“I get it that you're worried about my school, but this is my education.”
Connected literacies and critical pedagogies in anti-racist youth organizing

A Dissertation
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE
UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

by

Abigail Rombalski

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Cynthia Lewis, Advisor

August 2019
“I get it that you're worried about my school, but this is my education.”
Connected literacies and critical pedagogies in anti-racist youth organizing

©Abigail Rombalski 2019
Acknowledgements

I am indebted, as a scholar and a community member, to youth activists and socially-conscious youth (and your families!) whose lives and literacies are so meaningful and ongoing. I am grateful to the urban schools and the advisors who opened yourselves up to the necessary journey of anti-racism on school grounds. I am deeply appreciative of the vast array of youth-centered arts, activism, and educational organizations who continue to support racial justice work, as students, schools, and society feel the ripple effects and create or sustain movements.

Thank you to my advisor, Cynthia Lewis, and to my committee members—Bic Ngo, Tania Mitchell, and Tim Lensmire—for your continual commitment to critical scholarship in community and education. Gratitude to the many people who informed my development, especially those who sustain the following organizations: The Twin Cities Social Justice Education Movement and Fair, Dare 2 Be Real Network, The Robert J. Jones Urban Research Outreach and Engagement Center (UROC) and the Josie R. Johnson Community-Engaged Dissertation Fellows, Literacy Research Association Public Scholars Study Group, Public Science Project’s CPAR Institute at CUNY, an emerging Twin Cities YPAR Collective, Free Minds, Free People and the Education for Liberation network, Curriculum Inquiry Writing Fellows Program at OISE in Toronto, and the University of Minnesota Writing Center. Hope spills over in continued communion.

Finally, thank you to my family, especially my spouse and my kids, who are always part of the journey, the community, and the work. Onward.
# Table of Contents

Abstract ............................................................................................................................. ix  

CHAPTER 1 ......................................................................................................................... 1  
1.1 Relationships over—but including—Research ......................................................... 1  
1.2 Composite Sketch .................................................................................................... 3  
1.4 Overview of the Dissertation ..................................................................................... 11  
1.5 Positioning and Frameworks Informing the Study .................................................. 16  
1.6 Context, Methods, and Design .................................................................................. 19  
1.7 Commitments ........................................................................................................... 30  

CHAPTER 2 ......................................................................................................................... 32  

Methodology .................................................................................................................... 47  

CHAPTER 3 ......................................................................................................................... 62  
3.1 An Introduction to Youth Activist Literacies ............................................................. 62  
3.2 Theoretical framework ............................................................................................... 67  
3.3 Research Methods, Context, and Design ................................................................. 71  
3.4 Findings: Four literacies in youth organizing data .................................................... 91  
3.5 Discussion ................................................................................................................ 120  
3.6 Implications: The work ahead ................................................................................ 132  

CHAPTER 4 ......................................................................................................................... 138  
4.1 Theoretical perspectives ......................................................................................... 139
4.2 Design Overview ................................................................. 145
4.3 Data and findings: A framework for responsive participant observers........ 149
4.4 Framework applied: RPO in social media ........................................ 158
4.5 Conclusion ............................................................................. 165
CHAPTER 5 ................................................................................. 169
5.1 Key Findings .......................................................................... 171
5.2 Implications ............................................................................ 176
5.3 Future Research ...................................................................... 181
5.4 Where do we go from here? ....................................................... 185
BIBLIOGRAPHY ........................................................................ 199
APPENDICES ............................................................................. 210

Appendix A: Conventions for social media and transcriptions Following are conventions for in-text references to social media as well as for transcriptions. ................. 210
Appendix B, Chapter 4 ................................................................ 211
Appendix C, Chapter 4 ................................................................ 212
Appendix D, Chapter 4 ............................................................... 213
List of Tables

Table 1. Transcript from Lakeview T2GR teach-in with middle school staff, May 2016; See Appendix D for notes regarding transcriptions. ........ Error! Bookmark not defined.

Table 2. Interview transcript, May 2016 ..................... Error! Bookmark not defined.

Table 3. Six sets of IAYA literacy activities ................................................................. 85

Table 4. What are you passionate about? Youth Meet and Greet, 8/2016 ......................... 96

Table 5. Public Facebook Events (details) ........................................................................ 193

Table 6. List of Participants (Pseudonyms) ...................... Error! Bookmark not defined.

Table 7. Themes from open-coding literacy events from six different data sets with Interracial Anti-racist Youth Activists ................................................................. 195

Table 8. Demographics of social media influencers from IAYA ..................................... 197

Table 9. Literacy events from regular IAYA meetings (a sample of two dates from both schools) .............................................................................................................. 198
List of Figures

Figure 1. Focal youth activist Facebook posts. Youth participated in actions (FB, above left) and shared critical commentary (FB, above right) about racial justice schools, the city, and the nation. .............................................. Error! Bookmark not defined.

Figure 2. Nothing About Us, Social Justice Art by Ricardo Levins Morales, RML Studio. ................................................................................................................. Error! Bookmark not defined.

Figure 3. Lakeview High sit-in, 4.5.16. ......................... Error! Bookmark not defined.

Figure 4. Eastside High sit-in, 4.5.2016.................... Error! Bookmark not defined.

Figure 5. Eastside Sit-in Participatory Action, 4/5/2016... Error! Bookmark not defined.

Figure 6. Domains-of-Power framework from Patricia Hill Collins (2009)......... Error! Bookmark not defined.

Figure 7. Content analysis from 250 posts by IAYA focal members....................... 89

Figure 8. Self-love on Instagram. ................................................................. 93

Figure 9. Love for others on Snapchat........................................................... 94

Figure 10. Collective love on Facebook.......................................................... 94

Figure 11. Locations of activism from public Facebook events.......................... 106

Figure 12. IAYA social media posts with a purpose: Assets or critiques? .......... 109

Figure 13. Juxtaposed ideas of graduating, figure series 1 of 2, Critical.............. 111

Figure 14. Juxtaposed ideas of graduation, figure series 2 of 2, Asset-based......... 112

Figure 15. Eastside Race Justice Day, 2016..................................................... 164

Figure 16. Lakeview High Demographics...................................................... 187

Figure 17. Eastside High Demographics....................................................... 187

Figure 18. Public Facebook Events 1.............................................................. 188
Figure 19. Public Facebook Events 2. Types of activism pie chart based on the 25 public Facebook events within the course of one year. ................................................................. 189

Figure 20. Social media influencers: Racial demographics. ........................................... 189

Figure 21. Social media influencers: Percentage with immigrant parents. ................. 190

Figure 22. Social media influencers: School location (for youth) or community member. ........................................................................................................................................... 190

Figure 23. Content analysis of IAYA social media screenshots. ................................. 191

Figure 24. Themes from coding responses from the yPAR question: How'd you get woke? ........................................................................................................................................... 192
Abstract

In the past half a decade, many youth in urban high schools have witnessed the raised racial and political consciousness of a nation on screens, in schools, and on the streets. Many students of color have already seen or felt school or state-sanctioned surveillance, violence, and segregation. Some white students in urban schools have begun to see their worlds differently and to ask how they, too, are implicated. In newly formed solidarities, urban youth have raised their voices to talk, to walk, to march, to meet, and to thrive in the streets, working collectively—and sometimes separately—towards a just future.

Using an alternative format, this dissertation is structured as three separate but related papers. The first paper works to define youth activist pedagogies. The second paper explores the literacies of youth activists through the frames of connected literacies; freedom, struggle, and dialogism; and whiteness as property (Harris, 1993). The third paper examines youth-adult relationships and responsive participant observation within engaged research. As a whole, this dissertation examines the connected literacies and critical pedagogies of youth activists in urban schools, a unique group whose knowledges and activities are largely unknown or underutilized by teachers and schools.

Through a two-year, youth-informed critical ethnographic study, informed by asset-based and participatory action research, I documented pedagogical and literacy activities of youth across interracial anti-racist youth groups in two urban high schools in the upper Midwest United States. The overall research questions of the study asked: How did interracial anti-racist youth groups frame literacies and learning; how did they learn; and how were literacies and learning connected to liberation?

This study was youth-informed and connected across school, community, and digital space. I refused the dominant deficit discourses of urban education and youth, in order to see the strengths that were not only possible, but that already existed in youth knowledge, inquiry, and capacity. Interracial youth activists, led by BIPOC youth, mobilized throughout a major urban area, learning and leading in overlapping racial justice, arts, education, and Black liberation networks and activities. Critical race theories helped to illuminate the ways that activist youth pressed against racism while submerged within it. Across all three papers, and despite challenges, youth activists created ripple effects of consciousness raising and social change throughout themselves, their schools, and the city. Implications of this research suggest pedagogies, practices, and positioning to amplify youth-centered education in literacies for liberation.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

1.1 Relationships over—but including—Research

Research has been invasive, damaging, and performed with disregard to the needs or desires of many marginalized communities; some Indigenous researchers refer to it as the “r-word” in regards to those who have been over-researched (L.T. Smith, 2012), especially in projects with scientists who enter with a deficit frame or who are not a member of the community who is being researched. To contest and inform who can do research, a youth group produced a skit and video entitled “Mr. Researchy” (Public Science Project, 2011). They unpacked perceptions of what research is and who can do it. This video supported how youth can conduct research too, and they are uniquely poised to investigate, to understand, and to humanize issues in their own communities. In my dissertation research, I aimed to build capacity for youth research and to conduct critical research simultaneously; this was intentional work. I was outside the membership of many youth in this study, by age, race, and social class. Yet, as we shared in critical ideologies and local organizing, I proceeded with caution and care. Our relationships grew from the work we did together. In the edited anthology Humanizing Research (Paris & Winn, 2013), the editors discussed a humanizing research stance built on relationships:

Building on our previous work with youth of color and their communities, we conceptualize humanizing approaches as those that involve the building of relationships of care and dignity and dialogic consciousness raising for both researchers and participants. Furthermore, we view such a research stance and its processes as involving reciprocity and respect. (Paris & Winn, 2013, p. xvi)
I approached this research with working expectations for relationships first. In critical qualitative research, relationships are core to gathering data; they are also integral to the integrity of analysis and writing. Stories are not whole. They are fractured and limited. They are impacted by word count, authorship, and audience. They are bound by time and space. After years together, working with youth activists in schools and in the community, how ought I proceed to speak and to write? I want to honor and protect participants and those others with whom I worked in the context of research. I aim to maintain relationships, reciprocity, and respect.

In this introduction, I proceed with a fictional beginning, a composite that represents a group membership that I share with youth, teachers, and myself who are racialized as white. Though the activist groups were mostly led by students of color, they were sometimes co-led by white students, who comprised about a third of the youth in this study. In the writing process, I was often warned against writing about youth in romanticized ways. I was reminded to write in their flaws. Then, as I wrote about white youth, I was critiqued for representing those youth with too many shortcomings. Youth racialized as white—like any youth or any adults featured particular in in race work—are on a journey where we make mistakes and, hopefully, where we learn. Students racialized as white are not neutral nor innocent; they are connected individually and collectively to systems of oppression. However, white youth committed to this work are often growing.

It is my hope that the stories I share are nuanced enough to note both problems and resultant growth. I write with love and gratitude for those on—and off—these pages. Using data from the study, this fictional composite provides perspectives on whiteness, race, pace, and teaching. I hope that it allows the reader to analyze the complexity of how
race played out, interacting with literacy in implicit, explicit, and ongoing ways. This was a complex journey, working in solidarity with groups of interracial youth, fighting for racial justice in the community, and working for anti-racism in the schools. Imperfectly, I begin.

1.2 Composite Sketch

Following is a fictional reflective entry from a high school student racialized as white. This composite was compiled from data stemming from youth, teachers, and my own experience in a critical ethnographic study. Fictional composites may be both problematic and useful. The rationale behind creating a composite sketch was to center a racialized experience and to blur the overlapping boundaries of participants (Cook, 2013) racialized as white. There are many ways to enter into a story, and this is one.

When I walk into school, the rest of the world is somewhat put on pause. I shove my forefinger into my Caseology phone case and slide the vertical tab to silent. Social media apps are blocked as my phone automatically shifts to the school’s wifi. If I have enough data, I use an app booster to bypass the school wifi to access Facebook, Twitter, and Snapchat to respond to notifications.

I meet up with some friends at the round tables in the cafeteria space. I rush to complete whatever homework I had to do for points and laugh at a story someone is retelling. The bell goes off and we casually walk in different directions towards class. On the 3rd floor, in English class, I duck down to find an outlet behind a cabinet for my phone. The desks are in a giant circle. My friends are not in most of my classes, and I definitely don’t know everyone’s names. I land in a chair with a handout by Toni Cade Bambara. Ms. Naper is a middle-aged, white teacher with tats who rides her bike to work. She tells one guy, who’s just sitting there, to put away his headphones (they’re not even on). A minute later she acts like she’s friends with me, or something. Mostly, it’s annoying. I just want to do my work. Then she asks an interesting question about identity. I can’t say what I really think in front of all these people who I don’t really know. I’ll probably say something wrong. Or they won’t understand what I mean. Someone may call me racist. I think about a quiz in math class. “Remember to write a poem about your name, what it means, and if it’s your destiny!” The bell rings.

I think about yesterday, after play practice, when I went to a neighborhood organizing for change meeting. A few people were talking about racial capitalism. It was interesting, and I didn’t have to talk much. I’m white, so it was more important that I listened, but it still felt a little awkward. I have to GTS, as one of my teachers says (“Google that shit”).

There are many types of teachers here at Eastside, and all of them I’ve had are white. Not the security guards, not the administrators, but the teachers. Some teachers seem to ignore
what’s going on in the world or in the classroom. Some drone on in that teacher voice that penetrates the walls and seeps into a class discussion next door. One woman taught about Black history in U.S. history, but she let the Black young men sleep in class. Then there are the teachers we really notice are white, like the white teacher in a Black voices class and another in an African American Studies class, with. I mean, another friend said the movie Their Eyes Were Watching God was lit, but still.

There’s good stuff too, especially at our school. Some teachers make packets and create curriculum from the real world. One of my friends had a teacher who led a white privilege unit with a giant packet she had to annotate. We read August Wilson’s play Fences and had class discussions. The 9th graders did a “ripple effect” research project where they got to do a social change project and presented it to the class. In 10th grade, we created websites to use for our research presentations. Even if the websites weren’t awesome, and even if I couldn’t remember what my project was a month after I did it, they tried. Upper class students had an entire semester to produce a video, in groups or alone, with the help of a local video artist and two teachers. They researched a local social issue and hosted a video release party. A math teacher posted social justice math projects about inequities in a long hallway. A science teacher had a lesson the last week of school where we got to make ice cream. It was Ramadan though, so she had Muslim kids make chocolate chip cookie dough to take home for Iftar. The art teacher lets us into her room to create posters for actions. One of the social studies teachers came to our sit-in. In the summer, some of the teachers marched with their union for Black Lives Matter and for better schools, and one teacher was even arrested.

It seems like some teachers just want to keep their jobs, and they really don’t say much. But we can tell they’re racist. I mean, they say they’re not racist, because they teach here (as if proximity to melanin dismisses racism). But they always use names of the kids who are white; they use the names of the Black kids, but usually to correct something; they don’t talk much at all to the Latinx, API, or Native kids; they say names of Somali kids wrong, or they call two different girls by the same name, or mostly, they don’t use their names at all. One teacher (yes, a white woman) kept pressuring two girls to commit to when they were going to pray, “at the same time every day.” Meanwhile—the time of prayer changes. That teacher was unnecessary: “You’re just skipping when you want to.” It really wasn’t that serious. What if there’s a day you don’t want to pray? Looking for validation (not knowledge), she complained to the equity specialist (also a white guy). Another day, an older teacher, a white man, trailed my friend and me into the media center, having a mostly one-sided “conversation” about “all lives matter.” We were late for my class and didn’t have a pass. He didn’t give us one either. When he was done talking (I was saying “mm-hmm, mm-hmm” to end it sooner), he said he’d love to talk more, but he needed to get to class and turned to go out the door. The librarians are white, too. Most of the time, they welcome me and other white students, and they act all sorts of snappy with students of Color: “Where’s your pass? You can’t be in here. You need to go. Come back with a pass. Shshhhhh.” Once, a librarian—you know the one—even asked me to ask my friends (who are Black) to be quieter. What am I supposed to do about that?
Our racial justice club advisor is a cis/het white man with a random jar of pickles on his office floor. Sometimes when we are talking about something serious, he tries to be a devil’s advocate. He says he might not actually believe what he’s saying, but it’s for our own good to be prepared for “game day” and to be able to defend our stance. We don’t always finish our work in meetings, and then he wants us to come into his office to work, to get stuff done. Ugh. Some of our leaders refuse to go into his office to work. One time, on a bus ride, I timed him, and he talked for 14 minutes straight.

Adults run the spectrum of annoying, awesome, funny, or exhausting. Some of them really try. And hey, they give the grades.

As I walk out of school, I turn on my phone and the rest of the world floods in and takes over. Global and national news alerts and updates about Trump, group chats with friends, texts from my mom. Ting ting ta ting ting ting. Whatever happened in school, in those seven 50-minute periods, is pretty much gone. On the bus, I don’t look outside until I know I’m close to home. I pull the cord and the brakes jolt to a stop. I head to work, go back home, heat something to eat, and do dishes. My sister’s Facetiming someone. When I lie down, I hold the screen above my head. I snap a photo of the ceiling fan to keep up with my streaks. I head to the bathroom, press the alert button for Twitter, then the home button, scanning down the screen. Back on my mattress, I flip over on my belly and click to open Insta, <3’ing images that already have over 200 likes and commenting on my besties from the group. I scroll through a queer youth page that I follow on tumblr. Someone wrote about a Netflix season, so I save it to binge watch later.

It all happens so fast. A week ago there was a school shooting somewhere, maybe Ohio, and now there’s nothing about it in my feed. There’s a guy who’s always posting something intellectual and liberatory (and on the low, he is fine). He shared something about the Black Panther party and free breakfasts for kids. I don’t know too much about them, so I click. I scan, I read, I wonder why I never knew this. I watch a YouTube video. I don’t post anything about it. I don’t know enough to post.

I don’t talk to my parents very much. Well, I can, but my dad doesn’t live with us. They’re usually working, and we might end up yelling, or disagreeing, and I don’t have the right words to articulate what I’m feeling or thinking or learning. That this world is so unjust, that I don’t know what to do with this privilege that I have. That I’m still just a kid and I’m trying to learn what I’m supposed to in school, but I have so much to unlearn, too. I doze off with my cheek on my screen. It vibrates. Half-awake, I respond with a light tan thumbs up emoji, and I tuck the phone back under my pillow.

1.3 Paradoxes, Problems, and Potential in Urban Education

This is a jarring transition, from a composite narrative to a research problem. The narrative describes the relentless presence and pace of school and social media and a
preoccupation with teachers. It demonstrates—albeit in a fictional and reflective day—what little breathing, talking, or together time is available for young people, especially in interracial groups or around social issues. We are living through inundated times. The data never sleeps. Neither does injustice. And neither do the youth. Everything moves so fast. Problems in urban education rely on this pace to continue with business as usual.

This section first summarizes how current systems, structures, standardization, and accountability fail to engage communities in urban schooling. Then, it outlines research in urban education that implores dialogic learning opportunities, critical consciousness, and culturally sustaining, asset-based pedagogies, which set the stage for this study.

The narrative draws attention to paradoxes in urban education. Schools are under pressure by governing bodies to raise test scores, to maintain safety and control, and to prepare for college and career readiness, often at the expense of youth and learning. Structures surrounding urban education include but are not limited to racial and social class segregation and poverty, which contribute to an education debt (Ladson-Billings, 2006) and an opportunity gap (Milner IV, 2010). Students are divided by race, class, language, and dis/ability within schools and separated by schools (including by district, lottery, charter, etc.), which exacerbates segregation in institutional systems and structures. Schools that serve diverse populations are ripe with unchecked hegemony, compounded by the 95% white public school teachers in the upper Midwest (Boser, 2011) and 82.5% in the nation (Aud, S., Hussar, W., Johnson, F., Kena, G., Roth, E., Manning, E., Wang, X., and Zhang, 2012). The critically conscious teachers within that group may be a growing number, but the histories and systems of schooling still dominate the feeling of a school. Unexamined systems of whiteness in education are a
cultural invasion to many urban youth; these systems fail to attribute social capital to communities in regards to race/ethnicity, social class, languages, and literacies. Youth, families, and communities are regularly and implicitly devalued in schools (Leonardo, 2004; Mitchell, Donahue, & Young-Law, 2012). Education sociologists illustrate how devaluing youth of color contributes to the school-to-prison pipeline and mass incarceration in the U.S. (Alexander, 2012; Meiners, 2010; Noguera, 2011). Racist and oppressive structures have not been eradicated in schools or society. Societal transformation must be transformed simultaneously with urban education (Anyon, 2014). But who will contribute to this transformation?

Standardization in schools can curb curriculum from being shaped by context and community funds of knowledge. It fosters subtractive schooling (Valenzuela, 2010). Zero tolerance policies align with accountability ideologies and have resulted in dire increases in disproportionate suspensions and expulsions of Black and Brown students over the past two decades (Ladson-Billings, 2001), pushing students out of school. Accountability can decrease engaged participation and democratization (Anyon, 2014; Hill Collins, 2009). Perhaps most dangerously, it is followed by silence or failure to contribute to or critique schools, by students, parents, and teachers, and often followed by urban school teacher turnover (Darling-Hammond, 2010).

Contrastingly, decades of research on urban education urge schools to increase dialogic discussions for learning (Fecho, Falter, & Hong, 2016; Fine & Weis, 2003; Shields, 2004), raise critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995), and utilize the plural and shifting cultures, languages, literacies, and knowledges of youth (Emdin, 2016; Lyiscott, 2017; Paris & Alim, 2014). Some teachers strive to center students and to
include contentious issues (Ayers, Quinn, Meiners, Kumashiro, & Stovall, 2016; Juzwik, Whitney, Bell, & Smith, 2014) or anti-oppressive education (Kumashiro & Ngo, 2007). The demand for relevance is at an all-time high, but it is in direct paradox with the controlling frame of urban schools.

In U.S. public schools, there is a predictable discrepancy between experiences afforded to low-income and high-income students and white students and students of color. However, out-of-school opportunities, alternative schools, and social justice education emerge with dialogic learning in urban education (Alvermann, 2010; Mahiri, 2004; Winn & Behizadeh, 2011). Urban schools with ethnic studies, racial justice programs, and a centering of youth voice offer rich and relevant opportunities (Flynn, 2012; Gill & Niens, 2014; Mitra, 2014). Spoken word programs, for instance, have an explicitly social justice frame. They increase language and literacy while questioning the status quo (Camangian, 2008). Urban classrooms and after school programs become communities of inquiry, making sense of “topics of individual and social significance, through action, knowledge building and reflection” (Wells, 1999, p. 98). These unique learning opportunities can thrive in urban spaces, diving into the contradictions of justice-centered teaching; they engage at a systems level and a personal level; they “muster the courage to ask uncomfortable questions” (Ayers et al, 2016, p. 113). These opportunities remain too sparse, so research remains insufficient.

The problem of urban schooling is not youth nor disengaged youth. The problem is when schools, systems, teachers, and researchers are not deeply engaged with youth: their worlds, their curiosities and realities, their knowledges and practices, their struggles and dreams. When adults react to all the intensities that have been handed to us, when we
ignore histories, issues, joys, and the humanity of students, we contribute to the racial project (Omi & Winant, 2014) and sit in stagnant waters of schooling. Youth notice. We need those willing to be engaged with youth as leaders, ready to disrupt the status quo. In schools, youth stories often stayed muted behind a grey and sleeping phone screen, but as I spent time with them across schools, communities, and online, it became easier to see their multiple levels of activities; their teaching, learning, and literacies were prolific, interconnected, knowledgeable, and worthy of note.

1.3 Rationale from research and local needs

Youth are too often left out of being actors in school transformation. Critically conscious youth activists are philosophers, teachers, discourse analysts, organizers, and sociologists of urban schooling and racial injustice. They stand up to fight against injustice and they gather together to process, plan, act, and reflect. They learn under the tutelage of family, friends, and community members, and intersectional feminist, queer, and trans leadership of Color. However, youth in general, and marginalized youth in specific, are often excluded from conversations, research, and decision-making in schools. Urban education researchers recognize the deep and long-lasting implications of engaging youth directly with the transformation of schools (Ginwright, Cammarota, & Noguera, 2006). This engagement relies on the pedagogical assets of communities (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). Django Paris and Samy Alim (2013) acknowledge that the starkest limitation of this work is the “outright absence [of asset pedagogies] in today’s classrooms” (C. Smith, 2016, p. 141). To transform urban schooling into spaces of radical possibilities (Anyon, 2014), this dissertation study is grounded in the assets, pedagogies, and literacies of interracial youth already working to create social change.
Despite a growth in youth movements across the nation, youth organizing activities have remained understudied. Research from critical youth scholars has identified a desire to learn more about the pedagogical strategies and literacies of youth organizing groups (Bishop, 2016; Kirshner, 2007). In addition, out-of-school literacy research has shaped how the field understands literacies and learning (Alvermann, 2010), and the youth in this study blended literacy practices and events in school, out-of-school, and online—gifting lessons to learn.

Figure 1. Focal youth activist Facebook posts. Youth participated in actions (FB, above left) and shared critical commentary (FB, above right) about racial (in)justice.

As researchers and educators, we have the opportunity to learn from and amplify what youth bring to urban education. This study aims to do just that. First, this dissertation follows anti-racist education in two different urban schools with interracial anti-racist youth groups. Second, it tracks the asset-based, racial justice-centered activities of youth activists in the schools (individual, small group, and large group activities). Third, it responds to questions of learning and literacy. As the years of this
study unfolded, youth participated in conversations, planning, and social actions. They shared critical commentary (Figure 1) and organized to address racial (in)justice in schools, in the city, and beyond. They blended out-of-school languages and literacies in school spaces.

There was a local call for this study as well. Anti-racist youth groups were often viewed as culture/diversity clubs; as such, they were regularly at risk of being de-staffed or de-funded (Darling-Hammond, 2015). They were often supported by diversity and equity staff or initiatives; they were not legitimated as activities focused on literacy or learning. What could I learn and do, systematically, about the opportunities for literacy and learning within these groups, that might help enable them to sustain themselves because of it?

1.4 Overview of the Dissertation

This dissertation examines the critical pedagogies and connected literacies of youth activists connected across urban schools. Through a two-year, youth-informed critical and connective ethnographic study, I documented activities across interracial anti-racist youth groups in two urban high schools in the upper Midwest of the United States. These groups were connected to an anti-racist youth leadership network, informed by a research-based framework (Duffy & Galloway, 2012) and supported by adult advisors and advocates in their schools. The IRB title of the study was: Youth-Centered Literacies in Anti-Racist Youth Leadership Programs. My commitments were to the youth, racial justice, and public scholarship. The structure of this dissertation begins with an introduction, followed by three separate manuscripts, and a conclusion that speaks to the
lessons learned across the three papers. In this overview, I share the research questions about learning, literacy, and liberation that guided the study, and I summarize each paper.

Two initial research questions included: “How are literacies and learning framed in these interracial anti-racist youth groups? What are the literacies in these spaces, and what does it mean to learn in this context?” In order to explore literacies and pedagogies, the actions of youth activists were the unit of analysis. Within the first month of meeting the youth, two major changes shifted the context and frame of the questions. The first change was about the research context. Youth emphasized that their social justice learning and action was only partially associated with their school-based anti-racist group; it was a slice of their activist identity. Research is always partial in data collection and representation. Because of a commitment to ethnography and moreover to youth as participants/drivers, I expanded the scope from the locus of groups to multiple actions of youth, including but not limited to the groups with whom they were involved. With youth invitation, context stretched across school, community, and digital spaces. The second change in the guiding research questions was in their frame. Initially, I asked about literacy and learning in regards to equity. Listening to the youth prompted me to use “liberation” over equity. The idea of “getting free” reoccurred throughout the study, associated with Black liberation movements. Alongside the current state of urban schools and an overwhelming discourse of control, surveillance, and policing, liberation was a necessary frame to intentionally wrap around literacy and pedagogy. What was the purpose of literacy and learning, if not to get free? This concept layered onto the questions of learning and literacy. What was the role of liberation in youth activist literacies and pedagogies; how were literacies and pedagogies restricted or free?
In the first paper (Chapter Two), I explore how youth activists brought pedagogy to their urban schools. Across the corpus of the data, youth activists had explicit, recurrent commitments to teaching, learning, and pedagogy. This study elucidated pedagogies that interracial youth activists enacted through anti-racist education. For this paper, data analysis used narrative episodes from a six-month period of racial justice-based events (including teach-ins and sit-ins) and a three-day youth participatory research analysis camp based on youth activism. The methodological framework supporting this paper used the research and theory of culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and was informed by Black feminist thought, both central to Ladson-Billings and to the activist youth in this study. I used inductive and open coding, followed by categorizing codes into Patricia Hill Collins’s (2009) domains-of-power framework, before axial coding and collapsing codes into themes, to create a working theory of youth activist pedagogies. Youth cultivated a deep desire for knowledge and truth, through collective youth agency, amidst an ever-present discourse of whiteness and control. Further analysis showed the significance of pedagogies as multiple: as oppositional (or critical), collective (and relational), and expansive, connected to social movements. Youth activist pedagogies can help us to reimagine possibilities with youth as leaders and co-leaders, teachers and co-teachers, bringing multiple perspectives, community experience, and coalitions to the fore.

In the second paper (Chapter Three), I examine youth activist literacies, their ideological practices and literacy-connected events. I draw from decades of scholarship that has expanded literacy to multiple and out-of-school literacies: “No longer can we rely on traditional definitions of literacy—the ability to read and write—without
considering issues of identity, culture, community practices, funds of knowledge, access, and agency” (Kinloch, 2010, p. 191-192). This study took place within the consistent racism inherent in schooling, and in spite of it, youth activists led creative and persistent resistance, building their literacies along the way. "Today's youth literacy practices are anchored in deeply personal and political causes" (Haddix, Garcia, & Price-Dennis, 2016, p. 21). Analysis for this second paper gave me the opportunity to examine literacies across data sets. I had a series of questions: What were the literacies of youth activists? What was resisted, restricted, amplified, or denied? How did whiteness interfere with literacies, learning, and liberation? Further, how was whiteness pre-existing, constructed, circumvented, and denied by youth activists, amidst the co-construction of critical and connected literacies for social change? I used an interwoven framework of connected literacies; freedom, struggle, and dialogism; and critical whiteness studies (Leonardo, 2009; Roediger & Roediger, 2007) connected to critical race theory in education (Ladson-Billings & Tate IV, 1995). With this framework, I analyzed social media and group activities. Findings indicated literacies of love and resistance, organizing literacies, critical teaching literacies, and literacies of knowledge. The framework layered with theories of whiteness as property (Harris, 1993) and as one-dimensional (Calderón, 2006), to expose the normative, persistent damage of whiteness across otherwise liberatory literacies. Regardless, young people and their vibrant, multimodal literacies in youth-centered spaces worked for racial justice. Youth in this study circumvented dominant systems and oppressions and created opportunities for dialogic learning, for connected literacies, and for joy.
The third paper (Chapter Four) takes seriously the call to examine the self, important in both critical ethnography and activist work. I took steps to systematically reflect on myself and my role in relation to participants and to the study, as a white woman researching with both youth of color and white youth. Michelle Fine (2017) writes, “Those of us who are White have an obligation to excavate critically our own her-his-their stories of privilege to understand how we sit in tragic dialectics with structures of oppression, and how we might replace ourselves within solidarity movements of resistance” (p. xiv). I wanted to systematically understand how youth informed me, how I moved over, and how I got in the way. As such, this third paper’s theoretical frame centered critical ethnographic concepts of participant observation, positionality, and reflexivity. My commitment to follow the lead of youth meant that I needed to perpetually examine myself as an activist researcher, as an adult, and as a woman racialized as white. I was conflicted; we were in activist work together and youth contributed to the shaping of the research, but I was also a researcher separate from them. This research was not primarily youth participatory action research (YPAR). It was, nonetheless, crucial to imagine how youth could research in ways that were meaningful to them. It was necessary that I supported youth in ways that they desired.

In the third manuscript, I drew from one particular stage of data analysis to analyze my role as a participant observer. How did youth position me throughout the study? How did I respond to them? What mistakes did I make, or how did I contribute to a status quo that positioned youth as non-agents of their own contexts? Ultimately, I asked, “What are the dynamic ways that adults can support youth, being cognizant of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, context, position, and power?” To respond to the question, I used 90
self-reflexive memos (Heath & Street, 2008) and correlated multiple data sources (Yin, 2013) in thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to investigate how I responded to youth, and how they responded to me, in the study. After analysis, in a two-hour interview/dinner with Sincere, a local youth activist and focal member, I asked for specific feedback and we theorized together in response to analysis and preliminary findings. Based on findings regarding the importance of trust and reflexivity, I introduce a new framework, *responsive participant observation*, for educators, researchers, or youth workers ready to support youth while they lead.

In a concluding chapter, I summarize key findings from the three articles and discuss implications for education, based in the asset-based literacies and pedagogies of youth. I share plans for future research, including further analysis of the data as well as the need for participatory youth action research, recognizing what the research indicates about collective possibilities when we work with one another. Adults (educators, mentors, parents) have the opportunity to work alongside youth, theorizing, teaching, learning, researching, and envisioning liberation in education together.

### 1.5 Positioning and Frameworks Informing the Study

I am a researcher, teacher educator, organizer, and a parent in public urban schools, seeking youth voice, transformation, and justice in education. My approach to research was driven by my experience as a teacher, learning from critical and culturally relevant pedagogies (Freire, 2000; hooks, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Data collection and analysis was supported by a sociocultural approach to learning theories and critical literacies, including Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of dialogism (Todorov, 1984). Different
theoretical frameworks informed each of the three articles in this dissertation, as explained in their summaries, but I was guided by community assets and by critical race theory (Ladson-Billings & Tate IV, 1995), acknowledging and countering the endemic nature of race, racism, and White supremacy while simultaneously forwarding counter-stories (D. G. Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) and knowledges of youth. I recognized schooling as part of a racist and white supremacist system, and I acknowledged my role and responsibility within that, as an educator and as a white woman.

