

**BECOMING ACTIVIST: COLLABORATIVELY DOCUMENTING THE CRITICAL  
LITERACY PRACTICE OF URBAN YOUTH ORGANIZERS**

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This research study explores the critical literacy praxis of five urban youth organizers. As a literacy study, this research answers two central questions: How do urban youth organizers engage in critical literacy praxis as they become activists? How do urban youth organizers articulate a vision of themselves as activists? Critical literacy praxis is a kind of literacy about structures, structural violence, and power systems that involves engaging in cycles of action and reflection around social and political issues in the lives of learners. The research design takes a hybrid approach to critical discourse analysis through a taxonomy of critical literacy, answering the questions through qualitative interviews that explore polyvocality. Findings from this study offer practical implications for youth activists, literacy educators, social science researchers and community organizers alike. Youth organizing programming, like the Human Rights Activist Project, can offer a generative, safe space within community-based organizations from which to engage young people in critical reflection upon their social and political contexts, to collectively envision and take action for positive change. As a space not congested by external measures of formal education, organizing projects provide an informal youth development platform through which critical literacy learning is more fully realized. The participants of this study all call for further creation of such safe spaces for ethical, intersubjective, social justice youth activism.

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## **1.0 INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW OF STUDY**

### **1.1 INTRODUCTION**

Vaga De Franx: On any given event, when people ask me, “What do you really do?” I say, “Well, we organized for about four months. We connected, we flyer’d our campuses, we talked to people, we tirelessly outreached to professors, we annoyed administration, and annoyed security for months. And we did it with the idea in our minds that there were other students in other campuses who were doing the same and we had an opportunity to secure that community on our campuses because there was somebody on another campus doing the same.”

The work of youth organizing is a collectivist pursuit. In the pages that follow, I guide you on a writerly tour of this literacy research study of urban youth organizers in New York City. As the primary investigator, I am joined in my narration by the five study participants: Vaga De Franx, Gentle Meadows, Green Strawberries, People’s Republic of Mars and Awesome Woman (names for all participants are self-selected pseudonyms). The participants are all alumni of the Human Rights Activist Project (HRAP), a social action-oriented youth organizing program run by Global Kids (GK). All five participants are in their early twenties, come from historically under-resourced New York City neighborhoods and share the context of involvement in HRAP when they were public high school students.

When I first met with each participant to explain my ideas and gauge their interests, one noticeable theme to emerge was the notion of collectivity. Awesome Woman spoke of organizing a student union for all students of color at her university. Vaga De Franx discussed a building a citywide student coalition of activists. Green Strawberries was talking about Occupy Wall Street, People’s Republic of Mars about public health, and Gentle Meadows about community literacy projects and socially just investiture. All of these youth engage in their own communities to push the boundaries of what is possible and forward a human rights platform for justice and peaceable coexistence collectively with others.

I received an Educator Fellowship from Global Kids as a NYC public high school teacher in the mid-2000s. I went to work for the organization as a Senior Educator the following year, at which time I co-facilitated a branch of the Human Rights Activist Project at their partner school in Brooklyn, the High School for Global Citizenship (HSGC). Although I am no longer employed by the organization, I continue to publicly support the work GK does with NYC-based young people and in collaboration with youth internationally.

It is important to note that no participants in this research study attended HSGC. I got to know each of the youth in this study over time, through HRAP citywide happenings at GK headquarters on the East Side of Manhattan and at various leadership events around New York. Thus, their shared background for this research was their involvement in HRAP when they were in various other high schools where the program was facilitated across the city. It is their experience in human rights activism and social justice organizing that made them excellent candidates for participation in this research study.

## **1.2 OVERVIEW OF STUDY**

In the remainder of this first chapter, I provide an overview of the study I conducted, specifying why this study of critical literacy with these youth organizers is significant and timely for thinking about spaces of learning outside of schools. First, I identify the pedagogical and theoretical problem area of critical literacy praxis around which this research is focused. Next, I introduce the topic of youth organizing to contextualize the study in social and intellectual space. Finally, I outline research questions and the organization of the dissertation chapters that follow.

### **1.2.1 Critical Literacy Outside of Schools**

As educational research, this study is about critical literacy. Critical literacy is both a theory and practice of teaching and learning, involving a study of difference, becoming conscious of one's own experience, considering multiple perspectives on social and political topics, and acting to redress inequities, injustices and oppression (Janks, 2013; Lankshear & McLaren, 1993; Morrell, 2007). While critical literacy has been historically theorized within the context of formal education, research shows there are substantial limitations to conducting such overtly political work inside of schools (Beck, 2005; Freesmith, 2006; Luke & Dooley, 2007). As such, this study is designed to understand the function of critical literacy in productive activist spaces where urban youth organize around social justice and human rights.

To do so, I chose to dialogue with these urban youth activists, to study how they discern, dissect, debunk, respect, and create media, artifacts and social actions in response to the operations of injustice that they experience. From local and immediate acts such as campaigning

to combat bullying and police brutality in New York public schools to lobbying against state and federal policies that deny undocumented immigrant youth opportunities to go to college, such youth activism has yet to be purposefully investigated in relation to critically literate practice. With this work, I aim to answer calls of Sherrod (2006) and Blackburn and Clark (2007), to conduct ethical literacy research on sociopolitical activism of youth outside of school.

The notion of the ethical is important in this study and is explored in more detail when discussing research design. Whereas more diagnostic research moralistically judges research participants in the process of categorizing actions and motivations, ethical research is designed to respect the dignity and subjectivity of participants as experts of their experience. This research is significant, in part, because it documents youth critically examining social injustices and inequities in favor of building communities around justice, care and healing.

Leading youth organizing scholar Ginwright (2010a) has written about the function of care in organizing and the role of radical healing in working with urban youth activists. As literacy research, this study adds to understanding about learning in organizing space by analyzing the data to identify ways in which youth engage in critical literacy praxis as they build their subjectivity within their communities. By focusing on critical literacy learning outside of school, this work adds to research of community-based spheres that possess the capacity to educate young people to think ethically, to learn about sociopolitical issues and articulate their activist identities and their positions through organizing actions.

### **1.2.2 Urban Youth Organizing and Activism**

Youth organizing is a relatively new field of research, a hybrid space that is at once academic and activist in terms of both content focus and methodological approaches. Contemporary youth

organizing projects offer a space for both the individual and collective development of civic, activist and other identities. Youth organizing is a field that is worthy of greater attention in relation to urban studies in education because it has been identified as one of the only spaces for urban youth to position themselves as agents of social and political power with skills and tools to exercise that power in their own interest (Ginwright, 2010b).

The phenomenon of youth organizing emerges from a long history of youth activism in the United States (see Bartoletti 1999; Gordon, 2010; Hoose, 2001). Various youth development scholars, sociologists, and urban educators have begun to identify the personal, cultural and social benefits of conducting such work with youth. Scholars including Ginwright and James (2002), Noguera (2003), Fine (1994), Anyon (2005), and numerous others have identified the need for youth leadership through civic engagement learning experiences that challenge archaic notions of civility and verticality. In relation to issues of urban education, these authors have all argued for social inquiry projects with youth that lead to a range of social shifts calibrated toward greater equity and justice.

When youth engage in campaign development, outreach and peer education, they exercise the skills of critical literacy for local civic action, learning about and critically navigating their complex surroundings while building relationships with their peers and adult allies. In the process, youth participants develop skills such as community research, issue development, political analysis, direct action and reflection. By speaking at community meetings, lobbying for public policy initiatives and holding demonstrations, youth engage in advanced leadership and exercise their problem-solving skills on social and political levels. As urban youth organizers identify needs in their communities and articulate their collaborative



vision for social change, they utilize analytic tools and foster critical perspectives that result in a greater sense of civic responsibility (Ginwright, 2003).

The literature on the two topics of youth organizing and critical literacy overlap and intersect in complex ways. As a context for critical education, youth organizing projects take on critical literacy through four central components, where youth: (a) identify community issues for thematic investigation; (b) participate in and conduct social movement history and political education workshops; (c) engage in organizing and media trainings; and (d) participate in campaign development, community outreach, strategic action and intentional reflection. The latest research in relation to youth organizing has demonstrated connections to civic engagement, school-based learning and matriculation to higher education (Christens & Dolan, 2011; Heinz, 2012; Shah 2011). Most recently, Mira (2013) has demonstrated that youth organizing is an ideal model for promoting student engagement. Mira's work demonstrated that when learning pedagogies are simultaneously designed around personal development and community awareness, they enable active engagement of youth around social, political, cultural and economic issues. What still remains unknown are the critically literate practices youth engage with as organizers. The purpose of this research is to fill that gap in the literature.

### **1.3 ASKING RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The two research questions (and related sub-questions) that frame this study guide the theoretical framework and methodological design articulated in the chapters that follow:

1. How do urban youth organizers engage in critical literacy praxis as they become activists?
  - a. What do urban youth organizers read and research to identify issues for activism and

organizing?

b. In what ways do urban youth organizers consume, critique, and respond to texts? How do these literate practices inform their activist work?

c. How do urban youth organizers create texts to support their activism? What kinds of texts do they produce; how do they disseminate their work; to what audience(s); with what purpose(s)?

2. How do urban youth organizers articulate a vision of themselves as activists?

a. How do urban youth organizers define activism? How do these definitions relate to their articulation of their identities as activists?

b. What relationships do urban youth organizers have to the texts and contexts of activism and organizing?

These questions are answered by qualitative interview data. Findings related to each central question are included in the studies of each participant, as well as in the concluding discussion around their collective and divergent approaches to critical literacy praxis. One major finding to emerge is the call for funding of physical contexts where youth activists can come together to create safe space, to learn and build organizing campaigns while building their communities.

The answer to how we “become activists” will, by the end of this study, remain elusive. I am not writing up this study to attempt an absolute codification or classification of the *how* and *why* of activism. Creating such a research write-up would, to a certain extent, violently etch a method or impose a model for replication onto youth organizing. I have no such intention. Such claims to generalizable representations would undermine the very specific, personal and fluid experiences of local activists, such as the alumni of the Human Rights Activist Project

(HRAP) documented in this text. I purposefully resist these moves as ones that colonize and rigidize the nomadic and dialectic acts of activist collaboration.

The only answer I will affirm throughout this study is that the “essence” of what it means to be an activist is importantly unidentifiable. If this was not the case, activism would be nothing more than its own negation, functioning within replicable representative confines of institutionalized knowledge that range from the clinical to the diagnostic. Further, attempting to encapsulate what it means to “act” as “activist” is at once redundant and absurd. In many ways, the identifier of “activist” is but a moniker, a unified identity that is alternately vilified, romanticized, and reproached in mainstream American media and throughout the world.

#### **1.4 ORGANIZATION OF DISSERTATION**

This dissertation is organized into five chapters. Chapter two reviews the literature related to the past, present and future of both critical literacy and youth organizing. Chapter three presents an ethical-political methodological approach to conducting educational research. Chapter four presents descriptive, if fragmented, findings through studies of each participant. Chapter five presents a concluding discussion of critical literacy across participants, locating emergent themes and offering implications for youth, educators, organizers and researchers interested in this work.

## **2.0 REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE**

### **2.1 INTRODUCTION**

The skills involved in youth activist and organizing pursuits support the construction of sociopolitical activist identities through learning processes focused on social action (Watts & Guessous, 2006). Those organizing projects, conceived of across the research as grassroots literacies (Sheridan-Rabideau, 2008), civic practices (O'Donoghue & Kirshner, 2008), or civil literacies (Flanagan & Faison, 2001), frequently involved youth-led decision-making. By working collectively, organizers engage topics of identity politics and challenge the stereotypes of youth, particularly the negative representations of young women, youth of color, queer youth, and other marginalized groups.

Youth organizers engage in an activist model of citizenship guided by variants on the concept of the justice-oriented citizen (Westheimer & Kahne, 1998). Through grassroots organizing, they partner with other community organizers and conduct research with a focus on social responsibility. This method of social inquiry as activism, where individuals collectively organize for education and justice (Oakes & Rogers, 2006), posits the space for the construction of sociopolitical activist identities in youth that support critical literacy practices (Morrell, 2008). The skills exercised when participatory in such projects include working with others to

build consensus through collaborative decision-making, interpreting public problems and taking action, promoting youth efficacy in the process (O'Donoghue & Kirshner, 2008).

I approach literacy learning as an activist educator and researcher. There is a long and interesting (anti)tradition of activist researchers (see Cancian, 1993; Hale, 2006; Naples, 2011). Provenzo, Jr. (2005) called it an activist practice to ask questions that critically interrogate, interpret and contextualize the ways in which people can be empowered and disempowered. He argued that all learners should ask questions about who speaks in a culture, who defines literacy and whose knowledge is included in defining and creating curricula in learning communities.

To extend activist explorations of literacy further, this chapter discusses relevant research on both critical literacy and youth organizing. Generally speaking, the literature on these two topics suggests much for our understanding about activist learning outside of schools. From a survey of the literature across the two areas of study, there are important connections but only limited research on the operations of literacy in the development of youth as activists (see Ardizzone, 2007; Blackburn & Clark, 2008). What is not yet well-defined are the skills and outcomes of this work for future instantiations of organizing projects or for the creation of replicable learning models.

In the pages that follow, I first address the history of critical literacy in theory and in contemporary practice. I move to identify the limitations of critical literacy in classrooms. I conclude by contextualizing the field of urban youth organizing and considering the value of activist research with urban youth as an alternative operation of critical literacy in practice.

## 2.2 LITERATURE ON CRITICAL LITERACY

### 2.2.1 Defining Critical Literacy to Become Critically Literate

In addressing *critical* literacy we are concerned with the extent to which, and the ways in which, actual and possible social practices and conceptions of reading and writing enable human subjects to understand and engage the politics of daily life in the quest for a more truly democratic social order...referring to critical literacy *only* where concerted efforts are being made to understand and practice reading and writing in ways that enhance the quest for democratic emancipation. (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993, p. xix)

Critical literacy is built on exploring personal, sociopolitical, economic, and intellectual border identities. It dictates a politics of location where learners are positioned to operate as “border crossers” (Giroux, 2005). It is also grounded in the ethical imperative to examine the contradictions in society between the meaning of freedom, the demands of social justice, the obligations of citizenship, on the one hand, and the structured silence that permeates incidences of suffering in everyday life. It is a kind of literacy about structures, structural violence, and power systems. Critical literacy uses texts and print skills in ways that enable students to examine the politics of daily life within contemporary society with a view to understanding what it means to locate contradictions within modes of life, theories, and substantive intellectual positions, and to actively seek out such contradiction.

It is important to maintain deferral in defining critical literacy. Since the 1980s, critical literacy theorists have outlined emancipatory theories of learning (Freire & Macedo, 1987) that addressed the complex relations of power, language and oppression through social critique, advocacy, and cultural transformation (Knoblauch & Brannon, 1993). Educational researchers discuss critical literacy as a theory of social practice, as the negotiation of and the creation of meaning in the interest of social justice (Greene, 2008; Nieto, 1999; Provenzo, Jr. 2005). While there is no single model of critical literacy (as there is no single model of youth organizing), the emphasis on Freire's (1970) action-reflection cycle of "praxis" has offered participants a concept through which to construct meanings that support their literacy for civic engagement (Lankshear & McClaren, 1993). Recently, Janks (2010) has echoed the notion of critical literacy as both a shifting skill set and embodied social practice, highlighting the need for learners to engage with multiple cultural values to facilitate more justice-oriented understandings of both self and other.

### **2.2.2 Tracing the Study of Critical Literacy Theory**

Much of the earliest scholarship on critical literacy is based upon Freirian pedagogy. Paulo Freire is the preeminent scholar of critical pedagogy. Freire's text *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) has proven instructive in focusing on political dimensions of experience and initiating social change with "oppressed" persons by identifying structures of oppression in their communities and acting to redress those conditions (see Burbles & Berk, 1999, for discussion). In 1987, Freire and Macedo published their expansive volume on literacy and critical pedagogy. In it, they argued that those who are critically literate can not only understand how meaning is socially constructed within texts, but can also come to understand the political and economic

contexts in which those texts were created and embedded (Freire & Macedo, 1987).

While Freire and Macedo were perhaps the first to initiate a dialogue around the idea of critical literacy in their collection, it was not until 1993 that Lankshear and McLaren issued what was to become the seminal text devoted to the topic. In it, they stated that literacy is more complex than the traditionally defined skills of reading and writing. Rather, they argued that such a traditional definition of literacy is ideologically aligned with particular postures of normative sociopolitical consciousness that are inherently oppressive and exploitative. By contrast, critical literacy emphasized the social construction of reading, writing and text production within political contexts of inequitable economic, cultural, political, and institutional structures. Lankshear and McLaren argued for critically reflective teaching and research agendas in the tradition of Street (1984), focused on both the forms that literate skills take as social practices and the uses to which those skills are employed.

Lankshear and McLaren made a strong distinction between critical literacy and Hirsch's (1988) "cultural literacy," the latter of which dictated a particular corpus of knowledge young people were expected to know to be appropriately informed Americans. Critical literacy seriously challenged this notion of propriety, and warned against such a "colonization of culture" (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993, p. 17). The authors argued that critical literacy is an approach to teaching and learning committed to exploring how and why particular social and cultural groups of persons occupy unequal political positions of access to social structures. Rather than promoting any particular reading of any particular group, critical literacy seeks to interrogate the historical and contemporaneous privileging of and exclusion of groups of people and ideas from mainstream narratives. Throughout their volume, there is a lingering concern for doing critical literacy without falling into a "colonizing logic" or other forms of theoretical



imperialism.

The authors did identify three forms of educational practice that critical literacy can take on, varying by levels of commitment to inquiry and action: liberal education, pluralism, and transformative praxis. Liberal education here means an approach to disciplinary knowledge where intellectual freedom exists and where disparate interpretations are considered, but inevitably contradiction is avoided and rational argumentation within normative structures wins out. In pluralism, there is an emphasis on reading to evaluate principles that support a loose conception of tolerance. Tolerance here is aligned with a notion of diversity that is grounded on benevolence toward those who are not mainstream (and in the process maintains the mainstream). Against these approaches, the authors forwarded “transformative praxis” as that which takes the radical potential of critical literacy into direct emancipatory action in the world. Praxis is here defined through the Freirian (1970) process of naming the conditions of oppression and struggling collectively with others in a cycle of action-reflection-action against such oppression. Lankshear and McLaren argued that a guiding principle behind the processes of transformative critical literacy praxis involves an analysis “attempting to understand how agents working within established structures of power participate in the social construction of literacies, revealing their political implications” (p. 7).

Liberatory pedagogy based on praxis must be reinvented in each new context to prove effective in meeting anti-oppressive goals for learning and community building (Hodgkins, 2008). Critical literacy praxis, which Lankshear and McLaren also called “political and social literacies,” involves textual studies that are analyzed at the discursive level in which the texts were created and in which they are sustained. While the authors understood that this move might lead to such literacies being seen as “potentially subversive,” they forwarded a key

distinction centering on the difference between political indoctrination and the development of a critical consciousness – or what Freire (1970) called “conscientization.” They argued that even when students are introduced to texts that might be considered “reactionary,” a critical literacy approach involves working with them “to understand the nature and implications of the ideologies on parade; and in doing so engage students in reflection upon their own ideological investments” (p. 8). This purpose and direction of critical literacy is important because it illuminates the difference between the moralistic position taking of indoctrination and an ethical approach to reading through a critical consciousness that neither moralizes nor normalizes.

In the early 1990s, McLaren and Lankshear were some of the more radical scholars writing on the topic of critical literacy. Around the same time, Apple (1992) published an essay on “the text and cultural politics” which examined the social legitimation of certain knowledge in schools. Making the argument that “no curriculum is neutral” and that the selection and organization of curricular information is necessarily an ideological process, Apple argued that schools, teachers, and students must study the constructed nature of knowledge about institutions and experiences (whose history and knowledge is included in and replicated by curricular texts and operational contexts) in order to reflectively determine if the school functions as a democratic institution and/or as a site of social control.

Illuminating this struggle in their collection on critical teaching and literacy, Knoblauch and Brannon (1993) outlined four approaches to critical teaching and the idea of literacy learning which spanned: functional literacy and the rhetoric of objectivism; interpretive literacy and the politics of nostalgia; expressivism as a literacy for personal growth; and critical literacy. Of these four central approaches, the authors argued that only critical literacy offered the complexity of a sociopolitical framework which foregrounded the study of “the relationships of

language and power with practical knowledge of how to use language for advocacy, social critique, and cultural transformation” (Knoblauch & Brannon, 1993, p. 152). This made critical literacy distinct amongst a variety of approaches to literacy learning that claimed to address the sociocultural while remaining intentionally distant from the political.

Across their collection, Knoblauch and Brannon echoed Street's (1984) concern that the tyranny of academic literacies can serve to socially reproduce dominant ideologies (racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, xenophobia) that perpetuate forms of injustice. Writing that same year, scholars ranging from Hull (1993) to Comber (1993) were beginning to study the implications for critical literacy learning in schools. Comber (2001) later argued that one of the best ways to approach critical literacy is to begin with multiple sources and opposing views to interrogate their construction by specific individuals with particular (always political) goals.

At the turn of the millennium, just before the 2001 re-authorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) as the controversial No Child Left Behind Act, Janks (2000) posited four possible orientations for future approaches to critical literacy education based on different perspectives on the relationship between language and power: (a) to understand how language maintains social and political forms of domination; (b) to provide access to dominant forms of language without compromising the integrity of non-dominant forms; (c) to promote a diversity which requires attention to the way that uses of language create social identities; and (d) to bring a design perspective that emphasizes the need to use and select from a wide range of available cultural sign systems. Although frequently taken in isolation, Janks argued that it is through the interdependence of these approaches that learners can most fully engage theories and pedagogies of critical literacy.

### **2.2.3 Contemporary Practices of Critical Literacy Research**

Recent scholarship on critical literacy reified the emphasis on understanding the social and historical factors influencing social justices and injustices. Across the last decade of research, five overlapping components have been consistently articulated as “core principles” for cycles of critical literacy (Comber & Simpson, 2001), frequently conceived of as the “transformative elements” in critical literacy pedagogy (Lewison, Flint & Van Sluys, 2002). I have synthesized these concepts from across the literature as: (a) mobilizing learners as social actors with knowledge and skills to disrupt the commonplace; (b) conducting research, analysis and interrogation of multiple viewpoints on an issue; (c) identifying issues focused on sociopolitical realities in the context of the lives of the learners; (d) designing and undertaking actions focused on social justice outside of the classroom; and (e) reflecting upon actions taken and creating vision(s) for future project(s). This taxonomy of critical literacy outlines five tenets that researchers, educators and youth have used across the literature to define their own projects on their own terms.

The major emphasis across various critical literacy projects has been a naming of and a willingness to reflect upon the role that language and texts play in the construction of the self and the social. In practice, researchers and educators have articulated and studied critical literacy in a host of different ways. Petrone and Gibney (2005) drew on the work of critical literacy theorists to articulate a “democratic pedagogy” in American literature classrooms where students investigate and transform their worlds through an inquiry-based examination of culture and society, to consider what is present, what is missing, and what is possible. For Petrone and Gibney, this approach to teaching literature and intertextuality is about “foregrounding historical, cultural, and social issues” in the interest of supporting the development of critical

citizens who seek to expand the possibilities of democratic public life (p. 36). They argued that the English Language Arts curriculum should provide a space for students to deepen their traditional literacy skills while becoming critically skilled “consumers, producers, and distributors of texts and information” (p. 39).

Singer's (2006) text on “writing and reading to change the world” offered a series of stories of justice told through collaborative writing practices. Singer studied students writing about stories of injustice, finding an audience and collaborators while writing themselves into activism. In Singer's study, the youth studied models of expository essays about activists while reading Philip Hoose's (2001) text about the influence of youth throughout the history of the social justice movement in the United States. Writing “toward change,” the students were asked: “what does your activist story teach about movement toward making positive social change?” (Singer, 2006, p. 97). As students designed and executed culminating projects on issues of activism, participants became “consumed with the world outside of the school,” becoming experts in activism as well as experts in research literacy (Singer, 2006, p. 112).

That same year, Borshiem and Petrone (2006) published a study about “teaching the research paper for local action” in which they framed classroom-based learning through a consideration of how students engage in critical literacies through the consumption, production, and distribution of texts. As classroom teachers, the authors introduced a research paper unit that focused on social action locally, providing students with an opportunity to critically investigate their contexts and respond through the production of texts that promote positive social change. Echoing Freire and Macedo (1987), they called for individuals to make “meaningful” observations about their contexts – in this case, their schools. Individually, students were asked to follow a research cycle that followed five steps: (a) develop community-

based topics to learn more about them or seek to change them; (b) conduct primary as well as secondary research, including interviews, observations, and surveys; (c) write a traditional academic research paper; (d) produce a “real” research text (e.g. documentary, newspaper article, etc.); and (e) distribute their text to real audiences to help raise awareness about or change some aspect of their school or community (Borsheim & Petrone, 2006, p. 79). The authors spoke of the commitment, curiosity, and motivation necessary for students to see themselves as researchers who can exact “real” change in their school or community context.

One interesting finding to emerge from this study was that students reported that the research project process was a positive experience that filled the void of traditional research papers in school (lack of voice, purpose, or audience). By identifying issues and constructing research rooted in their everyday lives, the youth remained engaged in a literate process of contextualized inquiry and research. Students secured interviews with executives and political figures in their community, and reported feeling like “real citizens” (p. 82). Borsheim and Petrone also wrote that many positive results were unanticipated, such as shifts in “attitudes, ownership, community involvement, and oral and written communication” (p. 82).

More recently, Phelps (2010) argued that there are uses in applying critical literacy to the non-fiction study of cultural and ideological diversity, focusing particularly on learning about Islam in America. Phelps demonstrated how critical literacy is used to debunk stereotypical and harmful representations by introducing sociopolitical dimensions. By acknowledging that the ideological foundations of knowledge, culture, and identity are always political, Phelps argued that a critical literacy lens helps to reveal the social functions of texts in positioning individuals and groups of people (p. 191). Phelps replicated Cervetti, Pardales and Damico (2001)’s model of critical literacy that disrupted the commonplace to focus on

sociopolitical issues, to develop more nuanced views on complex contemporary topics and take action to promote social justice. Citing the work of Leland, Harste, Ociepka, Lewison and Vasquez (1999), Phelps argued that “doing critical literacy” in classrooms involves guiding learners to ask certain kinds of questions when engaging with any texts, such as: what is the purpose of the text? How does the text try to position the reader? How does the text construct reality? Whose interests are or are not served by the ideas in the text? What worldviews are or are not represented?

There is much to explore in relation to the relevance of the unanticipated in critical literacy research, including a continued interrogation of the definitions of citizenship. Janks (2010) defined critical literacy as multiple, as skill and social practice that is both embodied and shifting. She argued that there is an on-going socio-historical imperative for critical literacy learning that positions identity investment and the constitution of subjectivities within complex, multimodal, intertextual social spaces. She highlighted this notion of critical literacy as both a shifting skill set and embodied social practices that function through the interdependent negotiation of pedagogical domination, diversity, access and design in various learning contexts. This notion raises the question: where can critical literacy praxis be successfully implemented?

#### **2.2.4 Limitations to Critical Literacy Projects in Schools**

In her foreword to Lankshear and McLaren’s (1993) critical text, Maxine Greene called for a pedagogy that emphasized personal and social transformation beyond mere identification with dominant social codes. At that time, Greene (1993) contended that the postmodern emphasis on discourse, textuality, difference, and the structures of power should promote action-oriented

dialogues around problems of oppression, equality and justice. Yet time and again, postmodern scholars and their critics alike have articulated the tragic fault of critical literacy, naming the context of formal schooling as a limitation hindering social action. Although not always true, the overwhelming obstacle to critical literacy in schools has been the failure to put principle to practice and to fully enact models of critical literacy through activist actions in authentic spaces that extend outside of the classroom.

Since its entrance into educational theoretical parlance, critical literacy (like its relative critical theory) has been displaced and dislocated. It has been dismissed as being anything from too pedagogically loose of a model to too politically activist of a model (Freesmith, 2006; Luke & Dooley, 2007). As early as 1999, critical literacy scholars Comber and Nixon noted that literacy practices inside schools primarily function to sustain dominant cultural norms and ideologies. Even Borsheim and Petrone (2006) acknowledged that, “because of the nature of critical research, students are likely to ask questions that some people prefer they not ask about topics that some people prefer they not address” (p. 82). The focus on reflection and the examination of immediate context and internal constructions proved to be the most threatening aspect of critical literacy learning. Even when students considered sociopolitical, cultural, and ideological issues that could lead to possible action steps, they frequently did not take action if they were not explicitly supported to do so (Phelps, 2010).

In search of practical applications of critical literacy despite these critiques, Behrman (2006) conducted a review of the research on classroom practices that support critical literacy. Attempting to identify and locate teaching and learning strategies consistent with critical literacy, Behrman cited an immediate problem: critical literacy is frequently described in the research literature as a theory with practical implication rather than an instructional method.



Arguably, it is both and neither. While Behrman argued that such conceptions lack consistent application, he acknowledged that critical literacy authors such as Luke (2000) have intentionally resisted the development of any narrow methodology that claimed to formulaically enact critical literacy (while nevertheless replicating certain approaches).

Citing the democratizing values of bringing critical literacy from theory into practice, Behrman catalogued a list of common practices, articulated in six broad categories for critical literacy learning tasks: (a) reading supplementary texts; (b) reading multiple texts; (c) reading from a resistant perspective; (d) producing counter-texts; (e) conducting student-choice research projects; and (f) taking social action. Noting that the “social action” projects can produce unsatisfactory results despite the best intentions, Behrman found that the goals of critical literacy (detailed through an emphasis on democratization and social justice in the classroom) are not reflected in the hierarchical relations through which the classroom traditionally functions. As such, he argued that no pedagogy that presumes a hierarchical relationship possesses the capacity to fully support the development of critical literacy praxis.

