder (2006) and McLeod (2013), demonstrate how Black youth have incorporated aspects of Japanese culture into various creative expressions in film, music and art. Broder maps the emergence of hip hop as an art form out of urban communities in New York in the early 1970s to its preeminent stature in popular and mainstream music. Contemporary North American artists who have incorporated Japanese references and musical technologies into their work include Kanye West, Wu-Tang Clan and Nicki Minaj. McLeod (2013) describes these creative expressions as:

A fusion of techno-Orientalism²⁶ and Afro-futurism evincing a sympathetic connection based, in part, on shared notions of Afro-Asian liberation. The common element of utopian empowerment achieved through technological mastery and an aesthetic outlook based on hybrid cultural appropriations and re-

²⁵ www.grandviewresearch.com/industry-analysis/anime-market

²⁶ *Techno Orientalism* is a reductive term that surfaced in the 1980s and early 1990s to describe the rise of Japanese economic and techno-cultural power. An effort to describe Japan as an emerging world power evinced by the impact of media and cultural globalization on the reconstruction of a European collective identity and how the Orientalist representation of the 'Other' has been recast in the process (McLeod 260). The imagined Japanese by Western authors construct Japanese people as unfeeling people obsessed with technology. The term techno-Orientalism is similar to Edward Said's (1979) critique of Western construction of societies in the Middle East. Said contends that the Orient is not a real space but is a textual construction of Western authors.

appropriations represents a powerful and recurring trope in both hip hop and Asian popular culture. (258-259)

Now a global phenomenon, hip hop music and style speak to young people from various walks of life, cultures and ethnicities worldwide. Japanese youth's fascination with hip hop has resulted in their adoption of the genre in ways that are unique to their culture. They strive to maintain authentic representations of hip hop music, lexicon and fashion as portrayed by African American rappers. Hip hop's commodification and subsequent marketing as an essential part of Japanese youth culture remain a fixture of Japanese popular culture. This history is somewhat similar to Dick Hebdige's (2011) findings on the evolution of youth cultures in Britain during the 1970s. Hebdige's analysis of youth subcultures is based upon the complex relationship between dominant and subordinate social classes, between generations, and between those who conform and those who do not. According to Hebdige, subcultural members in Britain devise ways to disrupt their ideological and generational oppression and thereby create spaces for themselves. Fashion was a significant outlet to express their independence. Broder (2006) differs from Hebdige in that he sees Japanese youth appropriation of hip hop as performativity or mimicry. Broder points out that Japanese youth who have embraced hip hop are typically from social classes with significant disposable income. The appeal in this regard incorporates some elements of rebellion toward the traditional Japanese social structure and as in Hebdige's research, is centred on the edginess of a street style and aesthetic which is far removed from Japanese youth social reality.

McLeod notes that the Japanese set out to recreate pre-existent "Western technologies and creatively refine them such that they became representative of a uniquely 'Japanese' identified product" (259). But not everyone agrees with his positive take on what appears to be a

creative fusion of music as an art form that, on the surface, seems to transcend race and ethnicity. Tomiko Yoda (2000) sees Japanese appropriation of hip hop as a manifestation of youth angst, a symbolic protest of their lack of status and rejection and dissatisfaction with the government. Others, such as hip hop journalist Sacha Jenkins, in a 2005 interview, contends that Japanese youth appropriation of hiphop music and style “is like the ultimate Halloween costume. It’s fun when you’re rockin’ the costume for a couple of months but then you can be white again, and what could be better than that?”²⁷ Similar critiques about Korean-pop appropriation of Black hip hop culture without attribution imply the privileged position that East Asian consumers of Black culture currently hold in the global market (Gardner 2019; Hurt 2018; Mitchell 2020). Jenkins (2005) sees the proliferation of hiphop style and music as a marketing strategy in which Blackness is commercialized and marketed as a fetish to wealthy Japanese youth. Broder’s (2006) research also identifies Japanese youth appropriation and modification of hip-hop fashion and music as commodity for wealthy Japanese youth. He argues that the mimicry blurs Blackness as a space and undermines the visceral experience of racial trauma:

While creating new and unique discursive spaces, hip hop also has its negative side in Japan, operating at times as an unwitting site of transmission of essentialized depictions of African-Americans, some egregious, some more subtle... in the vast panoply of consumer choices available to young Japanese with disposable income eager for the next big thing. Directed at consumers of hip hop are billboard advertisements reading “Be Real Black,” featuring sneering African-American rappers flashing weapons. Young Japanese men and women periodically tan their skin “black” to emulate the skin of 50 Cent, Lauryn Hill, or

²⁷ Juarez, Vanessa. “Let’s Talk About Race.” *Newsweek*, vol. 25, 2005. 19 covers this topic extensively. Dec 2005. www.msnbc.msn.com/id/7025562/site/newsweek/

other African-American stars. In the end, the ideas of hip hop and blackness are often interchangeable and entirely conflated in the realm of marketing, advertising, and promotion of the art form. (Broder 41)

The Japanese attraction to hip hop is often a vicarious romanticism of the hood style and aesthetic of the ‘bling’ which sits comfortably with the larger pan-Asian appreciation of luxury consumption, and has been written about elsewhere (Lopez 2021).

For Broder, hip hop in Japan is more sensual and image based. “Its highest articulation is found in high-priced clubs” (40), resplendent with graffiti walls and props that mimic the malaise of low-income housing projects in New York, which is in stark contrast to “nagging social problems actual African Americans have to face, such as the glass ceiling for advancement, disproportionate confinement rates in prisons, or continued discrimination in housing practices” (40). Broder argues that while Japanese youth admire the aesthetic, Black American youth are focused on DJ culture in which storytelling depicts the lived experiences of Black youth. According to Broder, the intertwining of Japanese youth culture and urban hip hop as a phenomenon is best understood by contextualizing hip hop aesthetics as an image-based source of identity that has been assimilated, reconstructed, and reinterpreted by Japanese youth.

Sixteen years after Broder’s insightful research in 2006, the relationship between Japanese youth culture and North American Black youth is still significant. The tradition of referencing anime in hip hop by popular entertainers with large youth followings continues into today’s hip-hop culture. Denzel Curry (2019) notes that his attraction to anime pivots on the underdog narrative, also a popular and favourite theme from the participants in my study. Other major themes such as good versus evil and overcoming adversity through hard work are present

in most anime and manga stories and resonate across a wide audience; a sentiment that is echoed by the participants in my study.

Janet: What is it about manga books and stories that you like?

Steve: They generally have the same kind of theme about a young person who basically starts from nothing and they work, and there's usually a rival who is stronger than them and they work with other people around them to better themselves and also better the surrounding of the people around them to ultimately help out their friends. So that's kind of like the theme behind it.

Janet: Do you relate to those characters?

Steve: Kind of because they usually start out from basically nothing with people against them all the time and then they tend to rise up from that situation.

Black youth in the diaspora are familiar with the underdog or reluctant hero and outsider narrative in their real lives. Being an outsider seems to trigger underlying feelings of marginalization and lack in Black spaces that are subjected to systemic racism and oppression. In anime, the main character is often an outcast from their group and must fight to find their place among their peers and community. Examples of this archetype are found in *My Hero Academia* and *Naruto*, which are incredibly popular among Black youth, including these Blerds. In *My Hero Academia*, a boy name Midoriya was born without superpowers and was considered less than his peers. Midoriya aspires to be the number one hero in his world and eventually is given the opportunity to realize his dream. Through hard work and perseverance, his dream is realized. In *Naruto*, an evil fox demon that terrorized the village is defeated and sealed within a newborn baby boy. As this boy, Naruto, grows up, he is ostracized by the village. Determined to earn the respect of everyone, through hard work and

dedication he strives to become the best ninja and ultimately becomes the Hokage (the village's leader).

Being Black is hard work and the need for positive role models is ongoing for racialized youth who are bombarded with negative images of themselves on a daily basis. Embedded in these Blerds' admiration for their aspirational role models and underdogs who triumph over evil is the overarching thematic of the hero's journey (Campbell 1973). Our heroes in these beloved series embark on a journey to understanding with many encounters of hardships, setbacks, battles and obstacles both physical and psychological. In order to get to the next level, the hero must succeed. According to Angela Drummond-Mathews (2010) *Shōnen* Manga, a popular genre among our respondents, follows the pattern of the heroic journey. Like Steve's description, the hero leaves the familiar to cross a threshold of unfamiliarity and, "Must suffer trials, usually with the assistance from a helper figure or a shaman. The hero will likely suffer some kind of nadir²⁸ and atonement that will be followed by gaining a boon...that can be brought back ...to benefit the world" (Drummond-Mathews 70). These stories are heartwarming and exciting with interesting challenges that push the protagonists to dream of what is possible for them.

