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## Black girls and silence: "They ain't doing too much" ...learning, valuing, and understanding their use of silence through critical race theory and culturally sustaining pedagogy

Jason Mizell and N'Dyah McCoy

**Abstract:** This paper works to illustrate how silence, a powerful semiotic tool, was used by a Black<sup>1</sup> middle school girl, Cierra<sup>1</sup>, to negotiate for additional processing time in challenging situations and as a form of protection, for herself and others. Critical race theory, culturally sustaining pedagogy, and social constructionist grounded theory are used to help frame and analyze the work that Cierra and Jason did together as part of a university local school district summer camp for middle school students. The data that was generated and examined in conjunction with Cierra may help teachers and researchers to reconceptualize silence as a powerful tool that students bring to school as an asset instead of as a deficit or something to be corrected or policed.

**Keywords:** critical race theory, culturally sustaining pedagogy, humanizing research, silence, social constructionist grounded theory



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## Introduction

Silence is not the absence of sound, it's the absence of noise or interference. It's a place, a feeling, or maybe even a shield that provides one with time to contemplate how and when to take action or protect oneself and others. It can even be an instrument that speaks volumes by not uttering a sound. Silence of this sort was needed throughout 2016 when the world witnessed one of the largest mass shootings perpetrated by a single individual in U.S. history against people of color, the death of multiple unarmed Black<sup>1</sup> people at the hands of the police, and a presidential candidate subsequently elected the 45th president of the United States (U.S.), who advocated for racial profiling and demonized Latiné immigrants as rapists and thieves (Maas, 2016). Against this traumatic backdrop, a group of mostly Black and Brown youth and I (Jason) took part in an Art!Youth Institute (AYI) that followed the principles of arts-based youth participatory action research (Harman and Burke, 2020; Harman and McClure, 2011; Wood, 2012). The purpose of the institute was to provide a space in which middle school youth could use various semiotic affordances (e.g., poetry, map making, drama, modeling, origami, spoken word) to let their voices and ideas be heard on how they defined a flourishing community and what they needed for their communities (classrooms, school(s), neighborhoods) to become places that sustained them (Paris and Alim, 2017).

The program was part of a summer camp initiative between a large southeastern university and a local school district. The initiative brought together middle school-aged youth (i.e., 11-14 years old), pre-service teachers working toward earning a master's

degree in English education, doctoral candidates, and university professors interested in arts-based literacy practices. We spent our mornings engaged in activities that both explored and expanded our thinking about communities, schools, and families. The goal of the program as articulated through the course syllabus was multifold: helping multilingual<sup>2</sup> youth (1) examine and explore their communities multimodally (e.g. through modeling, drama, and poetry) and (2) develop ways of remixing youth-developed and school-sanctioned genres for their own purposes as they dialogued about their communities, and (3) provide preservice teachers with a meaningful clinical experience that would encourage them to explore and question their own understandings of teaching, teachers, students, and literacy development.

This paper explores how, throughout the course, Cierra<sup>3</sup>, a young Black girl and rising 8<sup>th</sup> grader, used silence, an often dismissed and maligned semiotic affordance. We examine how Cierra employed silence as a tool to transform and contest the dominant spaces (a middle school building and an art museum) that we jointly inhabited, and to shield herself and others from perceived dangers. In addition, we reflect on how Jason and Cierra worked to humanize each other through a willingness to share bits of their lives throughout the summer of 2016 by listening to each other and valuing the silences. Lastly, we reflect on how coming to understand how silence can be used has the potential to help teachers and researchers to (re)evaluate their own assumptions regarding what it means when a Black girl decides not to “talk.”

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<sup>1</sup> We have purposefully chosen to capitalize Black and not white as one small way of centering the lives and experiences of Black people and thus decentering whiteness.

<sup>2</sup> We use the term multilingual to refer to students who spoke different combinations of Black English, different varieties of

Spanish, and Mandarin Chinese in addition to what Baker-Bell (2020) refers to as White Mainstream English.

<sup>3</sup> Pseudonyms have been used for all participants and locations except for the authors. Cierra's pseudonym was chosen by her.