This classroom-based limitation is named frequently in the research. Beck (2005) wrote in search of a “place” for critical literacy in schools. Locating critical literacy as a movement drawn out of a cultural studies tradition aimed at transforming social inequity, Beck warned against placing issues of power and difference at the foreground of classroom conversations. Connected as it is to the attitude of questioning the social, political, and economic conditions under which texts were constructed, Beck wrote that critical literacy learning involves students examining the reproduction of inequality and injustice, while gaining a critical consciousness to participate in and transform their social worlds. Studying the use of critical literacy learning practices in an all-male maximum-security facility in Canada, Beck concluded that it is not a

good idea to teach critical literacy in settings where silence is encouraged, such as prisons and schools.

While critical literacy has historically been theorized within classroom spaces (Comber & Simpson, 2001; McDaniel, 2006) and researched as a conceptualization of particular operations of curricula inside schools, the central purpose and function of critical literacy praxis had been articulated as an assessment of texts in order to understand, uncover, and/or alter relationships of power and domination with reach outside of formal educational contexts (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Hull, 1993; Morrell, 2004). Yet, despite being theorized as an emancipatory theory of learning, researchers have consistently demonstrated that critical literacy is limited when attempting to take social action within the context of school-based literacy curricula. This points directly to the question: where is critical literacy learning more fully realized?

In 2007, Blackburn and Clark published their collection on “literacy research for political action and social change.” In it, they identified the need to take critical reading and text production outside of the classroom and into activist spaces with youth to engage their immediate needs for social change through political action that is not regulated by school-based interests. The authors argued that future literacy research must engage methodologies that foreground the immediate needs of participants, particularly focused on tackling the connections between the local and the global in literacy research for political action.

### **2.2.5 Lessons on the Activist Elements of Critical Literacy Praxis**

Lankshear and McLaren argued two decades ago that in order to continue conducting critical literacy research, scholars need to conduct research that: has historical function; approaches the process of becoming literate as more than simply becoming rational; takes an oppositional

stance toward privileged groups; seeks means toward political empowerment; supports multiple literacies; and counters the essentialization of difference. The authors argued that the most serious issues confronting literacy researchers was to create and participate in studies that accounted for the subjectivity of individuals while maintaining a fight for social justice:

We must maintain recognition of the materiality of the sign as a product of social forces and relations of power, as a lived embodiment of both oppression and possibility, subordination and emancipation; in the final analysis, we must reject any notion of the human subject which seals itself off from its own history, its own link to the community of multiple selves which surrounds it, its narratives of freedom; to construct a truly critical literacy, we need to make despair less salutary and economic, social, racial, and gender equality politically conceivable and pedagogically possible. (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993, p. 415)

Ernest Morrell is arguably one of the most prominent contemporary critical literacy scholars. Morrell foregrounded his early work (2004) in a cultural studies epistemology where the historical, social, economic, and cultural contexts of individuals and groups are explored. He approached critical literacy practice with an emphasis on situated communities where learning is defined as changing participation in relevant sociocultural activity over a period of time as one is apprenticed into activist practice.

Morrell (2004, 2007, 2008) has emerged as one of the most prolific critical literacy researchers writing today. Across his corpus, he frequently posits critical literacy as a “critical theory of literacy” overtly aimed at social change. Morrell's 2004 study apprenticing youth as critical researchers of popular culture was designed around core components of critical literacy work with youth that would “capture literacy events that demonstrate academic mastery and

critical consciousness” (p. 8). At that time, he designated the tenets of critical literacy as: the ability to challenge existing power relations in texts and to produce new texts that delegitimize these relations; a consciousness of the relationship between the dominant culture's use of language, literacy and social injustice; the ability not only to read words but to read the world into and onto texts and recognize the correlation between the word and the world; and the ability to create political texts that inspire transformative action and conscious reflection (Morrell, 2004, p. 57).

His multiyear critical ethnography focused on the relationship between participation and both academic and critical literacy development through research for social action. The study methodologically engaged students in participatory action research where critical social activist projects were designed with youth to create relevant, new forms of participation for them. He used sociocultural theory to approach the study of situated literacy learning with youth. He also highlighted the importance of using social theory to provide tools for the identification and analysis of hegemonic practices. Grounded in an approach to apprenticeship learning, Morrell's research centered on documenting the movement of a group of high-school aged urban youth from legitimate-peripheral to full participation as critical researchers of popular culture in a community of practice where they began to see themselves as intellectuals, researchers and social activists.

Morrell's research frequently focuses on the ways in which young people come to know and adhere to socially sanctioned ways of speaking and acting without being subsumed into oppressive relations. He argued in his 2004 study that the urban literacy classroom is an ideal context for critical literacy learning that engages students personally and as citizens actively transforming their sociopolitical world. The findings of Morrell's (2004) critical ethnography

demonstrated that critical literacy projects could produce proficiency in academic and other literacies, where student-researchers began to value popular cultural knowledge as well as academic content while developing their skills with the tools of investigation, inquiry, analysis and text production. His project demonstrates the need for the further study of organizing projects geared toward engaging youth as “critical citizens” through critical literacy.

In Blackburn and Clark's (2007) collection, Morrell (2007) discussed critical literacy and popular culture in urban education “toward a pedagogy of access and dissent.” In that essay, he contended that engaging in critical literacy involves the consumption, production, and distribution of print and new media texts by, with, and on behalf of marginalized populations in the interests of naming, exposing, and destabilizing power relations while promoting individual freedom and expression. Importantly, Morrell (2007) said that critical literacy is not only necessary to understanding and navigating the language of power in dominant discourses; it is also central to the capacity to redefine the self and the social space in terms that do not replicate forms of oppression. He has noted, in the tradition of the criticalists, that the only way to come to any sort of useful consensus about the precise definition of critical literacy is to review the working definitions of the term as it has taken shape across the research. Having reviewed such work in the previous pages, the following section extends that line of thinking into the social space of urban youth organizing.

### **2.3 LITERATURE ON YOUTH ORGANIZING**

Recent youth organizing work is expanding the idea of young people engaging in activism. Activism here is understood as one key component to cultural, political and social movements

(Reed, 1981), in relation to which individuals further develop their sociopolitical identities (Watts & Guessous, 2006). By undertaking social activist projects, social-justice oriented youth organizers reframe ideas about civic engagement to consider how power informs civic and community life. In the process, they foster their abilities to understand, question and challenge the subtle relationships between their identities, cultures and politics (Ginwright, 2010b).

In what follows, the context of youth organizing is introduced as a community-based space from within which critical literacy learning takes place. This involves many challenges: first, to define the terms of youth organizing and activism through a post-structuralist approach to questions of and deferral of signification; second, to delineate something of a non-narrative history of past and present activisms and organizing projects; and third, to trace the reach and limitations of youth organizing projects to establish the need for the present study.

### **2.3.1 Tracing Definitions of Activism and Organizing**

Youth organizing is a relatively new field of research, a hybrid space that is activist in content and that actively resists co-optation. Obviously, youth community organizing and social activism have a long history well before either concept was even considered a “field” for study. The history of youth organizing is explored in the subsection that follows. Broadly speaking, the contemporary study of youth organizing is an extension of positive youth development, situated in the crux between traditional youth development, youth leadership and community organizing.

Various approaches to youth organizing work have come out of an integration of community organizing principles (Alinsky, 1971; Reed, 1981) and critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970) into the field of youth development (Camino & Shepherd, 2002; McLaughlin, 2000; Mokwena, et al., 1999). While there is no single definition or model for organizing and activist

projects, there is more involved than simply negotiating cultures of power (Christens & Dolan, 2011). The process of engaging in social justice-based community organizing can generally be understood as a collective response to forms of political, economic, social and cultural forms of marginalization. In youth organizing contexts, young people are conceived of as agents of, not subjects to, change (Ginwright 2010a). They have rights and skills to exercise in the present as they take on roles of community leadership.

As an identifiable group, youth organizers are defined in relation to the work they do to alter unjust and inequitable landscapes by mobilizing campaigns and actions around human rights, social justice, and citizenship. The specific features of youth organizing include many functions that could be simultaneously understood as critically literate practices, such as: (a) the cultivation of habits of community-based participation through (b) the development of a critical consciousness in contexts where youth (c) talk explicitly about their identities and focus on (d) leadership development through (e) civic and literate skill building such as critical thinking, creative problem-solving, public speaking, collaborative planning, critical text production and group dynamics (Warren, Mira & Nikundiwe, 2008).

Youth organize around topics such as employment and labor rights, environmental justice, educational justice, police brutality, and the national poor people's movement. Of course, not all the youth involved in such projects are poor or workers, have been brutalized or experienced educational neglect. By crossing borders of communities with their peers and adult allies, youth organizers frequently explore topics that are historically unaddressed (or even avoided) in schools, from class identities and sexual orientation to immigration status and the operations of local governance. As research show, youth organizing projects promote the most

authentic approaches to systemic change on the youth engagement continuum (see Heinz, 2012).

### **2.3.2 Describing Divergent Histories of Youth Organizing**

The study of youth organizing and activism emerged out of the field of youth development, built on a foundation of an analysis of power and inequity. In organizing programs, such processes are learned through the practice and acquisition of skills necessary to pursue policy and social change, from lobbying and campaigning to taking direct action (Yee, 2008). Predominant conceptualizations of youth organizing have come out of an integration of community organizing principles (Alinsky, 1971; Bobo, Max & Kendall, 2001; Reed, 1981) into positive youth leadership programming (Clary & Rhodes, 2006; Delgado, 2002; Flanagan, Syversten, & Wray-Lake, 2007), and community development initiatives (Irby, Feber, Pittman, Tolman & Yohalem, 2001). Proponents of positive youth development (PYD) came to agree on three basic tenets of youth organizing: society must have a vision for its youth, who grow up in communities (not programs), and thus youth development must address the overall social and political contexts in which development occurs (Ginwright, 2010a). Whereas PYD focuses primarily on the individual, youth organizing places the emphasis on both individual development and social change, where youth work collectively to understand their personal struggles in broader social and political contexts.

Across this multi-faceted sector of research, scholars and organizers have forwarded various models of community-based youth work dedicated to civic engagement and social action, purposefully designing organizing programs that respect the intelligences, leadership abilities, and passions of young people (Listen, 2003). Such social action projects are focused



on youth political empowerment (James & McGillicuddy, 2001) and civic engagement (Flanagan & Faison, 2001). Prior efforts to research youth organizing have focused on identifying components of models that could be used for replication (Flanagan, Syvertsen & Wray-Lake, 2007; Warren, Mira & Nikundiwe, 2008). These studies use critical research frameworks, merging studies of youth community action with sociocultural factors such as youth popular culture (Gonzalez, Rodriguez & Rodriguez-Munez, 2006), antiracist identities (O'Donoghue, 2006), issue-based campaigns (Kwon, 2006), and civic activism (Sherrod, 2006; Torres & Fine, 2006).

As current research demonstrates, youth activists are guided by concepts of participatory democracy and the inclusive awareness of all willing participants within the complex principles and values of social justice (Ardizonne, 2007; Gordon, 2010). This social-justice oriented activist approach to youth leadership and citizenship development offers the learning space for youth to recognize injustice and act on it (Sherrod, 2006). Youth organizing focuses on a direct model for civic action, where action is understood as collaborative, public activities for desired change. Assessing promising models of youth organizing, Ginwright (2010b) called for the development of linkages to the relationship between individual development, neighborhood and community development and its relationship to broader democratic engagement and/or to social development.

Watts and Guessous (2006) argued that a focus on the sociopolitical development of adolescents is overwhelmingly absent from research on youth development, citing the risk that non-profit and governmental organizations face of being charged with political indoctrination and antinationalist sentiments. In particular, certain forms of democratic citizenship and advocacy work with youth are seen as too radical. Yet, as Morrell (2007) wrote, youth-initiated

critical research can serve as a potent tool for advocacy and positive social change in urban contexts. Durand and Lykes (2006) call youth organizing a space that moves from a youth development model of empowerment to one of genuine social solidarity with youth, supporting them in the development of skills to actively advocate, organize, and mobilize on their own behalf and on behalf of their communities.

One major organization conducting research on the current state of youth organizing is the Funders Collaborative on Youth Organizing (FCYO), a collective of researchers, grantmakers and organizing practitioners. In 2010, the FCYO conducted a comprehensive survey of youth organizing groups operating across the United States, producing a field scan report that identified 160 organizations in which adults and youth work collaboratively to create opportunities for community organizing and advocacy (Torres-Fleming, Valdes & Pillai, 2010). A substantial majority of these youth organizing projects focused on urban youth of color and operated within the nonprofit youth development sector. While this sector is not the only context for youth social action and political participation, it suggests that a sustainable space exists for refining future models of youth organizing (Hosang, 2003).

### **2.3.3 Contextualizing Urban Youth Organizing**

Social-justice oriented youth organizing is focused on an intentional exploration of the relationship between young people and grassroots community change, placing issues of justice and equity at the center of youth development work (Ginwright, 2003). In particular, working in urban settings, youth organizing projects address the intersection of race, economics, and geography, forwarding an integrated approach to social change the combines issue-based organizing trainings and actions with leadership development, political education and social

movement histories. Young people in urban contexts often have to negotiate higher concentrations of poverty, disappearing jobs, underfunded schools, and a lack of clean public spaces (Kincheloe, 2006).

Morrell (2004) argued that urban youth, often constrained within academic literacy practices at schools, are uniquely positioned to enact critical literacy praxis outside of school in organizing contexts. Organizing projects provide a rare opportunity for urban youth to consider their rights as adolescents in a democratic society and to take social action to redress injustice and inequity (Ginwright, 2008; Ginwright, Noguera, Cammarota, 2006). Urban educational researcher Anyon (2005) argued for a specific focus on urban youth in the development of sustainable activism and organizing projects. Pointing to the centrality of young people in civil and economic rights struggles historically, Anyon identified the need for public social spaces outside of schools to do this work with youth.

#### **2.3.4 Conducting Activist Research with Urban Youth**

Over the past two decades, urban youth organizing has emerged in educational research as scholars have begun to focus on spaces of learning and positive youth development outside of school. Today, many community-based organizations in urban contexts engage young people in activism around problems defined by the youth themselves. In the process of organizing, they teach critical techniques for research and outreach through social and political activist campaigning. Alongside innovative forms of youth development and popular political education, youth organizing projects have increasingly become incorporated into community-based work with urban adolescent youth. Learning about Learning in Urban Youth Organizing Projects

Across the existing literature on the positive implications for sociopolitical identity development, urban youth have reported that participation in organizing projects contributed to them beginning to value themselves as social and political actors (Ardizzone, 2007; Lewis-Charp, Cao Yu & Soukamneuth, 2006; Sherrod, 2006). Leading youth organizing scholars have demonstrated that when urban youth identify needs in their communities and articulate their collaborative vision for social change, they utilize literate skills and analytic tools that foster critical perspectives which result in a greater sense of civic responsibility (Ginwright, 2003; Haj & Abu, 2009; Warren, Mira & Nikundiwe, 2008). Some common pedagogical components of youth organizing projects include: generative issue development; consensus building; critical media inquiry; community research; political analysis; policy advocacy; protest; direct action; and reflection (Lewis-Charp, Cao-Yu & Soukamneuth, 2006). While these components have not been explicitly identified in relation to the study of literacy, literature on youth organizing consistently demonstrates that youth activists engage in forms of critically literate praxis through continual processes of ideological inquiry, critique and strategic social action (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2007; Larson & Hansen, 2005).

In some ways, this work in youth organizing points toward the necessity of developing a politics and pedagogy of voice that opens up texts to a wider range of meanings and interpretations, while simultaneously constructing student experience as part of a broader discourse of critical citizenship and democracy. Lewis-Charp, Yu, and Soukamneuth (2006) addressed the implications of youth organizing and activism in the development of positive identity formations among urban youth. Their research stated that “critical self-awareness not only helps an individual identify the seeds of her own problems, but also sheds light on dominant discourses that contribute to her marginalization and oppression of others” (p. 23).

Such practices point toward the critical reflection of the self as community member and/or activist.

Researchers have demonstrated that youth organizing is an exemplar space for youth leadership development by training youth to mentor, to peer educate, to conduct research and create critical texts for social action (Delgado & Staples, 2008). Youth organizing holds the potential to serve as an exemplar space for urban youth leadership development, forwarding an advanced form of leadership training where youth are supported to be ethical decision-makers and capacity building community leaders. In a study of urban youth activists engaging in struggles around issues of language privilege, youth voice, and social justice, Ardizzone (2007) wrote that youth reported that their motivation to participate in various social and political action projects within community-based youth development organizations was that they felt they were supported as growing activists, collaboratively involved in the direction, content, and purpose of their learning while affirming their ability to use their voices and actions to design campaigns and projects.

After conducting qualitative case studies of youth in community organizing contexts, O'Donoghue (2006) concluded that community-based organizations can build organizational intentionality around literacy, youth voice, public language, participation in decision making, skills development, and public projects that provide structured opportunities for youth-driven social and political organizing initiatives. Through the processive skills and practices of organizing, youth activists refine their tools and practices for reflexive social and political action. Sherrod (2006) has called for further research and advocacy to explore the role of civic engagement to promote social justice and human rights learning within youth activist projects.

## 2.4 NEED FOR PRESENT STUDY

The 2011 report from FCYO presented some of the most comprehensive mixed-method large-scale research to date on the impacts of youth organizing across the United States (Shah, 2011). Amongst some of its most significant findings, the report showed that involvement in organizing projects helped young people “become engaged in the civic and political life of their communities” through the development of skills of “critical social analysis” alongside a growing sense of agency, “through the belief that they have control over their actions and can make a difference in the world around them” through civic and political action (Shah 2011, p. 11). Importantly, despite the heightened interest and the growing reach of studies into field of urban youth organizing, little research has been conducted to understand the literacy practices utilized by participants as they mobilize themselves as activists and organizers.

This dissertation begins to fill that gap in the literature, demonstrating some ways in which critical literacy learning has been promoted and supported as part of the operation of youth organizing projects in various instantiations. The theory and practices of critical literacy are prevalent throughout the literature on youth organizing although the taxonomy has not been overtly named in the research. At the same time, there are constraints to critical literacy inside of schools based on structural and institutional limitations (Grabill, 2001). The tension between school-based literacy acquisition and critical language awareness (Dozier, Johnston & Rogers, 2006) points toward the need to create and support out-of-school spaces for the development of critical literacy practices. This points to the need for literacy work that counteracts the normalization of inequity and privileging of academic literacy, to engage alternative literacies as powerful everyday practices (Gutiérrez, 2008).

As if in answer to the challenge of conducting critical literacy learning inside school spaces, the field of youth organizing is an exemplar alternative space for critical literacy to be enacted outside of schools. These spaces support youth engagement in activism as a process to make social and political change (Strobel, Osberg & McLaughlin, 2006). In many ways, such activism aligns to the working conceptions of critical literacy praxis that has been outlined throughout this chapter. Specifically, by taking critical reading and text production outside of the classroom and into activist spaces with youth, organizing engages their immediate needs for social and political action (Blackburn & Clark, 2007).

Defining the parameters of critical literacy is intentionally challenging – and is thus well suited for the task of understanding the learning of urban youth organizers without dictating the parameters for future projects. Emerging from these insights, as well as from an ethical and political commitment to democratic and emancipatory forms of educating alongside youth, I foreground the language of social justice organizing as political and historical. In the chapters that follow, I focus on dialogic instantiations of critical literacy praxis that demonstrate critical consciousness, inter-subjective re-imaginings and articulations of becoming activist. In the process, this study fills a void in the literature, bridging the gap between the limitations of critical literacy in classrooms and the lack of literacy research in the context of urban youth organizing.

### **3.0 RESEARCH DESIGN**

#### **3.1 INTRODUCTION**

In this section, I describe the design of this research study. Primarily, this research is a qualitative interview study with five urban youth organizers. I selected the specific participants because of their diverse commitments within the social space of youth human rights activism in and around New York City. As I researched and worked to bridge the social and political with a focus on literacy, I engaged the participants in reflexive dialogue around the forces that pushed them to become personally and politically activist in the multiple cultural communities and issues in their lives.

The goals of this data collection and analysis are four-fold: first, to explore how urban youth organizers engage in critical literacy praxis in their activism and organizing; second, to examine how urban youth organizers articulate their identities as they become activists; third, to consider the implications that the various articulations of participants may have in the further study of youth organizing as an innovative out-of-school space for critical literacy praxis; and perhaps most importantly, to facilitate a dialogue around organizing with activists, educators, and researchers that contributes to greater connectivity and collectivity.

In the pages that follow, I describe the theoretical framework for conducting this study. I detail methods for selecting participants, approaches and limitations to collecting data, methods for analyzing the findings and considerations of research validity.



## 3.2 THEORETICAL FRAMING OF STUDY DESIGN

### 3.2.1 Conducting Ethical-Political Research

Identifying urban youth organizing as the background for this work, it is important to recognize that urban issues are worthy of study by urban youth themselves. The practical application of critical literacy praxis within urban activist spaces allow youth to purposefully negotiate contested authority and construct positive identities, possessing the potential to effect social change. Whether dubbed presumptuous or activist to do so, I take on this study in part to see how this research can support further training of youth activists and organizers with the inter-textual tools to engage in the war of ideas against hubris, prejudice and anti-intellectualism. This is important when thinking about research through a cultural studies epistemology in which to “open up spaces for authentic dialogue, new forms of participation, and curricular projects that are immediately relevant to the lives of urban youth” (Morrell, 2004, p.12).

Ethical-political research respects divergences and does not seek to essentialize participants into easily identifiable categories that treat subjects as objects in need of external diagnosis. “Ethical-political strategy” is a concept that has been applied to much critical social scientific research when foregrounding the subjectivity of research participants in respect for their self-reportage (see Behring, 2013). Leading post-foundational educational researcher Patti Lather defined what is ethical-political as that which does not dictate moral and political propriety, but rather seeks to understand the impetus behind such prescriptive dictates (Lather, 2001).

To conduct ethical-political research, it was important to conceptualize a methodological plan of study created through and reflected upon in dialogue with participants as experts of their

own experience. Since critical literacy is understood in relation to its deferral of definition and youth organizing is a space resistant to academic co-optation, this study is well suited for the consideration and application of methods that do no moralistic harm to the subjects of study.

Following Lather (2001), there is a centrality of praxis, of “research as process” through a critical emancipatory model of reflexivity. This involves a level of what Lather called “undecidability,” a reminder “that moral and political responsibility can only occur in the not knowing, in the not being sure” (Lather 2001, p. 187). Thus the emergent design of this study was greatly influenced by the individual participants. This model of emergent design allowed for research relationships to be developed and sustained through continuous reflexive dialogue on becoming activists, engaging a process built on collaboration.

Thus, as an ethical-political undertaking, this research project was conceived of as an approach to collaborative and participatory research, that provided participants with opportunities to refine research and interview questions, to determine methods of data collection, analysis, explication and representation of findings (Camarota & Fine, 2008). It is an appropriate approach in part because the topics of human rights and social justice take seriously ethical questions. In what follows, I outline my role as researcher in negotiation with the multiple subjects of study before moving to discuss methods for data collection and analysis.

### **3.2.2 Polyvocal Subjectivity and Role as Researcher**

As primary investigator, I aim to be transparent about my bias and my subjectivity. The reason for this is because I defer to the subjectivity of participants; I see my role as researcher as an exploratory one into communities of learners, looking at civic engagement, youth development

and social justice organizing to add support to anti-oppressive struggles alongside youth. I believe it is valuable that these youth engage in human rights activist and social justice organizing, and I seek to understand how and why they do so. Thus, this research was designed, in part, to offer a space for the participants to engage in critical reflection, considering their identities as activists and further positioning themselves as agents of social and political power. This supports calls from across the educational research landscape for social scientific inquiries into youth leadership that is connected to critical civic engagement in out-of-school spaces (see Ginwright & Cammarota, 2007).

Such designs add to understanding about the constitution of subjectivity, looking at the ways in which youth organizers articulate their activist identities as they engage in critical literacy praxis. By working in participatory ways with study participants, I sought to provide a forum for research that simultaneously allowed these youth activists to broadcast their positions and their multiple messages, to counter-narrate, peer-educate and connect with others involved in the same/always different struggles through a polyvocal approach to a politics of difference (Giroux, 2005). Hatch (2002) has characterized such attempts toward polyvocal educational inquiry as an intimation toward post-structuralist research, where research is designed with the contention that truths are multiple, fragmented, and contextual. Undertaking a polyvocal approach involves a series of steps that include: identifying all contributing voices, write a narrative of each selected voice, refine the narrative and revise to best represent each included voice (Hatch, 2002, p. 202).

The design herein proposed is thus an attempt to conduct research that is strategically ethical-political in its reportage of the multiplicity of youth activist voices, understanding the diverse experiences of urban youth organizing through the organizers themselves. While

qualitative research may traditionally tend toward a more holistic analysis, intentionally polyvocal research moves beyond the phenomenological goal of ascertaining “the meaning,” “the structure,” or “the essence” of the experience of participants (Tobin & Davidson, 1990). Polyvocal research considers the various meanings, structures, and constructions of experience, and offers alternate modes of representing findings. Thus, the write up of the study reflects the multiple meanings participants make of their experience while simultaneously analyzing their critically literate praxis as activists. Below, I outline the emergent research design and the actualization of that design in negotiation with participants. I first address sources for data collection and end by discussing steps of analysis.

### **3.3 DATA COLLECTION**

Organizing projects are centered upon the social and political power of participants. As such, I initially aimed to collaboratively co-investigate the aforementioned research questions with five urban youth organizers through a range of qualitative data collection methods during the first half of 2012. In doing so, I sought to explore the ways in which participants constitute their experience as they actively engage in activism and social action projects. In the following section, I describe the selection of the research participants and context of the study. I then describe in greater detail the methods for data collection and the limitations to this approach.

#### **3.3.1 Research Setting and Participants**

The study focused exclusively on a small sample of urban youth activists who were all

participants of Global Kids' Human Rights Activist Project (HRAP) when they were in high school and who are still involved in activist projects at their colleges and/or in their communities. The Human Rights Activist Project is the youth organizing component of Global Kids (GK), a community-based non-profit organization in New York City. HRAP is a program that fuses social action techniques with GK's approach to positive youth development, supporting youth to lead human rights campaigns that impact policy, while equipping them with tools to become lifelong community leaders and activists. HRAP thus provides the historical background from within which this study emerged.

There are numerous other youth organizing projects operating in this city and other urban areas in the Northeast (see Ishihara, 2007; Shah, 2011). I chose HRAP due to my personal experiences as an educator and facilitator in the program, when I observed youth engaging in critical learning while designing social action campaigns. Following Ginwright's (2010b) post-structural ethnography, I aimed to interrogate youth organizing as personal and biographically specific (for both participants and researcher) while challenging assumptions around the essence of easy identifications as activist.

The diversity of participants in HRAP made it an ideal program for sampling a range of activist alumni from across demographic groups. Broadly speaking, the youth who participate in HRAP are racially, ethnically, and socio-economically diverse, and the majority of participants come from New York City neighborhoods and ethnic groups that are largely underrepresented at American universities and in many professional spheres. The majority of participants in the program identify themselves as African American, Latino, South Asian, Middle Eastern, East Asian or Caribbean, and most attend schools with poor attendance and low graduation rates, in under-served and politically marginalized communities (Global Kids, 2011).

The participant sample was selected purposefully to include youth who could understand what Hatch (2002) called the “transformative intent” of research designed to encourage political action. Purposeful sampling is common in qualitative research as researchers push back against the notion of a “representative sample” of any group in favor of selection based on criteria – such as shared characteristics, settings or activities (Maxwell 2005; Patton 1990). While purposeful sampling evokes criticism as lacking objectivity, it can serve to capture heterogeneity in context.

The sample of participants I drew from are individuals who were all members of HRAP when they were in public high schools in NYC, and thus have that shared historical organizational context from which to speak about their past, present, and future instantiations of activism. Specific participants were selected through a process of snowball sampling (Patton, 1990) to access a diverse sample of individuals by ethnicity, race, gender, sexual orientation and religion – reflecting at least a fragment of a cross-section of urban youth activists (Shah, 2011). In order to map the articulation of themselves as activists through the critically literate praxis of organizing, this study employed qualitative data collection methods detailed below.

### **3.3.2 Data Sources**

In the initial design of this study, I aimed to conduct “critical auto/ethnographic research” with these youth organizers. Ethnographically, I designed this research to incorporate interviews, observations and artifact analysis. Due to limitations of access and proximity described in greater detail below, the study was restricted to qualitative interviews. Although this was not the original research design, it matches the caveat of “emergent design” that acknowledged that there could be shifts in the collection of data in negotiation with the participants of the study.

Interviews serve as a potent match for my “critical auto/ethnographic” overture of working alongside youth to have them self-reflectively explore their personal experience in connection to wider meaning.

### *Interviews*

To understand the positions of these urban youth organizers as activists, data was collected predominantly through qualitative interview (Rubin & Rubin, 2005; Seidman, 1998).

Qualitative research with interviews serves to uncover the meaning that subjects ascribe to the structure of their experiences and their perspectives (Hatch, 2002). These interviews achieve the multiple outcomes Lincoln and Guba (1985) propose to answer qualitative research questions: participants explain their motivations and activities in past and present events, self-reporting their emotional and intellectual responses to activist literacies by reconstructing memories, constructing experience and projecting futurity.

Interviews began upon IRB approval and continued through the late summer of 2012. Each interview was semi-structured with ethnographic questions that were descriptive, structural, and contrasting in order to explore emergent themes. The interviews were informal and dialogically responsive to the input of participants. On average, these conversations were approximately sixty to ninety minutes in length, and covered a host of themes around activist learning and organizing. Each interview was tape recorded and transcribed to identify how to further investigate and analyze emergent themes in-depth in future interviews. Following thorough transcription, the audio data was destroyed. Subsequent interview protocols were drafted upon analysis of the first round of interview answers to generatively extend our dialogue based on participant input and organically emergent topics. Over time, I expected that

participants would become better at talking in more sophisticated forms about their experiences. As the researcher is the primary tool of research in qualitative research, I expected too that I would become better at listening to them as the study developed and answers emerged.

### **3.3.3 Limitations**

There are many limitations to this study. The initial design as “critical auto/ethnographic” was proposed to ensure that this research allowed participants many levels of polyvocality.