As schools and society sustain racist spaces and systems, CRT remains vital. Scholars utilize critical race theories and praxis to name issues and to fight against oppression, in order to diminish and ultimately abolish the need for the work. CRT in education (Ladson-Billings & Tate IV, 1995) encompasses three stances: racism is endemic; there are ongoing intersections of race and property, particularly whiteness as property; and there are limits to the multicultural paradigm (multicultural approaches are insufficient if they do not also address oppression, resistance, and power; anti-racism must accompany non-racism). Initially, I was reluctant to “do” CRT, even though participants taught about race and worked against racism. First, I approached CRT as an assumption, for instance recognizing that racism is endemic, without thinking about the robust and possibilities of the theories. Then, I avoided it to some extent, hesitant to use it as an analytical framework. I did not want to be “CRTtitilicious” (Hughes, 2012, as cited in Ledesma & Calderón, 2015) to use race theory because it was a sexy thing to do or because it might make me a “good white”™ (DiAngelo, 2018; Johnson, 2016). I was worried about the lure of storytelling, or counter-narratives, and what that meant for me.
as a white woman. I did not need to sensationalize stories of students of color. In addition, I wondered if CRT might conflict with the asset-based frame of this study.

As I began to write, I was drawn back to Critical Race Theory for multiple reasons. First, the youth in the study became increasingly active in addressing racial injustices. Principles of CRT were woven throughout the data about youth activist organizing, learning, and literacies. Most specifically, as whiteness was a steady theme throughout the data, critically examining whiteness was central to analysis, especially in chapter three. Second, Ladson-Billing’s lifelong commitment to researching and lifting up assets and knowledges specific to Black and African American youth (and informing decades of my own teaching) was steeped in CRT. Third, whiteness and patriarchy were constant reminders, slippery and sliding back into a norm, in the systems and structures that youth were so deftly fighting against. So, I proceeded by leaning on Critical Race Praxis (Stovall, Lynn, Danley, & Martin, 2009). David Stovall has worked with youth-centered community-based programs with youth of Color, theorizing CRT into praxis. In the book, Stovall and his fellow authors write:

The goal of CRT should not be to legitimate itself as a field of scholarship to the academy. Instead it should operate as a call to work in addressing the predicament of children of color in education. CRT is not a panacea, but instead a means by which to identify the function of racism as an institutional and systemic phenomenon…CRT calls for the necessity of non-conventional approaches in challenging hegemony in urban schools. (2009, p. 106)

The youth in this study provoked non-conventional approaches that directly challenged the status quo in urban schools. I asked how the data talked back to or extended theories
of race, pedagogies, and literacies. I asked how interracial groups of youth, led by Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) youth, upset mundane racist constructs to create a new reality for themselves. I have ongoing unfinished appreciations and struggles with each of these frames, as concepts of race and whiteness continue to shift, but I hope this section shared some of the metacognitive decisions in this study.

1.6 Context, Methods, and Design

So much is possible when youth lead. During the high school careers of youth within this study, they led and participated in walkouts, sit-ins, classroom conversations, conferences, film viewings, and professional development sessions. They mourned lives taken by state-sanctioned violence, especially those stolen during their high school career without accountability on the part of law enforcement. They protested, posted, and made signs for Jamar Clark and Philando Castile as well as Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Gardner, Rekia Boyd, Sandra Bland, Laquan McDonald, Freddie Gray, Alton Sterling, Tamir Rice, Terrance Franklin, and more. As the study went on, they participated in acts of solidarity against Immigration Custom Enforcement (ICE), unjust voting laws for those formerly incarcerated, a Department of Justice (DOJ) program called Countering Violent Extremism (CVE), the 2016 presidential election, and the Dakota Access Pipeline (#NoDAPL). They joined walkouts and marches in support of Indigenous water protectors and DACA. Youth built their own school-based movements as well, to create a prayer space and a students of color union, and to change the name of their school. In this section, I share conditions in the schools that helped to support these groups, maintaining that the work and energies of the groups were youth-led and youth-
driven. I set the context of the study, surrounded by a local and national fight for Black lives, and then I proceed with overarching approaches to research methods and design.

For a decade, I was connected to a local anti-racist youth leadership network. With the aid and support of collegial relationships in that network and in the schools, in 2015 I purposefully selected research sites from over 20 participating schools in multiple districts in the upper Midwest. I learned about Time 2 Get Real (T2GR), a group at Lakeview High that began in fall of 2014. A few 9th graders had been part of an interracial anti-racist group in middle school, and two trusted high school English teachers offered to serve as advisors, so that the students could continue in what they viewed as imperative work. A youth-only group also formed out of mostly Lakeview youth, including many who attended T2GR meetings as well. Across the city at Eastside High, a group called SpeakUp re-formed with renewed energy after a retreat day in January of 2015, with the support of their administration, some teachers, and an equity specialist. These groups gained strength as youth reeled from November sit-ins after the non-indictment of police officer Darren Wilson in the killing of teenager Michael Brown. Their in-school actions were informed by their out-of-school activism.

There were a few factors that helped to set up the conditions for these groups to be supported in the schools. First, the anti-racist youth leadership network was an ongoing local resource; it was research-based, connected across multiple schools and districts, and implemented with support from school administrators. A number of districts were part of a multi-district equity-driven professional development (PD) group that utilized trainers from the network to provide PD without additional cost to schools and teachers (it was embedded in their initial partnership agreement). Next, some of the
districts had equity policies and budget lines that supported the work. These systemically-supported norms allowed advisors of anti-racist youth groups to attend professional development sessions based on race equity. Most advisors were part of equity teams at their schools as well, so most were not working in isolation. Advisors demonstrated continued commitment to learning about race. For instance, English teacher advisors posted book covers on their walls to share what they were reading, often connected to race, ethnicity, and identity. Advisors were able to bring school data and initiatives into the groups for feedback. They reserved rooms (their own classrooms or other space) for meetings and supported students who needed excused absences for meetings. They were a conduit between the overarching structure of the school and a youth group focused on learning about race and fighting against racism. To varying extents, these conditions laid a foundation for educators to encourage anti-racist education, conversations, and youth-driven action, even as they were also bound by school structures and some colleagues who denied or feared the importance of the work. These conditions helped to support the necessary reactions and urgency that youth began to demand, in and of the schools.

In the fall of 2016, Jamar Clark, a young Black man, was shot and killed by law enforcement. Youth and other community members took to the streets, to hold space with each other and to hold the city and state accountable. Protests again made their way into schools. Hundreds of youth from Lakeview walked out and held a die-in at a busy intersection. Youth from Eastside and other schools walked out as well. In second semester, in the spring of 2016, I became a participant observer with over 77 youth, ages 11-19, at three schools for six months, at one week-long middle school summer camp, and with focal participants for over two years, including over twenty-five activist or
organizing events. Throughout a year, I spent time with adult advisors in the schools and in professional development sessions (the professional development sessions and the middle school study falls outside the scope of this dissertation). These days were surrounded by the context in the fight for Black lives.

This multi-site critical ethnographic study was youth-informed, and the dissertation itself was based in two large urban high schools with interracial, anti-racist youth activists (IAYA). In groups of twenty or so, youth met one to three times per week for a semester (over 400 hours); I was in their service. Eastside met during the school day and Lakeview met after school. These groups held conversations about race and organized actions and education in their schools, including walkouts, sit-ins, presentations, and conferences. I attended school-based meetings and activities outside of school. This included arts and activism events, such as spoken word poetry slams or film viewing/discussions. I supported youth activism in schools and in the community. The process of this dissertation was messy. I had not set out to “research” “activists,” but many of these young people activists during the length of the study.

**Research methodology**

Critical ethnography was the main research-gathering method within this research design, centering participant needs through the ethics and actions of humanizing and participatory research (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Django Paris & Winn, 2013; L. T. Smith, 2012). Critical ethnography was necessary for examining literacy practices and events, to “provide closely detailed accounts” (Street, 2014/1995, p. 29). My aim was to be systematic in gathering data, to layer participant responses in analysis, and to learn from youth activists in urban schools: “Much of ethnography is about representing what’s
already represented in our participants’ lives, bringing those hidden textualities of human experience to the fore” (Kirkland, 2013, p. 190). When I entered the schools in January, I participated alongside groups, jotting notes that youth wanted recorded. In February and March, youth began to guide the modes of ethnographic data collection. I worked alongside youth, in person and virtually, as young people at Lakeview High prepared presentations on Google Documents, including a group planning a “White Ally” workshop. At Eastside, SpeakUp was prepping for their day-long Teach-In during 10th grade ELA classes. Again, I recorded notes based on their conversations and provided resources. For instance, I jotted down questions they excitedly asked in group, overlapping each other. When they needed a closing question for an activity, I repeated back their own questions. They were shocked the questions were theirs. After events, youth met to evaluate and reflect on the actions. Artifacts contributed to this study that were produced in preparation for, during, and after events. It was important to be part of the in-between aspects of youth activism, in meetings and on-line, both to support them and to understand the literacies and learning in more non-traditional spaces. Starting in March, I used audio recordings as well as continuing as a participant observer.

Just as youth guided data collection, they contributed their own research to the study. They were committed to social action in their schools and communities; research added a layer of support to their goals. Elements of CPAR (Critical Participatory Action Research) or YPAR (Youth Participatory Action Research) were enacted throughout the study and are featured in each paper. CPAR is an epistemological commitment that accompanies social justice in public education and necessitates humanizing methodological modes of research (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Paris & Winn, 2013).
CPAR situates researchers to be in direct conversation with the public, designing research and developing scholarship across differences and power. PAR produces “the social power to determine what is valid or useful knowledge” (Rahman, 1985, as cited in Cammarota & Fine, 2008, p. 28). Youth designed research for the purpose of social action. Sometimes they researched for production or performance, using crowd sourcing and critical media analysis, for example, when formulating the production of a video, an official social media post, or as they were preparing to perform or lead a session. Some used their teaching as a space for participatory action research. One group, comprised of youth and adult advisors, led a PAR activity in a teaching session. They created and distributed forms for youth to write how student reports of racism and microaggressions should be dealt with in schools, especially when an adult was the perpetrator. I compiled their responses for them to use with their school, as they wanted to change how their school responded to the racism that young people faced on a regular basis. At a local anti-racist youth leadership conference, I helped Sincere to prepare to lead a session about anti-racist teachers; she gathered visual data from her session that I compiled afterward. We wondered together how we could use that data to teach educators what students were hoping for in their teachers. Regularly, IAYA groups passed out evaluation forms after their political education activities. They held focal group meetings to debrief after events. Even if they viewed themselves more as activists than researchers, their work was systematic, driven by critical inquiry towards social action. It was informed by critical social theories, and it informed my study as well. Community action research “is a collaborative approach to inquiry or investigation that provides people with the means to take systematic action to resolve specific problems” (as cited in L.T. Smith, 2012, p.)
Youth were decision makers in data collection (they were in charge of how or if something would be recorded, for instance). They influenced data analysis (both informally, through what they said or wrote, and more formally, when I conferred with them about analysis), and I stay connected to some of these young people now as we proceed to work in education, critical research, and the community.

**Data Sources.** As a connected ethnography across school, community, and social media, sources included print, audio, and multimodal or digital sources. Print sources included observational jottings, field notes, and a field log with self-reflexive, theoretical, and analytic memos (Heath & Street, 2008), totaling 400 hours of time in the field. I did not record time interacting with youth online, but digital artifacts were part of the corpus of data. These sources included youth-created artifacts from preparing to lead as well as social media musings connected to the study. Screenshots were taken from focal members, hashtags, and public Facebook events. Print data also included selections of transcriptions from audio or video.

Audio was recorded during regular activities, special events, and semi-structured or conversational interviews, mostly from March through August 2016. I recorded 40-minute semi-structured interviews or small focal groups, including 20 youth interviews, six adult interviews, and ongoing conversations during data analysis. I only used video when I had permission, for sessions connected to the regional network or outside of school.

As alluded to in the previous section, youth produced data sets as part of their own action research within their IAYA groups, which they designed, gathered, and sometimes analyzed. This cohered with a goal of mine to co-construct knowledge with
youth. It reflected an aim of theirs that I would be useful in working with them towards their purpose. This data included youth-conducted surveys, PAR gathered in teaching sessions, and a three-day data analysis camp with youth activists in the summer of 2017.

I was privy to a lot of data. After the group was comfortable with me, I wondered if I was more conscious about my gaze than they were. I often asked myself what experience was for research, and what research would I refuse? This question comes from Tuck and Yang’s chapter “R-Words: Refusing Research” (2013). Even though SpeakUp, Time 2 Get Real, and Teach Yo’Self were interracial groups, they coincided with some affinity activities for Black students or for students of color. I considered these activities to be outside the bounds of this research. When I attended protests in the community I was often with youth participants. The goals of community protests were not different from the racial justice they worked for in the schools; however, I considered these events and places as sacred, as part of my duty as a community member but not as a researcher. To clarify, my own experiences were not outside the bounds of research, but I did not record research, jot notes, nor focus on the literacies or learning of youth in those tender spaces of hurt and healing.

Participants. There were approximately 20 diverse youth (self-described mostly as Black, POC, and white) in each of the anti-racist youth leadership groups from Eastside and Lakeview High (see Appendix B for school demographics). Over 50 high school students gave ongoing consent and assent to participate in this study, from diverse racial, ethnic, religious, and linguistic groups, ranging on gender and sexuality continua. Outside of this network, most youth also participated in social justice-oriented cultural groups, community-based nonprofit organizations, and socially conscious arts and
political education activities. Twenty youth became focal participants, who led activist events and education sessions, participated in interviews, and have maintained relationships with me today.

The groups were connected to a multi-city, multi-district, anti-racist youth leadership network. Advisors from the groups were informed by a research-based framework that supported systemic anti-racism in interracial student leadership groups, driven by a commitment similar to ethnic studies frameworks, to explore “who we were, who we are, and who we want to be” (Duffy & Galloway, 2012). The network prompted advisors and youth to develop anti-racist identities through dialogue and self-reflection about individual and collective racial and cultural identities. The network encouraged groups to have at least two advisors from different backgrounds (race, gender, sexuality, rank, etc.). At Lakeview, Time 2 Get Real had four to six consistent and supportive adults who attended their meetings, including a diverse group of teachers, parents, educational assistants, and administrators; T2GR advisors included a Black woman and a white woman, both English teachers. At Eastside, the SpeakUp advisor was a white man who was an equity/diversity coordinator for the building. Though I had been part of the network for years prior, I did not know the research participants from the two main high schools until the study began.

Research Analysis

My approach to qualitative analysis was thematic and supported by critical social theories. Re-immersing myself in the corpus of data, I re-read field notes, listened to audio, transcribed youth interviews, and jotted inductive codes and theoretical memos. I
read and re-read literature and kept a log of sensitizing concepts and quotes that reflected patterns or gaps in research about critical youth literacies and pedagogies.

Each of the three articles uses a different set of data and methods, along with its own frame and analysis, based on a specific research question. Sociocultural literacy researchers Nasir and Hand (2006) argue for “multiple levels of analysis, a focus on cultural practices, learning as a shift in social relations (related to identity), and a perspective that includes the way tools and artifacts (including ideas) come to have an impact on students” (p. 464). These layered analyses examined language, culture, and power within the interactions of participants, their learning, and their literacies. Briefly, I describe analyses from each paper.

Paper one (Chapter Two) is about the pedagogies of youth activists. I wrote thick narrative episodes based on youth teaching events, combined from multiple modes of data, including field notes, transcriptions, and social media. I chose four events for these episodes, two sit-ins and two teach-ins. Using nVivo, I listed and tracked initial, inductive, and open codes before clustering and categorizing them into Patricia Hill Collins’s (2009) domains-of-power framework and then re-organizing them into themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I paid attention to patterns as well as accounts that ran counter to the dominant story. Iteratively, I applied codes and themes across the entire data set. This was useful with a corpus of data as “thematic analysis involves the searching across a data set—be that a number of interviews or focus groups, or a range of texts—to find repeated patterns of meaning” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 15). The youth data analysis camp held in 2017 also contributed to the frame of this paper.
Paper two (chapter three), titled “Connected Literacies of Youth Activists,” uses multiple sets of data from social media, community events, in-school meetings, and a PAR activity co-led by youth and me. I categorized literacy events through open coding (Barton & Hamilton, 2010) in order to explore youth activist literacies across multiple modes of data. I used interviews to substantiate or counter the findings with youth voice. I analyzed the data using critical race theory, specifically whiteness as property (Harris, 1993), because despite liberatory literacy practices of youth activists, there was a theme of whiteness and control throughout the study.

For paper three (chapter four), I interrogated my own role interacting with youth throughout the study, taking seriously the directive for self-reflexivity in critical ethnography. The data set included 90 self-reflexive memos and correlating data. Using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), I deductively coded based on sensitizing concepts in critical ethnography: participant observation, positionality, and reflexivity. Throughout the study, I had not taken self-reflexive memos after working with youth on social media, but those interactions often filled me with tensions and questions. So, I analyzed digital documents using the frame I created of responsive participant observation. Lastly, an interview with Sincere and the interpretive drawings from another youth participant contributed to this framework.

Ongoing interactions with youth contributed to the trustworthiness in this research. Bolstering paper one, I held a data analysis camp in the summer of 2017, where eight youth worked to analyze youth activist artifacts from the previous year. Their research questions correlated with themes I had found from open coding, which constructed how I wrote. Two youth, Anneka and Max, helped to finesse the working
definition of youth activist pedagogies that is in the paper. For the second paper, youth served as co-researchers who led asset mapping activities to gather data about youth consciousness, literacies, and activism. In paper three, two youth focal members contributed explicitly to analysis and representation about adult work with youth. Sincere interrogated the preliminary analysis in a video interview and reviewed later drafts as well. Another young woman represented the analysis through art, featured in the infographic. Finally, my ongoing relationships with participants from this study inspired continued conversations and clarifications, which contribute ideas for public scholarship.

1.7 Commitments

These epistemological, theoretical and methodological frames informed and were informed by a commitment to youth and to racial justice. I was not there to solve anything for anyone, but I was there to work together with young people who understood their struggles and injustices in the schools. Prior to the study, I wrote four key commitments at the end of my research proposal. These commitments stayed with me throughout my research, including when I strayed from them. They drove me, shook me, woke me up, and ultimately led to how I analyzed and wrote about data. They included, briefly (see Appendix 1 for more detail): One, a commitment to public scholarship within an ethical approach for conducting research in urban schools; two, a focus on asset pedagogies and radical hope, denying deficit discourses without looking past the reproduction of dominant ideologies; three, a centering of the participatory needs of young people (which demanded flexible design within critical research) that included self-reflexivity, especially regarding critical white racial consciousness; and four, an intentional examination about whiteness, white people, white supremacist systems, and
oppressors alongside critical consciousness about “othering” people of Color and those
who have been historically/systemically marginalized or oppressed.

The construction of these three papers offers a triangulation, or perhaps a
kaleidoscope, that supports my overarching questions: "How did interracial anti-racist
youth groups frame literacies and learning, how did they learn, and how were literacies
and learning connected to liberation?" Across all three papers, and despite challenges,
youth activists created ripple effects of consciousness raising and social change
throughout themselves, their urban schools, and outside contexts. My hope is that this
dissertation offers critical frameworks wrapped in the assets of youth and the urgency of
youth activism. In partnership with others, I will continue to use this work to create
accessible tools for educators, critical researchers, youth workers, and youth in
classrooms or organizing spaces.
CHAPTER 2

I BELIEVE THAT WE WILL WIN!
LEARNING FROM YOUTH ACTIVIST PEDAGOGIES

…Show up on the right side of history, and show the hell up. We need you.

-Sincere, Facebook post, July 27, 2016 at 11:10am

The urgent and complex context of this study took place in the height of growing social movements in the United States, starting with the critical thrust of Black Lives Matter. Youth in this study marched together, learned together, and taught together. Sincere was a youth activist I grew to know over the past three years (all names are pseudonyms). She described herself as Black and as biracial, as a “poet. youth educator. student. activist. light of my own life” (Twitter). Her post came after repeated nights of occupying space to hold the state of Minnesota accountable in the police killing of Philando Castile. She, and others, enacted the belief which Ella Baker lived by: “We who believe in freedom cannot rest” (Dillard, 2013). Young people, community members, and even visitors whom I met from far away cities, sustained a collective and restless presence outside the governor’s mansion during long summer nights in July. Despite Sincere’s own frustrated experience in the schools, she pressed into them. She crafted opportunities to teach spoken word. She spoke of her desire to be a Black history teacher. She was a guide to youth and a philosopher with friends. Sincere and others called for consciousness and action, in a collective struggle to get free. Youth did not leave their activism in the summer nor in the streets.

The school year before Sincere’s post, I was a researcher inside of schools with interracial anti-racist youth groups. Their consistent commitment to teaching, learning, knowledge, and pedagogy were like protest signs for this research, demanding my
attention. Interracial anti-racist youth activists (IAYA) in this upper Midwest urban area participated in five main pedagogical activities within their activism, both outside and inside of schools: self-education, teaching, organizing with dialoguing, social action, and research. They wanted to spark conversations and to feel woke, like they were waking up or waking others up to consciousness and action. They demanded pedagogical presence and curricular relevance in their schools.

Even as schools are sites of social movements, they often try to side-step student agency and change. The demand for cultural relevance in urban schools is at an all-time high, but it exists in direct paradox with standardization and other controls (Kumashiro, 2009). Most schools have been framed by white people in a white supremacist system (Bonilla-Silva, 2010), an overarching cultural invasion (Freire, 1993). Schools in the U.S. continue to underserve youth, including Black, Brown, Indigenous, Pacific Islander, and Southeast Asian students, as well as students in poverty (Anyon, 2014; Leonardo, 2009) and those with disabilities (Anamma, 2016). Students in urban schools have had little time for collaboration around relevant issues (Britzman, 2003; Juzwik, Borsheim-Black, Caughlan, & Heintz, 2013). In addition, youth as a group are ignored regarding contributions to school change, as “too many schools operate under the false assumption that the quality and character of schools can be shaped by adults alone” (Noguera, 2009, p. 70). These conditions in the schools persist despite well-documented changes impacted by young people in social movement history (Anyon, 2014).

The theorizing of critical pedagogy can also benefit from social movement history (Tarlau, 2014) and youth’s place within it. A multitude of educational scholar activists, such as Jean Anyon, Ella Baker, Grace Lee Boggs, Patricia Hill Collins, Angela Davis,
Maxine Greene, and more, have recognized for over half a century the radical possibilities for liberatory educational change in social movements. Education scholars desire to learn more from youth organizers, including their pedagogical strategies and critical literacies (Bishop, 2016; Kirshner, 2007). And, as schools themselves still have much to learn about listening to youth voice, that audience will hopefully benefit from learning how a few urban schools sustained these interracial organizing groups. Thus, this manuscript works to identify pedagogies from youth activists in urban schools.

In the following sections, I share concepts that shape this paper as well as two vignettes of youth-led sit ins; I introduce a working theory: youth activist pedagogies; I describe the research design and discuss findings. One argument I make is that we need to take seriously the opportunity for pedagogies to be multiple, not singular. It is beyond time to enact a commitment to the collective, including learning from youth in the praxis of the Black Lives Matter movement, philosopher Patricia Hill Collins, and educational theorist Gloria Ladson-Billings. Youth in this study leaned on philosophies of Black feminism as learned from lived experience and social movements. As a white woman, let me be plain that I cannot contribute to the theory of Black feminist thought. I also cannot ignore the lessons I have learned.

**Framing Youth Activism and Pedagogy**

**Youth and activism**

Young people included in this study were scholars, activists, and teachers. Their discussions and leadership showed critical, capable, agentic construction of knowledge across multiple contexts. Youth organizers and scholars alike have challenged the social construct of adolescents as “limited” and have pushed against deficit discourses about
youth of color in urban schools (Kirshner & Ginwright, 2012). Critical youth studies research has contested the concepts of “adolescent,” “teenager,” or “youth” as these terms represent a false or ambiguous division (Ibrahim & Steinberg, 2014; Willis, 1977). Adult would not be a term, for instance, without the construction of a child. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2013) write that the concept of youth is “a diaphanous category, both contingent and reductive” (p. 177). I use the term “youth” or “young people,” recognizing the ambiguousness and imperfect de-racialization of this phrase. Thus, I ask readers to carry with them the context of youth in this study, interracial groups with distributed and Black youth leadership, supported by peers and adults in schools, homes, on-line, and in the community.

The word “activist” has contested definitions as well. Too often it has been defined individually, but here activism is based on collective work in social movements (Atkinson, 2017). Researchers have traced contributions of youth activists who march, give speeches, and participate in civil disobedience (Bishop, 2016). In urban settings, young people often lead physical activities; they “attend protests, disseminate information to their neighbors and peers, lead workshops, and work internationally with other young people” and participate through music, visual and street arts, and people’s theater (Ardizzone, 2007, p. 63). Present in this study in the upper Midwest, as well as in Oakland and other urban spaces, “youth and student activism cannot be understood outside of hip-hop cultural, political, and spatial forms” (Gordon, 2010, p. 23). Youth of color activists want to create change through tactics involving political communities or collectives. They lead direct actions, influence policy decisions, and mobilize peers and community members against everyday injustices, racial and educational inequality, youth
incarceration, and criminalization of young people (Kwon, 2013). Throughout these examples there are pedagogical connections, but much of the research does not frame these activities as pedagogical. This paper aims to capture possibilities, questions, and constraints of anti-racist youth activist pedagogies in urban schools.

**Pedagogy**

The youth in this study demonstrated a deep desire to gather, critique, and construct knowledge and truth. Who chooses what knowledge is to be distributed, constructed, critiqued; how; and towards what outcome? These are questions of pedagogy. When Patricia Hill Collins (2009) wrote *Another Kind of Public Education: Race Schools, the Media and Democratic Possibilities*, she told the story of being asked to write an essay for her Philadelphia high school from the prompt, “What does the flag mean to you?” (p. 1). After her teacher read her response, she retracted the offer. Hill Collins reflected on the process of being asked and unasked, to participate in this patriotic—and not necessarily democratic—act:

> Seeing how my version of truth and that of my teacher differed dramatically led me to question the very criteria that are used to determine truth itself. Why do we always believe certain people and routinely disregard others? How did we come to think this way? More importantly, who gets to decide which rules we will follow in determining what counts? (p. 5)

Pedagogy provides a context for creation and is “integral to the thinking, theory building, and exchange” of knowledge (Jocson, 2018, p. 37). It can shape how learners participate with and learn from each other and the world; in some instances, as they work towards a common goal.
A detailed review for a 2013 volume of Curriculum Inquiry (Thiessen et al., 2013) highlighted prolific uses of pedagogy. Scholars divided the queried concept into the following: critical pedagogies, pedagogy of process or quality (humanizing pedagogy), pedagogy of a cause or a concern (pedagogy of freedom), pedagogies connected to groups (such as Indigenous epistemologies in Red pedagogy), and pedagogy as a synonym for teaching and learning (student-centered pedagogy). Many scholars conceptualized pedagogy as the act or art of teaching (Alexander, 2004; van Manen, 1991), connected to methods or practices, beliefs, and ways of knowing (Luke, 2006). Toukan and Gaztambide-Fernández (2017) recognized these complexities and emphasized that pedagogy “exists in contexts and relationships that are positional, temporal, and spatial” (p. 440); it is impacted by processes, intentions, and relationships. This contextualized view denies the restricted perception of learning within the vacuum of curriculum. It relies on relationships and on perspectives of space, time, and place, as sociocultural and embodied disruptors that contribute to knowledge.

This empirical study of youth-as-teachers (and youth-as-activists) addresses how youth contribute to pedagogical understanding in the context of anti-racist education. Similar to Toukan and Gaztambide-Fernández (2017), these youth attributed relationships and political events to shaping their learning. Youth activist pedagogies centered knowledge and supported paths for learning and liberation through three main areas: critiquing hierarchy and power, a commitment to collectives, and connecting across contexts with tension and youth agency. Analysis showed how youth activist pedagogies were multiple: oppositional (critical), relational (collective and positional), and asset-based and expansive. We ought to consider, as Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz (2018) invites us,
how to use pedagogy as interruption towards both knowledge and change. I remain hopeful that these lessons from youth activists guide us to examine our own enacted pedagogies.

**Presence and pedagogy: Sit-ins**

In April of 2016, groups from two diverse, urban high schools held school-wide sit-ins in response to officers not being charged in the shooting death of Jamar Clark, an African American young man four years out of high school. These groups of interracial anti-racist youth activists (IAYA) had been meeting for the past year as well as participating in community-based activist events. They used personal stories and participatory pedagogy to craft the sit-ins.

At Lakeview High, a group called Teach Yo’Self organized the sit-in where over 150 students of diverse racial backgrounds gathered together in the cafeteria. A student leader named Abdul spoke. He was a Black Muslim student with a proud West African heritage. He shared a story from his experience protesting in the fall, holding space with 100 other people, demanding that the names of officers and the tape in Jamar’s death be released. One night, after an increase in police presence, he was maced by an officer and saw people beaten and dragged by eight others. He said, “It kinda sounds cheesy, but we came up more resilient and strong.” Abdul set the tone for the event, welcoming those who knew about the issue and those who wanted to learn: “This is a very, very serious thing. And you’ve heard this at every action, but we want you to either care about the issue or care about learning about the issue, because it’s a real thing.” Abdul’s introduction framed the narrative for his audience. He did not shy away from tension, instead he used it for his audience to understand how this violence affected someone they
knew—creating a connection to their lives. They would all enter into conversations from a different place, which was okay, as long as they cared about learning.

That day, students joined together for four-and-a-half hours.iii There were many activities, including an introduction, 18 minutes of silenceiv, personal stories, reading select news reports, and roundtable conversations with personal question prompts about policing and race. Towards the end of their time together that day, students participated in a whole group step-in. They created a large circle, encompassing the gathering space (see Figure 3).

![Figure 2. Lakeview High sit-in, 4.5.16.](image)

Members of Teach Yo’Self gently attracted the room’s attention through call and response: *ago—ame* (Swahili for “I am knocking” and “I am answering or ready to listen”). DéDé and Mo, Black students with immigrant parents, described the step-ins:

A question or a prompt is going to be said, and if you resonate with that, if the answer is yes, you’re gonna step-in to the circle. If the answer is no, if you haven’t had that experience, then you’re gonna stay back. What needs to be
known is that if you step in or stay where you are, you’re making a statement either way.

Youth leaders asked questions about student experiences with policing, and even if the questions themselves were not racialized, the bodily responses on the floor were. The step-ins were designed with critical questions for embodied tension. When Jean Anyon (2014) theorized social movements in urban education, she wrote about the power of engaging contradictions:

The role of contradictions [is] in stimulating political contention…These and other contradictions plaguing folks day after day, if used strategically, can become mobilizing points for youth and their families. (p. 168)

In the step-ins, young people from this school were present with each other. The step-ins formed an activity of shared experience and solidarity, with students in a giant circle participating together under mostly Black and youth of color leadership. They were able to process what they were seeing around them, setting the stage to later strategize collective action.

Across the city at Eastside High, youth from a group called SpeakUp prepared to lead a sit-in as well. They discussed and critiqued strategies, speeches, and the agenda in group chats, while also making posters in the art room, and during a run-through in the media center (see Figure 4, bottom left).
Figure 3. Eastside High sit-in, 4/5/2016.

Just after 2:00 PM, students gathered, sitting against hallways and lockers. They marched silently through the halls with fists or hands raised, picking up more students. They dropped a “Justice 4 Jamar” banner from the 2nd level and carried handmade posters. Finally, over 150 students circled together, atop lunchroom tables, on benches, and on the floor, to tell updates of the trial and to share their own stories. Kam, an Afro-Latinx young transwoman, asked the crowd,

Who do we call for help when the cops are killing us? The very ones who are supposed to be protecting us? Even before this very sit-in, we learned we can’t even talk to our teachers about what’s going on in our community; they’re not allowed to.

Youth circled up to testify, to listen, to question, to respond to each other, and to write for social action. They chanted, sang, and covered walls with giant rolls of paper to write public notes to Jamar Clark, to the police department, and to the school district.
There were tensions in these sit-ins, as students discussed difficult questions and shared personal stories. They asked, authentically, “What is our role in these injustices?” “How do we create change?” The question of race was ever-present with regard to both police killings as well as daily racial injustices. In Kam’s speech, she referenced a Lake Public School district tweet, attesting that LPS staff were ready to support students after the decision of the non-indictment; however, the district had also emailed teachers asking them not to weigh in on the matter with students. Students were angry. Many did not want difficult truths and racialized issues to be restricted from school. They wanted, in part, for “the teacher [to] devalue her or his own power to explore with students the dangerous territory of the unknown” (Britzman, 2003, p. 224). They believed what bell hooks (1994) wrote: “We cannot despair when there is conflict…Our solidarity must be affirmed by a shared belief in a spirit of intellectual openness that celebrates diversity, welcomes dissent, and rejoices in a collective dedication to truth” (p. 33). They wanted to explore the truth about Jamar’s case and other oppressive acts in their school and in their lives.

Before leading sit-ins, teach-ins, or meetings, students discussed their pedagogical goals. They aimed to hear from multiple voices, including from multi-marginalized people. They sometimes lived it out, as experiences by a trans of color leader and disabled speakers at the Eastside sit-in showed. They connected questions to students’ personal lives and enabled a diverse audience to participate. Through systematic analysis of the activities of interracial, anti-racist youth activists (IAYA), youth desired to construct knowledge through collective youth agency, despite dominant discourses, in order to raise critical consciousness and social action. When youth used their pedagogical
power, they enacted their own agency and accessed multiple perspectives to construct knowledge. This was bleakly different from much of the menu of urban schooling, but they were practiced and they were ready.

Using domains-of-power analysis to create a working definition of youth activist pedagogies

Using Patricia Hill Collins’s domains-of-power framework (2009) as an analytic tool helped me to articulate a working definition of youth activist pedagogies. Hill Collins created this framework to address inequities in education, with an intent to uncover how power both oppressed and was resisted within and across domains of structures, ideologies, practices, and relationships. She noted that the framework, “as well as the strategies for practicing resistance that it might catalyze, can be applied to any form of social inequality” (p. 53). Hill Collins herself pushed the framework forward by analyzing how African American women’s political action constructed flexibility and solidarity away from the agendas of the state and toward participatory democracy. Using her framework aligned with what she knew was possible from youth: “I want to look to [youth] to envision and take action for new possibilities” (p. xi). I, too, wanted to see how liberatory activities rose up or were resisted.

Table 1. The Domains-of-Power Framework

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Structural Domain</th>
<th>Cultural Domain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Institutional structures</td>
<td>Ideas and ideologies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disciplinary Domain</td>
<td>Interpersonal Domain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational practices</td>
<td>Relationships and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>communities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 6. Domains-of-Power framework from Patricia Hill Collins (2009).
This working definition of youth activist pedagogies comes from open coding and then categorizing codes into the framework. Anneka and Max were two youth leaders who reviewed a draft and contributed to a penultimate iteration. This detailed description can serve as a sounding board for how groups approach, construct, critique, and expand knowledge, purpose, and agency.

