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DEMYSTIFYING CONSCIENTIZATION: (RE)DISCOVERING POLITICAL
ORIENTATIONS IN YOUTH ACTION RESEARCHERS

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Demystifying Conscientization: (Re)Discovering Political Orientations in Youth Action

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In social justice work, marginalized youth are often positioned as change agents: people whose critical awareness can be harnessed in the service of political transformation. However, such work commonly portrays youth as naturally insightful about structural inequality and inclined toward activism, neglecting the true complexity of young people's political orientations. The purpose of this study is to paint a more nuanced picture of Black and Latinx youths' political identities that takes account of individual youths' development in relation to the political socialization project of YPAR. I draw on research conducted over the course of a year and four months spent with a group of high school youth as I facilitated youth participatory action research (Y/PAR). I pay particular attention to their politics in relation to questions of race, inequality, and social change, as we interrogated local challenges through a curriculum that explicitly framed inequality as structurally rooted. This study finds that young peoples' responses to learning about structural inequality are complex. Political education can resonate with youth in ways that challenge common sense neoliberal frameworks and expose the class structure as functional and reproductive. However, sociopolitical development does not occur on a linear

path; sometimes consciousness develops and sometimes it is submerged by pre-existing beliefs rooted in the same system that is being critiqued. This study demonstrates the complexity of reconciling political orientation to civic orientation as YPAR offered young people the opportunity to pursue civic engagement on their terms in ways that they found personally and politically significant. Opportunities for meaningful engagement illuminate fissures between the civic and the political as the scope and character of civic opportunities may misalign with youths' political values in ways that may lead to compromise or retrenchment. For progressive civically-engaged youth, critical consciousness development can expose the nuances of the neoliberal state and civil society that have emerged in the modern era under the banner of "progressivism."

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	ii
Introduction.....	8
Chapter 1: Literature Review.....	13
Chapter 2: Methods.....	50
Chapter 3: Background, Setting, and Participants.....	75
Chapter 4: Black Resilience Neoliberalism.....	102
Chapter 5: Summer 2015: Seeking Political Clarity Through Neoliberal Dogma.....	146
Chapter 6: Fall 2015 – Summer 2016: Political Development & Civic Engagement.....	185
Conclusion.....	233
References.....	240
Appendices.....	251

LIST OF TABLES

Table 2.1: Youth Researcher Background Information.....	63
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LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 4.1: “African American Teenage Boy” Poster.....	149
Figure 4.2: “White Teenager” Poster.....	154
Figure 4.3: List of Potential Action Research Topics.....	181
Figure 6.1: “The Plug” Action Research Group Logo.....	205

Introduction

Contemporary youth-based organizations for racial, economic, and anti-colonial justice like Black Youth Project 100, Dream Defenders, Newark Student Union, and the fluid ranks of #BlackLivesMatter, have rightfully been celebrated by movement scholars and the political left for their autonomous, organized, and thoughtful presence in modern campaigns for equal and human rights. However, not much is known about why young people come into that kind of work, what political beliefs they enter with, how they wrestle with understanding the social-political structure, and how they negotiate political orientations with consideration to all of the other political influences in their lives. What these contemporary portrayals neglect is a comprehensive analysis of how organizing spaces themselves contribute to politically socializing youth in particular ways, and of the potential dynamic interests and ideologies that exist between movement actors within an organization. Exploring the ways in which youth-activist organizations facilitate sociopolitical learning and political ideological development can lead to a better understanding of what sustains some youth in progressive activist work and not others. It can also contribute to greater insight about how the goals, directions, and ethos of particular youth-activist groups take shape over the course of a movement or campaign.

In similar ways, social justice research often positions poor youth of color from segregated communities as change agents: people whose critical awareness can be harnessed in the service of political transformation. Critical political development otherwise known as *conscientization*, is a central striving in the youth-based activist space known as youth participatory action research (YPAR) (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Fine, 2009). PAR is an approach to interrogating and disrupting processes of dehumanization enacted by and through the state on communities through research and action led by communities themselves, often in

collaboration with scholars. It is through this process of critical reflection, research, and action, that participants lift the veneer on systems and structures that reinforce their dehumanization, in what is known as *critical consciousness* (Park, 1993). Although YPAR has an extensive body of literature, many studies leave questions unanswered about how Black and Brown youth *enter* projects understanding problems in their communities and problems faced by members of their racial in-group in the U.S. context. What is more, many studies stop short of a full-scale analysis of youths' changing interpretations, discourses, and their articulated influences over those changes, with respect to matters of race, class, and social change. To this end, this study raises the question, "How do Black and Brown youth participating in a politically left, structuralist, race/ethnicity-affirming, action research group develop politically in relation to questions of race, inequality, and social change?"

Highlighting moments of resistance (even resistance to progressive, humanizing, anti-deficit ideas) is critical to the work of humanizing accounts of Black and Latinx youth as such accounts validate their agency and ability to evaluate political information, rather than constructing them as passive and uncritical citizens. Working with large-scale surveys of Black youth's politics, Cohen (2010) describes in young people a "willingness to provide a complex analysis of their lives and this society, even when others do not, and their willingness to highlight both structure and agency in their lives" (p. 3). This means that young people are not uniquely impervious to neoliberal discourses that emphasize personal choice and individual effort as the sources of disparities in quality of life outcomes between groups, over explanations that center institutional or systemic injustice.

This understanding of Black and Brown youth from poor communities as embedded in contexts (like public schools) that affirm the validity of neoliberal theories of the social order,

contrasts with criticisms of these particular youth that suggest they are prone to a maladaptive “culture of victimhood” that is responsible for their inability to rise above their circumstances (Murray, 1984; Ross & Glaser, 1973). Neoliberalism, as a political ideology, has arisen to become public common sense above other theories regarding the nature of the relationship between the public, the state, and the private sector (Hall and O’Shea, 2013). Its affect extends beyond policy to influence the choices and cultivate the perspectives of citizens. Elaborating on the consequence of the forty-year shift toward neoliberalism (Harvey, 2005) on the public’s common sense, Hall and O’Shea (2013) argue, “The broadly egalitarian and collectivist attitudes that underpinned the welfare state era are giving way to a more competitive, individualistic market-driven, entrepreneurial, profit-oriented outlook” (Hall and O’Shea, 2013, p. 11). For this reason, this study also raises the question, “How do young people involved in Y/PAR grapple with neoliberal common?”

Chapter one looks across three strands of literature brought to bear on the research questions raised in this study. I begin by reviewing literature on critical consciousness: it is conceptual foundation, theories of consciousness development, and the ways in which scholars have attempted to study it with youth populations, in particular. My survey of the literature revealed quantitative trends in the study of critical consciousness and stage models that suggest a linearity to critical consciousness development. This is followed by an exploration of YPAR research that explores its foundation, ontological frameworks and tensions, and its relationship to critical consciousness development, demonstrating a limited body of research on critical consciousness development in YPAR. Finally, I examined research on youth political socialization: the history of youth political socialization research, contemporary studies of youth political socialization, and the study of marginalized groups’ political socialization, which

reveals a misrepresentation and overrepresentation of youth *civic* socialization research under the title of youth political socialization research.

The next two chapters, two and three, respectively explore the theoretical framework and methods supporting this research, and my background in TRIO that, in several ways, informed my choice of setting and participants in this study. In chapter two, I elaborate on the theoretical foundations of this work, which includes a recognition that race, class, and place fundamentally shape youths' lives in particular ways that ultimately influence their political identities. It also includes a recognition of neoliberalism as a "common sense" worldview that has shaped public discourse in taken-for-granted ways to justify social reproduction. Finally, the theoretical framework explores the central object of study in this research "political orientations," highlighting the role of both structure and agency in shaping youths' politics. Chapter two offers a table of all youth researchers that displays significant aspects of their background in relation to this study. It outlines methods used in this research which include participant observation, opinion polling, student journals, interviews, and document collection. I elaborate on my use of discourse theory and analysis to analyze data. Chapter three finds me reflecting on my TRIO experiences as both a college student and pre-college worker and how those experiences shaped the current study which takes place in an Upward Bound program. It elaborates on the focal participants' backgrounds and offers a historical overview of the school-community in which this study takes place.

Chapters four, five, and six are data analysis chapters. Chapter 4 focuses on young people's entry into YPAR, analyzing their political discourses and ideas in relation to questions of race, class, and social change at the outset of our time together. It looks specifically at the first of three phases I planned for the 2015 Upward Bound summer program through which I initially

facilitated YPAR. Chapters 5 and 6 offer a bisected analysis of the relationship between YPAR and critical consciousness development, detailing the political development of focal youth while also capturing the trajectory of activities engaged by myself and the youth researchers. Chapter 5 looks at YPAR during the 2015 summer program of Upward Bound, and Chapter 6 explores youths' political development after our YPAR group was taken out of Upward Bound's official curriculum. Both highlight larger themes and trends that emerged within the group but narrow in on focal youth researchers whose political orientations were best characterized within the context of a particular theme. I conclude with implications for activist educators that speak to the significance of direct-instruction and youth-led praxis.

CHAPTER 1: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

This study endeavors to understand and describe how a group of youth researchers' political orientations develop over the course of their time in YPAR as they are exposed to a curriculum that explicitly attempts to foster, enhance, and/or affirm each member's critical consciousness. For this reason, it is crucial to review literature on conscientization to understand how it has been researched, particularly as it relates to youth. Conscientization and critical consciousness are terms developed by Paulo Freire to describe critical reflection and action of the oppressed to disrupt the common-sense conditions of their oppression. Research on critical consciousness is expansive however, several themes emerge.

In Y/PAR¹ scholarship, goings-on in the Y/PAR setting are typically the focal units of analysis, however, in this research, Y/PAR is considered among many contexts that influence (or attempt to influence) young people's political orientations. Research on youth political socialization looks at the relationship between young people's spheres of social influence (e.g. parents, school, peers etc.) and their civic knowledge, preferences, and (to a much lesser extent) actions. Reviewing themes across these areas of scholarship is essential to situating the current research undertaking as it provides insight into areas un(der)explored in both YPAR and in critical consciousness research and theory. By bringing these literatures into conversation with youth political socialization research and theory, this study can better help us understand the political ideas undergirding youths' participation in "social justice" organizations as well as a

¹ Stylized this way to be inclusive of both PAR and YPAR

more comprehensive understanding of the ways in which moments, actors, and institutions both within and outside of critical political spaces influence young people in particular ways.