## Literature Review

The United States educational system and its methods of discipline have created a unique educational experience for Black students, in particular for Black girls (Morris, 2016). When one examines how being Black and female impacts education, it becomes apparent that Black girls experience higher rates of suspension and other disciplinary actions throughout their K-12 educational careers. In comparison to Latina and white girls, Black girls are more likely to be suspended from school (LePage, 2021; Paul & Araneo, 2019; Raffaele Mendez et al., 2002). In addition, Black girls are not able to enjoy their childhood because society labels them as being “too sassy”, “too grown”, and “too fast” or hypersexual (Husband & Bertand, 2021) when they engage in innocent activities like dance and play. For example, Morris (2016) reported that the behavior of many Black girls is perceived as disrespectful, violent, or sexual while the same behavior, when exhibited by white girls, is seen as a sign of immaturity. As a result of the hypersexualization and adultification of Black girls, the essence of childhood, in which children are allowed to make and learn from their mistakes as part of their overall development, is stolen (Blake & Epstein, 2019; Curtis et al., 2022, Epstein et al., 2017). Due to this adultification, they are frequently punished and criminalized (McArthur & Muhammad, 2022). Douglas (2014) reports that exceptionally harsh punishments are used as a means of deterrent for other students of color, especially other Black girls. This tradition or reasoning is not new. It is reminiscent of how those who were enslaved were publicly humiliated in front of their families and peers for insignificant actions in order to stand as a warning to others.

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In schools, public humiliation currently involves having students arrested at school, suspended, or expelled. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2019), Black girls were more than three times more likely to be suspended or expelled from school than girls from any other racial or ethnic background. With that said, it is important to distinguish between Black girls’ actual behavior and their teachers’ and peers’ biases (Morris, 2007). In a study by Blake and Epstein (2019), multiple Black women had the opportunity to share some of their earliest memories of elementary school, when they were between five and nine years old. One of them

stated, “The teacher would say she felt threatened, you know, by me expressing myself in the classroom; like, I was like overpowering her when a - a white person would be [viewed as], ‘Oh, they’re intelligent; ‘you know?’” (p. 5). Another Black woman from this focus group went on to add:

[I]f a Black girl . . . raised a different perspective — like . . . I remember saying, ‘I’m not sure that I agree with that,’ or, ‘That doesn’t make sense to me because ...’ — then it’s like, because it’s a Black girl raising the idea, now it’s perceived with a tinge of just challenging authority. (p.5)

These misinterpretations of behavior often lead to punishment and are a direct result of the mismatch between teacher demographics and the student population in the U.S. (Harper et al., 2019). Although racially, linguistically, and culturally diverse children are increasingly populating public schools (Wynter-Hoyte et al., 2020), white middle-class female teachers continue to be the majority of K-12 teachers

in the U.S. (U.S. DOE, 2016). Most white teachers do not have much experience interacting effectively or empathetically with Black students. Often, it is the teachers' implicit racial bias toward Black children, particularly Black girls, which leads them to misinterpret their behavior (Husband & Bertrand, 2021).

The viewing of Black girls' behaviors and bodies through a racialized and thus deficit lens also leads teachers to view their languaging practices as deficient. According to Morris (2007), many times school administrators state that Black girls are excessively loud, but what does it mean to be loud? How is this term constructed and by whom? Caraballo (2019) argues that being loud, or the construct of loudness, is a term that often carries a negative connotation because it also carries an underlying comparison between people or groups of people. Additionally, many scholars (Fordham, 1993; Rosenbloom and Way, 2004) claim that loudness is closely related to variations of excess, including an excess of loudness by volume, style, or behavior. This excess of volume, style, and behavior is often attributed to Black girls and is often reduced to the conclusion that "Black girls do too much." This is a phrase that Black girls hear frequently throughout their childhoods. Being positioned as "doing too much," a manifestation of adultification, sexualization, and racialization, is frequently seen even when Black girls are following the rules and participating in classroom discussions. Morris (2007) provides an example of this when they report on how one teacher in their study commented on the active participation of his Black girl students. Morris stated: "I ask[ed] him after class if it was just the topic today that encouraged more participation from the girls. He says no—that the class is always like that. He says that "the girls just talk a lot" (p. 498). As can be seen in this excerpt, Black girls were actively participating in the class discussion, doing exactly what the teacher wanted, and yet when the teacher was questioned

about their participation, the teacher expressed his disapproval of them, because they were "just talk[ing] a lot" (p. 498) or in other words, "doing too much."