Youth activist pedagogies desire knowledge and social change through collective youth agency. These pedagogies are steeped in context: inspired by social movements, art, and music, mobilized by political events, and supported through relationships. In their practices, youth are personal, participatory, action-oriented, apprenticed, and public, across schools, communities, and digital space. They are committed to self-education, to teaching, to research, to social action, and to relationships: learning in collectives with multiple perspectives, co-constructing language and meaning, disagreeing, and critiquing discourse and hierarchies, with family, friends, the community, and conversations across contact zones. Ideologically, they are informed by texts and by critical social theories, including Black feminism; they center embodied and marginalized experiences, including the histories, leaders, writers, and goals of BIPOC people. Youth access ideas of plurality and complexity: through their own shifting, plural, and non-binary identities; through language repertoires and concepts, like being unapologetic, being part of or wary of call-out culture, and how to enact radical love; and through conflict in regard to concepts like whiteness and ego. Youth activist pedagogies aim to be critically conscious and resisting of systems and structures of power (even while slipping into their hegemonies), including racial
capitalism, cisgender patriarchy, anti-Blackness, white supremacy, and schooling. Collective youth agency inspires a humble “everything’s a rough draft” “always learning” approach to an urgent, collective, expansive, active, joyful, and lifelong journey towards getting woke and getting free.

**Research Design**

This paper draws from a two-year, multi-site, youth-informed ethnographic study with interracial, anti-racist youth activists (IAYA) in diverse urban schools, in which I asked how they framed learning and literacy (though the question of literacy is not addressed in this paper), how they learned, and how learning and literacy was connected to liberation.vi

**Context**

In this upper Midwest urban area, interracial groups in schools formed to have discussions about race and to lead racial justice actions. Three groups were featured in this study: SpeakUp at Eastside High, and Time 2 Get Real and Teach Yo’Self at Lakeview High. Teach Yo’Self was a youth-only group with overlapping membership in Time 2 Get Real. SpeakUp and Time 2 Get Real were connected to a broader network for anti-racist youth leadership, supported by humanities teachers or equity specialists. The groups were sustained by student membership, piqued in part by the context of Black Lives Matter and other activism (locally and nationally), issues that students attested they did not get to discuss in school. My entry came from being part of a local anti-racist youth leadership network. Schools, advisors, and students vetted me before research began. In weekly meetings I introduced myself, to remind existing participants about the research and to be transparent with new participants. I served as a responsive participant.
observer in school for six months, with focal participants in social media and twenty-five youth-led activist events over two years.

Over 50 high school students gave ongoing consent to participate in this study, from diverse racial, ethnic, religious, and linguistic groups and ranging on gender and sexuality continua. Students identified as African American, Black, African, East African, Afro-Latinx, Latinx, Eritrean, Oromo, Somali, Asian or Asian Pacific Islander (API), Filipinx, Hmong, Indigenous, white, Arab, Jewish, white-passing, bi-racial, multi-racial, and students of color. At the time of the study, in 2016, youth most commonly identified themselves as Black, hijabi (a term used by Black Muslim young women who wore hijabs), bi-racial, POC (people of color), and white. Many students of color had at least one immigrant parent. There were more young women than young men in both groups.

The groups enlisted students from the schools to participate in protests that included sit-ins and walkouts. They responded to teachers, administration, and to other schools and organizations who asked them to present. They organized Racial Justice Days in which students, community members, and a few teachers led classes for the entire student body. They participated in activism outside of school as well. The four pedagogical activities selected for analysis in this paper included the two sit-ins described earlier as well as two teach-ins: a day of leading 10th graders in conversations about race and racism, and a presentation for a nearby middle school staff about the benefits of interracial, anti-racist leadership groups.

**Positionality.** My entry into these sites stemmed from a decade working in a local network of anti-racist youth leadership; the trust of adult organizers connected to these
groups gained me access and introductions to youth. My overlapping connections to the research context included: knowing teachers from prior work, being a supervisor of student teachers, and working with youth outside of schools as a community organizer. Youth learned, by my actions, that I was there to learn from them and to support them, and only with their consent did research begin. I was critically conscious and self-reflexive (L. T. Smith, 2012) of my identity and role as a woman racialized as white, as an adult, and as a university resource. I had to constantly consider when to move back in youth-centered space, when to move out (without being asked) in space designed for people of color, and when to move up and intervene as a critical ally or accomplice. In race-centered scholarship with a diverse group of youth, their goals paved the path for research.

**Methodology**

I used empirical data to generate a working theory of youth activist pedagogies, using Gloria Ladson-Billing’s theory of culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) as a methodological guide. Ladson-Billings (1995) theorized CRP by examining successful, asset-based teaching of African American students with culture and systems of oppression in mind. She drew on Black feminist thought to develop knowledge and centering lived experience, dialogue, relationships, and caring around “a greater sense of commitment to what scholarship and/or pedagogy can mean in the lives of people” (1995, p. 474). She relied on personal accountability and recognized “who makes knowledge claims is as important as what those knowledge claims are” (1995, p. 474). In similar ways, I relied on Black feminist scholars, race-conscious work, and relationships, assets, and knowledges of youth.
The IAYA youth in this study were participants and leaders in social movements. They read and were led by philosophies of Black feminist thought; they were nurtured by lived and studied theories of intersectionality and Black liberation. They readily referenced bell hooks, Assata Shakur, and Angela Davis. They were guided by the collective, queer, trans, Black feminist and womanist leadership of the Black Lives Matter movement (Garza, 2014). The Black feminist philosophies and ideals that guided youth framed their pedagogy and my praxis.

**Research methods in a two-year study with youth activists.** Critical ethnography and participatory action research (PAR) were epistemological methodologies in this study, student-centered like other studies of civically engaged learning and activism (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Kinloch, 2010; Kirshner, 2015). Using critical PAR “engages research design, methods, analyses, and products through a lens of democratic participation” (Torre, Fine, Stoudt, & Fox, 2012, p. 171), connecting to the ethics and actions of humanizing youth research (Paris & Winn, 2013). Towards the end of the study, a group of eight young people came together for a three-day data analysis camp based on artifacts and experience from their own activism; their work also informed this paper.

I used ethnographic research methods (Ardizzone, 2007; Bishop, 2016) while collaborating with youth, aligning with Jacqueline Messing’s assertion that: “Young people are arguably the central stakeholders in their communities’ linguistic and cultural futures. Yet their voices and perspectives have been noticeably absent from the scholarly literature” (2013, p. 113). My participation and methods of data gathering in this IRB-approved study were negotiated at each site, with each situation, and with each
participant (Rogers, Winters, Perry, & LaMonde, 2015). Data sources included field notes, audio recordings and transcriptions, interviews, narrative self-reflexive memos (Foley, 2002), and program-related artifacts, including online documents, youth research, social media, and group chats. The two teach-ins and two sit-ins selected for analysis included forty hours of youth preparation, action, and reflection. I wrote thick narratives with multiple data sources (Yin, 2003) and inductively open coded the four episodes, line-by-line, using nVivo. Next, I organized codes into Hill Collins’s domains-of-power framework (2009) and continued to work iteratively with data, participants, analysis, and the working definition of youth activist pedagogies.

Next, I describe findings that substantiate the multiple ways that youth activists approached pedagogy. Ideologically, structurally, in practice, and in relationships, they resisted hierarchy and oppression; they valued collectives and multiple perspectives; and they constructed knowledge through critical questions, difficult truths, and tensions.

**Discussion and data in lessons from youth activists**

**Resisting hierarchy and building access**

The groups in this study led sessions in the schools and in the community, and they were hyper aware of hierarchies, access, and power. At Eastside High, SpeakUp was invited by 10th grade English language arts teachers to lead a day of classes in conversations about race and racism. As they planned, youth discussed the hierarchical embodiment of a typical teacher (which was also racialized, as most of their teachers were white) and how they wanted to avoid it:

**Preparation for a Teach-in (field notes):**

*(codes: constructing knowledge about teaching; avoiding teacher discourses)*
Students talked about how they didn’t and shouldn’t use a “teacher voice” and then mock-spoke in teacher voices, telling students what to do or how to do it (“Get out your notebooks,” “It’s time to begin”). Kam reflected, “We need to be not up here [using her left hand, strikes in the air next to her forehead], but at the same level.” Tabby added, “Don’t hover over students.” They probed at the introductory sing-song phrase, “Does anyone wanna start…” and then commented that it “was condescending.” Another student said, “[We need to be] coming in not as teachers but as fellow students.” Later in the session, Cora was talking about “asking the kids,” and then she corrected herself: “I’m a kid too.” (Field notes, 2.2016)

A teacher voice could be authoritarian, conforming (Britzman, 2003), or demeaning, which students worried would risk relationships and the difficult task of discussing race and racism. Youth from SpeakUp resisted this notion of hierarchy. They aimed for access and horizontal leadership modeled after social movements, like those of Civil Rights activist and youth leader, Ella Baker. Ms. Baker coached “group-centered leadership” over “leader-centered groups” with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and others; they wanted to create an atmosphere of listening (DeLaure, 2008). SpeakUp said that they needed to present themselves as equals and to value the voices in the room, in order to build trust and to create an environment for honest dialogue.

In a Facebook group chat the following year, the data analysis crew (including some SpeakUp members) discussed what identities, values, or strengths they bring to a group. On the flip side of reducing hierarchies, they wanted to build access. In this group
chat, I coded for *hierarchy and access* (italics)—*multiple perspectives and collectives* (underlined)—and **learning** (bold):

Facebook group chat from youth data analysis crew, June 2017

Janet: I rly value *love and community* in activist spaces but I mean I think most ppl would agree

Diego: Also *meeting people where they're at*

Huge for me

Janet: truuuu that’s a good one

Sally: **Teaching people when they don't get something or said something wrong** and *not calling them out/yelling at them*

Charrise: I value *humility* in activism understanding that *we’re never done learning*.

Anneka: I value a **growth mindset** in activist spaces. Also *making spaces accessible for younger kids (middle and elementary students)* and *I value equity in education*.

Charrise: ^^

Janet: I loveeee it when I have *the opportunity to combine art w my activism and make new ways to make things engaging and not too heavy by adding activities* also agree with anneka *accessibility for younger ppl* I wish I had opportunities like that when I was in middle and elementary school

Kira: **I really value education** and *making activism accessible to all*. Also I agree with everything said so far!
Diego: I also think figuring out ways to engage with and support disenfranchised people who don’t feel comfortable talking about social justice topics by engaging in this kind of work (due to past trauma, etc.) and making them still deeply part of a movement is super important to me.

Throughout the study, students wanted to be flexible and to give choice in their teaching. They wanted to avoid hierarchy and to teach “at the same level” (a code in analysis), bringing access and activist norms into their pedagogies. When Hill Collins spoke about the Black Lives Matter movement, she noted “leveling” as particular to intersectional Black feminism and to power: “The notion of a network social movement that isn’t hierarchical, it has a different way of working, flexible in relation to the challenges it confronts” (2017). Social movements sculpted what youth activists brought to their pedagogy. On the last page of the Combahee River Collective statement (1978), it reads: “We believe in collective process and a nonhierarchical distribution of power within our own group and in our vision of a revolutionary society.” IAYA were ideologically grounded in the Black feminist movement through their activism and pedagogy. They resisted hierarchy and knew they were stronger together.

Valuing agentic youth collectives and multiple perspectives

Just as youth critiqued hierarchy, they emphasized collectivity and multiple perspectives. In their ideologies, practices, and relationships, they valued learning from each other. The eight youth activists who gathered to do data analysis were drawn to multiple perspectives. They valued out-of-school knowledges, shown by the racial justice programs they created and by a coding activity called “Who do we learn from?” They categorized their experiences into a Venn diagram of “institutional” and “non-
institutional” learning and naming community members, activists, friends, English teachers, parents, elders, social media influencers, books, songs, events, and organizations as grounding to their unlearning and to their knowledge. Charlene Carruthers (2018), from the Black Youth Project, gained her knowledge in similar ways: “Self-study, comrades, elders, and people I met in the streets taught me how to understand the world and gave me the room to imagine a radically different future.” Youth activists honored collective, expansive, and participatory contexts for learning and action.

Tazmin was a 10th grader from SpeakUp who co-designed a session called “We don’t all look alike” for a race justice conference, speaking from her perspective as a hijabi Black Muslim young woman. She credited the collaborative method of using a panel as effective teaching:

That’s why I made it a panel. I like that, because then people can answer the questions, also as myself answering it too, so during the whole panel it wasn’t just me knowing it, it was other people’s perspectives. So then we would all put in ideas and gather it together. That’s why I thought yesterday went really well. [Interview transcript, 5.25.16]

The strength of Taz’s panel gave the student speakers the opportunity to tell their own stories. It gifted multiple perspectives to the student audience to construct their own truths.

When I asked Tabby, an 11th grader who described herself as Palestinian, Israeli, and Saudi Arabian, how she learned within SpeakUp, she said she relied on peers to shape her opinions about activism:
If you’re gonna walk out, someone’s gonna ask you why. I like to form my opinions before I answer…my thoughts are shaped by what my peers say…collaborating….gives it a lot more merit…instead of just one person expressing their opinion.

[Interview transcript, 6.2.16]

Tabby was a student journalist who relied on multiple sources to construct truth. However, it was interesting to hear her credit peer collaboration to build meaningful rationale for a walkout. Being part of something bigger than oneself, and leaving a legacy, resonated with Tabby and others in SpeakUp. Some youth re-tweeted what Angela Davis proposed: “I think the importance of doing activist work is precisely because it allows you to give back and to consider yourself not as a single individual who may have achieved whatever to be part of an ongoing historical movement.” In their edited book Youth Resistance Research and Theories of Change, Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2013) synthesize the studies and name “collectivity itself as a theory of change” (p. 137). These youth activists saw their participation in collectives and multiple perspectives as part of creating knowledge, history, and a movement for change.

**Centering knowledge: tensions, questions, and difficult truths**

The section above addressed how youth activists honored multiple perspectives and collectives. Another path to knowledge was wrestling with tensions, questions, and difficult truths, especially with pressing issues and relevant contexts.

Youth leaders in the Time 2 Get Real group from Lakeview High were asked to speak to a nearby middle school staff about starting an anti-racist group. Youth across the study took up a different tone when they were asked to teach adults. Teachers as a group
were majority white (and often all white). Students of color harbored feelings from years of being weaponized or not seen in school, and white students brought their own experience of racial ignorance or witnessing mundane and overt racism. Tenth graders Madi and Kimberly, who are white, Faisa, who is Black and hijabi, and Max, who is bi-racial (white and Black), led the session. As they prepared, they named discomfort as a goal. I stayed in the back of the media center as they presented. Using step-ins and storytelling, they offered active ways for the teachers to engage. Some of the staff complied. Madi, Kimberly, and Faisa shared their own personal experiences. Towards the end of the session, Max spoke. He took a spoken word stance, holding up his phone similar to how he read from it at protests. Within his speech, he was explicit about how easily teachers benefit students racialized as white:

As a teacher…if you are not actively identifying how race plays a role in that classroom, and you’re not taking steps to work upon that, you are contributing to that system…you are allowing white students to benefit, silently, from their privilege, and not acknowledging it.

Max wanted these teachers to learn through feeling friction. Similar to the step-ins at the Lakeview sit-in, he rejected the false notion of neutrality as he spoke about anti-racism. Max recontextualized activist discourses. He reflected ideas from Desmond Tutu, printed on posters and t-shirts which said, “If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor.” His Twitter home page (and a photo on mine as well) read words of the protest sign, “White silence is violence.” IAYA had emerging or thick ideas about whiteness and white supremacy; talking about whiteness was one method to
leading with discomfort. These were normed phrases in protest spaces that pushed against the status quo in school; these youth activated these ideas to bring tension into teaching.

Often IAYA discussed how discomfort produced a desire for knowledge, for deeper understanding, and for social change. In an interview, Max spoke about his desire to “discuss difficult concepts,” to “raise discomfort,” and “to get deep,” in order to elicit change. He also reported questions that his peers were starting to ask:

Students are starting to understand. They’re starting to educate themselves on what the problems are, and they’re saying, “How can I be a change agent? How can I make change in my community? How can I do my part as an ally in a liberation movement?” (Lakeview newspaper, May 2016)

Max and other youth aimed to “transform conflict and difference into rich zones of collaboration and learning” (Gutiérrez & Stone, 2000, p. 157). They shared knowledge across contact zones of varying backgrounds and identities (Torre, 2010), in protest and personal spaces, school groups, and on social media. Barbara Smith (as cited in Hill Collins, 1990) noted the possibility in diverse collectives: “What I really feel is radical is trying to make coalitions with people who are different from you…to be dealing with race and sex and class and sexual identity all at one time. I think that is really radical because it has never been done before.” Youth in the data analysis camp also raised this point. They knew that relationships across difference impacted their activism, and they wanted to understand it more.

The most overarching theme in this study was young people’s desire to learn and share knowledge and truth. IAYA were drawn to utilizing discomfort as a tool, including with people of various racial/ethnic backgrounds and other identities. These youth were
pedagogical agents, connecting in school and social movements. Youth activist pedagogies aimed for learning and liberation through a critical view of hierarchy and power, a commitment to collectives and multiple perspectives, and a centering of knowledge through questions and tensions.

**Analyzing and Collectivizing Pedagogy**

The domains-of-power heuristic from Patricia Hill Collins helped to reveal what was liberating and oppressive in youth activist pedagogies. The drive for knowledge spread across the domains of ideologies, practices, and relationships. Critical ideologies and humanizing relationships drove participatory practices at Eastside and Lakeview sit-ins. SpeakUp prepared to teach by raising awareness of hierarchy. Taz’s youth-led panel was one of many instances that emphasized learning from multiple perspectives. Max, Faisa, Madi, and Kimberly’s middle school staff teach-in created discomfort in order to learn.

Themes of oppression, of whiteness and control, seeped into each of those knowledge-seeking domains as well. Even as youth resisted hierarchy and critiqued power, they slipped into oppressive norms of power and control. Audre Lorde noted (1984), “the true focus of revolutionary change is never merely the oppressive situations which we seek to escape, but that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within each of us” (p. 123). In the institutional domain, knowledge was least present as a theme, even though schooling and teaching were structures created with the intent to share knowledge. In this domain, Hill Collins asked, "How do public schools and the media help reproduce racism, and how does anti-racism manifest itself within these particular social institutions?" (2009, p. 55). She recognized the duality, that racism and anti-racism
could both happen. In this study, social media and youth leadership represented their own structures that created assets and learning. However, when youth took up the structure of teaching, they sometimes slipped into hegemonic ways of being, with codes such as control, rules, doing too much, segregation, time, and whiteness. Youth were not ignorant to this paradox. In fact, an inquiry from the youth data analysis camp included the question, “How are we implicated in being an oppressor?” As shown in their critique of teaching and hierarchy, they could be aware of and associated with oppression at the same time.

Collective self-reflection helped the groups to address issues and to gain clarity about their work. IAYA groups regularly debriefed after actions. They reviewed evaluation forms after teach-ins and they hosted film nights for reflection and further education. Bi-racial students were more likely to reflect aloud on their positionality within groups. However, youth rarely dug into the dominant oppressions that might perpetuate within their groups. They did not collectively ask how patriarchy, heteronormativity, Islamophobia or xenophobia, or whiteness might be impacting them in-group. Honest reflection with oneself, with theory, and within coalitions of solidarity can identify and disrupt structures of oppression. Yolanda Sealy-Ruiz invites future teachers to do “archaeology of the self.” She talks about reflexivity and positionality, a “constant digging and reflecting and re-reflecting” whereby teachers can “look at their pedagogy, to look at their practice as a source of interruption” (2018). I wonder how this digging and reflection can also be collective.

It is with this persistence of the collective that I most value youth activist pedagogies. In other research with young people and pedagogy, Limarys Caraballo and
Sahar Soleimany (2019) wrote about a conceptual framework for transformative teaching grounded in youth participatory action research (YPAR) projects with pre-service teachers and youth. They explored two main concepts, critical pedagogy and asset-based pedagogies of care and affect. They supported a relational pedagogy of love with the power to disrupt, especially when used in collective ways. Can we approach pedagogies as multiple? If we use pedagogies as critical, relational (positional and reflective), and asset-based and expansive, then the knowledge constructed will reflect that collective commitment as well.

**Implications – I believe that we will win!**

There was a new type of public education emerging in the schools, informed by young activists. In Patricia Hill Collins’s (2009) book she asked, “Will we know [resistance] when we see it?” (p. 84). Youth activists created demands for anti-racism, from education to action. Ripple effects included the formation of Students of Color unions, fights for ethnic studies and heritage language courses and against school resource officers, and Race Justice Days at schools throughout the region. School and district administrators and staff watched as students organized. To varying extents, they resisted it, welcomed it, and co-opted it, but they saw it.

Social movements inform youth action: “[W]e must understand all education as happening in movement spaces…as Jeff Chang (2014) has written, ‘cultural change precedes political change’” (Paris & Alim, 2017). In the times we have behind and before us, social movements can provide us with coalitions for learning, for healing, and for proceeding in flexible solidarity (Montgomery College, 2017). To be politically and pedagogically effective, to create a movement beyond a moment, takes relationships,
pedagogies, re-framed structures, and collective work. Youth activists wove their pedagogies out of lessons from Black feminism, which has emphasized the interplay between Black women’s oppression and Black women’s activism. Black feminism has social change at its core, from the “individual empowerment” to “social transformation of political and economic institutions” (Hill Collins, 2000, p. 238). Black feminism has a history that recognizes its uniqueness and its interconnectivity with other movements (Hull, Bell-Scott, & Smith, 1982). What if pedagogies were this interconnected and collective? When Gloria Ladson-Billings theorized CRP (1995), she wrote that it was “specifically committed to collective, not merely individual, empowerment” (p. 160). The notion of the collective is consistent throughout Black feminist thought, social movement theory, and culturally relevant pedagogy. Collectivism defies the individualism in the predominant trajectory of schooling and asks us to rethink public education. Activities within urban schools that shift focus from the individual to the collective will continue to build power and capacity for necessary and equitable change.

My hope is that there are multiple applications from this study: One, anti-oppressive youth groups should be supported while heightening youth agency: “Without a sense of agency, young people are unlikely to pose significant questions, the existentially rooted questions in which learning begins” (Greene, 2009, p. 140). The high schoolers in this study revealed an unwavering commitment to knowledge. Youth activist practices were laborious, emotional, intellectual, literary, and pedagogical, but they were not typically regarded as academic. Classrooms can be movement spaces (Anyon, 2014), connected to public projects (Greene, 2009), and regarded as constructors of knowledge. Two, educators can use the domains-of-power heuristic to reflect on our own pedagogies.
It would be elucidating to track activities, beliefs, structures, and relationships, especially in participatory ways, to seek out contradictions and to create change within our own pedagogies. Three, youth-serving institutions and youth-centered groups can use the pedagogical lessons from this study. In my work with youth researchers, for instance, I will ask how we are generating knowledge, how multiple perspectives and collective youth agency are afforded, and how we are reflective about hierarchies, dominant discourses, and structures that oppress us. Fourth and finally, this study points to the readiness of BIPOC educators to grow from the experiences of critically conscious youth organizers. I hope young people and youth participatory action researchers continue to take up questions of teaching and pedagogy, as youth across the globe continue to press for change, inside and outside of classrooms, in active pursuits of learning, teaching, and social justice.

Sprung from protest culture, these youth brought a direct, collective belief from their activism to the schools: “I believe that we will win!” They shouted it, sung it, believed it. As Grace Lee Boggs said, “We have the power within us to create the world anew” (quoted in Montgomery College, 2017). Youth activists are in the classrooms. They are serious scholars of race and pedagogy and relentless seekers and producers of knowledge. Critically conscious young people are philosophers, teachers, discourse analysts, and sociologists of urban schooling and injustice. They deserve to be equipped not only with their lived experience, not only with the stories of their families and ancestors, not only with social movement histories, but also with the capacity and the invitation to research, to theorize, and to teach. Youth held themselves together and they raised all of us up.
CHAPTER 3

CONNECTED LITERACIES OF YOUTH ACTIVISTS

3.1 An Introduction to Youth Activist Literacies

As injustices saturate schools and society, youth continue to rise up, to become activists (Bishop, 2016) and young revolutionaries (field notes, 2016), to speak truth to power and bring change into existence. Connected to this study, youth and I stood on the recent and unresolved shoulders of the Black Lives Matter movement, Standing Rock and No Dakota Access Pipeline (#NoDAPL) protests, marches and political education against Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), Islamophobia, and Countering Violent Extremism (CVE), a Department of Justice program to fund organizations to surveil East African Muslim youth. The work was relentless, and young people were among those not backing down.

In racialized ways, these youth grappled with the notion of when and how to act against injustice, but they were together in quests for truth. As they shared on social media and in interviews, reading and self-education were an important part of that quest. On one Facebook page, the youth group Teach Yo’Self (a pseudonym) spread word of their “first revolutionary book,” a book they encouraged their members to read and to discuss, The Autobiography of Assata Shakur (Shakur, 2016). These activist youth took critical and connected literacies with them, from streaming and the streets into classrooms with seats.

This chapter draws from a two-year, youth-informed, multi-site ethnographic study, in which interracial anti-racist youth activists shared literacies and leadership across schools, community, and on-line spaces. This original research makes empirical and
conceptual contributions by making visible how youth activists formed and informed learning, literacies, and liberation.

**Rationale for the study**

In the past five years, racial consciousness has risen throughout the United States as a result of social movements such as the fight for Black lives, buttressed by social media, and highlighted by groups of committed folks in various community contexts. The languages and literacies of youth activists percolated in this context; organizing groups have grown or formed anew in institutional and non-institutional spaces, and they remain understudied. Therefore, it is these connected literacies of anti-racist youth organizers that are the main focus of this chapter.

Elizabeth Bishop’s book, *Becoming Activist: Critical literacy and youth organizing* (2016), explored gaps in knowledge about the critical literacy of youth organizing. She broadly asked: “How do urban youth organizers engage in critical literacy praxis as they become activists?” She also asked, “How do urban youth organizers articulate a vision of themselves as activists?” (p. 8-9). Her ethnographic research, emergent design, and interviews with individual youth organizers took place outside of school. Indeed, youth activism scholarship has often focused on young people’s involvement in community and after school organizations. In a project called “Writing Our Lives,” with urban youth writing in public spaces, Haddix and Mardhani-Bayne defined “radical youth literacies as ways of knowing, doing, writing, and speaking by youth who are ready to change the world” (2016, p. 9). They saw young people’s desire for literacy production, and writing in particular, in public spaces. How do these
out-of-school studies mesh with what we know about youth activism inside of school spaces?

Unfortunately, many educators continue to underutilize youth and out-of-school literacies, despite the abundant research supporting it: “[W]ithin the past decade research has shown that students’ vast out-of-school literacies remain untapped and unexplored in classrooms” (Hagood, Provost, Skinner, & Egelson, 2008, p. 60). Even in youth centers, where youth workers often center experiential knowledge, they can dodge the value in out-of-school and youth-centered knowledges and literacies. Blackburn and Clark (2011) examined literature discussion groups in an LGBTQQ youth center. Perhaps surprisingly, leaders at the center did not invite youth to bring their full repertoire of literacy practices into discussions, and likewise, struggling students did not know what practices they could include. At the center and in schools, “teachers need to be reminded to ask themselves what skills youth might possess within out-of-school contexts but not know how to transfer to school learning” (Moje, Giroux, & Muehling, 2017, p. 12). Researchers value the question of outside literacies as well. In an exhaustive review of literature on Black girl literacies (Muhammad & Haddix, 2016), one of their guiding questions asked, “Did researchers focus on in or outside of school literacies?” (p. 306). In the framework from their findings, Gholnecesar Muhammad and Marcelle Haddix outlined the interconnectedness of identity, history, politics, and intellect with multiple and collaborative Black girl literacies, in and out of school. The overlapping nature of in and out-of-school literacies, denying its separation, is growing in literacy research.

Robust and relevant literacy experiences in urban schools are growing as well; women of color scholar leaders in the field amplify identity and literacy together in the
participation of Indigenous, Black and People of Color (IBPOC) youth. Haddix, Garcia, and Price-Dennis (2017) built their teaching and research on the assets of youth, popular culture, and identity. They looked to “leverage [youth] identity constructions in the classroom” (p. 22). Tamara Butler (2017) cultivated and charted youth organizing literacies inside of her classroom: “Critical youth organizing literacies are significant to literacy education because they reposition youth as contemporary change agents and highlight classrooms as sustainable spaces to engage in social justice work” (p. 84). These studies identified social justice and youth-centered literacies in urban community organizations as well as in more traditional classrooms. In what other contexts, and in regards to what recent issues, have youth activism and literacy been studied together?

In a yearlong review of literature during 2018, I tracked the terms “youth activism” and “literacy” together through an ongoing Google alert. Most articles were about the civic engagement of youth. Studies about youth activism and literacy were mostly about critical media production, digital, or social media literacy (Alvermann, Moon, Hagwood, & Hagood, 2018; A. E. Crampton, Scharber, Lewis, & Majors, 2018; Dail, Witte, & Bickmore, 2018; Pandya, 2018; Vink, 2018), ballooning topics in the field of literacy. However, it is notable that in the Black girl literacies review, the two categories identified in need of more study were digital literacies and reading (Muhammad & Haddix, 2016). In my study, I wanted to spread a broader net with interracial groups of youth activists, to explore new literacies as well as those more explicitly connected to reading, writing, and speaking, beyond the kin of digital media. This was also a direct response to local school districts, whose students participated in diversity/equity groups, but whose districts did not legitimate them as learning or literacy
spaces (even though school leaders and I had seen their activities brimming with meaning-making). The question weighed on me: What data would I gather about the opportunities for literacy development within these anti-racist youth leadership groups?

As literacy scholars predicted, the blurred literacies of interracial youth activists in my study crossed schools, communities, and digital spaces. Through ethnographic and participatory research, overlapping connections became visible. Out-of-school and in-school literacies were not completely distinct. If they were, it would reify the idea that reading and writing, for instance, were sequestered for school, and that multimodal or digital literacies were not modes of real learning. My work explored youth organizing in schools with intentional tethers to their connected literacies. Research questions for the overall study asked: How are literacies and learning framed in these interracial anti-racist youth groups? What are the literacies in these spaces, and what does it mean to learn in this context? How was liberation connected to youth activist literacies and pedagogies? For this chapter specifically, I asked: What were the literacies of youth activists across multiple spaces? How was liberation connected to those literacies? In the remainder of the chapter, I describe a guiding theoretical framework, research design, findings, and implications for the connected literacies of youth activists. This chapter does not feel as tight as the papers in chapters two and four. There was so much data. I did not want to be limited to page numbers in attempting to get this into journal form as yet. Therefore, this chapter will continue to develop in different iterations with varied purposes (and possibly with multiple authors) as it shifts from a dissertation chapter to other forms in the time ahead.
3.2 Theoretical framework

This dissertation research aims to make visible how youth activists formed and informed learning, literacies, and liberation. From my experience teaching in radical and normative urban school spaces, I entered this study with a fierce belief in diverse groups of young people and their communities as knowledge holders and producers. I approached my research from a critical sociocultural perspective (Lewis & Moje, 2003), recognizing learning as a social and a cultural process (Nasir, Rosebery, Warren, & Lee, 2006) produced through tensions and multiple perspectives (Bakhtin, 1981). I also understood that most schools have performed in the ways they were designed, by segregating youth through tracking, cultural dominance, and white supremacy (Anyon, 2014; Kumashiro, 2009). For these reasons, it was important to access both asset-based and critical theoretical frames.

There are three main components that scaffold a theoretical framework (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to this study about literacy, learning, and liberation. First, I used a frame of freedom, in which struggle plays a central role. Sociocultural theories of dialogism provide a window into exploring discomfort in language, learning, and living as part of the struggle toward liberation. Second, I developed a working concept of connected literacies, drawing from literacy studies and from theories of connected learning. Third, I applied critical whiteness studies and whiteness as property, stemming from critical race theorists in education, to examine how whiteness legitimates and restricts dialogic opportunities for learning and literacy. Following, I briefly explain each of these frames.

**Freedom, struggle, and dialogism**
This framework about freedom necessitates intentional thinking on the notion of struggle. African American teaching artist and community leader Keno Evol (2016) has described freedom as personal and as uncompromising. bell hooks wrote of well-being and being wholly present as necessary in liberation. Freedom is complex. Freedom is joy, and also, as Angela Davis’s book explicitly tells us: *Freedom is a constant struggle* (2016). It extends Frederick Douglass’s lesson that without struggle there is no progress (1857) and Du Bois’s early twentieth century notion (1989) that *un*learning is a path to liberation. I too am bound up in this struggle for liberation, as a community member, as a woman racialized as white, and as a researcher, as “no one is free until we are all free” (King Jr, 1967; Lazarus, 1985).

Experiencing struggle is a key component to learning, to communication, and to the sociocultural concept of dialogism. Bakhtin’s (1981) conception of dialogism is described as the borderland between the Self and the Other (Ibrahim, 2008). It provides an exacting and expansive view of struggle, a generative crux of learning that is too often simplified or ignored. Meaning is constructed in shifting relationships between multiple perspectives, in what Bakhtin calls “consciousness” (Todorov, 1984). Dialogism is drenched in social factors (Holquist, 1990, as cited in Ibrahim, 2015). It jars us, internally, as we learn about ourselves, each other, and the words that inform our lives. It wrestles externally, in dialogue and interactions. How we communicate, and thus how we learn, is framed by authorship and audience. Dialogism is contextual, swirling through contradictory or dissonant thoughts, texts, and talk. As Bakhtin (1981) points out, “No living word relates to its object in a singular way: between the word and its object, between the word and the speaking subject, there exists
an elastic environment of other” (p. 276). Dialogic opportunities can raise critical consciousness, social connectedness, tensions, and understanding. Though it is always present and possible, intentionally dialogic opportunities remain underutilized in schools. Dialogism has the potential to shift hierarchies of power and pedagogy (White, 2014), but it relies on learning as unfinished, which is different from a more common dialectic approach that aims to use education to come to closure or to a pre-assigned end. Engaged literary research, however, can illuminate the struggle and how we understand each other:

…how people can and do communicate across these divides and the role such communication plays in teaching and learning…diverse people will struggle to understand one another. We therefore will need to understand the nature of that struggle. (Freedman & Ball, 2004, p. 4)

This study bubbled up in the spaces where interracial youth were intentionally entering into dialogic readings, thinking, and conversations about race. They raised questions for themselves and each other; they were willing to struggle in the hopes of getting free.