Conducting observation and artifact analysis aligned with ethnographic overtures to triangulation in order to improve confidence in research reporting (Hatch, 2002). Although I initially worked with participants to plan observations of them in workshops, trainings and campaign development sessions, there were limits to my ability to observe them in their organizing space.

The primary obstacle to conducting observations was around the idea of access. Most of the events in which they organized were in secure spaces within universities and/or within the homes of specific individuals. I spent more time with Vaga De Franx in public organizing spaces than any other participant. Gentle Meadows was outside of the city for much of the study, participating in activist pursuits in the context of closed-door shareholder spaces. People’s Republic of Mars went abroad and was limited to dialoguing when he was occasionally back in New York. Awesome Woman and Green Strawberries were deeply involved in the back channels of organizing, going to undisclosed locations with small groups to organize actions.

As qualitative interviews emerged as the primary data source, analysis of artifacts in the context of activist observation became less necessary. The interviews served as a re-telling and



reconstruction of the experiences of activist work, providing insight to answer the research questions. Dialoguing around approaches to literacy learning and articulations of activism produced rich data for polyvocal write-ups of each participant. While early stages of this design posited these write-ups as “portraits,” social scientific portraiture as designed by Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) lacked the political force to allow for necessarily fragmented stories to be told. Instead, findings are drafted in narrative excerpts that highlight critical literacy practices.

### **3.4 DATA ANALYSIS METHODS**

#### **3.4.1 Description of Data Analysis**

Out of respect for the subjects of research, data was analyzed and coded in cooperation with participants to ensure that criteria for analysis were not overly prescriptive. Creating conclusions in conversation with stakeholders allowed for an important reflective critique. In doing so, participants could further identify, explore, and articulate their positions, their learning and their needs. To do so, participants collaborated throughout the process of research, setting the terms for collecting data and pointing to emergent themes for analysis and conclusion. Despite the shifting outcomes anticipated from the emergent design, the final product included hybrid principles of critical discourse analysis (Rogers et. al, 2005).

Critical discourse analysis is an effective approach to analyzing this data because it employs a social theory in which discourse constructs, represents, and becomes represented by the social world (Fairclough 1989; Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). Attempting to answer questions about relations between language, identity, and society, critical discourse analysis emphasizes

meaning-making as dialectic, socially constructed, interactional, and always situated culturally and historically. Thus, critical discourse analysis can be used as more than a tool of critique, bringing together micro-and macro-analyses of social and political forces. Further, this method of analysis demands reflexivity from the researcher (Chouliaraki & Fairclough 1999), acknowledging the processive nature of constructing meaning around the subjects of the study. Van Dijk (2001) called for critical discourse analysis to take hybrid approaches so as not to authoritatively delimit the experiences and perspectives of participants.

As such, this study hybridizes discourse analysis through Foucault. I take my working definition of discourse from Foucault (1972), who wrote that systems of power, made up of practices, simultaneously offer the space to liberate and constrain subjects. Discussing the parameters of discourse, Foucault (1972) named discursive spaces as the locales from which truth and falsehood are produced and made pertinent. He argued that this space is characterized by the interplay between “a code which rules ways of doing things...and a production of true discourses which serve to found, justify, and provide a reason for these ways of doing things” (Foucault, 1981, 8). This conception is useful in studying the discursive space of youth organizing, where the discourse of activism and organizing is simultaneously outlined and interrogated by asking questions about what is thinkable, speakable and doable in these contexts.

Mouffe’s (1993) post-structuralist political schema of articulation theory is well suited for such discourse analysis of activist youth. Mouffe’s use of articulation theory supports the development of an ontology of democratic citizenship through an analysis of reflexive agency, a will to act, and an ethical ability to make room for the adversary in one’s actions. For Mouffe, the effect of articulation is that the subject invokes her/his identity drawing upon discursive

forms that are always only partial. It is in the inability to fully determine the identities of subjects and practices in terms of a fixed discourse that allows for the engendering of dynamic sociopolitical spaces with greater choice and agency. Nadensan and Elenes (2008) called for research that examines how Mouffe's poststructuralist ontology of society, agency, and citizenship might contribute to more democratic and socially responsible critical pedagogy. In the processes that follow, I take this consideration into the realm of critical literacy study.

### **3.4.2 Process of Data Analysis**

Each of the youth organizers was examined in detail through two distinct stages of a multi-layered critical discourse analysis. The following steps were undertaken in order to systematically organize, review, unpack and analyze the discourse of the youth.

First, an analysis of each interview was conducted through the taxonomy of critical literacy praxis (Comber & Simpson, 2001; Lewison, Flint & Van Sluys, 2002). I organize the language of the participants into five categories in order to code their articulated discourse: (a) mobilizing self as social actor to disrupt the commonplace; (b) conducting research, analysis and interrogation of multiple viewpoints on an issue; (c) identifying issues focused on sociopolitical realities; (d) designing and undertaking actions focused on social justice outside of the classroom; and (e) reflecting upon actions taken and creating vision(s) for future project(s). An initial reading of the data through this framework provided insight into understanding how the elements of critical literacy praxis operate in the subjects' activism, identifying examples of each element as retold through the language of the participants. This analysis answered the first research question, while serving to organize clusters of trajectories for emergent themes and lines of inquiry pursued in subsequent layers of discursive coding.

The second stage included an analysis of how each youth organizer articulated him/herself as activist. Partially, this involved understanding their individual articulation in connection with (or divergence from) emergent themes, actions, and pronounced identifications in relation to organizing and activism. To understand this articulation, I applied Mouffe's (1993) articulation theory as one hybrid element of analysis that accounts for individual subjective identities emerging from and through discursively created social spaces. Analysis through articulation theory involves a process of identifying social meaning, (such as activist identities) where meaning is discursively constituted through the practice of linking relational “elements” (differences) to one another to define them against each other. These elements, which lack meaning in themselves, become meaningful only when articulated by and through a social discourse that enacts transformation into “moments” (of activism) (Mouffe, 1993). Mouffe delineated element from moment to make the point that a particular signifier only achieves significance in the specific social historical context of its discursive production and articulation.

This is true for activism and activists, defined in relation to their engagement in events that are unique to their historical-material moment. This phase of analysis answered the second research question, bringing a polyvocal understanding to the ways in which youth organizers articulate definitions of activism, interactions with the texts and contexts of activism, and visions of themselves as activists. To do so, I searched the collected data for examples of youth using the term ‘activist.’ Of course, spoken identification is not the only mode through which to align and position one’s self within the realm of activism. Still, these moments in the transcribed text provided essential self-definition, defining activism and themselves in relation to such definition. In the end, research questions are answered with the understanding that these (and all) youth are continually becoming, that answers change as sociopolitical contexts do.

### 3.5 TRANSGRESSIVE VALIDITY

To attend to the question of validity and to accommodate the wide variety of responses and interactions with youth, analysis was conducted with participants throughout the course of the study. Each interview transcript was sent to the participant so that he/she could re-read for emergent themes, propose and identify trajectories for further inquiry, and clarify any errors or vague details. After conducting both stages of analysis, participants received a digital copy of all of my write-up. I answered any questions participants had about my analysis via email, Skype, and/or in person. This process continued until all data sets were thoroughly analyzed. These steps were taken to ensure that member checking supported the findings of this reporting (Hatch, 2002). Further, the representational design of the findings was meant to produce the greatest amount of polyvocality and transparency possible.

I use forms of Lather's (2007) catalytic and transgressive validity to triangulate the findings into some illuminating if intentionally inconclusive implications. Lather's own work serves as an example of new directions in qualitative research, and I attempt to follow her path in resisting the commodification of research. Lather's approach to validity in educational research is connected to on-going questions about reportage of findings, of how to ethically represent the many truths of other people in writing. Lather approaches validity through discourse, citing Brizman's (1991) contention that discourse "words the world." Considering validity in the context of a methodological site of authority, Lather offers a counter-practice of "transgressive validity" that: "foregrounds the insufficiencies of language," "gestures toward the problematics of representation," "fosters difference and heterogeneity," "supplements and exceeds the stable and the permanent," "embodies a situated, partial, positioned, explicit tentativeness," and brings ethics and epistemology together" (Lather, 2007, p. 128-129).

The lack of finality and conclusivity does not, however, negate the truth of the self-engendered articulation of the participants. The final product of study meets Van Maanen's (1988) characterization of post-structuralist research as that which reports polyvocal truths through multiple voices. In the end, this a text that represents the multiplicity of ways that urban youth organizers engage in critical literacy praxis as they articulate themselves as activists. Beyond that, the proof is in the people.

## 4.0 FINDINGS

In what follows, I map out the trajectories of the five individual youth organizers becoming activist, focusing particularly on the critical literacy praxis through which they engage in the work of activism and organizing. Data collected from each participant was organized first through the taxonomy of critical literacy. The five categories of this taxonomy are provided with varying sub-section titles to reflect the differing themes that emerged in dialogue with each participant. The data from the interviews was coded through this taxonomy and excerpts selected that best fit the realm of these categories while offering polyvocal organizing insights.

Following this taxonomical approach to exploring their critical literacy through their discourse of activism, I include the framing of their experience in terms of their articulation of their activist identities. This consideration of articulation is key to understanding participants in relation to their organizing actions, to the elements of their temporal experiences in moments of activist discourse spaces. As self-reportage was key in keeping with the ethical-political schema of this study, participants are quoted at length to support the notion, well matched for research that is built around transgressive validity (Lather, 2007), that there is value in letting the data speak for itself (Gould, 1981). I begin with Vaga de Franx and take a non-narrative tour through our discursive exchanges, using interview dialogue data to guide our understandings. I repeat this cycle with Gentle Meadows, Green Strawberries, People's Republic of Mars and Awesome Woman.

## **4.1 VAGA DE FRANX**

Before I began this study, I spoke to some Global Kids staff and snowball sampled suggestions as to which youth activists might be interested in participating in the study. In nearly all of my conversations, Vaga De Franx came up. Although she and I didn't know each other particularly well, I was fortunate early on when I approached her that she was so eager, insightful and willing to participate. I came to learn it was emblematic of her spirit as an organizer and an activist. Her passion, commitment and deep sense of care and concern came out during the course of our work together in ways that my research writing could never begin to encapsulate.

Vaga De Franx is an undocumented student and community organizer. In each of our meetings, she accentuated the importance of local organizing and talked about understanding relevant space for activism in our immediate lives. She was attending a university in the city during the time of the study. Tuition increases had complicated her enrollment plans for the following school year, and she was actively protesting the hikes.

### **4.1.1 Mobilizing Self as a Social Actor to Disrupt the Common Place**

In her day-to-day, Vaga De Franx seeks out information about current social justice struggles, questioning moments and operations of oppression. During our first interview in early spring of 2012, she talked to me about her approach to understanding history and current events, seeking out multiple perspectives in the media and using mainstream media against itself:



VDF: Democracy Now! I think is a big one and a lot of activists know about it. It is its own independent news media. And I think that what a lot of activists do is – well, have very little faith in mainstream media. We use media. Like, if we are on the Internet, we see an article and we almost use it to prove our point of what the media wants us to think, what the media wants us to believe, and why they want us to believe that.

Here she uses mainstream media in ways that force a meta-critique of its underlying messages. She engaged in the same critique as she discussed her thoughts about the New York Times. She recognized that despite the level of professionalism and expertise in the paper, there were problems with what they reported, how they reported, what they leave out and how one is expected to perceive their articles. She used the example of their reporting on illegal weapons trade in Mexico and how it shaped messages to United States citizens about Mexicans as the sole, violent perpetrators of the “War on Drugs.” Here she offered alternative ways of understanding the material conditions surrounding US-Mexico relations, a topic that was very personal to her as an activist. This topic of borders was one I wished to explore further, but she interrupted her own critique of mainstream media to discuss another important information medium in her learning: books.

VDF: Your question before was where do you get your information from, and I think books. Because even in the university, a lot of my fellow student organizers, you know – the class structure is there and you have to go to class. But in terms of really learning, I don’t think any of us look at a textbook and think, “This is what I’m learning.” It’s more like, independent books and who is publishing these? What press is publishing these? Which is something that I never worried about until now. I need to see who is feeding me this information. So when you see that it is this publishing company who has also

published Howard Zinn, then I know I can rely on this information and I'm pretty sure that I want to read this perspective. A lot of things happen to be around Marx, and analyzing Marx, and you know – you don't have to read Kapital (laughing) to think Marx is right. That is another thing, in our generation, people reading Marx and you know, they say, "I'm not a communist, not a socialist." But there are smaller books and they give you a better perspective. You know, feminist issues. The Communion is a great book on patriarchy and the way that relationships work.

Her discussion of independent books and publishers raised questions about the purveyors of media, illustrating the knowledge and skills she has in the present to seek out perspectives that will add complexity to her learning. She asked questions about textual intentions and the positions of writers, readers, and distributors. Implicit in her referencing of Howard Zinn is the acknowledgment of his work as a progressive scholar and a "people's historian" whose legacy is connected to publishing alternate ways of seeing, telling and constructing history. I knew what she meant, too. I have a series of presses whose reputations precede them in my quest for inventive writing around cultural theory and activism: Semiotext(e), the AK Press, PM Press, Haymarket and Seven Stories immediately come to mind.

She took this discussion into the issues she organizes around the most: educational equality, immigrant rights, Stop and Frisk and other forms of "racist police brutality." She also went into an extended aside about environmentalism and the internal struggles of meta-cognitive activism and activists in making small moves toward sustainability. I asked her how she thought people should learn the history they don't know or don't understand in a quest for informed social justice actions to happen:

VDF: Peer education. Study groups. Being able to, sometimes when I read a book, I get influenced by the writer and I - sometimes even asking the most critical questions, you sometimes can't analyze a book objectively and compare it to other people's ideas or just reality, you know. So, being able to read within a study group and talk about it, it helps so much. It doesn't allow you to just get caught up in that writer's work. It really, like – talking about feminist theory with men has been the most informative thing I have ever been through. Because, as a woman, I am reading the book and I'm just like yes, yes, yes, that's exactly what I go through. And the feminist writer will give me an analysis of why men suck. And why this and why that. And then it's just like, men suck, men suck. And then I talk to a man who is my friend and I'm like, well - you don't suck. (laughs) But you have these ideals too. So, being able to talk about that. That's the best way. That's really the only way, to me.

This emphasis on dialogue is a topic that emerges time and again in conversation with the participants. Vaga De Franx highlights how essential it is to share in making sense of ideas and frameworks, to include disparate voices in order to gain a more just and measured perspective.

#### **4.1.2 Considering Multiple Viewpoints**

The examples above illustrate Vaga De Franx mobilizing herself as a social actor. Her consideration of the complex perspectives and viewpoints associated with some activist critiques ring out from her uses of media and her call for peer study and shared dialogues around books and histories. Whether interrogating the underlying messages on chauvinism or feminism, there is a way in which Vaga De Franx questioning the intentions of a feminist writer is a form of activist queering. In her organizing and activism, she challenges overly moralistic

positions while working to include subordinate groups into her reading and her dialogues. In doing so, she seeks to include a diverse range of individuals to participate in actions promoting alternate ways of seeing these same groups. This is as much about including silenced/marginalized voices as it is educating with and about them. I asked her where she got all of this knowledge around issues of identity and community organizing. She affirmed her earlier sentiments, stating that it was through peer education and lots of recommended reading:

VDF: I think that a lot of it has been peer knowledge. Most of it really. When I was not in Global Kids, I got all of this organizing training from other community organizations. I remember going to FIERCE and doing a workshop on race and racism within institutions. And then going to SBU (Sisters and Brothers United) in the Bronx who did workshops on educational justice and campaign development. So I got all of this organizing training, and how great to do that. How to educate your community, how to treat each other better, what the issues are, how to teach others, and then I didn't necessarily build up my ideology.

What I realized in Students United is that is where I developed my ideology. I was practicing the ideology of what was there. You know, when you work with a social justice organization, a non-profit, even if they are not pushing an ideology on you, naturally, what you see in your community, the issues you see and why they come about and how to solve them, through the experience you start building certain values or certain ideologies of how things should be or why these things aren't working. And then you go off to college and you read Marx and you're like, "Oh, there you go." [EB & VDF laugh]. I'm living it and I didn't even know it for the past few years.

So a lot of it was training but then I read Marx, people are always surprised that I didn't read the Communist Manifesto until a few years ago. I read it and it makes so much sense. To me, I practiced before I even knew. A lot of it is just stuff that people recommend to me. We were talking about reform or revolution and I met people from Hunter [College] who said, "Well, you should read Rosa Luxemburg" because she talks about this issue and she talks about that issue. But you know, for example, the book that influenced me a lot over the last few months is called Wobblies and Zapatistas. It is kind of a study of, a form of interview, with an activist who was a labor organizer and an anti-war organizer and warrior. And he talks about different movements in history, like the Zapatistas in Mexico and what all of these movements have in common and the ideology behind it. Like anarchism versus Marxism, you know, and class struggle and all of these things that people encounter when they organize. And he talks about how people educate each other, you know. And how the influences of organizing take place. So that's a good book, and I really like that. So mostly, like that.

Here she talked about Leftist literature, history and theory, privileging counter-narrative and harnessing the power of the sociopolitical to foreground ideas of difference and shared ideology. We spoke in greater detail about the multiple perspectives explored through the interactive learning that happens in youth organizing workshops. In doing so, we talked about how workshops and learning function in spaces of anti-oppressive organizing with youth.

EB: The workshops are very fascinating to me, in terms of going back to the basics. Because when you talked about GK and other organizations the last time we talked, you said something about how learning that then allowed you to do what you do now. In terms of, maybe it wasn't the most radical, or adventurous type of learning or training,

but it was like the basics of organizing training. Because you talk about the workshops now with the people who need it –

VDF: It's funny because out of all the student organizers that I have met, everybody always says that I am the most neutral. And that I am the most non-sectarian. And I really am the least sectarian organizer that I have come across. And that is because the workshops that I learned and went through and the skills I learned from Global Kids and other organizations really allowed me to develop that patience and that understanding and that ability to break things down, to break information down, you know, to listen to experiences and analyze them. And really look past all of that theory and personal.

The ethical learning involved in this workshop space is striking in terms of critical literacy, mobilizing self and others as actors with skills to understand and plan actions on sociopolitical issues around identity and community. I asked her for more detail about running workshops, and she named essential differences between workshops and other, more stifling forms of educating. She also highlights crucial challenges involved in creating peaceable learning environments:

VDF: You know, when you do a workshop, you have your audience, and you have this shitload of information that you are supposed to cram into their brains in 45 minutes. And the way of learning within workshops is completely different than learning within an institution, and completely different from just the organizing that we have been doing. But a workshop – you get in there and it's most often times a circle. You can see everybody's face and everybody is most likely looking at each other. And you give information in an interactive way. And almost in a very basic physical and entertaining way. You don't ask your audience to list for you the number of socialist leaders in

Soviet Russia. You ask them – what do they think socialism is? You know, very basic questions. And it really makes people question themselves and not get patronizing. It really means they are going along with the workshop and they are learning with everyone. And we have that safe space that allows everyone to not feel self-conscious about their lack of theory or their – how much they know. And so when I am in groups, or in meetings, I can do that with people. And we had a lot of problems because people don't know how to do that. People who are plugged into the student movement but don't even know what safe space is. And are fighting for social justice and practicing a theory that is all about justice and equality – but yet they don't know what safe space is. And they don't realize how important it is to always implement it. So we held a workshop last week on safe space and it was the first time we had ever done that.

She went into a long aside explaining how to conduct a safe space workshop. She referenced safe space quite frequently around issues of learning and healing, and talked about it in great detail across our conversations. There is a sense in which she questions everyday experiences in this form of activist organizing, teaching participants to defer their judgment and seek out multiple perspectives. She highlighted the importance of community in this type of learning, and creating a shared physical space for understanding within a local organizing setting.

As we explored the connections outside of the local, I made a point of asking Vaga De Franx what she thought we had to learn from global student movements outside of the United States. She had spoken previously about movements in Chile, Quebec, Mexico and Columbia.

EB: Everybody who is involved in this study is in the United States. All US-based organizers and activists. So what do you think we are supposed to learn from some of these other global student movements that you have been checking into recently? Like,

you probably know more about Quebec than anyone else I am talking to right now. And some of these other places too. Just in terms of – maybe the tools and skills of trying to build a movement. What are you learning from Quebec? Or from Chile?

VDF: Definitely that, you know, being able to nationally build that national force is definitely – but in terms of legislation and government and their relationship to government is that these groups have really brought up their own ideas. At this point, they're not saying this is what's wrong, fix it. They're saying this is what's wrong and this is what we want from our government and that's it. No excuses. No justifications. No asking. No pleading. No. It's come to a point where this is just not working for us, here is what we want. We are not asking. And for me, it's like – back in the fall, I remember saying at an interview, saying – or in defending Occupy Wall Street for example. Well the reason that they make no demands is because that is not our job. Our job is to be citizens. The government's job is to come up with the solutions. And now, looking back at that, I retract completely. Because what I have learned from all of these student movements is that, sometimes you can lose your faith in institutions, and justifiably so.

This critique of institutional authority resonates throughout these dialogues with Vaga De Franx. She shared experiences and observations of oppressive conditions and the struggle against apathetic and unreachable administrators. She continues to discuss how she learned to focus efforts on direct actions:

VDF: For them, it's come to a point where that's it. This is not working. We want public education and we want it to be free and we want all of our friends to be able to achieve going to higher education institutions. And we want resources from our university to be



given to our communities and this is how we want that to happen. And this is what we want democracy to look like. Not this democracy that you are preaching and not the democracy that is set up, but the one that we want. And they lay out these very sophisticated platforms that are their platforms. And they are so sophisticated and serious and just incredible that students came together to write this out and plan this out and envision it and put it on paper and then own it and say this is what we have come up with and this is what is going to happen. It's not a question. It's not a plea. This is what's going to happen. And to me, that's so powerful. That's so incredibly powerful. And these governments don't acknowledge it but that's where all of the sudden, mobilizing thousands of students and having them storm the institutions, the buildings, occupying, all of these things, all of a sudden government has to acknowledge them. And all of a sudden, government has to acknowledge this platform as a serious platform. And all of a sudden, they have to decide whether to say yes to it or no to it. But either way – The power is still the students. Whether the government says no at this point is no longer – it will only strengthen them. I've seen that in the Mexican student movement, which has completely erupted almost out of nowhere. But at the same time, we see that here because we are not in Mexico. But these things have been organized for years.

She discussed the strength involved in drafting popular information and proposals, creating shared visions with other activists. She also talked about institutional recognition, that acknowledgment that comes following the physical occupation of a space or similar direct actions. It is clear that she mobilizes student activists despite and in spite of institutions.

VDF: What happens with a lot of these student movements, and Occupy Wall Street is that – everybody thinks that it was just spontaneous. The people that were involved have

been organizers for years. The people who were involved look at Occupy Wall Street as that one-year project. You know? That foreshadowed other projects. But, we see it as spontaneous and out of nowhere. But at least in the Mexican student movement, it was sparked mostly by the elections and them just being so critical of the electoral system and the corruption within the elections and within the candidates. The complete hijacking of the media and the media is so corrupted and does not in any way actually televise any kind of reality that these Mexicans feel is their reality. And they have come up with the evolution of the IFE, which is the elections committee – they want the abolition of it. They don't trust it. They don't want it reformed. They just don't want it. And they've come up with their own institutions of holding elections. And that's what they want. And you have seen this amount of mobilizing and organizing of ideas and they built a student union. But they are there and they have those conditions. And later on, they are going to have to include the workers and move onto a bigger issue, or whatever it is. But, it's happening for them. And they are that critical of the state. And they become such a powerful force that, that's what we have learned here. You can't plead, you can't ask, you just have to demand it at some point. So, we do need demands. I have completely retracted from that statement, back then.

EB: Is that where Chile and Quebec and other student movements come in?

VDF: Yes, but even within Quebec their student union still does not include racial minorities too much. We have seen that a lot. In Chile, they haven't been able to communicate with lower class students as well, so we've learned about that. And I think at least in New York City, the demographic is so different than these countries that we have to analyze their structures but at the end of the day know that we need it to work

for the United States and for New York City and how do we do that? And I think even within our clubs and within our organization, we have seen what works and what doesn't work.

Through her connections to international organizing she acknowledged the value of learning from other activist groups, while highlighting the local differences. In doing so, she demonstrated great dexterity, moving from the macro to the micro-political, addressing global issues and bringing our dialogue always back to the personal.

#### **4.1.3 Focusing on the Sociopolitical**

For Vaga De Franx, her activist work is grounded in her commitment to community. She talks about emphasizing the social element of activism to understand the connections between the personal and the political. In particular, she highlights the importance of focusing on the social and the political when organizing around any activist issues.

VDF: I guess the one thing that for me makes you an activist is being active in your community or society. But there has to be a political reason or a social justice reason for you to do what you are doing. So if you become a vegetarian because you personally want to be healthy, that might not necessarily be an activist thing to do. Whereas, if you become a vegetarian because you believe that the meat industry or the way that our society produces or overproduces meat – or in third world countries how there isn't a large supply of food, then even though that's a personal choice, to me that is activism to a certain extent... You're doing it consciously for a political or social reason that is not for your benefit alone. Now, I guess that to me that is what makes you an activist. But then there is also – is it just you becoming a vegetarian or is it part of a larger, you

know, movement where people are planning on going vegetarian together. I think that there are different levels of activism, but to me as long as you are doing it for a political or social cause, and you're conscious of that, then you're being active and you're an activist.

She understands the connections across and between identities and ideologies in her discussion of organizing social movements around political issues. She explains the role of theory and practice in her current work organizing, and discusses the choice of Students United to remaining politically un-affiliated.

EB: Where does ideology fit into actual radical struggle and practice?

VDF: I think that has always been an issue with movements. How do you move from theory to practice? And I think, like Wobblies and Zapatistas, what you see now is revisiting that theory and – especially with anarchism and socialism, which is what it argues – anarchism is all about practice, and socialism is all about theory, but putting theory into practice. But you've never seen societies actually reach communist or even the ideal socialist society. So building that bridge, I think, is extremely useful.

EB: Especially with something like Students United. It's fascinating to me. And, although I don't know the history, of NYSRT or all of it, but certainly some of this comes from Marxist roots and some of it comes from anarchist roots. And it comes from different places, so...

VDF: Choosing to remain – because everyone has the right political line – so choosing to remain and be a student group that doesn't have a set political line, that has kept us from being sectarian in many ways.

EB: That makes sense.

VDF: But at the same time, there are things that are socialist in nature in theory and we are really learning a balance, even within our structure. We have centralization, we have core people, we have representatives that have one vote, or two votes. We have consensus, because consensus is set so that everybody has to agree. We have votes. Those representatives have to represent their campuses, you know. But we still have campus autonomy, so each campus can do what they need without having to come back to a central committee or something.

I asked her to talk more about her thoughts on local action as she reflected on the work she does now and the work she will continue into the future. I was curious about her sense of accomplishment and success related to local projects, and if she envisioned herself continuing to organize around the issues she engages with now.

EB: You talked a lot before about the local. And I asked you about national movements and global connections. It seems like it is easier to see changes happen locally, which is one reason that the local is very beneficial. You talked about some of the bigger protest movements as being momentum – just to kind of keep work going. Part of what you are talking about, like the commitment to do this work, as you say – it comes from necessity, right? But when we talked, you said the top two issues you were working on basically were educational and immigration rights issues. And that does sound really person, so I started to wonder – when you leave college, do you think that it will still be educational issues? Or do you think that you will grow into other facets of activism that are maybe also personal?

VDF: No. You know, I think that I'm always going to be involved in education because students are always going to be in a pivotal role. That's not just because I'm in that age

group and we're pivotal. They've always been pivotal. And they've always – you can't keep them isolated. It has to be accessible to everyone, education. You know, even as a worker, if I were to move on and become a worker or a mother or whatever, it still affects me. If we're talking about saving public education, and rebuilding it, and really making it public, then it's an education that is going to be accessible to the community. It's not just about resources, but it's about being able to make decisions about it. Yeah, resources. Having community spaces. Having the university serve as that. It's going to be important, whether I'm a worker or a senior citizen. It's something that hasn't changed at all. So I'm always going to be tied to education. It is just such a vital part of our society, especially higher education, I can't see myself as not being a part of that.

She challenges power and the language of power in her discussion about making demands locally, and her particular focus on higher education is a complex tension around institutional agitation, acknowledgement, and silencing. Much of our conversation, as well as my observations of her activism, related to reports and experiences of injustice within the university setting.

#### **4.1.4 Taking Action**

The bulk of our exchanges were related to the topic of action. Vaga De Franx spoke in our first interview about positioning herself and her learning within the context of youth development organizations. This related to our conversation about understanding ideology and deciding to participate in certain forms of direct action. GK and other youth organizations had taught her to consider her point of view, “how to relate to the community, what is community, you know all of these ways of relating to everyone and working on these issues in a holistic way.” She

suggested that the world of community-based organizations did not tend to be too politically adventurous or daring. “But it was so good. I can do what I do now because of that, you know.” She’s been working with Students United and NYSRT since then. In identifying these varied levels of activism, she tapped into emergent themes around engaging in social action within institutions of higher learning. On her current organizing and activism, she said:

VDF: I think it is the most adventurous and most exciting work that I have done...It really is self organizing and the fact that we are doing it without salaries or a boss or – it’s literally us – it gives it a sense of accountability. It is far more; it is stronger to me in that setting. Just seeing the way that students work within institutions like the university has been such a learning experience for me.

She demonstrated a commitment to activism that makes it seem as though she has always been doing this work. She talked about the movement from spectator to actor not only for herself, but for those working around her in Occupy Wall Street and the Free CUNY movement. She noted that even when a social movement shifts or changes, the power and skills developed can be taken forward and reinvented in other locales. She provides a snapshot of one particular friend of hers. He had only recently joined up with Occupy before the NYPD shut down Zuccotti Park.