Conscientization

Foundational Frameworks for Understanding Critical Consciousness

Conscientization is a term developed by Paulo Freire to describe a process or an awakening; central to which is a revealing and disrupting of structural oppression through critical analysis and action. Ultimately, conscientization research explores questions around the development of counter-hegemonic political thought, efficacy, and action (Freire, 1973; Watts, Diemer, and Voight, 2011; Mustakova-Possardt, 1998; Guishard, 2009; Diemer & Blustein, 2006; Peterson, Hamme, and Speer, 2002; Zimmerman & Zahniser, 1991). Freire wrote extensively about the concept within the context of his research praxis in Brazil and El Salvador in which he described “literacy” as *reading the world as one reads the word*. Only through dialogic critical reflection about systems of oppression would oppressed classes be able to challenge hegemonic worldviews, and liberate themselves and society in revolution, an act he ultimately recognized as one of love. Literacy was central to Freire’s (1993/2000) consciousness raising work with Brazilian peasant-class farmers in a society where literacy, social class, and political enfranchisement were inextricably intertwined. The implications of literacy extended beyond mere apprehension of words on a page; learning to read was not a politically neutral educational endeavor, it meant accessing the right to vote among other formal citizenship rights, but it also meant the ability to engage with texts that could awaken conscientization. Therefore, a critical pedagogy was required in which, according to Freire (1993/2000), oppressed peoples dictated the terms of their own literacy, disrupting patterns of colonial relations of teaching and learning that positioned an “all-knowing authority” over “uncivilized and backward” pupils.

Theorizing of what is now understood as conscientization pre-dates the actual word; overlapping aspects of the phenomenon which conscientization seeks to describe have often been described using other terms. Research on conscientization is primarily situated in the fields of social and community psychology and education rather than political science. Mustakova-Possardt (1998) notes historical influences in philosophy, phenomenological studies, and applied psychology to the development of conscientization as a theory. Additionally, Watts et al. (2011) describes parallels between research and conceptualizations of *empowerment* and *conscientization*, and the relationship of these ideas to what they understand as a broader concept in *sociopolitical development*. While empowerment attends more to feelings of political efficacy and personal power to make social change, conscientization (and sociopolitical development) emphasizes “awareness of the structural causes of social problems and social inequality (critical reflection)” (Watts et al., 2011, p. 51; Peterson, Hamme and Speer, 2002). Sociopolitical development (and critical consciousness) is described as a capacity to critically analyze the structural foundations of oppression and apply these insights to enact social change; deconstructing the *ideological foundations* of oppression to transform material conditions (Watts, Williams, and Jager, 2003). It includes spiritual elements and moves beyond critical consciousness to address a more pointed and intentional directing of conscientization toward goals/causes perceived as legitimate ones in the achievement of liberation over oppression. This review synthesizes the language of critical consciousness and sociopolitical development and does not review empowerment theory.

Theorizing Processes of Critical Consciousness Development

Research on critical consciousness (i.e. the full actualization of conscientization) outline its meaning and purpose with respect to marginalized groups, explore stage models of conscientization, and empirically investigate the extent to which it exists (or does not exist), and

how it develops among particular groups or population samples (Freire, 1973; Mustakova-Possardt, 1998; Cross, 1971; Guishard, 2009; Diemer & Blustein, 2006). Critical consciousness, according to Freire (1973) develops as a process, over time. Oppressed folks experience relative naiveté caused by the obscuring of the centrality of power and social structure in their domination, and a tangential concealing of resources with which they might come to recognize and resist this web of structures. Conscientization describes the awakening experienced as this web of structures is revealed and individuals commit themselves to justice-oriented resistive praxis.

There are three tenets of critical consciousness to which most researchers subscribe -- *critical reflection*, *political efficacy*, and *critical action* (Watts, Diemer, and Voight, 2011). *Critical reflection* involves recognition of social and economic inequalities as a public rather than private concern, rooted in systemic flaws. *Political efficacy* is the belief in the capacity for social change through individual and/or collective action/activism. *Critical action* acknowledges that social change and equity require direct and/or collective action. According to Mustakova-Possardt (1998), three other principles of critical consciousness are illuminated in Freire's work: first, it is a way of knowing through critical analysis of reality, second, a connection to reality through intimate participation rather than mere observation, and lastly, it is a dialogue between the self and the social world that leads to a *rearticulation* of reality. Reviewing Freire's writing on conscientization, she (1998) identifies two intersecting components of critical consciousness: *structural development* and *moral motivation*. That is, the development of a structural worldview and a will to disrupt inequality and injustice motivated by a sense of morality in this action. Situating critical consciousness within social psychology, she describes it as a "neo- Piagetian social-cognitive developmental evolution of how people make sense of their social world and

their own relatedness to it, and of the increasing responsibility they take for this process with advancing development” (p. 14).

A significant amount of Freire’s research describes the development of critical consciousness, i.e. conscientization (Freire, 1973, 1975, 1993/2000). Individuals on a trajectory toward conscientization move through *semi-intransitive consciousness*, then into *naïve consciousness*, and finally (hopefully) arrive at critical consciousness. The semi-intransitive individual, according to Freire (1970), “cannot apprehend problems situated outside their sphere of biological necessity. Their interests center almost totally around survival, and they lack a sense of life on a more historical plane” (p. 17). The semi-intransitive individual has limited capacity for structural analysis as biological, immediate, and/or possibly superficial things supersede or impede critical reflection. Naïve consciousness, Freire states “is characterized by an over- simplification of problems [and] by a strong tendency to gregariousness” (p. 18). Among other markers of a person at this stage, folks exhibiting naïve consciousness dismiss or diminish the idea that structural powers figure in any significant way to the landscape of inequitable social outcomes; rather, they lean on individual attributions of social problems, and assume a more benevolent posture in their understanding of and relationship to the axes of state power. Moving from naïve to critical consciousness is laborious, especially without immersion in spaces for collaborative support. Summarizing Freire’s (1973) thoughts on this transition, Guishard (2009) paraphrases, “[W]ithout the nourishment of a space where one can reflect, deliberate, and de-ideologize reality, with others, naïve transitivity can revert to a level of consciousness that is immersed deeper into the dehumanizing abyss of oppression than semi-intransitive consciousness” (p. 90).

Other scholars have conceptualized processes of racial consciousness development. Cross (1971) theorizes a stage model of Nigrescence or Black identity development that regards Black conscientization or political awakening as culminating after a process of colorblindness and internalized racism, followed by racial awakening, and finally an immersion-emersion in Black culture and politics. He argues that Black Americans are socialized into the world to understand white superiority and Black inferiority as natural and inevitable, and through racist/racialized experiences they are able to question the common sense of a “natural social hierarchy,” which ultimately opens a pathway toward disruption of that common sense by immersing themselves in counter-hegemonic Black spaces, texts, and praxis. This Black critical consciousness entails a commitment to justice and action.

Watts et al. (2003) conceptualize a stage model of “political awakening” in *sociopolitical development*, which takes course over five stages, beginning with “a lack of awareness of social inequity, or a belief that it is a just inequity that reflects the abilities and motivations of the groups in question” (p. 188). In other words, individuals at this stage are either unable to recognize inequity or posit a theory of inequality that centers a neoliberal, meritocratic understanding of social outcomes. Stage two is characterized as an emerging awareness of injustice to which individuals respond by assimilation or some other kind of acculturation. To move beyond this stage, one must have a sense of “empowerment” and nascent “conscientization” to recognize the workings of the social structure in maintaining or exacerbating inequitable social outcomes. Going forward, the empowered individual is convicted to more fully interrogate the conditions of oppression and achieves a sense of efficacy to act in order to disrupt structural inequality. Finally, “[i]f the conditions or this mode of consciousness and action are supported in the environment,” according to Watts et al. (2003), “liberation

behavior characteristic of the liberation stage can be established” (p. 188). For this reason, Watts et al. (2003) devote attention to the conditions most suitable for sustaining sociopolitical development.

Studying Critical Consciousness

Empirical research on conscientization has amassed a significant amount of quantitative studies that seek to measure aspects of critical consciousness (i.e. critical reflection, political efficacy, and critical action) largely through survey metrics. Some attempt to weigh participant reliance on either structural framings of social problems versus individualistic/victim-blaming explanations within a particular population (Watts et al., 2011). For example, Neville, Falconer, Coleman, and Holmes (2005) used an Attribution of Blame Scale (ABS) to assess respondents’ explanations of African Americans social and economic positions, finding that those who espoused post-racial “color-blind” philosophies were most likely to posit individual responsibility for social mobility. Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, and Malle (1994) measure *social dominance orientation* (SDO) using the SDO scale to determine levels of support for theories of “group social position”. In other words, to what extent did respondents understand whole groups as experiencing inequality versus buying-into the idea of societal meritocracy? Measuring likelihood of engagement in political action, Corning & Myers (2002) employ the Activism Orientation Scale (AOS) that categorized survey items with either ‘conventional activism’ or ‘high risk activism’ to assess individuals’ orientations. They also investigate the extent to which perceived level of danger influences respondents’ likelihood to engage in particular forms of action.

Qualitative research on critical consciousness is firmly situated in studies set in Y/PAR or some other explicitly critical-political contexts, which will be reviewed later in this chapter.

However, scholars have investigated critical consciousness using qualitative methodologies outside of these spaces. Many studies rely on interviews with participants to understand their relationship to critical consciousness. Mustakova-Possardt (1998) drew on two interview samples, Colby & Damon's (1994) Midlife Social Responsibility of 100 urban-metropolitan U.S. residents and her own (1995) study of Bulgarian midlifers' Social Responsibility and Critical Consciousness, finding various levels of 'moral motivations', 'structural developmental analyses', and critical consciousness, across participants. Theorizing sociopolitical development, Watts et al. (2003) interview self-identified Black American activists to understand what factors played a role in supporting their critical consciousness. Taking a transactional approach in their analysis, their findings reveal the significance of ecological factors over psychological ones (e.g. empowerment) in shaping these activists' political orientations such that particular moments and participants' interpretations of these moments, cultivated their critical consciousness and its future directions. Other qualitative studies of critical consciousness engage ethnographic and case-study approaches to understand and describe what critical consciousness looks like within a particular population. Dorman (2012) for example, investigates how three recently-graduated teachers from an urban teacher preparation program cultivate "critical awareness" in their classroom within her framework of five tools for effective teaching "for equity and social justice." In her study, she pays particular attention to teachers' "appropriation" of two specific critical awareness pedagogical tools: *Tool 2: Express and cultivate critical/sociopolitical awareness* and *Tool 3: Craft Relevance/Authenticity*. She investigates teacher's exhibition of critical consciousness vis-à-vis their apprehension and execution of these pedagogical tools. Her findings are situated within a framework that judges mastery of critical awareness pedagogy, revealing that although most teachers grasped conceptual knowledge indicative of critical

consciousness, they demonstrated varying degrees of ability to enact their understandings as a classroom praxis.