**Connected literacies**

Language, literacy, culture, learning, and liberation are tightly woven and complex possibilities, one in service to the other. I employ the term “connected literacies” as a frame in this study, conceptualized from new literacies, connected learning, and the profound connectedness of youth activists, overlapped, entangled, and networked across time, space, participants, literacies, activities, and modes. The word “literacies” expands the traditional and flattened notions of literacy, from the word to the world. Literacies are the “socially recognized ways of generating, communicating, and negotiating meaningful content through the medium of encoded texts within contexts of
participation in Discourses (or, as members of Discourses)” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011, p. 64). Literacies, like learning, are situated, laden with power relations, histories, languages, people, and cultures. Literacies are situated in the evolving identities of youth, in multiple contexts, texts, and practices. The concept of connected literacies in this chapter highlights themes from the recent practice-based research volume of Adolescent Literacies: out-of-school literacies, the multimodal nature of literacy, social media, identity construction, and a critique of the ongoing standardization of schooling (Hinchman, Appleman, Alvermann, 2017).

Connected learning, similar to the field of literacies, is part of the sociocultural turn and contributes to this frame as well. Mimi Ito relays that we are “learning in an era of abundant connectivity” (Mimi Ito, 2014). Omnipresent and deictic opportunities for learning across contexts are often separated from schooling. The utilization of “[c]onnected learning addresses the gap between in-school and out-of-school learning, intergenerational disconnects, and new equity gaps arising from the privatization of learning” (Mizuko Ito et al., 2013, p. 4). Youth deserve the 21st century skills and efforts of connected learning “that value and elevate the culture and identity of non-dominant children and youth” (Ito et al, 2013, p. 33). Connected learning encourages scholarship across identities, experiences, histories, ideas, discourses, emotions, futures, and modes. It highlights participatory cultures alongside social movements and new literacies (Korina Mineth Jocson, 2018), and it is grounded in young people having a stake and a voice in collective activity (Ito et al, 2013). Connectivity in digital literacy anchors “the ability to employ digital communication tools to socially construct and network with others…to create and use networks to acquire information and build social relationships” (Beach,
In this study, the connected and expansive notions of literacy created possibilities for freedom in the lives of youth organizers. Connected literacies fashioned themselves against a backdrop of connected learning and critical, multimodal, and racial literacies.

**Critical whiteness and literacy**

Finally, I use a theoretical framework of whiteness as property to expose the normative and persistent damage of whiteness in literacies and schooling. In this study, whiteness limited or restricted literacies. Ultimately, this frame helped me to see how critical, multimodal, and racial literacies stretched beyond whiteness. Literacies have always been racial (Valerie Kinloch, 2010). However, it is worth closely identifying how whiteness as property interacts with literacy. Whiteness as a construct is continually new, especially to white people and dominant society, including in literacy work and in schools, partly because the ways in which whiteness has exacerbated itself and continued its power is by rendering itself invisible. There is power in being able to see and name whiteness on the path to deconstructing or abolishing it (Roediger, 1994), especially as it connects to literacy. It is also powerful to illuminate how multiple voices and collective youth agency, moving away from the singularity of whiteness, were part of what contributed to youth (and all of us) getting free.

I was prompted to utilize whiteness as a frame because of the call from critical race theories (CRT) and because whiteness was a central concept to youth participants in my study. CRT acknowledges the endemic nature of race, racism, and white supremacy, while validating counter-stories and knowledges of youth. Foundational critical race theorists aimed “not merely to understand the vexed bond between law and racial power
but to change it” (Valdes Culp & Harris, 2002, p.2, as cited in HoSang, LaBennett, & Pulido, 2012). Change towards racial justice was a main objective of the anti-racist youth groups in this study. Critical race scholars note that a vital struggle is not against race or racism but against white supremacy and whiteness (Ibrahim, 2015; Matias, 2013). As a scholar racialized as white, I tread cautiously and intentionally. I recognize racism is a whiteness problem, but the repetition of centering whiteness, including with white scholars, warrants attention to probable perils. In this study, I use examples from the lives of students of color and white students; in that way, it is also distinct from most CRT that (importantly) centers only students of color.

I used theorizing from Harris (1993) and Calderón (2006) in order to elucidate whiteness throughout this study. First, Cheryl Harris (1993) developed the theory of whiteness as property with intellectual contributions from lived experience, counter-narratives from her grandmother, and analysis of law, accompanied by philosophical writings of John Locke (1689). There are necessary scholarly contributions to the formation of whiteness through examining how people became white (Lipsitz, 1995; Thandeka, 1999). Distinct yet interconnected, according to Harris, whiteness was formulated through law. The literary creation of written laws worked to legitimate whiteness as rare and exclusionary. Enactment and eventual enculturation of these laws then led to whiteness as property being interpreted—by people racialized as white—as “natural” (Locke, 1689) and as a right. Written law afforded treasured property to particular classes of white men. The theory of whiteness as property (Harris, 1993) has direct lines to the field of education as well. For instance, Harris enlists examples from school segregation and financing spent on white schools; these schools were government
property that granted exclusive rights for whomever was deemed as white. Second, Delores Calderón (2006) has theorized whiteness as a one-dimensional ideology. In her analysis of law, whiteness represented both property and power, including written law perpetuating legitimation and hierarchy. Whiteness is invisible, including in language. It operates as neutral, authorizing, and equalizing. It supports a dominant U.S. ideology of individualism and downplays group culture (though it is represented in “group think”). I was continually perplexed with the normally-invisible connections between ideologies of whiteness, education, and the word.

There are three concepts about whiteness to parse out before continuing. One, critical whiteness scholars have delineated an explicit difference between whiteness as an ideology and whites as a currently racialized identity group (Leonardo, 2013; Lipsitz, 1995; Roediger, 1994). They are implicated in each other, but they are not the same; for instance, scholar Zeus Leonardo (2009) offers that white people can make a choice about buying into/acting upon ideologies of whiteness. Many activists and scholars attest that this needs to be a continual struggle (Love, 2019). In this study, whiteness is an ideology, not a group of people. Two, whiteness, like race, is socially constructed. The field of critical whiteness studies builds on critical race theories that recognize both the social construction and the social realities of race. What Franz Fanon (1967) calls the “fact of whiteness,” others theorize as both real and imaginary (Leonardo, 2013), fluid and fixed (Duster, 2001), empty and full (DiAngelo, 2006), oppressive and false (Roediger, 1994). As such, like any social construction, whiteness has, will, and needs to continue to change, leading to the third point. Three, though whiteness is fluid, complex, layered, forming, morphing, and reliant on context, whiteness can also exist in a fixed state

73
I argue that it remains useful to be able to identify characteristics of whiteness or how whiteness has perpetuated itself (perhaps more plasmic than fixed) in order to disrupt it. I may be critiqued, in my analysis, for perpetuating whiteness as fixed-state in using theories of whiteness as property (Harris, 1993) and as one-dimensional (Calderón, 2006). My intention is not to solidify whiteness to remain stagnant. However, identifying reoccurring ideologies of whiteness-in-practice may help to splinter solid-state whiteness towards further fluidity and future freedoms. Critical race theorists in education (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005; Donnor, Rousseau Anderson, & Dixson, 2018; Ladson-Billings, G. and Tate IV, 1995) maintain that whiteness as property has a clenched fist on education. Examining schooling and literacies through theories of whiteness provides cyclic, mundane examples of its supremacist destruction. It demands examination and expungement. And, as whiteness is fluid, it can unlearn its embeddedness and eradicate itself from its fixed state, so that each of us can move more freely in this world.

Later in this chapter, my analysis outlines how freedom, struggle, and connected literacies intertwined with whiteness. Youth activists both rejected and constructed property functions and ideologies of whiteness; in fact, their modes of literacy and interaction with whiteness restricted or extended their participation and freedom.

### 3.3 Research Methods, Context, and Design

**Methodology**

This study was designed as a critical ethnography, as I recorded everyday occurrences to better understand the literacies of anti-racist youth groups. I had also made intentional provisions for elements of youth research within the study. However, at the
time, youth did not want to work on research; they were active in other fights for racial justice in the schools and community. Therefore, I worked with youth towards their goals alongside my research. Critical ethnography takes seriously a commitment to research for social change. It stems from a history of critical qualitative research working to develop emancipatory knowledge and discourses of social justice, keeping in perspective the positionality and ethical responsibilities of the researcher. It necessitates a “compelling sense of duty and commitment based on the moral principles of human freedom and well-being” (Madison, 2005, p. 5). As I worked towards research, I also participated with youth in community-engaged social justice work that extended beyond the study.

Critical ethnography is a path to research that honors untold narratives. It brings researchers into the frame and brings participants into the research. It denies neutrality or objectivity in research; it recognizes power in and between people, space, discourses, and society—it allows for boundedness and unfinishedness of story. Critical ethnography recognizes issues inherent in putting tale to text. It values participants as subjects, not objects, and in this chapter, it centers activities. Theo van Leeuwen (2009) says that “the core of a social practice is formed by a set of actions” (p. 148). Thus, I use the word “activity” as any set of actions forming a social practice. To note, in the study, youth defined an “action” as a collective act of resistance, so I kept that term for that purpose.

Critical ethnography is important to the field of literacy, especially due to the “conceptual advances in how researchers think about literacy that have arisen from non-school-based research” (Hull & Schultz, 2001, p. 576). Literacy studies have explored nuanced and positive contributions of youth in urban settings, including in critical ethnographic (Heath, 1983; Kirkland, 2013; MacLeod, 1995; Street, 1984), community-
engaged (Kinloch, 2010, 2012), and participatory studies (Mirra & Morrell, 2011). Exploring language, culture, inquiry, and ideas can be central in ethnographic literacy studies: “Ethnography is a scholarly approach to inquiry aimed at understanding cultural phenomena. The ethnography of literacy reflects the ideas, voices, meanings, imagining, and systems of knowledge guiding practice and performance within a cultural group” (Kirkland, 2013, p 2.). Spending extended time with youth activists allowed me to track their ideologies, practices, relationships, and the structures around them.

Critical ethnographies are well-suited for work about youth literacies: “Ethnography is particularly important when focusing on youth cultures, because youth perspectives are often in a state of flux” (Messing, 2013, p. 113). In Indigenous Youth and Multilingualism (2013), editors Wyman, McCarty, & Nicholas investigate youth culture, literacies, and languages across Indigenous communities; their research identifies youth as undeniable agents of change: “Young people are arguably the central stakeholders in their communities’ linguistic and cultural futures. Yet their voices and perspectives have been noticeably absent from the scholarly literature” (p. xv). Interracial, anti-racist youth activists (IAYA) were an unusual subgroup in school, and being privy to their languages and interactions in group meetings, in the context of teaching and in social media spaces gave me a much fuller picture than if I had only gathered artifacts or interview data within a single place.

Indigenous epistemologies can illuminate important shifts in power, for research to be in dialogue with the people. As such, I worked to take “a collaborative approach to inquiry or investigation that provides people with the means to take systematic action to resolve specific problems” (Stringer, 1996, p. 15, as cited in L.T. Smith, 2012, p. 130).
Often, action took priority over research. In addition to collaborating with participants in multiple ways, researchers ought to be self-reflexive with intentions, interactions, and interpretations. Throughout the study, I aimed for ethics and actions of humanizing research (Paris & Winn, 2013); my positionality and my identity as a white woman, along with the identities and agencies of youth, mandated my introspection and action. My role as a community organizer helped to sustain reciprocal relationships with youth in this qualitative research. It disrupted perceived and systemic hierarchies; youth were leaders in activism and positioned as decision-makers in research.

**A setting in activism, community, and music**

Much of this research was anchored in the schools, but youth and community activism spread well beyond school walls. I share stories from my own memory to set the scene for the study. For me, public activism in the community was outside the bounds of research. I was there as an engaged community member, not as a researcher. However, these marches for justice did not vanish from the bodies nor minds of youth (or me) when they returned to school. In this section, I describe protests increasingly common during 2015-2017, especially protesting for and with Black Lives Matter, against unjust police killings of Jamar Clark, Philando Castile, and others. I describe how literacy, in different ways, carried people through these times with community, activism, and song.

During school walkouts, youth orchestrated groups to exit different schools at staggered times. They marched in masses to meet at a park in the middle of the city. In the parks, youth and other community members gathered. As new groups approached, a surge of energy spread through the crowd and shouts went up. They stood in stacked circles or cyphers, huddled together in the wind and the rain. They sang, marched,
chanted, held signs, recited speeches and spoken word poetry, recorded each other, listened, and laughed. After gathering together to raise voices, histories, and perspectives, they took to the streets, individual and collective agency swelling up as they marched. They sang Jayanthi Kyle’s (2014) song about this urgently formed protest family, about a demand and hope for the future:

The day’s gonna come when I won’t march no more
The day’s gonna come when I won’t march no more
But while my sister ain’t equal & my brother can’t breathe
Hand and hand with my family, we will fill these streets

In mass occupations, youth stayed all night. Much of the time, they wandered from group to group, circled up or perched on the curb of a sidewalk to continue conversations or listen to music, ready to laugh, to love, and to resist. They met intergenerationally and stood with elders. On highways or at airports, or when the police presence increased on the streets, youth faced physical intimidation and violence from officers. Some streamed the action. Some were prepared to be arrested. Some were. They were disgusted and disheartened by a seemingly immovable and unchanging white supremacist system. Within mass occupations, some youth questioned non-violent tactics. They asked questions such as: Was non-violence the answer? What means would be necessary? What would create change? One young person, a bi-racial young Black woman with the pseudonym Sincere, told me that she was prepared to die in these streets. Sincere was a truth-teller, and this was the tragic truth. So, what brought her through (for now)? Later in the study, I learned first-hand about how teaching others was healing for
Sincere. In the meantime, I witnessed the positive effect that music had collectively, in and out of protest spaces.

From the album *To Pimp a Butterfly* (Lamar et al., 2015), Kendrick Lamar spoke hope into existence in his song “Alright.” Youth remixed the song as they played and sang it together during night-time occupations throughout the city:

Alls my life I had to fight…

I’m fucked up homie, you fucked up, but if God got us, then

We gon' be alright

Do you hear me, do you feel me, we gon' be alright…Huh, we gon' be alright¹

Music, especially shared in community, offered hope and healing. Songs and soundtracks carried youth, carried me, and carried on.

Social actions and demands for justice were ongoing. At some point, youth went home. Some worked jobs. They went to community organizing meetings and open mics. They hung out longer, later. They slept (but I’m not sure when). They kept their cell phones on, a collective and dialogic stream of consciousness layered on top of their personal experience. They continued to heal with each other, through music and sharing complex multimodal texts that inspired and informed them. In spring of 2016, Beyoncé released *Lemonade* (Beyoncé, 2016), a visual album for Black women and girls across a spectrum of shades, with Warsan Shire, a Somali poet who wrote many of the lyrics. Youth commented about it on social media, they played the album at events, and they led discussions at conferences. Some attended her live concert that May. Beyoncé’s album

---

¹ Kendrick Lamar’s lyrics are not all represented here. My intention is not to erase lyrics. However, as a white woman, I committed to the youth with whom I worked not to re-tweet or recontextualize the n-word in any way.
started with a song called “All Night” in a section titled “Redemption.” She spoke of lessons from a grandmother, the alchemist, and a gift about healing:

You spun gold out of this hard life. Conjured beauty from the things left behind. Found healing where it did not live. Discovered the antidote in your own kitchen. Broke the curse with your own two hands. You passed these instructions down to your daughter, who then passed it down to her daughter…True love brought salvation back into me. With every tear came redemption. And my torturer became my remedy. So we’re gonna heal. We’re gonna start again.

Would there be redemption from these all-night occupations? Where would they—and we—find healing and the strength to start again? Songs were among the multimodal literacies of resistance that sustained youth and, at least from my view, provided them/us with hope, truth, and a life source, connected from the ancestors to a speculative radical future. In lessons that they created for conferences and school, these youth organizers taught about racism, colorism, exoticism, and beauty, and they called on songs to guide their teaching. They spoke about social justice work as hard but healing. Music created a literary background that informed the context of this study. Youth were surrounded by soundtracks as they walked back into school.

**Context and Participants**

This study took place in an upper Midwest state where 97.5% of the teaching force was white. This weighted percentage has impacted gaping cultural mismatches between youth and teachers and has been one of multiple contributing factors in low expectations for BIPOC students. In addition, in districts across the state, there has been wavering support of diversity/equity work. No one wants to be racist (or to be called racist), but
few educators had the knowledge, personal experience, capacity, or network to support
anti-racist youth groups in the schools. School leaders (BIPOC and those racialized as
white) with this skill and commitment were often shifted around to new schools or
districts, or they were isolated within a school without a wide web of support. Regardless,
youth in a few schools, with a select number of supportive teachers, staff, administrators
and parents, found ways to enact or support this anti-racist work.

There were two main urban high school sites, Lakeview and Eastside, in this
research study. These schools were connected to a multi-city, multi-district anti-racist
youth leadership network, supported by the efforts of a desegregation lawsuit that enacted
an integrated district model for professional development. I was a participant observer
within the integrated district for a year and in the schools for six months. I sustained
relationships with focal participants, concluding the study at two years (but not the
relationships). In that time, I attended over 25 activist or organizing events (see Figures 5
and 6) and met with youth in schools, in the community, and in digital spaces.

There were at least 50 participants between the two schools. In sometimes fluid
ways, students identified as being Jewish, Muslim, Christian, and atheist. They were
White, Jewish, White-passing, African American, Black, African, Afro-Latinx, Somali,
Oromo, Eritrean, Filipina, Hmong, bi-racial, multi-racial, and students of color. At the
time of the study, they most frequently named themselves as Black, POC, students of
color, and white. Many students of color had at least one immigrant parent and roughly
one-fifth of the students identified as LGBQIA+, with a few students at the time, or later,
who identified as transgender, gender fluid, or gender expansive. Identities have been
anonymized and names in this paper are pseudonyms.
Context and Data Collection, Sources, and Analysis

This paper examines meaning-making activities from two schools who sustained interracial, anti-racist youth groups that participated in weekly group meetings, social media communications, public actions, school-based events, and research. My goal was to gain a deeper understanding of literacy practices and events within these interracial, anti-racist youth organizing groups. This section includes a deeper description of the two sites, data collection, multiple sources that informed the study, and analysis using critical ethnographic sources, social media, and youth participatory action research.

Lakeview and Eastside High were two schools with interracial, anti-racist youth groups who took part in this study. SpeakUp had at least one meeting each week during the school day (and often an after-school meeting as well), held during rotating class periods in the media center. Students walked through the swinging door in pairs or small groups. They bypassed the sign-in and the librarians who percussed a constant shushing soundtrack. A group of 15-30 young people gathered chairs into a large oval circle, surrounding a group of tables. Often the scene looked like friend groups clumped together, with a cluster of young Somali women on one end of the room, a few newer (and thus quieter) participants somewhere else, a few young men sitting down, quiet, throughout the space, white students sprinkled within a mostly B/POC circle, and the overlapping talk of an interracial group of friends and unnamed leaders chatting about what they needed to prepare for next. Phones were more prevalent than paper as they prepared for upcoming racial justice-oriented events. I usually sat in or just outside the circle, depending on the number of people, the space, and the activity. Bill Graham was their advisor; students spoke of him as a cisgender, heterosexual white male who worked
at the school as an equity coordinator. In meetings he almost always stood, phone in hand, and he usually found or created a reason to duck out and miss at least part of the meeting. At some point in the meeting, the sign-in sheet was passed around to collect names and IDs for Bill to submit to the office for excused absences. Youth with immigrant parents spoke about the ineffective process of excused absences; their parents would already be angry for receiving an automated phone call for them having missed a class, because the excused sheet never beat the robocall. The group gained new members after any school-based SpeakUp event, so at meetings, they usually went around the circle and shared their names, pronouns (if comfortable), and how they identified/how others identified them racially. Meetings were often action-oriented and involved reflecting on a past action or planning for an upcoming event.

Lakeview’s Time 2 Get Real group met twice a week, on Mondays after school in a big circle of desks in Ms. Axmed’s classroom and on Thursdays during lunch with four to six youth leaders in Ms. Walter’s classroom. Both advisors were English teachers and on the school’s equity team; Ms. Axmed was Black and hijabi and Ms. Walter was white. They participated—cautiously—within the group and sometimes sat outside the group; they demonstrated a cognizance of their multiple identities, including their adultness, in this youth-led space. Monday meetings were led by youth, often sprung from a Thursday planning meeting. This process reminded me of how Chris Emdin theorizes cogens, or using a small group of youth to co-generate planning and dialogue about teaching in urban schooling (Emdin, 2016). Youth leaders passed a basket of paper around the circle, so that students could take out paper handouts that listed their mission, tips for having racialized conversations based on a compass (a common tool in these groups), and a list
of agreements. A student leader read their list of agreements before every meeting. Each meeting, they went around the circle, sharing names, pronouns (if they wanted), grade level, and a check-in, usually something personal, often about the school day or the past weekend. These meetings were sometimes action-oriented, but often they were structured more like a class period, with a specific topic for discussion planned by the leadership team. Youth often came with at least one other friend, and I noticed that they sat in more racially segregated groupings than at Eastside. Members of another group, Teach Yo’Self, were often present. Teach Yo’Self was an interracial group of youth who mostly attended the school, but their meetings were held outside of school (and typically without adults). Finally, there were two parents (one mother of color and one gender nonconforming white parent) and a few other staff or administrators, Black and white, who visited meetings as well.

After attending meetings in the schools for a month, youth started to use me as a resource. I might take notes for them, ask clarifying questions, or reflect on lesson plans for upcoming presentations, on topics including but not limited to social media, teachers, race/racism, and white allyship (which morphed during the study from white privilege to accomplices). At this time, I began data collection. Modes of data collection were negotiated at each site and with each student, on an ongoing basis (Rogers, Winters, Perry, & LaMonde, 2015). As described just above, the combination of regular meetings and group actions (collective acts of resistance) totaled 90 sessions and 400 hours of participant observation in six months. I conducted semi-structured interviews with twelve students and five teachers and had ongoing informal conversational interviews. I accumulated field notes, self-reflexive memos, audio recordings, artifacts, and interviews,
and together we participated in community-engaged social justice work. Specific data sources used in this chapter’s analysis are embedded in the table below (see Table 3):

| Table 1 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Six sets of IAYA literacy activities |
| Social media | Public events | IAYA meetings (in school) | Key Events (school-based events) | YPAR crew (analysis) |
| 250 personal posts (two years) | 25 public youth-led Facebook events (two years) | 28 meetings in six months, coded for literacy events | 40 hours from four key events (sit-ins and teach-ins) | 3-day data analysis camp based on a year of activism |
| 290 participatory survey responses (in one year) |

Throughout the study, I took an ongoing iterative approach to data that combined both inductive and deductive analysis (Maxwell, 2013). I analyzed data in multiple stages. First, prior to analyzing specific data for this chapter, I thematically analyzed (Braun & Clarke, 2013) one set of 90 self-reflexive memos (from chapter four). Second, I constructed a data set based on four key episodes (from chapter two), from sit-ins and teach-ins (I wrote these episodes in narrative form from 40 hours of data, using multiple sources, and open-coding line-by-line). Third, for this paper, I derived inductive codes with a multi-step analytical process (Luttrell, 2010), reading and rereading the corpus of data, sorting, indexing, and reading again. Fourth, to identify themes for youth activist literacies, I reread field notes and listened to audio recordings to search for patterns and co-occurrences in 28 IAYA meetings at both Lakeview and Eastside (Barton & Hamilton, 2013; Heath & Street, 2008). I reread and listened again, examining the material through the conceptual lens of the theoretical framework, using the framework.
to select and transcribe sections of audio. Fifth, to compare patterns across groups and modes, I analyzed 250 screenshots from social media, 25 public events hosted by youth on Facebook, four key school events, and 290 survey results from a YPAR mapping project (see Tables 4 and 5). Sixth, I used axial coding (Moje, Overby, Tysvaer, & Morris, 2008) to reduce codes and to compare and clarify themes across these multiple data sets. In each of these stages, there were decisions to make. For instance, among the strongest codes was one of “truth” or “knowledge.” It was difficult to decide on the identifier for the theme. In this chapter, I ultimately labeled it “literacies of knowledge,” intending to discuss literacy consumption and production alongside the desire for knowledge and truth. Finally, as I found patterns across the data sets, I reduced data and identified salient examples from across the study, including youth interviews and artifacts, that illumined the theoretical framework: ideas of liberation, struggle, and dialogism, connected literacies, and whiteness.

**Participation and analysis using digital engagement and social media.** Social media was a prevalent literacy that connected activists across identities, schools, and organizations. I participated in group texts, group chats, and on Google documents as a participant observer and support for youth, especially as they prepared for teaching. Over the course of a year, I took screen shots after I interacted with something on a Twitter or Facebook timeline (and occasionally Instagram or Snapchat). Youth were participants and social media influencers within their circles, and they had invited me into their digital world. I saved posts purposefully, choosing ones that seemed tangentially or tightly connected to literacy, learning, or liberation. The set of screenshots used in this chapter

---

2 Screenshots after interacting with it was important, as I was hyper-aware of surveillance of youth. With any screenshots that I did cull to use in a paper, I sent note to participants, asking their permission.
were not primarily artifacts from racial justice events, they were posts from “normal” times. In total, I used three sets of data connected to digital literacies: social media screenshots from individual youth influencers, public organizing events from Facebook (events I also attended), and youth’s metacognitive commentary about social media.

**Connections to youth participatory action research (YPAR).** In addition to ethnographic methods for data gathering, it was necessary to hear analysis directly from youth about the research. Eight to ten youth came together from five different high schools in the summer of 2017, all connected to the study, to review their activism through youth-created artifacts from the previous 18 months. Youth-led Participatory Action Research (yPAR) is based in social justice principles and includes training for and conducting of systematic research to improve the lives of students, school, and/or communities. In PAR, those most impacted by an area of inquiry come together as a research collective to define for themselves the research question and the research design, collect data, analyze data, and decide together what should be done with the results (Fox, 2016). Together, we examined conference programs, actions they had led/co-led, and reflected upon personal experience and collective inquiry. Their inquiries, themes, and ongoing interaction contributed to this study as well.

This study was lengthy and complex, intermingled with social justice work. There were multiple contexts, including schools, community spaces, and digital spaces. Young people were affiliated with multiple groups and they spanned sometimes shifting racial/ethnic, religious, gender, and sexuality categories. The data collected was varied. As such, there were certainly limitations of this study as well.

**Limitations**
Connected to my participation, one limitation of this study was losing myself in my research (Lather, 2012), and moreover in the relationships and goals of the youth with whom I was working. As yet, though difficult, I do not ultimately regret that limitation. I was committed to supporting youth, their actions, and their anti-racist purposes. I was deeply engaged with them, and I did not always duck around a corner to type. Even when I wasn’t with participants physically, I was engaged with them via social media, up to ten hours a day at times, if my on-line behaviors lined up with theirs (Jocson, 2013). This impacted the level of systematic organization and thick descriptions of the research. This was adjusted, in some ways, with the longevity of the study, the multiplicity of youth artifacts, continued relationships with youth, and many participants’ ongoing willingness to contribute to data collection, analysis, and future projects and writing.

A specific limitation of this study was the use of social media (including Twitter, Facebook, and Google) without using the breadth of tools available for analysis. Though this chapter makes use of social media, it does not maximize social media analytics, which can be used to track content or relationships. In my opinion, that work should be done directly with youth authors themselves. I worked with these youth for over two years, but I was not a voyageur into their social media histories. Based on a shared Google mapping project we did together, I know that they would be interested in analytics, and I could use social media analysis with youth in the future. In addition, youth commonly wrote metacognitive comments about social media in their posts (see
Social media was the fourth most common code in content analysis from their social media posts, as seen in the third row from the top. IAYA were analysts of the modes that they used in their own communication.

Limitations of research can also include the positionality of researchers and research methodologies as well. Next, I briefly describe my own racialized positionality that informs this research. The brevity here is expanded in chapter 4, in which I analyzed self-reflexive memos, to more carefully ascertain how I moved and interacted with interracial groups of young people in this overarching study.

**Positionality and reflexivity**

As an emerging critical scholar racialized as white, I feared perpetuating whiteness and its invisible, insidious violence. I needed to understand more about
whiteness in order to see it, address it, confront it, and disrupt it. This is an unfinished journey. I have learned about critical scholarship and self-examination from Toni Morrison, Paulo Freire, bell hooks, James Baldwin, Michelle Fine, and others, as well as from my community, how to navigate nuances, delve into discomfort, and proceed with inquiry and humility. When I walked into schools, I sometimes viewed my racialized body as an obstacle to social justice work. I was hyper-conscious about my actions (or inactions) as a white woman. However, youth had normed white women teachers; we were on a shifting scale from aggravating to allies, but in many ways, we were accepted in a school space. Thus, it was up to me to be serious and reflexive about my interactions with youth. I had to wrestle with what my positionality meant, in research and in writing (for more explicitly on this journey, see chapter four). “Researcher self-positioning vis-á-vis the identities of participants certainly shapes the interaction, the interpretation of the interaction, and in turn, the readers’ understanding of the findings” (Rogers, 2018, p. 10). Researcher identities impact research and writing; I needed to be resolute in transforming myself as well as researching systems in schooling (Rombalski & Grinage, 2018). I have no doubts that this study and its analysis would yield different results with another researcher. I cannot stipulate what those results might be, only that my reliance on IBPOC scholars and participants, on scholars of critical race theory and of critical whiteness studies, continue to influence my frame.

Lessons from activism shaped my positionality and my approach to research. Aboriginal activist Lilla Watson is often attributed with these words: “If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. If you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.” Zapatista activists in México relayed to
international volunteers: “If you have come to help us, you can go home. If you have come to accompany us, please come. We can talk” (as cited in Denzin & Giardina, 2016, p. 171). These messages applied to research as well: “If you want to research us, you can go home. If you have come to accompany us, if you think our struggle is also your struggle, we have plenty of things to talk about” (Denzin & Giardina, 2016, p. 171). I shared struggles in this study with research participants. Our struggles included unraveling whiteness, learning about race and racism, listening to youth, and creating social change. These struggles were not mine alone, to proceed, or to solve, or to move. Movement is stronger together.

Through this study, I aimed to understand more about the collaborative youth work towards racial justice in the schools, steeped in learning and literacy. The next section describes the findings from systematic analysis from the multiple sets of data outlined in Table 3. As in any research, much of the story is left outside the words on the page. My hope is that the work continues, in conversation with young people who continue to do this work.

3.4 Findings: Four literacies in youth organizing data

This section includes themes from the most salient literacies of interracial, anti-racist youth activists (IAYA), findings drawn from analysis across multiple data sets. There were four key literacies. Love and resistance were connected literacy practices in digital spaces and threaded throughout the study. Three other youth activist literacies included: organizing literacies, critical teaching literacies, and literacies of knowledge. Below, I share examples from across data sets that speak to each.

Literacy practices of love and resistance
Melanin absorbs sun

light. We are light filled.

(shared Facebook post from Sincere)

**Love and social media.** Literacy practices of youth activists were based in love and resistance. Youth in this study fell into, circumvented, or sliced up dominant systems and oppressions. They also created rich opportunities for dialogic learning, for connected literacies, and for joy. The literacy practices of love and resistance were explicitly highlighted in social media literacies as IAYA expressed love for themselves and each other. At the beginning of this section was a post from Sincere, celebratory love directed at herself and any youth of color scrolling by. Social media hosted opportunities for activism and solidarity. For instance, when young people posted a #Blackout Tweet for an event, they created embodied opportunities for solidarity based on what people wore. After these types of events, they shared photos to further spread the word. Throughout youth activism, images of love and joy erupted, disrupted, and sustained otherwise blighted times. Hashtags such as #Blackgirlsbreaktheinternet or #BlackoutEid hijacked the status quo of otherwise damaging days. They shared in self-love, celebration, and community. On Twitter, Leticia (a multi-racial Black and Asian youth) posted an image to draw dialogic response. Others double clicked on it to create a heart, and she @’d them (tagged their name) with a list of character attributes, including their activist group name and comments like “gorgeous” and “truth.” They loved on each other in these communities of practice (Lave & Wegner, 1999). They shared love across racial groups, referencing learning from each other too, like this post from Anneka (who was white, and
a sophomore) to Veronica (who was Black and bi-racial and a junior): “Happy solar revolution to [@vera] my luv, my ma, my fav veronica eva. Cant count the ways you influenced me :’)

”. They attributed their growth to each other and demonstrated love through sharing pride, beauty, writing, and talent, like a side-by-side, two-screen video of two participants at an open mic: “yusuf and I made a song [two crying yellow emojis] original lyrics whl we boutta take it far” (whl short for Wallahi, close to or signifying “for real” in Somali). Self-love, love for others, and collective pride/love were shared on social media, much of which sprung from activism (see figures below).

![Self-love on Instagram.](image)

*Figure 2. Self-love on Instagram.*
These posts were deeper than a trend, more than a notch on a timeline. Social media provided a space for shared experiences with a celebratory audience. In Figure 9, Max had snapped a photo of Sincere and posted it with bawling emojis on Snapchat. They shared activism and a bi-racial identity; they called each other family. “No, no, that’s my brother for real,” Sincere would say. The relationships youth built outside of school drew them to each other in school. They loved the love, as Janet relayed when asked what she valued in activist spaces: “I rly value love and community in activist spaces but I mean I think most ppl would agree” (fb group post, 2017). Pride exuded in
individual and collective identities. Love was liberating. When youth posted photos with others, they shared love and appreciation; their activist community was linked, in photos from organizing events or with a group name in the mentions. This love was visual, asset-based, self-promoted and boosted by friends and acquaintances. It connected, healed, and sustained them (it also perpetuated a sense of community that continued face-to-face). On the topic of youth activism, Robin D.G. Kelley posits, “What are today’s young activists dreaming about? We know what they are fighting against, but what are they fighting for?” (Kelley, 2002, p. 8). She draws from Dr. King’s call for the “strength to love” (from his novel of the same title), in order to build “a truly liberatory movement” (p. x). During these times of protest, even if IAYA did not articulate always what they were fighting for, in a specific 10-point plan, they were fighting with and for the liberation of loving themselves and each other.

Love’s role in education was recognized as untheorized by bell hooks (2000):

“We must dare to acknowledge how little we know of love in both theory and practice” (p. xxix). It was amplified by Lauryn Hill (Hill, 1998) whose \textit{Miseducation} album started with a teacher who wrote “l-o-v-e” on the board and listened as his class worked to define the concept.\footnote{This recording actually took place with a group of young people gathered to talk, off the cuff, in a living room setting.} It remains important and complex, taken up by Anne Crampton’s (2017) multi-school ethnographic study of love and literacy:

\begin{quote}
[L]ove is linked to what makes school—for students and teachers—matter….There remains a need to articulate love’s variety, and its simultaneous capacities for doing good, and for doing damage in schooling. It is inherently multidisciplinary and therefore tricky to categorize, it is both misguided and
sometimes transcendent, it is immense, and sometimes so small as not to be noticeable. (p. 4)

The “smallness” of love in these quasi-private social media posts could have been missed in this study about youth activist literacies, had I not been invited by young people into social media space. They friended me and gave me access to group accounts. It makes me continually grateful for the relationships that youth built together, the bonds often hidden from school. In this study, visual digital representations of love were both framing and central to youth experience, kinship, and action.