VDF: And one of the things I’ve always thought was, once an activist, always an activist. You know? You can’t just turn off that button. And now that he does not have Zuccotti Park, he can’t go back to there but he has something that now he just can’t let go of. And now he is organizing on campus, and now we’re building that sense of community. And everybody is doing that, you know. Occupy Brooklyn, Occupy Baruch, Occupy the Bronx, you know. At the same time, the way that Occupy Wall Street unified labor unions, community organizations, it also built this other group of people

who have never been active like this. And now, we have those people plugging back into those communities and joining up with these organizations, and helping these organizations. And, to me what is amazing is that Occupy has helped these organizations and these organizations have helped Occupy. There is a feeding off of each other type of thing and if there is a big encounter, it is going to happen and it is going to be huge and people are going to see that what they are doing locally is going to come together and show something. So I'm not too worried. People are really worried and disappointed, kind of just like "Is it dead? Is it gone?" But I think that in the years of organizing that I've done, it doesn't worry me too much. I feel like there is a natural process of organizing what is going on. It's very organic in a way. People are going back to their communities, organizing there, and naturally they are going to want that big encounter... whatever it is, we are going to need that because we all need the reassurance that if you plan a big protest, everyone is going to show up in solidarity.

There is a deep sense of reflection in Vaga De Franx, with goals of community building. In the process of planning and participating in actions, from sit-ins to teach-ins and rallies, she changes the existing discourse around her. She talked about her experience with "Bloombergville" at City Hall where she camped out on and off for three weeks during the summer of 2011. She discussed it as a counter-space from which to position herself, a vantage from which to initially respond to Bloomberg's budget cuts.

The main forms of organizing that went on at Bloombergville were through General Assemblies and consensus-based decision-making: "It was basically like a mini-Occupy because we were smaller in numbers and the media blackout made it like we did not even exist. Bloomberg started to evict us, and he did so easily." Shortly thereafter, Adbusters released the



call to Occupy Wall Street that went viral across the Internet. Vaga De Franx talks about this distinction. She remembers the feeling that there was a personal connection with Bloombergville versus the form of Internet-based organizing in the nascent days of Occupy:

VDF: So we would make decisions based on how to handle food, how to handle security, how to handle all of these things – but as far as demands, we couldn't make decisions on where we were going to go, or what demands we needed to solidify, because we did not know how many people were going to show up.

September 17th arrived and Occupy set off. Working groups were put in place to take care of the aspects of gathering services and supplies. General Assemblies took over as the main organizing tool: “Even organizing a general assembly of that scale was something that we figured out in the process.” She equated this balance to the essential questions of reform or revolution, planning or spontaneity. “Occupy was a weird hybrid of both,” she said of Occupy's embrace of competing narratives and creation of public counter-space. Here she highlighted the complexity of horizontal organizing within a massive economic and social justice movement, where, by definition, a multiplicity of relevant issues defies any guise of unification. She went on to talk critiques of Occupy and a vision for future organizing.

#### **4.1.5 Reflection for Futurity**

As we turned to talk about the future, she reflected on her past and the lessons she learned as an organizer and an activist with Occupy Wall Street:

VDF: I think that, you know, we knew that when the winter hit, it was going to be hard. You're talking about an outside encampment, you're talking people's health, about being responsible for that, so obviously it thinned out and people dissipated a little bit,

but I still see people in the subway who are wearing Occupy Wall St t-shirts and you just know. And when you asked me before - what is better, the local organizing or these big encounters? I think that the big encounters and the general assemblies, it builds momentum.

She noted the continued restlessness despite the lack of a location for the movement, pointing to the need for a counter-space where organizing for economic and social justice can continue. Her current work with information activism involves and includes the creation and dissemination of a Free CUNY 'zine.

VDF: And so when we are creating the 'zine, which is a student led publication, it's the ideas of the students, right? But it's also, what sources are we using? Because we are not going to use textbooks, we are not going to use the New York Times; I'm not going to use those resources. We're going to use the books that we are reading, you know, the books we are reading, how they affected how we look at the world, but also using these books to bring about our own conclusions, and our own ideas, and our own theories, you know? Essentially, we are going to be the next authors, and the next professors, and the next teachers. So, you know, just like they're changing the way we are thinking about things now, we are going to change the way that people are going to think about things later on. So, we have to get our information from good sources but realize that they are just sources. We need to come up with our own analysis of the society that we live in and we have been, and when I start talking to students about an issue, and they start talking to me, you know, they end up coming up with things that they didn't know they had in them. As they are talking, they realize these things and the next thing you know they come to a big conclusion that maybe you didn't know! And the book that they were

reading allowed them to get there. So the 'zine is going to be kind of like that. Because there are so many things we want to say. So it's going to be an analysis like that, and we are going to come up with that ourselves. And there is no place in the classroom to really express that to each other. You know, one of the things I keep saying is that we keep having these meetings and we never get anything done because we keep talking about the stuff we are reading, and our society, and our analysis on it. And the next thing you know, our meeting has stopped and we are not doing anything so you know, it's like, how can we get this information outside of this meeting room where there is only ten people, out to people who really need to know. And it's things that you can't say in the classroom; it's too radical, things like that. You know, we can't hold events every week and expect everyone to come. But if we can put it in a zine, then that is something that you can carry in your pocket and share with people. And someone asks where can you find that, and you say they left a stack in the library, and all of the sudden people start exchanging information. And it's there, you know, whenever you want it. And it's written by your fellow classmates so you don't feel like you're being taught from the top down.

EB: It's interesting too because you're talking about something that is physical and concrete, and so much of the information that we are talking about now is digital and in a new way so – it just seems like a really striking juxtaposition to make something tangible. It's becoming more interesting to me all the time asking about who is controlling this information, and who can shut down any information at any time. And it's not tangible because people put so much trust in Google Docs and the cloud. And

the information can be gone depending on how radical the concepts that you're coming with are.

VDF: Yeah. The more I organize, the more weary I become of all these websites and the more I realize I have so many emails at my IP address. Is that bad? But yeah, definitely having something that can't be stopped because it is physical at the end of the day. And you can't stop people from talking about it. You can't stop people from passing each other this. Even if we can't distribute inside the library, we can keep it in our book bags and distribute it on campus and things like that.

This reflection on the divide between physical and digital information came up multiple times over the course of the study. It relates in many ways to ideas of information sharing and connectivity, as we attempt to locate safe spaces for learning that cannot be censored or silenced. We continued to reflect on issues of local autonomy and network building as she discussed her current and future work. She highlighted the need for organizational intentionality and collaborative dynamics with fellow organizers and activists as they planned actions. As we concluded, I asked her for her vision and her plans for future action:

EB: So maybe talk just a little about some of the larger global implications you see. Because you were talking about Quebec and Mexico and Chile and I was talking about Spain. What kind of networks do you envision? Because when I do this work and talk to you and some of the other participants, I wonder what we will connect into or build out of? And what kind of larger international student movements do we see?

VDF: Like the New World Order alternative? (laughs)

EB: Yeah, an anti-oppression option. But what do you envision? Do you think that the work – because I know you believe in local work and always working in your neighborhood and on community. But, going to scale – do you see that happening?

VDF: See, that's the thing. I think that locality is what would actually make a larger scale movement work because – and I do think about that a lot. Students have to nationally link up with the working class, the workers, different sectors of the population. But you know, being in touch with student movements abroad, we have realized that it's important to build those ties on a larger scale and nationally have that movement strong. But none of it is going to work unless every neighborhood and every community starts implementing safe space. Starts implementing educational programs, social programs, starts offering resources and spreading resources. It's not, you're not going to be able to form those ties if you don't have a strong – you can't just have three people, three student leaders from Chile talking to three student leaders from the United States. Doesn't mean that those connections can't happen but it has to include a lot more people. It has to include localities and – I guess the reason I do emphasize locality is because I want to see the larger scale connection and that larger scale movement. And I know that the only reason that is going to happen is if localities are strong and communities are strong. You can't – if you have these movements in which three students here and three students there are communicating, then you just kill those off and you are done. Nobody else knows about it and nobody else – there's not a community back there that is going to mobilize itself. So I emphasize locality because I want to see that. But you have to get it from the root and then work your way up...and

then you see schools in other parts of the city wanting to organize and start their own thing. And so we have kept those connections.

Before we concluded, she told me about efforts to connect youth organizers across the country, particularly focusing on building networks with young people in “middle America.” The event, called the National Student Power Convergence, was to take place near the end of the summer.

VDF: It’s a national convergence that people are literally donating two dollars to because this isn’t covered by some big grant. This is something that we need, and it’s something that we are organizing and we are building donation funds and fundraisers here and there. Whatever it takes to make it happen. But it’s going to be the first national student empowerment convergence that grassroots groups have organized. And, you know, we are hoping to build that connection and start that student unity – a student union for example. And we’ve learned a lot even this year. Folks that last year, at our NYSRT retreat were like no student union, no centralization, no this and this and that. They see what is going on in Quebec and Chile and this year around, at the student conference, student union is one of the biggest topics. So, you know, it all happens on its own. Sometimes, I get caught up in trying to envision the future and trying to envision all of this. But when I sit back and think where I was a year ago and where our organization was a year ago, it’s all happening. All you can do is strengthen your own community and your own campus so that when that time comes, we are a good student group who are able to participate...So learning that – just patience – has been really helpful.

#### **4.1.6 Articulating an Activist Identity**

Vaga De Franx articulated her identity as an undocumented student and community organizing. She is committed to local organizing and involves herself with citywide coalitions of other self-identified social justice activists. She identified moments and situations of injustice, such as a lack of access to affordable higher education in New York City, to organize against economic stratification and exclusion. She located her activism in relation to her personal life and her learning. In doing so, she highlighted the importance of understanding our histories through international, independent sources, and using the mainstream media against itself. She made deep inquiries into who produces information and policy positions around topics such as the “War on Drugs” and the NYPD’s Stop and Frisk. She positioned her own activist work in relation to international struggles, building off of international models while recognizing the unique make-up of her communities in New York.

As an organizer, she facilitated anti-oppressive learning around publishers, Marxists, liberals and progressives through peer education, study groups, teach-ins and workshops. In that contest, she asked probing questions that focus on elements such as shared readings, generative brainstorming, collective experiences and the creation of a space for stories. She dissected the importance of and challenges around creating safe space for non-sectarian educative sessions. At the same time, she troubled elements of ideology in relationship to activism, advocating for forms of neutrality that do not push immovable political positions.

For Vaga De Franx, to be an activist means to be focused on the social and the political. She moved fluidly between discussions of planning major events that build momentum to sustaining local, autonomous activism that is not dictated by top down organizing. In multiple ways, she articulated a frequent refrain that localities have to be strong in order for wider

networks to sustain and grow. It is apparent that she defined her activism in part in the struggle for community access to resources, as much of her work is related to issues around immigration and education. In this pursuit, she called for continued patience, listening and healing.

One lasting notion Vaga De Franx offered is that the skills of community-based social justice organizing and human rights activism can be reinvented in multiple locales in relation to many different issues. From Bloombergville to Occupy Wall Street and Occupy CUNY, her activist identity is not encapsulated in a single moment. It is a life pursuit to work against repression. She builds herself and her community with the tools to protect themselves from risk of censor, arrest and deportation, sharing information with stakeholders in communities that are being oppressed. From physical ‘zines to Internet networking, she took a nuanced approach to information freedom and the dangers implicit in activist sharing. She positioned herself as an activist beyond institutional dogmatism, articulating an argument that no one should be silenced or intimidated for their actions. She ended our discussions for the study by talking about future plans for the National Student Convergence, acknowledging organizers as tools in sociopolitical community struggle, and laughing about building a New World Order alternative.

## **4.2 GENTLE MEADOWS**

Gentle Meadows is a soft-spoken young queer man. He recently graduated from a liberal arts college in the Hudson Valley of New York, completing his degree in three years. He majored in Political Science with a minor in International Studies. He is distinguished by his humility, and throughout our interview he was shy to talk about himself and his accomplishments in great detail. He began by talking in brief about his life history:



GM: I'm from New York City, I grew up in New York City. I went to an inner-city public high school. I grew up in a lot of neighborhoods. I moved around a lot in New York City neighborhoods where it was primarily immigrants living in them.

EB: What neighborhoods?

GM: Elmhurst in Queens, and Sunnyside – that's where I went to middle school, in Queens again. Jackson Heights, in Queens again. And now in the Upper East Side with my mom. I mean, that last one is not primarily immigrant populated, but the others are.

He was excited to participate in the study because he has known me and my former co-worker from Global Kids for quite a while: "I feel like you guys have been part of who I am today as an activist and a person who thinks with these ideas." This personal connection was clear as he spoke in greater detail about the formal and informal conversations we had while he was in GK. It was as true for me as it was for him, and I told him so.

GM: Yeah, it's a good thing. I mean, with your work at Global Kids and even the programs - with our conversations, I mean I feel like that is a very foundational part of why I think of things this way today. It's not just the programs themselves, but also the conversations and how it, you know, how it expands to other than that specific time and place.

EB: Me too, though. I feel like you have informed – and some of the other people you know who are doing this work with us – have completely changed my perspective on a million things too. So it works both ways, which is phenomenal.

Gentle Meadows said that he didn't know what he would add to the project at first because he didn't consider himself well versed on anything "critical." As he said that, he went into a lengthy aside about Critical Security Studies and the focus of his undergraduate research and

learning around human security versus national security. “So, um, I got a little bit [of knowledge] there but I wouldn’t say I am a pro at Marx or anything,” he said and laughed the thought away.

#### **4.2.1 Quietly Disrupting the Peace**

When he graduated from high school, Gentle Meadows attended “a super liberal arts school” upstate from the city. He critiqued his university heavily throughout the course of our conversation. Although he is quiet upon first introductions, Gentle Meadows is deeply inquisitive, questioning the status quo and asking tough questions about the current state of domestic and foreign policy. As an activist, he organizes around issues related to “access to education,” a phrase he used many times throughout our nearly two hour dialogue.

EB: So the idea of questioning and inquiry, endless inquiry, is super important. I think about it in schools too, but it seems like it is not always allowed to happen. A part of it, I think, has to do with a culture of testing, for sure. That there has to be an answer. You can’t have endless deferral or dialogue when people are made to think things are black and white when, as you say, they are quite grey.

GM: I wish that they would ask more open-ended questions, especially in the humanities and in literature. Because those never have – I mean yes there is recorded history, but history has always been written, primarily, by the winners. And you need to always question that. I mean, maybe this isn’t, or wasn’t, the major perspective on this particular issue in a certain period of time. But, I don’t know – seeing other point of views is important.

I met Gentle Meadows when he was a senior at a high school in Queens. During the school year that followed, we explored many complex topics together, examining multiple perspectives on current events with a deep historical context. So much of GK's pedagogy is designed around interpersonal, interactive and informal learning through dialogue that offered more multiple perspectives and room for reconsidering positions than any individual alone could achieve.

GM: Yeah, from food production to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the Israeli-Palestinian issue which was a very hot topic, and women's rights. Um, I remember we did an LGBTQI day, which was also very controversial for the people there.

EB: Why was it controversial? I mean I remember, but for you.

GM: Like, so in the two high schools combined, I would say the majority of students come from immigrant backgrounds. So I would say on issues of immigration and things like that they would be more progressive. But on other issues, like cultural issues, they would be like – whether women should be treated equally as men. And acceptance of, not just tolerance, but acceptance of lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgendered, intersex people. It's more up in the air. Some people do and some people don't care. Some people don't know. So that dialogue definitely helps there. Books wouldn't change that if you are just reading them alone. They need to be discussed and – you just need to talk with other people about it.

EB: I remember that very clearly. Especially since we were two queer leaders –

GM: It was awesome.

EB: - teaching about heterosexism. And I remember –

GM: Yeah the different terms too.

EB: Little Ali [a pseudonym]. Hopping up and shouting at some point, “I get this. It’s the opposite.” You know, because it was like, about judgmental heterosexist language and Ali yelled “It’s the same thing for gay people today.” That was a moment of education that I carry with me. Because why else educate, right? But to see messages coming through and people’s perspectives changing. It was phenomenal. And then I have – I just came across it, I have your video project! (Pulls out DVD).

GM: Mmhmm. Oh yeah, whatever happened to that? (laughing) I lost my copy.

EB: Well you can have a copy of this copy if you want.

GM: Oh my god, I totally forgot about it.

Here we went back in our shared memory to a time when we explored underlying messages of bigotry and oppression through the use of ironic and inquiry-based language that questioned the textual intentionality behind prejudiced thought and action. The workshop he referenced was about “Homophobia and Heterosexism” and asked participants to read dialogues that turned the moral verbiage of heteronormativity around on the straight world. I remember Gentle Meadows as quite daring that day, un-characteristically extroverted as he argued for equality for sexual minorities. It was a memorable example of disrupting the common place at his school in Queens.

So much of what could be qualified as disruptive about Gentle Meadows is his call for understanding and caring for all people. His video I referenced was a recent project he conducted in the mid-2000s where he randomly interviewed people in New York’s Union Square about their views on gay marriage. This was an example of him mobilized to challenge to the discriminatory status quo, offering a counter to the many mainstream messages of

dehumanization and an inclination toward judgment. In part, this is about him growing as a social activist and privileging multiple viewpoints in ethical consideration of care and equality.

#### **4.2.2 Perspectives on Activist Work**

When we talked at first about whether or not he considered himself an activist, Gentle Meadows was quick to acknowledge the mainstream narrative that critiques (if not condemns) images and acts of activism:

GM: I mean, I do. I like to think of the term as broadly as possible.

EB: The term activist?

GM: Activist. Organizing I think is more specific but activist should be an umbrella term. I feel like now, in society, when someone talks about an activist, it's normally painted in a negative light. And I don't think it should be that way. It connects a lot of people in a lot of ways. I don't know how I would define it – socially aware, that is definitely one term to associate it with; engaging with the community, with your surroundings; trying to realize what – maybe that everyone has, people have different goals but it is the process that links you with another person together.

EB: Right.

GM: If that process is organizing, if that is the term that you use, and call it that, then that's what it is.

EB: When you talk about it being painted negatively in a general way, what do you imagine? What do you think people take away, generally, from the idea of activist?

GM: I don't think it's fruitful, but I think nowadays people think about it like – it's because society is apathetic. They think anyone who is engaging in something – that it is

a bad thing. Or “It’s not my business. It’s completely separate from what I’m going through right now.” Um, and I think that is in a way very closed-minded. And they are not seeing the big picture that everything is interconnected. And, it’s non-involvement. I feel like that’s become a fad in the past. I mean I went to a very very liberal arts school. People are very apathetic. And it’s almost cool not to be an activist. Not to engage. Not to participate in your community. It’s cool to just be like Thoreau and hide in the forest. Being an activist is like, engaging with people. Having a communal experience. And another thing, when I say engaging with people on a communal level, it’s not just having a barbeque. It’s about politicizing issues – that’s definitely a big part of it. I feel like the Left, or the progressive movement in general, in the past fifty years or so has been on the defense. But a part of politicizing space is that you kind of take back – you make it more grey. That there is possibility for change, I guess that’s what I mean.

Here he calls for alternate ways of visioning and understanding activists. His language evokes an egalitarian sense that this is as much about identifying an alternate vision on activism from the romanticized leftist mainstream as identifying an alternate from the vilified corporate conservative mainstream. He enacts this approach to alternate visioning in relation to issues of education as well as immigration. He talked in depth about studying the marginalization of immigrants in his recent research:

GM: A huge section of my project is how they – how these NGOs and groups function to re-orient policies and ideas from a state centric point of view to human security. So immigration policies, instead of reinforcing the state, and having it so that it’s for the state’s benefit, it should primarily be first for the individual and the human being. So

instead of using immigration as a nation-building, state-building project, should be used for human rights or human welfare, human development - whatever you want to call it.

We talked about the competing narratives that inform his learning. Here he continued to question textual intentions and explore underlying messages as we discuss the ways in which he consumes information about current events, human rights, and social justice issues. His youthfulness and humility shined through here, as I urged him to go in-depth in discussing his news sources.

EB: So you talked a little bit about the media. And that's sort of the other leg of this study. Like, what kind of information do you take in, where do you get your critical perspectives that you have got?

GM: I wish I knew more!

EB: (laughs) You know a lot.

GM: Like apart from what my friends – a lot of it is from sharing with my friends on Facebook, or like social media. I don't use Twitter a lot but I've gotten a couple of things from there. I wouldn't know if they are part of the critical umbrella, or if they would –

EB: Well just multiple perspectives, I guess. Like, where do you get your information?

GM: Well, let's see. What I have on my phone, let's see. Democracy Now! Is one of them, Amy Goodman, she's amazing! Um, NPR is I feel like, they could be better sometimes. They've gone way too moderate lately. I like the Real News. I think it's Canadian...

EB: Right, the Real News Network?

GM: Yeah, yeah.

EB: Totally.

GM: I really like Rable.ca. It's Canadian. And there's another, what is it called? It's based in Montreal, I forget the name of it.

EB: So you have got a lot of Canadian media coming at you.

GM: Yeah. Adbusters is cool too, I like them. As far as American media, I don't know. I don't know. Um, Democracy Now! (laughs).

EB: I know, right.

GM: What else do we have? I don't even know. (long silence) But, as far as general news, I just look at Huffington Post if there is something sudden that Democracy Now! can't cover immediately. Um, but that's about it. What are other news outlets? I don't even know.

EB: Well, I mean, like I read Al Jazeera... But you have to go international.

GM: Oh yeah, Russia RN. What is it? It's a Russian news source in English.

EB: But you said you get a lot of information from your friends online?

GM: Yeah.

Our conversation about sharing information led to a discussion of difference and relationality around organizing topics as he talked about the title of this study:

GM: Becoming activist. I like the fact that you use ing. It doesn't end. It just doesn't. You keep learning about new issues and you keep on trying to – part of being an activist, I'd say, even though it is broadly defined, it's about seeing how different issues are connected to each other. And that is how you form a movement. Not just with your specific one issue. Like, for example, environmental advocacy, or environmental justice.



But how that relates to feminism, for example. Or like, migrant justice. I don't know, it's a never-ending process. What does it mean? It's – like, how do you become an activist?

As his rhetorical questions imply, there are many multiple ways to articulate answers to these questions. The inquiry involved in learning about various interconnected issues highlighted the use of deferral in the effort to define activist while always simultaneously growing into the term. By discussing the intersectionality of environmentalism with feminism, he points to yet another way of understanding different struggles in relation to one another. This is a unifying concept, that insists on remaining critical when understanding issues and dialoguing with others to come to shared platforms from which to take political and social action.

#### **4.2.3 Reading the Sociopolitical**

As he related ideas of activism across issues, Gentle Meadows shared his understanding of the connection between personal and political through the notion of community-based politicization:

EB: Okay, so the idea of politicizing issues. I think it's a really smart one and you are one of the first people to vocalize that, out of the people who I have talked to for this study. So, what does that look like? How do people politicize issues?

GM: I would say conversation, discourse. That's the – a lot of people would say that it's not fruitful or it's not good for change. But, by talking about something, people rethink what they previously thought. It's not taken for granted anymore. So that questioning that happens in your head, it brings up the idea that – oh, maybe there are other possibilities out there, not just the ones I have known all my life. Or that I have been taught in school by a different generation. So, it's a catalyst for change, definitely.

He identified the value of competing dialogue and narratives as he highlighted the ways in which multiple perspectives on a given issue can challenge one to re-position themselves vis-à-vis social and political topics. It brought us to a conversation that looked closer at his own roots and history as an activist:

EB: Which leads to the question – how did you get involved in doing this type of work? This kind of activism or organizing in your life?

GM: I think Global Kids.

EB: Okay. So talk about it. What kind of –

GM: That's the only, or one of the only things that really gave me this social justice bent. Like, I was part of Model United Nations in high school, but that was more focused on debate and your speaking skills. And, you know, your ability to back information up with specific examples. And it's not, it has nothing to do with – it is personal gain. It is all about you controlling the stage for thirty seconds, or one minute, or however much time that you have. So, you simulate how government bodies work. And – I mean, it's good to get young people thinking about how they would react in like high levels of government. But at the same time, Global Kids – it has a very grassroots level that is very close and personal. That is more easily relatable definitely. And just the different workshops. I mean, it's not just – it's not the banking method. Like in classrooms and in US history or European history. You actually do workshops, you play different games and that is how we used to start our activities. And then you act it out, you do it with other people, collaboration is emphasized. And I feel like today education has become lonely, solitary, sedentary. Um, even when you are doing homework, it is just you and your own – so Global Kids, the type of learning and how learning happens

is very interactive, and interpersonal. I feel like not only do you retain more that way, but it also teaches you that - maybe it requires that I work with other people to succeed in life. And it's not just about you doing everything on your own.

So much of Gentle Meadows' power lies in his calm fearlessness, positioning himself in ways to continually re-write ideas and re-design actions as he learns more. His aside about Critical Security Studies had left us briefly discussing a queering of the performance of security, and the concept of state power as a form of identity construction:

EB: It's interesting when you reference Butler. She was one of the formative people when I started studying queer theory. Just to have her come off the tongue, to use her name and know what it means. It's interesting. I don't come across that very often actually.

GM: Yeah, it's interesting. I remember one article, it was Cynthia Weber I think – I don't know if I'm pronouncing that right. It was about how the state's identity is constructed. How it's a performance, and she uses Butler to perform her analysis. I thought it was interesting. I buy it. A lot of people in the class didn't. Even in a liberal arts school like mine. Surprisingly.

EB: Well, I buy it too (laughing). So, why do you buy it?

GM: God, well, I need to look at the specifics of the article. But, I mean... So constructivism, it's all about identity and how identity influences your actions, or if it's not a person, the state. And how you can predict what a state would do. And it has to do with how others perceive you, so in the community of states different relations you have are constructed by different things. So it's not all about military power and who has the most weapons. Or who has the strongest economy, so it's also about language – human

rights language, human rights talk, discourse, that constructs one's identity - it's not just physical, tangible things, like guns or military capabilities.

This was important because the conclusions I had begun to draw about this study pointed to a queer theory of activism, where youth organizers gather around issues that foreground difference in an effort to provide just and equitable spaces for growth and learning.

#### **4.2.4 Taking Action**

Gentle Meadows acknowledged that he was not as involved in forms of direct action currently as he had been in high school. He did have a lot to say about the movement for college endowments to divest from fossil fuel companies and to invest in socially just investment:

GM: Another thing that I am really conflicted about, even my friends too in college, is – so it's the SRIC. Socially Responsible Investing Committee. So it's, I am really conflicted about it because I don't know if it is radical enough to create significant change, but I was a part of it.

EB: So explain what it was.

GM: So it's investment advocacy, it's shareholder advocacy. So using the endowments of colleges to pursue political and social goals. So, for example, we work with an NGO called the Responsible Endowments Coalition. They're based in the city, and they pretty much get around to many universities – maybe 40 across the country – and try to get their endowments to pursue different things like environmental sustainability, campaigns against – when Citizens United, what's the term for that?

EB: Plutocracy, I don't even know.

GM: Campaign Finance Reform. Or like, my college, what they did a couple of years ago, was stop – this is super minor, but it's why I am so conflicted about it, even though I'm not a part of it anymore. Like stop McDonalds from using a pesticide. But things like that don't change power relations.

EB: They don't change power relations, you said?

GM: Yeah, like material existence...I mean, yeah you get them to stop using a particular pesticide, but at the same time, they switch to a different kind. Um, so I don't know how effective that is. But, I mean, that's been effective like in the 90s, during – or in the 80s, I'm getting my decades confused (laughs), but South Africa, Apartheid –

EB: Yeah –

GM: A lot of universities divested from South Africa and joined the movement. And that's one way that kind of advocacy accomplishes. There are different campaigns. A lot of other schools, I actually met people from the University of Pittsburgh at the conference.

EB: Oh really? Cool.

GM: Yeah, they were part of that. I don't know if they are – if they are the people, or the university leading this, but I remember them talking to me about how they were interested in using their endowment for, um... To stop or get companies to change from mountaintop removal practices.

EB: Yeah, totally.

GM: Yeah, so. A lot of issues came up. Like, we talked to the Board of Directors. They are very conservative, even at my liberal college. Some of them are flat out racist and say these really ridiculous things, even at a super liberal arts school. But anyway, like,

they – we wanted to divest from a lot of companies... Um, well for example, they are invested in a lot of unethical companies. Like [companies] involved in producing weapons for Israel... Like, what are other ones? A lot of unethical pharmaceutical companies that my liberal college has invested in. And a lot of colleges are invested in these companies just for making money.

Divestment and socially responsible investing has had a recent resurgence through renewed campaigns to fight climate change. Gentle Meadows explained to me the function that students played in advocating around endowment divestment.

GM: So our job only consists of suggesting possibilities for them to consider. And most of them get rejected if it's too controversial or too radical or if it's not going to make the college any money. I mean, I guess it's a fact that green companies or ethical companies don't make as much money as other ones, but I mean, I don't know. So, another thing that they advise us to do – instead of divesting, which was something they we're really against unless there was a really big movement like what happened in South Africa, was share out or what is it called? They have all of these technical names for everything. Anyway, so what happens is you submit a proposal to a company saying, "Hey, you should change or reconsider your policy" on a given issue, like pesticides. And they would reconsider it and have a shareholder vote in their meeting. And like for example, as our college, we have a vote in that. Out of like thousands of people. I mean, it's not a lot and it would probably fail, but – if they don't reconsider that, it goes to the media or at least the media have an opportunity to cover it. (Laughs). Given that our media is biased now. (Continues laughing). And they would get bad publicity, but that's the worst

thing that can happen to them. So I don't know how effective shareholder advocacy can be.

EB: It's interesting listening to you talk about them voting. Because when you showed up tonight, you were talking about whether or not you were going to vote in the upcoming presidential election.

GM: Yeah, yeah it's true. I don't know how active voting can be. It could change things but it's not progressive enough I don't think.

EB: Right.

GM: For systematic change, I don't think voting is – yeah. I don't know.

In multiple ways, Gentle Meadows challenges the power of institutional structures as well as the symbolic act of voting around economic interests in higher education. In the same community, operating from the same locale, he talked about the other community-based work he was involved in as a literacy volunteer.

EB: So then, maybe talk a little bit about the topics that are closest to you. What are you organized around?