These trends in research on critical consciousness belie a certain rigidity—stages, measurements, and linearity, that leave little room for chaos, multiplicity, dissonance, setbacks, and stagnation (Guishard, 2009). They render critical consciousness as something static and definite and/or reduce empirical understanding to queries of who has it and who does not. There is also an inherent assumption in much of the literature that the advent of critical reflection automatically inspires critical action (Mustakova-Possardt, 1998). Departing from these typical understandings of critical consciousness, the proposed research positions conscientization as something that is, perhaps, cacophonic, and that develops uniquely in persons. This study embraces this messiness grounded in Taylor's (2016) assurance that, "The development of consciousness is never linear—it is constantly fluctuating between adhering to ideas that fit a "common sense" conception of society and being destabilized by real-life events that upend "common sense" (p. 213).

With regard to critical consciousness, this study makes an axiological distinction between *understanding* and *belief*, recognizing both as constituent parts of critical reflection, however; 'understanding' has its limitations. Chin & Samarapungavan (2001) research and theorize the conceptual distinction between understanding and belief in their study of students' apprehension of scientific concepts, noting that researchers studying student learning often falsely conflate these two ideas. They say of the difference, "When we distinguish between understanding and belief, we assume that students learning a new topic in school may construct at least two separate conceptual structures; one structure is for their understanding of the ideas they are being taught, and the other structure is the set of ideas that they themselves believe" (p. 236). This kind of

dialectic clarity is also important as one considers, what Rocha (2014) describes as the difference between knowing and understanding. Knowing entails having information; a collection of facts or data. Understanding implies a deepness; thicker, and more intimate than knowing. Rocha compares understanding to wisdom, and highlights the distinction made between the two Spanish verbs for “to know”: ‘saber’ and ‘conocer.’ Where ‘saber’ is relegated to questions like, “Do you know the time?,” ‘conocer’ is reserved for questions like, “Do you know yourself?”

Youth Critical Consciousness

Critical consciousness has often been conceptualized as an adult process or studied within the context of adulthood (Mustakova-Possardt, 1998; Cross, 1971, 1991; Freire, 1973). However, a significant amount of research understands youth as having (or capable of having) critical consciousness and endeavors to understand conscientization within this population. These studies are both qualitative and quantitative, engaging various methodological designs. Research pertaining to youth critical consciousness is extremely prevalent in education research that falls under critical youth studies (CYS) and its counterpart-- participatory action research (Y/PAR), though it also appears in school-based studies that highlight the relationship between conscientization and outcomes like “student success” or student achievement (El-Amin, Seider, Graves, Tamerat, Clark, Soutter, Johannsen, and Malhotra, 2017; Seider, Clark, and Soutter, 2015; Seider, Graves, El-Amin, Soutter, Tamerat, Jennett, Clark, Malhortra, and Johannsen, 2017; Watts, Abdul-Adil, and Pratt, 2002; Duncan, 1996).

Critical consciousness in critical youth studies and ypar. CYs and Y/PAR position young people as thoughtful, critical, political agents as opposed to typical homologous accounts of youth as passive, uncritical, or inert citizens in the making in other kinds of research on youth citizenship (Cercer, Cahill, and Bradley, 2013; Cammarota & Fine, 2008). Both areas of

scholarship regard youths' critical consciousness development as fundamental (Akom, Cammarota, and Ginwright, 2008; Cencer, Cahill, and Bradley, 2013). Cencer et al. (2013) say of critical youth studies,

“[They] broaden psychological interpretations of youth by making a distinction between the lives of young people and the way young people are categorized and represented in social discourses, cultural practices, and policies (Hall & Jefferson, 1976; Weis & Fine, 2000). Such analysis understands young people in relation to the global context by locating youth resistance and/or agency to dominant cultural and political maps of meaning” (p. 217).

For example, Hosang (2006) draws on case studies of youth-justice organizations based in East Los Angeles and Greenwich Village, New York City, to explore how they organize campaigns to disrupt common-sense discursive and ideological representations that attempt to rationalize structural inequities facing their respective membership ranks. He elaborates on the former's grassroots activism for school reforms related to “disappeared students” (typically characterized as dropouts) and the latter's advocacy for displaced and harassed LGBTQ youth, as well as both groups' involvement in ideological struggles to reframe pathological characterizations that malign each to more easily justify their marginalization. He concludes by summarizing that the work done through these groups “provide[s] structured, strategic spaces and experiences through which young people and their allies can make sense of the vexing and contradictory forces that shape their lives and allow[s] them to test new avenues of struggle and resistance” (p. 16). As seen here, CYS situates the study of youth critical consciousness in their experiences of citizenship, activism, and marginalization, while Y/PAR is an approach to critical and transformational research praxis that centers youths' knowledge, values, and change making efforts within a particular community. PAR is decidedly justice-*work* that takes place within explicitly political contexts designed to enhance sociopolitical development in service of the liberation of the oppressed. Although CYS and Y/PAR are both research paradigms in which

critical consciousness is essential, they depart from one another in important ways. Cammarota & Fine (2008) briefly explicate the difference saying,

“What perhaps distinguishes young people engaged in YPAR from the standard representations in critical youth studies is that their research is *designed* to contest and transform systems and institutions to produce greater justice—distributive justice, procedural justice, and what Iris Marion Young calls a justice of recognition, or respect. In short, YPAR is a formal resistance that leads to transformation—systematic and institutional change to promote social justice” (p. 2) [emphasis added].

CYS broadly illustrates the complexities of youth navigating societal institutions marked by injustice and represent them as having the necessary critical, psychological and intellectual capacities to arrive at critical analyses of inequality and to respond in thoughtful, resistive (not arbitrary) ways to push for their own humanization (i.e. Willis, 1977). PAR, on the other hand, is contextually grounded “formal” praxis in service of structural change vis-à-vis conscientization. Despite the overwhelming representation of youth critical consciousness in these areas, other areas offer distinct approaches to the study of youth critical consciousness.

Quantitative studies of critical consciousness survey young people to measure relative conscientization. Some quantitative studies of critical consciousness, for example, assess young people’s participation in and thoughts about civic and social action activities (Peterson, Hamme, and Speer, 2002). Zimmerman & Zahniser (1991) developed the Sociopolitical Control Scale (SPCS) to measure young people’s perception of their own efficacy in change-making through political action. Participants responded to statements like, *Many local organizations are active in social issues so it doesn’t matter whether I participate*. Pancer, Pratt, Hunsberger, and Alisat’s (2007) Youth Inventory of Involvement (YII) broadly measures young people’s participation in extracurricular activities including political ones. Items assessed frequency of participation in formal (e.g. attending community meetings) and non-traditional political participation, like attending protest marches and demonstrations. Diemer & Blustein (2006) investigate the

relationship between critical consciousness and career development among urban youth. Critical consciousness was measured using both a 14-item Likert SDO scale (sociopolitical analysis) and a 17-item SPCS (sociopolitical control) while career development was measured across three dimensions using quantitative scales. They found that individuals with higher levels of critical consciousness demonstrated greater insights and held stronger commitments in relation to their future careers.

School-based studies of critical consciousness. Outside of these research contexts and methods, studies of youth critical consciousness are also situated in school-based environments that explore how critical political awareness influences student attainment and academic achievement. Although some YPAR, at times, takes place in schools (e.g. Shultz, 2008) several school-based studies of critical consciousness are not situated within this context (El-Amin et al., 2017; Seider et al., 2015; Seider, et al. 2017; Watts et al., 2002). El-Amin et al. (2017) argue that schools can advance academic achievement in their marginalized youth by cultivating critical consciousness. Three themes emerged from their longitudinal study of the dynamic ways that five urban schools in the northeast fostered critical consciousness in their Black youth: *teach the language of inequality, create space to interrogate racism, and teach students how to take action* (p. 20). Similarly, Seider et al. (2017) use a mixed-method approach to investigate critical consciousness raising efforts in secondary “progressive urban schools” and “no-excuses” charter schools that highlight sociopolitical learning or civic engagement in their missions. They find that progressive secondary schools facilitated significant gains in young people’s critical awareness of racial inequality, while no-excuses secondary charter schools were responsible for gains in youths’ consciousness of class-based inequality.

Research on youth critical consciousness is certainly represented across several fields,

subfields and methods of inquiry, however, most prominent in CYS and YPAR. This study of youth conscientization is situated in YPAR, therefore, it is necessary to review studies that engage YPAR, as conscientization is a central part of the process. YPAR attempts to facilitate young people's sociopolitical development in an explicitly political, formal research environment. What follows will review this field of scholarship to demonstrate the nuance that the questions raised in the current study attempt to address.

Youth/ Participatory Action Research

Foundations of Youth/ Participatory Action Research

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is an approach to collective organizing, research, and resistance that centers both the use and production of indigenous knowledge to actively address some local force of inequity. In PAR work that explicitly centers the knowledge and agency of youth (YPAR), this manifests as an inherent tension as this attempt at “decolonizing praxis” usually must reconcile with having an adult person (e.g. a scholar, graduate student, or teacher) as a “facilitator”. I purposely use the language of ‘facilitator’ instead of ‘leader’ or ‘teacher’ to resist a power hierarchy that truthfully is never fully escaped. To highlight this study's contribution, it is important to explore the theoretical foundations of YPAR and how scholarship that engages a youth participatory action research approach takes up critical consciousness.