The other "extreme" of "doing too much" could be construed as doing nothing or being silent. Traditionally, silence has been defined as a lack of voice or presence. In many cases, this conceptualization of silence has led teachers and others to either ignore it, look down on it, or in some cases, punish students who use it because it is perceived as a form of being disrespectful. When Black students are in question, particularly Black girls, silence holds a negative connotation. In this context, silence is often translated as laziness, lack of engagement, or participation. Silence is often simplified, although it offers rich information about how and why racialized students choose to employ it as they navigate predominantly white spaces (Carter, 2007). Power-Carter (2020) posits that in white spaces, Black girls employ their silence to reclaim their authority by choosing when to speak, with whom to speak, and how to speak. This idea is crucial to understand in order for us to push back against the negative framing of how Black girls apply silence as a tool to navigate white spaces and contexts.

Over the next several sections, we discuss the events that allowed Jason to co-construct knowledge and a humanizing learning space with Cierra. In addition, silence, one of Cierra's most powerful semiotic tools, will be explored to demonstrate the various ways that she used it to negotiate for additional processing time in challenging group situations, and how it was used as a form of protection for herself and others. Additionally, we work to help teachers and others understand how they can view silence as they work to value, understand, and learn from the Black girls with whom they work.

Throughout the next section, we explain how we used critical race theory's tenet of whiteness as property in

order to understand why and how Cierra’s use of silence could be negatively seen in school-sanctioned spaces. Afterwards, we then explore culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP), focusing on one component, humanizing relationships. Focusing on humanizing relationships helped us to examine Jason’s and Cierra’s relationship and how that impacted our ability to analyze and understand how Cierra employed silence as a semiotic tool.

### Frameworks for Understanding Cierra’s Silence and Humanizing Research

#### Critical Race Theory

We use two different lenses, critical race theory and culturally sustaining pedagogy, as we explored Cierra’s use of silence. The first lens that we examine is critical race theory (CRT). In particular, we examine one of its tenets, whiteness as property. In what follows, we briefly provide an overview of the development of CRT and its use in education. We then focus on how we used the filter of “whiteness as property” to understand and situate Cierra’s use of silence.

CRT developed as a contestation to frustrations with the limitations of critical legal studies (CLS), which were based on examining the intersectionalities of power and law (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Early CLS theorists and activists knew that in order to truly explain the many injustices witnessed in communities of color, CLS needed to be refined so that it would also include how perceptions of race and racism play a role in how laws impact the lives of those who are racialized (Taylor et al., 2009). Ladson-Billings (1998) went a step further in order to connect our educational system to the legal system and how

that relationship shapes possibilities and futures. She stated:

The connections between law and education are relatively simple to establish. Since education in the USA is not outlined explicitly in the nation’s constitution, it is one of the social functions relegated to individual states. Consequently, states generate legislation and enact laws designed to proscribe the contours of education. (p. 17)

As such, states and local school districts are able to decide which behaviors (e.g., languaging, literacies,

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knowledges, behaviors) they deem to be appropriate. This is evident when one examines the values that are inscribed in intelligence, languaging proficiency, and even socio-emotional intelligence tests. Au (2016) states, “Standardized testing fundamentally masks the structural nature of racial inequality within an ideology of individual meritocracy, an ideology that advances a racialized neoliberal project” (p. 40). Thus, as a filter, CRT allowed

us to hone in on the racialized ways in which Cierra’s silence(s) could be racialized in schooled spaces. We did this by focusing on one of CRT’s tenets, whiteness as property (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Harris (1993) states, that “the origins of whiteness as property lie in the parallel systems of domination of Black and Native American peoples out of which were created racially contingent forms of property and property rights” (p. 1714). This parallel system of property rights did not entail just physical property but also linguistic, intellectual, and behavioral standards (i.e., different ways of “proving” the educational level of people). In other words, white ways of speaking or not (i.e., their use of or not of silence), has been

established as the norm. This idea of white ways of producing knowledge through their languaging and how it is held as more valuable than that of other groups is very much in line with Delgado-Bernal's and Villalpando's (2002) idea of apartheid of knowledge. They showed how, in educational spaces, white ways of knowing were held as valid, whereas those of racialized groups were held as inferior. Examining Cierra's use of silence through the tenet of whiteness as property helps us to see that it was not that her use of it as a semiotic tool was lacking, but that it was viewed as lacking by some because of the racialized identity of the user.