GM: Um, on campus, in college, I'd say primarily I worked with other issues that maybe are more secondary to me. But off campus, in the surrounding neighborhoods - for example undocumented youth and the access they have to education. That's huge for me. And a lot of students from my high school were undocumented. Even though it was unspoken and no one really talked about it, there was this unspoken understanding that yes, there was a certain population that – really a huge portion of our school is undocumented. But anyway, so for three years in college, I volunteered at this project where you teach and tutor adults, adolescents, and children in the Hudson Valley in the

English language. Just like in high school, it's not communicated to you that they are undocumented, but you know at least some of them are. And I thought that it was really important. And while not everyone in the program thought of themselves as an activist, I definitely think that they are doing activist work. I mean, I try to make it interactive. But sometimes with just two hours a couple of times a week, it's hard to get them to learn a lot of things with the time that they are given. I don't know, I don't know what else to say about it. It's really rewarding but it's hard too. There's definitely not only a language barrier, but there's also a racial barrier, there's a – there's this gap because you are a different sexual orientation than them. There's a, I mean, I don't come from a rich, or even a middle class family, but there is really a class divide. These people would probably be earning less than poverty levels. And the fact that they are undocumented and that I have legal documents – that's another divide that I would say are divides we need to close by providing access to education and other methods. So, that's one issue.

This connects back to the sociopolitical in many important ways, as he focuses on creating opportunities for subordinate groups of individuals to participate in their communities. In his current moves as an activist, we returned to talk of the online nature of organizing.

EB: Everybody has been talking to me about the online nature of activist learning and organizing. And, I was telling Green Strawberries about this, when I saw her last – one of my advisors said to me that it can't all be disembodied online. Like, to really make stuff happen, you are going to have to have physical people coming physically together. Like, do you have anything – do you think about that at all? Activism and organizing happening online rather than having events physically?



GM: Um, I mean I like both equally. I do have a preference for physical mobilization but online networks and online communities are awesome too. Um, I mean. I don't know what to say about that. Like, yeah so I sat in on this one class. It was an anthropology class on media. And like different – what online communities mean and how it differs from real life, in-person engagement.

Part of his activist pursuits are fundamentally about discourse, challenging and changing existing discourses around issues of justice and access:

GM: I mean – I support the Bradley Manning case. Like, just like what he said in his testimony, information should be free. And I think that is activism. Releasing information and even like creating information. Like documenting what is going on on the ground from your perspective as a person, as a bystander, that's definitely activism I would say, even though, even if the person doing it might not consider themselves an activist.

In his pursuits, he creates opportunities for subordinate groups to participate while studying the relationships between power and language to understand relationships between personal experience and larger cultural stories. A major point here is that taking action is not always about physicality. There is much to explore in the intellectual, digital and community-based study of the relationships between individuals, information, sociopolitical issues and activist organizing.

#### **4.2.5 A Vision of the Future through the Past**

When he moved to talk about his future, he reflected on his family and his history in more detail:

GM: It's kind of funny like how your study asks how literacy is involved. Like, when I – when I look at my grandparents, I don't know if I'd say that they were activists but a certain part of me wants to say it. Like, there are definitely issues that they are passionate about. But, and on other issues, I wouldn't say they were very progressive about it. Like, for example, they think that America is a very cruel place and people are too individualistic around here. And like, when they watch the news and see how the Bush tax cuts, how there are talks about them being extended, they are just like – why would he do that? Even coming from a background in Southeast Asia, which is not the most liberal society or form of government. Like, wealth distribution is a good thing. Like, maybe it's not happening, but the average person thinks that it is generally a good thing. But here in America, they think that it is always being questioned. And that there is this thinking in America that someone is poor and it is their fault. But they don't think that. So, sometimes they look at it from a very Christian point of view, like that we should feed the poor, feed the hungry, take care of your neighbor. And I think that is advocacy, whether or not it has religious or Christian message... It's a form of – it's definitely a way to connect with other issues. So, becoming activist, I don't know how to say it. You can't pinpoint it, but...

As we concluded our discussion, he talked a little about a vision for his future activism, as well as he identified as the most pressing needs for others engaging in social justice work:

EB: How do you see activism in the future?

GM: Well, what I see from my university, the racial diversity needs to be improved. So like, focus on literacy. How is that defined? Is it words written on a page? Or is it dialogue, incorporated in that term? In a way, I don't know, I hate myself for saying this

but literacy sometimes, or writing things down, as opposed to the oral tradition, it's a very Eurocentric thing imposed on the rest of the world. So, from an anti-imperialist perspective, can literacy incorporate oral tradition or discuss things not on paper but...

EB: What do you think? Do you think it can?

GM: I mean, I feel like people could have different answers. I mean, I like literacy. More people should be literate with reading and writing. And learn from that, and develop as a human being from words on paper. I mean, I like both. Like, you can't just choose one. I mean, oral tradition is good but it also has its limits. Same thing with writing.

EB: Which is interesting, too when you think about new media. Because it's like the fusion of so many things...

GM: It's good that there are more – many different types of mediums out there to communicate ideas. Like you know, I forgot who said it, in anthropology, that the Medium is the Message.

EB: Oh, Marshall McLuhan. Totally.

GM: Yeah, that's who it is. Like, there should be more mediums out there.

EB: Yeah, definitely, when I think about the future of doing this kind of work, researching and connecting with youth activists and organizing groups, a huge part of it is to see how they are creating a future. And how we all create messages for ourselves and others in different ways.

GM: The how question is really important.

Throughout our conversation, he continued to question history and current events, applying lessons of theory to the complex problems in the material world. He left shortly after our

dialogue to start graduate work in history at a university in Europe. Our exchange has continued entirely online since then.

#### **4.2.6 Articulating an Activist Identity**

Gentle Meadows quietly articulated his activist identity. In this study, he positioned himself first in relation to the moments of his youth in the immigrant neighborhoods in Queens where he grew up and attended school. Much of his activist roots are connected to his time in Global Kids and his involvement with the citywide coalition of the Human Rights Activist Project. He highlighted the importance of conversation and dialogue as foundational for learning and growing, gaining multiple perspectives and coming to understand the experiences of others.

In his articulation of himself as an activist and organizer, his humility downplayed his deep knowledge about issues around international affairs, state security and human rights. As he remembered the work he did when he was in high school around food production, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Israel and Palestine, women's rights and LGBTQ rights, he pointed to the importance of having safe spaces for learning. He argued that the elements of such workshops focused on positive youth development structures that make space for social justice organizing, to discuss controversial topics and work past barriers to create peaceable, actionable visions.

Gentle Meadows stressed the need to politicize issues. In his activist work, he continually studied topics of marginalization, human rights, nation-state rights and the concept of welfare. He highlighted the interconnections between complex social issues, and argued that human rights activists need to engage in a struggle even if it is not personally related to one's experience. He evoked Judith Butler to talk about the performance of identity and the performance of statehood. In doing so, he highlighted the notion that discourse spaces are ripe

for catalyzing change for individuals and institutions. He argued that not taking hard political lines allows for things to become gray, and for possibilities of change to be realized through rich dialogues and narratives.

His activist work ranged from his early interviews in New York's Union Square around same-sex marriage equality to his more recent work around socially just investiture and community literacy. As Gentle Meadows talked about the Socially Responsible Investing Committee at his school, he was clearly skeptical about the university and questioned the real power behind shareholder advocacy. He argued that activists challenge oppressive discourses around justice and access. As he stated early in our study, activists connect people through being socially aware and engaging with the communities in which they are involved. As such, he championed information freedom in his own view on contemporary issues in the digital present. He named Bradley Manning in this discussion, arguing that action is not always about physicality and that information should be transparent and free. He reinforced the notion that although human rights activists and social justice organizers often have different goals, it is the process that connects them.

### **4.3 GREEN STRAWBERRIES**

I don't remember how I first met Green Strawberries. There was a moment when I worked GK citywide events on the weekends where she and Vaga De Franx were very visible. They were friends with Gentle Meadows, which is how I was introduced to her. My initial introduction to her was as a young activist interested in feminism, queerness, education and immigration.

Green Strawberries is an undergraduate woman, living in Queens at the time of this research and studying Political Science at a private college in the city. She has a tendency to question the everyday in a way that operates around and within many borderlands that are at turns moralizing and conscientizing (Freire, 1970). The arc of our dialogue moved between positions of justice, morality, creation, critique and right. We met a few times before I invited her to work on this project. I visited her at the Bowery Poetry Club where she was selling her art. When the study began, we met briefly in Union Square to talk about a host of issues – about access to higher education, women’s studies, assessment in K-12, public schooling in NYC and our experiences in the non-profit world.

#### **4.3.1 A Digital Occupation**

At the time of our most in-depth interview, she was deeply involved with Occupy Wall Street. We met for an interview at a café on the corner of Tompkins Square Park in the East Village. As we talked about Occupy, she was quick to interrogate the benefits of Internet organizing as a sustainable forum for activism:

EB: What about – you talked about the Internet organizing of Occupy. I was talking to one of my advisors about, when I talk about this project and all of you participants being separate and acknowledging that you all know each other in different ways, he said that there was something disembodied about doing it all on the Internet. So, what do you think – if the organizing is happening online, does that mean that it loses something?

GS: It definitely loses a lot I think. You can’t create a revolution with – the Internet is just a start-up. It should not be where you are going full time. First off, anyone can put anything on the Internet. Sometimes, with what you hear, you can’t even be sure. So you

need to know people who are already connected to that thing and be like – yo, is this really what is going on? So it really comes back down to knowing someone, right? I definitely feel like it's more important to have, if not a one-on-one, a collective. Post that there is going to be a meeting, this time, this place. Don't start a meeting online, that makes no sense to me. I don't know how one can get much done that way. It's also, I also feel like it takes away humanity. It's very dehumanizing. And if we are going to try to get of a place of true equality, we are going to need to get to a more human place, right? Which is one thing that I feel like is – I wish people recognized more and that they realized what the Internet is really doing to us and how maybe we shouldn't be so dependent on it for everything. And the other thing is, right – you put anything on the Internet and the cops will fucking find out, right? You tell another person, in code, the cops are probably not going to find out. That's the other thing I feel like people are probably not getting.

EB: Yeah. It's really interesting to look at the laws that are coming down on the Internet and Internet freedom. And as a tool of organizing and social movements using digital tools, it's kind of terrifying but it's also – you don't want to be intimidated enough not to use them. It's a strange space to negotiate.

There is a sense of personal indignation in Green Strawberries as she argues against dehumanization. Although she doesn't go into detail about the limits of organizing online, she questions its practice even as she acknowledges the Internet as a revolutionary space for communication and information freedom.

EB: So do you see pockets that are really successful – like, is a lot happening at Zucotti Park or – where is it happening?

GS: From my perspective, everything is happening on the Internet. Mostly. A lot of it is happening on the Internet. And then I feel like - because Occupy Wall Street is very interesting. I think it is definitely different from other forms of movements. Because of that, it's not this one unified movement – right? It's literally, like, here's Occupy Wall Street, here's one branch, there's another, sometimes they intertwine but not really...

EB: Do you think that is a deficit to it? Or do you think that it is a good thing?

GS: I think that it's not such a good thing. But I feel like that is just how it is going to be for a while. If Occupy Wall Street does go further...

EB: Right. Because I wonder a lot if it isn't necessary that it branches in a million directions. Like if you wouldn't just have to ignore issues, you know, in order to have it be unified in any way.

GS: Well, the issue with the stemming of branches and what not is, um – the fact that there are all these different views how to go about creating a revolution. Anyone you talk to in Occupy Wall Street – they're always talking about “when we get to the revolution” this is what is going to happen. But the problem is that we all want to get to a revolution in a different way, and so we are all kind of being like – you know you don't really agree with me, I'm going to go over here. So, is Occupy Wall Street ever going to go anywhere with that kind of mindset?

Green Strawberries offered some pointed critiques here, of the multiple views on revolution and the Left as caught up in a hyper-intellectual paralysis. It was interesting talking to her about the importance of multiple perspectives and the danger of information overload. The shared discourse space of the Internet created a platform for us to use our language to discuss the messages behind the media we consumed online. Throughout our conversation, Green



Strawberries explored subtle messages in blunt ways. She simultaneously criticized the white Occupiers for their “G20 Chic,” questioned the virtues of organizing online and romanticized the internationality so immediately accessible through online media.

#### **4.3.2 International Perspectives**

Together, Green Strawberries and I went into detail about alternate ways of becoming informed around issues and learning about social justice organizing. My questions were related to information access and consumption.

EB: What kind of information do you consume to know all of this stuff? Right, because you don’t decide to be an immigrant rights activist out of nowhere. Or, to understand economic injustice. Like, how do you get yourself informed on all of this stuff?

GS: Honestly, some of it is through books. The obvious would be the books. But I get a lot of my news from people that I know who are on the same page as me. But also, I watch a lot of South Asian news, which is so much more blunt about worldly issues as well.

EB: So what kind of sources?

GS: Literally, I don’t know what channel it is honestly. It’s the channel that my father watches. (laughing)

EB: It’s on satellite or something?

GS: It’s on the TV. It’s – well I don’t know what it is. I don’t turn on the TV, but my parents do. I don’t watch TV, but that is the only time I will watch it. So I just tell my mom, can you put on the news. And that’s where I get a lot of my news from. I’ll send it to you. I’ll ask my mom what it is. But, the way they talk is very blunt, straight up,

which is what we do not get from our media. So, I feel like I learn a lot more from that. And then Democracy Now! would be another thing, I listen to that a lot on the radio. Or else articles people have on their Facebook or articles that are emailed to me.

EB: Any good books stand out to you?

GS: Well, I can tell you about a book that is fiction though, but I think really makes one conscious about a lot of things. Two books. Um, and it definitely talks about Marxism and goes into Marxist theory and all these things. One is the Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood.

EB: Oh yeah.

GS: You've got to read it.

EB: My mom loves Margaret Atwood.

GS: She's fucking phenomenal. And then the other one is *Caucasia* by Danzy Senna, which deals more with race. Particularly in the sixties and how that is connected in so many ways to now.

EB: In the U.S., or globally?

GS: In the U.S. And then some globally. They go into Brazil at some point.

Her international perspective is striking in the context of media and learning. In fact, much of what she discussed was of a global scope. When I asked about activist learning, she talked about the positions of silenced/marginalized voices – first in the context of Occupy Wall Street and then in Palestine. She highlighted events and organizing strategies as she named sociopolitical realities of activist learning.

EB: What type of learning – or organizing – do you find yourself in? I mean, I know that you have been in different parts of different events. We talked about general

assemblies when we were together before. What kind of learning do you see happening at these events?

GS: I mean, when we are talking about General Assemblies – I have been to mostly Occupy Wall Street General Assemblies, that’s where I’ve developed my view of GAs. I don’t think it really works as well as – I just think they’re not going about it well. I feel like I learn nothing and I get a headache after 4 hours.

EB: Right.

GS: When it is the same thing. And I think a lot of that is because the Left has just so many different forms of what is right that no one wants to step back and say we are trying to be here for the same thing. So, I can step back a little and hear you out – but no one is willing to do that.

EB: What do you think the “same thing” is? What do you think the common ground is?

GS: That they are all Left.

EB: Right.

GS: That’s it. That’s really it. Then there are reformists and anarchists and social-anarchists and ISO socialists and other forms of socialists and communists and you know – you talk to different people and it means different things even though they have the same sort of background.

Here she names the competing narratives at work within Leftist organizing and activism, highlighting their differences in ideology and their attempt at identifying unifying principles. One topic that she named as central to her learning, her peer educating and her art was the topic of Palestine. Here she detailed her personal commitment to activism for a “Free Palestine”:

EB: What makes Palestine so relevant for you?

GS: The fact that these days I've been recognizing how whitewashed I am. How whitewashed I have become. And trying to go back into my roots. And the Palestinians are my brothers and sisters, right. It's – what is happening to them is beyond ridiculous. So I feel like a lot of the Palestinian issues connect back, you know, to connect with my brothers and sisters in that way and their struggle and recognizing their struggle. That's why it is very important to me.

EB: When you say your brothers and sisters, you're not Palestinian, are you?

GS: No, I'm Pakistani and Afghani, but you know. They're still my brothers and sisters.

She went on to talk about how frequently people assume she is white and associate her with whiteness. Her conversation foregrounds the notion of difference here, incorporating questions that explore perspectives on race specifically related to the social and political positions of Middle Eastern and South Asian individuals.

EB: So, I'm interested in stories, as I've said to you before. So was there ever a moment where you were – you felt like you really recognized that you were becoming an activist? Like was there a topic or an event or a time?

GS: Um, well it was around the time when I was with Global Kids. My parents are very conservative people and their views are very traditional and conservative. And being that my family is lighter-skinned, they were treated as, I guess, white people in Pakistan. And so their view on a lot of issues of people of color is the same as white people. But then, they get pissed at white people. They say stuff, you know. But I was in Global Kids, and my parents didn't really let me go out and Global Kids is the only thing they really allowed me to go to because I pushed and pushed. And then one day my mom asked me, "Why are you pushing so hard? Do you have a boyfriend there or

something?” And I’m like, “No, I don’t have a boyfriend there.” And that was around the time that I was figuring out my sexuality so her saying that kind of offended me a lot as well for other reasons, so. But you know, literally sitting down at the moment with my mom and starting to cry and being like “How can I not?” And hearing my mom say, “What do you mean by that?” And I start bringing up issues. And she said, “But you are not dark-skinned. Those are not things that you need to deal with.” And I’m like, what are you talking about? I’m still a person of color and I recognize that. I mean, back then I didn’t as much. But I recognize now. And I will never struggle like they do, but they are still my brothers and sisters, which is what I tell my mom. They’re still my brothers and sisters. So her not getting it actually pushed me more to do it. And that was a moment when I realized I need to be doing this for so many more reasons than I thought. As a human being, I can’t allow things to just happen.

### **4.3.3 Roots of the Personal in the Political**

The quote above highlights the obviously personal connection Green Strawberries has to the social and political issues she organizes around. She is very personal about her politics and her passion comes out assertively when she talks about issues of human rights, justice and equality. Her focus on the sociopolitical first emerged through her understanding of the connection between the personal and the political.

EB: Okay, so break it down. What kind of organizing do you do?

GS: I’ve mainly focused on, and this is just - I don’t know why, but on immigration. Undocumented immigration and student rights have been my main focus.

EB: You don’t know why?

GS: Well, part of it has to do with having family that are immigrants – um, South Asian and South Asians here are mostly immigrants. And then I got involved with this organization called D.R.U.M: Desis Rising Up and Moving, which got me really into immigration policy and law. And that's really where it started. And being that my best friend is undocumented, and having her go through so much, there was no way that I couldn't – I would have had to do something.

EB: Right. What about student issues? What kind of issues?

GS: Um, when it comes to upper-level education, mostly tuition and stuff like that. When it comes to high school and middle school, it's more about what kind of education they are getting and how they are being treated. The policing in these schools. Those are the issues I deal with.

She explores power relations and challenges systems of institutional oppression. In doing so, she seeks to attend to those she perceives as silenced. It is noticeable that she always includes subordinate groups in her discussion, whether youth or racial, ethnic or sexual minorities. The definition of subordinate is shifting here, as she demonstrates in her discussion of LGBTQ rights. She takes measure of power and cultural capital to determine which issues to devote her time to and which to not focus on as much.

EB: When we were talking in Union Square that one day, we talked a lot about gender rights and LGBT stuff too. Are you still involved in that kind of organizing in queer communities?

GS: Definitely, definitely. But not as much, only because I feel like the LGBTQ community has grown so quickly in power than any other. If you really think about the history, I mean the US history, of the LGBTQ activism and organizing, it really

happened in the sixties and it just keeps going. And it's because anyone can be LGBTQ. It doesn't matter what race, what class. It could be anybody. And I think that as time goes by, we start to recognize how fluid sexuality is - it's just becoming such a powerful community. So in that sense, I haven't really been doing as much because they are already doing so much. So, if I can give my time to something that is doing less well – you know.

#### **4.3.4 Taking Action**

When it comes to taking a position, (re)writing and designing her way into a world of activism and organizing, she has much to say about the role of art as a form of creative response:

EB: What about producing? I know that the one time we were talking about doing – my friend, the poet Katie Byrum, calls it “Kamikaze Art.” But art in different places, and leaving stuff. Do you feel like, are you involved in the production of information? Or, you know, are you making anything these days?

GS: I've been doing a lot of street art lately. It's mostly about Palestine and Israel. Students and immigration and all that stuff. And by the way, when I talk about immigration, I'm not talking just about U.S. immigration. I'm talking about Palestine for example, so it's broader. But I have been doing mostly a lot of street art...A lot of my work, it's mostly spray paint. And I usually do a background that is very random. Whatever inspires me at that moment. And then I stencil in whatever writing – or words – see sometimes it's just a word, like freedom.

EB: Right. You make your own stencils?

GS: No I don't make my own stencils. I have before but... I do have, I'm doing this with someone else too. And occasionally that other person will work with me. So, but not always. So, you know. For certain reasons, for safety reasons she can't always be with me. We do have an image that we go by. And when I do something independently, it's a certain letter. And when she is doing something independently, it's under another letter but with the same logo.

EB: Do you have photos of any of your stuff?

GS: No I don't. Never.

Her movement from spectator to actor is noticeable. In particular, she focuses on the real “work” of activist organizing – meeting and planning, as compared to the aggrandized notion of activism distilled down to the singular image of the shouting protester.

EB: Right. So we have talked a bit recently and you had been at Irving Place and these different places – so where have you been recently? You've got some stuff going on!

GS: (laughs) Recently, it's been more meetings than anything else, but I can't really talk about it because it is some action that is going to happen. So it's private but is going to be very radical.

EB: But then will it become public in its moment?

GS: Yes.

EB: Okay, I got you.

GS: Um, there is going to be this huge thing where the cops will get involved and people will probably get arrested. That's pretty much what we are dealing with right now, and it has to do with immigration policy and what not. So mostly, literally, it's been meetings. That's what I have been doing lately.



Here, she lays down the importance of preparation in organizing, holding teach-ins and meetings, interrogating policy initiatives and planning strategic actions. In the process, she acts to educate and change the existing discourses around her on the topics of immigration and education. Action is understood for her as much in organizing processes as in any one moment.

#### **4.3.5 Radical Self Reflection**

Green Strawberries reflects on the past as she talks about where she is today. It is noticeable how strongly she critiques the practices of the Left in regards to issues of race, gender and class.

EB: You think that Occupy is successful at all?

GS: I think that Occupy has been successful in branches, not as a whole.

EB: Okay.

GS: I feel like the immigration and the union perspective has definitely been successful. I don't really feel like many others are really doing anything. I have been hearing a lot about how a lot of people in Occupy Wall Street are not for focusing on undocumented immigration. That's just not an issue. Which makes me think, this is mostly by white people, right?

Through her continued critiques, she returns to (re)create a vision for the future. When I asked her about her vision, she went on a long aside about attending a Socialist conference in Chicago with Gentle Meadows. Her plans and steps for the future are connected to this remembrance:

EB: Where do you imagine it taking you in the future?

GS: Honestly, I just see myself [laughs]. Here's the thing. I don't have one of those five-year plans...

EB: No, no. [laughing]

GS: Even my degree, which I moved to political science recently. I have the degree, awesome, I'll do something with it. But really, I am going to focus on, I would really love to move to a Middle Eastern or South Asian country for a while but live with the indigenous...But I feel like, the problem with that is, I'm being very individualistic in that way. Because I'm going away from a collective to find my own self as a person of color. So really, that's my only plan so far. And hopefully, if I really do that and it truly happens, I can come back with a better, more radicalized perspective and take it even further. I definitely see myself becoming more and more and more radical as time goes by. And I see that because of the people I am also connected to also.

#### **4.3.6 Articulating an Activist Identity**

Green Strawberries articulated her activist identity as she teased out the benefits and challenges at work in the constitution of Leftist political organizing. At the time of the study, she was involved in organizing political events for Occupy Wall Street. She identified herself as more of an organizer than an activist. In saying so, she made the distinction between activists who show up at events and organizers who make it possible for events to happen.

As an organizer, she was skeptical of the operations of online organizing, even as she recognized its benefits. When I spoke to her, I frequently thought of the “Indignados” in Spain. She embodied indignation when it came to standing up against dehumanization, both online and in physical spaces of organizing. She argued that there is a deep need for activists to connect to people already involved with struggles “on the ground.” Green Strawberries challenged the fractured branches of Occupy Wall Street, critiquing the operations of the white, labor

movement's cooptation of Occupy's moment. She pointed out the difficulty of organizing without a unified message on the Left, a criticism leveled from many political perspectives.

Despite the divergence of topics, Green Strawberries had clear elements from cultural history, media and current events through and against which she positioned herself. She accessed much of her information from blunt, international news. She focused her organizing around issues related to immigration and education, as she had many friends and associates who struggled to get access to civic resources and higher learning. She created activist artifacts around the struggle of the Palestinian people, speaking in depth about her street art around Palestine and her desire to live in the Middle East to live and feel connected to her heritage. In her radical activist pursuits, she argued that organizing and activism is more than spectacle. She pointed to the crucial work of community building and challenged the political Left in the U.S. to find similarities to organize around even when the ideological lines force differences.

#### **4.4 PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF MARS**

People's Republic of Mars is a young man from Queens. He was finishing his final year at a private university in the city during this research project, having spent the previous year studying in London. I asked him if he had any preferred words to identify himself and he answered, "I prefer the word catalyst."

He is incredibly ambitious and always busy with projects and fundraisers. In his young career as a community organizer and activist, he has achieved much. Notably, he founded an organization, which he talks about later in the study. We talked in great depth about the specificity of organizing online and the larger notion of seeking out multiple perspectives as a

form of information activism. Much of our conversation around social and political organizing deviated toward a discussion of foreign affairs and ways to attain peace through the operations of major international and nongovernmental organizations. A diplomat with the heart of a social justice activist, People's Republic of Mars seeks to disrupt human rights violations in every form. He takes seriously the objectives of the Millennium Development Goals, critiquing various levels of public policy while brainstorming ways to positively impact material conditions to those without access to clean water, healthy food, affordable healthcare and quality education.

#### **4.4.1 Standing for Human Rights**

As we began to discuss his history around human rights activism, he questioned the underlying messages of some seminal texts upon which human rights policy is based, particularly looking at the CRC and other such frameworks of human rights. He explored the concept of hypocrisy and policy gaps as he talked about the textual intentions driving the human rights agenda:

PRM: And there are things that we do in the U.S. and we, you know, Guantanamo, waterboarding, everything. But when other countries do it, we say that it is a violation of human rights. Like, this is also a violation of human rights. So, we have to be a role model kind of. If we expect them to do something, we have to do it first and then tell them – all right, we are implementing and you should do it. Like, we haven't signed – what is it called? The – it's the children's human rights.

EB: Oh, the CRC?

PRM: CRC. Right. We haven't signed that yet...Yeah. (silence) So we cannot just tell people not to recruit child soldiers. Like, I personally think that child soldiers are, you

know, child soldiers are a terrible idea. You know? They force kids to fight. But, as much as I hate those people who recruit child soldiers, I see the other side also. I see that we have not signed, so we cannot just go and tell them “Stop that.” You know? We have to do that first, you know... But I just feel like before we tell them, we have to implement human rights here first.

#### **4.4.2 Perspectives on Media, History and Peace**

Throughout the course of our conversation, People’s Republic of Mars was quick to acknowledge policy gaps and hypocritical positions, asking hard questions about what constitutes a violation of human rights, on whose terms and with what evidence. I turned the conversation to talk about how he consumes media to consider multiple points of view on issues.

EB: Let’s jump back to sources for a minute. Where do you get your information from?

PRM: Well, for me, it’s from a diverse source. Like, I would do BBC, CNN, and I would compare that to – like, I would also do Fox, even though it is a little biased. But I would still be going there. For news about Middle East, I would do Al Jazeera. They have done a wonderful job covering the revolution in Egypt and everything. I just feel like it was less biased in terms of – in terms of what I have seen and what I have read in other news medias. I would do Huffington Post. I would compare styles and just analyze the whole thing, trying to get a better picture. So the whole different range of media... I have taken a class on literacy and public address, so I know what are some phrases that people use to make something seem more important or less important. So I feel like I

kind of have the ability to – I mean, no one knows what is happening on the ground, but I do more research to get a better picture.

His comparative news analysis named the diversity of sources he seeks out for perspectives on current events, some of which are progressive but still major forces in the information world. Our conversation moved to the topic of bias, and we began talking about what is happening globally. He began a discussion of marginalization, examining differences in the discourses around human rights as understood in the United States and elsewhere in the world. I shared an observation from my time at Carnegie Mellon to illustrate the competing narratives around issues of rights in the U.S. We tapped the topic of counter-narratives in a variety of ways:

EB: It's a challenge. When I was first in Pittsburgh, there were – and that's like the Rustbelt, Western Pennsylvania – there were signs that said "US Out of the UN" all over the place. You know? In many ways, it is like fighting an uphill battle in this country for any kind of international law like that because of exceptionalism, right? This idea that for some reason we don't have to be connected or involved on those kinds of platforms.

PRM: I mean, for many years, our policy was one of isolation from the rest of the world. I mean, we are geographically located in a place where, you know, isolation is very favored in a sense. But now, it's a global world, you know? We cannot just isolate ourselves and not doing anything about things like Rwanda or Bosnia. It's our responsibility, it's our world. You know, if someone is struggling, it will become our responsibility. But it should not be like motivated by selfish means. Like, oh we want natural resources, or a logic like that.

His call to action, to amp up human rights protection and fix the United Nations, demonstrates his motivation to create a peaceable world. We talked about summits where "Third World"

representatives protest, but that the exercise of voting does little to change the material conditions of people in need. He critiqued the U.N. and a large discussion about peacekeeping followed. He argued that the “UN has a big role in peacekeeping and peace enforcement”:

PRM: I understand that [the peacekeepers] loyalties should be first for their countries and second for the U.N., but kind of finding a common ground on something that, you know, we don't need like – if something like a genocide is happening, you don't need Security Council vote to try to prevent. And I feel like we should have more peace enforcement.