**Literacies of love and resistance.** Love was not always on its own; often it accompanied ideas of resistance. This combination afforded a strong sense of cohesion and shared purpose among participants, as outlined in examples throughout this section. For instance, one fall before the start of school, a group of IAYA came together from multiple schools to help plan a city-wide social justice conference. The group responded to an opening participatory question, “What are you passionate about?” I categorized their responses below, sections which were consistent across the corpus of data. They could be divided into two overarching frames of love (care/relationships/creativity) and resistance.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>What are you passionate about? Youth Meet and Greet, 8/2016</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth, art, and healing (love)</td>
<td>Speaking (learning, teaching) Truth 2 Power (resistance)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### About young people:
the simple ideas of young people, 23 and under, middle school, Youth empowerment—how to communicate and collaborate with adults, youth panels, bringing youth voices to the front of the movement

### Power and voice:
empowerment of Black women, people having the opportunity to come alive, finding your voice, empowerment, people power, speaking out, changing the world, [Power] of people, power mapping workshop, Protest 101 kits

### About art:
poetry, writing, Black youth artists, poetry, music, social justice, fashion, art and any self-expression, art, dancing, documenting the revolution

### Rights:
know your target (state, fed, local), know your rights in the classroom, on the streets

### About healing:
healing, healing kits, Black love, POCs in mental health system

### Teaching/Learning:
Workshops like Black feminism, intersectional feminism, microaggressions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topics of art, healing, and young people comprised half of their passions, all asset-based. The rest of their responses were about resisting or speaking truth to power, through organizing, teaching, and learning. Education scholars Na’ilah Suad Nasir and Yolanda Sealey Ruiz (2018) have asserted that love is needed, not only in activism, but for teaching and learning to be possible:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>@ProfNai: “I for real think love might be the most important element of teaching and learning”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>@RuizSealey: “yes! Sister Nasier it is! And I love writing about it! Sending love to all who read this, too!”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Beyond the Twitterverse, Jackson, Sealey-Ruiz, and Watson (2014) wrote about cultivating reciprocal love in classrooms: “We are defining reciprocal love as a deeply rooted interest in and concern for community that extends personal well-being to communal sustenance” (p. 399). Stretching from the personal to the communal was core to youth and racial justice activism, just as these scholars found reciprocal and community-based love as necessary for learning in schools. Community was an essential part of love; it connected love through resistance and across multiple experiences.

Love and resistance were named together by young people as well. When I was analyzing the data set of sit-ins and teach-ins, I struggled to identify a group of codes that were loosely asset-based. They seemed to hang together, but I was unsure how to compress them. In a Twitter group chat (personal communication, September 13, 2018), I posed the problem to a few young women who were part of the study (my posts are those that are right-aligned):

*Abby:* Hi all! I need some help if you have some thinking time. What one or two words or phrases might you come up with, if you collapsed the following terms? love, emotion, healing, care, with, space, safety, trust, flexibility, and "i believe that we will win"

and xoxo to those of you in that college life rn!!

*Leticia:* self care

^^ good one. others?

*Charrise:* Resistance

^^ thk u. self-care towards resistance?

Charrise: I dunno I feel like there’s a lot of emotions in resistance in terms of like social resistance and you have to love something in order to want to actively change it i think. & it can be healing at times.

*Anneka:* Self love, community love
What these young women said about self-care, resistance, healing, and love represented a juxtaposition and a relationship throughout the data. Love, self-care, and healing rode alongside resistance in order to do the racial justice work they cared so much about.

In *The Fire Next Time*, James Baldwin (1998) wrote about love and the complex relationship in forming the self through the perspective of the other. It was not a simple emotion nor an easy concept. He theorized love as bound up in toughness and growth:

> It is for this reason…that love is so desperately sought and so cunningly avoided. Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within. I use the word “love” here not merely in the personal sense but as a state of being, or a state of grace—not in the infantile American sense of being made happy but in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth.

(p. 341)

Youth were on steady quests for love: for community, knowledge, truth, and growth. They dared to be real. Racial justice work was hard, and they needed grace and love for self-growth and to forge forward in community.

In interviews, one focal group stressed the importance of self-care and having fun in their racial justice work. They knew that it was not sustainable to be serious all the time. Sincere said (see also transcription guide in Appendix):

> It’s not hard stuff all the time. It’s about always being able to balance it. I think one thing that I didn’t learn for a long time, until somebody made it for me—that there’s a balance, and [we need to] uplift each other—is self-care. Uplifting these
kids\(^4\) along with challenging these kids and asking them to branch out and talk about the hard stuff. I think it needs to be balanced is all I’m saying. (8.3.2016)

Theorizing about love for self and community was not taught in the schools. Nonetheless, youth were beginning to learn these lessons from peers, mentors, and social media. Self-care and mental health, including in racialized ways, were topics on the rise on social media, especially in activist and women of color discourses. IAYA continued to organize, disrupt, and resist in the schools. They created lessons for critical teaching and sharing knowledge. Within these times, popping out from the seams and in between times, they found ways to center love and to sneak in joy.

**Organizing literacies**

“I get it that you're worried about my school, but this is my education.” -T2GR meeting

Key activities throughout the study included those of organizing literacies.

Literacy scholar Tamara Butler defines “critical youth organizing literacies as acts of critiquing texts and co-creating new meanings around texts in mobilizing efforts” (2017, p. 84). As with many current literacy scholars, I adopt an expanded view of the traditional notion of print text to a grounding notion of meaning-making through multiple semiotic modes. In my analysis, texts stemmed from multiple activities within meetings for planning, co-constructing, and reflecting upon actions and events. Organizing literacies were steeped in a commitment to connectivity and community. And, even though some parents and teachers were worried that activist activities distracted from school, it was abundantly clear that organizing literacies provided opportunities for real life education.

---

\(^4\) At the time, Sincere was talking about her own experience as a youth activist as well as looking out for younger students.
Organizing actions and events was a main purpose of the interracial anti-racist youth activists that I supported over the course of this study. A group of 20 IAYA youth and five community organizers (including myself) met to discuss the social-justice work they had done in their schools in the past year. Young people wrote about school-connected events such as youth-led walkouts, sit-ins, and other after-school events. They jotted “joined a racial equity club” and wrote about creating race justice days, in which many of them led workshops: a white allyship workshops, a white privilege talk to teachers from students, a workshop about Latinx students in school, and a discussion on racial equality, racism, and disparities (there were more youth-led sessions at those events as well). Someone had “created a diversity inclusion cohort” and another had “courageous conversations.” They wrote about “standing up for Chicanx studies,” “helping students sign up for chicanx/latinx classes,” and “talking to the principal about college info, like the FAFSA, in Spanish for parents.” A few students had “led a BLM workshop at a local college,” and two others wrote: “worked to have sex education at my school” and “disrupting business as usual.” Youth created and sustained movements. Events and actions gave youth something to hang onto, a memory, a feeling, and a togetherness, creating a shared experience around a common purpose for racial justice. The actions themselves, the planning for the events, and the connectivity and community inherent in the organizing all contributed to the organizing literacies of youth activists.

**Organizing literacies: Meeting, planning, and co-constructing actions and events.** During regular meetings with Time to Get Real and SpeakUp, I was a participant observer. I recorded and analyzed literacy events from 28 meetings (see appendix) to chart the regular activities in these weekly events, some of which were directed at
planning for actions/events, and much of what was also centered on growing their own political education. Meetings were youth-led and rich in opportunities for literacy and learning, factors often recognized as vital but infrequent in typical urban classrooms. Meetings formed patterns that included:

- critical inquiry and discussion
- a fluid approach to disagreement, clarifying ideas, and co-construction of text
- literary references, critical theories and concepts
- use of multimodal tools and technologies
- planning for actions
- reflection/counter-narratives about personal stories, pedagogy, schools/teachers, or community.

These literacy events were in line with Bishop’s (2015) critical literacy research with youth organizers outside-of-school as well, which included: mobilizing to disrupt, interrogating complex perspectives, identifying sociopolitical issues, taking social justice action, and reflecting and envisioning activisms.

It’s important to zoom in, to see how youth critiqued texts and constructed meaning together. The SpeakUp group from Eastside High spent two days planning in small groups for a school-wide sit-in in the spring of 2016, in response to the non-indictment of officers who shot and killed Jamar Clark the previous fall. Their plans included a sit-in, a silent march within the school, singing and chanting, gathering to speak and listen to one another in large group, and an action whereby students could write a message on long scrolls of paper to Jamar, to the police department, and to the
school district. Kam, an Afro-Latinx young transwoman, gathered her thoughts. Students had been building on each other’s knowledge of the case, and they were critical about wanting to provide details that were not assumptive nor sensationalized. Youth had witnessed time and time again the justification of Black men killed by police:

There was a way it was presented, watching it… you know, they used that to justify his killing… this is so wrong, how they’re presenting this, how they’re showing the world like wrapping it up in a neat little bow, you know, saying this is what happened, and this is why it should be the way it is. (Kieran, a white young man from Lakeview, 4.4.16)

Kam wanted to summarize the case: the context, the reason, and who called an ambulance to the scene. She was gender and power conscious and asked how to phrase or rephrase “female acquaintance” or “friend.” Students did not want to say “Jamar’s girlfriend” to assume a specific or heteronormative relationship. As she posed questions, it gave space for others to contribute (“S” represents voices from different students; see appendix for transcription codes):

Kam: Jamar and his female friend got into a domestic dispute. How would you change that? Cuz I don’t like that word.
S2: --I don’t like that word either.
S3: And his partner?
S4: Partner, yeah.
S1: --You don’t have to gender her.
Kam: Jamar and his friend
S5: --it can still be domestic abuse and not be female.
S2: Yeah
Kam: But like, to be historically accurate, to what happened.
No, but I mean, I’m not being, what’s that word, specific
Me: If you use the word domestic abuse or assault, it infers a domestic assault happened.

Anneka: Also—cuz she just came forward
Nebesa: She did?
S: They were not together, and he never abused her.
Kam: Oh snap
S4: Did you guys read—
Anneka: --yeah, she released it last night
Kam: So I’m gonna be like—
Anneka: No, just don’t say that, because she just recorded an interview that said that she had fallen and broken her ankle and he didn’t touch her.
S:--Oh my God
Anneka: --It’s not even circling. People don’t even know it. I’m just like—
Kam:—So…

S2: You should talk about that!
S3: Are you talking about the interview?
S6: Tanea’s dad, evidently was at the party--
Tabby: Do you know--
Anneka: Just look up Jamar Clark, case, and—
Tabby—yea, okay, wait--
Anneka: And I just researched it recently, so I know.

Students were wary to repeat initial reports from the press. In addition, a new statement contested that story. They valued getting to the “truth” through multiple sources. These layered conversations were common. Youth disagreed, questioned stereotypes, substantiated facts, and clarified sources. Students discussed the impact of words and deliberated through critical language awareness. Kam listened, she practiced, and in the moment of the sit-in she altered it a bit more. The same type of co-construction happened frequently, especially when students were writing to prepare for a literary performance such as a speech or a post on-line.

The skills students gleaned from organizing were wide-ranging. They attributed learning decision-making, conflict-resolution, and listening as skills more applicable to jobs, college, and life than what they learned in school. One student referred to Time 2 Get Real as a group where she learned “home ec for racial justice.” Another student, Rose, spoke in an informal interview about her learning as well. Rose was a senior, a
Black young woman, and a leader in her school. As she reflected on her learning and literacies, she said:

Just by being part of the group, you learn how to communicate with others, like other people, where in a classroom, you're like forced to. And this is a type of work environment where you have to work together to get the work done. And you build skills, on like, how to communicate efficiently with adults or make sure that the message you're trying to send is a clear one, and precise. And that's not necessarily things you can learn in school. (5/21/16)

To Rose, skills and context were connected in meaningful ways. Indeed, literacy scholars have critiqued ongoing literacy education policies that frame the teaching of literacy skills as “separate from the purposes, audience, and contexts in which they are made meaningful” (Moje, 2016, p. 70). Youth need to “understand the relevancy of learning to read, write, compose, and communicate with proficiency…build their own social futures” (p. 70). Rose knew that SpeakUp was working for a shared and critical purpose. Organizing literacies provided a context, a purpose, and an audience for youth to work together for racial justice and social change.

**Organizing literacies: Connectivity and community.** Connective literacies were multimodal and spanned across mode and space; they included purposeful use of social media and music. Connected communities enabled newly formed solidarities inside and outside of school. Youth organized and connected with youth and other community members across many places: community organizations, schools, public parks, government buildings, and the street (see Figure 11). The figure below represents the
percentages of activist locations based on the public Facebook events that were youth-led or co-led with youth over the course of one year:

![Places of Activism](image)

Figure 5. Locations of activism from public Facebook events.

In group meetings, connectivity was central; use and discussion of digital tools were more prevalent than pencils or other written work in groups. They used phones to track agendas that were passed around in group chats or group texts. They composed poems that they read at protests. They strived to stay updated: "Can someone message the FB group if anything changes?" They asked each other to consider the affordances of social media in regards to boosting events: “How are we gonna amp this? I’m so serious.” The form, the platform, and the intended audience was pivotal to the relevancy and success of an event, such as a “planned twitter storm” prior to or during an event in a physical space. They were specific and thoughtful about what kinds of media they created for a certain event. “How are we doing…I don't wanna be rude, but will this be a template, info, what?” They created hashtags, videos, power point slide presentations, websites, and official descriptions and statements, for speeches, for printing, and “for immediate
release” on social media and news outlets. Youth were hyper-aware of positive and negative affordances of social media. Discussing the form and function of these organizing literacies contributed to social change and to their literacy development.

Music was another digital literacy tool for youth, emotionally, physically, and intellectually. Students used songs from Kendrick Lamar (“Alright”) (2015) and Macklemore and Lewis, featuring Jamila Woods (“White Privilege II”) (2016), to teach others about institutionalized racism. Thought-provoking new visual albums, protest music, videos, dancing, and singing provided theory, analysis, content for lessons, metaphors, release, and joy. Music has been a common vehicle for change, yet it is too unsung in schools. Tamara Butler (2017) worked with four ninth grade girls of color to examine how critical youth organizing literacies were provoked, enacted, and sustained in their World Humanities class. For their project, they chose a song about a selected social justice issue for a capstone project. They built on their knowledge of songs, the music, the tone, the lyrics, and the message. They analyzed, refuted ideas, and moved on, very similar to regular engagements with youth in this study; the overlapping disagreement resonated with me. Connected and multiple literacies in social media and music are abundant and complex. They are accessible and engaging to youth and they build community, yet they often remain so distanced from school.

The organizing literacies of youth activists were relevant to their learning as well as to the impact of their social justice work. IAYA planned and reflected on actions, events, and their own education. In formal and informal meetings, they critiqued texts and one another, using multiple perspectives to construct truths worth telling. In interviews, students like Rose recognized the real-world skills that they were gaining
through this work. In planning meetings, Time 2 Get Real and SpeakUp both discussed the affordances of digital media in messaging for a public purpose. Finally, the youth activists in this study did not relegate forms of literacy or learning to out-of-school or in-school locations. They were deeply connected with one another, the community, and through their literacies. They brought multimodal literacies from one world into another, learning and teaching and healing from music and other references to youth culture that resonated with their primary audience. Finally, they used these organizing literacies in their most prevalent activity, teaching.

Critical teaching literacies

Literacies of love and resistance vibrated throughout organizing literacies and critical teaching literacies. Youth strived to raise awareness and knowledge with themselves and others, so political education or teaching others was a major component of their literacies and their activism. I used the term critical teaching because youth activists were critical about abuse of power from individuals and systems. In this first section, I examine their critical teaching on social media. Critical teaching included categories of “teachers” (young people) acting #unapologetic or being part of #calloutculture (concepts raised up by youth and in social media during the time of this study). In nuanced ways, critiques also sustained self-love and pushed radical love for others, like Baldwin’s words: “If I love you, I have to make you conscious of the things you don’t see” (Baldwin, 1989, p. 156). When I analyzed 250 social media posts from focal participants (also referenced in Figure 3), there were three notable patterns: Assets, which was later delineated as types of love; critiques of power (resistance to whiteness,
school, or other systems of oppression); and both, for instance, posts that included literary references that also served as a critique. See Figure 12 below:

![Social Media Postings from IAYA - Purpose]

**Figure 6.** IAYA social media posts with a purpose: Assets or critiques?

**Critical teaching and critique: “PSAs for white people”** (Veronica, Twitter). In this study, youth of color frequently critiqued whiteness and white people on social media. Social media provided a platform for youth to theorize and to teach while envisioning an intended audience. The following Twitter posts were from four different young Black women, two bi-racial, and all from different ethnicities, as they critiqued whiteness:

I wish #justwhitepeopleshit was a trending hashtag / ima need all you white folks to stop acting like the police protectin and servin everyone stfu. / why are white people so eager to have opinions on things they don’t understand such as, yknow, not being white / Whiteness is the root of all evil.

A young woman named Veronica named these iterations “PSAs [public service announcements] for white people.” Even if youth only interacted with friends of color on
a thread, a bi-product of this labor was to teach white people, friends or acquaintances scrolling by; they were an additional intended audience.

In addition to writing these PSAs, youth of color responded to ongoing racial microaggressions and verbal assaults on social media and in person. They responded in a variety of ways. Sometimes they sub-tweeted about it (sub-tweeting is discussing a situation, or venting, without explicitly adding someone involved into the thread), like this small group conversation on twitter:

Veronica: “how are u gonna go to eastside high, an urban minority-white school, and be surprised by ……poc doing things”
Kam: Like I said I’m not obliged to congratulate your white ass for getting ‘good grades’ try going/completing school as a POC.
Angel: all we have are Beck’s and Becky’s
Kam: Boooooooooooooooom!!!!
Veronica: PS maybe a lil petty but there’s a reason our valedictorians are always white.
Fadumo: thank you!!
Veronica: maybe our class officers are all women of color bc we get shit done and don’t rely on white mediocrity to get recognition [yellow thinking emoji]
Fadumo: I wanna retweet that too!

Certainly, youth processed issues in person, but bringing it to social media allowed for quasi-public reading and “teaching,” with a sideways hope that things might change. This writing also enabled near-immediate processing to the flurry of microaggressions that came at young people, digitally and in person. It is important to note that these social critiques about dominating systems of whiteness and schooling were relegated to on-line or small group spaces; they were not usually discussed in the school-based groups.

Overall, these on-line practices added to youth’s critical literacy and racial literacy skills, whether they were writing or reading the posts.

Critical teaching: Writing for both assets/love and critiques/resistance: AKA “my electricity went out but my highlight is still glowing” (Fadumo, Twitter). Tweets
were not only critiques. Social media posts could represent the paradox that students were living. Students criticized the school system and found ways to love on themselves at the same time. For instance, Sincere, below, smiled proudly in a graduation photo after the emotional rollercoaster of being on stage with administrators who would walkie her name throughout the hallways to warn people she was coming. See also the figure of the Sponge Bob meme that a friend of hers posted.

Figure 7. Juxtaposed ideas of graduating, figure series 1 of 2, Critical.
Youth were not trying to live a lie, but they were able to curate the complicated history of their lives, with the help of memes, humor, and their own digital photography.

It became a growing question, to explore paradoxes such as love and resistance, trauma and healing, assets and needs. When the youth data analysis crew gathered in the summer of 2017, one of their central inquiries was about utilizing assets alongside needs: “Why is it important to talk about assets as well as needs/trauma in our communities?” Youth across the study echoed this sentiment. Sincere talked about it regarding spoken word and social justice: “But do we need to write about trauma?” She loved spoken word, the opportunities and the community, but she struggled with feeling like she was required to write and perform her pain.

In this social media analysis, two-thirds of posts had shared something positive, including literary references, while simultaneously expressing a critique about oppression or power. Youth passed around literary resources and political education on social media.
They referenced authors and artists. Critical teaching occurred on-line and in organizing spaces. Youth longed for assets, for something positive, to assist in their teaching and in constructing their knowledges. Those literary references to James Baldwin and Assata Shakur and others met those needs.

Sometimes events spurred from social media took more time and deliberateness to process or attack. Taz identified as hijabi, Somali, Black, and African American. She took an event that she critiqued online and turned it into a class that she and some friends taught at their whole-school Race Justice Day. As Taz described it:

Something happened recently on social media...this kid put down these Somali girls. He’s like “they’re wearing too much make-up, nananana,” he just kept throwing hate, and he was like “they’re ugly”...everybody kept replying and saying “they’re beautiful” and “Why are you hating?” You can’t say a whole race is ugly. You can say that girl is ugly, sure. That’s your opinion. It’s not a fact. He was tryn to make it a fact...Everyone was saying, “that’s not true, that’s racist.”

Finally he said “ya’ll some terrorists.” Whaaaa...

Motivated by that social media event and other experiences, Taz and her friends created and led a session called, “We don’t all look alike.” Taz valued the opportunity to teach from her experience as well as to learn more as she prepared. She discussed what it meant for her to do this work, connected to her identity, her reality, and the need for change:

That’s why, um, for the presentation, we over-planned. I didn’t go to sleep. I didn’t even eat that day cuz I was so nervous--Exactly. If it’s important I’ll put my whole, I’ll put my whole effort. 100, 120%...If it’s something that’s going to be out there, for me to do in real life, I’ll do it. If they let me choose my topics
and how I wanna like present it? Straight up—Ima be the first one done. And I’m gonna turn it in on time. And I’m gonna make time for it after school, during school—the hours I’m free, the times I’m breathing—and doing—on Facebook or Instagram—I’ll be doing that work, cuz it’s important to me.

Teaching grew Taz’s awareness of pedagogy, motivation, and racial literacy. She did this work with her friends, as part of a larger purpose, while applying multiple literacies. She had told me before how she couldn’t “do” a written essay. We both knew, from reviewing data on 9th graders, that over 50% of her class had failed 9th grade English.

What if she, and others, could be assigned to do something they cared about so deeply? Youth created political education opportunities for peers throughout the study. Critical teaching literacies connected lessons from the community and social media to in-school spaces.

**Literacies of Knowledge**

I’m not part of “woke” twitter

I’m tryna be part of intellectual Black artist twitter

-Dédé, Twitter.

A longing for knowledge was a reoccurring theme throughout the study. IAYA yearned for racialized and historicized knowledge. Often without significant adult support in the schools, they nonetheless shared literary resources (in person and through social media) and practiced racial literacy through various types of knowledge consumption and production. “One of the advantages of this new media and creative language use is that youth have been able to connect the broader social and civic concerns of their lives in ways that school literacy has failed to do” (Gloria Ladson-Billings, 2016, p. 146). Just
because their school did not offer up readings and resources to discuss did not mean that they were not doing it. In fact, they brought resources into the school. Even if they did not write as a group in school, IAYA still produced their ideas and thoughts in various multimodal forms outside of school. These connected literacies grew the knowledge of the young people involved, regardless of whether their teachers knew about it or not.

**Reading and resources.** What were the literacies of knowledge percolating within interracial anti-racist youth groups in the schools? As alluded to earlier, literacy references were shared across social media, in youth-planned actions, and in regular meetings. I traced examples of literary references during regular after-school meetings with the Time 2 Get Real group at Lakeview. I systematically grouped literary references into six main categories, and examples are listed below:

1) Activism and youth production: After a youth-led, anti-ICE walk-out and march, youth debriefed and talked about the usefulness of a half-sheet flier that was distributed prior to the start; beforehand, some did not know what ICE was, nor its impact in our city.

2) History and podcast: They looked up local racist histories and listened to podcasts on redlining (e.g., “Why Geography Matters” by Rashad Shabazz). They discussed poll taxes, literacy tests, and voting rights. They invited a social studies teacher in to talk about it from his perspective. They also organized a walk-out and protest in the park, with many speakers from the community, in a campaign to “Restore the vote” of formerly incarcerated people in the state.

3) Race and documentaries: They suggested to each other that they watch the documentaries *Cracking the Code, Race the Power of an Illusion,* and *The Color of Fear.* At one meeting, this was accompanied by the comment, “White people read, let’s use documentaries,” followed by snaps.


5) Whiteness and community resource: A parent of color in a meeting shared her learning experiences with a community organization and passed around a “White Racial Frame” handout.

6) Popular culture and current events: Students mentioned contemporary media issues with Jimmy Fallon, Tom Brady, Miley Cyrus, Taylor Swift, Patricia
Arquette, and Hamilton. They discussed images seen online, like “The Genderbread” person, as well as national tragedies, including at Charleston.

I list these references for context about literary sources used by youth activists. With all these resources, how were these knowledges explored in their groups or in classes at school? In the groups, and in particular at Lakeview High, youth explored their own resources with each other, to various extents. According to students, most classrooms moved ahead with a curriculum that did not invite youth literacies into discussion:

Teachers also often assume that their students’ out-of-school activities do not reflect valid and relevant school-based literacy practices. As such, they rarely connect their students’ interests in and uses of new literacies, including media and popular culture texts, to their in-school reading and writing abilities (Provost, Skinner, Egelson, & Hagood, 2008, p. 60).

The advisors at Lakeview welcomed any of these youth-led literacy resources into the Time 2 Get Real (T2GR) after-school group, part of which I attributed to how adults supported youth to plan for meetings. Lakeview’s T2GR group discussed a few of these resources in depth, like an interview on intersectionality from bell hooks and a podcast from Shabazz on redlining. Even though these out-of-school and youth-selected literacies were not often invited into traditional classes in the schools, in these groups it made a difference that youth had the responsibility and efficacy to lead.

**Racial literacy.** Bringing in multimodal texts for discussion contributed to a growth in racial literacy within these interracial groups. Without enlisting the phrase itself, racial literacy was most noted by youth as their growth area from anti-racist work. Students who spoke about the knowledge and skills they gained from group activism also had an overwhelming theme of racial literacy (though they did not use that term). Sealey-
Ruiz and Greene (2015) define racial literacy as a “skill and practice in which individuals are able to discuss the social construction of race, probe the existence of racism and examine the harmful effects of racial stereotyping” (p. 60). In focal group interviews, Madi and Kimberly (white) spoke with Ayan (Black and hijabi) about what they noticed in their own and each other’s growth:

Madi: I really improved this year in my language, like knowing how to talk about these things. Before, I would just shut down, but now I kind of have the language to talk about these things with my family, whether or not they agree with me.

Ayan: I don't know what it's like with your family, but I feel like you've improved, like student wise. Cuz last year, remember on the phone—[to me] she has this theater thing, she was performing something—And this kid was saying racial stuff. And you were always like 'I don't know what to say'...and [then you said], “Stop being like a racial person, a racist person.” From the beginning of the school year I feel like you grew around the language too.

Kimberly: With my friends, at lunch, after school and stuff, but it's, I mean there is a benefit to that and that is nice, but there's something like a lot of my friends share the exact same viewpoint as me. I think talking about these things in T2BR is a little more beneficial for me because I get to hear, like, more viewpoints rather than just the rest of my white middle class friends’ viewpoints on everything.

From Eastside students (Tabby, who is multiracial and Arab and often assumed white, and Snow Leopard who is bi-racial and Black), interview responses were similar, and they attributed their own learning and racial literacy to the SpeakUp group and social movements:

Tabby: Learning in SpeakUp has meant space to have discussions with my peers about their perspective and experiences, [to talk about] issues, accomplishments, endless learning opportunities with peers, [who have] different knowledge to give each other. Outside [of the group] my learning has been extremely limited.

Snow Leopard: My vocabulary in this group, and in this movement, has grown a lot. I’ve been able to speak about it rather than keep it in my head. You learned new things that you never learned about.
Within the scope of racial literacy, students racialized as white were able to climb out of their silences (DiAngelo, 2012; Rogers & Mosley, 2006). Students of color were able to practice their talk in interracial spaces. All of them were able to begin to bring their language and their demands to school and to the community.

**Knowledge consumption and production.** Students showcased their knowledge in varied ways: in meetings as well as throughout the community, on open mic stages, in class with video production projects, and online. In-school activism did not draw on “traditional” school literacies and knowledge. There was a learned paradox about truth that became a constant struggle for IAYA when confronted by norms in school, at home, and in society. In a focal member interview, Molly, a white student, disclosed how she learned things “for real” through this anti-racist student group. She wanted to “figure out the truth” and grow in her knowledge:

So one thing I love about Time 2 Get Real is that, all this crazy stuff that’s going on, I don’t get to know about, I’m not allowed to watch the news, with stuff like this is about because my mom doesn’t think anything of it is correct, which, it’s sometimes correct, and um, but she’s also denying the fact like what happened on the highway, she was, um I told her, like, she was saying it had nothing to do with Black Lives Matter, it was just angry people being stupid(?). I told her what happened to you, and Max, and the rest of you guys who were there, and she was telling me I was wrong(?) (right). So then I told her I’m done talking about this anymore, I won’t talk to her anymore about this kind of stuff (mm-hmm). …but um, I’m glad to have Time 2 Get Real because we find a way to figure out the truth (right.)

And, um, that means a lot to me. I’m going to be going into the U.S. History next year, and after I just went through that um, the seminar yesterday, I was, I’m kinda like, like pissed off right now, sorry for my language (no—you’re good [laughter]), but I don’t wanna hear—like, my teacher, I’m gonna have, I’ve never had him as a teacher, so I don’t know what he’s gonna be like, my sister’s had him, but I haven’t, and I don’t wanna read from those textbook that they give us, cuz I think they’re full of with—sorry for my language—crap. Cuz [laughter] (thank you, you are--) (let her speak her, she’s speaking her truth) (ok, sorry) Cuz they’re like what, probably a hundred years old, probably not, but they’re from one side. And I just wanna know like, from a whole bunch of other si—like, I
wanna I want that guy who talked to us, to like literally teach at my school. Cuz I feel like he speaks more truth out of his mouth than some of the teachers. I just wanna learn about more of this history for real (8.2.16).

After Molly’s statement, students proceed to talk about reading *A People’s History of the United States* (Zinn, 2015) along with other texts and literacy practices; they went around their group for over ten minutes sharing resources. It was striking to me how readily they shared resources to build knowledge outside of the group, but they did not typically explore these resources within their groups.

One important discovery in this study was not what I found, but rather what was missing. The written production of text, across modes, came largely in individual student work, collective actions, and social media. In group meetings, some students took notes. Many used hand-held devices to look up information, to share and to teach each other. The vast majority of the group’s written production, however, happened in alternative spaces outside of the group: in arts and community organizations, in spoken word clubs, in lesson planning, and in writing for the purpose of activism, but not in their regular meetings and not in the space where they had adult co-council. In those spaces, adults did not usually bring nor share literacy resources, nor did they prompt youth, even in participatory ways, to make meaning with words. What opportunities were missed? Why? Prying into these questions could create future openings for meaning making, community, and literacy production.

In the upcoming discussion section, I use the theory of whiteness as property (Harris, 1993) to examine how whiteness obstructed youth activist literacies. Nonetheless, literacies connected young people and contributed to the development of collectives in spite of the white supremacist systems that surrounded them.
3.5 Discussion

Youth activist literacies were supported by an infrastructure of love and resistance. Organizing and critical teaching literacies connected youth activists across time and space. Literacies of knowledge and working towards truth gave IAYA a continued purpose in unlearning and learning. Where did their work fit within other literacy research? Richard Beach, Gerald Campano, et al (2010) identified four literacy tools for transformation. Each of those tools was prevalent in this study on the literacies of youth activists: IAYA engaged in critical inquiry, enacted individual and collective identities, constructed spaces, and established agency. Elizabeth Bishop’s (2015) study on critical literacies with out-of-school youth activists aligned with this study as well, though there were more discrepancies worth investigating. Across both studies, youth activists interrogated complex perspectives, took social justice actions, and reflected and envisioned activisms. However, Bishop wrote about two distinct critical literacies that were not prevalent within these in-school organizing groups: first, “mobilizing to disrupt” and second, “identifying sociopolitical issues.” In the first category of “mobilizing to disrupt,” it was notable that this study took place within the structures and confines of schooling and administration. Even though young people learned about creating demands outside of school, inside they often worked to comply and gain permission rather than enlist demands. They mobilized with minor disruptions. They worked relentlessly to gain and re-gain permission to exist and to organize, which sometimes created distractions from their larger goals. In the second category, in Bishop’s study youth “identified sociopolitical issues.” In this study, they identified sociopolitical issues for their own individual or small group teaching cycles. However, in school-sanctioned groups, they
did not spend time identifying issues to deconstruct, to learn or to teach about, or to mobilize around. For instance, their work often focused on what a school asked them to do rather than what they may have decided was most pertinent. They worked against racial injustice, but they did not define racial justice. In the structure of school, within activist groups, these critical literacies seemed to be side-stepped. Why?

I pose that a contributing factor to the suppression of these literacies was aligned with the same mechanism that evaded deep collective literacy consumption and production in the study: the lure or the convention of whiteness, and within whiteness individuality, among other characteristics. I explain this reasoning through the theory of whiteness as property, with the hope that once we see it, we can change the paradigm.

When youth have so much to offer, and so much skin in the game, it is worth examining the verge they are on, in order to move their work and all of us to a more liberating place.

Whiteness has been traced through literacy in schools and in literacy research sparingly, but over decades (Rogers, 2018; Smith-Burke, 1989; A. I. Willis, 2015). I mapped whiteness, connected literacies, and dialogism or struggle across youth activism. I used whiteness as property because it was often an invisible construct in the structure of schooling. In this study of multiple literacies, I traced whiteness as property enacted through literacy events such as creating or defending written documents and law (as it was historically created, according to Harris, 1993). Following, I describe three things: One, functions of whiteness as property restrain anti-racist youth activism in schools. Functions such as exclusion, transfer, and rights to enjoyment were a normalized burden on activists that impacted their literacies. Two, connected literacies dissipate whiteness. Literacies and dialogism opened connections and collectives that operated against
whiteness. Three, in closing, I share a few key implications from this research for anti-racist and literacy education, including about the untapped potential of collectives such as interracial anti-racist youth leaders.