### **Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy: Humanizing Work**

Another filter that was used to examine and understand Cierra's use of silence was culturally sustaining pedagogy and its focus on developing humanizing relationships. Paris (2012), one of the principal founders of CSP, built on the work of Ladson-Billings (1995), who conceptualized and developed culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP). CRP highlights the importance of preparing teachers who have a "willingness to nurture and support cultural competencies, and the development of sociopolitical or critical consciousness" (p. 483) among students of color. Paris (2012), although appreciative of what he understood to be Ladson-Billings's stance, stressed that pedagogy must go beyond just being culturally relevant; he suggests that it must become more *culturally sustaining* (p. 95). He posited that schools must become places that not only maintain heritage ways of being and value cultural and linguistic sharing across differences, but that they should also work "to sustain and support bi- and multilingualism and bi- and multiculturalism" (Paris, 2012, p. 95). He focused on developing a pedagogy that required schools to "support young people in sustaining the cultural and linguistic competence of their communities while simultaneously offering access to

dominant cultural competence" (p. 95). Thus, the lens of CSP allowed us to not only value Cierra's silence as a semiotic tool but also as part of her cultural and linguistic repertoire that we needed to not only accept but also sustain as she used it to navigate her world.

Throughout the following section, we work to provide the reader with an understanding of the context of situation (Halliday, 1978) in which Cierra and Jason found themselves in 2016. Situating the work allows us to share with the reader what Cierra found important.

### **Methodology**

#### **Art!Youth Institute**

The setting for this work was a middle school in a U.S. Southeastern semi-urban school system that shares many of the complex and conflicting characteristics of what is generally considered an urban school system (Gadsden & Dixon-Román, 2017). Although the city houses the state's namesake university, it is the county seat of one of the nation's 10 most impoverished counties. According to census data, 62% of the population identifies as white, 27% as Black, and 10% as Latiné. The Art!Youth Institute designed and implemented a curriculum rooted in the multiple affordances of literacy and research with youth through a professional development partnership in the local school district (Burke et al., 2018). It was also created to introduce doctoral and masters level students to Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) (Mirra et al., 2016). In preparation for working with the middle schoolers, the graduate students and professors read about and discussed YPAR, photovoice, theater of the oppressed, and different artistic outlets, such as modeling, painting, and acting (Burke et al., 2018).

The summer camp hosted approximately 100 K-8 students and was hosted on the campus of a local

middle school. State University and the Lewis County School District invited students from the entire district to apply for a spot at the inaugural summer camp. Most of the students who applied were either Latiné or Black. There was a very small percentage of white students and students from Mainland China who participated in the program. The camp lasted the entire month of June. Students participated in various activities from 7:45 a.m. until 3:45 p.m., Monday through Friday.

The section of the camp that Cierra and Jason took part in, Art!Youth Institute, involved approximately 30 middle school and nine graduate students (5 masters and 4 doctoral). The group of youth participants was divided into two groups. Each youth group worked with the graduate students for 3 to 4 hours Monday through Thursday for two weeks. Generally, one or two youth worked collaboratively with one of the graduate students as they explored different books, built representations of their communities, and/or explored the local community. Although there were assigned partners, the arrangement was fluid. At times groups would join together or youth researchers would bond with a different adult and decide to change groups. Additionally, at times youth participants would decide to opt-out of activities. All of these variations were not just accepted but valued. We saw ourselves as guests in their space(s), and thus we worked to honor their needs.

### Our Positionalities

Weaving together [or explaining] the languaging of someone else . . . is more than just repeating words from one language or

mode to another; it is working to honestly express culturally specific nuances that are expressed *not just orally* [emphasis added] or bodily but, in many cases, multimodally. (Mizell, 2020, p. 45)

As researchers, we realize the importance of acknowledging how our positionalities play a role when working with co-research participants. Thus, we feel an obligation to share our positionalities and how they influence our work. Although Cierra was instrumental in helping to select what to share, in the end, we, Jason and N'Dyah, are the weavers, interpreting and showcasing her knowledges.

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**Cierra.** Cierra, a rising ninth grader, had attended Lewis Middle School since sixth grade. She and her family resided in a public housing community located near Lewis Middle School. Initially, Cierra didn't easily share information about herself or her family; small nuggets of information emerged as we engaged in various activities, such as reflective journaling. Over time, Cierra let Jason, and eventually the entire group, know that she

lived with her mother and younger sister. In addition, she told him that she had been labeled with a learning disability and that she also stuttered.

**Jason.** As the adult paired to work with Cierra and thus a participant researcher, I openly share my positionalities. I grew up relatively close to State University. Just like Cierra, I grew up in public housing and attended public K-12 schools. As a young Black boy who grew up in the Southeast of the United States, I am intimately aware of how race, skin complexion, dis/ability, and socioeconomic status impact one's schooling experience. In addition, I also

knew that since my family was Black and poor, and I was labeled as dis/abled, I automatically had multiple strikes against me before I even started. Due to the factors that I had in common with Cierra, in addition to being the father of a 13-year-old Afro-Latino, I felt the need to look out for her and try to provide her with options to acquire the skills that she may want in order to critically understand, deconstruct, and when necessary, remix dominant and communal ways of languaging.