EB: Right. It's complicated. When I think about issues, like the peacekeepers for instance. Do you want them to have weapons? Will that promote a form of violence? I think peace enforcement is an interesting sort of paradoxical term. How do you enforce peace? Do you enforce it with weapons?

#### **4.4.3 Challenging Power Relations**

People's Republic of Mars is deeply knowledgeable about international diplomacy and the conflicting perspectives around the operations of the U.N. Army. He talks about the corruption and duplicity of Ambassadors in various locales in the world, and he highlights the need for meaningful work that affects subordinated groups. As he spoke in brief about the connection between the personal and the political, he began to detail the work that his organization is currently doing.

PRM: I was inspired by HRAP to create my organization. And, right now, we have two schools. I mean, we will be – it wouldn't be fair if I said I'm not doing anything. I'm doing stuff, but it's not me directly doing it. I'm making perhaps, like people do it. But

that is also considered kind of activism. So I think that is why I started the organization. I volunteer time. A lot of my friends have their own non-profits or their own initiatives, and I just go volunteer here and there.

He talked about his experience volunteering at various initiatives, revisiting and complicating his original definition of activism as action on the ground. He also talked about the ways in which he uses language to challenge positions and postures of power.

EB: So, I've read a lot doing this research and talked to a lot of people about the critique of rights, which is a fairly interesting thing to think about. Like, that the UN or the US or anybody involved in the creation of the UDHR – that those were first world countries with first world interests. Do you ever confront that?

He went on a long aside, talking about the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the concept of human rights generally as a “good framework.” He discussed the divides between theory and practice, and accentuated the point that there is always bias in implementation. He critiqued the bias in various religions that promotes forms of condemnation instead of tolerance. Talking about human rights policy, he highlighted the disjoint between foreign policy initiatives and consistent implementation:

PRM: But, I mean, whatever the documents that we have right now – they are good. They just – the implementation is biased. For example, even like U.S. in general. They would not be forcing countries to implement human rights the same way. You know, Saudi Arabia, for example. We never worry about who is running the country, what kind of rights are there and what kind of rights are respected. But we would be voicing our opinions and concern over Iran - or some other country, that we are not good friends with right now. So, I feel like the implementation is very biased.



His critique of the bias in human rights protections in practice brought immediately to my mind the nearly twenty year gap between Brown versus the Board of Education and the forced integration of segregated schools in the United States. Our discussion included much emphasis on subordinate groups and ways to provide for the politicized articulation of counter-narratives and self-determination amongst such groups. He focused in particular on immigration policy and the struggle of undocumented persons:

PRM: Like, DREAM Act – I love my work with immigration. When I was in high school, a lot of my friends, even though they were talented, they were super-talented, all the grades were very good, everything under their belt, but they couldn't go to good schools because of their immigration status even though they lived here their whole lives. You know? So, I am always active whenever something comes up. Like, when a recent update happens. For instance, recently Obama kind of like – was suspending the deportation of young undocumented immigrants who would have been benefited from the DREAM Act. So, just updating people about things like that. You know, that's just – the DREAM Act is something that I want to see passed. So that's something I feel like I would do more work on. Just, try to like – not only DREAM Act. Just to get like, kind of like a comprehensive mediation. I think that DREAM Act should be, would be like a first step. But...work to make sure that there is comprehensive immigration reform passed.

#### **4.4.4 Taking Action**

When we spoke about taking action, it was in terms of re-writing and designing actions, positioning People's Republic of Mars in relation to his past and current activism and advocacy.

PRM: Activism doesn't have to be like, just standing in front of something and chanting slogans. It could be just changing something that's not - that you do not perceive it as being right. You know, that could be poverty; that could be just making sure that people get the education that they deserve... It could be a single thing like that. Just like, feeding people. I work in a soup kitchen. All of these things would be considered activism.

I wondered if the other participants would agree with this definition, as well as scholars and hardliners on the topic of activism. Is it moralistic to stand up against something you perceive as not right? And what does it look like to stand up to poverty or hunger in practice? Is feeding people a form of ethical activism? I wanted to know more, and asked him how he became an activist. He immediately named Global Kids and HRAP:

PRM: HRAP was a big part. HRAP started – or planted the seeds of activism in me. I would be working on the DREAM Act, I would be working on anti-discrimination, so many different things. Food justice. I got involved with anything, pretty much. That's the beginning. That's the start.

Although he didn't go into great detail about his initial motivation to get involved, he was highlighting a form of intersubjectivity. He noted that he wasn't doing as much activism as he has previously, that he was more involved with organizational and policy level topics:

PRM: So, I am not currently doing like, ground activism right now, but I have done that before in the past. I feel like I am still involved in activism. Just, telling people what is going on in the world and what they should be doing about it is a form of activism.

#### 4.4.5 Envisioning Activism and Advocacy

This focus on Internet organizing informed our discussion of his reflection on the past and his goals for future activism. When I asked him about the future, he encouraged me to continue to connect with human rights organizers internationally. He noted that it is a difficult struggle to develop a network of organizers “that is not so much censored or edited by diplomatic channels.”

When I asked him for his vision for the future, he focused on the need to remember the intentions and objectives behind the Millennium Development Goals because they “pretty much cover everything.” As an activist and an organizer, he had more specific plans for himself:

PRM: Well, right now I’m trying to expand my organization. Get the 501c3. So I am looking for lawyers that could guide me through the 501c3. It’s a long process, so. I want to do more activism because it’s a human rights organization. But, I am going to do the implementation of human rights but at the same time do a lot of activism here in the US and even in other countries when we expand. So that’s my goal, you know. There have been organizations, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, but I want to do more ground work and more like, radical activism but you know – not necessarily violent or anything. So that’s my goal. That’s the plan. Let’s just see how things go.

Before he left our interview to head to a day full of meetings at his university, I asked him one last question: why did he choose People’s Republic of Mars as his pseudonym?

Well, like I said, it’s just like a utopia. It’s an ideal place for me. Because Mars has not been inhabited yet. So I just feel like, it could be a new beginning and a new world. And if you start a new world, you want to make sure that everything you messed up in this world gets – you get to start anew, in a way. You could start everything from a fresh

beginning. Yeah, so that was the thinking process there, People's Republic of Mars. And also, it's a people's republic. It's not like a dictatorship or anything else. A people's republic. I always prefer giving people the voice.

#### **4.4.6 Articulating an Activist Identity**

People's Republic of Mars articulated his activist identity in relation to his deep knowledge of public health, international affairs and foreign policy. He is situated in a space where diplomacy intersects with direct action around human rights violation. He is adept at providing insight and suggestions on organizing projects as he talked about his own work within and outside the realm of policy intervention. He stated clearly that activism doesn't have a particular medium, mode of operation or location. He alluded to the "grassroots," where organizing means to organize one's self and to prepare others to engage in networking and community activism locally.

As an activist, People's Republic of Mars is internationally and globally-minded. His local work in New York has always been connected to immigration, access to healthcare and education, and creating safe community spaces. He invoked international frameworks for thinking critically about our interactions with our rights. In doing so, he challenged the hypocrisy of the United States around implementation of human rights policy and approaches to peacekeeping. Like other study participants, he deferred to international news for diverse information about current social and political events happening around the world.

As an organizer, it is noteworthy that People's Republic of Mars recently created his own organization. In discussing his business plans and objectives, it is clear that he wanted to move beyond the slow grind of policy lobbying and into the realm of direct action, to bring

clean water and food to children and schools. He acknowledged the wide array of forms that activism takes which are quieter than the trope of public protest such as feeding people, teaching, and being of service in local community spaces. As he contemplated the role of Internet organizing and his future work around human rights, People's Republic of Mars demonstrated the expansive vision of empowering individuals and communities with the tools to achieve a healthy standard of living. He used the language of history to challenge power in contemporary struggles for human rights, safety, freedom and dignity for current and future generations.

#### **4.5 AWESOME WOMAN**

In her own words: “Awesome Woman is a college student who is incredibly curious about the world. She's particularly interested in community organizing, event planning, race politics, women's rights, literacy, feminism, theater, LGBT identities and issues, post-colonial manifestations of culture and fashion. She spends most of her time organizing several events on campus and loving people. She's plain and simple, AWESOME!”

I met Awesome Woman when she was a sophomore in high school. She always struck me as an insightful, outspoken young woman. As you will learn in the pages below, Awesome Woman thinks deeply about issues and intelligently challenges social and cultural norms that allow ignorance and hate to go unchallenged and unaddressed. Over the course of the study, we met up around downtown Manhattan and in Brooklyn for lengthy conversations. In each of her vocal critiques, she spoke knowledgeably about so many interconnected issues, crossing borders between race, gender, religion, sexuality and citizenship.

#### 4.5.1 Questioning the Status Quo

Across our six hours of interviews, I was struck by Awesome Woman's ability to mobilize her self. Through her stories of the past, she described vivid remembrances, current struggles and future visions. During the course of the study, she directed numerous cultural programs and activist projects at her university, attended a citywide Feminist Bootcamp, and traveled to South Africa on an educational study trip. She talked chronologically about each of these epochs, but I introduce them here discontinuously to highlight emerging themes in her on-going conversations around prejudice, identity, internationality and the dire need for critical education.

EB: Do you see yourself disrupting the commonplace frequently?

AW: Yeah. Wow. I never thought about that, but I totally do. (laughing). All the time. Yeah. A lot of my friends from high school are guys and so, they make fun of me for being a feminist but I'm like – really, some of all y'all are feminists too, you just don't know it.

EB: Or they don't want to admit it.

AW: They don't admit it.

EB: What was fascinating was in the video you showed me from the Feminist Bootcamp, because you use the word "language." Not many other people do, but you do. You say I want to use and support certain language. And you know, one of the questions in my analysis is – do you question the textual intention of things? And it sounds like you constantly do.

AW: I do. I do. That's why – yeah. Have you seen the video, did I show you the three videos I made?

EB: I don't know if you did.

AW: So I did three different ones. One, it was about men and – like I was on Facebook one day and it was like, “Oh summer’s coming. I don’t want to see any girls with any folds” and blah blah blah. And I’m just like, shut the fuck up. Who are you to judge? It’s not your body, first of all. And if you don’t like it, look away. So I made a video about that. And then, I made one about questions. Like me as a woman-identified queer person, how can I judge some male who is, I don’t know, who is walking around wearing flip-flops or whatever. And I’m like, why are you wearing those? Ew. You shouldn’t be wearing them. (laughs) Yeah. But, why do I need to do that? Why is that any of my business? Why do I need to comment?

EB: It is totally a form of violence though, right?

AW: It is. It’s just wrong. It just promotes – we already have a society that hates bodies and movement and all that stuff.

Awesome Woman questions the operations of status quo moralism. She looks at different points of view and considers multiple perspectives on issues of identity, community, mainstream media and hateful position taking. In doing so, she simultaneously uses language to interrogate the status quo while proffering a more peaceable future. There were many multiple ways in which she was disruptive (Piven, 2011) engaging in deep reflection on the actions she has taken and has yet to take. We talked across concepts of language, voice, silence, power and marginalization in our discussion of her activism and organizing. In early reflection upon the differences between cultures, she extended a critique of human rights similar to that articulated by Peoples Republic of Mars and the Eurocentrism Gentle Meadows talked about:

AW: It’s so interesting. When we talk about other peoples, and other countries, and say what they are doing is wrong. How do you know that? You don’t live in that society.

You know? You don't know what goes into it. I remember I was reading a chapter from this book – my friend is reading this book called *Half the Sky* and I read a chapter – and it is about this woman, and it is about a whole bunch of different women and their struggles. And it was about this one woman, who got raped and she ended up being sort of like a Mother Teresa – she has taken women who are battered and she had her own shelter inside her house. So it's like this amazing story about how she overcame and has done all this stuff for other women. And then it says, that she got married and became somebody's second wife. Like, it's not a problem that she is somebody's second wife but that they put it under as like a joke, you know. Like, she did all of this and then she decided she was going to be a second wife. How sad, how demoralizing, how degrading. You know? And I felt like that was really there, and I was so unnerved about it. Like, why – there is so much we don't understand and we just, our views of human rights are what we consider rights. And we don't take in all of the social and political aspects of things that happen in other places. And it's really horrible. I guess - what am I trying to say? I'm not going to call it Eurocentric, because we're not Europeans, but like, the idea that like, how we believe things should be the same everywhere. But that's not true. And half of the difficulties of having treaties is that. I mean, not that we shouldn't try or shouldn't aim for that. But treaties that like, where all of those countries are supposed to agree upon, like the Geneva Convention.

EB: The CRC.

AW: Exactly. So like, different politics and history. A lot of rich history. Like why people don't greet the same way, and are considered so barbaric.



She questions textual intentions around the creation of our identities and our values in relation to these moralistic positions and approaches to thinking about rights. Much of what Awesome Woman said echoed sentiments expressed by People's Republic of Mars, that there need to be a sense of self-responsibility in a nation's dictates beyond its borders. We took the notion borders further as she continued to discuss history and current events:

AW: There are borders, like actual barriers that were put up, that don't make sense.

EB: Like colonized lines?

AW: Yeah, like families who have been separated for centuries because of lines that are superficial or artificial. I'm not sure which word I'm looking for.

EB: Both, I think.

AW: Maybe (laughs). And then within places, people separate themselves all the time. Within the nation, or whatever. And so now, I'm so interested in South Africa. And there was this really shitty special that I watched the other day. And I was just like - oh, it's on so let me watch it. And it was called "Global White Woman." And basically, it was like, sort of like, an exploration of beauty for white women in South Africa. So I was really so upset. It was basically like this Indian dude who was like, a self-identified Indian dude, who was like basically talking about his obsession with white women and why. And he was so misogynist, I couldn't even appreciate it. And at the end, I was like why did I watch this? It didn't explore anything that was new to me and I feel like it wasn't new to a lot of audiences. Like, we know white women are beautiful, are considered beautiful in South Africa, but why really? And who came up with these ideas of beauty? That was not explored.

Awesome Woman organizes around numerous interconnected issues, and speaks at length about their interconnections. She consistently told stories in answer to my questions, inevitably responding with deep complexity and an embrace of contradiction and complication as a result.

#### **4.5.2 Speaking Exponentially**

Awesome Woman offered multiple perspectives on her own work in relationship to the current events and issues she organizes around in her local contexts. In doing so, she considers multiple viewpoints and alternate ways of seeing the topics that she organizes around. To speak exponentially on local and global topics, she reads deeply:

EB: Let's talk in terms of looking at literacy a little. What information do you take in – do you consume – that enhances your perspective on this stuff? Where do you get your information?

AW: So, I like to read a lot of blogs. Like, Saddam Hussein's ex-mistress. And she is – well that's what she is famous for. Or, that's how I got to know her. But she writes all about racial tensions within the Black community um – and history and she writes a lot of novels also. She's kind of just like a Renaissance woman.

EB: Is she in the U.S., or is she –

AW: She's in the U.S. And so I follow a lot of people. So media, I dive into that. Also, I just have like – because I've been in all these different diversity trainings. And so I have a lot of texts. But, I'm really about reading traditional – well, not traditional. But the issues I am involved with, sort of like the bibles of these different topics. So like...

EB: So like...authors?

AW: Yeah. Like Audre Lorde is super important in that way. About being queer, or being Black and queer. Or being of color. And, I started to read Gender Outlaw. I'm not finished with it.

EB: Kate Bornstein?

AW: Yeah. I met her! Oh my god. She's such a character. I met her at this, like this "femmes conference." (laughing) Yeah, that was really interesting. Yeah, so I'm reading the bibles. And I'm really interested in Richard Wright, and – in general, I'm also interested in spirituality and how that manifests in different contexts. You know. Like, how people – based on age and... So, I've read the Bible sometimes. I can't read the Qur'an for some reason. I'm going to learn how to read Arabic next semester so that I can really read Arabic and – so yeah. Those are kind of my sources and just like, I watch a lot of stuff. Things that are thrown out to me, I do watch. Yeah, so I put myself out there for information. So not – I'm taking stuff in, but I also put it back out there. And I don't really say anything rude, you know. But I still say like – I have an audience for some stuff.

At one point in our discussions, I asked her why she engages in activism around specific issues, specifically looking at issues related to women and to religion:

AW: Um, so - why do I do that? So, I feel like right now what I organize are things that are more like cultural programming. All of them are not necessarily acts of activism but they can be. Like I'm on the board for the Islamic Student Association at my school. Usually, it's kind of like we're meeting together and we share a similar spirituality. But when things happen – like for instance when the NYPD surveilled us, like we're on that big list of schools – I took a big part in organizing our teach-in. And that's when it

becomes activism. When you organize, when you have this community, you keep it strong and whenever a threat comes to this community is when it comes to activism. Organizing in general can be about that community and when you have an issue that arises, that is when it becomes activism.

In talking about these moments where cultural and personal issues become overtly politicized, Awesome Woman articulates ways in which she responds to moments of injustice, bigotry and hatred. In doing so, she highlights her own responsive output to the inputs she receives:

AW: I feel that my personal activisms are more about educating people. So I get angry a lot. I made a video one time and – well no one would say, or some people would say – that the video was like, me being an activist. But essentially it's not very obvious. So there were a couple of people on Facebook talking shit about women's bodies. Like, "summertime is coming, I better not see your jelly rolls." And blah blah blah. And, "Ladies, you can wear one pieces." And I'm just like – that's not your body! Why do you have an issue with someone else's body? And that pissed me off because that further perpetuates the negative images we have of women's bodies. And we just allow that to happen. And it's just like – who are you, man, to tell me what to wear? And who are you to say anything about my body? And I feel like – a lot of people have these negative – a lot of people are really uncomfortable with their bodies at all. There are so many body issues. And it's like constantly we are being slapped in the face with it. And people say this is what we're supposed to look like. But not – we're humans and we're supposed to look like a whole bunch of different shapes and sizes. People don't know that. So I made a video and basically what I said was if you don't like it, look away. That's what it was about. But I did outline why it is like that, why you can't do that and

why you should stop doing that. So for me, that was an act of personal activism. And some people took it in and were like – you have a point. And it really isn't for me. I really have no reason to say what a woman should wear. So, the person who was really adamant about this. When they saw the video, they messaged me and they were like – you're right. And I was like, snap!

EB: That's the goal though right? Some kind of education?

AW: Yeah. Education is super important to me and just in general – so I don't let a lot of stuff slip by. People always think or say “oh you're easily irritated or agitated” and I'm like “No! You're just an asshole and I tell you why you're an asshole.” [EB laughs] I'm not going to let you continue to be that way because that's just not who I am. My mission on earth is not to let people just continue being how they are. I feel like I have to say something – I just can't sit back and let things slide by. If no one says anything to you, you're just going to keep doing that, saying that to other people and making other people feel like crap. And who knows what that one little comment can do to a person. Um...I totally drifted. What was the question again?

### **4.5.3 The F Word**

This tendency to drift in and out of story is a key part of Awesome Woman's ability to peer educate. She is at turns macro and micro, enraged and joyful. I learned so much in simple conversation with her. She discusses difference by foregrounding feminism, accentuating the connection between the personal and the political. In our conversations, she constantly crossed borders of identity, exploring the tensions between social rigidity and moralism. I asked her

when she first began participating in activism, and she told me a story that was highly personal and detailed in its remembrance. I excerpt here at length to respect her nuanced memory:

AW: I can say I started to be an activist when I went to Sudan for the third time. I went to school there, for almost a year, I went for a whole school year.

EB: How old were you?

AW: I was eleven. No, I was twelve, and I turned thirteen then. My birthday happened while I was there. And I remember, like, I was terrified to go to school. Um, or I was optimistic – but I was also terrified.

EB: You had been here?

AW: Yeah, I was coming from a New York City school, post 9/11, coming from a really shitty experience. Like even after Sudan, like when I came back for 8<sup>th</sup> grade, awful experience. But I'm glad it happened, because I don't know who I'd be. It made me an optimist. So bad! The worst times of my lives, really, and I just remember in 6<sup>th</sup> grade being bullied like crazy, out of hand, but I couldn't even tell the teacher because then you would be a snitch. And nobody respects a snitch. Like, it was dangerous. I couldn't be me, and I couldn't even say anything really. Because I know – my dad, he is the kind of guy that is like – I don't care what the laws are, I'm going to protect you. And I was like, I can't have my dad being crazy. You know what I mean, that's a big deal. And if I told, then what would happen to me? You know, there were just a whole bunch of things going on with that. And I remember coming to – going to the Sudan, and I'm just like – wow, kids are going to accept me because they are like me. No. I was American as fuck to them. But I was like – I was a foreigner terrorist here, but when I came to Sudan it was like – you are American, you represent evil.

EB: Wow.

AW: Yeah, and I felt that. I really felt that.

EB: That's crazy.

AW: Yeah. And my classmates – all my classmates were international rich kids. Some of them are coming from parts of Europe, and they are either Sudanese or like – other forms of Arab. Or, there was also an Asian girl, one Asian girl. Their parents were either in business, or government – which is also business, or they are just rich in Sudan. And so, and also, I am poor in America – I think I'm poor, but in Sudan, I do have money there. So, I'm just coming from this very interesting background. Coming here and I just expected them to be open with all arms. But no. It was very difficult. I remember being in fights every day. I never had a fight in my life in America. And now, I had so many fights. Like, every day I would fight girls. I went to an all-girls school, all-girls Islamic school. All-girls Islamic International school. Big deal, it was like – so much. And I remember, so okay – one time, I had a friend. So what happened was, eventually, all the English-speaking kids, all the foreign kids who were not from Europe or did not speak Arabic, formed a pact. So I had friends, I had a friend from Florida whose parents – and she was like me in a lot of ways – and she is from the US, her parents are also both not Sunnis. Her mom is African-American and her dad is Sudanese. My mom is Haitian, my dad is Sudanese. So I was like, “Oh my God, twins.” (laughs) I had another friend and she was an Egyptian-Irish person. It was like “Oh my god, you're Irish and Egyptian.” She looked one way but talks and you're like [AW makes inquisitive look on her face]. And she was so different from me. And I had another friend from Canada. But Mani is the most important. She was my – I remember when I was really sad, um, she – because

she got promoted to another grade, just because her dad was like, “I’m going to give you money, promote my daughter.” And I failed the English exam – no wait, I failed the math exam, so I got left back technically. So I was in 6<sup>th</sup> grade. But – so she bit a teacher. And that was because – so you are allowed to hit kids, in that school. And so – I witnessed it, so – when he was trying to hit her, he brushed up against her. And I don’t know if it was on purpose or not, but she bit him because of it. And she got in trouble because she bit him. And I was like, “Yo, this is not right. Like, I can’t – this is totally not right. He like, molested her or some shit, I’m not gonna” – So I remember, I was crying because I was like – my friend is going to be expelled, like my one really tight friend, and we had this similar background, and I loved her, I couldn’t let this happen. So I was crying and crying, and she was sent to the principal’s office. And people were saying rumors like “Oh, she’s going to get in trouble” or “they’re going to expel her” or whatever. So one time, in class, the same teacher is talking and he was like “she’s a troublemaker,” or whatever, and so I ran to the principal’s office – and the principal is also my distant relative, and I went down and I screamed – “He...” and you know, I was very embarrassed about body parts too, but no – he touched her boob. You can’t let that happen. He definitely. And that’s why she bit him. She has a right. She felt like she was being attacked and she attacked him back. And people were surprised. Because I don’t – I never really spoke up about anything except, I used to just fight. That was more like fighting then – and I never got in trouble because my aunt was like headmistress, but still things were difficult for me. And I also didn’t tell anyone that she was my aunt, and I would go to the headmistress but not get in trouble. And I didn’t want to say anything,



and she didn't say anything either. And I was just like "No, this is not okay." I think that is what I can identify as my first act of activism.

EB: It's incredible.

AW: Yeah (laughing). I – I was crying saying like "No, you can't do that." But yeah, that was it. The first act of activism and that came from a really – from a place of me feeling like the cultures I was a part of were very women hating. And I really wanted - I really felt a lot of anger about that. And so, coming back to America, I definitely really became more active about it. But that is what I think of as my first – yeah.

As she detailed that story from her youth and traced her activist history, she discussed her most recent trip to South Africa. In the process, she leveraged the silenced/marginalized voices of those she knows, those she meets, and all who are oppressed:

AW: I'm trying to think of like really profound moments on my trip. There was one time, when I was on this bus with this kid who, like, I don't think – he told me I was the first Muslim person he spoke to. This was a white Afrikaner kid. We spent – we were going to a national park, and we spent like four hours on a bus together. And I'm not sure what's his experience with black people or women. And we had an intense conversation about religion. And he was talking about Christianity from his point of view, which was so interesting to me because I asked, "What sect are you?" And he said, "I don't have a sect." And I'm like, okay, but the things that you are talking about are very specific – versus, like, the Christianity that I am used to, which is like – because he was talking about, or really his main argument with me was about that he thinks that Islam, that some of the things that we require Muslims to do is performance. And he was trying to define performance for me. His English, also, wasn't the best. He was trying to

explain performance to me, and I was not getting it. I was actually kind of offended. I was like, what do you mean, performance?

EB: Like, Judith Butler, or no?

AW: (laughs) Yeah.

EB: But not?

AW: Well, performance. And he was talking about how – that to be a good Christian, all you have to do is believe there is a God. And I was like, what you don't have to pray, you don't have to go to church, you don't have to be a good person? You don't have to give charity? Or what? What does it mean to be a good Christian? And I was just thinking about it, and I'm like, I wonder what his context of Christianity, tied to South Africa, how does he get that? And then I was thinking about, in general, what were the people who came to South Africa for? They came on a mission, right, but when they used Christianity as a means to it, I'm like, what are their ideas of what a good Christian is? And how is that translating down to this fellow? Like, what that means. Because basically he was saying, "If you're chillin', you're a good Christian." And I'm like, there's more to it, I'm sure! Like, I don't know. And I don't use him as the example of what Christianity is, because I have had so many sources –

Awesome Woman went on a long aside about experiences with the other US-based students who traveled to South Africa with her. She highlighted the need to be inclusive and open to understanding multiple perspectives to get a sense of what is so political about social and cultural histories and memories.

AW: I feel like if you really bring folks together and let them talk, they will realize. Like the conversation I had with the guy. He was like, "whoa, Islam is the same thing as

Christianity, basically.” And I’m like, “I knew that.” But to him, it was some foreign thing where we are just dark people and – you know.

EB: That’s a challenge for you, I’m sure. You know some stuff, and you have to educate people whether you are in South Africa or Brooklyn.

AW: Yeah. And that’s always a challenge too because sometimes I feel like – is it my duty to educate everyone?

EB: It gets exhausting, right?

AW: It gets so exhausting. I’m like, just – I need to stop telling people about myself. You need to research. Like, I can’t be the Rosetta Stone of Otherness for you (laughs).

EB: You’re not trying to be a native informant, bell hooks style.

AW: Right – I am not trying to do that. But I do believe in educating people as is possible in informal ways. So that’s a challenge. But the guy that I was talking to, he was saying all of these things to me, but then he was like, “Can I be honest with you? This is the first time that I had a real conversation with a black girl. Like a black person period.” And then later, toward the end of the trip, I was getting really tired and it was late at night, still on this bus, I was trying to get comfortable, and he was like “Do you want to lean on my shoulder?” And I was like, what the fuck? This dude asked me to like – and in my mind, maybe I’m making it bigger than it is, but in my understanding of his context, this is the first time that this is ever going to happen for him. When he tries to engage people in the future. What does it mean? And so, I was thinking about – I sometimes have conversations with people and I don’t realize how epic they are until later in life –

EB: You’re pretty epic.

AW: (laughs) Thank you... But things like that, I'm just like – every conversation in South Africa was pretty epic on its own.

#### **4.5.4 Taking Action**

For Awesome Woman, an important part of her activist work involves her creation and dissemination of original information, programming and educative materials. In particular, she uses media to actively challenge inequitable power relations. She spoke on multiple occasions about her use of video:

AW: Another video I made was about the question, “where are you from?” And it talked about like, geography versus the essence of where are you from? I was really mad and I made it like two hours after an incident happened. Like, it happened and I went home and I was like, I'm going to video this.

EB: That's such a good exercise, such a creative way to respond to stuff.

AW: Um, so that's – okay. So yeah, I constantly disrupt the commonplace because I just have a lot to talk about. Like one thing that irks me is when people say female and male instead of – or, I mean they use it as a noun instead of as an adjective. Like if you're saying “I can't stand when males do this or females do this,” like that's just awkward. Like, are you not familiar with English? I'm pretty sure you're not supposed to do that. (laughs) It sounds gross to me, and I usually hear it with negative connotations especially. Like, you know. And that's one thing that irks me to heck, I can't stand it. Well, especially like the stuff boys write on Facebook. Like, “all females don't know blah blah blah” and I'm just like, shut the fuck up.

It is noteworthy that Awesome Woman includes subordinate voices as she addresses the sociopolitical realities of counter-narratives in counter-spaces. Our conversation around her participation in Feminist Bootcamp revolved around an inclusion of subordinate voices:

EB: You showed up to Feminist Bootcamp. I've had that link open on my computer since when you were over last –

AW: There's a video of me on that.

EB: Really? I totally want to see it. (searching for video) But, in my mind, I don't think that feminists are militant, you know. None of those stereotypical things. Even still, I'm like, I wonder what happened when she got there? ... What does Feminist Bootcamp actually look like? Is everybody in camo or, do you know what I mean? And of course I know that they're not. But what does it look like?

AW: It's definitely not – I definitely expected the organizers to be, I didn't know these organizers and they presented themselves as rich white feminists. But I didn't know them– they wrote the Feminist Manifesto. But everybody who knew them loved them overall.

EB: That's interesting because I was just reading about how so many people who do feminist art or feminist work often homogenize everything into a white middle class experience. What's their book?

AW: I forgot what it's called. Young Feminist's Guide to – it's like one of the first books in the Feminist Manifesto it's called...They're really nice women and I – it actually was more diverse than I expected, so I was okay with that. Although they are – or seems like they have this one book and they like – it could've been a homogenized

experience but it really wasn't. I thought I would be the only person of color, but there were like at least two other people of color – so there were three!

EB: Out of a crowd of like – fifty?

AW: No, it wasn't that big. There were like twenty of us? It wasn't bad.

EB: Where was it held?

AW: At one of the theatres.