Lewin (1946) is credited for developing PAR as research epistemology divorced from notions of objectivity; however, critical and emancipatory PAR (fourth generation action research) blossomed out of anti-colonial movements in Latin America owing credit to community activists and researchers from the fields of critical pedagogy, liberation psychology and liberation theology (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). Ignacio Martin-Barò's work, and the

work of scholar-activists like Paulo Freire and Orlando Fals Borda are pivotal cornerstones of contemporary action research wherein marginalized citizens organize to resist oppressive state action. Freire and Fals Borda's participatory action work involved organizing with the proletariat agricultural class in Latin America for literacy, political enfranchisement, and workers' rights while Martin-Baro mainly served an external role as a public theorist, regime critic, and activist during revolutionary uprising in San Salvador (Fals Borda, 1987; Nyirenda, 1996; Burton & Kagan, 2004). Challenging the traditional role of the scholar and theorist in research, Martin-Baro (1994) calls for action-oriented praxis saying:

“To acquire new...knowledge it is not enough to place ourselves in the perspective of the people; it is necessary to involve ourselves in a new praxis, an activity of transforming reality that will let us know not only about what is but also about what is not, and by which we may try to orient ourselves toward what ought to be” (pp. 28- 29).

Each of these early Latin American scholar-activists believed the knowledge, culture, and action of the oppressed could transform the dehumanizing social structures sustaining their oppression.

Though it is often unacknowledged, Y/PAR also has roots in Africa and Asia (Guishard, 2009). Its history in the U.S. is connected to the African American civil rights movement with the Highlander Folk School and its sponsored citizenship schools during the 1950s and 60s (Payne and Strickland, 2008). Organized by activist-educators Septima Clark and Myles Horton, citizenship schools taught young (and older) African Americans in the south-- originally focusing on literacy and other traditional academic skills to pass voter literacy tests. Citizenship schools were often led by young people and relied on a student-centered and student-directed critical pedagogy in which the curriculum was shaped by students' own learning goals and experiences as laborers. The program quickly evolved to encompass a curriculum that engaged students in a broader range of issues related to electoral politics and black political enfranchisement. Levine (2008) says of the expanded curriculum,

“[It] entailed teaching how the government functioned on the local, state, and federal levels and how to use newspapers to follow current events. It also meant helping new voters learn to reject those who tried to get their votes through bribery or specious claims of friendship, demand that politicians explain and justify their platforms, and focus their support to gain the maximum electoral impact” (p. 38).

As recent generations of U.S. Black and Latinx communities and their young people experience new and recurring forms of marginalization and dehumanization, Y/PAR remains as vital and relevant an instrument in the pursuit of structural change as it was during the civil rights movement era.

Understanding the Y/PAR Approach

The *participatory* component of Y/PAR distances it from erudite and abstract notions of research and acknowledges youths’ power to bring knowledge and skills to projects in service of collectively deconstructing the problems that plague their schools and neighborhoods. *Research* in YPAR typically involves practices situated within the social sciences (e.g. identifying a problem, developing research questions, the use of qualitative and/or quantitative methods of data collection, and data analysis and interpretation); however, it is unhinged from commitments to Western empiricism and “objectivity” in the pursuit of research and action for justice (Cammarato & Fine, 2008). *Action* is often conceptualized as a commitment to collective social and political change (Tuck & Guishard, 2013) though what counts as action in much of the YPAR literature ranges widely.

A significant portion of scholarship about YPAR seeks to clarify and refine this approach; engaging in theoretical, ethical, and conceptual analysis, debate, and elaboration. Fine (2009), Cammarato & Fine (2008) and Rodriguez & Brown (2009) focus on theorizing what YPAR is and what it does. In response to what she perceives as corporations co-opting revolutionary language and images of PAR, Fine (2009) outlines a framework for youth PAR.

She says, “At its heart, PAR insists that those persons who have been most structurally disenfranchised have, what Arjun Appadurai (2006) calls “a right to research” the conditions of their oppression and their resistance” (p. 2). Cammarato & Fine (2008) identify an analogy to YPAR in *The Matrix* film, likening students to the main character, Neo, who participated in learning that exposed the veneer created by the system, and simultaneously strengthened his capacity for dismantling that system. Similarly, Rodriquez & Brown (2009) offer guiding principles for participatory action research with youth, distancing it from student voice research, which they find valuable, but largely silent on the politics that impact *which* student voices are heard. They describe the importance and centrality of marginalized youth perspectives for local change-making and challenging power structures.

In Torre et al’s (2008) study, YPAR is theorized as a *contact zone* for *Nos Otras*; a unique space in which students with different backgrounds and positionalities with regard to the social hierarchy can come together. In a contact zone the *Nos Otras* or “us others” interrogate the sociopolitical distance between group members with varying social positionalities, inviting the opportunity to deconstruct issues of power and privilege both within society and within the group itself. Tuck (2009) re-envision the purpose of the YPAR space to move beyond what she calls the “reform/revolution” paradox often underlying the action component in participatory action research, recognizing the limitations and/or difficulty operationalizing either pursuit. She advocates for an alternative epistemological framework for change rooted in liberatory indigenous values of sovereignty, contention, balance and relationship.

One of the major ethical dilemmas in Y/PAR is in regard to facilitator authority and the relationship between the facilitator and youth in action. The current study confronts issues related to facilitator authority and student-centeredness considering that Y/PAR vehemently calls

for youth to lead projects in many regards, yet conscientization also requires the unveiling of complex systems of oppression. When/if students conceptualize problems like homelessness or unemployment as evidence of the cultural or individual failings of people, facilitators must inevitably decide what their ideal role is in responding to those framings (Guishard, 2009). As questions arise concerning “what is best” for youth, facilitators run the risk of reproducing the top-down hierarchical arrangements that YPAR attempts to disrupt. Tuck and Guishard (2013) discuss an ethical framework for de-colonial participatory action research (DPAR), marking a distinction between PAR, positivist social science research and DPAR. They describe the ways in which traditional research can/often does exploit, silence, and render powerless participants from indigenous groups and marginalized populations in the name of scientific objectivity, or to contribute to a knowledge production in academia without concern for reciprocity. DPAR resists these research practices and centers the knowledge and experiences of the local population, it commits deeply in authentic collaboration, where participants truly share authority over research and the products of research and is primarily concerned with achieving justice and social change. In this way DPAR is committed to preserving the dignity of research participants, and places significant value on reflexivity and humility of the scholar.

Guishard’s (2009) research highlights the ethics of participation in Y/PAR as she critiques exploitative and dehumanizing researcher practices and offers insights toward the humanization of participants and the contestation of inequities related to power differentials in authoring and authorship. Her own study provides an exemplar of this kind ethical facilitation as she vulnerably lays bare her own complicated path of developing critical consciousness alongside her research collaborators. Guishard contends,

I, for a time, was guilty of appropriating PAR by neglecting to attend to the politics of inquiry, and my own “awakening of critical consciousness”, in my work and writing. The

business of who gets to know and theorize about/on others and who is known by eyes that lack self-scrutiny is difficult subject matter in research. Illuminating the micro-politics of the research process it is at the core of what is beautifully unique, transgressive, but at the same time challenging about conducting participatory research (p. 88).

Self-reflective accounts of the facilitator's experience in Y/PAR are often a product of hindsight, and a way in which scholars engaging YPAR advance the refinement of this approach and interrogate the role of the facilitator (Nygreen, 2013). Nygreen (2013) uses auto-ethnography to analyze what she calls "me now vs. me then" throughout her time facilitating Y/PAR with youth researchers at a last chance high school. She provides a critical self-analysis, detailing the trial and error of her moves as a facilitator/educator reflecting on her field notes and some of the inherent problems with the project which involved the group teaching a social justice class at their school. The politics of race, gender, class, and power within the group impacted whose voices were heard and which opinions were validated. In her analysis, she points out her blinders when it came to perceiving and addressing these issues as they arose.

Maguire (1993) writes about the ethical challenges and feelings of ambivalence that came with facilitating participatory action research as a graduate student through a Battered Families Services organization in New Mexico. She describes her missteps in attempting to form a participatory research group through this organization, and the insight she gained after the projects' conclusion. She wrestles with her own roles in the process (organizer, researcher, educator) and positionality as a white woman, in relation to the Navajo and Pueblo women in the group. Maguire says, "Reflections on the struggles I encountered in practice ...illuminate some of the theoretical and methodological contradictions still to be worked out within participatory research" (p. 157). Similar to Nygreen, her focus is not primarily about the project itself, as her reflections highlight the group's deviance from what she calls "real participatory action research." She continues, "...reflection on the flaws and inadequacies, and even modest successes

of *attempting* this alternative research approach may help others find the courage to learn by doing rather than being immobilized and intimidated by ideal standards [of PAR]” (p. 158).

The dilemmas highlighted by researchers employing this approach to inquiry and action have driven critical YPAR forward in important ways. In this study, I similarly grapple with some of the challenges of practice raised by the previously mentioned scholars, which forced me to question my ethics as facilitator and to reflect on the true nature and *value* of this work. Despite the conflict of the “facilitator” not yet being resolved, this subfield benefits from constantly raising new questions and interrogating issues of power toward the articulation of a vision of a more effective, critical, and transformative Y/PAR praxis.

Critical Consciousness in Y/PAR

Tepid empirical analysis. Although the action research process benefits from clear articulation in the literature, the empirical documentation of conscientization within YPAR deserves further unpacking. Y/PAR has an extensive body of literature, yet many studies leave questions unanswered about how youth *enter* projects understanding problems in their communities and problems faced by members of their racial in-group in the U.S. context. Additionally, reports on Y/PAR often paint a picture of universal or undifferentiated student buy-in, offering limited insights about moments of large-scale or individual student resistance to structural analyses of inequality, or the trial and error of educative moves that hopefully lead young people to resist neoliberal-individualistic explanations of inequality. Park (1993) describes conscientization in PAR as a process of both critical analysis and action. He says, “Critical consciousness is raised not by analyzing the problematic situation alone, but by engaging in actions in order to transform the situation” (p. 8). Cammarota & Fine (2008) also confirm the interdependence of critical analysis and civic action in critical consciousness saying,

“Learning to act upon and address oppressive social conditions leads to the acknowledgment of one’s ability to reshape the context of one’s life and thus determine a proactive and empowered sense of self. *The intended consequence of YPAR is praxis and thus changes of consciousness that allow the young person to perceive him/herself as capable of struggling for and promoting social justice within his or her community* [emphasis added]” (p. 10).

Despite critical consciousness development being a central aspect of YPAR, quite often, scholars do not empirically explore the development of critical consciousness in these formal spaces.