**N'Dyah.** The other voice that is woven throughout this piece is mine, N'Dyah, a Black woman, who attended public schools for the better part of my K-12 experience. My experiences resonated with those of Cierra. I was raised in the same county and matriculated through the same school district until upper elementary school. I also strategically employ[ed] silence to protect myself and those whom I identify with as I navigate[ed] predominantly white spaces. Sharing some commonalities with both Jason and Cierra pushed me to examine the data purposefully and critically (Charmaz, 2008) through a race-conscious lens. In other words, race and racism were not an afterthought as I interacted with the data generated from this study. I was invited to collaborate on this project because of my emic position and personal knowledge of the school system involved in this project.

### **Data Collection**

Data for this study were collected through field notes, audio and video recordings, reflective journaling, and photovoice methods (Burke et al., 2016; Wang, 1999). Over 60 hours of participant observation, over 20 nightly reflection logs (written, video, and/or audio recordings) from adult researchers, hundreds of pictures of project activities, and collections of art and modeling projects produced by youth and adult researchers were collected. An additional component

included several unsolicited nightly reflections that Cierra contributed.

The nine graduate students and two professors were all active participant-observers, as we worked directly with the youth, while also observing and reflecting on how activities were carried out and what activities our youth co-researchers wanted to take in. We engaged in various literacy activities (ranging from reading stories to using our cell phones in order to research fashion design colleges and food banks). Adult and youth researchers also filmed and audio-recorded over 60 hours of conversations. Additionally, hundreds of pictures of artifacts were taken as we took part in field trips to a local state art museum, a nature center, and science and history museums in a nearby major city.

For the purposes of this study, we focus on Cierra's and Jason's nightly journaling, pictures, audio and video recordings of their conversations, and handicrafts that they made. This is done in order to center Cierra's use of silence and her interpretation of it.

### **Data Analysis and Discussion**

A social constructionist approach to grounded theory (SCGT) (Charmaz, 2008) was used to explore, examine, review, organize, and critique the data in this study. As a methodology that allows for the collection of data with ongoing data analysis and creation of theory in process, a social constructionist grounded theory pushed us, Cierra, Jason, and N'Dyah, to own our positionalities and thus our ways of moving through the world. This acknowledgment meant that we had to admit, as three racialized individuals, that our past experiences with racism, being hypersexualized, and/or adultified impacted our noticing of themes. This is particularly salient because our work was also filtered through a CRT and CSP lens. CRT allowed us to openly acknowledge that



race and racism were driving components of our context, while CSP pushed us to humanize each other and to value and desire to sustain and nourish our cultural knowledges. Charmaz (2008) asserted that

(1) Reality is multiple, processual, and constructed—but constructed under particular conditions; (2) the research process emerges from interaction; (3) it takes into account the *researcher’s positionality, as well as that of the research participants* [emphasis added]; (4) the researcher and researched co-construct the data—data are a product of the research process, not simply observed objects of it. *Researchers are part of the research situation, and their positions, privileges, perspectives, and interactions affect it* [emphasis added]. (p. 402)

Thus, SCGT allowed and compelled us to be honest about how our lived experiences (as filtered through CRT and CSP) and knowledge(s) influenced how and why we noticed certain patterns as we coded. In addition, it permitted us to openly and intentionally center Cierra’s voice. As we worked through the data, this approach pushed us to “pay particular attention to the ways in which language as a social and cultural construction shape[s], distort[es], and structure[s] [our] perceptions of reality” (Patton, 2015, p. 127).

Jason: As a critical scholar, I used a multistep process to sift through the data. I paid particular attention to themes that were related to how Cierra as a Black girl was positioned in hegemonic spaces and how she responded to that positioning. In addition, themes that dealt with how Cierra and I co-constructed knowledge and/or demonstrated solidarity were salient. I transcribed some of the videos and audio recordings manually and using Kaltura; then, I had a certified transcriptionist transcribe the same recordings, as well. This was done to ensure that I had recreated each episode with as much fidelity as

possible. Part of my instruction to the certified transcriptionist was for her to make sure that she accurately recorded Cierra’s intonation and silences. This allowed me to accurately recreate not only what she said, but also to analyze the purposes of her silences in relation to her overall participation. By comparing both transcriptions, I was able to group together segments across both transcripts that touched on the same themes. This allowed me to develop labels that summarized them succinctly (Charmaz, & Belgrave, 2012). Additionally, by comparing the transcripts, I was able to focus on Cierra’s pauses or silences. Afterward, I discussed the transcripts with Cierra and solicited her opinion regarding my interpretation. N’Dyah then reexamined our themes and compared them against the existing literature, looking for similarities and differences.