Impact on Black Youth Identity

Despite the appealing themes and concepts in Japanese material culture, questions about the impact on Black youth's identity are relevant. Rayna Denison (2010) explores Japanese anime and manga's significance and global reach on consumers in the West and uses a transcultural lens to examine the notion of crossing cultural boundaries. She notes:

²⁸ Nadir – refers to a low point in one's life; a moment when all seem lost; the worst moment, or the moment of least hope and least achievement. (also see Cambridge dictionary)

It suggests that media may not just be produced for one domestic market, but, rather, for diasporic audiences, for subcultures in other nations, for regional cultures and for audiences who join in ... the ‘communities of imagination’ ... that gather around media texts. (222)

These “communities of imagination” include many Black youth who have grown up on a steady diet of anime since the 1990s. The establishment of manga and anime as a fixture in North American households began with television shows developed for kids. Marketers recognized additional market share within Black communities, and they developed advertisements and promotional programs with cultural elements familiar to Black youth. In a 2015 interview, Jason Demarco, former associate creative at Toonami, notes that television was the primary after-school activity for children in lower-income urban households, and action-packed, fast-paced shows like *Dragon Ball Z*, which attained cult status among young Black males, was important for teaching certain skills as well as providing entertainment (Francisco 2015). Recognizing the popularity of hip hop in Black communities, Demarco’s creative team incorporated elements of hip hop in the theme music for promotions that reinforced the appeal to racialized youth. He explains: “We always used a lot of hip hop, as well as drum and bass, so not only were they seeing a show that appealed to them [but we also had] the music, and the way it was presented was appealing to them much more than sort of other kids’ networks were” (Francisco 2015). Francisco writes:

Today’s biggest artists and rising stars of the game who stand in the booths uploading tracks on Soundcloud were those same 9 to 14-year-old boys who watched *Dragon Ball Z* close to twenty years ago.

Creators such as Demarco believe that they have honed in on Black youth attraction to the artform. However, the homogenizing and reductive nature of Demarco's use of hip hop as the defining identity of all Black youth, misrepresents the diversity of the group and ignores other key factors that attract Black youth to anime shows. Rick, a participant in my study, offers another explanation as to why Black youth love anime:

Rick: Another thing that really helps with relating to a lot of anime is that all the characters like the mainstream ones, really start from the bottom. They're underestimated. They're not expected to succeed. And that, kind of eventually, they become what they dreamed of.

The underdog story is highly relatable to Black youth who see themselves struggling at the lower end of the racial hierarchy. Rick and other participants echo the longing and desire to succeed and be recognized as worthy individuals without the restrictions placed on their skin color. In this regard, Japanese manga and anime are significant influencers and instructional guides in the experiences of diverse childhoods in North American. Rick's argument reveals that despite the success of Demarco and others, they lack the insider's nuanced understanding of the correlation between Black youth's racialized experiences and the freedom of expression and independence that anime and manga represent to them. The limitations of these creators of content who are targeting Black youth raise questions about the type of influence they are wielding when they do not fully understand their target market, and their inability to contextualize racialized experiences beyond stereotypical notions. Scholar and author Ebony Elizabeth Thomas' (2019) insightful theorizations on the "Dark Fantastic" and her research with young people on the limited attention that is paid to character development of Black females in popular texts is worth

noting. The “Dark Fantastic” examines how racialized characters are understood within mainstream texts, particularly those written by white authors. Thomas’ work reinforces questions about the type of impression that is left with young Black readers when information and imagery are skewed toward limiting stereotypes. By systematically mapping the negating patterns of marginalization and/or destruction, Thomas advocates for a more responsible approach to Black content as well as the need for Black input in creating positive and affirming imagery of Blackness.

Race

The lack of input from racialized communities reflects gaps in knowledge about what is relevant to young people in the diaspora. For many marketers and creatives, broad stroke decisions lump everyone, irrespective of ethnicity, into one pool. To them, Black youth cultures are synonymous with hip hop, and this narrow view excludes racialized youth such as these Blerds who may participate for other reasons that do not fit stereotypes of Black youth. So, for example, while great effort was put into making the music and themes that appeal to Black youth, not as much effort was put into making role models that look like them; hence most of the participants in this study spoke about the aspirational aspects of anime and manga, rather than the way their favorite characters look.

Frank: I just like what they do. Yeah, as opposed to their race.

Ben: But I think it just goes back to me. Even growing up, it was never about the character looking like me ... So, for me, it was like their ideals and what they do, and the story and character development, stuff like that. That's what I was always drawn to.

Ben seems to suggest that discussions around representation usually focus on the binary relationship between Black and white to the exclusion of others, like him, who identify as multiracial. Hence the other strengths of the text remain the focus for Ben and not the racial make-up of the cast of characters: “You can have like the superhero and world stuff. And then you have the everyday stuff. There's like romance and stuff that just, it's about, like farming or whatever, just like anything.” The random and unpredictable storylines seem to engage these Blerds who are also seeking opportunities to entertain and alleviate their boredom during their down time.

Participants have learned to navigate the uneven racial landscape of anime and manga to find pleasure, entertainment and fun. How this influences Black youth connections to their own unique cultures does, however, require further inquiry. Sixteen-year-old Frank expresses great admiration for his favourite character, Tanjiro, in *Demon Slayer*.

Janet: What do you like about *Demon Slayer*?

Frank: I like that there's this boy who's protecting his sister. And you know he's really trying to help her.

Janet: Do you see yourself like him?

Frank: Yeah, sometimes

Janet: Is he Black?

Frank: He's white.

Tanjiro is not white; he is Japanese. However, his wide-eye features make him appear Caucasian, which is why Frank describes him as white. Frank's response is indicative of Japanese success in whitewashing Asian characters to access a white market. And like Ben, Frank has learned to access aspects of the texts that he finds appealing. Amy Shirong Lu (2009) notes that

whitewashing ethnic and non-white characters has been the norm for decades for Japanese and other Asian cultures. Representations of Asian characters with ambiguous features have served to erase cultural and racial barriers while simultaneously capturing larger market shares across the globe. Shirong Lu notes that this trend in representing characters' race in ambiguous ways was initiated by Osamu Tezuka (1928–89), one of the original creators of Japanese anime and manga, who drew inspiration from Disney's animation success and coopted many visual elements from American animation studios that resulted in the 'big-eyed' style of anime characters. Shirong Lu writes:

Such Western influence may have been ingrained in the visual style of subsequent anime characters. Some scholars have even called this phenomenon 'ethnic bleaching' (Sato, 1997), which removes cultural barriers by making anime's characters more accessible to Western audiences. In other words, when anime is turned into 'culturally odorless commodities' in which 'bodily, racial, and ethnic characteristic(s) have been erased or softened' ... non-Japanese consumers may be able to enjoy it more readily. (183)

Not everyone agrees with Shirong Lu's interpretation of her findings. Yukako Ikezoe (2013) contends in his essay "Behind the Trend of Huge Eyes in Japanese Anime" that large Western eyes in Japanese manga are an artistic license that Japanese creators utilized to enhance the viewers' experience and understanding of the story. According to Ikezoe, the visual enhancement compensates for sounds or animation, as opposed to a strong desire for the Japanese to be white. Tabatha Butler's (2013) argument in an online post supports Ikezoe's explanation. Butler notes that borrowing Disney's simplified animation style served two purposes for Tezuka: It helped him cut animation costs, which was crucial in an already

struggling industry, and it also ensured that his manga and anime films sacrificed none of their emotional intensity. The large eyes, though cartoonish, allowed Tezuka's "Disneyesque" characters to express any emotion called for by the scene (Johnson-Woods 2).

Lu's alternative perspective to the artistic narrative around big eyes in Japanese manga and anime does, however, force the reader to think about how transcultural media consumption can influence individual and cultural perspectives, whether deliberately or not. Lu's research does not isolate the perspective of Black subjects who are fans and consumers of anime and manga, thereby revealing potential limitations in the research outcome, analysis, and understanding of the role of racialized subjects in the consumption of Japanese texts. It also does not challenge the concomitant effects of invisibility on identity formation on Black youth or consider the overt effacement of the Black subjects or denigration of their subjectivity in anime television series, films, and manga graphic novels.

Janet: What do you take away from these comics or books or graphic novels?

How does this help you as a Black man in a society where Black youth are marginalized?