Guishard (2009) confirms this saying, “While many educators and researchers frequently employ critical consciousness in their critique of education, in their analyses of the social, economic, and political inequalities, few explore the notion empirically” (p. 93). Indeed, a 2017 comprehensive review of Y/PAR research is absent any mention of critical consciousness or conscientization (Caraballo, Lozenski, Lyiscott, and Morrell, 2017). The notion of critical consciousness in scholarship engaging Y/PAR is often discussed alongside an empirical inquiry of young people’s activities within a particular project (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2008; Rubin and Hayes, 2010; Shultz, 2008) where it is often understood as a natural outgrowth of the action research process when individuals or groups are exposed to the critical, action-oriented approach. In other words, much of the scholarship engaging Y/PAR is about the research and action component, while inquiry into how the process influences or “causes” critical consciousness development is either ancillary, taken-for-granted, or goes undiscussed; this, despite many researchers identifying consciousness as the something that inspires civic action.

Guajardo & Guajardo (2008), for example, document the story of their Y/PAR center in South Texas that engages a story method approach to advance community justice on behalf of youth and local residents. Youth researchers documented community members’ life stories and experiences to develop a fuller understanding of the challenges that residents confronted and to determine a course of action to address those challenges. They and former Llano Grande youth

researcher, Carmen Casperalta, describe the process of Carmen and other youth researchers' engagement with literature that aided in their understanding of systems of oppression and other learning experiences that developed their research skills. They elaborate saying:

Critical perspectives are...an integral part of the curriculum as students and teachers discuss social, political, and institutional inequities as they read Freire... [and] Ladson-Billings. Henry Trueba's work also became part of the literature that guided the research work. Through these readings, Carmen and her classmates learned research skills such as interviewing, observing, and analyzing data; and they learned about critical ethnography and pedagogy as well" (p. 10).

Guajardo et al.'s project reveals the transformative changes these Latinx students made in their South Texas community and in their own lives, including the creation of a Spanish immersion program that provided jobs to many unemployed locals, and their influence in the passing of legislation that reformed the financial aid process for undocumented citizens going to college in Texas.

Similarly, Shultz (2008) documents his time working as a teacher with his class of students from Chicago's Cabrini Green housing project. He engages his class in YPAR and writes about wrestling with the complexity of negotiating authority as an anti-oppressive stance toward urban teaching and YPAR facilitation. His work points to YPAR's potential to be politically transformative in schools and alludes to its potential for building academic skills in the classroom. Shultz (2008) highlights the YPAR group's process of research and action in service of getting a new school building to replace their current dilapidated one. This text describes how he scaffolds students through various inquiry-based political activities and academic activities, both in service of their action-agenda of obtaining the new building, and students' growing interest and commitment to this kind of learning versus traditional curriculums. However, he also makes sure to comment on external roadblocks or lapses along the way. In the end, the group did not get a new school building but their school would

eventually be shut down and students were sent to a new school.

Rubin & Hayes (2010) find that divergent school and life experiences between students in a divested Black and Latinx community and their middle-class, suburban-living counterparts, led to YPAR projects in which inequality and social justice were conceptualized quite differently. Students in Surrey—the Black and Latinx school-- were primarily concerned about the violence in their community and decided on a project to tackle “drugs and murder”, while the students at Allwood—a mostly white suburban school—took on a project that stemmed from their concern that backpacks could not be worn in the hallway of the school. Rubin & Hayes (2010) underscore the significance of *congruence* and *disjuncture* in their analysis of the divergent nature of these projects, referring to the ways in which the young people’s citizenship experiences either confirmed or negated the efficaciousness of the social contract, leading to divergent interpretations of what counts as “injustice”. Students in Surrey had very little reason to trust in the merit of democratic institutions, while Allwood students held high trust in these same institutions. Students in Surrey worked on a project to compile an anthology of writings and photographs about their concerns, with many students describing it as an empowering and liberating experience. Midway through their project, Allwood got a new principal who overturned the ‘no backpack’ rule and despite their lack of intervention to resolve this issue, the students still took ownership over the outcome and felt a sense of accomplishment.

Across these examples, scholars narrate Y/PAR experiences that focus on the experience of the entire group. The collective is generally to be understood as moving in a particular direction in a cohesive way (i.e. most youth are eventually on board with the project), generally led by a congruent interpretation of community (or school) problems, which itself (their common interpretation) is understood to be a product of the Y/PAR educational experience (and/or a

unifying social class experience) that motivates them in similar ways to take political action (i.e. most youth understand the problem being addressed in Y/PAR in similar ways *because* of their similar grasp of and buy-in to the Y/PAR experience or because of their shared social positionality with other youth researchers). In this way, youth researchers are understood to share a collective consciousness to a degree. Additionally, despite cursory allusions to critical consciousness, much of the scholarship involving a Y/PAR approach does not explore it as a focus of the inquiry.

Studying the demonstration of consciousness. Though few Y/PAR studies interrogate the actual process of critical consciousness *development* during a project, several study or document participants' demonstration of consciousness. Watts, Griffith, and Abdul-Adil's (1999), Watts, Abdul-Adil, and Pratt (2002), and Watts and Abdul-Adil (2008) for example, raise questions around African American male youths' development of critical consciousness through critical hip-hop media analysis within the *Young Warriors* program. They describe using rap music videos and movies as a formula for critical discussion designed to stimulate young people's analytic capacities and critical consciousness. Evidence of conscientization in these studies is seen in youths' engagement in critical dialogue within the YPAR group. Elaborating on changes in consciousness demonstrated in their study, Watts et al. (2002) say, "It was only over time that brief declarative sentences...evolved into more complex and sophisticated responses that were well defended and constructive as well as critical" (p. 47). Watts & Abdul-Adil (1999) offer a brief empirical inquiry into the discourses youth engage, looking across five categories of responses that indicate the presence of critical consciousness during Young Warriors group sessions. They track the amount and frequency of "critical consciousness responses", which reveals a markedly upward trend. One such example of this was in response

to a facilitator's question, "If you could change some of the things going on in this community, what would be some of the things you'd want to change?" in which youth(s) answered, "have more security," "people have to be in at a certain time," and "I think it would be a lot more Black unity, then all of this would be settled. You know, all the drugs and everything" (p. 268).

Similarly, Romero, Cammarota, Dominguez, Valdez, Ramirez, and Henderson's (2008) study highlights the voices of young people across several project cycles throughout the Social Justice Education Project's (SJEP) tenure, describing the role that the program played in developing their conscientization. Several current and former students describe the role that the research collective's work played in raising their consciousness as they developed, carried out, and presented their research. One former student says,

I love knowing that without the social justice education project I would have probably gone through life as a halfway conscious, media-controlled drone...Prior to the project, I had only some knowledge of what social justice was, let alone did I even know all of the injustices that were right under my nose, and that I went through every day...[SJEP] opened my eyes and mind...I got the chance to do a lot more research on some of the things that affect my community and we came up with several ways to resolve these injustices..." (p. 141- 142).

Luis' comments indicate that Y/PAR is directly responsible for his development of critical consciousness as he understands it. Examples like this are cited as evidence that conscientization did, in fact, take place as a result of Y/PAR praxis, and allude to a linear growth from relative lack of consciousness (perhaps semi-intransitive or naïve consciousness) into critical consciousness. While these studies seemingly verify that the Y/PAR process is a pivotal way in which to stimulate and foster sociopolitical development, they provide limited insight into particular moments in the Y/PAR process and how those moments contributed to young people's development in any specific way, nor do they endeavor to unpack how, why, and which particular practices advanced young people toward critical consciousness. YPAR studies often

narrate the long arc of projects and focus less on intimate portraits of the discussions, debates, and rifts over particular analyses, interpretations, and understandings that affect individuals or the entire group in ways that resonate moving forward.

The less common position some researchers' take is moving beyond collectivism and cohesion in their framing of youth researchers to draw attention to tensions within the group or ways in which individuals engage with Y/PAR process. Cahill, Rious-Moore, and Threatts (2008) is one such example in which the researchers attend to these issues within the PAR collaborative itself and the challenges related to identity and power that participants navigated, and the deeper self-understandings they developed as a result. Their research narrative is descriptive about critical educative moments stemming from the group's justice work and its engagement in critical discussions. The project they describe was largely undefined at the outset which led to an organic inquiry process with organic conversations untethered to a formal research agenda. Cahill et al. (2008) highlights conversations and contestations that would eventually lead them to investigate issues of gentrification, local community divestment, interpersonal and institutional racism, and misogyny, at their intersections. They say, "...we critically investigated our everyday lives in our neighborhood, the Lower East Side of New York City. Along the way, we not only learned how to do research, but also we learned a lot about ourselves and our community" (p. 89). They describe the research project – including reading research, agenda setting, discussing community and personal challenges, and campaigning – that set them on a trajectory to more fully understand structures of oppression. This work importantly illustrates the complexity of achieving accord in Y/PAR. Although Cahill et al. (2008) highlights the voices of individual participants, those voices suggest Y/PAR process was primarily, if not exclusively, responsible for fostering their conscientization.

Inquiry into the development of young people's analyses of social problems in their communities and problems impacting members of their racial in-group necessitates a review of the literature on youth political socialization to understand how scholars have studied the ways in which individuals and institutions (outside of the Y/PAR context) have shaped young people's politics in particular ways. Y/PAR scholarship may, at times, romanticize young people's experience in Y/PAR, implying (often through omission), a smooth upward trajectory toward critical awareness and action. It may also lead readers to assume that the Y/PAR process itself is primarily or exclusively responsible for the advent of young people's critical awareness. One of this study's contributions is its attempt to disrupt this pattern by bringing the Y/PAR approach to conscientization development into conversation with research and theories of youth political socialization to develop a more complex and comprehensive understanding of how young people involved in Y/PAR yet situated within complex social ecologies negotiate political orientations on matters of race, class, inequality, and social change.

Youth Political Socialization

While YPAR intends to politically socialize youth through methods designed to enhance conscientization-- which include structuring a critical educational environment, researching inequality, and helping to orchestrate action efforts to confront injustice-- other individuals and institutions play an active role in shaping young people's political orientations. Reviewing research on youth political socialization (YPS) is vital to developing a more comprehensive understanding of the ways in which previous scholars have undergone systematic inquiry into the forces that influence youths' politics in their social worlds.

Researchers across the social sciences-- including political science, political psychology, civic education, and social psychology-- have researched the influence of socialization on

individuals' and groups' political beliefs and behaviors (McLeod, 2000; Owens, 2008; Habashi, 2017). Owens (2008) defines political socialization as “*the processes by which citizenship orientations are transmitted [and is] conditioned by shifts in the political, social, and economic contexts at the community, nation-state, and international levels*” (p. 1). Researching political socialization can provide insight into the political cultures of a society and reveal the mechanisms through which certain patterns of socialization and political discourses develop staying power (Almond, 1960). The study of political socialization also illuminates micro-level socialization of individuals and discreet population groups. This study attends to both the macro and micro aspects of socialization in its exploration of youth researchers' political orientations over the course of their time in YPAR.