AW: Yeah, we had two older women too, which was kind of rare.

EB: Cool... So, was it – did you feel like, did they do teach-ins on different ideologies and approaches to feminism?

AW: No, it wasn't about that.... Everyday was a focus. One day was the body. One day was reproductive justice. Everything was a new topic, and I think my favorite was the last one when it was the bodies. It was like body and images and, so first we talked to – we went to Columbia and we talked to this woman. She's a feminist and she's disabled. She's a professor. We talked to her and she was so beautiful. And, yeah she talked about a very important thing, about how when you talk about feminism it's supposed to include all. But you go to events and they're not wheelchair accessible. What does that say?

EB: It's an ablest feminist agenda.

AW: Yeah, so Tuesday was the work day. We went to our internships. And I got to work with my friend who works at Girls for Gender Equity. And I was there, helping her. They had their 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary gala. And every time I do something, I'm surprised that I'm connected. Because you always think like, I don't know anyone. But actually, I know lots of people.

EB: I know. I was just thinking about that about my friend from college who was involved with Autostraddle and was remembering you and our conversation about it. Everything is way more integrated than we think that it is. Really connected.

AW: Yeah, I totally want to do the training and if after college, if I don't end up doing something else, I might try to be a full-time doula. Or so, yeah the woman who came when we were talking about abilism. At Barnard. And I was thinking about how beautiful she is. And, so at my school we have something called "the ism project." So there is, it is through a center for multiculturalism. And they deconstruct isms, you know. They deconstruct abilism but I want to do like a photo-shoot with different disabled women. I think I want to have a gallery and not really talk about it, just show it. So she really just inspired me. People don't really focus. They only victimize, which is not fair.

In approaching topics of activism and action, it's interesting to consider what Awesome Woman conceives of as most imperative. She highlights the central role of educating, information sharing and discussion in understanding others and connecting across differences to create safer spaces for care and healing amongst communities.

#### **4.5.5 Perform the Unwritten**

One thing that is noteworthy in dialogue with Awesome Woman is the way in which she includes competing narratives and counter-narratives in a larger conversation around identity. As a performer, both theatrically trained and conceptually focused, she ceaselessly pushes into new terrain:

EB: Tell me about the Hijabi Monologues.

AW: Oh no, that performance was postponed.

EB: Oh, okay.

AW: But this Saturday, we are doing a limited performance. It's free. It's for Global Deaf Muslim. So they are trying to put together sign language for the Qur'an. They want to have the Qur'an in sign. You should see some of the videos – it's so intense. The girls are saying things like "We're deaf, not dumb." And they are trying to come up with signs for certain phrases... But different words and the signing of them. It's really fascinating.

EB: Yeah, it is.

AW: So what happened was – our room got cancelled. So, I reserved space at the university. Because of some bullshit – it got cancelled. They had another event at the same time as our event. And they were like – hey, can you move your event? And we were like, "No, we can't move our event." And the Law School had moved their event to another day. So they invited us. So, although it is a limited performance, we are getting an honorarium so that is cool. And they are going to have people sign what we are saying, which is incredibly cool. The Hijabi Monologues itself – that is a piece of activism.

EB: Yeah, that's what I am thinking. So – break it down.

AW: So, Sahar – her name is Sahar Ullah. She went to Stanford and it talking about her experience with some of her classmates. And one of her good friends, he is a white Christian man. And he was like – you should write everything you are saying and perform those words out. And she was like, ok, and she started writing. And she had a



show at Stanford and then she went out – what she says is, I feel like I’m quoting her now, is that her show was inspired by the Vagina Monologues, in which she takes something private and makes it public. And Sahar, her vision is to take something that everyone is talking about, and make it more private. Because women are telling different stories. And the hijab is not the center of the story – it’s a prop. It’s just a prop, yeah. But the story, they are talking with their perspectives on the Hijabi, or on being a Muslim. So you don’t necessarily have to be Hijabi, that is the one who wears the hijab, to tell the story because it is still part of your life whether you wear it or not. So I like – I am fascinated with this project. And I’m part of the cast.

EB: So you are performing at universities and other places?

AW: Yeah, so we performed so far – we have only performed in one other – this is going to be our second performance. We performed at this graduate student residence hall, another limited performance, of students at Columbia and other students in the city. And so, I really love the project because it is not trying to be political, it is just telling a story. And I feel like that in itself is an act. Just to open your mouth and tell a story that everyone else is talking about. And to say, “I have a stake in this, here’s my perspective.” And they also do, at the end of every show, there is a question and answer, and there are feedback sheets because she is always trying to update the show and make sure that whatever message is out there, that is translates. So I can say that one piece that is part of the show is this woman who, she’s walking, it’s called 49<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup>, and she’s from Ohio originally, and she is visiting New York during the time of the Park 51 center – that whole issue – and she’s coming and she’s really fearful. And she is walking in

Time Square and she's really fearful, and that was just a couple of months after the Time Square bombings.

EB: Right.

AW: So, she is walking in this area and she is just like highly aware and really scared. Things are going on around her. She is being followed by this woman, and she doesn't know why, and she feels like she is going to be attacked. And the woman's like, "Can I hug you?" And the woman is like, "You want to hug me? You stopped me in this crazy busy place to hug me?" And she said, "Well, I come from a place of hate." She was from Israel, and she was like "This hug, seeing you is like, it civilizes a future for hope." And so, people were touched by it, but the story and what it is about – it's just like, wow. I'm a walking representation always. So that is what it was like for me. Because at first, I didn't even pick up on that second part. I was like, this is really cute. But then – that's me. You know? And I'm just like – damn, she is a representation. That is the whole idea of this. And I find a lot of people don't get that. Or you have to – or they don't care. And I'm really excited about that story, and it was done very well.

EB: That's very interesting, especially because a lot of what this project is about is about how you perform your activist self every day. Like, every – I always know that I am performing my radical queer whatever (laughing). Like, you know. And not in a performative way, as if it's untrue. But more the feeling that, "that's how you are." A walking representation. It's really interesting.

Awesome Woman engages in deep reflection and visioning around her activism, from early design and institutional programming to direct action and public performance. As a trained

performer, she pushes past borders of gender and sexuality, tapping a shared social justice discourse space that is not known in many cultural circles:

EB: We have already talked about performance, and it sounds like you have got a lot of stuff going on there. So I wrote, where do you see your involvement in activism going in the future? Do you have any ideas?

AW: I'm really interested in sexual harassment. Like, sexual harassment in my community and in communities at large. Like I feel like it's ridiculous that we have to walk around and be harassed, that that is just normalized. Like even the way we teach it to kids. Like, we can tell the boys "This is how you talk to a girl," but we tell the girls, "Don't talk to boys." It's really messed up. Like, how do you – we can't do that, basically. You can't tell girls like, "don't get raped." And then you say to guys, "Have as many girls as you want. You're free, the world is yours." And it's just like, why can't you say the same thing to the girl? Why can't it be? Why is she called a slut or a whore when she's having a healthy sexual relationship? She can do whatever. Why can't she do that if he can do that? And so, it's just sending weird messages to our kids. And clearly it's being played out when we see TV and like, why – so like, for example, when we talked about – oh, someone was calling Kim Kardashian a whore because she slept with all of these guys. And I'm like, well, she is dating Kanye West. Do you think that he's a whore? Because he's probably a whore too, why, like he's definitely a whore, it's not even a question (laughing). So why are we doing this? And I feel like, I'm really not about – I don't want to raise my kids in a woman hating society. And so I am, I really want to promote equality in all ways. So sexual harassment, and sex education, I want to talk about all these things. I think it's important that everyone receives it. I don't mean

just condoms. Like, total sexual health. I think it's really sad that women don't know they have a cervix, or what does it do.

In her visions for the future, Awesome Woman offers more than I could ever encapsulate on the page. I asked her why she agreed to be a part of this study about activism and literacy:

AW: I agreed because one, it's you! And I'm really – I just want to help out in any way and I'm really interested in being documented and seeing what work will come out of this and will it be useful to me in the future. So that's my reason for being involved. I imagine we are going to meet all the other participants and exchange ideas. I don't really know what is going to come from it but I imagine some of the other people you are meeting with are also artists and they might be interested in the same kinds of things that I'm interested in. On that level, it can become a very social interaction. Also, I feel like we might be able to produce things and organize in the future. Also, I do expect a book. That is what I hope will happen. That's what I want to happen for you!

EB: There will be a book.

AW: Yay! And I definitely want it to be a text I will be able to use in the future for whatever reason. I don't imagine my life in the future as me just being a teacher and that's it. That's not me. I'm never just doing one thing. I'm always involved. And I do see activism continuing to be a part of my life until I die.

#### **4.5.6 Articulating an Activist Identity**

Awesome Woman articulated her activist identity in many multiple ways. Early in the study, she detailed the concept of an “active activist” and acknowledged that there are a lot of things she refuses to accept about the oppressive and violent ways people talk to and interact with each

other. One thing that is noteworthy in conversation with Awesome Woman is the way in which she included competing narratives and counter-narratives in a larger conversation about identity politics, rights and freedoms.

As an activist and a trained performer, she actively pushes into new terrain. While we worked on this study, Awesome Woman's activist actions included international educational travel to South Africa, Feminist Bootcamp, and many other moments of critical cultural programming in and around her university. It is important to note that throughout her participation in this study, she was outwardly critical of the social world that perpetuates prejudice from within university settings. She called for seminars and purposeful learning instead of misogynistic parties with no message that add no value to the school community. She focused a great deal on the struggle around mobilizing women on campus, and pointed to the importance of consuming and producing multimedia information as a form of educational activism.

As an organizer, Awesome Woman brought together many perspectives and voices to expand the discourse around equality, identity and judgment. She worked to grow the Black Student Union, she organized cultural programming around LGBTQ and feminist issues, and she created media to challenge dominant narratives from bigoted status quo discourse spaces. In all of these moments and the numerous others she articulated throughout the course of our time together, she counteracted violent elements in sociopolitical and cultural contexts, created safe spaces, celebrated differences and offered a powerful message of joyfulness in struggle.

## **5.0 CONCLUSIONS**

I have organized this conclusion in response to the stated goals of this study. I first explore how the participants engage in critical literacy praxis in their activism and organizing. In doing so, I analyze the data across the individual cases to consider these youth collectively articulating their activist identities. Then, I move to consider implications for the further study of youth organizing as an innovative out-of-school space for critical literacy. Finally, perhaps most importantly, I conclude this discussion by providing entry points to facilitate a long-term dialogue around organizing with youth, educators, and researchers for greater connectivity and collectivity.

## **5.1 DISCUSSION**

This discussion affords an opportunity to bring the atomized analysis of each individual into a collectivist, non-representative look at urban youth activism. In what follows, I discuss each element of the critical literacy taxonomy, looking at its overarching operations and specific similarities across the youth participants. Doing so demonstrate the ways in which this study highlights the operations of critical literacy outside of school in the context of organizing. It is important to note that these taxonomical elements are not mutually exclusive, nor does an individual engage in them in a chronological or linear way. Rather, the interconnection between

these elements demonstrates that these practices operate in simultaneity when youth engage in acts of social justice-oriented activist organizing.

### **5.1.1 Mobilizing Self as a Social Actor to Disrupt the Commonplace**

The first element in the critical literacy taxonomy is the ability to mobilize the learner as a social actor with knowledge and skills to disrupt the commonplace. An implicit precursor to this study of activism was that all of the participants self-identified as activists. As such, I look not specifically at how others mobilized them, but rather how they mobilized themselves. While it is beyond the scope of this conclusion to unpack all the assumptions around the concepts of the unique learner, the parameters of the social, and what qualifies as “a disruption of the commonplace,” such queries are nonetheless important. The contested discourses around these terms must be named and explored in order to look at the divergent intentions and motivations driving the actions of the youth.

Individually, each participant is, as People’s Republic of Mars stated, a catalyst to and for change. Each tended to focus on the local with a global mindedness. Even with the stress on local action, the various discussions we had about online organizing demonstrated that this need not always be defined by physical proximity. All of the youth expressed a personal connection to the social issues around which they organized. Their most urgent concerns related to family and friends, around issues of race, immigration, gender and education. From their personal and familial histories, the participants reckoned with topics related to authoritative power structures, from access to higher education and policing in K-12 schools to the Dream Act and federal deportation policies. They pushed their personal understandings through intentionally collective dialogue with others, and each participant highlighted ways in which they self-mobilized in

shared learning spaces. From peer education and study groups to teach-ins and rights workshops, they moved beyond isolated learning experiences, such as reading independently, to the creation and maintenance of safe spaces to share social knowledge.

Positioning themselves as activists both inside and outside of schools, the participants spoke of the limitations to critical conversations in classrooms. They raised “questions that some people prefer they not ask” (Borsheim & Petrone, 2006, p. 82) within formal learning institutions while learning to educate in self-organized contexts outside of those spaces. The participants explored the operations of language and power, questioning the textual intentions behind dominant discourse positions and unjust public policies on issues at once personal and political. They discussed social conditions around questions of identity, from race to class, immigration status and religious affiliation to gender and sexuality. In the process, the participants named shared frameworks for thinking about, talking about and organizing themselves around feminism, queerness, economic and racial justice. Their shared background as alumni of the Human Rights Activist Project provided a platform for talking about children’s rights and human rights while negotiating ideas of universality and difference. In varying ways, they articulated a collectivist approach to self-mobilization through the creation of safe spaces for anti-oppressive learning.

People’s Republic of Mars discussed the Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) as frameworks that are useful to him when thinking about equality of access to resources and opportunities. His argument revolved around the idea that the United States needs to “lead by example” when it comes to issues of rights, instead of hypocritically attempting to enforce policies internationally when they have not signed on to treaties and do not uphold those values domestically. Even as he identified



certain hypocritical positions of the United States of various rights-based issues on the world stage, he considered the value of using these frameworks as tools to create new platforms around public health and poverty.

Both Awesome Woman and Gentle Meadows offered perspectives on human rights cushioned in a critique of Eurocentricism. Awesome Woman talked about the challenges of Eurocentricity, pointing to the difficulties of organizing and upholding treaties with diverse cultures based on shared moral visions and unified language around human rights policy. Despite this, she argued that human rights activists should celebrate their different politics and rich histories. She acknowledged that people separate themselves even within the most local spaces, and as such it is important to bring a sense of humility to working with others to disrupt the commonplace. Gentle Meadows called for more open-ended questions in discussions of history and written records, arguing for inquiries into the producers of official, institutional records. They point to the value of seeking out alternate histories and considering diverse perspectives on issues, practices Behrman (2006) listed as critical literacy learning categories.

Green Strawberries talked with a sense of inevitability about the splintering of the American political Left into factions of socialists, communists, anarchists, progressives, and others. She argued that there is a lack of collectivity because “we all get to revolution in a different way.” Gentle Meadows discussed such divisions, and Vaga De Franx called for non-sectarian approaches to political activism and social organizing. Of course, discussions of right in relation to social justice tend to waver between moralizing and conscientizing. As they navigated complicated ideological quagmires around ideas of activism, the participants identified important distinctions between their priorities and their approaches to mobilizing

themselves. Collectively, they negotiated between policy advocacy and direct action, between what is tactical and what is strategic in the processes of organizing.

The participants demonstrated an overt commitment and attention to the realm of the sociopolitical around issues of injustice and inequity. Despite their unique priorities and atomized experiences, it is evident that their local and immediate work was connected to other intersubjective topics. To more fully understand how the participants mobilized themselves around these topics, we must look to the processes through which they critiqued and responded to messages and actions that complicated, reified or extended their activist positioning.

### **5.1.2 Conducting Research and Analysis around Multiple Perspectives**

The second element in the critical literacy taxonomy involves conducting research, analysis and interrogation of multiple viewpoints on an issue. Multiple perspectives are key to understanding different complex positions and interpretations around any topic (Comber, 2001). Gentle Meadows gave the example of the influence of certain South Asian cultural schema on some of his peers' resistance to accept their LGBT-identified classmates. All of the participants highlighted the importance of a safe space in which to have difficult conversations and explore contentious topics. This point inexorably linked to the next taxonomical element, which focuses on the identification of issues focused on sociopolitical realities. In the early stages of engaging organizing, youth may have only limited knowledge of specific issues and related social injustices. As such, participants identify issues while conducting research and seeking out multiple perspectives, and continue in an iterative cycle of identifying new issues and conducting new research accordingly.

The most prominent practices participants identified were in searching out independent, international media resources, asking questions about who owns the modes of production to control who speaks and what message is conveyed (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993). They sought out diverse perspectives on a host of issues. Below, I briefly recap the ways in which each participant spoke about conducting research, gaining perspective and reckoning with 21<sup>st</sup> century media cultures. I will then move to take a more macro view of their approaches and priorities to gain insight into the sociopolitical issues that impact their lives.

Gentle Meadows talked about the need for alternative visioning in order to actively imagine taking actions toward social change. He discussed how valuable his skills of seeking out multiple and contrasting positions have been on his recent research around state-centric versus human-centric perspectives on immigration and security. Gentle Meadows emphasized the importance of understanding and exploring the interconnectivity between issues, citing the work of environmental feminists as an example. He discussed how people get caught up on the language, but that there is power in growing into a term while seeking to defer its denotations and actively re-writing its meaning through action. When I asked him how he became informed on issues, he named the media that he turned to in order to understand topics: Democracy Now!, the Real News Network, Rabble, Al Jazeera, Russian RN, and other international news outlets. He said he learned a great deal from videos and interviews on the ground in locations where current events are unfolding. He talked briefly about the nature and function of social media for aggregating diverse sources as well. He said it was important to use many sources because there are multiple perspectives on activism too, and he was glad that the this study, “Becoming Activist,” had the progressive gerund “ing” in it’s title, which signified an intentional allowance for change, growth and fluidity.

When I asked Awesome Woman how she informed herself about particular issues, she said “I put myself out there for information.” She said all research starts by Googling it, and laughed at the truth of her own statement. She went on to talk about conducting research and how much she learned from reading a wide range of blogs. She named various identity-centered blogs about race, sexuality, gender and spirituality. She frequently returned to discussions of the Internet, access to information and its effects on community organizing. She considered the role of digital connectivity in the Arab Spring and connected it to a critique of corporate ownership, surveillance, censorship and privacy. “I’m taking stuff in but I also put it back out there,” she added. In a subsequent section, Awesome Woman’s critical and creative output is discussed in greater detail. What is key to understand here is that for her, personal activism is as much about educating people as any other actionable element. She spoke to the challenges of sharing information and organizing a community when it is under threat, and argued that some communities are constantly under threat. In the end, she echoed a point that Gentle Meadows raised as well – that it is important to politicize the community, and to recognize the ways in which communities already are politicized when seeking to take justice-oriented activist action.

Green Strawberries frequently evoked the concept of creating “revolutionary space” as she discussed her approach to accessing and consuming information. She initially named South Asian satellite news as a consistent source for her, and in the process she highlighted the role of family influence over media consumption. She talked about the alternate ways in which she becomes informed about issues and learns about social justice organizing. Specifically, she discussed the silencing and marginalizing of people from Occupy Wall Street to Palestine whose narratives, stories and positions are not proffered through the mainstream media. She accentuated the importance of international perspectives in media and learning, highlighting the

global scope of understanding regardless of proximity and location. Green Strawberries offered a compelling critique of the digital present, weighing the benefits of sharing information face-to-face against similar practices online. She challenged the general assemblies and human microphones of Occupy Wall Street as insufficient modes of information sharing. As she made sense of her own information overload, she fretted her inclination to prioritize international issues over domestic ones. She challenged Internet organizing as dehumanizing, and spent much of our discussion negotiating ideas of privacy and information freedom while acknowledging the power of sharing information online.

This discussion around accessibility and Internet organizing came up in most of my interviews with the participants. Vaga De Franx named the benefits of the Internet in providing her with up-to-the-minute information on current local and global issues of human rights concern. Although she did question the surveillance state and its ability to trace information back to IP addresses and email paths, she nevertheless privileged the power of online immediacy for sourcing content. She acknowledged that there were not many mainstream media sources she relied on, and named Democracy Now! as the source that she and many similar activists used to get independent, on-the-ground news from around the world. She argued that rather than defer to dominant discourses, she and other information activists use mainstream media as a tool to critically analyze messages and biases. “We use media,” she said. Vaga De Franx also named books and reading as vital to her understanding. She spoke of the importance of researching publishers to understand who is disseminating the information that we consume. She highlighted the value of developing a nuanced position on issues through reading non-polemicist texts and balancing multiple, divergent perspectives. She raised an important point about doing this work outside of community-based youth organizations, to develop her own

ideological positions through working in “real community struggle.” At the same time, she acknowledged the value of such youth organizing trainings in preparing her for the “real work,” providing a space to exercise her skills around social research and critical media analysis.

People’s Republic of Mars said that he considered multiple media sources to understand policy gaps and hypocrisies to better understand definitions of and violations of human rights. He identified BBC, CNN, Al Jazeera and the Huffington Post as places where he can access otherwise silenced and marginalized voices. He named his impetus toward informing people and translating information globally in a way that is not unduly biased. He discussed the value of organizing online and seeking out multiple perspectives as a form of social and political information activism. Researching topics from diplomacy to human rights policy, he articulated the delicate balance required to develop a public persona to disseminate curated social justice content and sources. He echoed the others in considering political issues from multiple perspectives, gathering a justice-oriented understanding of both self and other (Janks, 2010).

### **5.1.3 Identifying Sociopolitical Issues**

The third element in the critical literacy taxonomy involves identifying issues focused on sociopolitical realities in the context of the lives of the learners. This section is slightly more condensed because of the connection to the previous and following taxonomical elements. Such an identification of issues involves conducting research on multiple perspectives, designing and executing actions around those issues, and reflecting upon the steps taken. The social and political are central to both the operation of critical literacy as well as to the work of youth organizers (Ginwright, 2010a). I use the work of Watts & Guessous (2006) here to define the sociopolitical in relation to understanding agency and opportunity structured around civic

service and social justice. Sherrod (2006) pushed this idea further, rooting the sociopolitical into the sphere of urban youth activism. This focus on identifying sociopolitical issues in the context of the communities in which learners live is fundamentally the work of critical pedagogy and popular political educational models.

Vaga De Franx talked about how activists and organizers can create and facilitate productive community-based learning when the topics and issues addressed are generative from the groups of individuals involved. She discussed the interconnections between class, gender, race, ethnicity, immigration status and access to education in a conversation about police brutality and the policing of public spaces. As a peer educator and facilitator in various organizations at her university and in her social worlds, Vaga De Franx articulated the importance of being political without choosing to take a hard political line. She argued that in workshops and other learning spaces, such a deferral from taking a position allows for the exploration of deeper connections and hybridity between organizing concepts. She used the conceptual distinctions between socialists, autonomists, and anarchists as an example of such factions within the political Left that can interrupt productive dialogue for learning experiences.

As stated earlier, all of the participants organize around issues that are immediate to their lives. They all named the connection between the personal and the political. Moreover, their fluency with multiple perspectives allowed them to tease out the layers and distinctions that tie together sociopolitical topics for greater action. Green Strawberries talked about the deeply personal roots of her political work. She organizes around immigration and the state of undocumented students because some of her closest friends are undocumented. She named multiple issues in higher education, from Dreamers to the cost of tuition and the economic striation of access to college. She also talked about K-12 education, discussing curriculum and

focusing particularly on the policing of public schools by the New York City Police Department.

In pinpointing issues, Green Strawberries attended to those that she perceives as silenced; she named youth subcultures as well as racial, ethnic and sexual minorities as her priority because they are not frequently considered in mainstream, white labor organizing. She discussed the central importance of peer education in understanding the sociopolitical, talking specifically about her work around the conditions of the Palestinian people. For her, Palestine is personal, and she dialogued around deep issues of whiteness, race, ethnicity and nationalist identities. Even as she acknowledged the challenges of rectifying differing ideologies around peace and self-determination, she highlighted the importance of celebrating and honoring difference. She remembered Global Kids as a space to figure out her identity as a human rights activist and her position in the history of social activism.

Of course, there are wide distinctions between what topics and issues the participants choose to focus on, especially when such considerations are connected to strategic action planning. For instance, People's Republic of Mars takes seriously topics of international diplomacy and personalizes the global context. In his work, he acts to fulfill the objectives of the Millennium Development Goals, critiquing various levels of public policy as he brainstorms ways to positively impact material conditions for those without access to clean water, healthy food, affordable healthcare and quality education. He sees United Nations frameworks such as the UDHR as useful, and frequently turned to a discourse of foreign affairs to talk about ways to attain peace through major initiatives of international and nongovernmental organizations.

Awesome Woman identified issues that are focused on transgressions of personal political space, acting against local aggressions and oppressions based on race, gender, sexuality



and religion. She identified numerous interconnected topics in talking about her early experiences of activism, her participation in NYC-based programming such as Feminist Bootcamp, and her travel to South Africa as part of a cross-cultural educational trip. Through her actions and her reflections, Awesome Woman highlighted the social and political issues around which she is most passionately involved. She offered deep insight, scathing critique, necessary humor and healing visions of doing work that is ever more just and equitable. She takes a wide view of that which is most personal, and personalizes the political in the process.

Gentle Meadows lamented the trend of popular apathy generally present in his undergraduate community, and how frustrated it makes him as a thoughtful and committed human rights activist and peer-educator. He accentuated the personal-political connection in community-based events around social justice topics, and talked at length about using conversation and dialogue to interrupt dominant, normalizing and oppressive discourses (Freire, 1970). In his activism, he explored inequities based on culture, race, sexuality and class, questioning whether dialogue is useful for affecting social and political change. He inevitably argued that it is good when individuals are asked to rethink their location and personal position on a topic. By accentuating the value of competing counter-narratives, he illuminated the power of perspective to understand sociopolitical issues and organize actions to redress unjust conditions and oppressive contexts for learning and working. At various times, Gentle Meadows and all of the participants spoke about Global Kids, HRAP, and other social-justice organizing workshops as a space for them to identify and explore issues within the safe space of a positive youth development organization.

#### **5.1.4 Designing and Undertaking Social Justice Actions**

The fourth element in the critical literacy taxonomy is designing and undertaking actions focused on social justice outside of the classroom. Historically, this work was begun inside of schools but geared at social and political audiences outside of schools (Knoblauch & Brannon, 1993). It is noteworthy that such literacy work was frequently challenged at the level of school administration and superintendence. The crux of this study is thus focused on the ways in which activist action is supported and undertaken outside structures of formal education. All of the participants gave differing definitions of activism and action in relation to social justice. Awesome Woman spoke about times when she is and is not an “active activist,” and talked about the complexity of organizing beyond the tropes of marching and chanting.

People’s Republic of Mars asked similar questions about the definition of “on the ground” activism, claiming activism could be anywhere. He talked about the history of activism and organizing within communities beyond the spectacle of street protest. He argued that activism involves work to change something that you do not perceive as being right, such as rampant poverty and lack of access to quality food, water, healthcare and education. He sought to widen the mainstream definition of activism as he discussed his varying work around the Dream Act, food justice and anti-discrimination more broadly. Pointing to the interconnection of these topics, People’s Republic of Mars challenged simple definitions around social justice action and advocated for information activism as a powerful mode of operation, both face-to-face on the ground and online. Both in person and in cyberspace, the participants offered varied definitions of what qualifies as activist action.

Much of the activist work of the participants involved the creation and dissemination of information, programming and educative materials. For Green Strawberries, her activism

focused on the role of art. While she organized around a host of issues about students, immigration, gender, internationality and identity, she primarily created art about Palestine and Israel during the course of this study. In talking about her strategically undercover street art around the boroughs of New York City, she discussed vandalism, the freedom of information and the value of making public statements. On a more collective level, Green Strawberries highlighted the preparatory work involved in being a community organizer. She discussed the importance of meeting and planning in order to imagine and execute effective actions.

When Gentle Meadows talked about the activist work he was involved in, he discussed the movement around Socially Responsible Investing Committees (SRIC) at his and other colleges. As his current activist focus, he explained that this project is part of a movement for college endowments to invest in socially just investments. He questioned the radicality of lobbying through shareholder advocacy and doubted the possibility of affecting actual change in material conditions. Still, he highlighted examples of the role of divestment as an activist strategy around policies of apartheid, the use of pesticides, the practice of mountaintop removal, and the operations of weapons companies.

Gentle Meadows doubted the effectiveness of SRIC because university trustees reject positions they consider too radical. In doing so, he questioned institutional power relations and the advocacy role of the student body. He said the best that could happen is to threaten the use of media to exploit the unwillingness of universities and companies to change their positions, but doubted that this will happen given the state of mainstream media in the United States. As he spoke, it was clear that he wanted to believe bad publicity and voting would be enough to force systemic change, but he was uncharacteristically skeptical. He acknowledged that these college-based issues are secondary to his activist work in comparison with other relevant issues.

When he juxtaposed his work with SRIC to other community-based work organizing literacy events and volunteering with immigrant adults who are learning English, his commitment to undocumented persons and access to education flared up as a personal, purposeful and political issue for action.

Vaga De Franx was most notably active in activist projects during this study. She was involved in the early days of Occupy Wall Street, rallied for Occupy CUNY, and worked with a number of other networks for undocumented youth, students, and Leftists. She spoke eloquently about Occupy Wall Street as one project of a movement for social and economic justice in the United States. She stated clearly that Occupy Wall Street was not the end game, but rather a part of a larger process of talking about class in public. She echoed Green Strawberries that organizing and executing social action takes planning. Doing so demonstrated her historical perspective and knowledge of the long struggle of rights-based social movements. As she talked about activist actions at her school and the surrounding city network, she illuminated the need to navigate social and cultural powers in ways that are political, that connect out from the personal. Her deep critique of institutional bureaucracy rang loudly as she praised the commitment and accountability that activists and community members demonstrate to one another in spaces of self-organizing not regulated by any university or organization. Ruminating on the cyclical nature of organizing, she highlighted the importance of resilience and self-care for sustainable, long-term activist struggle.