Some of the early codes were: (a) building of trusting relationships between Jason, Cierra, and select other adults, (b) refusal to participate (e.g., not talking, standing outside the circle, repeated use of cell phone) (c) requests for space to not do traditional reading and writing activities. The initial codes led to the second stage of analysis, a discussion of initial codes with Cierra. Over the course of three different sessions that lasted about an hour each, Jason and Cierra discussed the initial codes. Cierra stated that she did not agree with the label of refusal to participate. She stated that it would be more accurate to state that because she did not feel safe, she decided to “hang back.” This process of triangulation was carried out at three months, six months, and one year. Additionally, at 16 months, through a photo-elicitation interview (Epstein et al., 2006), Cierra and Jason discussed their time together, revisited their previous interpretation of conversations, and reflected on the projects that were co-constructed. In addition, they also expanded on their understanding of how they used various semiotic devices to construct meaning, especially silence. The initial

codes were eventually refined and became using (a) silence to protect self, (b) silence to protect others, and (c) silence as protection from the world to deflect emotional and physical exhaustion. These codes were established with Cierra's help as she felt that they most accurately represented her intentions. The following three themes are presented in the order that Cierra felt was most indicative of why and how she used silence. Additionally, as we, Jason and N'Dyah, examined the data and Cierra's responses to it, we, in conjunction with Cierra, selected examples that showed clear instances of each theme.

### Silence to Protect Self

Jason: The morning of June 19 started just like the previous two weeks at the Art!Youth Institute. The adult researchers met at 9:00 a.m. to talk and plan for the day. We ran through a quick game of Zip, Zap, Zop (Badie, 2014; Leep, 2008) and discussed how to play the Name Game. Afterwards, since this was to be our first meeting with the youth co-researchers, Kurt informed us of the name(s) of the student(s) that we would work with during that two-week period.

Around 9:30 a.m., Kurt went to pick up our new group of youth co-researchers. We heard them before we saw them. As they came down the hall, we heard raised voices and the sound of running feet. Suddenly into the room burst a group of 15 boys and girls who ranged in age from 11 to 14. Most of them were either pushing or playfully hitting someone and talking enthusiastically. Four students, Stan (a rising 9th grader), twin sisters Zania and Zepa (rising 6<sup>th</sup>-grade students), and Cierra (a rising 9<sup>th</sup>-grade student), were not talking. They entered the room, looked around, and sat down at, under, or stood behind a desk. Once our youth co-researchers were in the room, the adult researchers walked around asking them their names, trying to determine who their partners were. I asked several of the girls if they were Cierra before one of them pointed her out to me. As I

approached, I could see her looking me over. Once I arrived by her side, I asked if she was Cierra. She just looked at me and took out her phone. I introduced myself and asked what school she attended and what grade she was in. *Her answer was no answer.* Soon thereafter, one of the university professors announced that we were going to play a theater name game. Everyone would say their name and match it with a movement. I cajoled a very reluctant Cierra to join the group and to stand next to me. As each person said their name and performed an action, she just stood there taking it all in, *silently.* When it was her turn to say her name, she just stood there, *pure silence.*

Lewis (2010, as cited in Spyrou, 2015, p. 9) states that "silence is not neutral or empty." Cierra's silence was definitely not neutral or empty. She was telling us loudly and clearly that she wasn't interested in interacting in this *sanctioned way.* Months later during a follow-up conversation, I asked Cierra why she did not want to say her name during the Name game. She stated:

[Yeah, I didn't say anything] Because, I don't . . . I didn't want to get in it [the Name game] because I didn't know how to play . . . I needed more time with that game, and if I wanted to play it or not. Plus, I didn't know y'all.

This is very much in line with the observations of Blake et al. (2010). They found that the teacher-student relationship with Black girls was of paramount importance in order to provide a safe space for Black girls to share themselves and also as a way of making sure that teachers did not misinterpret their actions as ones of defiance.