The Development of Youth Political Socialization Research

Early research on YPS endeavored to understand the ways in which youth developed political ideals and was marked by periods of major decline and precipitous resurgence associated with moments of public concern about democratic stability (Flanagan & Sherrod, 1998; McLeod, 2000; Cook, 1985). Interest peaked during the postwar 1950s amid concerns about patriotism; specifically, young people's allegiance to values associated with democracy (a likely byproduct of red scare) and their support of nation-state political economies, as childhood was understood to be the time when individuals developed these loyalties (Flanagan & Sherrod, 1998; Cook, 1985; Flanagan, 2013). The social movements of the 1960s and 70s prompted a new direction in political socialization scholarship marked by questions about social change and stability. Evidence of these themes during this era are illustrated in Hyman's (1959) rendering of the field in which he attests that political socialization is conceptualized in terms of 3 dimensions: participation or involvement in politics, radical or conservative goals, and

democratic or authoritarian forms. Instead of concentrating on childhood, research in the latter part of the 20th century concentrated on adolescents and young adults as this demographics' civic actions played a central role in challenging the status quo of the previous era. To that end, intergenerational political socialization became a focus in research as scholars sought to understand how and to what extent families, across multiple generations, passed down political attitudes and behaviors (Flanagan & Sherrod, 1998; Jennings, Stoker, and Bowers, 2009; Glass & Bengtson, 1986).

Over the past decade, scholars in this field have attempted to broaden traditional and limited conceptualizations and approaches that dominated in the previous era of studying YPS. One of the enduring trends in the literature is that it often looks at formal civic behaviors like voting patterns, campaign organizing, and political party affiliations to draw conclusions about young citizens (Flanagan & Sherrod, 1998; Flanagan, 2013; Strachan, 2007; Mcleod, 2000). Moreover, three primary agents of socialization are typically understood to influence young people in this scholarship: *the media*, *school*, and *parents* (McLeod, 2000). Across these independent variables, researchers often situate young people as passive internalizers of the political influence that these “big three” wield (McLeod, 2000; Flanagan, 2013; Jennings & Niemi, 1968; and Habashi, 2017; McLeod, 2000). Flanagan (2013) and others note that this transmissive model around youth political socialization coupled with overreliance on narrow measures of what constitutes “political behavior” result in contrived analyses that often find youth to be apathetic citizens or apolitical, precipitating panic over the uncertain future of American democracy.

Habashi (2017) and Owens (2008) both argue for a major shift in the study of political socialization in the 21st century and an expansion of narrow approaches. Rapid globalization,

technological advancement (e.g. social media), new patterns of immigration, and global military conflict have redefined what it means to study political socialization in both the U.S. and abroad. Progress in the study of YPS is seen in the production of research that focuses on agents of socialization beyond “the big three” or that recognize the interdependence of socializers, and that acknowledge youth have agency in their own socialization process. Indeed, scholars have increasingly come to recognize young people as actively involved in shaping their political development (Andersson, 2015; Gordon & Taft, 2011; Habashi, 2017; Flanagan, Bowes, Jonson, Csapo, and Sheblanova, 1998; Dunsmore and Lagos, 2008; Yates and Youniss, 1998; Youniss et al., 2002). Youniss et al. (2002) contend, stating, “political socialization is not something that adults do to adolescents, it is something that youth do for themselves” (p. 133). Accordingly, Andersson (2015) puts forth a new conceptualization of YPS, that is, *situational political socialization*, which he argues, “transcends this conventional view of political socialization as something that is strictly formal, rational, controlling, hierarchical (top-down), future-oriented and focused on the preservation of the social order. The concept makes clear that political socialization is carried forward by the participants themselves...” (p. 969). Despite these nuances, a clear and commonly held definition of what counts as the “political” eludes-- a challenge that is accompanied by the reengagement of past approaches to the study of YPS.

Civic Socialization Vs. Political Socialization. For example, studies often conflate what is perhaps better understood as youth *civic* socialization with YPS. Oftentimes, political socialization is conceptualized as the study of influences over young people’s civic and current events knowledge, or their civic participation (Elcock, 1983; Cook, 1985; Roberts & Parsell 1988; Niemi and Junn, 1988; Dunsmore & Lagos, 2008; Habashi, 2017). These studies investigate whether particular agents, institutions, or contexts play a role in increasing things like

knowledge of party platforms and candidates, voter turnout, volunteerism, activism, and organizing (Pacheco, 2008; Hanks, 1981; Simon & Merrill, 1998). Simon & Merrill (1998) quantitatively evaluated the impact of a comprehensive civic education program whose curriculum involves a range of activities designed to boost students' civic knowledge and interest, and to increase parent voter turnout. Participating K-12 classrooms engaged students in candidate research, policy discussions, role playing, and craft activities, and encouraged voting-related parent discussion and personal engagement with news media. They found that a statistically significant amount of program youth "said...it was important to vote on Election day," "had political discussions" with parents, and reviewed news media for "campaign information" (p. 36). Voter turnout was also found to be higher in areas supporting a Kids Voting Program than areas not engaging this program, and students' "teachers said the program had a positive impact in increasing short-term...knowledge and enthusiasm about the election" (p. 39). Pacheco's (2008) quantitative study explores whether living in a swing state or community vs. a homologous political context (i.e. primarily Republican or Democrat) yields any significant differences in future voter participation, finding that "adolescents who reside in politically competitive locales or states have higher turnout years later compared to those who live in uncompetitive contexts" (p. 415). Political socialization in this instance is inferred to have taken place because of an increase in voter turnout. While it can be argued that *civic* socialization may have influenced voter turnout as a result of the Kids Voting Program or living in a swing state, it is less clear whether the politics undergirding young people's particular civic actions were shaped in any particular way as a result of these influences. Political socialization in this respect is defined as socialization into formal civic knowledge and civic participation, and the scope of this research is to determine whether socialization happened.

When young people's actual politics are studied in YPS research, it is often an inquiry into political ideologies and values, party allegiances, and civic trust (Habashi, 2017; Gordon & Taft, 2011; Banks & Roker, 1994; Mcleod, 2000; Cohen, 2010; Flanagan, 2013). These texts in YPS literature offer fairly little descriptive exploration of *how* youth are socialized in particular contexts. Banks & Roker's (1994) quantitative study investigates potential differences in the influence of two different schooling models across several dimensions of youth politics in a sample of 127 British girls. Questionnaires were devised to gather information about students in areas like: *level of interest in politics*, feelings of *political alienation*, *overall political commitment*, *support for the current government*, and knowledge of local government elected officials. Questionnaire analysis revealed that private school girls held statistically significant more system-supporting attitudes, supported the Conservative Party over the Labor Party, and reported less feelings of political alienation than girls attending the state school. Gordon & Taft (2011) draw on two ethnographic studies to highlight the experiences of teenage activists who identify the centrality of youth-led peer socialization in their political development. Youth critiqued adult structured opportunities for civic engagement as symbolic, shallow, and patronizing attempts to "socializ[e] youth for the future", opting instead for adult alliances rather than leadership. Teens advocated for youth-led campaigns and political/civic learning. Gordon & Taft's account of YPS is not a systematic analysis of the ways in which youth-led socialization operates in specific activist contexts to influence young activists' politics; rather, the authors highlight the voices of young people who reiterate the point that youth-led is better than adult-led for various reasons. Corroborating the function of youths' voices in this article, the authors write, "These quotes suggest that youth activists see a great deal of value in youth-led political socialization, of teens teaching teens" (p. 1519). To be sure, youth are granted agency in these

accounts that breach the boundary of a transmissive model of political socialization, and rightfully so; however, if studies rarely conduct generative analyses of the ways in which institutional contexts and persons in youths' social networks influence the actual political values and beliefs espoused by youth, what conclusions can be drawn about the process of socialization—beyond the fact that it took place? Moreover, studies often do not engage methods in which the socializing agents, contexts, and institutions are systematically queried about their role in attempting to shape youths' values and politics. They typically rely exclusively on firsthand accounts from youth about their experiences. The current study addresses these gaps.

YPS and marginalized youth. A read of the literature on political socialization also reveals limitations for understanding the complex terrain that marginalized youth of color in particular are navigating to develop their understandings about race, class, inequality, and social change. Flanagan (2013) says, “teens political theories are built up over time as they negotiate power and privilege in their relationships; as they encounter discrimination and wrestle with exclusion; and as they interact with fellow citizens from diverse backgrounds” (p. 17). In other words, social ecology plays a pivotal role in socializing youths' political beliefs yet social ecology is rarely engaged in this literature.

Habashi (2017) embraces an ecological model of political socialization. Her study opens an inquiry into the experiences of Palestinian youths' political socialization experiences, describing a wider array of socialization influences both formal and informal, at the local, national, and global levels, that in order to make sense of, youth constantly exercise agency. She elaborates on this ecological model stating that it attends to “the different ways that youth are politically socialized, with particular focus on multiple agents, realities, and relationship between local and global discourses that assist in forming youth's perspectives and actions, keeping in

mind that all of these elements are closely interrelated” (p. 18). This work investigates how youth experience socialization in specific contexts as much as it acknowledges their agency across these various politically significant socialization experiences. YPS literature requires more conversation about the stated and expressed political ideas and values transmitted across these various contexts to better understand the ecology of political socialization. Similarly, Kwon (2013), provides an in-depth exploration of how working class Asian American and Pacific Islander youth in California experience political socialization through youth programming. Her study investigates the growing influence of the nonprofit and philanthropic sectors on youth programs that she argues are a technology of control over young people who are framed as “at risk.” It reveals the way in which youth programs attempt socialize young people to perceive problems in their community as emanating from cultural pathology, and to understand themselves as both in danger of succumbing to that pathology and also exceptional/ different from pathologic community members. She also finds nonprofit youth organizations to be arbiters of what she calls neoliberal affirmative governmentality wherein civic engagement is often framed as acts of community service volunteerism for personal betterment (e.g. community cleanup) and simultaneously constructed as the primary path to advance local change. Kwon’s (2013) study also demonstrates young people’s agency and strategic ability to modify institutional expectations and goals to pursue social change on their terms. In addition to investigating the political socialization roles of institutional workers, both Habashi (2017) and Kwon’s (2013) studies demonstrate the need to further explore the ways that institutions themselves – as places that embody particular already-understood cultural, ideological, and moral principles-- carry the power to communicate values to youth both through and a part from the cognates working within them.