### **5.1.5 Reflecting on the Past and Envisioning the Future**

The fifth and final element in the critical literacy taxonomy involves reflecting upon actions taken and creating vision(s) for future project(s). While all of the participants approached

activism and organizing in unique ways, they shared the context of an investment in the protection and defense of human rights. Whether they physically rallied students and workers or digitally created art and organized information for dissemination online, all of the participants engaged in social justice actions and forms of human rights activism. Further, all of the youth participants talked about their future activist work by first reflecting on the past. This is striking as a clear example of praxis (Freire, 1970; Lankshear & McLaren, 1993), reflecting on action taken to envision the next steps towards social change.

Gentle Meadows discussed the importance of history and values that come from the oral histories of families and through shared cultural expression. He told me to continue to focus on literacy as a topic of further research, retelling a story about his grandparents learning English when they first arrived in the United States. He envisioned a future of activism around a diversity of identities and highlighted the important role of complex literacy skills in the digital future. He maintained his quiet strength throughout our exchanges, demonstrating a deep consideration for activist futures that provide more equitable opportunities to all people.

Green Strawberries reflected on the past as she talked about her current activism. She proffered a running critique of the practices of the political Left in regards to race, gender and class, and returned to those topics throughout the course of our dialogues together. She called upon her recent history as an insight into her future. She discussed some of the limited successes of Occupy Wall Street, mainly in the realm of unionism. She said that she is excited about the future, but “I don’t have one of those five year plans.” Her studies in education and political science have her thinking about internationality. She talked about possibly moving to the Middle East or South Asia, and became very meta-cognitive as she critiqued her individual motivations for wanting to go, to be a part of a collective that she felt connected to closely. In

the end, she said if she leaves, her hope is to come back to New York with a more radical perspective and “take it even further.”

In the context of future activist work, Awesome Woman talked about the need for shared learning spaces. She stated how significant these spaces are for creating safety for performance and practice of activist identities, struggles, and strategic planning. Awesome Woman rages against the normalization of violent and oppressive behaviors. She possesses a willingness to talk about things that could be perceived as taboo. In her video blogs, she counteracts irrational fear-mongering and bigoted moralizing. Instead, she privileged public health concerns, access to information about sexual education, and dialogues around bodies. She talked about different uses of language and discourse, pointing to the way children are brought up to reinforce archaic dichotomies of gender. When she reflected upon her work in the Hijabi Monologues, she complicated easy ideas about performance. Rather than taking something private and making it public, the Hijabi Monologues reclaims the private in a public space. She said that the performance is not “trying to be political” but to be about “story,” to produce counter-narratives in counter-spaces. As she envisioned the future, she said, “I really want to promote equality in all ways.”

People’s Republic of Mars reflected on the past as he discussed his future goals. At turns altruistic and strategic, he encouraged me to focus my work on connecting with human rights organizers internationally and supporting civic engagement initiatives in youth development work. He said that HRAP inspired him early on to create his own organization. Talking about his removal from on-the-ground activism recently and considering the operation of groups like Amnesty International, he said that with his organization “I want to do more activism because it’s a human rights organization.” At the time of the study, he was going through the process of

applying for non-profit status to expand the reach of his organization. He returned frequently to the idea of the Millennium Development Goals because they “pretty much cover everything.” He talked about his dual focus on the implementation of policy initiatives and activist work outside, beyond, and despite the limits of policy. He said he is interested in pursuing activism that is radical but non-violent. His vision for the future can be understood in the context of the discussion of his pseudonym: that Mars is an as-yet uninhabited utopia where a fresh world can be created. Colonial critiques aside, he made a point of highlighting the importance of having a people’s republic, of creating a political space that includes the legitimate voices of the people who live in that world.

Vaga De Franx, in her passionate appraisal of the past and future of her activist work, spoke about the difference between spectacular events and on-going organizing. She argued that big activist events build momentum and allow for a shared public space for more local forms of organizing that need to take place on a micro-level. As she reflected on her work the past year, she interrogated the idea of a general strike in this economy. As she contemplated the diffuse operation of power in contemporary sociopolitical organizing models, she highlighted the importance of recognizing the position of all stakeholders in terms of arrest and other affordances of risk and safety. Vaga De Franx is a producer and disseminator of information, creating online media and hard copy 'zines while highlighting the relevance of non-digital physical artifacts that can be handed out at the library or read on the subway without a need for Internet service. Her reflection turned to an analysis of discussions that are not allowed to happen in university classrooms, particularly around more radical forms of social action such as boycotts and sit-ins. Here she points directly to the limitations to such critical work in schools. As she visioned, she pointed to the need for intentional, collaborative dynamics to plan and

execute actions beyond the context of formal education – even as education remained a key issue in the struggle for justice. As we ended our dialogues, she was discussing the upcoming National Student Power Convergence and the importance of building deep knowledge of local needs, to affect real, positive, socially just change on the ground in our communities.

## **5.2 ARTICULATING ACTIVISM AND ORGANIZING**

### **5.2.1 Articulation Theory and Critical Pedagogy**

As mentioned briefly in the early description of methods for analysis, Mouffe's (1993) articulation theory is a framework useful for understanding the constitution of sociopolitical identities – such as that of activist. Through her post-structuralist ontology of political theory, Mouffe forwarded a conception of radical democratic citizenship that is focused on the embodied actions of individual subjects in pluralistic democratic politics. It is here that she introduced articulation theory to account for how individual subjective identities emerge from social discourses.

Mouffe's work has been written about in relationship to critical pedagogy, to teach youth to adapt to changing discourse positions while enhancing reflexive agency, empowerment and social responsibility (Nadesan & Elenes, 2008). I use the framework here to extend my analysis to a second discursive level beyond an acute literacy focus. In doing so, I identify connections and divergences between participants' articulation of their activist identities, contexts where they organize and material conditions through which they form subjectivities.



Mouffe's equation of articulation theory essentially states that relational elements (signifiers that lack meaning in themselves) achieve significance (social meaning) when articulated by/through social discourse in moments of socio-historical contexts. For each of the participants, their different understandings of activism and themselves as activists were created through moments in their lives. Extracting elements such as tactics, organizations, interlocutors, issues, texts and locations is key to understanding how participants define themselves as activists in relation to their moment. From running teach-ins and staging boycotts to organizing protests and lobbying politicians, these youth created meaning in relation to their moment.

The central point here relates to the articulation of identities in fluid discursive spaces of human rights activism. Moments of activism exist in multiple instantiations, where signification is best understood as continually shifting. Mouffe's work is useful in this study by complicating struggles over meaning and value around terms such as social justice and processes such as civil disobedience. Policy initiatives give way to further advocacy and direct action that result in new models of organizing community resources. Looking through these few moments, it is possible to decipher elements of youth activists becoming activist.

At the end of each youth study above, I read the interview data to map trajectories of the youth articulating their activist identities. The youth involved in this study collectively articulate their activist identities in a host of different ways. Together, the participants each articulated a discursive position that defers judgment so that more open-ended learning and development can take place. As youth activists, they remembered the workshops from Global Kids and other youth development organizations as moments of powerful learning. They invited multiple voices as they fought for people they did not know. One question that came up time and again was a query of why ideological lines have to dictate the terms of action for any organizers.

There is much left to debate around the definitions of activism and organizing and the use of the terms. Through Mouffe (1993), it is clear that there are commonalities in the articulation of each of the youth activists. They articulated the need for educative spaces that were safe and inquiry-based, they spoke to the influence of family, friends and community on the organizing work that they do. They shared priorities around immigration, LGBTQ rights, information security and access to quality education. These major themes are reflective of the current domestic and geopolitical landscape. Beyond policy, they are all defined by the action that they take. Around shared concepts of collectivity and bringing stakeholders together, they are characterized by their orientation as anti-oppressive, radically non-violent, and morally pluralist. This relates to the ethical notion of alterity out of which Mouffe's (1993) writing is based, the recognition that one can only understand one's self by understanding the other.

Of course, as a writer and an outsider, I can't say what they intrinsically state by articulating their activist identities everyday. They demonstrate through their multiple perspectives and critical approach to research and outreach that there is benefit in not being stuck in a position on an issue. It's not about fixity. It is about identifying in relation to moments of struggle. The participants demonstrated that actions are defined as activist in relation to the discussion of their operation. They are activist individuals, responding to social conditions of inequity and injustice. These youth position themselves in ways that are highly political and yet different from one another. This is neither theoretical nor rhetorical. Although there is value in deferral of definitions of organizing and activism, there are implications for naming positions, campaigning around values, creating sustainable actions and investing in community building.

The idea of becoming remains crucial here in recognition of the endless equivalences that can be made because both discourses and subjectivities which are always processive. Mouffe's model forces us to focus on the development and construction of individual subjectivities that are able and willing to participate in democratic politics. Specifically, this work involves doing so in ways that contribute to them becoming border-crossers who politicize issues, recognize and respect difference, and value dialogue toward ethical action.

### **5.3 IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

In this section, I briefly discuss implications from this initial study, addressing nine levels of audience organized from micro to macro, not hierarchically, so as to not prescribe forms of linear movement. Starting with the reader, writer and participants, I move to speak directly to audiences in the worlds of literary and educational research. I turn to speak to youth organizers, community activists, educators and non-profit managers invested in the sustainability and scalability of this work. These implications reflect my larger contention, explored in the final section, that alliances are everywhere possible. As Mouffe (1993) would argue, there are moments of social action in every step of the processive operations of youth organizing, including the steps of research and writing.

#### **5.3.1 Participants, Writer, Reader**

To address ongoing considerations of and concerns for ethics, politics and methodological rigor, I start with implications directly related to the participants. Gentle Meadows, Awesome

Woman, Green Strawberries, Vaga De Franx and People's Republic of Mars made this study possible. I maintain that our initial designs for research were ripe with transformative potential. While it was beyond the scope of this study to deeply engage with certain post-foundational hybridized research methods, the central importance of participant voice, input and experience remains intact. The divergent histories, stories and insights of the participants reflect a deep commitment to continued collaborative activist work around human rights and social justice with youth.

All of the participants were suggested to me as committed, vivacious and visionary activists. They all entered the study with histories of activism, and each anticipated future uses of this study in their own work. As they move into full participation as adult actors in non-profit management, human rights organizing, youth development, educational leadership and international affairs contexts, it is my hope that this limited study sparks other research that extends our inquiry further. Reflecting on a meta-level, it will be interesting to trace the trajectories of where their reflections, their visions and their futures take them. Perhaps a longitudinal study will follow.

As an educator deeply committed to studying adolescent literacy, the space of urban youth activism provided illustrative insights into elements of critical learning outside of school. As a post-structural cultural theorist, I am epistemologically located outside of more mainstream approaches to educational research. Thus, as the sole author of this text (despite the structured design for triangulation with and input from the participants), I recognize the ways in which I forced my fragmented, descriptive interpretation upon the reader. Even as I sought to take anti-authoritarian positions, it is true that writing remains a personal activity and each researcher carries an "I" from which they write, whether they choose to acknowledge it or not.

This text thus necessarily serves as an articulation of myself as an activist educator researcher, and an articulation of the youth participants in moments of activism and organizing in their lives. Like other modes of documentation, writing makes a mark that locates the reader, the writer and the participants in reconstructing specific junctures in time and history. Future study calls for deeper inquiry around ethics in relation to participatory research and auto/ethnographic approaches to critical education growing out of the specific community-based needs of young people and their families, to ensure that documentation is neither violent nor exploitative.

### **5.3.2 Researchers, Academics, Educators**

Fundamentally, this work is about literacy. Although this study is also about so many other things, the impetus behind this research is to begin to better understand the ways in which urban youth activists and organizers engage in critical literacy practices as they learn, design and undertake social action initiatives. This research could be reframed in many other lights, reflecting a heightened interest in and commitment to understand social movement theory, urbanism and other wide reaching topics included in this study. Yet the function of this study remains explicitly and intricately tied to literacy and the attempt to identify opportunities for and examples of critical literacy learning operating without the limitations of school-based vertical organization and top-down dictates (Beck, 2005).

For literacy researchers, there is much to learn in the study of out-of-school spaces. Doing so outmaneuvers the school-based limitations to conducting critical literacy projects around such radical and contentious ideas as citizenship and democracy (Janks, 2013). That is not to say that educators and youth should be fearful of cultures of assessment in schools, such that they don't seek to challenge the status quo. It is, however, to recognize that there is much

we can accomplish by focusing on spaces of less formal education, such as informal learning in the context of urban youth organizing (Ginwright, 2010a). While there is no extant correlation, researchers from Morrell (2004) to Mira (2013) have begun to provide evidence suggesting that youth who engage in organizing are more resilient and their critical perspectives assist them in experiencing academic successes and matriculation to higher education. This study begins to address that gap, but more research is needed to develop a clearer picture of these connections.

Critical literacy, as a theory of literacy education and social change, serves in part to debunk stereotypes (Phelps, 2010). It offers a pedagogical orientation with implications for a wide variety of stakeholders, from classroom teachers to public youth advocates (Morrell, 2008) who are interested in perpetuating critical literacy learning. Such literacy does not exist in a vacuum and praxis requires no specific context – save perhaps the stipulation of situated work. Throughout the study, participants reveal their political intentions (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993) through language that advances social critique and cultural transformation without reproducing oppressive ideologies (Knoblauch & Brannon, 1993). In fields ranging from New Literacy Studies (Street, 2003) to Blended Learning (Keengwe & Kang, 2012) and the Maker Movement (Santo, 2013), there is emergent evidence of new contexts for learning that simultaneously accentuates individual strengths and collectivizes community priorities. Various other public and academic spheres intersect with this work, highlighting the value of dialogue in examining perspectives on social and political topics (Comber, 2001). Social discourses are defined as processes that bear the trace of other discourses from which they position their conceptual histories and trajectories. Educational researchers, political scientists, urban sociologists and cultural theorists can leverage their skills and institutional resources to expand the discourse around innovative organizing spaces for critical literacy in action.

Cushioned within the wider world of scholarly writing for academic audiences, there is much to consider in further approaches to humanizing such social scientific study. Pushing the boundaries of peace and human rights research, of new social movement theories and urban development, of social justice and critical pedagogy research, this study resituates youth activists as community builders in their learning, living and work environments. There are innumerable anthropological, sociological and psychological questions to explore around participatory action research and identity, focused specifically on literacy as well as wider schemas for studying youth in contemporary sociopolitical contexts. Moreover, there are deep epistemological questions to answer in the space between social justice oriented work and post-foundational conceptions, to organize without essentializing. In doing so, such work matches the critical literacy call of Janks (2000), to consider how language creates social identities and how activist approaches can promote and attend to issues of diversity.

This research is informative for educators working across the fields of instruction and learning. From early childhood to higher and continuing education, across urban, suburban and rural contexts, there is strength in conducting situated work with youth around ideas of power, intelligence and leadership in ways that support individual development and community initiatives. For pedagogical practices to be successful, they must respond to the socio-historical contexts of the youth. Frequently, this is the domain of citizenship education. Cushioning critical literacy and youth organizing research in a discourse of civic engagement has the potential to offer a great breadth of transformative and/or indoctrinating results. Fundamentally, the distinction is answered through the question: what's your vision? Short-term answers for youth organizers might relate to specific issues they organize around, in search for viable victories. More long-term conclusions are based on thinking about community development in

ways that challenge exploitation, through studies of power and discrimination that take a design perspective to replicate critical literacy structures (Janks, 2000), to study rights education and build ethically activist curricula in ways that are intentionally and reflexively anti-oppressive.

### **5.3.3 Organizers, Organizations, Networks**

Many community-based youth organizing projects take Freirian thematic investigation as a model for the creation of social justice-oriented youth development programs (Delgado & Staples, 2008). As an informal space of learning akin to models of popular political education, such projects support the design, development and execution of conscientizing cultural actions in the context of local and larger geopolitical events (Shah, 2011). Such spaces of learning include workshops, outreach, campaigns, reflection, planning, commitment, resilience, and enduring visions of local/global communities. What would it mean to design, enact and replicate such participatory pedagogy outside of traditional classrooms? Partially, this involves creating texts, building tools and initiating action around the nodes that define youth activist work. Such participation, when undertaken with overt social and political purpose, points to an answer to the questions of what it means to be engaged citizens versus merely members of a mass audience.

Youth organizers use language and other symbolic systems (art, graffiti, music, performance) to interrogate discourses, language and messages of bigotry and oppression (Ardizzone, 2007). The participants of this study, with a shared background in human rights and social justice organizing, call for care and understanding as they mobilize themselves and each other against discriminatory and dehumanizing topics. They possess an inclination toward greater justice and equality with overt intentions towards and learning about others. Speaking to



all youth organizers, this research advises: Be loud in your struggle for human rights and social justice. Silence to violence is itself a kind of structural violence. Share your passions widely.

There is a nuance to this type of work, which requires nuanced training and the investment of adult allies. Vaga De Franx, Gentle Meadows and Awesome Woman all spoke at length about workshops, about creating opportunities for learning in safe spaces. This reflects the need for a youth organizing pipeline to be established in community-based organizations, such that program participants can contribute to community organizing work as adults and perpetuate productive cycles of apprenticeship, mentoring, peer education and critical teaching. Research has already begun on such a leadership pipeline (see Ginwright, 2010b).

There is a need to conduct further research that includes community organizations, to extend this line of inquiry into critical literacy in political learning spaces outside of school. Organizations like Global Kids, Fierce NYC, and others already doing the work of continually supporting youth to share their passionate indignation around shared topics of identity and social injustice. Fundamentally, these organizations intersect around youth developing literacy skills, participating in civic engagement and constructing sociopolitical identities as leaders in the context of the globalized, technologically shifting economy. There is a need to establish networks, to connect youth across towns and villages, regions, territories, states, nations, other borders and divides. Despite the challenges of competing for limited foundation funding, there is potential for great connectivity by connecting young people, sharing resources, and creating opportunities for youth to engage in forms of intellectual, social, and physical border-crossing.

#### **5.3.4 Space, Funding, Futurity**

As was highlighted by each participant, proximity is still important in organizing initiatives but it is fundamentally different in a digital age. These youth activists demonstrated the ability to do the work of organizing and activism anywhere and everywhere. They push the boundaries of the local to consider online communities, cyber-actions, social networking and more. All of the participants talked about information activism and connectivity. Collectively, the participants named the need for shared learning spaces in order to have time and space to discover sameness and to strategize around social justice, strength, resilience and healing (Ginwright, 2010a).

For its part, Global Kids and the Human Rights Activist Project, as well as other workshops referenced throughout, provided the space for youth to identify relevant sociopolitical issues and engage a pedagogy of critical literacy as they organized campaigns. This work was not done in a vacuum of radical activism. Rather, it was cushioned in the sphere of childhood and positive youth development. Such work requires a level of sustained investment to create a consistent space for critical literacy learning, to fund after-school and out-of-school initiatives around literacy, justice and equity that are not constrained by formal educative parameters. More observational organizational study is necessary to (paradoxically) institutionalize dynamic anti-oppressive approaches to situated critical literacy praxis.

## 5.4

### COMMUNITY AND CONNECTIVITY

Cushioned in the realm of recent research and writing on literacy and activism, conclusions around community and connectivity are multiple. The participant youth have pointed to the immediate and intersubjective nature of mobilizing themselves around a framework of human rights and social justice. They highlighted the ways in which they learned to create a safe space for the interrogation of multiple perspectives around sociopolitical issues. They point to the value of exploring topics and interrogating mainstream U.S. media without falling into traps of moralism, righteousness or hubris. While critiques abound around “nonpolitical” position-taking and activism guided by ideas of “right,” it is evident that youth organizing projects provide a space for the ethical expansion of forms of activist learning by engaging in variants of critical praxis (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2007). This idea of ethical activism requires deep consideration and exploration, to a much greater extent than this dissertation study can afford.

Conclusions based on connectivity are important here to forward a conversation about building ethical networks for further refinement of critical literacy in such out of school spaces. I can identify a host of ethical dilemmas in naming conclusions that proffer generalizations around youth organizing and activism. Thus Lather’s (2007) concept of “transgressive validity” proves useful early and often in this work. Any and all answers to emerge out of this study come through the iterative meaning making, where individuals construct their activist identities in relation to the social and the political. This is personal and reported autobiographically. To understand such constructions with any depth, it is important to focus the gaze on the youth themselves, on their activist and organizing pursuits around the critical consumption, production and dissemination of information through various activist routes.

Following Mouffe (1993), definitions around activism are not about establishing a baseline against which to determine who qualifies as an activist, but rather about how activist identities are constructed in social and historical contexts. In light of this knowing, the idea of position-taking proves important in alluding to an iterative subjectivity, where individuals choose to act and articulate the self through each moment and event of activism. In practice, the youth involved in this study defined their activist identities as they questioned the prioritization of issues. At the same time, they look at interconnected, multiple topics for informed activism.

Future study of youth organizing should thus examine the development of sociopolitical identities in relation to the motivation of individuals and groups to engage, to mobilize and join actions around specific and diverse issues. Despite the limitations of resources and funding to approach vast and sometimes disparate topics, the participants of this study demonstrated great willingness toward collectivity. Their conclusions pointed to the benefits of further study around overtly political positive youth development programming in community-based organizations, to create and support a safe space that is not always accentuated in other contexts of campaigning and organizing. There is a necessity for such spaces of education across multiple contexts and borders, of the global North and global South, across economic, cultural and sociopolitical divides, both in person and online.

I pause to acknowledge my researcher voice here, as I have attempted to do throughout. The conclusions I have drawn in writing are limited based on my operation as a writer, a thinker, and a social justice-oriented critical educator. In my practice, I demonstrate a similar level of outrage against injustice and inequity as the participants articulate themselves. Despite our differences, we are very similar as we speak up and get riled up when someone is perpetuating discriminatory bigotry. It makes people uncomfortable when the status quo is

shaken and dominant violence is challenged, but it is a huge part of activist work in defense of human rights, which itself is a value-laden framework for situated organizing projects.

It is important to note that this study was not built solely around a privileging of human rights activism as the only approach to conducting social justice based work. Still, there are shared concepts and modes of communication that are highlighted by the participants throughout. Thus, there is similarity in these youth activists even as they question the essentialization of their unique identities. Despite differences on issues, the participant youth shared platforms of human rights and approaches to peer education and community-based learning that are intentionally anti-oppressive. Even as the initial level of the personal motivated these individuals as catalysts toward activist and organizing, all the participants named intersubjective extensions outside of their immediate social worlds. They spoke of this much as I talk about ethics that don't moralize through a queer theory of activism: in acknowledgment of sameness and deferral of definition in the struggle for creating identities built around dignity, respect, safety, freedom and health. Doing so is to acknowledge the inherently political while refusing to submit to the traps of the post-structural cliché.

As a knowledge worker, I introduce a queer theory of activism as one conclusion that spawns research futurity. Ginwright's (2010a) idea of "radical healing" is crucial here - not just for urban youth, but also for all marginalized young people. Exploring the history of youth social movements and expanding the self-reporting of youth from such movements adds substantially to the understanding of the motivation and the approaches to youth activist learning. Here enters the ethical in the realm of the non-hierarchical and non-moralistic. The interconnection of issues around anti-oppressive tenets posits a queer theory of activism that expands the conversation of difference beyond the sole documentation and tolerance of or

acceptance for pluralistic diversity. Considering and re-considering the idea of organizing around identity politics and single-issue topics is at once fruitful and requires troubling.

Following Pinar (1998) and Kumashiro (2002), a queer theory of activism takes an ethical approach to working around dominant and normalizing discourses. It creates a condition for an approach to social justice and human rights activism that does not moralize on the grounds of right – except, perhaps, in the pursuit of peaceableness, equity and freedom. This is not to downplay the political stances of the participants and myself, nor to assume legitimacy of those ideological terms and concepts as they are pursued. Of course, these terms and positions are political and have traces of morality written upon them through their connotative connections to desire, perception, interpretation and action. Still, there is power in deferral.

Forms of activist queering around issues of identity related to minoritized or non-normative position-taking that extend discussions of language, power and social justice through non-dominant discursive spaces. Through our choices about the words and ways in which we speak of our identities, we make choices to include political labels in our lives, to defer to categorization. The loose definition of community that comes out through such a queered theory is not always place-based, but it is non-sectarian as it looks across multiple perspectives on issues. Highlighting the importance of safe space locally is key to connecting across identity groups locally, nationally and globally. A queer theory of activism provides a framework where youth organizers gather around issues that foreground a politics of difference in an effort to provide just and equitable spaces for growth and learning, creating opportunities for subordinate groups of individuals to participate in and engage activist communities in person and online.

This work is rooted in post-foundational forms of deconstruction and post-structuralism. As a researcher and a writer, my work has, for many years, been acutely focused on exploring

particular, political sites of intensity without providing normative options. By not judging the function of power/knowledge in overtly moralistic terms, such a post-foundational position rather serves to expose the negotiable spaces of resistance. I am deeply committed to a continued interrogation of power/knowledge functions. I aim to further explore the uses of queer theory as an underexplored vantage from which to explore the multiple ways that power functions in relation to identity, ways that are neither unified nor singular in their approach. This is true of “activist” as well as it is of any articulation of a constructed identifier.

My approach to the data in this study involved reading, reporting, and retelling in ways that were exemplar without being representative. In part, this is related to interaction with texts and contexts, and articulation of a self in light of such interaction. Such texts not only shed light on how participants articulate themselves as activists, but they are also key elements to illustrate how and why youth become activists, what that means to them or why anyone should pay attention. Their self-articulated visions of themselves in relation to these identities speak to a need to understand social activism and organizing on multiple levels of theory and practice.

Building networks around literacy learning and youth organizing offers the space to share cultural and educative resources for critical pedagogy and restorative social justice practices. Lots of people talk about critical pedagogy just as many people wax on the definitions of literacy. Even the most recent article about critical pedagogy and gay-straight alliances in *Educational Researcher* reflects the timeliness and relevance of thinking, writing, talking and organizing about activist queering (Mayo, Jr., 2013). Such activist projects offer a space for both individual and collective identities to be defined through a refinement of the tools of reflexive social and political action with skills and processes where positive youth development meets community-based organizing. Understand the function of these tools is the challenge for

literacy researchers, critical pedagogues and community organizers alike to develop schema and spaces for scalability of organizing pedagogies.

Of course, markers and measures of effective social justice action, organizing and activism are wide reaching, from building a critical mass and growing a base to boycotting industries, lobbying policy, stopping traffic and various other interpretations of interrupting the status quo. I initially drafted these conclusions as the U.S. Justice Department was actively seeking the extradition of Edward Snowden from Russia and Pfc. Bradley Manning was up for 136 years in prison for his role as a whistleblower/leaker/traitor. These individuals and others demonstrate with great severity that information is important and language matters a great deal in rights-based activism. Multidisciplinary foci on new media studies, critical media literacy and multimodal competencies are essential in the current social and political economy. There is a need to build, fund and support organizational intentionality around youth organizing (O'Donoghue, 2006). The next level of networked and resourceful organizing and community activism with youth requires spaces that celebrate literacy, youth voice and public language.

So what is the prescription? Non-prescriptive activist thinking: building communities and identities around care and healing while moving away from all forms of violence (psychological, institutional, physical, emotional, psychic, structural and otherwise). Of course we cannot reject our dominant contexts, but we can focus on expanding interpretations to yield a larger knowledge base. As Pinar (1998) wrote in his seminal text on queer theory in education, "The crucial battle now for 'minorities' and resistant subalterns is not achieving democratic representation but wrestling control over the discourses concerning identity construction" (p. 7). Our work is thus the struggle to counter-attack that actively seek to silence, oppress, marginalize and displace.



This requires space to counter-narrate. I call it counter-space. As the youth participants in this study noted, the future of online organizing lacks a physical space for interpersonal presence. The creation and maintenance of a counter-space would fill the need for a locale from which to self-organize, designing arenas to encourage critical literacy learning and allow a diversity of individuals to organize together. This physicality can take many forms: DIY maker media collectives, organizing workshops, popular education seminars, art shows, teach-ins, conferences, celebrations and other safe spaces for cross-cultural, intersubjective exchange.

Becoming activist is more about fluid movement than it is about evolution. This study forwards a conception of complex human identity as constitutive even while development occurs. The work of critical literacy, and youth organizing, is to create a capacity for physical, psychological, intellectual and emotional border crossing (Giroux, 2005). This requires understanding and working together beyond the boundaries of identity, beyond nationality. Against compartmentality, hubris, ignorance, hatred, negativity, it is essential to build community consciousness, raise the level of discourse, cultivate resilience, and envision ways to re-invent ourselves from beyond oppressive conditions. We achieve this through iterative forms of what Ginwright (2010a) calls “radical healing.”

The challenge for organizing collectively and connecting youth activists is in cultivating these disparate community nodes. In the process of facing that challenge, there are opportunities to establish youth organizing as a powerful model of youth leadership around ethics, politics, education and citizenship (Heinz, 2012). This is as true locally as it is nationally and globally. As I conclude writing this section, Egypt is in a state of violent turmoil and the death toll in Syria is rising. The call to anti-violence is only getting ever louder. The scope of this work is

both macro and micro in negotiating futures of human rights activism and significant roles for youth in such struggle, in their most local contexts and in their most global visions.

Such negotiation requires a focus on language, understood broadly in terms of sign systems and the power functions around signification. This reifies the centrality of literacy research in learning about and refining pedagogical models based on organizing. Discursively, the work of social justice and human rights organizing draws many parallels to the elements of critical literacy, replicating issue-based praxis as codified by the literacy-driven taxonomy. There is much left unexplored in the connection between the rich fields of youth organizing and critical literacy, both at once vital sub-genres of the academy and intentionally defiant outliers.

I could write much more with the study participants. We barely scratched the surface of understanding their impassioned activism in our work together here. Vaga De Franx, Gentle Meadows, Green Strawberries, People's Republic of Mars and Awesome Woman all talked in many directions with many trajectories, detailing specific issues with specific tactics ranging from legal advocacy to civil disobedience and radical re-visioning of social intersectional interactions. In doing so, these youth activists, and their wider social worlds of educators, researchers, and community organizers, demonstrated the capacity to contribute to a network of ethical learners who move beyond moralizing, beyond tolerance, to add their trajectories to combat oppression. There is much yet to understand about the practices of literacy learning in spaces of youth organizing. Future research must consider the role of the word, the environment, and the activist, in the social justice struggles of a digital, globalized future.

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