Oftentimes, students who exercise silence remain unrecognized and invisible and the reasons behind their silence are unknown by others. However, this act of silence is used often to protect themselves from

**Figure 1***Heart that Cierra made for Jason*

peers and adults (Carter, 2007). This happens in large part because they do not fully trust that others are genuinely invested in who they are and their lived experiences. Silence can be used as protection in an attempt to avoid judgment based on what others may perceive to be their identities (Schultz, 2010). Thus, if Cierra had chosen to engage and share her name and a related motion, she could have possibly opened herself up to harm. She opted for silence instead. As she stated, “I didn’t know y’all.”

Her silence was her way of taking control of the situation and resisting. It wasn’t a physical or even a verbal resistance, yet it was a tangible silence that “spoke” volumes. As Ephratt (2008) stated, “Silence . . . an indirect speech act is, in fact, a case of acting out . . . in that silence is used to activate the other” (p. 1922). Cierra definitely activated others in our group when she decided not to participate. Some of the adults in the group tried to encourage her to participate. Quite a few of the youth participants also tried to encourage her until someone else decided to say her name for her.

Due to Cierra’s identity as a Black girl, her behavior, like that of many other Black girls, was heavily surveilled, especially within the context of schooling (Morris, 2016). Her feeling of initial discomfort with

the game made the choice of employing silence as a protective tool logical. In order to avoid the label of “doing too much” or being “unlady-like,” Cierra chose to employ silence to protect herself from possible judgment from those around her. Often when Black girls actively engage in activities, their actions are not valued in the same ways as they are for white girls. CRT’s tenet of whiteness as property helped us to understand why Black girls’ actions are generally judged more harshly than that of white girls. Thus, Cierra chose to remain silent to protect herself.

As noted in the excerpt from her conversations, Cierra’s silence was used to provide her with additional time to make an executive decision about her participation in the game and ultimately her interactions with her peers and the adults in the room. Cierra used her silence to create a third space, a place where she could go in order to disrupt an activity that she wasn’t comfortable taking part in (Gutiérrez, 2008).

In a separate conversation, Cierra stated:

I don’t like to talk in front of people. I stutter, don’t you understand. I stutter. I get nervous and I stutter. That’s why I don’t want to do any of those games. Why can’t we have books read to us? Why can’t we do something other than those games where you have to talk in front of everyone?

Once again, Cierra’s comments demonstrate that her silence helped her to create a safe space. A third space that she could mentally and even emotionally inhabit until she was ready to directly interact with others. This third space became a place that she could inhabit to disrupt, (re)image, and (re)design how she would interact in different educational spaces.



made months earlier and asked her if she remembered making them with me. She stated that she invented the game because

When I designed the game, I wanted to end camp off with everybody feeling good about their self. And people who felt bad about their self, feel like their self-esteem [can go up] (personal communication, October 17, 2017).

As we continued to talk, I asked her if she remembered not repeating in front of Kurt that I had a husband. At first, she said that she did not remember but a few seconds later she stated:

Oh, he should accept you how you is. It don't matter if you straight or gay. He should accept a person how they is, and who you are. They should accept you if you gay or not. Like, that was wrong. That's like, that's bad, what would you call that? (personal communication, October 17, 2017)

She continued by saying:

It's not none of their business. That's between you and you husband. I mean, if they want to know then they've got to ask you and that's up to you. (personal communication, October 17, 2017)

Cierra's silence was intentional when she interacted with Kurt. It allowed her to push back against a perceived hegemonic norm that discriminates against non-heteronormative behavior. Her silence affirmed our humanizing relationship as she strategically used silence, choosing what (not) to speak on, how to speak, and with whom to speak as a means to protect me (Power-Carter, 2020). Cierra's use of silence demonstrated her agency; it allowed her to take control of different situations by providing or withholding information that she deemed could

maintain a space of safety for herself and those with whom she connected. In order to push back against the expectation of heteronormativity, Cierra paused and chose not to share the information she had about my family structure because she perceived that it could possibly endanger me.

Jason and N'Dyah: Blake et al. (2010) spoke to the importance of teacher-student relationships with Black girls, in particular as it relates to their experiences in schooled spaces. In multiple situations, Cierra was able to purposefully act to protect herself and others with whom she had built community. Her decision to use this form of protection was heavily linked to the relationship that she and Jason had built and continue to build.