Like Kwon (2013), other scholars highlight the ways in which institutional socialization can pose a barrier to youths' development of critical politics. Woodson (1933) for example, interrogates the role that schools play in stifling the social-political development of black youth. In *The Miseducation of the Negro* he argues that Black folks in American schools are taught from a Eurocentric perspective that implies African descended people contributed very little to modern society's advancement. In white institutions, he argues, Black students learn that white ways of being and thinking are superior, and then return back to their race, forced to see it through the eyes of whites as a backward burden to humanity-- a condition which causes them to develop contempt for their own. Black folks are also kept from a political education. He provides examples of textbook publishers that went on formal campaigns to promote propaganda that spun slavery as a benevolent institution in which slaves and masters were friends, and that slaves looked at their masters as paternal figures. He identifies state legislatures role in striking down a bill that would require the U.S. Constitution and Declaration of Independence to be printed in school books out of concern that it would engender black students to revolution or to press for their Constitutional Rights. In the twenty-first century, Loewen's (2007) research reveals similar mechanisms of schooling, finding that social studies, civics, and history curricula most often prohibit youths' development of a class politic and structural perspective of economic inequality. Through systematic review, he also demonstrates the ways in which textbook writing styles and content both exclude and convey information about race and racism that hinders understanding of structural racism and government's complicity in its maintenance.

Flanagan's (2013) assertion regarding teens' political theories also suggests that experiences of structural marginalization color the ways in which political beliefs and behaviors develop for young citizens from subordinated groups in ways that are not easily captured by

studies that do not take into account that hegemony, white supremacy, anti-blackness, colonialism, hetero-patriarchy and misogyny are inscribed in U.S. culture. Several researchers look at Black and Latinx youths' perceptions of discrimination and its impact on their social-emotional, and academic development (Eccles, Wong, and Peck, 2006; Wong, Eccles, and Sameroff, 2003; Fisher, Wallace, and Fenton; 2000; Gibbons et al., 2014; Ogbu, 1987; Brown & Bigler 2005; Steele, 2010; Stevenson & Arrington, 2009); however, much less is known about how Black and Latinx youths' understandings of racism and their perceptions regarding the viability of the social contract influence their political development and orientation toward civic action. Addressing the "how" requires longitudinal study and qualitative methods of inquiry, a deviation from quantitative tendencies in YPS research. It also marks a departure in much of the YPAR literature which maintains that this process politically socializes youth into critical consciousness but oftentimes does not explicate how consciousness unfolds for youth, how it may vary among a group of participants, and/or why some may *not* develop "critical consciousness" as it is typically defined.

Conclusion

Chapter one looks across three strands of literature brought to bear on the research questions raised in this study. A review of scholarship on critical consciousness reveals quantitative trends and several stage models that suggest a discreet measurability and linearity to critical consciousness development. In contrast, the current study offers an ethnographic portrait of the complexity of sociopolitical development that escapes these framings. Though YPAR is understood to raise critical consciousness, few studies empirically explore the advent of conscientization. What is more, the study of youth political socialization often conflates what is described as political socialization with what is actually the study of *civic* socialization,

underscoring the need for research that legitimately explores the processes by which young people come to understand themselves in relation to larger debates around the distribution of resources with respect to race and class.

CHAPTER 2:

METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this study is to understand, describe, and track the political orientations of young people involved in a Y/PAR project over the course of one year and four months. The previous chapter identified a gap in studies of youth activism (e.g. CYS and Y/PAR research) that reveals limited insight into the ways in which youths' politics are influenced by particular actors and socialization experiences both within and outside of explicitly activist contexts. The current chapter will outline my approach to studying Y/PAR youths' politics. It begins by grounding the empiricism in particular theoretical assumptions and historical processes to explicate the larger social structure and its relationship to individuals who must make sense of and navigate that structure as marginalized folk. I then elaborate on the methods activated in this study, specifically, political ethnography—and its concomitant data collection instruments. Finally, I describe the data analysis process, which includes a reflection on how my positionality influences my interpretation of the data.

Theoretical Framework

This study explores the ways Black and Brown youth participatory action researchers' political identities develop over the course of 18 months. A few concepts are central to my analysis of marginalized youth of color's political identity development. These include a fundamental recognition that race, class, and place shape youths' lives in particular ways that ultimately influence their political identities. It also includes a recognition of neoliberalism as a "common sense" worldview that has shaped public discourse in taken-for-granted ways to justify social reproduction. Finally, I understand individuals' political orientations to be a product of

social production, by which I mean, orientations are shaped both by societal structures and youths' agency.

Race, Class, and the Legislated Ghetto

The youth researchers in this study all reside in an urban, primarily Black and Latinx, community in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Like many metropolitan area cities in the northern U.S., this one has a damning history that involves deindustrialization, white flight, and redlining. Inequity is witnessed and felt spatially in demographic patterns that reveal poor Black and Latinx populations living in segregated and dilapidated, divested city neighborhoods juxtaposed to the two neighboring suburbs occupied primarily by wealthy and upper middle-class white folks. The history of policy decisions that created these disparities is the oft invisible backdrop against which urban-living Black and Latinx citizens (youth) must reconcile an understanding of the self, the groups to which he/she/they belong and develop a worldview politic and civic orientation. Situating the findings, analyses, and conclusions drawn in this study of youth researchers' political orientations requires accounting for the decussation of race, class, and what I am calling "the legislated ghetto" in the U.S. More specifically, in this study, I view the intersection of race, class and the concentration of low-income people of color in urban spaces to be socially created phenomena that function to perpetuate capitalism and white supremacy. I also view the pervasive promulgation of neoliberal common-sense in public discourse, state policy, and popular culture, as working to conceal the nature of these systems to justify inequality.

Race. Racialization in the U.S. is predicated in the history of European colonization, chattel slavery, the expansion of capitalism and Western imperialism (Omi & Winant, 2015). Its historical significance is connected to the building of the European empire and its pursuit of

global conquest through military force and the colonization of non-Christian (often Black and Brown) peoples. Justifying this kind of force as a supposedly Christian empire was a critical existential crisis—so critical that it required a rearticulation of the social order that simultaneously explicated and validated the superior constitution of Europe (in relation to the colonized) and excluded colonized and enslaved populations from the plentitude of humanity Quijano (2000). As Christianity became a less significant (and useful) mechanism of social ordering, it gave rise to the salience of corporeal differences; “white” skin tone would serve as the primary point of distinction between fully-human, civilized, Europeans and “The Other”—e.g. enslaved Africans and Indigenous Americans. Whiteness was the expression of deep, profound, and heritable superiority in relation to the “Other”.

The ramifications of racialialization are realized in its present-day globalized omnipresence throughout all aspects of Western life. For this reason, the current research project draws on racial formation theory to understand both the larger racial structure that youth navigate and the subjective ways in which race is taken up by individuals. Omi & Winant’s (2015) theory of racial formation relies on Marx, Gramsci, Foucault, Althusser and other social theorists’ analyses of the social structure. The interaction of state biopolitics (i.e. mechanisms of control and surveillance), hegemony (i.e. technologies of legitimizing domination), capitalism, colonialism and the histories of resistance and consent to these structures formed the racial structure and the subjective positions that individuals take up in response to the structure. According to Omi & Winant, race is unstable, and is formed and reformed through the collection of all historical and contemporary struggles over power and freedom between structures that support white supremacy and people of color resisting domination. Central to racial formation theory is the concept of racial projects (Omi & Winant, 2015). The racial project is a dialogic,

co-constructive process that organizes race meanings and applications in everyday interactions and in institutions. Race has particular meanings and significances at the social structural level but ultimately the racial project organizes the way in which race is taken up, resisted, re-articulated, or internalized by individuals, groups and institutions. Insofar as the social structure imposes racialization, the collective and individual interpretations and responses of institutions, racialized subjects and the cultures in which they are both imbedded form new racial meanings at the local and structural level. Though this process means that race can be signified and leveraged in particular ways depending on the context in which racial meanings are being interpreted and responded to, what ultimately remains stable is white supremacy.

Omi & Winant (2015) dedicate significant attention to the interdependent relationship between racialization at the social structural level and the ways in which race is experienced (and internalized) by individuals. Race was constructed by colonial powers, which became formal governments that systematically classified people based on supposed “essential” differences, and provided (or withheld) resources based on these classifications. Therefore, race is an apparatus of the state like taxes and judicial powers. What is more, race does not cease to exist outside of the relationship between government and racialized subjects. Race itself informs the organization of private lives; racialized subjects create communities (or get relegated to certain communities) based on race, make decisions about friends, marriage, jobs and political orientations based on this state apparatus. Drawing on Foucault’s notion of governmentality and Althusser’s notion of interpellation, Omi & Winant (2015) remark that to internalize race is to internalize the state (p. 138). Because of race’s influence over our lives, experiences, friendships, thoughts and feelings, in many ways, makes the state a central component of our being. The state “hails” us and we respond (p. 138).

Class. In the U.S., race is inextricably linked to class such that a profoundly disproportionate number of the poor are represented among Black, Latinx, and Native American populations (Census, 2013). A structural Marxist analysis of capitalism places racialization as one of several tools employed by the ruling class in service of their domination over laboring classes. The assignment of societal power to whiteness was leveraged in the southern plantation society to prevent the growing threat posed by interracial insurrection. The legal establishment of white civil, land, and property ownership rights that were denied to non-whites proved useful toward placating poor whites with the ancillary but intended consequence of keeping a relatively stable proletariat class (Wynter, 1979; Omi & Winant, 2015). Early notions of Black inhumanity and the inferiority of other non-white groups in science, law, and policy that justified chattel slavery and the denial of other basic human and citizenship rights to racially minoritized groups, verify that race --and indeed, racism— has traditionally functioned beyond mere stigmatization; rather it wields a power intended to sustain a class structure. Oliver & Shapiro (2006) remind, “What is often unacknowledged is that the same social system that fosters the accumulation of private wealth for many whites denies it to blacks, thus forging an intimate connection between white wealth accumulation and black poverty” (p. 7). From this lens, I view racial patterns in the contemporary class structure as emanating from the social structure, rather than as an indication of some cultural failing of racially minoritized groups.