Rick: I think it creates a need. We [Black people] need comics and stuff like that for us... And I think that when you see that you're like, "Wow, we have our own."

Like, what would that look like? Right? So it kind of gives people ideas about those kind of things.

For Rick, lack of appropriate representation should fuel the desire for more Black content that is created and controlled by Blacks. One could infer from Rick's comment that the way forward is ownership, the ability to make decisions around content and utilizing Black talents who could create stories and artwork that contextually depict accurate images of people of African descent

and relatable experiences. At the same time these works would incorporate the elements of science fiction, exciting action scenes, and diverse topics that are interesting, imaginative, and appealing to a broad audience.

Anne Lei's (2018) insightful essay "Constructing Race in Anime" identifies several patterns that suggest deliberate racial stratification in anime that establishes a hierarchy of white, Asian, and Black in descending order of superiority. Black and brown characters are attributed with the least favourable characteristics. Lei further demonstrates that on those rare occasions when Black and brown people are featured, stories are written to perpetuate essentialist characteristics that reinforce negative stereotypes and tropes. Lei writes on the functions of race in anime and manga as follows:

There are four commonly occurring patterns of black/brown racial constructions in anime/manga that, when taken together, build towards a particular white/Asian/black racial stratification in which white and Asian people are suggested to be equal in racial status to each other through "equal superiority," so to speak, over brown and black people. (1)

What emerges is an understanding that the racial demarcation of white signifying superiority crosses all colour and racial lines in the broader understanding of race politics. Allan Kastiro (2016) criticizes the denigrating depiction of Blacks in anime and manga and alludes to a deliberate attempt to perpetuate white supremacy and racism. Kastiro highlights a few characters from popular anime and manga that portray non-Caucasians as caricatures regarding phenotypes, dress style, behaviour, speech patterns, and activities that Japanese artists imagine Black people are doing. According to Kastiro, portrayals of *Pokémon Jinx* and Mr. Popo from *Dragon Ball Z* are racist caricatures that Black fans are forced to reconcile with their enjoyment of the shows.

Another Black character that stands out for Kastiro is Chocolove McDonell from the manga and anime series *Shaman King*. Sixty-four episodes were aired between July 4, 2001, and September 25, 2002, on TV Tokyo in Japan. The series premiered in the United States in 2003.

Chocolove is African American with large lips, Afro hair, and wears an African wrap on the lower half of his body. He is depicted with the jaguar spirit, which might suggest that Blacks are primitive and uncivilized. These representations of racialized people are potent reminders of a colonial past that have created an image of Blacks as primitive with no teleological evolution in contemporary society.

Steve reveals that these stereotypes and the limited depictions of positive Black role models in anime are, in some ways, problematic for him.

Steve: I don't particularly look to find myself within the anime. I know it's from a different culture and I'm watching it because I appreciate that culture. So I'm not really looking for myself in it, but it is good when I do see like a Black character in anime and they're being portrayed in a positive light because it's from a different side of the world. They're not always portrayed positively because the engagements is not there.

It is clear that Steve understands what is missing from anime, but he seems to focus instead on other aspects of the culture that he enjoys. He also excuses the creators on the basis that a Black character in anime is likely to be misrepresented because of the Japanese lack of exposure, engagement, and proximity with Black culture. Steve's comment could be seen as a desire to distance himself from the emotional and psychological effects of cultural and racial marginalization which appear to permeate local and international borders.

Claire Jean Kim (1999) contends that a racial hierarchy has been established that places Blacks at the bottom of the social ladder in anime. In her essay “The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans,” Kim addresses this understudied area in racial politics by highlighting the limitations of solely focusing on a black/white binary or a racial hierarchy approach, as do North American anti-Black discourses. She visualizes a constructed system with two axes, “Superior/Inferior and Insider/Foreigner” (107). In this environment, the dominant group valorizes one subordinate group over another. The affected subgroups remain outsiders and diametrically opposed to each other. What unfolds from this is a divide and conquer rule of thumb. A “normative blueprint for who should get what, this field of racial positioning profoundly shapes the opportunities, constraints, and possibilities with which subordinate groups must contend ... serving to reinforce white dominance and privilege” (Kim 107). Similarly, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2002) points out that the tri-racial system becomes a salient factor in racial stratification. Colour gradation becomes cultural capital for mobility along the continuum of the social hierarchy. This important marker determines access to social class and opportunities for advancement. Bonilla-Silva’s analysis of White/Honorary White/Collective Black is very similar to Kim’s White/Asian/Black racial hierarchy, as both research findings seem to suggest that racial categorization and the framing of Blackness within anime are constructed to promote and perpetuate narratives and even more important ideology about racial groups that uphold colonialists’ views of Black and brown people as inferior. These seemingly innocuous and sometimes complex stories in anime that are presented as entertainment can leave stigmatized understandings of minorities in the minds of the consuming public (Kim 1999; Bonilla-Silva 2002).

Negative depictions by the Japanese of racialized peoples continue to reinforce structural and systemic racism in North America. North Americans perpetuate and maintain their cultural values by exporting American culture through imaginary images in films and products that are consumed by other cultures (Aranda 2020; Iwabuchi 2002; Lu 2008). Kastiro explains this phenomenon from a historical perspective.²⁹ He describes the Japanese society as mainly being homogenous, which creates some distance or isolation from the rest of the world. According to Kastiro, what the Japanese know of other people and cultures comes from American media. Consequently, much of what the Japanese know of other cultures, including African Americans, is mediated through a North American lens. The distance between Japan and other cultures situates the Japanese culture in an oddly liminal position. Hence it is not surprising that Japanese perceptions of Black people mirror North American media representations of racialized individuals as seen in advertising, entertainment, film, news, and music videos. In the article “What does ‘American’ Mean in Postwar Japan?” Yoshimi Shunya (2008) writes:

From the late 1950s onward, “America” was distilled as a uniform image with even greater power than before to gain people’s hearts. Until the early 1950s the word “America” was simply invoked as a model to be emulated ... “America” also came to be associated with the “pop-culture” of Japanese youth. As “America” became less direct, more mediated, and increasingly confined to images, it conversely became more interiorized and its effect on people’s consciousness became deep. (86-87)

Such is the imprinting of American cultural ideology on non-Western cultures that submit to American dominance on the global stage as a world leader. Hence, the effects of cultural

²⁹ Including World War II and USA troops’ occupation of Japan.

imperialism on the lives of racialized youth are far reaching and complex. Cultural imperialism permeates all layers of society including institutions such as schools (Said 1978). It usually disadvantages the poor, women and children. In this example, a monolithic view on the marginalization of people of African descent is disseminated to other societies. For the Japanese who look to American media for definitions of what constitutes popular culture, a skewed version of Black culture in North America is concretized and becomes the blue print for all things Black irrespective of geographic locations on the globe.

The Power of Positive Representations

The Blerds in my study are aware of the politics at play in the texts they read and watch for pleasure, especially with respect to race. Twenty-one-year-old Rick was very insightful in his analysis:

Rick: One big thing is who is not in it [i.e., Japanese manga], if that makes sense, because a lot of American comics will have main characters who are white and they'll have Black characters who are not important. They [the Japanese] don't put in a Black character for the sake of just being there.

Blerds like Rick, while enjoying the artform and stories, understand that representation is important and should not be based on tokenism, which they often encounter in North American material culture. Another participant elaborates further:

Ben: I think it would need to be more than just having a hero in a story that's Black. Yeah, I mean, I don't know. It needs to be more nuanced, in my opinion. Maybe. Why? Because I think just doing the same thing, well actually, maybe there's something to be done there by just doing the same thing and making it a different person. I think that's interesting. I don't want to read something that's

built for the sake of ... Yeah, it needs to be interesting because, once again, the story, the characters, whatever, are more important to me than how they look. At the end of the day it's a drawing, but I understand that representation is important.

These Blerds are drawn to positive representations of themselves when they see it. Individuals like Rick and Ben would rather have no representation than have negative or token representation. Unfortunately for these Blerds, much of what they read portrays a message that being Black automatically disqualifies one from accessing opportunities and privileges, as there are few positive representations of Black subjects who (a) overcome adversity, (b) make the right decisions, and (c) are morally upstanding citizens. These are the characteristics participants are consistently drawn to whether they are embodied in Marvel or DC superheroes or teenagers in anime and manga graphic novels.