**Functions of whiteness as property restrain anti-racist youth activism in schools**

Property functions of whiteness have historically involved exclusive rights of possession and use (including the right to exclude and enjoy), reputation and self-ownership, and the use of distribution (including the right to transfer) (Harris, 1993). Most of these IAYA groups were connected to (or “owned by”) schools. As student groups, they were sanctioned by the schools. Students had permission to gather only if a teacher was present. They could only activate with permission. For instance, when Taz was planning her session called “We Don’t All Look Alike,” it was only after the entire group had undergone months of planning and defending their idea multiple times to multiple audiences to have a youth and community-run school day to learn about race and racial justice. Students were mandated to hold formal meetings with groups of parents, teachers, security, student groups, and administrators, in order to gain approval for hosting this event. Students accepted it as normal to be asked to legitimate their work or their continued permission to exist. Administrators or advisors mandated “approval” through official documents, paper trails, and meetings with multiple stakeholders, the same mechanics of legitimation that contributed to forming whiteness in the first place.

To note, multiple levels of permission were the norm at Eastside, a lower socioeconomic status (SES) school with more administrators of color than at Lakeview, who had a higher white demographic, higher SES, and a school with predominantly white administrators at the time. This “required” hoop-jumping was not policy; instead, it was
ambiguous practice used in normed regimes of power and control. Schools benefitted from the labor and knowledge of youth who organized and led activities for tens, hundreds, and thousands of students. Nonetheless, youth received absences for actions, even those held within the walls of the school, if they missed class. At the time, neither youth nor adult mentors pushed harder. We did not realize how legitimating these activities played so deeply into the distraction of racism and kept us from doing deeper anti-racist work. “Whiteness as property, interest conversion, and the critique of liberalism...are especially powerful because through them, researchers are able to uncover and unmask the persistent and oppressive nature of the normativity of Whiteness” (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004, p. 28). It remains essential to examine the oppressive and normative systems that surrounded youth-led activities working toward anti-racist education, especially in schools that “owned” these student groups. Anti-racist youth groups were ridden with the paradox of working towards anti-oppression while steeped in the normalcy of whiteness and other systems of oppression. Despite the fact that they were mostly youth-run, and outside of traditional classes, dominating structures of school controlled use of distribution, including rights to exclude, transfer, and enjoy, which ultimately impacted the critical literacies the groups employed.

**Exclusion.** Whiteness impacted youth activist literacies through acts of exclusion. As prepared as they may have been, the youth groups failed to collectively resist most exclusions or oppressions handed them in school, especially as they needed the school to distribute power and involve them in leadership. Both youth and advisors valued open access to these groups. Bill, an advisor for SpeakUp, spoke about how everyone should be included. In a meeting, he affirmed that “No one is a card-carrying member.” On the
other hand, he still wielded power and maintained the right to exclude students, especially in an effort to preserve himself, his job, and his reputation. After Bill got into a power struggle with Kam, he kicked her out of the group. He worked with administration to exclude her from coming to school on the Race Justice Day that their group had worked for months to plan. The work that adults can be willing to do, in order to push out or exclude students is extraordinary. Bill told other students it was because of her grades, a legitimation technique to create detachment and a false impartiality between him and Kam. Whiteness works as it claims a neutral stance. The group had spoken explicitly about working towards intersectional racial justice and valuing those who were multiply marginalized, including trans students of color. When Kam, Annika, and others deliberated how to retell Jamar Clark’s story to the student body at the sit-in, there was a level of critical language awareness that helped to develop anyone listening or participating in the discussion. Nonetheless, Bill was successful in excluding Kam from the group. The group did not mobilize against her exclusion. They were angry, demonstrated in a salty group chat of emojis supporting Kam, but they also seemed accustomed to existing within the school structure and its rules. They vocalized that they were worried about leverage and the school’s right to self-ownership, that if they pushed too hard, administrators might “pull” the upcoming school-wide Race Justice Day, as some adults had already threatened. Adults in a school system, cushioned by whiteness and power, maintained rights to exclude. This exclusionary act pushed out a talented young transwoman and leader of color from the group; following, she left the school completely. Research on school pushout continues to grow. It flips the frame from student drop out to school pushout and discusses the inequities to particular groups of
students in particular danger of a school-to-prison pipeline, including LGBTQIA youth and trans youth of color (Chmielewski, Belmonte, Fine, & Stoudt, 2016; Snapp, Hoenig, Fields, & Russell, 2015), Indigenous youth (Johnston-Goodstar & VeLure Roholt, 2017; Tuck, 2012); Latinx youth (Luna & Revilla, 2013), Black young women (Morris, 2016), and students in multiple categories (i.e. students of color and those who receive special education services) who are disproportionately suspended (Adams & Meiners, 2014; Meiners, 2011)). What we do not know is how the leadership of these students, their languages and literacies, would continue to impact the literacies and liberation of their classmates if they were able to stay part of the conversation.

Transfer was a property function of whiteness that worked in a more subversive way, but it still kept anti-racist work and multiple literacies at bay. As adults transferred power or authority to youth, they hopped back in at a moment’s notice. Many of the adults at either school, including administrators, shifted responsibility or accountability from doing deep work with race and racism, and they appropriated credit when it was convenient. They maintained power, yet they stepped backwards to avoid wading with youth into difficulty. For instance, as Bill transferred leadership to youth, more than once, he threw up his hands if he did not agree with how things were going. He looked down at his phone or went to make copies to avoid interaction or conflict. Often, he did not stay for the duration of a meeting. Some youth enjoyed their leadership and the autonomy of the groups, as Rose, Tabby, and Snow Leopard all discussed, but at the same time it was stressful, and they wanted more support (discussed further in chapters two and four). I thought in a community-centered spaces that results might be different, but when Mollie Blackburn and Rayan Schey (Blackburn & Schey, 2017) reviewed LGBTIAQQ
curriculum and pedagogy, they too saw the explicit need to have adults and youth share agency in order to access youth literacies. They saw that "adult fears dominated the shape of literacy events in schools” (p. 56). They called on adults and youth to "mutually recognize risk and share agency” (p. 57). If power is transferred to avoid accountability, it can also be shifted to share agency.

In SpeakUp, the transfer of power from Bill to youth exposed that young people were still learning, about pedagogy, about race and racism, and about organizing. Unfortunately, it was also utilized as a “gotcha” moment, as a safeguard against adults who were also learning, but who did not want to assume the vulnerability or risk. It is possible that transfer of power to youth, without support, was a contributing factor to not discussing actionable sociopolitical issues within the IAYA groups, compared to what Bishop (2015) saw in the critical literacies of her study. For SpeakUp at Eastside, they were so busy being busy, trying to meet the demands of adults in order to host events, that they did not often hold dialogic discussions about issues within their group as a whole. With Time 2 Get Real at Lakeview, they had discussed select texts for deep conversations, but they were more likely to discuss oppression than domination. Direct conversations about whiteness could have been fruitful, for instance, but they were generally avoided unless small groups were preparing to teach something. Whiteness as a system of oppression remains underdiscussed, even in anti-racist spaces. Over two years, youth racialized as white in the study explored a trajectory of whiteness topics that included white privilege, white allyship, and being an accomplice, but these were not conversations with the entire interracial group.
Transfer of power to youth was also a reflection of the training of adults. In adult advisory professional development, the curriculum was based on sharing untold histories, but few print texts were used for reading and discussion, with very little writing or text production. Adult advisors in these high school groups were challenged to increase student leadership, so they did not often do the work to select texts, discussion questions, activities, or research. There was minimal group reading and even less written production. Youth espoused that they valued multiple perspectives, but in their large groups, they missed the opportunity for that struggle. They wanted to be “on the same page,” with each other, and advisors did not guide them into discussions with disagreement, as even conscientious teachers can be timid about wading into the racial tensions (Pollock, Deckman, Mira, & Shalaby, 2010). Vacillating levels of honest exchange impacted their conversations, resources, and actions. At times, planning and organizing took the place of dialogue and disagreement.

Finally, the mirage of how power might be transferred or shared between youth and adults was also constructed by the perception of how these groups were similar to, or dissimilar from, school. Perhaps the lack of reading and writing in group was because of the notion (and truth) that youth resisted school, and these groups were supposed to be different than school. Groups represented a struggle against white supremacist systems. However, the misinformed and ahistorical assumption that reading and writing were activities associated with school and with whiteness was not corrected in IAYA group spaces that I heard. For example, one student had said, “White people read, let’s use documentaries.” Some youth responded that creating or using an on-line survey was “doing too much,” even if it was a digital affordance that could have simplified their
work. Adults—nor other students—did not contest nor inform these comments. Literacy is often ahistoricized, especially in school, partly because of a lack of ethnic studies and the knowledge of how intensely literacies are a part of cultural and community growth, liberation, collective organizing, and resistance movements (Lyiscott, 2017; Muhammad, 2015). Under the transfer of power, the potential of anti-racism with multiple literacies was largely kept from youth.

**Enjoyment.** The rights to exclusion and transfer that many adults wielded, normal in schools, impacted group activities, multiple literacies, production of knowledge, and enjoyment in these school-based groups. Who held the right to enjoy multiple and multimodal literacies? As a reminder, much of the data showed that youth enjoyed consuming and sharing texts and knowledge out-of-school and within the political education classes that they taught. Out of school, they reveled in word play, reading, and producing provocative texts. Why not during these school-based groups? Digital tools were regularly denied in schools (including the restriction of phones and the blocking of social media and YouTube), even though they were a main site for sharing counter-narratives and discourse about race, whiteness, and social justice. Youth were not as vulnerable with each other in large groups across contact zones; they did not often share their own counter-narratives. They did not have much experience with participatory methods (even though they aimed to deconstruct hegemonic practices and to amplify horizontal leadership). "Adolescents should be encouraged to see themselves as agentive, capable beings who can learn to resist and counter deficit narratives about their cultures, identities, and literacies” (Kinloch, Burkhad, & Penn, 2017, p. 67). Young people were agents. They readied to resist, and like any of us teaching or organizing, they would have
benefitted from pedagogical guidance and encouragement for participatory methods, co-
theorizing, and identifying issues, like the youth activists in Bishop’s study (2015) and 
like youth activists in this study did outside of school. Even when they taught, in asset-
driven and culturally relevant ways, they could always use more affirmation in order to 
enjoy themselves and believe in themselves more.

Property functions of whiteness, and the lack of critical reflection, limited anti-
racist work and the development and agency of youth in school groups. It excluded 
participation of marginalized youth. It transferred ownership to youth and from youth, 
especially when adults perceived that they were at risk. It served to restrict enjoyment 
and youth-centered literacies when diverse groups of young people were together. 
Nonetheless, youth participated, they grew, and they thrived. They did not limit 
themselves to the narrow view of learning and literacies in school.

**The turn: Connected literacies to dissipate whiteness**

Thus far, the discussion outlined the myriad ways that whiteness sustained itself, 
even in a study about youth doing anti-racist work. So, what is the turn? Scholarship on 
Critical Race Praxis (Stovall, 2009) intentionally implores critical race theories to impact 
practice. Harris’s (1993) scholarship also affected real-life practice as she applied 
whiteness as property to affirmative action. She unpacked ways that affirmative action 
could de-legitimate property interest in whiteness: “Affirmative action begins the 
esential work of rethinking rights, power, equality, race, and property from the 
perspective of those whose access to each of these has been limited by their oppression” 
(p. 1779). Connected literacies may create a similar opportunity, to flourish by valuing
diverse social discourses, multiple literacies, and human lives, while de-legitimating property functions of whiteness in literacy and school.

New and multimodal literacies have rejected the sterile role of whiteness as property regarding the written word. In schools where a literary “canon” can be plated in gold, students read graphic novels voraciously. #Ownvoices and BIPOC authors increasingly break into publishing new literary giants, a threat to replace texts that have loomed to withstand the test of time. Queer of color theorists typically relegated for third year college classes are available in quotes on Tumbr, read and shared by young people. High school students are not being taught critical discourse analysis, yet they screen shot racial microaggressions perpetuated by classmates and build receipts (or references) to support a case to change their circumstance. Young people are crafting lyrics, sculpting beats, donning headphones, and creating musical empires despite music not often being invited into school. A proposal for multimodal literacies is not. For over a decade, researchers have discussed the value in engaging adolescent multimodal practices (Vasudevan, 2006). However, they remain underutilized in the schools.

As seen in literacies of joy and resistance and in critical teaching, social media has provided a public property, of the people, where writing in multiple and blended languages and modes has developed a new cultural capital and authority. Youth have built on each other’s stories, constructing truth across multiple perspectives, critically analyzing multiple layers of discourse, and creating space for love, joy, hope, humor, and healing. Youth critical media production continues to reduce the old regime, to uncloak invisible yet stalwart authorities of whiteness. The schools, the knowledge, and the
literacy are not relegated to one group or one legitimating force. Indeed, through sharing multiple languages and literacies might we be able to get free.

**Untapped potential in out-of-school literacies (Connections and collectives)**

Youth activists produced radical and liberatory texts, but they did so on their own more than in the school-based group. Gordon wrote and sang original music in a band. Kam was a singer, songwriter, performer, including on Soundcloud. Mira and Tabby and others wrote for the school newspaper. Anneka and Sincere wrote. Nebesa and others produced videos. Snow Leopard drew. Yusuf and Amina performed regularly at an Open Mic night. Their activism crossed over into the worlds of this written production and performance. Many of them brought their poetry and their words into activism spaces. They spoke with raw open honesty about hurt, healing, and existence as resistance. Their knowledge production was not part of the in-school groups. It was a side gig, it was not central.

I wonder how school, as a structure of white supremacy, could be toppled by youth production from community, collective, and digital spaces. Even though adults transferred responsibility of group leadership to youth, youth did not act on their self-ownership to identify their issues and mobilize. In their groups, they were under the spell and the structure of the school. Outside of school, they mobilized and did the work. Harris (1993) describes reputation and self-ownership as one of the property values of whiteness:

...[O]ne's labor, "the work of his hands," combined with those things found in the common to form property over which one could exercise ownership, control, and dominion. The idea of self-ownership, then, was particularly fertile ground for the
idea that reputation, as an aspect of identity earned through effort, was similarly property.

Law affirmed whiteness as public reputation and personal property to be protected. Now, however, youth can have control and agency over the production of their hands, in “the common” found on-line and in their collective action. They have taken screen shots and merged with co-signers to legitimate their claims. Like affirmative action, this has not taken away from anyone else’s talent or production. It has affirmed the value of multiple perspectives and creative and collective production. Youth are ready with the work.

3.6 Implications: The work ahead

The possibilities in the literacies of youth activists are as urgent as their work against racial justice and their love for each other. Implications support the work and the hope that youth are already consuming, discussing, performing, and producing. Out-of-school literacies must be blended more intentionally into school, to heighten opportunities for social, connected, multimodal, and critical literacies, and for the lives of youth. As authors in the recent Handbook of Adolescent Literacies (Haddix, Garcia, & Price-Dennis, 2016, p. 34) implore:

It is damaging and counter-productive to maintain false binaries between in- and out-of-school literacy practices and performances. Instead, literacy educators must have at the forefront not only a desire and a primary objective to acknowledge and celebrate the social histories of their students but also be explicit about the ways that their literacy performances and engagements can prepare them for secondary life.
My hope is that we can change the conditions for these literacies to rise, to become more visible. Opportunities for multimodal literacies, like lessons from youth activism that span in and out of school spaces, can increase and impact our learning and our lives.

One implication is for groups to consider how they are intentionally or unintentionally formed, including the individual and collective identities of the group, across multiple perspectives and contact zones, in order to enhance dialogic opportunities for learning and growth. Many of their learning opportunities came when youth were teaching, but their groups were primed for doing and discussing more as well. We can engage youth, for instance, in discussing which sociopolitical issues are crucial to form diverse research collectives and to foster cross-cultural understanding (Torre & Fine, 2006). These opportunities ought to include critically theorizing about whiteness (Matias, 2013; Tanner, 2017) and other dominant oppressions.

Within intentional formation, the preparation, positionality, identity, and work of adults and youth in youth-centered spaces cannot be overstated. With issues of race and whiteness, dialogism remains relevant. Dialogic instruction is "about figuring things out—in class, face-to-face, teacher and students together" (Nystrand, Gamoran, Kachur, & Prendergast, 1997, p. 2). In the words of James Britton, dialogism includes "A struggle to organize . . . thoughts and feelings, to come up with words that . . . shape an understanding" (as cited in Nystrand et al., 1997). A dialogic learning zone (Wells, 1999) deliberately includes multiple perspectives, based on individuals’ and communities’ diverse experiences and relations, with attention given to contradictions and convergences (Enciso & Ryan, 2011, p. 19). Tensions or contradictions “transform conflict and difference into rich zones of collaboration and learning” (Gutiérrez & Stone
Youth and adults together can access critical social theories, in conversation with the lived experience already present in their histories, bodies, and schools.

A second implication is that youth, educators, researchers, and others sit with the connected literacies of youth, to access, learn from, wrestle with, and talk back to critical theories, multimodal texts, and young people themselves. This includes finding ways to think through what is unknown:

When you’re writing, you’re trying to find out something which you don’t know. The whole language of writing for me is finding out what you don’t want to know, what you don’t want to find out. But something forces you to anyway.

(James Baldwin)

In the course of this study, so much was unasked and unexplored, but IAYA were at the verge of that exploration. To talk, to write, to think, needed only an invitation and the conditions to slow down and to proceed together. There is much racial justice work to be done in schools. This must also include digital tools and the assets and possibilities of youth. Korina Jocson (2013) asks educators to consider youth with everything they can imagine:

[B]uilding on each other’s talents, skills and experiences; working together as critical consumers and producers to create new(er) multimodal texts; disrupting dominant notions regarding the way things should be; pushing the field of youth media arts as tech-savvy amateurs/professionals; distributing high-quality multimedia products to reach larger audiences in shaping media culture, history and society. (p. 78-79)
What Jocson writes about young people and media literacies requires that we believe in each other, across age and mode. It requires community, that we learn from each other in order to work together, that we know each other in order to build onto each other, that we create shared purpose in order to thwart dominant systems, and that we value young people not as a separate, socially constructed category of people who will be, but of talented, thoughtful people who are currently contributing to shape our worlds.

A third implication is to consider how young people will change our schools. The social and participatory cultures of youth are equipped to push into the schools, to magnify the purposes of real-word issues relevant in their lives, but not without joy. Quoted throughout activist movements, including by Audre Lorde, Emma Goldman said, “If I can’t dance, I don’t want to be part of your revolution.” We must dance and feel joy in order to be free. On the path to freedom and education liberation, joy is possible, necessary, and cannot be ignored.

The connected literacies of youth leaned on a center and a frame of love and resistance. Youth organized for a day-long school take-over, an act of resistance, a race justice conference for over 1000 students. As they prepared, they developed racial literacy and critical language awareness, getting words right for public messaging. The relevance of writing for a real audience has never been dismissed, and here it is also connected to creating change. Youth tweeted before the event, warning students to not skip this day of school. As youth prepared to lead sessions, they sought multiple sources of knowledge, scouring for literary examples most relevant to their peers. They taught sessions throughout the day, critical literacy lessons about music, identity, race, and
social media. At lunch, and at the end of the day, 40 youth activists gathered in a classroom. They had transformed it from a 9th grade social studies room to an “activist space,” visited by community elders, artists, organizers, and youth from other schools. Youth brought the upbeat emotions from community activism into the classroom. They jumped up and down, hugged each other, recorded and sang, “I believe that we will win! I believe that we will win!” Sharing love and creating joy were necessary and multimodal literacies in social movements, and there was no hesitation to bring it into this renewed school space. They posted photos after the event, sending shout-outs and love to organizers and session leaders. When it was all done, they were not done. They stayed thirsty for knowledge. They hosted an evening for reflection and watched a documentary about the Black Panther Party. And the beat goes on.

In the main findings from this paper, the activist literacies of youth included love and resistance, organizing literacies, critical teaching literacies, and literacies of knowledge. Youth in this study co-constructed working definitions of race through critical and intersectional lenses, racial literacy, and critical language awareness. They accessed multiple digital tools and modes, and they resisted whiteness in digital and organizing space. They marched together and learned together. They yearned for counter-hegemonic discourse and for multiple perspectives, especially in interracial contexts. They wanted conversational sparks, to feel woke, like they were waking up or waking others up to consciousness and action. They were deeply engaged with each other, within a school, and with literacies and issues of the 21st century. The question is not how to engage civically within a system, but how to work collectively within and against a
system, bringing families, communities, joy, literacies, and love into the schools where the youth already are.

Youth are creators and mashers of words and worlds. They will continue to enliven multimodal literacies, connections, and collectives. They will unravel and co-construct new knowledge and newfound truths into existence. We must learn to see the paradoxes in front of us. We must simultaneously move over and support youth as they mobilize. We have the access, the tools, and each other.
CHAPTER 4
RESPONSIVE PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION BESIDE AND BEHIND YOUTH ACTIVISTS

So much is possible when youth lead. During the high school careers of youth within this study, they led walk-outs, sit-ins, conferences, film viewings, and professional development sessions. They met with peers, parents, teachers, administrators, community organizations, school boards, policy makers, and law enforcement. These critically conscious young people were philosophers, teachers, discourse analysts, and sociologists of urban schooling and racial injustice. Being an adult researcher in this youth-centered space necessitated critical, racialized self-reflexivity—both during and after research. Educators, youth workers, and researchers have the opportunity to center and amplify the radical possibilities that youth bring to urban education. There is ongoing critical research about youth-adult partnerships (Mitra, 2009), more prevalent in the field of youth studies than in education. This article focuses on the teetering tensions between my commitment to research and to activism with interracial anti-racist youth activists (IAYA) in two urban schools in the upper Midwest.

In the upcoming sections, I explore the theoretical perspectives that informed this paper, including critical ethnographic methods of participant observer, positionality, and reflexivity. Next, I share design overview for the study as a whole and this paper in particular, asking, ultimately: How did youth position me as a researcher within this study? Then, I explain findings from my data set of self-reflexive memos and its analysis that created a newly developed framework for responsive participant observation (RPO), the approach I took during research. Finally, I apply that framework to a new data set, examining the extent to which I was a responsive participant observer with youth in
digital spaces. I write this with a commitment to young people, as I continue to ask how adults learn to be self-reflexive, with ourselves and with youth, to question our positioning in order to work in solidarity with one another towards justice?

4.1 Theoretical perspectives

My background

Before beginning this research, I was a middle and high school teacher for fifteen years, a white woman in diverse urban schools (with students who mostly identified as Black, bi-racial, and white), actively wrestling with racial inequities in normed systems of whiteness in education. In the public and alternative schools where I taught, youth were hungry to connect to what was relevant to them. My interactions as a teacher and a researcher were guided by critical pedagogy (Freire, 2000) and culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogies (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris & Alim, 2014). I entered this study with a deep belief in young people as knowledge holders and producers. A commitment to humanizing, activist, and public scholarship informed my goals, methods, interpretation, and writing. I situated myself in activist scholarship, valuing "the production of knowledge and pedagogical practices through active engagements with, and in service of, progressive social movements" (Sudbury & Okazawa-Rey, 2015, p.3). I was involved with overlapping groups of young people as an organizer and supporter of local social movements. Taking an activist stance in research meshed with my commitment as a community organizer, but what else did it entail? How would I need to be regularly reflexive and increasingly conscious of my biases and what I could not see?

An activist stance

My experience in education and activism, bolstered by readings of critical race
theory (CRT) and scholars of color, led me to constantly consider race, intersectionality, and identity; to privilege experiential knowledge and multiple perspectives; and to maintain an active commitment to racial and social justice (Crenshaw, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Dixon & Rousseau, 2006; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Sleeter & Bernal, 2004; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). The ethics and actions of participatory research (Cammarota & Fine, 2010; Lincoln & González, 2008; Paris & Winn, 2013) centered participant needs. Research was done “with and not on or about youth participants as a way to learn from, collaborate with, and center the narratives of young people in educational projects” (Paris & Alim, 2014, p. 22). As I aimed to do critical inquiry with communities, “in solidarity with others” (Campano, Ghiso, Rusoja, Player, & Schwab, 2016, p. 51), critical, activist scholarship served more as an ethical framework than methodological prescription. This ethical guide had its challenges because I prioritized activities of youth groups ahead of research. In what ways would I be first with youth, setting aside research in deference to young people’s needs and sacred spaces of protest (Yang & Tuck, 2014)? What type of activities did I deem as “research,” and when did I unintentionally omit research because I was a participant? When was my advocacy for youth a threat to being permitted to research? Having neither a paved nor predictable path, I navigated with youth and racial justice as my compass, conscious of my white body in interracial but mostly youth of color-led spaces.

**Concepts from critical ethnography, enacted by activist scholarship**

Activist research necessitates an entanglement of commitments: to participants, their communities, and their goals; to the research; and to critical self-examination. Participant observation, positionality, and reflexivity function simultaneously as methods
of research and a theoretical frame. The role of researcher can be directly answerable to participants: “[P]articipants exercised power, pushed forward their agendas, and reconstructed, debated, and assigned identities to me” (Giampapa, 2011, p.133). Participant-guided research may not be norm, but it could be (see Appendix B, as I needed to respond to a school district’s initial request for me to be a neutral and passive observer). A researcher committed to decolonizing or humanizing research should be “led by the members of the community and does not presume to be a leader or have any power that he or she can relinquish” (Denzin, 2003, p. 243). In critical scholarship, participants need to understand a researcher’s ideologies, vulnerabilities, and commitments, especially for a white researcher in race-centered work.

*Participant observation* (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992) is the engaged role of a researcher and a method or activity of data collection, and is often a beginning step in ethnographic research (Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999). Some describe “observer as participant” as the most ethical stance, whereby a researcher’s activities are transparent (Gold, 1958) and lead to informed and trustworthy interviews. However, a participant observer’s role is not easily defined. John Van Maanen calls it the “double-edged notion of participant observation…less a definition for a method than it is an amorphous representation of the researcher’s situation during a study” (2011, p. 3). Participant observation offers opportunities for a researcher to share of herself and to be useful: to share time, questions, knowledge, resources, and a capacity to advocate (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005; Madison, 2005); to theorize or to story together (San Pedro & Kinloch, 2017); to act in solidarity as an accomplice or to accompany the group (Glesne, 2015). The frame of accompanying participants also disrupts the power dynamic
between researcher and participants—and the socially constructed power dynamic between adults and youth.

Researchers have had complex relationships as participant observers, shown in examples from critical ethnographies in education. Education ethnographer Bic Ngo wrote about the *Unresolved Identities* (2010) of Lao American high school youth as they challenged the meanings of “immigrant” and “urban” within the discourses of their lives. She theorized about the blurred boundaries she experienced as participant observer, including with her own immigrant roots and her relationships with participants as researcher-confidante-friend or researcher-mentor-friend. Hers was a dialectical and shifting researcher identity: “Because identity is discursively constituted by ourselves as well as others, how we position ourselves (e.g. as a researcher) and how others position us (e.g., as a friend, confidante) may collide and conflict” (Ngo, 2010, p. 122). Similarly, Keisha Green (2014) introduced the concept of double dutch methodology (DDM), an embodied way that she conceptualized research with urban youth of Color, blurring roles of participation. Built from the foundational blocks of Lave and Wenger’s (1998) legitimate peripheral participation (LPP) and the work of Paris and Winn (2014) that focused on humanizing relationships that matter to participants, Green wrote: “A DDM is concerned with privileging the everyday interactions, voices, and experiences of the participants” (p. 149). This ethnographic stance was complex as I, too, needed to determine levels of engagement. When should I watch others as they jump rope, when should I hold the ropes, and how would I hop in when invited? I took cues from the youth, for instance, from their eye contact and from their group chat. I anticipated missing my timing, getting tangled up, and being honest with the mess.
Positionality is a researcher’s political stance represented in all phases of research. Community-engaged literacy scholars Campano, Ghiso, and Welch (2015) discussed positionality and the actions of researchers with regard to ethics, relationships, and power. They emphasized that researchers should benefit their participant community and be “public, transparent, collaborative, and creative” (p. 38) about research. Michelle Fine (1994) identified positionality in qualitative ethnographic research as presenting itself in three main ways: as ventriloquist, as “voices,” or as activist. As ventriloquist, an ethnographer aims to be observer-only and nonexistent (which Fine troubles the most, pushing researchers toward social action and away from colonizing and othering); As “voices,” participant voices carry localized meaning and “experiences that are in opposition to dominant discourses and practices,” but interpretation does not include reflexivity from the ethnographer herself; and as activist, “in which the ethnographer takes a clear position in intervening on hegemonic practices and serves as an advocate in exposing the material effects of marginalized locations while offering alternatives” (Fine, 1994, p. 17). Of these, I chose to take a political stance as an activist scholar and used my position to intervene, aiming to center or elevate the leadership, experiences, and voices of youth and their goals for racial justice.

Positionality cannot help but be conflated with one’s identity, especially within a racialized society. A researcher’s activist positionality must be aware of one’s identities, interactions, and power, including race/ethnicity, gender, language, social class, immigrant status, sexuality, nationality, age, dis/ability, education level, and employment. Urban education scholar Rich Milner (2007) stressed the importance of racial and cultural awareness of self in conducting education research: “Researchers’ multiple and varied
positions, roles, and identities are intricately and inextricably embedded in the process and outcomes of education research” (p. 389). Positionality as an activist scholar incorporates an intervening stance and identity-based reflexivity, discussed further in the next section.

Reflexivity is a method or tool used to validate and question qualitative research practices (Pillow, 2003). Critical ethnographic, indigenous, and community-engaged researchers have recognized an ethnical need for reflexivity in decolonizing and humanizing research (Lozenski, 2014; Smith, 2012). Cannella and Lincoln (2007) have called on researchers to be reflexive and transparent about ethical struggles, to be in methodological collaboration and conversation with community partners, and to learn from the dialogue. Researcher actions and non-actions, within hegemonic discourses in urban schools, require regular interrogation. Paying attention to identity and interaction is a necessary part of reflexivity. For instance, Michelle Fine (1994), Patti Lather (1986), Kathy Schultz (1997), and others (Fine, Weis, Powell, & Wong, 1997) have examined “whiteness” within their own positionality. White women are the major teacher demographic in U.S. schools. Many white teachers aim for a colorblind, or color evasive, ideology, trying to avoid racism by avoiding race and, as a result, denying the lived experience(s) of many youth of Color (Solomona, Portelli, Daniel, & Campbell, 2005). Instead, teachers or researchers across racial groups, and including white women, need to engage in race-conscious activities and research. As Watson and Scranton (2001) have emphasized: "Those who hold a central position in the dominant discourse have a responsibility to engage in critical, reflexive research to support both theoretical and
political change” (as cited in Trusell, 2014, p. 275). Reflexivity must also be racialized, including or particularly applying to white researchers in urban education.

How does reflexivity happen? Reading (and citing) research from critical scholars of color is a continual touchstone of reflexivity and learning, especially as a white researcher. During research, reflexivity can happen in the moment, as acts of self-consciousness or premeditated self-reflection, in addition to habits like writing self-reflexive memos (Foley, 2002), triangulating data with interviews, and holding member checks. During writing and production, there is space for reflexivity as well. These practices may be designed to get more data, but more importantly, participant engagement contributes to the construction of knowledge. Critical ethnographer Doug Foley (2010) wrote that he aimed to “become much more reflexive about all ethnographic practices, from field relations and interpretive practices to producing texts” (p. 473). He intended to make his research “more personal and reflexive and thus more open, accessible, and public” (p. 481). In these ways, reflexivity in research can also contribute to public scholarship.

In my study, reflexivity was continual and unescapably connected to my identity, my positionality or stance, and my actions—or inactions—as a participant observer. My multiple identities were shifting and layered: critical researcher, adult, activist, youth advocate, ally, accomplice, university representative, and white woman, including the role of an “interchangeable white lady” (Teague, 2016). Like any racialized being, it was relevant to consider how people perceived me, not only how I perceived myself.

4.2 Design Overview

Context, Participants, and Data Sources
At the time of this study, the anti-racist youth leadership groups I observed were in their second year as student organizations in their respective urban high schools. I gained entry because I was part of a network of anti-racist educators who advised these groups. My overarching research questions were about the literacies and learning within those groups, questions the youth and advisors were interested in as well. However, the district initially declined my proposal, citing a need for me to be an “observer-only” for viable research. I had to contest that notion (see Appendix A); arguing that no interracial anti-racist group in a school needed a white woman acting only in observer-mode to surveil their actions.

Though IRB had been eventually approved with school districts, I did not record research until the young people, in consensus, had the opportunity to vet me, to approve the study, and to collectively and individually give assent. I introduced myself weekly in group meetings, to remind participants about the research and to be transparent with new participants. Keeping with the ethics of engaged research, my participation and method of data collection was negotiated at each site, with each situation, and with each participant (Rogers, Winters, Perry, & LaMonde, 2015). The questions about my interaction in research drove the research questions for this paper: What were the roles, responsibilities, and opportunities to work within a community of interracial youth towards racial justice? How did I interact with youth in the study, how did they position me, and how was I self-reflexive in the process?

Over 50 high school students gave ongoing assent to participate in this study, from diverse racial, ethnic, religious, and linguistic groups, ranging and shifting on gender and sexuality continua. Students identified as African American, Black, African,
Afro-Latinx, Latinx, Eritrean, Oromo, Somali, Asian or Asian Pacific Islander (API), Filipinx, Hmong, White, Arab, Jewish, White-passing, bi-racial, multi-racial, and as students of color. Black, POC (people of color), and white were their most commonly referenced terms. Many students of color had at least one immigrant parent. Because it was an ethnographic study, and not one where I was actively intervening through research, parents were sent information forms home for passive consent but gave active consent for any videotaping in schools. Anyone could deny participation at any time.

Data sources included field notes, audio recordings, interviews, self-reflexive narrative memos, and artifacts from youth teaching, online documents, and group chats. I spent six months with youth in the schools, followed by digital connectivity and social justice event-based organizing for two years. Groups organized school-based racial justice events, including conferences, sit-ins, and walk-outs. Being a participant observer was challenging. After meetings, instead of ducking around the corner, or to a car, office, or library to write, I kept hanging out. Informal spaces and “in between” times offered dialogic conversations, authentic literacies, and opportunities for building trust. Upon returning home, instead of spending hours typing notes, I remained digitally present with young people via social media, as much of their planning occurred in group chats or online Google docs. Being in synchronous digital spaces was a big learning curve for me as a participant observer. Social media was an effective field for sharing knowledge, questions, problems, ideas, disagreements, and joy. It was also inundating. I participated on social media, but I did not take notes after those interactions. I did, however, review previous jottings and listened to audio in order to complete field notes. Analytic and self-reflexive memos were ongoing, including in a voice-to-text option on my phone. For this
article, I systematically reviewed over 90 self-reflexive memos, inductively coded and created themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006), and examined patterns specific to sensitizing concepts (Bowen, 2006) of researcher positionality, participant observation, reflexivity, and reciprocity. I studied data connected to salient events from the memos, in order to raise up multiple sources of evidence (Yin, 2003) that were part of the story.