### **Silence as Protection from the World**

As a way of infusing explicit literacy practices into our space, we often read books that were related to the theme of community. During the third day of working together, we read the book *Tar Beach* by Ringgold (1991). Protagonist Cassie Longfoot dreamed that she was the owner of the Union building whose guild her father was not allowed to join because his father was not white. As Cierra and I, Jason, talked about the story, another student, Antiere, joined the group. He divulged that in his neighborhood, the police continuously harass his cousins because they are Black. As they spoke, Cierra started to physically distance herself from the conversation. When it was time for her group to depart, she asked if she could take home an audio recorder because she wanted to reflect on their time together. The following excerpt is taken from her recorded reflection:

The book [*Tar Beach*; Ringgold, 1991], it was mostly about the projects and about racism. It was a good book and it relate to people that live in apartments and the projects. And

ummm..... [six-second silence] it was good, it was a.... [two-second silence] was a good book... [four-second silence] and you would have enjoyed it too..... [.....] [eight-second silence] what I didn't like was, was the book talking about racism, I know that happened and back in the day but you still don't have to bring it back up!

She went on to say:

I didn't really think of racism like it was in the book, in that way. I just felt; I don't know. I mean, some teachers they act mean towards to you, to me, because of my color, but I don't know. It probably just me thinking like that. Sometimes if like I asked a teacher what the answer to something is like they are mean to me but help the white kids and they go like eh, you can go find the answer. Or something like that. It bothers me to talk about it. Because I feel like they was treated, I mean, not trying to say this in any race, but I feel like back then white people treated Black people wrong so many times, in so many ways. I mean, everybody could have been treated equally and how people want to be treated, but it seems like they wanted to treat us like trash..... [five-second silence]. I don't like talking about it because I just feel bad about it.

Her thoughts reflected the climate of the summer of 2016. She acknowledged the racism that was prevalent that summer. It was emotionally and

physically exhausting. In one of the follow-up conversations with me, she stated that she left the group when Antiere spoke about how his cousins were targeted because it was just too much. She chose to use her silence to protect herself from that conversation by physically moving. Also, her silences or pauses throughout her recording serve as a way to draw the listener's attention to either what she just stated, or to allow reflection time before she made her next point. Her silence provided her with a way to reflect on, and take respite from, the racism that she faced.

### Conclusion

Black children historically have not been afforded a rich and long-lasting childhood (Boutte & Bryan, 2021). In particular, Black girls have their childhoods regularly cut short. By the time they are six years old, Black girls regularly experience adultification and hypersexualization (Epstein et al., 2017). As Morris (2016) posited, Black girls are not seen as innocent nor as worthy of having their mistakes seen as simply immature errors. If we truly want to create learning environments

that value and sustain young Black girls, we must lean into CSP (Paris & Alim, 2017). This will help us to value all of who they are while we work to combat how they are judged against a white measuring stick or through the white gaze (Yancy, 2008). As we (Cierra, Jason and N'Dyah) reflected upon the purpose of this research project and the conversations that were had between Cierra and Jason, we discovered that only when Jason was willing to listen not only to Cierra's voice but also to her silences were they able to jointly develop a truly humanizing relationship. Through the development

**“If we truly want to create learning environments that value and sustain young Black girls, we must lean into CSP. This will help us to value all of who they are while we work to combat how they are judged against a white measuring stick or through the white gaze.”**

of a humanizing relationship, Jason was able to see, hear, value, validate, and work to sustain the various ways in which Cierra employed silence as a tool to protect herself in schooled environments (e.g., by allowing for extra processing time), to protect those in her community from heteronormative expectations (e.g., by refusing to talk about Jason's husband), and to protect herself emotionally and physically from the stresses of daily racism (e.g., by physically distancing herself from a painful conversation). In addition, by filtering her silences through the lens of whiteness as property, we were able to purposively reject the deficient framing of Cierra's silences. This framing helped us to understand that often teachers are implicitly, and at times explicitly taught to view the silences of Black girls as either an act of rebellion, disrespect, or as a sign of ignorance.

As researchers and teachers, we must listen not only to the voices of young Black girls but also to their silences. Additionally, we must (re)evaluate our assumptions regarding what it means when Black girls, like Cierra, decide not to "talk." This (re)evaluation will help us to recognize silence as an intentional tool of power versus a behavior that requires correction or policing. When we recognize silence as an act of power or a tool that students use to negotiate their learning, this will aid teachers and students in the construction of humanizing interactions. We must come to value Black girls' silences as the rich and meaningful semiotic meaning-making tools that they are... because even no response is indeed a response.

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