For the most part, Black children and youth do not have access to a diverse repertoire of images in the texts and media they engage, and they need this because they access information from multiple sources in their identity formation. A 2018 longitudinal study conducted at Tufts University by researchers Julie Dobow, Calvin Gidney, and Jennifer Burton on how racialized children process sounds and images from popular animated TV series revealed that the animated world children see is consistently out of sync with their reality. When Black youth see stereotypes of themselves portrayed as inferior, particular beliefs or understanding about Black people are conveyed to them. These stereotypes persist in both how characters are drawn and how they talk. Non-American accents, for example, are usually attributed to bad guys and villains. According to Peffley et al. (1997), stereotypes are "cognitive structures that contain the perceiver's knowledge, beliefs, and expectations about human groups" (37). Media misrepresentation of ethnic groups can confuse young people about aspects of their identity.

Human beings evaluate everything they encounter, so these evaluations are based on actions, insights, and directions. Therefore, children and young people need to see dynamic characters who look and sound like them and their loved ones. A counter-narrative suggests that good guys can have accents like theirs, and racialized males and females can be much more than sidekicks.

The joy the Blerds in my study express when they see positive representations of themselves in anime and manga is illuminating. Carol's excitement at discovering a Black role model in *Carole and Tuesday* is mirrored in Rick's comment that *Homecoming*, which features a Black family, was his favourite book to read in 2018. Steve continues this theme:

Janet: The fact that there is not a heavy Black focus does not deter you from being interested?

Steve: No, it doesn't. But anytime I do hear about an anime that's coming out by a Black artist, I would be engaged.

Joe has his own take on the issue:

Joe: There is a lack of representation now, at least because the big heroes obviously are all white, but that's because they have 80 years of history behind them. I think there's definitely a lot more variety now. Given the elements now, they don't have the same historical backing to keep these characters on the shelves.

Joe cites history as a reason for the racial gap in positive racialized superheroes in comics and implies that there is some catching up to do. The excitement participants display in seeing Black role models in their reading material for pleasure suggests more needs to be presented. One could infer that their desire and fantasy is to appear normal, like their white role models Clark Kent and

Peter Parker, while still being that person with hidden *superpowers* i.e., the ability to vanquish the enemy and protect the less fortunate. Ben points to the Marvel Black Spider-Man comic series with Miles Morales as an attempt at inclusivity. Miles Morales is an ordinary young person with challenges that participants can relate to. The Morales character is very accessible as a role model, and Ben, like Morales, is bi-racial.

Ben: It's big, the latest animated Spider-Man movie that's focused on a half Black who became Spider-Man. Morales [is his name]. I think he's also a comic book character as well. So, I think a lot of stuff they did with him was interesting. Because it's more than just him being a Black Peter Parker.³⁰ He's his own person.

When Steve was asked about the limited selection of notable Black characters in the texts he enjoys, he referenced the series *Afro Samurai* that was made to show inclusivity and whose main character is a positive Black representation:

Steve: There are anime out like *Afro Samurai*. That's one of the older ones that was made for that purpose.

Afro Samurai (1998-2002) is a manga series written and illustrated by Takashi Okazaki, a Japanese graphic designer and manga artist. Okazaki was a student at Tama Art University when he created the vengeance-driven Black warrior, Afro Samurai, in 1998. Inspired by his love of soul, hip hop, and American media, Okazaki located *Afro Samurai* in a futuristic yet feudal Japan. The series tells the story of Afro's quest to avenge his father's death when he was a child at the hands of his main rival, the gunslinger Justice. Initially, Okazaki created a six-page adventure novelette that he and his friends funded and self-published in limited quantity

³⁰ Peter Parker is the original white Spider-Man.

(McLeod 2013; Strike 2007). The initial reception was lackluster but increased after Okazaki won a contest to build his character as a toy, which an executive of Gonzo³¹ luckily saw. Interest in the toy led to well-known African American actor Samuel L. Jackson's involvement in the production of the anime series. The show also attracted other big-name actors, including Lucy Lu and Ron Perlman.

Afro Samurai was unique in many ways. The production affords a seamless integration into the U.S. market, particularly the Black market, with a product that captured the best of both worlds: hip hop and the Samurai warrior ethos. In order to achieve this, *Afro Samurai* was developed not as a Japanese show that was exported to the States and remastered to be incorporated into U.S. markets but was developed directly for U.S. television, with post-production dubbing into English. The success of the anime series was directly attributed to this reverse engineering in production. Actor Samuel L. Jackson's iconic voice as Afro Samurai and his alter ego Ninja, as well as a soundtrack written by RZA from Wu-Tang Clan added the right amount of cultural and racial properties to the anime project. Wu-Tang Clan, a popular American hip hop group formed in Staten Island, New York, in 1992, is highly influential in hip hop and viewed as the voice for disenfranchised Blacks in America. The group created rap music that incorporated Eastern philosophy appropriated from popular culture, including kung fu movies and comic books (Chasteen and Shriver 1998). The association of RZA, the leader of Wu-Tang Clan with the *Afro Samurai* franchise is analogous to the group's connection to Japanese popular culture. It was undoubtedly a brilliant marketing strategy to corner the Black market, who are avid consumers of the genre. *Afro Samurai* premiered on Spike TV as a five-episode miniseries

³¹ *Gonzo* is a Japanese anime studio owned by ADK, established by former Gainax staff members on September 11, 1992. Gonzo is a member of The Association of Japanese Animations (Wikipedia).

in 2007 along with the television film sequel *Afro Samurai: Resurrection* in 2009, which garnered two Emmy nominations and one win. *Afro Samurai* has also been adapted into a video game and a live-action film (McLeod 2013; Spike 2007).

The production of *Afro Samurai* is instructional. A Black character is showcased as the principal player. He is not relegated to the fringe or obscurity, and most importantly, he has control over the choices he makes. *Afro Samurai* depicts a Black protagonist in situations where he is challenged and seeks to overcome barriers with a single-minded purpose. Stories like these are impactful to Black readers who typically do not see many Black protagonists making crucial decisions in their lives. *Afro Samurai* was also successful as a manga and film because it had the financial backing and collaborative support of a mainstream distribution and marketing company. Most importantly, *Afro Samurai* had input from Black content creators including Samuel L. Jackson with respect to storylines. According to Alexander Dumas Brickler (2018), *Afro Samurai* could be viewed as a recovery of the Black male identity that young people in the diaspora could embrace as someone who looks like them. Afro Samurai as a character is a representational figure that gave the Black male visibility, something that is necessary for their self esteem.

The importance of Black representation in texts is reiterated by advocate and writer Walter Dean Myers (2014) in a New York Times magazine article, about the impact James Baldwin's book *Sonny's Blues* had on his identity and self-esteem:

I didn't love the story, but I was lifted by it, for it took place in Harlem, and it was a story concerned with black people like those I knew. By humanizing the people who were like me, Baldwin's story also humanized me. The story gave me a

permission that I didn't know I needed, the permission to write about my own landscape, my own map. (Myers 2014)

Myer's comment reflects the importance of representation in all aspects of Black life. Stories that connect familiar experiences or autobiographies that depict the experiences of people of African descent give young readers an opportunity to see themselves as worthy. It also gives an insight into their place in society and how to navigate systemic structures and institutions that shape their lived experiences. Much of the manga and anime that the Blerds in my study enjoy do not offer them this visibility, and do not give them permission to write about their lived experiences.

The Impact of International Marketing and Production

Despite its success, *Afro Samurai* is not a typical case. Its success in the Black North American market indicates the power that marketing and production play in showcasing diversity and accessibility in anime and manga. This power has not often been used to bring about similar outcomes as *Afro Samurai*. As Denison (2011) points out, anime as a transcultural phenomenon is best understood by looking at distribution deals:

Perhaps the most purposeful type of transcultural exchange in anime takes [place] between the Japanese producers of these media texts and their American counterparts, who buy their products, translate them and then distribute them to the English-speaking marketplace. (223)

Structural and institutional practices are embedded in production, consumption and distribution. The creative post-production work, including the incorporation of Western cultural elements that have altered the cultural appeal of anime texts, is crucial to the success of Japanese products in the homes of North Americans (Denison 2011). People in general will relate positively to items that they are familiar with. White-passing characters, seeing iconic landmarks, and hearing

familiar American and British accents will facilitate easy transitions into North American households. Denison describes the transcultural exchange as “purposeful,” meaning that key decision-makers such as production houses would need to be convinced that the absence of Black content in marketing and publishing is problematic. Rick makes an interesting observation about the decisions around the marketing of Black content:

Rick: I guess population disparities would limit ... a lot of media in North American society ... It's been like, oh, if they're like Black characters, then it's a black thing. If a white kid does it, it's everyone's thing. Yeah, that's kind of like the difference. If it's not a mainstream publisher or something like that, then it's just a Black thing. Yeah. So I think that limits your exposure.