Youth had urgent goals in fighting against racial injustice in the schools and the community. Groups co-constructed mission statements, posted in schools and on social media home pages. These statements were a road map for my commitment. They included: “having continuous conversations about race, identity, racism, and injustices that students face…including Islamophobia and xenophobia”; “organizing actions to promote racial and intersectional awareness in our community”; and “dismantling white supremacy through education” (field notes, 2016). I was engaged with these communities and therefore accountable to these goals.

At the time of the study, youth were not focused on research, but on activism and political education. My notebook, computer, audio recorder, and a school sticker nametag reminded youth of my outside role or prompted them to ask, “What’s that for?” Sometimes youth read my notes, listened to recordings, or even leaned into the recorder to repeat something salient, salty, or explicitly connected to literacy. Youth contributed their own artifacts, including photography, lesson plans, and surveys. As a connected ethnographic study, my research spread across schools as well as community spaces, school-based protests, off-site retreats, and digital spaces. I also spent time with youth—as well as some of their parents, friends, and community members—participating in community-based activism and protests. Relationships developed or sustained in
community activism were relevant, but I held those spaces sacred and outside the bounds of “doing” research. I did not collect data when participating in community activism, even if youth participants were present.

4.3 Data and findings: A framework for responsive participant observers

A freshly designed framework for responsive participant observation (RPO) (see Appendix C) represents findings from analyzing self-reflexive memos and correlating data. The RPO framework is critical, dynamic, spatial, and reflexive. It pays attention to power, space, and purpose. Youth guided me to participate in three main ways. First, and most frequently, I was with them (or to them, I would say, “with you”). I was a listener or a resource, working with them towards a common goal. In the “With you” section, I included examples of with-ness and reciprocity throughout the study, ending with a moment in which a student wanted me with her, but I was not. Second, when youth were leading, I was benched and at the ready. In the “Benched and ready” section, I shared a story of my engagement and pedagogical participation at a sit-in. Third, when other adults were around, I sometimes made moves to block and open for youth to lead. I had to pay attention to power; I intervened, as needed or requested, to create openings for youth. An intervention in which I blocked and opened for youth took place at a school-wide Race Justice conference. This RPO framework showed how my role as a participant observer was responsive as it shifted and layered over itself. My engagement was fluid, cognizant both of power and youth potential. I needed critically conscious field vision, to scan the situation, to read the players, and to know their goals. This analysis prompted me to ask: What interactions worked to support youth, and how did I fail? Applied, how can adults be better at supporting diverse youth and anti-racist youth leadership?
With you

The theme of being “with” youth was the most important position of my role as responsive participant observer. This idea of “with-ness” has been developed by many scholars, including Freire (2000), who theorized the importance of learning with students-as-teachers, critical of domination and oppression. A commitment to “bearing with-ness” (Fine, 2016) has centered researching with (not on), communities, within humanizing, participatory, and public scholarship. Education scholar activist Cindy Cruz, using feminist and queer of Color theory, has written about building “with” students, citing the potential for “teachers as critical, coalition-building agents of social change” (Cruz, 2016, p. 16). In her subsequent 2017 speech at the American Educational Research Association, she referenced the sport of women’s rugby as a coalitional space. In rugby, support is essential to play, represented in a repeated phrase whereby players yell “with you” to signal their support. As a woman’s rugby player myself, I resonated with this phrase and the partnership it implied, on and off the pitch. Cruz also wrote about being “with you” in education:

…[R]elation [is] necessary to build coalition, or simply to build relationships with your students and their families that are not based on dominating them…Building relations that are “with you” require the participants to think about a relation that is horizontal, non-hierarchical, non-imperialist in the midst of all this difference (2016, p. 15).

My own experience of being “with you” shifted based on the needs of each school-based group I engaged with. At Eastside High, I was more of an insider, co-counsel, advisor, or mentor. I offered suggestions during meetings and participated in
group chats. At Lakeview High, I was more of an outsider and a resource, offering counsel to advisors or youth outside of meetings or events. In both spaces, I reviewed surveys and meeting plans; I helped take notes or co-plan curriculum, programs, or retreats. I aimed to be a “member of the community formed for a purpose that transcends the research” (Kinloch, Larson, Orellana, & Lewis, 2016, p.15). It was most important that youth goals in the fight for racial justice in the schools were realized, so my interaction was based on youth need over any pre-meditated research plan. Yet throughout all this, I was still a researcher; our exchanges could contribute to data collection and to reciprocity.

One way I worked to build with-ness was through reciprocity. Researchers should have skills or services to offer the communities with whom they work. When some young people introduced me, they said, “Abby’s the plug,” a term that meant I was willing to offer services or resources. It was an indicator that we had a reciprocal relationship. Reciprocity with youth was not complicated. It was about paying attention and being proactive, sometimes to mundane things. In the data, I marked the following examples as reciprocity: Before a conference, I connected youth with community members to contribute to their efforts; I found and replaced white board markers that I noticed had gone dry; I asked about what hashtags they wanted to use for social media promotion, literacies already common in their practice but perhaps forgotten in the moment; once in a while I brought candy or cold press; I worked late at night with youth on shared Google documents, creating plans, surveys, or presentations; students asked me to serve as a job reference or to share a GoFundMe page. One participant texted me to pick up toothbrushes and deodorant after he was released from an overnight in juvenile detention.
after a protest-related arrest. To name these actions as reciprocity was too simple; we were working with each other for racial justice, honoring relationships over research.

Sincere (a pseudonym) was a high schooler, a bi-racial Black woman, a spoken word artist, and a youth educator who I met during this work. We became colleagues and talked about our connection as “not dominating, but a reciprocal relationship” (interview, 2017). We had ongoing conversations, theorizing and interpreting data together. In a recent interview/conversation, Sincere evaluated this RPO framework and co-signed, or agreed with, the “with you” concept. She also openly critiqued a specific time that I wasn’t “with her” as she needed me to be. There was a traumatic event (too much to address in this paper) where she needed me to be with her, to listen to her, and to put any teachable moments aside. My mix of listening and attempting to offer another perspective was not what she needed at the time. Reflecting back, she wanted me to say, “I’m with you.” And that would have been enough. Sincere valued the perspectives that some adult mentors/elders offered; she named those multiple perspectives as markers for her own growth. In specific times surrounded by trauma, however, she didn’t need another lesson—in the moment, she just needed me.

**Benched and ready**

The first position in this RPO framework took a political stance in solidarity with young people and people of color. The second position in this responsive framework was that of being *benched and ready*. I rode the bench as an active observer, as young people took the lead in their school or community. In the following example, I was benched and ready at a school-based sit-in. Before going to school that day, I was unsure about my role; I had to wait and read signals from the youth and the situation in the moment.
I sat beside and behind over 200 high school students in chairs, on benches, and atop tables across a multi-purpose gathering space. The rounded edge of a long, grey lunch table pressed against my back. Many students were dressed in Black, prompted by a “#Blackout” tweet the night before. This was a sit-in; student leaders repeated a notice from administration that students would receive unexcused absences for missing class.

Students gathered in somewhat segregated groupings—including White, Black, Latinx, Asian, Black Muslim, POC, and LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender/gender expansive, and queer) youth. Surrounding the youth, white staff worked, gazed, walked, and joked; business as usual. Three Black men, deans, and behavioral support staff, peered from atop nearby stairs. Two white male construction workers were drilling holes in some new construction. I was the only adult seated. Student-made signs were posted on walls, informing the rationale behind this four hour sit-in. One read:

Two police arrived at the scene of an ambulance call, and 61 seconds later they shot Jamar Clark in the back of the head. Over spring break, the city failed to indict the two officers in the murder of Jamar Clark. In this city, every person killed by PD in the past 10 years has been a person of color. (youth-produced artifact, April 2016)

The district attendance boundaries for this school stretched throughout neighborhoods that were segregated by race and by class. In two years, there were two police killings in two different neighborhoods. School was one place where they shared space. Students said they decided to hold this action in school because they wanted relevant conversations in classrooms, but they were not happening there. Youth wanted to process, question, and heal together. An interracial group of youth leaders stood in front
of a drop-down projector screen. They gave short speeches, read local media posts from their phones, and facilitated conversations with a digital presentation.

Max (all names are pseudonyms) was a focal member in this study. He was a cisgender young man and a high school activist who identified as white (based on how he thought others saw him) or bi-racial (based on how he saw himself, with a white mother and a Black father). He walked over and sat next to me on the cafeteria bench. We sat next to each other for 18 minutes of complete silence, representing the 18 days of the precinct occupation after that fatal police shooting. After the silence, I thumb-jotted in the notes section of my phone and passed it to him: “I will be listener only unless any of you students direct me otherwise within small groups.” He typed back, “ok” (field notes, 2016).

That day I was an observer, but I was at the ready; I hung outside of white or interracial circles, trying to respect youth space and their need to process without adults. I did not insert my white self near POC-only groups; it was important to “know when to get out of the way” (Meiners, 2016). In memos, I wrote about how commonly accepted/unchallenged my white woman body was in school spaces. I wondered silently, as youth did aloud, why other teachers were not there to support, to listen, or to learn. I learned to be benched in youth-only spaces. There were plenty of times they did not need my participation, not as a white woman nor as an adult. Nonetheless, they shared their appreciation for me being present and ready. They gave me directions to come off the bench, based on their needs. Throughout the 4.5 hours of Lakeview’s sit-in, Max checked with me about pedagogical decisions regarding sound, space, and groupings, as well as ideas about camera angles for digital publication. As I was benched, I was intentionally at
the “ready” in person, by text, by direct message, and on social media feeds. During transitions I helped to move tables, and a few of us shared stories with each other about our experiences during the police precinct occupation. Throughout the study, it was a challenge to know when to share my own stories, and when to remain silent and simply listen to others. It was important to story and to humanize myself (San Pedro & Kinloch, 2017), but I was cautious about re-centering whiteness and adultness in youth-centered space.

Being benched and ready, I was more observer than participant. Sincere talked about this “ready” position as significant because it allowed “youth to be leaders” (interview, 2017). I did not need to lead, and it was not better if I did. Being benched and ready coincided with the “with you” position, and it shifted swiftly to intervening as needed.

**Blocking and opening**

*Blocking and opening* was the third position in this RPO framework. It is an intervention, an active movement to pivot power away from authority and back to youth. Educators and researchers have a responsibility to interrupt and to deny deficit discourses that underestimate urban youth and students of Color (Utt & Tuchluk, 2016), to reconceptualize and advocate for youth as literacy consumers and producers, co-creators of knowledge, and civic agents of change (Purcell-Gates, 2007). Examples of blocking and opening happened commonly in group meetings if an adult took up a lot of space. It also occurred at Race Justice Day, a youth-organized, school-wide conference for 1,200 students during a regular school day. In this story I was called to intervene: to block and to open.
I did not usually wear my university name tag (to lessen any perception of hierarchy, I preferred the less formal and more common visitor sticker), but at Race Justice Day, I wore it. I was observing in one classroom when I got a text message: “idk if you saw Hawa’s message but she said she needs your help” (personal communication, spring 2016). I headed downstairs to Hawa and Yusuf’s session, “Internalized and Institutionalized Racism.” A tall, older white male math teacher was standing outside the classroom with the two student facilitators, both Somali students, and all three were looking around or down at the ground, frustrated. The session time had just started. The song selection for an analysis activity bothered this teacher, so he pulled Hawa and Yusuf outside of the room: “I don’t allow this type of music to be played in my classroom” (field notes, spring 2016). As I approached, he glanced down at my 5’2” sturdy frame and my university name tag. I introduced myself and shared that I was there supporting the youth. I explained that Hawa and Yusuf had a specific plan for critical literacy within their session. I asked him to engage with the class as a learner, to bring up his questions and concerns within the session (instead of blocking their instruction). I interpreted that my position as a white, middle-aged adult with a university identity helped this conversation to take place. A flurry of group chat messages resulted in another white male teacher coming to the room—an ally to the youth group. He sat down in the back of the class, modeling his role as a learner, the session restarted, and I left to head to another room. My goal was to block the interjections and objections of the first teacher and open the agency back to the youth, so that their lesson could continue.

Even though these students had permission to lead, the white male licensed teacher had no issue interrupting their lesson, asserting his authority “in my classroom.”
Students called me off the bench to intervene. My intervention responded to an explicit request from youth (often intervening was in response to reading a subtler situation). Interrupting is not usually valued in a conversation, nor in research, but disrupting power is vital in social justice work (Kinloch, 2018). It was often challenging for youth to interrupt or block people in positions of power. Hawa and Yusuf called in adult reinforcements to help them to do the work that they set out to do. Here I was guided by youth directly, so this intervention was not a difficult choice. I treaded firmly yet gently, as their work, not mine, was at risk. The power of being a teacher of record could still, likely, shut down a classroom. Barbara Dennis encourages ethnographers who may doubt the necessity or success of intervening to “Do it anyway—aren’t we always intervening?” (2009, p. 136). In multiple ways, my presence was a constant intervention. At the close of that day, Hawa and Yusuf reflected to the group, flabbergasted, that the math teacher approached them afterwards, thanked them, and told them how much he learned. This type of intervention allowed youth to do the work they had set out to do.

**RPO Framework and moving forward**

Throughout each of those dynamic positions, the goals and actions of youth were at the center of my decision-making: to be with them, to be benched and ready, and to block and open for their work. I tried to read their needs while considering how I could be least intrusive and most humanizing. At multiple points in the study, I conferred with youth to interrogate, validate, or change my interactions and interpretations. When I met with Sincere about an initial iteration of the framework, she highlighted the unique value of relationships with adults willing to act as I had (interview, 2017):
We don't get that kind of support. This is like a sub-level of support that not a lot of people talk about. Being with somebody, and being there for them, and being able to step out in front of somebody, and step out on the line for somebody, that's what's important for me. That trust aspect binds it, so well.

I was more confident in the usefulness of the framework after Sincere critiqued it, shared examples of her own, and emphasized how much trust was a part of the framework. Sincere reflected on our relationship over the past two years. She and a few others had named me an auntie/older sister; others saw me as a mom/mentor—bonds I valued as well. Her words also served as a warning. We had developed a trusting relationship, but I did not have the same type of relationship with every youth connected to the study. What might that mean, ethically and in humanizing ways, with data analysis and representation?

As I learned more about the framework from Sincere, I wanted to use it with another data set within the study. I was hesitant with what my role should be interacting with participants in digital spaces. I had not initially thought about taking self-reflexive memos after online interactions, but after my talks with Sincere I decided to apply the RPO framework to my interaction with youth via social media.

4.4 Framework applied: RPO in social media

The responsive participant observation framework I described in preceding sections illustrates researcher positions gleaned from a self-reflexive, ethnographic data set in conversation with correlating events. I wondered, however, how would it stand up within a narrower data set? How might a new layer of analysis critique or push the framework? How I positioned myself in digital spaces was an ongoing challenge, which

158
is why I wanted to examine this participation. Digital documents, group chats, and public social media comprised the bulk of digital artifacts and interactions from the youth groups. The expansive use of digital and social media literacies was highly relevant to youth and activist literacies as well (Jenkins, Shresthova, Gamber-Thompson, Kligler-Vilenchik, & Zimmerman, 2016).

In this section, I apply the RPO framework of with, benched/ready, and block & open to interactions between youth and myself in digital space. Examples came from re-reading the self-reflexive memos, group chats, and shared digital documents, using the framework in the second reading as well as open coding for what did not fit inside the frame. Youth invited me to join them on social media and Google documents. We co-constructed digital documents and lesson plans; I was “with” them, listening and offering questions or resources. They added me to group chats; I needed to be with them and benched at the same time. I was conflicted; I could not be observer only, conscious of both white gaze and adult surveillance. Youth might forget my researcher presence, which could risk ethical consent. When I got off the bench, sometimes I wrote too much and too fast, shifting their agency. The intervening position of blocking and opening was different in digital spaces because often these spaces were already youth-only. Instead, my role focused more on inviting multiple perspectives. In addition, youth relied on me to intervene in a different way; I used social media to link youth with others and to legitimate, amplify, support, and boost youth action.

**With you**

With digital tools, I needed to be “with” youth in ways that they directed; I was not in charge and it was not always comfortable. When I first met a group at Lakeview
High, I was asked by one student, a Black anti-racist youth leader, to meet and coach a group of white students preparing for a “White Ally” workshop. He wanted to introduce me to the group in a chat, so he started to type on his phone. He decided quickly that he was “doing too much” (field notes, February 2016). He rethought his options and handed me his phone. “Introduce yourself,” he told me. I sent a short video to their group chat (to both white and POC students). In a self-reflexive note, I wrote:

Sending them that video felt weird! It also felt important to do, as now I was the one on the other end of the video camera. I think that some of the work to decolonize research is not only to have participatory research, but also for researchers to be part of the study, to be viewed, evaluated, analyzed, and to not know where that video will show up. For instance, today I caught a glimpse of my face on someone’s phone. (field note, 2.22.2016)

Youth have thick understandings of the affordances of multiple literacies and technologies. I needed to learn to get comfortable being “with” students in this way, where I was a subject and a participant too.

**With you, ready, and benched**

On social media, I was benched; mostly, I was an observer. As youth added me to their accounts, I paid attention to the posts that reflected actions or commentary in line with youth activist goals and events. I gently interacted, “liking” posts. I was a reader. On Twitter, tweets rained down about *wypipo/wipipo/yt ppl/white ppl*. “Whiteness” was a pervasive concept in the study, percolating in side comments and in Twitter posts, in constant working theory. For instance, Charrise was a Black feminist youth who tweeted
about the paradox of white people who say one thing and do another: “White ppl who say they are the good whites™ but hang out with racist white ppl. Whd??” Warnings that came from Charrise were a constant curriculum for critical whiteness studies and they motivated me to keep investigating my own racialized self. Youth of color discourse about whiteness in social media was a space for my own learning. I was benched, and tweets were a window to question myself and to apply those lessons as I continued to learn.

In group chats, my role was different. I was benched and I was a participant. It was challenging to navigate my interaction in what was otherwise a youth-only space. I jumped in too soon, like when one does not leave enough wait time in classrooms, conversations, or interviews. Group action was mostly synchronous; any five youth were available at a given time, and I was available nearly all of the time (I didn’t have teachers or employers, for instance, telling me to put my phone away), so I learned—slowly—not to respond all the time, or mine would have been a prevailing “voice.” I made mistakes. I watched as the group chat scrolled; I sucked my teeth when I typed something that shifted, or worse, halted, the trajectory of a chat. Digitally, I had to pay a new kind of attention to context and discourses including: the thread prior, time between entries, and who was online. Real-life context across multiple levels of discourse played a role in the tone or content of group chats: the time of day, school activities, social events, activism in the community, current events, and social justice anniversaries on a national or global scale. Students were hyper-aware of their own interaction and identity on group chat platforms; their participation shifted dramatically depending on the group members. These were nuances of critically conscious group chat “netiquette” that I needed to learn.
Youth did not explicitly instruct my movement. I had to interpret their responses, reflect, and learn from my mistakes. In addition, even though I participated on social media throughout the study, it was a mash-up of building relationships and communicating more than research. I viewed those interactions as “ordinary,” so I did not take field notes or self-reflexive memos, which in retrospect I could have. My interactions with youth online was just as prevalent, and also required introspection, as face-to-face.

**Block and open**

Youth planned their actions in person, or they used different digital platforms to communicate with each other to strategize. In a group chat, I was the only adult. I was not there to block anyone, but one of my roles was to offer perspectives, to prepare youth who might later be blocked by adults. I helped them to strategize questions to ask adult gatekeepers who had been postponing a decision to host Race Justice Day; they were in a constant uphill battle with administration. In the example below, students imagined a future conversation with their principal, Mr. Camacho (extended group chat represented in Appendix D):

Abby: If for some crazy reason Camacho says not this year, what is your next question to him?

Gordon: Why not? Or when next year?

Nebesa: how [sic] will it be different if we wait to have it next year?

Abby: (Keep asking potential questions to ask Camacho)

In my prompts, I tried to “open” the conversation for youth to consider multiple perspectives to further their goals. I typically entered group chats through asking questions or making comments in parenthesis; these were intentional moves to de-center
or make myself smaller without being invisible. My role in “youth only” groups (online or in person) surprised me; my participation was more welcome than in some other settings. I learned through observations, conversations, and their commentary on social media that they valued time to consult and to organize:

Help the youth, Listen to the youth, trust the youth / More than often do my peers and I feel lost and hopefuls because of the lack of trustworthiness from adults. / Be that inspiration you needed when you were in high school and younger! (February 21, 2018, youth on Twitter)

They yearned for supportive adults who they could trust, who worked beside or behind them.

**A new position: Linking, boosting, and amplifying**

As I analyzed digital interactions, specific to the context of social media and youth activists, a new position emerged from the original framework. Initially, I worried about preserving the anonymity of participants, about how my participation could create unintended negative consequences for youth. However, as I soon came to see, youth were capable of valuing their work and their creative and intellectual property; they were hyper-aware of appropriation and adults who co-opted their actions. Youth activists instead wanted connections, support, and amplification on social media. Recognizing this, I tweeted, retweeted, or shared youth actions, maintaining an interactive yet unobtrusive presence, with the goal to increase participation or awareness of their events. On occasion, I responded to a direct question, to link youth to scholars of color or other resources when they asked for it. In these, and other ways I detail in the following section, I was called to link, boost, or amplify youth and/or their actions, to stand on a
virtual bench with a sign in the air.

If students asked me for photos, I sent them via direct message, so that they could post on social media via their accounts if they wanted, instead of posting them myself. I did not need the capital or credit of authorship. One student used a photo for a school newspaper article about a racial justice event. I asked her to leave out my name, but she said, “It’s just more professional if we use a name.” I acquiesced. The youth were in charge.

![Figure 9. Eastside Race Justice Day, 2016.](image)

All interaction online came with ethnical concern, whether I was interacting and “with them,” observing, blocking, or boosting. I was wary about my presence. Could I
disrupt the status quo of invisible researcher while maintaining a de-centeredness in youth space? My decisions were guided by youth, including listening to how they discussed ethics and norms of social media. I maintained online interaction in running feeds or with hashtagged events, not as a lurker (Anneka and others processed viewing or creeping on individual timelines as “lurking,” an activity that was secretive or quasi-unethical, like eavesdropping, so though I took screenshots, I did not go back to lurk on timelines). My most driving guide continued to be connected to the mission of racial justice that we shared.

4.5 Conclusion

Limitations

Systematic analysis of self-reflexive memos helped me to understand more about my role as an adult accomplice (or co-conspirator), a white woman, and a researcher with youth. Listening to audio was another honest reflection of ways in which I did too much—when I talked too much, asked too much, interrupted too much—and when I did not do enough of being with, benched and ready, or blocking and opening. Though a discussion of all these mistakes is beyond the scope of this paper, they still afforded me continual learning to examine the effectiveness of being a responsive participant observer.

Throughout research, I had to contend with the conflict between the goals of the youth and of my own research. Though in small ways I reminded youth about the research process (i.e., asking permission to use an audio recorder), in their eyes my main role was still to support them. While later sharing my data analysis, I learned that some of them had forgotten they were part of research, or they could not remember the purpose of
the research. One student questioned, critically, how I would represent them? With his request, I realized that no matter how I aimed to be “with” them during data collection, I was still an authorizer and someone who represented the data. As Patti Lather bids of fellow researchers, “Let’s not fool ourselves. Just because we’re deconstructing doesn’t mean we’re also not authorizing, constructing something in power” (2012, p.104). When Sincere commented on the RPO framework, she affirmed its relevance, but there were still other perspectives missing. Youth did not select and analyze this data, I did. Thus, limitations in this paper point to possibilities in future research, including critical participatory youth-based research about the role of adults (and our identities) with youth in face-to-face and digital space.

**How do we continue together?**

Critical and activist researchers have a commitment to honor and build relationships with the communities with whom we work. Relationships and trust can come from being transparent, available, and connected. Being self-reflexive about these interactions gives researchers a space for blunt honesty, to ask questions of ourselves that we may not ask participants right away.

Within the study, ongoing self-awareness and intentionally working *with* youth led to non-hierarchical solidarity between youth and adults. In meetings and informal times, youth shared how frustrated they were with adults who consistently underestimated or demeaned them. They valued the rare ways in which adults supported them: being with them, listening, offering new or historical perspectives, being transparent, and being ready to advocate, fostering authentic relationships and trust. The predictable hierarchy of adults and youth dissipated through intentional valuing of each
other’s knowledge. I noticed a flattening of positions of power, between adults and youth or teachers and students, in two distinct spaces: One, as part of a shared activist identity, and two, in digital space, as we worked towards a common goal of increased racial consciousness and justice in education.

This initial research opened new relationships and commitments to working beside and behind youth in research, teaching, and community organizing. How will I stay accountable to being a worthy witness (Winn & Ubiles, 2011) as I represent this research? In writing, how can I maintain a framework of being with youth? How can I remain benched and ready for the scholarship that youth need me to do? What can I do to block myself and to open opportunities and connections for youth in writing and representation? This RPO framework promotes options for nontraditional scholarship and conversations about working together. I hope this article encourages responsive participant observation as researchers traverse toward community-engaged, critical participatory action research or co-researching with youth (Watson & Marciano, 2015).

It can be challenging to have prolonged research relationships, especially due to flux in urban schools, with students, school administration, teachers, and structural gatekeepers. Some adults within the schools actively de-centered or de-legitimized youth voice. I needed to decide if or how to disrupt uneven power structures in order to support youth (Madison, 2005); sometimes this was at the risk of losing adult trust, data, or entry to a site. Yet if, as Torre and Fine (2006) posit, participatory learning has democracy and justice at its core (as cited in Kinloch, 2011, p. 59), then educators and researchers need to continue to “disrupt the intellectual comfort zones” (Gilyard, 1996, p.19) and flip the script on normed authority, including about research.
Throughout the research, I continually felt the weight of my particular dilemma—can I do right by research as well as by youth? I was stuck between two demands: the demand of youth (and myself) to be part of authentic changemaking, and the demand of academia to document and publish research. Public scholarship and activist research helped to blend those demands together. I was committed to research that came from, responded to, and gave back to youth both during and after the study. I was driven by the centered and sufficient voices of youth activists who seamlessly crossed the borders of school and society. They were consciously and actively dissatisfied with the status quo, color-evasive and institutional racism, and systemic inequalities. “Social justice” was not a cute, contemporary name of an after-school club. It was an active and relentless pursuit, for and with the people. I was here as a researcher to be with, and to bear “with-ness to,” this community of young people (Fine, 2006, 2016). There was no measure or metric except for the people who were most affected within this work; there was no exit strategy, and there is continual work to do.
Youth play an irreplaceable role in social movements and social change. There is indelible power in youth teaching other youth as they engage with a broader social purpose. Sasha Costanza-Chock (2012) outlines key points regarding ways that young people are uniquely well-equipped to contribute to social movements:

Young people can be powerful agents of social change; Youth often innovate social movement media practices; Youth can speak truth to power, in ways their peers can hear; Youth movements frequently operate outside formal channels of political participation; Often, youth who have to struggle the hardest develop the strongest connections to social movements. (p. 2-3)

Young people in this study were powerful and collective agents of change. They aimed to raise critical consciousness with themselves and others. They were driving forces behind social movements on-line, in the community, and in the schools.

This dissertation research was a critical ethnographic, youth-informed study connected across school, community, and digital spaces. Spending time with youth across these three spaces enabled me to understand their roles and my role to disrupt injustices, much of which included supporting the youth who were doing that already. I also examined ways in which this activism also fell into the status quo. It made it more palatable that IAYA also questioned how they themselves were complicit in their work. In critical ethnography an expectation is that researchers address injustice, arguably in both writing and action:

Critical ethnography begins with an ethical responsibility to address processes of unfairness or injustice within a particular lived domain….The critical
ethnographer also takes us beneath surface appearances, disrupts the status quo, and unsettles both neutrality and taken-for-granted assumptions by bringing to light underlying and obscure operations of power and control. (Madison, 2005, p. 5, emphasis in original)

As a responsive participant observer, I was able to get close enough to note some missed opportunities for knowledge production in these school-based groups. Alongside their efforts toward racial justice lurked a pervasive whiteness within the structure of school; thus, it was as important to note strengths as well as identify systems of oppression and control. Using critical race theory, specifically theories of whiteness as property (Harris, 1993), allowed me to see how youth activism both defied whiteness and collapsed into it. Critical social theories supported and pushed analysis throughout the dissertation, examining power along the way.

Despite some unequal power distribution and missed opportunities, I entered this study with assumptions about the assets of young people, including the powerful literacies of youth and communities as knowledge producers. However, before the study I did not know what those literacies would be. I learned of their longstanding commitment to racial justice work. In some ways, I was like many other adults in underestimating them. For instance, I did not know to what degree they were cued into Black and queer of color feminist theories, nor how much they shared these primary text sources with one another on social media. Their synthesized activities included conversations about race, participation with each other on social media, and organization of teaching and social actions. In data collection, I used qualitative, ethnographic, and participatory methods that relied on youth input and decision-making. Critical participatory action research with
youth informed this study at multiple junctures, including contribution of artifacts, inquiry, analysis, and representation of data.

In this concluding chapter, I summarize key findings across the three main chapters and discuss implications from this research for the broader field of education. I share plans and ideas for future research, and I circle back to my initial research commitments, to ask what social justice scholar Dr. Josie R. Johnson (Johnson, 2017) asked me once about community-engaged research: “Did I do what I set out to do?” Though this dissertation offers systematic and empirical research on its own, it is also a step on a path to continued public scholarship.

5.1 Key Findings

This research was framed by the assets, not the deficits, of urban youth. It was worthwhile to record their unique literacies and contributions to teaching and learning as they worked towards racial justice in the schools. Nonetheless, the endemic nature of racism was persistent across the study. Despite challenges, youth activists created ripple effects of consciousness raising and social change in themselves, their schools, and beyond. Each chapter demonstrates possibilities in the pedagogies and literacies of youth activists in urban schools.

A major theme running throughout all aspects of the study centered around how youth were consumed with teaching, learning, and pedagogy. Chapter two initiated a working definition for youth activist pedagogies, due to the extensive pedagogical practices and commitments of youth organizers who worked toward critical consciousness and social action. Main pedagogical activities included self-education, teaching, organizing and dialoguing, social action, and research. Findings from thematic
analysis of key events, such as teach-ins and sit-ins, showed that youth sought to construct knowledge through tensions, questions, and difficult truths via collective youth agency; this relentless truth-seeking endured amidst the dominating discourse of whiteness in teaching and in school. Youth activists rejected single perspectives and whiteness, instead placing value in truth from multiple perspectives. For instance, Max spoke directly to valuing multiple perspectives as he prepared other high school students for activities at a sit-in:

We have to and must hear everyone’s perspectives and we must acknowledge that everyone will have different perspectives, unfortunately based on the melanin content that they were given at birth. And that’s something that we have to, that’s a must, we must acknowledge. Everyone may not have opened up before…but if we do open up this floor, then everyone must be extremely respectful…you can offer your own experiences. We have to talk about what really goes on. (April 5, 2016)

Max valued multiple perspectives as well as difficult truths. Youth were stirred by situations that rattled the status quo, even if they were uncomfortable or filled with disagreement. And even though schools did not legitimate activism as a scholarly venture, IAYA craved critical theory, unlearning, and new knowledge. Some youth posted “always learning” as a sub-title or key message on their social media homepages. This humility allowed them continued growth. The data was inundated with examples of youth who talked about school, pedagogy, teachers, and their own desire to teach. One area for further study is how social movements produce future teachers, including BIPOC
teachers who have not yet viewed themselves as such. We must continue to see these future educators for who they have been, who they are, and who they want to be.

Chapter three revealed the connected literacies of youth activists. I found that the racial justice work and everyday interactions of IAYA could be sorted into four main literacies: literacies of love and resistance, organizing literacies, critical teaching literacies, and literacies of knowledge. Love and resistance were ideological literacy practices that centered and framed social movement organizing, demonstrated in person and through social media. I had noticed the concept of love in frequent yet fleeting ways during the study, but I was unsure how to record it. When someone left a meeting, Anneka would shout, “I love you so much!” That example was explicit, but how would it be documented? Youth captured love on social media and shared it to sustain themselves and their work. When I had asked a small group of youth how to group minor codes in research (including love, emotion, healing, care, space, safety, trust, and flexibility), Charisse named resistance. She added, “You have to love something in order to want to actively change it.” In addition to love, resistance was a common tenet of youth activists; its pairing with love is something for further study. Organizing literacies, critical teaching literacies, and literacies of knowledge provided powerful experiences to youth activists. Organizing literacies came in the form of planning, attending events, and social connectivity. These were time-consuming, distributed leadership activities that created shared experiences and the opportunities for critical language awareness for organizers. In critical teaching literacies, youth organizers took on the role of educators as face-to-face teachers as well as instructors of critical literacy on social media. They shared assets, critiques, and literary resources. Finally, youth were relentlessly drawn to literacies of
knowledge. They sought out political education, through which they increased racial literacy and continued working toward racial justice. Prior to this research, I saw social media connectivity as valuable, but there is much more to investigate regarding its critical and multimodal affordances for youth-driven literacies, social movements, and liberatory literacies outside of and connected to schools. For future study, one striking lesson was how youth activists used literacies to create love, joy, and healing for themselves and each other. Another relevant lesson for more deliberation was how the theory of whiteness as property was tethered to the literacies accessed or rejected in these spaces.

In chapter four, I examined my own racialized role as a white woman researcher with interracial anti-racist youth activists. As such, I investigated the critical ethnographic constructs of participant observation, positionality, and reflexivity. As a teacher, researcher, parent, and community member, I had pressing questions throughout research: What were the roles, responsibilities, and opportunities to work within a community towards social justice? How did I interact with youth in the study, how did they position me, and how was I self-reflexive in the process? I used thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) with 90 self-reflexive memos from the study. With those memos, correlating data, and a final youth interview about the analytic process itself, I developed a framework for responsive participant observation. Like Sincere attested, this framework stood on relationships built on trust. Findings indicated that the needs of a community of practice were often shifting, and the relationships between youth and adults could produce meaningful and sometimes lasting work.