Rick has pinpointed one of the major influencers in what is created and marketed. White content is automatically considered mainstream and part of the dominant group which contributes to a large portion of sales: “If a white kid does it, it’s everyone’s thing.” As Rick sees it, the proportion of people of African descent relative to the general population is small. This limits the investment decisions to push Black content, so it is usually relegated to niche markets because it is not considered a significant portion of the mainstream market. This appears to be a general condition that holds true across North America.

Production and publishing houses’ roles and decisions around marketing to specific demographics significantly impact who gets access. In an online article, Grace Shuttie (2020) shared the following observation about those who are in the publishing field: “The younger generation are quite global,” she says, referencing her daughter who enjoys anime and is starting a degree in anthropology and Japanese. “I think publishing doesn’t move quick enough and have enough of these types of young people inside publishing to enable them to connect with that”

(Shuttie 2020). Although she may have only been referencing the need to include other cultural voices, the same is true for the content as a whole. The publishing industry does not seem to have enough people invested in creating content and understanding racialized youth and their needs. This problem could also emerge from a lack of diversity in the higher echelons of corporate structures where planning and funding decisions are made. Canadian-born YA and children's writer Zetta Elliott's (2015) insightful essay on the lack of Black representations in children's literature, "Black Authors and Self-Publishing," could well have been about producing and publishing of anime and manga. She notes:

Despite the fact that the majority of primary school children in the U.S. are now kids of color, the publishing industry continues to produce books that overwhelmingly feature white children only. The message is clear: the lives of kids of color don't matter. (1)

The limited representations of marginal voices in key decisions around racialized group continue to obstruct a more inclusive publishing industry.

Conclusion

Participants' feedback indicate Japanese anime and manga as the most popular texts for entertainment and recreational pleasure. The flexibility in anime as a transcultural medium is without a doubt. Its diversity in tone and style is expansive (Byford 2020). The success of the Japanese mixed media business model cuts across race, class, gender, geography, and cultures. Complex business structures have harnessed the internet, Japanese cultural producers, and strategic business mergers to enter North American markets and households with minimal disruption in cultural meanings because of effective remastering, dubbing, and aesthetic appeal. However, except for *Afro Samurai*, which utilized the fusion of hip hop and anime to attract

Black consumers, other well-known anime productions do not reveal a collective interest or desire by studio owners and marketers to establish aspirational Black role models in content creation, even though Black youth are significant consumers. Longitudinally, the impact on race, representation, and identity formation may be concerning given the way sales have exploded in North America and the demography of the persons consuming it. How will Black youth, enmeshed in Japanese anime and manga youth culture, see themselves in the future without significant connections to their own cultural identity requires further enquiry.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

*Black Panther*³² was one of the top grossing films in 2018, breaking box office expectations. It received accolades for its precedent-setting representations with respect to race, gender-conscious casting, and costuming. Marvel Cinematic Universe showcased their first Black director, Ryan Coogler, and an almost entirely Black lead cast and Black women in powerful roles. The costumes were extravagant and complemented the vivid landscape of the mythical Wakanda, located in sub-Saharan Africa. *Black Panther* was one of the most talked-about films in 2018 and won three Oscar Awards. It had all the properties and qualities this study's participants seek in the texts they engage with for pleasure: science fiction tropes done in imaginative and interesting ways; an impressive Black superhero in T'Challa, who demonstrates exemplary prosocial skills; and numerous exciting fight scenes where good triumphs over evil. The film represented a future in which Black people survive, have power, and commandeer significant natural and technological resources. *Black Panther* was supposed to increase Black pride and representation. Yet, participants did not identify *Black Panther* as a pivotal text for inspiration and fun. Graphic novels, comics, games and more emerged from the windfall gains of this franchise. Yet, no participant mentioned *Black Panther* graphic novels/comics as a favourite in their comic book collections. Instead, their preferred texts are described as traditional comics with white superheroes such as Superman and Spider-Man, or Japanese manga and anime with white-passing characters in series such as *Demon Slayer*, *Fullmetal Alchemist*, *Naruto*, and *My Hero Academia*.

³² Following the death of his father, T'Challa (Marvel Superhero Black Panther) returns home to Wakanda to inherit the throne. Faced with treachery and a powerful enemy who threatens the safety of his nation, T'Challa is forced to choose duty over personal choice in order to become the hero that he truly was.

Only one participant referenced the success of *Black Panther* and, significantly, he is a film student.

Steve: So, there aren't really many Black films that are focused, that are in the positive light, like the thing that comes to my head immediately would be *Black Panther*. Because that had like a really big impact when it came out... That was like one of the first solo films to reach a billion dollars because of the impact it had on the black community because it was showing us in a positive light.

Despite the success in sales, *Black Panther* did not reach and affect Black youth in the same way that Japanese anime and manga have. In addition, DC and Marvel comics have had a foothold in North American comic book markets for decades. As Joe puts it, they have “80 years of history behind them.” The cumulative effect is that white cultures and Asian cultures including Japanese, Korean and Chinese are considered normative. By normative, I mean that it is mainstream. Black culture is, however, not normative because it has always been situated as other or outside. Black outsider status permeates all layers of society, including what could be perceived as innocuous entertainment in which individuals believe that they are making independent choices without external influences.

The Significance of Not Being Normative

According to literary scholar Louise Rosenblatt (1995), “Literature permits something resembling ideal experimentation because it offers such a wide range of vicarious experiences” (190). To Rosenblatt, literature helps the reader imagine and articulate ways of being in the world. But what are the underlying implications when your race and your culture are rarely exhibited? Steve captures the idea that Black culture is not treated as an evolving experience

with a present, past and future. He sees the diversity and multiplicity of the Black race being reduced to a single month:

Steve: Depending on what school you go to, there would be none [Black books].

And by enlightening curriculum, they really aren't any books for racialized people, unless there's like, a month and then they just give you a book about it for that month, and then you never talk about it again. But it's not really in the curriculum ... At my high school, as I was leaving, they introduced a Black history course that teaches more about Black history. However, I think it should really just be included in the history course because it is a part of history, but it's not really talked about as much.

What Steve is recognizing is that Black History Month implies that Black cultures have no futurity and what is known belongs in the past. He understands that if Black history becomes a part of the national school curriculum, Black life would be normalized as a part of society. Reading about Black history only one month in a year does not make it mainstream. Seeing a major Black film such as *Black Panther* is a novelty and not considered a common occurrence. Hence, Blerds like Steve reach for what is normative. They reach for what they are familiar with at school, at home, in the society and even globally: white youth culture and white-passing Japanese culture.

One of the tasks of a teacher is to acknowledge, respect, and learn about the cultures of their students. This is an obligation that is prefaced in the United Nation Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) that requires the provision of an integrated curriculum in which current cultural resources are made available to students. In an ideal world, sites such as schools and online communities would provide entry points for exposure to texts that valorize Blackness

and the richness of diversity. Within these spaces, interest would be stimulated to pursue other Black texts for pleasure reading that are outside formal school settings. These encouragers, however, are limited or non-existent. Sixteen-year-old Tom had this to say:

Janet: Do you get to read books that are aspirational for you as a young Black male in the classroom?

Tom: I don't think there are a lot of books that are directly related toward us or the Black community.

Tom's interest in books is heavily dependent on those that he can relate to in terms of life experience. He expresses a desire to see aspects of himself in the books he reads, an indication of the limited exposure or lack of information about his own culture that is available in books. These books address Black experiences, not just during Black History Month but with ongoing information about the diversity that exists in multicultural Canada. Ben's observations are like Tom's; however, he believes that Black books exist, the problem is to find them.

Ben: There's not as many like Superman. You know what I mean?

Comparatively, there's, I'm sure, I'm positive there's lots of great stuff but it's not like propped up in the bookstores.

Tom and Ben's comments suggest that although Black youth are not reading books which valorize Blacks, it does not mean they would not read them if they were readily available.

Janet: So, do you think schools should consider a more diverse offering for books to read and literacy-related courses?

Tom: Yes. It would be interesting to learn about what other Black males have gone through and help other people understand what we, what other Black males

and just the Black community in general, what we have faced and what we must go through; and open their eyes to see that.

Racial exclusion in literary texts has far-reaching effects on perceptions such as self-concept and not feeling valued. Erasure and invisibility signal to the Black youth that they are out of place and do not belong. According to Tom, Black people work so much harder for what is average to most white individuals. These seemingly mundane privileges by their non-racialized peers ultimately impact Black youth's ability or inability to realize their full potential. This line of reasoning includes perspectives on how Black children and youth are socialized to view themselves and their subsequent acquiescence and acceptance of marginalization as normative.

Valorizing Black Books

One could argue that the onus is on educators to fill this gap in the curriculum or risk Black youth continuing to look for their heroes/role models in non-Black spaces that privilege Eurocentric perspectives and ideals. Black books for children and Black youth with images of themselves and beautiful unforgettable stories have been around for decades. These books range from classic Black YA novels to science fiction and contemporary creative autobiographies. Over the decades, significant creative works from award-winning authors including Virginia Hamilton, Mildred D. Taylor, Dionne Brand, M. Nourbese Phillip, Zetta Elliot, Nnedi Okorafor, and Nalo Hopkinson have captured the rich and complex nature of Black childhood in North America, Africa and the Caribbean. Mildred D. Taylor's (2001) *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* is a classic novel that portrays the life and struggles of a Black family during the depression in 1933 Mississippi. The story follows young Cassie Logan, the main protagonist and narrator, as she gives her perspective on the family's challenges to keep their farm and maintain their independence. Cassie is given a voice throughout the story which describes what her parents and

three brothers had to endure. They encounter many instances of racism and social injustices.

Toward the end of the novel, Cassie learns the importance of self-respect and family history.

Scholar Francine Johnson-Feelings, in a tribute essay to Taylor, writes:

She respects her characters by showing them in their fullness as individuals and as knowing, or unknowing, players in big social movements. The plots are full of the suspense, the drama, and the routine of the real lives of real people. Her pacing is perfect. The language is authentic and energetic. The insights she shares are relevant, enlightening, and enduring. (Johnson-Feelings 2020)

Early influencers of Black YA literature and conveyors of political messages of Black empowerment include the works of multiple-award-winner Virginia Hamilton, whose 1985 illustrated book *The People Could Fly* is a story that builds on African folklore of people gifted with supernatural powers. The narrative and illustrations depict enslaved Africans remembering their ability to fly and choosing to escape slavery by flying back home to Africa. It is a poignant story about power, memory and myth. In the foreword, Hamilton explains that *The People Could Fly* is a metaphor for the present-day struggle and accomplishment of American Blacks. This can also be inferred as encouragement for Black youth to understand their historical significance to the continued struggle for civil rights, and to develop an appreciation for their Black identity. YA author Nnedi Okorafor pays tribute to Virginia Hamilton's legacy in a 2004 essay titled "Her Pen Could Fly: Remembering Virginia Hamilton." Okorafor admits that her *Windseeker* series with a thirteen-year-old female protagonist situated in Nigeria was inspired by Hamilton's work.

Okorafor also describes the impact of Virginia Hamilton's 1967 novel *Zeely* on her own characterizations of young, strong Black female protagonists. Hamilton's coming-of-age novel portrays Elizabeth Perry, an imaginative eleven-year-old. On the way to her uncle's farm for the

summer, she changes her name to Geeder and her brother's to Toeboy, for fun until they return home. Geeder meets six-and-a-half-foot tall Zeely and becomes obsessed with her. She forges a friendship with the tall dark-skinned woman who leaves a profound impression on her. Geeder finds a photograph of a Watutsi queen that looks like Zeely and decides that Zeely must be a queen, and she tells all the children in the village of her discovery. It was not, however, until Zeely tells Geeder a surprising story that Geeder begins to like herself, instead of needing to pretend to be someone else. The story shows that there is a limit to what we can pretend because things are what they are. Hamilton is credited with the uncanny ability to incorporate lessons on self-esteem and reminders that Blackness is a multifaceted representation of power, resilience, strength, beauty and magic. The book's message conveys the importance of coming to terms with one's identity and learning one's racial history. Okorafor states:

For me, this book [*Zeely*] was the first book I ever read that seemed to celebrate “African-ness” in Black women. Hamilton's first book broadcasted that Black was beautiful, something I don't think black women and girls are told often enough. I discovered Hamilton's other books as an adult, and they each helped to reinforce my drive to write what I call African fantasy (fantasy based on African myths and culture). (372)

The above revelation affirms the characterizations of Okorafor's strong female characters in the *Binti* trilogy(2020) in the form of the main protagonist Binti, her desert dwelling grandmother, and the seer who shows Binti the means to realize her true power and the importance of understanding one's history. *Binti* is science fiction in a futuristic African setting in which a

sixteen-year-old embraces her Black identity, overcomes racial oppression and otherness, and learns self-acceptance through experiences with the outside world.

In recent years we have seen additions by writers such as Tomi Adeyemi, with interesting and exciting stories with Black images and positive role models for Black youth, that capture the diversity of Black cultures in the diaspora. Equally interesting is a rich display of Afrofuturism in speculative fiction by Nalo Hopkinson in *Brown Girl in the Ring* (1995) that portrays a dystopian imagination of the haves and have not in Toronto in the not-too-distant future. More recently, 27-year-old Ghanaian-American novelist Yaa Gyasi's debut novel *Homegoing* (2017) has received critical acclaim. Gyasi uses the method of couching historical events in the lives of fictional characters to highlight the complexities of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. It is instructive that it is a novel that one of the participants in the study enjoyed and found relatable.

Rick: I think that if all other people are able to read that book [*Homegoing*], it would really help them to understand a lot of things that they're going through and stuff. So, it's relatable.

This type of story is familiar to people from the African and Caribbean diaspora, who are separated from their own stories and histories of origin. *Homegoing* deals with themes such as race, sex, colonial history, identity, and other contemporary issues with an unvarnished honesty. The generational legacy of colonial inequities and oppression becomes clearer to the experiencer in contemporary society. The intertwining of the past and contemporary events intrigued Rick and piqued his interest in his own history and ancestry. By returning the reader to their ancestral origins, the process of gaining the wisdom of past generations is achieved.

The Best of Both Worlds

Homecoming is crucial as a novel that connects with contemporary Black youth. The themes and the style of writing caught the attention of Rick, a young Black male. What this indicates is that there is a combination or formula that works for Black youth who are willing to be engaged and which could possibly lead them to text-only novels. It is a combination of themes reflective of the issues that most young people look for in their pleasure reading – aspirational, good overcoming evil, escape from reality – but written in a style that is engaging and informative.

Tom: I like to see other people's point of views and what they like to watch or what other people live like around the world because a lot of people have different ways, right? And have different customs and different traditions and stuff like that.

As indicated above, there are many Black YA writers who are offering such a combination, but not enough exposure is being given to their works, especially in school curriculum where young people often get their introduction to classic novels. That is obviously an area that needs to be addressed. How do we promote YA Black literature to schools, libraries and families so that Black literature becomes normative, a part of their everyday reading? What are the effective ways to bring more traditional books and formats to Black youth's attention? Would Blerds move to chapter books on their own, but also, do they even need to?

Currently these Blerds do not read many books; they read primarily graphic novels and comics. They had this to say:

Ben: I found there's a wider range of content [in graphic novels] to read. And they're more than just superheroes. They're stuff about like, just people living

their lives and like, you know, and it's like, reflect real life elements and stuff like that.

Mary: People are just really tired of Hollywood, tired of those beauty standards, tired of a lot. They [Japanese and Korean] offer something else where you could escape into...something that you could follow if you wanted to. And if you didn't want to, then you could be your own person.

Rick: The Japanese have so many creative ideas and their readers are used to those kinds of ideas. There's less censorship, with respect to what kids say and do. An American novel would not allow certain kids to do certain things, they wouldn't sell So having the freedom with Japanese characters, people are more drawn to it The story in the Japanese comics tend to be more experimental.

These Blerds have tapped into a major difference between what is on offer in traditional texts and what exists in Japanese graphic novels; namely, that these graphic novels push the boundaries of what the censors in North America consider appropriate. For example, webcomics have easier entry points for producers to bypass mainstream censors because there are virtually no gatekeepers. This means that anyone can upload their webcomics for the world to see regardless of content and general appeal (Kleefeld 2015). There is an opportunity for North American publishers to take more risks with what they do publish for consumers who are constantly evolving, with the exponential expansion of new communication technologies that have blurred international borders with respect to content and censorship. These Blerds are open to the complexity of experiences that are presented to them in fan fiction and manga. They have demonstrated that they are discerning consumers who have been navigating the barriers of

intersectionality with an astute understanding of the plight of marginalized groups who have chosen alternate ways to communicate and share their creative content.