There were three main ways that I was positioned by youth. First in the framework was a call to be “with you.” Youth positioned me to be “with” them as a
listener, resource, and co-planner. Building trust and relationships was part of that position. It was vital to share a common goal with youth, to be proactive, and to be reciprocal. Second, youth positioned me to be “benched and ready.” Youth were leaders, and I needed to listen and to be ready to respond in ways that they directed. Third, youth positioned me to “block and open” for them, to intervene. In some instances of disproportionate power, I blocked others, especially adults, in order to open opportunities for youth. In order to intervene or offer support, I had to be available—by text or in person—to read the situation and to critique power, while simultaneously being aware of youth potential, strengths, and the shared goal of racial justice. Unique within the analysis of this chapter, I saw an flattening in hierarchy in between youth and myself. It was intentional, as an adult and as a white woman, to come in through a side door, to de-center myself, and to work with IAYA. However, I believe that hierarchy dissipated in part due to a shared activist identity in a community of learners. Hierarchy was also lowered upon further analysis of digital text—a space that allowed youth and adults to be “at the same level” (a value promoted by youth throughout the study), especially within social media.

Throughout the chapters and the study, rays of brilliance shone and shadows of oppression layered on top of themselves. The contributions of young people noted in this research live in the bodies of the youth themselves as well as in the institutional memory of those in the schools, both educators and youth who retell the stories of activism. However, as student, teachers, and schools change, these memories can be fleeting. A guiding purpose of this research was to make plain the potentials of literacy and learning of interracial, anti-racist youth groups in the schools, in part, so that their work can
continue. No school is free from racial injustice, and the work can be pursued in solidarity with youth and community members as active participants of a social justice-oriented learning community.

5.2 Implications

The youth activists in this study carried gifts and challenges into their schools. This dissertation has examined their pedagogies, literacies, and interactions within schools and systems. This section on implications sits with critical questions raised in the three main chapters and examines routes to exploring further. First, through the chapter on youth activist pedagogies, how will we enact the dialogic potential in youth activist pedagogies? Second, with the implications learned through youth activist literacies, how will we boost the power in connected literacies? Third, from the self-reflexive chapter that examines my role as an adult, and a white woman, in this work, how will we hold ourselves accountable—as grown folks—for building capacity for growingly conscious adults and youth to work together? Finally, where is this work headed?

Youth activist pedagogies. Schools and other spaces serving youth have the opportunity to be more serious about inviting and learning from youth and youth activist pedagogies. In a consortium of academics gathered in a conference for critical race theory, Daniel Solórzano (2016) encouraged fellow scholars to “keep engaging in dialogue and sharing our pedagogies…across disciplines and across fields, especially pedagogies of race and racism and pedagogies that unmask and challenge white supremacy, white privilege, and whiteness as property” (minute 23). The pedagogies of anti-racist youth activists call for ethnic studies, diverse social justice groups in schools, youth-led opportunities, and critically conscious teachers, including Indigenous teachers.
and teachers of color. Educators and researchers need to examine how social movements inform education, as youth continue to inform social movements: “Oppressed people, whatever their level of formal education, have the ability to understand and interpret the world around them, to see the world for what it is, and move to transform it” (“Ella Baker Center for Human Rights,” 2018). Youth are aching to transform their schools. Youth activist pedagogies yearn for multiple perspectives, questions, and difficult truths through collective youth agency. This goal for collectivity spans all this dissertation, and it is a value across many communities of color. Community-engaged education scholar Gerald Campano (Beach, Campano, et al, 2010) writes of bayanihan work, “the spirit of cooperation that has its roots in the Filipina/o tradition of gathering together to help relocate a member of the community by physically carrying their house to a new site” (p. 63). In his description, he applies this collective work to classrooms, denying the assimilation and individualism valued by whiteness as property:

    Rather than assimilating…students into a predetermined school ideology where individual worth is measured by deviations from a norm, the communal orientation of many student narratives can help us imagine a classroom where all members are supporting one another…not just…a range of perspectives that merely coexists in school; it is also potentially a guiding ideal. [These] students did in fact work to create a communitarian space where learning was collaborative, where one person’s success was everyone’s success and one person’s struggle was everyone’s struggle. (p. 63)

The work to create collectives and learning collaboratives is not only indispensable in social movements and activism, it is a foundational aim of sociocultural theories of
learning. Social movements have pedagogical undercurrents that are advanced through the work of a group. “Social justice is often advanced through group work that engages people in collective action” (Staples, 2012, as cited in Aldana, Richards-Schuster, & Checkoway, 2016, p. 353). Educators can follow the examples in chapter two, using Ladson-Billing’s (1995) theory of culturally relevant pedagogy and Hill-Collins’s (2009) domains-of-power framework to self-examine their enacted pedagogies, to look for paradoxes that deny struggle, and to enhance opportunities for multiple perspectives, working in collectives, and listening to youth.

Connected literacies. Educators can amplify the connected literacies of youth by increasing opportunities for collective youth knowledge production (through reading, writing, research, art, and other forms of digital production). Chapter three shares literacies of youth activism alongside the opportunity for deeper work with complex, relevant texts, such as critical theory, out-of-school youth-based literacies, research, literacy performances, and production. The endemic nature of racism and white supremacy has played a role in relegating youth activists’ literacies—counter-narratives, arts, and digital media productions—as illegitimate or not for school. As Leigh Patel explained in a recent talk at Macalester College, critical consumption and production of text offers continued youth engagement, connecting with themselves, with one another, and with social justice: “How we live, how we organize, how we engage in the world--the process--not only frames the outcome...it is the transformation” (2017). Youth organizing is a transformative literacy practice, which can in turn create connected transformative literacy events in schools, communities, and online.
Youth activists in this study taught sessions to their peers about microaggressions, social media, white allies/accomplices, asset mapping, colorism, healing, and intersectional feminism. The future of their work is unknown, but the power to transform the reality of schooling is real. From history, we know this ordinary and collective work is key to social change:

Regimes of racial segregation were not disestablished because of the work of leaders and presidents and legislators…ordinary people adopted a critical stance in the way in which they perceived their relationship to reality. Social realities…came to be viewed as malleable and transformable…what it might mean to live in a world that was not so exclusively governed by the principle of white supremacy…This collective consciousness emerged within the context of social struggles. (Davis, 2016, p. 66-67)

The notion of collectives cannot be ignored, not only for the work they can produce, but for the love and the light that is possible within them: "It is in collectivities [collective actions] that we find reservoirs of hope and optimism" (A. Davis, 2018). Youth produce hope as well as difficult truths from these shared struggles and connected reservoirs. Literacies are much more connected than they are out-of-school or in-school literacies. How can these overlapping and multimodal connections be fostered, explored, valued, and shared? For now, young people continue to walk through school doors. With connected literacies, shared purpose, and collective work, schools too can share in these reservoirs—for the youth, by the youth, and with the youth.

**Grown folks.** Research about youth organizing outlines benefits for youth, especially in school engagement and career readiness; it also cites the importance of
supportive adults in organizing spaces (Fox & Fine, 2015). Adults capacity could improve through learning more about organizing, intersectional identities, race, conflict, and context. For instance, 97.5% of the teachers in this upper Midwest state are white; there is an overwhelming number of white woman bodies in the schools. We (white women) need to more deeply understand our racialized selves and our role in this work (along with how we may need to work ourselves out of these jobs). One day, towards the beginning of this study, youth from SpeakUp instructed 140 tenth graders to “Step into the circle if you have had more than one teacher of color in your lives.” No students stepped into the circle. We can work to disrupt the majority white workforce, to interrogate hierarchies, and to create opportunities for distributed leadership (qualities the youth in the study valued); we must be self-reflexive in the work. Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz (2017) asked her pre-service teachers to go into schools and to look not only at themselves, but also at how they might interrupt the status quo:

As I invite my students to do the type of work which I call “the archaeology of the self,” this constant digging and reflecting and re-reflecting, I also invite them to understand that the schools they're going in, that at the very least they can interrupt the status quo that is there and that they look at their pedagogy, for them to look at their practice as a source of interruption. (minute 1:40)

As seen throughout my dissertation, this work requires pedagogy and reflexivity. How can adults do more heavy lifting, how can we create opportunities to work in partnership with youth, and how can we also follow as youth lead?

In addition to reflexivity, how can adults demonstrate learning from others and doing this work in collectives? In the anti-racist youth leadership network that led to the
development of these school-based groups, Duffy and Galloway (2011) emphasized that advisors should never do the work alone. The name “Time 2 Get Real” in this dissertation was a pseudonym, but the “2” signified something essential: we cannot do this work alone. School workers, educational assistants, administrators, teachers, family, community members, and researchers, too, can work within the coalitional models of social movements, just as social justice can be advanced through engagement in collective action. We have to find our people.

5.3 Future Research

Future work necessitates collective effort (educators, mentors, parents, researchers, and youth), theorizing, teaching, learning, researching, collectivizing, envisioning, and organizing liberation in education together. There are important ideas for work with this dissertation’s data and in the development of participatory action research: 1) Empirical research from my study, relevant to the field but thus far unexplored; 2) Putting research to action; and 3) Continued research by youth.

Continued research from my study. There were three specific areas from my original study that were unexplored in this dissertation: One, data about teachers and the professional development of advisors (detailed some in the “grown folks” section above); two, data from specific focal participants or those with shared group membership (i.e. young women racialized as white, youth with immigrant parents, or any youth interested in writing out of the research); and three, data from middle school contexts. Further examination from those categories would elucidate context-specific findings about anti-racist youth literacies and learning in schools, especially done in continued conversation or authorship with any of those groups.
For example, Max and Yusuf were focal participants in this study. Max was biracial (Black and white) and an English-speaking student. Throughout the course of the study, he identified as both white and as biracial. He knew this was a literacy study and talked about both hating reading, and his difficulty either picking up or finishing books (informal interview, 2017). A middle school principal, however, identified his leadership potential and made Max an offer to be part of an anti-racist youth leadership group—contingent on not skipping classes anymore. In high school, as part of his activism, he wrote many of the official documents that were shared on social media, changing his lived experience with literacy products relevant to his life and mission. Yusuf, who spoke multiple languages, including Somali, English, and Arabic, was diagnosed in middle school with dyslexia and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD); his context of learning included a history of difficult experiences in U.S. schools since elementary school (semi-structured interview, 2016), with the exception of a middle school teacher and coach with whom he is still close today. In high school, he regularly performed original poetry at local Open Mic nights and he co-led community events in advocacy for Somali youth. Both of these young men were leaders in their communities, and literacy events were an integral part of their activism. Alfred W. Tatum and Gholnecsr E. Muhammad (2012) are among many scholars, parents, and community members who recognize “the wide range of literacies practiced by African American male youth inside and outside of schools” (p. 435). Further analysis of this subset of data (ethnographic data specific to Max and Yusuf, including interviews, artifacts, organizing, and teaching sessions, from the corpus of data), including writing with Max and Yusuf themselves, could be an avenue to pursue.
Other research to consider is the data that I gathered around middle school youth. Despite these specific educators knowing about Max and Yusuf’s formative middle school lives, many teachers in middle school often miss out on the literacies of their students:

Because middle school teachers often do not realize the sophisticated literacy competencies that their students exhibit in out-of-school contexts, they miss valuable opportunities to tap into the out-of-school literacy practices students have at their disposal. Moreover, middle school teachers often overlook important literacy competencies from students’ personal lives that could assist in developing their students’ in-school literacy development. (Provost, Skinner, & Engleson, 2008, p. 60)

In the data analysis camp, and with multiple focal groups, high school youth spoke about how they felt a commitment to do more with younger students. I did not include any of the middle school data in this dissertation, but I did gather data in one middle school and in one middle school anti-racist leadership camp. Those contexts were more adult-led, and further analysis could add significance to understanding a middle level approach to anti-racist education.

**Continued research and action beyond my study.** Any of the findings and implications previously discussed in this dissertation would be interesting for further scholarship. In addition, since youth organizing has been researched in the fields of civic engagement and school engagement, it could be useful to systematically review studies to see how organizing and activist literacies could be lifted out of the studies that did not focus on literacy. Sparking from activism in particular, I would like to dig more into how
love and resistance inform each other, especially as theories of resistance in education are already a burgeoning field. In the growing field of critical whiteness studies, I would like to continue inquiring with educators, youth workers, and youth about the slippery role of whiteness in groups that aim to be anti-racist, in affinity or interracial spaces, both inside and outside of school. Perhaps connected to the theory of whiteness as property, more work is needed to examine the literacies accessed or rejected in varying educational spaces. Finally, I look forward to applying lessons from the act of doing this research in three ways: (1) work with youth to design youth-informed and community-engaged studies, whereby they apprentice to lead, gather, and produce research; (2) be a responsive participant observer in a team that systematically seeks out assets while also bolstering opportunities to increase literacies, pedagogies, and knowledge; and (3) coach teachers and youth in urban schools to see the dialogic and literacy-connected possibilities for social action.

I have been able to directly apply this literacy study to a community partnership, with a group who called me to the table in part because “our babies can’t read” (community partner, personal communication). We began to create a frame for participant observations, starting with a broad definition of literacy and text. We noted culturally connected assets in their program, opportunities for literacy growth, and structures that limit or block access to literacies and learning. Children need to learn to read while making deeper connections and meaning with the world, and we can work with them in that journey.

**Continued research by youth.** More than anything, I would encourage research about youth activist literacies or pedagogies to be done through methodologies that use
youth participatory action research as a grounding epistemology. What do they find most intriguing? What is important in their lived experience in and out of the schools? What are they hopeful for? What questions do they have? Going forward, I will be working with youth (including some from this study) to create a public and university-connected space for youth to conduct their own research, to connect across communities, and to continue the work.

5.4 Where do we go from here?

Throughout the study, youth were invested in teaching, in changing their schools, and in becoming teachers themselves (critically conscious teachers and teachers of color). The connected literacies of youth activist literacies thrust forward limitless opportunities for critical consumption, discussion, and production too often missing in urban schools. These pedagogies and literacies are relevant to schools, communities, research, and teacher education. This is public and activist scholarship, working towards both resistance and liberation in education.

My own growing networks and collectives—of organizers, youth teachers, and activist scholars—give me hope for the world that is yet to come. But most of all it is the youth that I continue to work with who spread urgency, reality, music, and light. The following message was penned by a young man, a high schooler and socially conscious performance artist with the pseudonym Diego. I had asked him to write something about our work in social justice education, and he wrote:

My social justice-oriented peers give me life when they nourish each other with art and care for themselves/each other in a healing, celebratory way. They know better than to try and apologize to their oppressors for fighting for freedom, because, honestly, what is the point? I am grateful for the fact that I live…where students work hard to show up and advocate for causes in bunches of ways. I’m grateful because this makes me realize the scale of social issues and how we have
to mobilize together. I want teachers to know that they are working in an institution that has the power to lift people, but it can also be a funnel into incarceration and danger. I want teachers to remember education is life-giving if students can see themselves truthfully represented and feel they have agency to explore their stories.

Hope thrives in Diego’s message. I am in deep gratitude for the pedagogies, literacies, care, art, advocacy, love, relationships, joy, freedom, work, showing up, mobilization, and the next moves. Vamos. Let’s build.
Figure 10. Lakeview High Demographics.

Figure 11. Eastside High Demographics.
Figure 12. Public Facebook Events 1.
Figure 13. Public Facebook Events 2. Types of activism pie chart based on the 25 public Facebook events within the course of one year.

Figure 14. Social media influencers: Racial demographics.
Figure 15. Social media influencers: Percentage with immigrant parents.

Figure 16. Social media influencers: School location (for youth) or community member.
Figure 17. Content analysis of IAYA social media screenshots.
Figure 18. Themes from coding responses from the yPAR question: How'd you get woke?
### Table 3

**Public Facebook Events (details)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Leaders</th>
<th>Type of event</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Place</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prison Blockade</td>
<td>community/youth</td>
<td>Protest and Meeting take-over</td>
<td>demand to change government project</td>
<td>Park building</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BLM March</td>
<td>youth/community</td>
<td>Protest</td>
<td>to raise awareness for social change</td>
<td>Street</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Release the tapes</td>
<td>community/youth</td>
<td>Mass occupation</td>
<td>demand to change government practice</td>
<td>Street</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What’s good?</td>
<td>youth</td>
<td>Political education</td>
<td>to raise awareness for social change</td>
<td>School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restore the vote</td>
<td>youth/community</td>
<td>Walk out and protest</td>
<td>to change government policy</td>
<td>Park</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highway protest</td>
<td>community/youth</td>
<td>March and protest</td>
<td>demand to change government practice</td>
<td>Street</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jamar Clark sit-in</td>
<td>youth</td>
<td>walk out and sit-in</td>
<td>healing and political education</td>
<td>School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jamar Clark sit-in</td>
<td>youth</td>
<td>walk out and sit-in</td>
<td>healing</td>
<td>School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-indictment response</td>
<td>community/youth</td>
<td>protest</td>
<td>to raise awareness for social change</td>
<td>Street</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth Activist Summit Planning and Social</td>
<td>community/youth</td>
<td>planning meeting</td>
<td>to gather together and build</td>
<td>Common org</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Islamophobia</td>
<td>youth/community</td>
<td>political education</td>
<td>to raise awareness for social change</td>
<td>Comm org</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immigration/Refugees/Muslim march</td>
<td>youth/community</td>
<td>march</td>
<td>to raise awareness for social change</td>
<td>Street</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No DAPL</td>
<td>community/youth</td>
<td>protest</td>
<td>to change government policy</td>
<td>City building</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-election march/Mni wiconi</td>
<td>youth</td>
<td>march, protest, and gathering</td>
<td>to raise awareness for social change</td>
<td>Street, Park</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic Studies summit</td>
<td>community/youth</td>
<td>political education</td>
<td>to gather together and build</td>
<td>School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Justice conference</td>
<td>community/youth</td>
<td>political education</td>
<td>to raise awareness for social change</td>
<td>School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICE march</td>
<td>youth/community</td>
<td>walk out and march</td>
<td>to protect immigration policies</td>
<td>Park, Street</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICE march</td>
<td>community/youth</td>
<td>walk out and march</td>
<td>to raise awareness for social change</td>
<td>Street, Park</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riday</td>
<td>youth</td>
<td>political education</td>
<td>to raise awareness for social change</td>
<td>School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riday</td>
<td>youth</td>
<td>political education</td>
<td>to raise awareness for social change</td>
<td>School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TYS Community Meeting</td>
<td>youth</td>
<td>healing/gathering</td>
<td>healing</td>
<td>Park</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CMenotCVE</td>
<td>youth/community</td>
<td>political education</td>
<td>to raise awareness for social change</td>
<td>Comm Org</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ongoing occupation: Jamar Clark</td>
<td>community/youth</td>
<td>Protest</td>
<td>demand to change government practice</td>
<td>Street</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ongoing occupation: Philando Castile</td>
<td>community/youth</td>
<td>Protest</td>
<td>demand to change government practice</td>
<td>Street</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pray-in</td>
<td>youth</td>
<td>protect and sit-in</td>
<td>demand to change school practice</td>
<td>School</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 4

**List of Participants (Pseudonyms)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonyms *member of the Data Analysis Crew</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Identities by mostly race and gender *at least one immigrant parent (some ethnicities unlisted due to anonymity)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SpeakUp (Eastside)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anneka*</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>White young woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veronica</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Black and bi-racial young woman*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rose</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Black young woman*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janet*</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>White young woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leticia</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Black, bi-racial Black/API young woman*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taz/Tazmin</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Black, Somali, hijabi young woman*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cora</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>API young woman*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kira*</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>White young woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sally*</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Bi-racial young person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kam</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Afro-Latinx young transwoman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Snow Panda</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Bi-racial (Black and white) young woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tabby</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>POC/Contested white *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fadumo</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Black, Somali, hijabi young woman*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angel</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Black young woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gordon</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Black young man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mira</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>White young woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hawa</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Black Somali hijabi young woman*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yusuf</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Black Somali young man*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nebesa</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Black and bi-racial (Black and white) young woman*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td></td>
<td>Fartuun, Brian, Esi, Rahma, Marco, Roda, Marina, Qali, Sha, Lucy, Hayden, Nasra, Joanna, Ifa, Jake, Elias, Paul, Zalia, Paige, Danie, Dezi, Ari, Marie, Elias, Ska, &amp; Venus (immigrant status not listed here)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Time 2 Get Real (and Teach Yo’Self), Lakeview**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Max (TYS)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Bi-racial (Black and white) young man*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sincere</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Black and bi-racial (Black and white) young woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DéDé (TYS)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Black young woman*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madi</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>White young woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kimberly</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>White young woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faisa</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Black Somali hijabi young woman*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abdul (TYS)</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Black young man*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kieran</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>White young man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ayan</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Black Somali young woman*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others (TYS)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Claudia, James, Khasan, Aliyah, Daga, Mohammed, Za’roc, Samuel, Naomi, Abdi, Kaytrada, Maya, Kate, Charlotte (immigrant status not listed here)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Interconnected youth activists from other schools**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Charisse*</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>African American young woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Molly*</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>White young woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diego*</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Bi-racial Latinx and white young man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruby</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>White young person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td></td>
<td>Chia*, Xeng*, and Earnest*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5. Themes from open-coding literacy events from six different data sets with Interracial Anti-racist Youth Activists
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Social media</th>
<th>Public events</th>
<th>IAYA meetings (in school)</th>
<th>Key Events (school-based events)</th>
<th>YPAR Crew (analysis)</th>
<th>YPAR Ripple effect mapping</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>250 persona</td>
<td>25 public</td>
<td>28 meetings in six</td>
<td>40 hours from four key events</td>
<td>3-day data analysis</td>
<td>290 participatory survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>l posts (two</td>
<td>youth-led</td>
<td>months, coded for literacy</td>
<td>(sit-ins and teach-ins)</td>
<td>camp based on a year</td>
<td>responses (in one yr)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>yrs)</td>
<td>Faceboo k</td>
<td>events</td>
<td></td>
<td>of activism</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>events (two</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>yrs)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LOVE</td>
<td>love (self,</td>
<td>gathering</td>
<td>Minor codes of circle</td>
<td>Minor codes of love and joy</td>
<td>friends and family</td>
<td>personal experience,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&amp; resis tance</td>
<td>others,</td>
<td>, sit ins,</td>
<td>and joy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>relationship s with peers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>collectiv e,</td>
<td>community,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>and family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and identity)</td>
<td>, healing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ORGANIZING</td>
<td>organizing</td>
<td>protests,</td>
<td>Norms, planning actions,</td>
<td>collective youth agency</td>
<td>social media;</td>
<td>community organization s,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>walk outs,</td>
<td>co-constructing texts</td>
<td></td>
<td>actions: community</td>
<td>activism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>marches,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>learning, organizing,</td>
<td>and school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>mass</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>and educating/teachi ng</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>occupation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical Teaching</td>
<td>critiquin g</td>
<td>critiquing</td>
<td>disagreeme nt discussions</td>
<td>critique of whiteness in</td>
<td>actions: community</td>
<td>multimedia literacy and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>power and</td>
<td>power in</td>
<td>and conversations about</td>
<td>pedagogy; whiteness in</td>
<td>learning, organizing,</td>
<td>history</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>whiteness</td>
<td>protest and</td>
<td>pedagogy</td>
<td>teaching/leading as: control,</td>
<td>and educating/teachi ng</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>through</td>
<td>political</td>
<td></td>
<td>rules, hierarchy, facts/expert,</td>
<td>working with theories</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>posts</td>
<td>education</td>
<td></td>
<td>doing too much, and time</td>
<td>and concepts,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>including whiteness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KNOWNED</td>
<td>sharing</td>
<td>political</td>
<td>resources: literary,</td>
<td>co-constructing knowledge</td>
<td>what happens in</td>
<td>multimedia literacy;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>knowledge</td>
<td>education</td>
<td>community , school, tools,</td>
<td>with multiple perspectives and</td>
<td>school, including</td>
<td>personal experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(assets</td>
<td></td>
<td>and theories/ concepts</td>
<td>difficult truths</td>
<td>reading critical</td>
<td>and relationship s with</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>plus</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>texts; working/teachi ng</td>
<td>peers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>critiques</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>g theories and</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>concepts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of social media influencers</td>
<td>Number of screenshots from connected posts</td>
<td>Demographic description of youth</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>Black Muslim young women</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>White young women</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Bi-racial/Black young women</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Black Muslim young men, 1.5 or 2.0 gen</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Afro-latinx young transwoman</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Black young women, at least one 1.5 gen</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Black young man</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Bi-racial young men, 1.5 gen</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>API young woman, Filipinx, 1.0 gen</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Latina young woman, bi-racial</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>White young man</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 7

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Lakeview</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Lakeview</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Eastside</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Eastside</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3/7/2016</td>
<td>Summary: Race and geography discussion</td>
<td>4/25/2016</td>
<td>Summary: Restore the vote meeting</td>
<td>3/8/2016</td>
<td>Summary: Beginning planning for May RDay</td>
<td>4/6/2016</td>
<td>Summary: Planning for sit-in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>circle greeting, distributes paper, agreements, and weekend word</td>
<td></td>
<td>teacher visitor about laws and voting rights and former felons (then dips)</td>
<td></td>
<td>In Circle, T: Hi how you feeling anything you wanna share (then no wait time)</td>
<td></td>
<td>chatter, in circle formation (no opening)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>tools: Max phone agenda, phones or jotting on paper from many; listening, drawing, one sleep, YouTube blocked for students</td>
<td></td>
<td>passes out conditions, permission slips</td>
<td></td>
<td>Tabbie: Race Day planning</td>
<td></td>
<td>4 agreements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>action: follow-up from Racial incident teaching &quot;what would you like to see at Lakeview/IPS? Also talk of this as a class for elective credit endorsing policy</td>
<td></td>
<td>Walkout prep announcements about legislation</td>
<td></td>
<td>discomfort: We never had a conversation about race ourselves, how we’re impacted at Eastside or anywhere. We need to spend time dedicating ourselves to learning”</td>
<td></td>
<td>tools phones, stories, background to the skin and the case tools and literacies: notes are computer, varied use of audio, chants, singing RLP matter, no justice, no peace, prosecute the police, if my sister ain’t equal and my brother can’t breathe. Snow Leopard &quot;like these comments?&quot; speech (snaps): created posters: instructions to write</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Literacies: Hamilton lyrics sung, Rashad Shabazz Why Geography Matters podcast, Paisley, no real lines from the south to Minneapolis, Browenville (big poetry book)</td>
<td></td>
<td>tools organizing statement, official statement, phone, Twitter, Max’s laptop, “planned twitter storms”</td>
<td></td>
<td>Tabbie about things to do</td>
<td></td>
<td>circle now, around with race and names and then “and I’m still Black”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Marc Bamuthi Joseph</td>
<td></td>
<td>literary: poll taxes, literary tests, ACLU Council on Crime and Justice, 2nd Chances Coalition; Hart ovar video; phones</td>
<td></td>
<td>Tabbie continues about schedules</td>
<td></td>
<td>tools phones, stories, background to the skin and the case tools and literacies: notes are computer, varied use of audio, chants, singing RLP matter, no justice, no peace, prosecute the police, if my sister ain’t equal and my brother can’t breathe. Snow Leopard “like these comments?” speech (snaps): created posters: instructions to write</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>So it’s super cool, I gave it a listen during study hall when I should have been studying”</td>
<td></td>
<td>disagree: Shopping to interrupt to ask a clarifying question</td>
<td></td>
<td>tools: three FB instead of coming, group chats.</td>
<td></td>
<td>pedagogy: 63 women leadership, claps and affirmation, stories: applause</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>quote: “Slavery was not in the interest of Blacks in the south, nor in the interest of whites in the south”</td>
<td></td>
<td>school announcement &quot;unless you’re in a pre-approved activity with an adult”</td>
<td></td>
<td>action: outreach, scheduling, logistic committees</td>
<td></td>
<td>Q: How do you feel this has impacted you? If anyone has anything to say this is the time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>questions about next time</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>action: outreach, scheduling, logistic committees</td>
<td></td>
<td>To district sent out something about not talking about it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>tools interaction w school twitter and emails re: teacher roles and support</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>pedagogy: adults and youth equal voices</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


https://doi.org/10.1080/01609513.2015.1076370


https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203092965


Whiteness, 113–137.

Ella Baker Center for Human Rights. (2018). Retrieved September 15, 2018, from https://ellabakercenter.org/about/who-was-ella-baker?gclid=CjwKCAjwzJjrBRBvEiwA867byqDh7bT11Hr4JTO4vdVsCiX3XaVhf2GXQ2o4GUB_XWRiDm8EBr-_bxcjMQAvD_BwE


Fox, M. (2016). On research, art, and transformation: Multigenerational participatory research, critical positive youth development, and structural change. Qualitative Psychology, 3(1), 46.


https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2014.892498


https://doi.org/10.2304/elea.2013.10.1.68


Milner IV, H. R. (2010). *Start where you are, but don’t stay there: Understanding diversity, opportunity gaps, and teaching in today’s classrooms.* ERIC.


Examination of the Supports Needed for School-Based Youth-Adult Partnerships. https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118X08316211


APPENDICES

Appendix A: Conventions for social media and transcriptions
Following are conventions for in-text references to social media as well as for transcriptions.

Social Media Notes: Any print-based posts from social media use the same grammar and font, as possible, as used in the original post. Because youth were anonymous and names were pseudonyms, their tweets and Facebook posts are not noted in the reference section.

Social Media Key (if not written out in full)

- **fb**: Facebook (original post)
- **fb/s**: Post re-shared on Facebook
- **t**: Twitter (original post)
- **r/t**: Post re-tweeted on Twitter

Transcription Notes: This research did not primarily use interview data. I did not fully transcribe every auditory event and interview (Clausen, 2012). Rather, I listened and re-listened multiple times to over 40 hours of selective audio, jotting notes into an Excel document, transcribing parts of meetings, teachings, and informal interviews, adding a new topic to each column. I carefully transcribed sections of audio, based on selection of salient parts, according to themes across data sets. This is in line with Ochs’ (1979) claim and Davidson’s (2009) continued assertion that transcription is based on the theoretical goals of the researcher. There were meetings that were fully transcribed, such focal group interviews and the large group circle that took place at April 4, 2016, at Lakeview High after a day-long sit-in (referenced in chapter three).

Transcription Key

- **__(underline)__**: stress (may be only a partial word)
- **CAPS**: more volume
- **.word.word.**: . in between a string of words together indicates emphasis on each word
- **...**: pauses, within 1-3 seconds
non-verbal communication, movements

explanatory asides

comments from researcher

Appendix B, Chapter 4

Response to school district’s Department of Research, Assessment, and Evaluation after they initially requested observation only:

RESPONSE: In ethnographic research, validation of research, like triangulation, comes with trust between the researcher and participants. Relationship building, in research as well as teaching, is part of that trust and validation. This ethnographic research depends on participation because of the research questions about literacy practices, events, and how learning is framed.

Drawing on discussions with my advisor, Dr. Cynthia Lewis, I need to keep with standards of ethnographic research that include varying degrees of participation. Due to the ethnographic methods of data collection in this study, and with the knowledge and experience that I have teaching diverse demographics of teenagers across [our city], building relationships and trust with research participants is part of the research integrity in ethnographic research. A completely passive observer role, especially with teenagers, would limit the validity of this study. As a white researcher, it is important to show my vulnerability, my interest in listening to students, to talk about race, and to offer resources to staff and students, as asked, in reciprocity for sharing their stories and knowledge. Student participants will give informed consent and assent to the study. Their feelings and concerns are an important part of building trust, so in addition to their own participation and informed consent/assent, students will decide if there are times they prefer me to be a passive observer or an active participant. Acting as a responsive participant observer strengthens the validity of this qualitative, ethnographic study.
Appendix C, Chapter 4

Responsive Participant Observation (RPO) Framework

Building trust and relationships
without co-opting or taking over.

"Bring with somebody, and being there for them, and being able to step out in front of somebody and step out on the line for somebody, that's what's important for me."

Be critical, dynamic, spatial, and reflexive.

Responsive Participant Observation (RPO) Framework

In the spring of 2016, youth led a school-based sit-in to gather, process, and occur after learning that the officer who shot Aaron Clark would not be charged. I was there, and not only did I support the students, but I also helped facilitate the protest. I helped move furniture between different activities, and sometimes I shared stories of my own. Being accountable, and being able to tell stories together, were both important.

I was on the main stage of a stage when I felt a presence or awareness was taking over. It had to block or unblock myself as well. It was a sense of shared space, people's awareness. I could identify for them and ask questions to get youth back to learning.

Youth-led engaging ideas to think through space and design is schools. They are in charge of youth voice and visibility on campus or simplifying their efforts. Youth-led的城市化 needs on social media. As an organizer, a teacher, and a university teacher, I understand the needs on local and national leader of space. It was important that I connected with youth to show ways that they are performing groups, social media, Google ideas, and phone calls, not ways that were expected to me (the email).
Appendix D, Chapter 4

From Facebook Messenger Group Chat, Spring 2016.
This chat came after a group discussion about edits to a proposal, prior to a student meeting with the principal. Participant names are pseudonyms.

Author 51372*
You are all ridiculously impressive. The proposal looks so great. I hope you know how you are changing school history not just for East. Anyway...If for some crazy reason Camacho says not this year, what is your next question to him?

Gordon 51388
Why not? Or when next year?

Nebesa 51404
how will it be different if we wait to have it next year?

Author 51413
(Keep asking potential questions to ask Camacho)

Kira 51429
Does anyone have ideas for questions then?

Author 51438
I like Gordon’s first question and Nebesa’s question.

Brian 51454
what about our proposal makes you hesitant?

Author 51463
(and it might not be in the proposal...it might be outside factors...) these are good, keep 'em coming so that whoever goes has a stack of questions at the ready in case you need them

*The number represents the time since participants last used the Facebook app or any of its functionalities including messenger. It can loosely be a time gauge for the on-line conversation.

---

\(^i\) See more information about Black Lives Matter co-founders Patrisse Khan-Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi at blacklivesmatter.com.

\(^ii\) Philando Castile was a cafeteria supervisor at a local school. He was pulled over due to racialized mistaken identity before a police officer shot and killed him with his girlfriend and her four-year-old
daughter in the car. His death was streamed live on Facebook. Philando’s mother, Valerie Castile, travels to school districts to eliminate student lunch debt on behalf of the Philando Castile Relief Foundation.

iii Decisions were made collaboratively and with intentionality, including the time selected for the sit-in: the same amount of time that police allowed the slain body of 18-year-old Michael Brown to remain in the street in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014.

iv 18 minutes of silence represented the number of days that the community occupied the street in front of the police precinct where Jamar Clark was shot.

v In this paper, neither the words “diverse” nor “urban” are code for students of Color. Diverse indicates a racial diversity in the schools, unique to U.S. context, but common in this upper Midwest urban region, in which white students comprised 20% (Eastside) and 55% (Lakeview) in these two particular schools. Students in these anti-racist groups were racially and ethnically diverse as well, comprised of white students, a predominant number of Black students, and other students of Color.

vi This dissertation research asked about the learning and literacies of anti-racist youth leaderships groups, but the framing of literacies is not included in this manuscript.