The intent of this project was to study what Blerds in urban Toronto are reading for pleasure, and the surprising discovery is that they read graphic novels and comics more than they read traditional novels. The question now arises, do we push for Black youth to return to traditional novels only, or do we accept that graphic novels have their own appeal and have real value, and therefore pursue a combination of traditional and non-traditional texts as part of any curriculum? Research conducted by educators has demonstrated that graphic novels are effective in teaching literacy skills in school settings, and they have advocated for its use (Frey and Fisher 2004; Gavigan 2011). As with traditional novels, complex issues can be told in graphic form (Eisner 2008; McCloud 1994; Sousanis 2015). In some ways it is about inference and reading between the lines. According to Scott McCleod (1994) readers are getting facial expressions and competing information which require complex higher order thinking. This is particularly important for young people who are struggling to read for various reasons, including those pursuing English as a second language, difficulties reading text only, or problems decoding (Cary 2004). For example, young people who are struggling with facial expressions may find graphic novels and comics excellent because there is so much information going on visually and otherwise. Michael J. Pagliaro (2014) notes that visual images in graphic novels are essential to the story being told. Graphic novels use different conventions and rules that require expanded reading strategies. Indeed, a close look at current graphic novels suggests that they are for all readers. This challenges the notion that these books have limited literary value (Cary 2004; Short 2018). Graphic novels are a complex and universal way of telling stories and often provide the same fulsome experience as a text-only novel. In these contexts, individuals do not have to read a

full book but limit themselves panel to panel. Carol, for example, talks about her brother's reading challenges and explains how *Shōnen Jump* manga improved his literacy skills.

Carol: I'd say that's probably how my brother got so smart was like, reading *Shōnen Jump*³³ and all that kind of stuff. Books introduce all those kinds of themes and vocabulary that you never knew before.

Author and graphic artist Will Eisner (2008) has this to say about the graphic novel: “Storytellers have a responsibility not only to the reader but to themselves. Stories have influence... An ever-advancing technology affects the communication environment” (156). Eisner's comments are true of all stories, not just the graphic novel, and that in itself highlights the value of both the traditional text-only novel form of storytelling and the non-traditional graphic novel. Creative and innovative ways to encourage young people to read is an ongoing task of educators and parents. When children's and young people's reading choices are supported, this ultimately leads to feelings of support for the texts they enjoy and also increases confidence level. If a young person is enjoying what they are reading, they are more likely to read more often and consistently, which is the desired outcome for educators and parents. The conclusion I have drawn from my research is that our goal should be focused on getting the best of both worlds. Online reading has become a fixture in contemporary society and is here to stay. How we address this evolution in communication and transference of information and knowledge will have far reaching outcomes in young people's identity formation and social worlds.

³³ *Shōnen Jump* is a weekly shōnen *manga* anthology published in Japan by Shueisha under the Jump line of magazines. *Shojo* are girls' *manga* (see Johnson-Woods 2010).

Summation

The Blerds in this study are intelligent and educated, curious, adventurous, and fun loving. They seek, in their pleasure reading, the same things as their white counterparts: escape from reality, the triumph of good over evil and heroes that are aspirational. They have found these in comics and graphic novels and the participatory culture that has evolved from these – fan fiction, fan art and cosplay. My research has shown that there is great value in the texts that Blerds have chosen to read for pleasure in that it gives them agency and allows them to express their creativity despite racial, social and cultural restrictions. The caution arrives from the fact that they do not really have the freedom of choice that they think they have. What they read is what has been made available to them by mainstream media, as a product of multinational marketing companies and producers. The creators of this material culture are not usually Black and they often present limited Black aspirational heroes, so the heroes these Blerds are constantly aspiring to emulate are white or white-passing Japanese. This has implications for their identity and self-esteem, as the lack of Black role models can and does suggest that Black is not normative, therefore not valuable. While it may be difficult to change the marketing strategy of production houses whose primary concern is profit, educators, primary caregivers and allies can do much more to introduce Black youths to the rich offerings by Black YA writers and combine this with positive graphic novels and comics. Unless this is done, we will continue to inhabit a space where Black youth become more and more marginalized, seeing images of themselves only once in a decade when someone is bold enough and powerful enough to create something for them like *Black Panther* or *Afro Samurai*.

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Appendices

Appendix A – What Do Young Adults Read?

WHAT DO Young Adults READ?

Purpose

My name is Janet Seow and I am a PhD candidate at York University. As part of my PhD dissertation, I have developed a creative project to determine the extent to which Young Adult (YA) Afrofuturism literature is influencing young people in Toronto. The goal here is to obtain volunteers who are willing to work with me on a research project. I am seeking their opinions and to understand how young people in the diaspora use YA Afrofuturism texts to understand the social and political arrangements that inform the conditions in their lives and identity in Canada.

What will you do if you take part?

You would be involved in focus groups, surveys, individual interviews or some other creative work. What I would like to talk with you about is: your choices and motivations in reading YA Afrofuturism texts.

Will doing the research help me?

Discussions about choices and motivations in reading YA Afrofuturism texts may allow young people to reflect on their identity and experiences and possibly gain further insight into their lives. However our main aim is to write a final report for my assignment. This report will help young people, educators, library professionals and policy makers.

Confidentiality

For research purposes I will analyze your feedback and our conversations. All our conversations will be audio taped and partially transcribed. I will make sure that your participation remains confidential and anonymous. Our conversation should not upset you in any way: in fact, it should be enjoyable for all of us. Even if you give your consent now, you can withdraw it at any time. I will not include your name or any identifying information in my final report about this project, but your contributions to our conversations may be included under a pseudonym in the report I will write for my course at the conclusion of this assignment.

Contact info:

Email:

Poster expires on December 20, 2019

Appendix B – Online Informed Consent, Semi-Structured Interview

ONLINE INFORMED CONSENT FORM [Semi-Structured Interview]

FOR YOUTH

My name is _____ I am a Humanities PhD candidate at York University and Principal Investigator. I can be contacted at e-mail_____.

As part of my PhD dissertation, I have developed a creative project to determine the extent to which YA Afrofuturism is influencing young people in Toronto. The goal here is to obtain the opinions of young people by using surveys, interview and focus group discussion to understand your choices and motivations in reading YA Afrofuturism literature, and how young people in the diaspora use YA Afrofuturism texts to understand the social and political arrangements that inform their identity and condition of their lives. Information from the research will be included in a report in the form of a dissertation, academic presentations, and academic articles.

I would like to invite you to participate in my research. We will have one conversation in the form of a semi-structured interview. Our conversation will last approximately 40 to 60 minutes. We will meet via Skype at an agreed time and discuss topics that include the impact of Afrofuturism on young people like you as well as your personal thoughts and reflections.

I do not foresee any risks or discomfort from your participation in the research. Every effort including the use of codes and anonymizing will be made to exclude identity revealing details and personal information.

Benefits from discussing reading choices and motivations may allow young people like yourself to reflect on your lived experiences and possibly gain further insight into identity formation. The project offers deeper theoretical insights into how race and culture play an important role in youth subcultural practices. It will be relevant to professionals, including library science practitioners, publishers, authors, education developers, readers, parents, teachers, and government officials in designing diversified communication and education tools.

Your participation in the study is completely voluntary and you may choose to stop participating at any time. Your decision not to volunteer, to stop participating, or to refuse to answer particular questions will not influence the nature of the ongoing relationship you may have with the researchers or study staff, or the nature of your relationship with York University either now, or in the future.

In the event you withdraw from the study, all associated data collected will be immediately destroyed wherever possible. Should you wish to withdraw after the study, you will have the option to also withdraw your data up until the analysis is complete.

For purposes of confidentiality information that is collected electronically and in the form of field notes will be coded and anonymized to remove all identifying information. All consent forms with identifying information will be separated from other coded or anonymized data and stored in a locked filing cabinet. Data in digital form will be encrypted and password protected.

In the case of online data, relevant online privacy laws and site terms of use will be adhered to in order to avoid and protect data access to third party viewing. Data will be stored for 2 years up until 31/12/2022 at which time all hard copy data will be shredded and all electronic data relating to the research will be deleted and storage media reformatted.

Unless you choose otherwise all personal identifying information will be removed from interviews and recordings. All information you supply during the research will be held in confidence and unless you specifically indicate your consent, your name will not appear in any report or publication of the research.

Data will be recorded via handwritten notes, flash drive, video and audio recordings. Your data will be safely stored in a locked facility and only the principal researcher will have access to this information. Confidentiality will be provided to the fullest extent possible by law

If you have questions about the research in general or about your role in the study, please feel free to contact me at _____ or my supervisor _____ at _____ and at _____. You may also contact the Graduate Program in Humanities at _____ and/or _____ ext. _____.

This research has received ethics review and approval by the Delegated Ethics Review

Committee, which is delegated authority to review research ethics protocols by the Human

Participants Review Sub-Committee, York University's Ethics Review Board, and conforms to the standards of the Canadian Tri-Council Research Ethics guidelines.

Legal Rights and Signatures:

I <<fill in participant name here>>, consent to participate in Afrofuturism, YA Literature and Representations of the Diverse Child: Diasporic Visions of the Future conducted by Janet Seow. I have understood the nature of this project and wish to participate. .

Additional consent (where applicable)

1. Audio recording

☐ I consent to the audio-recording of my interview(s).

2. Video recording or use of photographs

I <<insert participants name>> consent to the use of images of me (including photographs, video and other moving images), my environment and property in the following ways (please check all that apply):

In academic articles

☐ Yes ☐ No

In print, digital and slide form

☐ Yes ☐ No

In academic presentations

☐ Yes ☐ No

In media

☐ Yes ☐ No

In thesis materials

☐ Yes ☐ No

Appendix C: Online Informed Consent Form – Survey Questionnaire

ONLINE INFORMED CONSENT FORM [Survey/ Questionnaire]

FOR YOUTH

My name is Janet Seow. I am a Humanities PhD candidate at York University and Principal

Investigator. I can be contacted at e-mail _____.

As part of my PhD dissertation, I have developed a creative project to determine the extent to which YA Afrofuturism is influencing young people in Toronto. The goal here is to obtain the opinions of young people by using surveys, interview and focus group discussion to understand your choices and motivations in reading YA Afrofuturism literature, and how young people in the diaspora use YA Afrofuturism texts to understand the social and political arrangements that inform their identity and condition of their lives. Information from the research will be included in a report in the form of a dissertation, academic presentations, and academic articles.

I would like to invite you to participate in my research by completing an online survey about your reading preferences that will last approximately 40 to 60 minutes.

There is some risk that individuals screen names may be recognized and you will be required to change settings to hide screen names and other identifying information in the user interface. Every effort including the use of codes and anonymizing will be made to exclude identity revealing details and personal information.

Benefits from discussing reading choices and motivations may allow young people like yourself to reflect on your lived experiences and possibly gain further insight into identity formation. The project offers deeper theoretical insights into how race and culture play an important role in youth subcultural practices. It will be relevant to professionals, including library science practitioners, publishers, authors, education developers, readers, parents, teachers, and government officials in designing diversified communication and education tools.

Your participation in the study is completely voluntary and you may choose to stop participating at any time. Your decision not to volunteer, to stop participating, or to refuse to answer particular questions will not influence the nature of the ongoing relationship you may have with the researchers or study staff, or the nature of your relationship with York University either now, or in the future.

In the event you withdraw from the study, all associated data collected will be immediately destroyed wherever possible. Should you wish to withdraw after the study, you will have the option to also withdraw your data up until the analysis is complete

For purposes of confidentiality information that is collected electronically and in the form of field notes will be coded and anonymized to remove all identifying information. All consent forms with identifying information will be separated from other coded or anonymized data and

stored in a locked filing cabinet. Data in digital form will be encrypted and password protected. In the case of online data, relevant online privacy laws and site terms of use will be adhered to in order to avoid and protect data access to third party viewing. Data will be stored for 2 years up until 31/12/2022 at which time all hard copy data will be shredded and all electronic data relating to the research will be deleted and storage media reformatted.

Unless you choose otherwise all personal identifying information will be removed. All information you supply during the research will be held in confidence and unless you specifically indicate your consent, your name will not appear in any report or publication of the research.

Data will be recorded via handwritten notes, flash drive, video and audio recordings. Your data will be safely stored in a locked facility and only the principal researcher will have access to this information. Confidentiality will be provided to the fullest extent possible by law.

The researcher(s) acknowledge that the host of the online survey (e.g., Qualtrics, Survey Monkey etc.) may automatically collect participant data without their knowledge (i.e., IP addresses.) Although this information may be provided or made accessible to the researchers, it will not be used or saved without participant's consent on the researchers' system. Further, "Because this project employs e-based collection techniques, data may be subject to access by third parties as a result of various security legislation now in place in many countries and thus the confidentiality and privacy of data cannot be guaranteed during web-based transmission.

If you have questions about the research in general or about your role in the study, please feel free to contact me at _____ or my supervisor _____ at _____ and at _____. You may also contact the Graduate Program in Humanities at and/or _____ ext. _____.

This research has received ethics review and approval by the Delegated Ethics Review Committee, which is delegated authority to review research ethics protocols by the Human Participants Review Sub-Committee, York University's Ethics Review Board, and conforms to the standards of the Canadian Tri-Council Research Ethics guidelines. If you have any questions about this process or about your rights as a participant in the study, please contact the Sr. Manager & Policy Advisor for the Office of Research Ethics, 5th Floor, Kaneff Tower, York University (telephone 416-736-5914 or e-mail ore@yorku.ca).

Legal Rights and Signatures:

I <<fill in participant name here>>, consent to participate in Afrofuturism, YA Literature and Representations of the Diverse Child: Diasporic Visions of the Future conducted by Janet Seow. I have understood the nature of this project and wish to participate.

Additional consent (where applicable)

3. Audio recording

☐ I consent to the audio-recording of my interview(s).

4. Video recording or use of photographs

I <<insert participants name>> consent to the use of images of me (including photographs, video and other moving images), my environment and property in the following ways (please check all that apply):

In academic articles

☐ Yes ☐ No

In print, digital and slide form

☐ Yes ☐ No

In academic presentations

☐ Yes ☐ No

In media

☐ Yes ☐ No

In thesis materials

☐ Yes ☐ No

Appendix D: Online Questionnaire Jul 14, 2019

Online Questionnaire

Sample Questions – Graphic Novels or Comics

Graphic Novels:

- Have you ever read a graphic novel? ☐ Yes ☐ No
- If so, how do graphic novels compare to other materials you have read?

- What types of Graphic novels do you read?

- Describe the things you like best about graphic novels?

- Do you feel more confident reading graphic novels with images of Black people? ☐ Yes ☐ No

- If so, why do you feel confident reading graphic novels or comics with Black heroes?

- What do you think about using graphic novels with Black people in schools?

- Is there anything else you want to tell me about your experiences reading graphic novels?

Sample Questions – YA Afrofuturism Novels

YA Afrofuturism Novels:

- Have you ever read a YA Afrofuturism novel? ☐ Yes ☐ No

- If so, how do YA Afrofuturism compare to other materials you have read?

- What types of YA Afrofuturism novels do you read?

- Describe the things you like best about YA Afrofuturism novels?

- Do you feel more confident reading YA Afrofuturism novels with images of Black people? ☐ Yes ☐ No

- If so, why do you feel confident reading YA Afrofuturism novels with Black heroes?

- What do you think about using YA Afrofuturism novels with Black people in schools?

- Is there anything else you want to tell me about your experiences reading YA Afrofuturism novels?

Appendix E: Sample Interview Questions

Sample Interview Questions

1. How old are you?
2. What types of books or comics do you read? If so why?
3. What age did you start to read novels or comics for pleasure?
4. Are you a part of a reading club?
5. Do you visit the library frequently?
6. Did your parents or family members encourage you to read?
7. How do you get access to the books or comics that you read?
8. What does Afrofuturism mean to you as a person of color?
9. Why do you read Black science fiction?
10. Why do you read Black speculative fantasy?
11. Do you think a representation of race is important in science fiction and fantasy? If so why?
12. When did you start to read YA Afrofuturism novels or comics? Why?
13. Who are your favorite authors?
14. Why is it important to see people of color in the novels or comics that you read?
15. Who are your favorite characters and why?
16. Do you see your favorite characters as role models? If so why?
17. Do you feel empowered when you see Black characters in positive roles in stories?
18. Does Afrofuturism change the way you see yourself in society?
19. Do you believe there are enough books available for young people that address the issues that Black youth face on a daily basis?
20. Do you think there should be more books for young people that address issues such as race, sexually and gender? If so why?
21. Are there enough books about Black youth in schools? Why?
22. If you could make a recommendation about the books you read in school, what would that be?
23. What is cosplay?
24. Do you participate in cosplay culture? Why?
25. What does cosplay mean to you as a young person?
26. Do you attend conventions for cosplay, gaming or comics? If so why?