The legislated ghetto. The concentration of Black and Latinx residents in divested urban spaces is not a coincidence nor is it merely a reflection of individual preferences to reside in racially homogenous communities (Troutt, 2013; Sharkey, 2013; Massey and Denton, 1993). During the latter half of the 20th century, mass white exodus out of cities marked them as spaces where Black and Brown peoples lived (Troutt, 2013). This exodus was facilitated by the Federal

Housing Administration and G.I. Bill (1944), which paved the way for racialized patterns of urbanization and tangential suburbanization. Among other things, the 1944 G.I. Bill offered returning WWII vets the opportunity to obtain federally-backed, low-interest rate mortgages to purchase property at the same time that suburban communities were being constructed directly outside of city boundaries. Suburban developers systematically denied Black and Latinx folks entrance into these communities. Simultaneously, the FHA created a color-coded property valuation system for banks to determine whether an area was worthy of investment—neighborhoods that were marked blue or green were worthy of federally-backed investment while ones that were coded red were deemed unworthy. Disproportionately, communities that were primarily Black were coded red or redlined. As the G.I. bill guaranteed subsidies expanded to all potential homebuyers (i.e. not just veterans) white populations left cities in droves to take advantage of low-interest rate mortgages and suburban accommodations, however, the federal government through redlining, nullified these social welfare benefits for Black and Latinx potential homebuyers. Alderman (2003) notes, “between 1934 and 1962, the federal government backed \$120 billion of home loans. More than 98% went to whites.”

Today, owning a home is the primary asset contributing to most middle-class American’s total wealth (Oliver & Shapiro, 2006). The value of suburban homes in white communities since the early days of the FHA and G.I. Bill has significantly increased while Black and Brown neighborhoods in America’s cities typically suffer from crumbling infrastructure, housing abandonment, declining industry, diminished (or depreciating) property values, and social disorganization (Oliver & Shapiro, 2006; Massey & Denton, 1993). While the children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren of white Baby Boomers all benefit from generational wealth accumulation passed down through perpetual homeownership, no such wealth trajectory

exists for the vast majority of Black American families (Oliver and Shapiro, 2006). The impact of urban concentrated poverty on residents extends beyond general malaise, it directly influences the life chances of Black and Brown people. Within the context of the argument that *place* fundamentally affects quality of life and opportunities, Troutt (2013) explains the circumstances befalling urban communities, saying,

Many communities have unstable tax bases, strained public services, and aging infrastructure needs that constrain the resources of most institutions in town. A lack of institutional cohesion usually mirrors a lack of social cohesion, and folks in less stable places spend a lot of their energy struggling to hold on to reliable options. They endure bad treatment, deferred maintenance, higher taxes and user fees, slow responses, and the obstacles can amount to traps (p. 16).

Understanding the legislated ghetto as a central component of youth researchers' lives, this research project situates at the core of all findings and data analysis the reality that policy decisions paved the way for white folks to access middle class lives at the direct expense of Black and Brown folks' relegation to poor urban communities.

Neoliberalism

I regard neoliberal ideology as public common sense (Hall & O'Shea, 2013; Harvey, 2005) that pervades modern conceptions of civil society, and even notions of justice, social change and mobility. Neoliberalism, as it is typically defined, reflects an emerging sense of the necessity of synergy between the state, civil society, and global private markets. It positions "freedom" within the context of the political economy—freedom of international trade, freedom to commodify public goods and services, and corporate freedom from government regulation. Looking beyond its hold as an economic principle within the framework of global capitalism, this dissertation attends to neoliberalism as it exists within public thought and discourse, taken-for-granted, and informing the ways in which people understand themselves and the working of the world, and ultimately working in service of justifying, sustaining, and reproducing the

economic and politic structures that support inequality.

Inextricably connected to the maintenance and justification of racial disparities in the present is the emergence of the neoliberal state with its policies *and* policy substantiating discourses throughout the 1970s and '80s. The advantages conferred to white Americans through social welfare supports denied to Black Americans and other racially minoritized groups throughout the 20th century found refuge in selective public memory and the neoliberal state's espousal of personal responsibility, accountability, and bootstrap self-reliance doctrine. Describing the principle of human capital central to the theory of the neoliberal state, Harvey (2005) says, "Individual success or failure are interpreted in terms of entrepreneurial virtues or personal failings (such as not investing significantly enough in one's own human capital through education) rather than being attributed to any systemic property" (pp. 65 – 66). The Reagan presidency (1981-1989) ushered in an era of bipartisan support for heavy-handed austerity measures that cut social welfare programs, privatized social services, and weakened labor unions-- policies that benefited wealthy Americans and corporations at the expense of working Americans, which maintained wide support from the white American public (Troutt, 2013; Spence, 2015; Harvey, 2005). At the heart of this class masochism was the color-evasive critique that "big government" was misusing and redistributing "hard-working American's" (i.e. white people's) tax dollars and giving handouts to "undeserving," "lazy" populations (i.e. Black people).

Inequality vs. structural inequality. One of the more clever and nuanced techniques politicians and entertainers have tapped into is engaging a discourse of "inequality" to seemingly advocate for social justice on neoliberal terms. This research theorizes the emphasis on *inequality* to be a manifestation of neoliberal common-sense operating to pacify, misdirect, and

avoid examination of *structural inequality*, ultimately paving the way for neoliberal solutions. The particular leveraging of “inequality” to which I’m referring has been taken up famously by former president Barack Obama in his advocacy for the My Brother’s Keeper initiative. Focusing narrowly on unequal outcomes between boys of color (Black boys in particular) and other groups (inequality) and even committing to disrupting those outcomes, masquerades as progressive mobilization to root out injustice, when in fact, it is the catalyst for market-based reforms that pass on government responsibility to the private and philanthropic sectors or individual citizens and communities. However, acknowledging that the very real disparate outcomes between these boys and their white counterparts is a function of the socially reproductive arrangements of the economic, political, education, and justice systems (structural inequality) at least opens the pathway toward systemic level change. A focus on inequality allows for problematizing the group experiencing marginalization, as is the case with Black boys in My Brother’s Keeper (Dumas, 2014). In this way, social actors that loathe inequality may privilege rehabilitating and “helping” poor residents as the goals of “social justice” work in marginalized communities in place of goals that reflect an understanding of impoverished communities as produced through regressive anti-black policies.

Political Orientations and Social Production

This study recognizes youths’ political orientations as myriad, complex, dynamic values and stances that are not easily captured under labels like “conservative” or “liberal”, and that are constantly influenced by complementary and conflicting variables in their social worlds. In this research, I regard political orientations as attachments to particular theories about race/ism, class, inequality and social change, specifically, the influence they (can) wield in the social world and in the life experiences/chances of groups and individuals within U.S. society. This definition of

political orientation is not exhaustive as notions of what constitutes “the political” and what gets “politicized” are quite expansive, (Schatz, 2009). Although they are not entirely distinct, political orientation here should not be confused with *civic orientation*, defined in multiple ways but often either as 1) conceptualizations of (good) citizenship or 2) civic engagement (Crystal & Debell, 2002; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Political orientations are expressed through varying forms of actions (and inactions), discourses, and alliances, all mediated by heteroglossia (i.e. multiple/competing viewpoints) in young people’s social and internal worlds. Within this framework, I situate critical consciousness as a political orientation that, at the very least, subsumes an understanding of inequality rooted within the social structure and an understanding of action as a legitimate pathway to social change that supports the liberation of oppressed groups.

In order to more fully understand how Black and Brown youths’ political views on race, class, inequality, and social change develop, it is necessary to recognize the influence of both structure and agency. Operating from a social production theoretical framework, this study understands power and hegemony as central to understanding why particular political orientations are more readily available to the public as well as why certain others remain at the margins, and that individuals exercise relative agency in navigating these structures to form *elastic political identities* (i.e. political orientations). Power lies in the ability to produce narratives in reference to race, class, and inequality to supplant all other narratives, and to institutionalize that narrative through laws and policies (Hayward, 2014; Butler, 1998). Hegemonic narratives normalize oppression and rationalize structural inequality by reframing it as a problem at an individual level (Gross, 2011). Over time, the production of “knowledge”—e.g., the idea that lack of individual work ethic, not structural inequality, is responsible for the

conditions in urban neighborhoods-- becomes *common sense* (Gross, 2011). Within the context of hegemony, I acknowledge young people's agency in negotiating political orientations through questioning, choosing credible sources, distinguishing between good and bad theories, and deciding when to revise or when to double-down on their political beliefs. Holland's (1998) notion of "figured worlds" offers a useful frame from which to understand youth agency in developing elastic political identities with the resources available to them within the social structural and cultural contexts they inhabit. She argues:

"[P]ersons, and to a lesser extent, groups are caught in the tensions between past histories that have settled in them and the present discourses and images that attract them or somehow impinge upon them. In this continuous self-fashioning, identities are hard-won standpoints that, however dependent upon social support and however vulnerable to change, make at least a modicum of self-direction possible. They are possibilities for mediating agency" (p. 4).

In this view, young people are seen as actively negotiating and deciphering materials of political significance in the social world to form their own positions on matters of race, class, inequality and social change. Although hegemonic forces converge to dampen it, to deny the agency of poor Black and Brown youth would spell condescension (Cohen, 2010).

Methods

To avoid conflation, it is important to highlight here the distinction between this ethnographic study of young people's politics both within and outside of the YPAR context and my engagement in the justice-oriented approach to community research --PAR-- that often subsumes social scientific methods, however, disconnected from notions of objective inquiry, and the exercise of research for erudite purposes of knowledge production for scholarly audiences. Though my research on/about youth rejects the most dogmatic elements of positivism, it is, in fact, an attempt to offer an empirically grounded, transparent, social-scientifically sound ethnographic account of the political values and discourses that young people espoused whilst

being a part of a YPAR collective (save for any relaying of potentially damaging or unethical information). The execution of this ethnographic research was *not* participatory in the sense that Y/PAR studies ascribe aside from member checking efforts. On the other hand, in PAR, our research group engaged in a range of activities in the pursuit of local justice, reaffirmation of our humanity, individual fulfilment, critical and current events knowledge acquisition, community exploration, fun, and comradery. Although my familiarity with and subsequent (over)reliance on the process of social scientific research often guided my practice as a facilitator in PAR, a significant portion of what we did as a PAR collective was not related to traditional research. Moreover, in my role, I remained relatively committed to authentic collaboration and the ‘youth-led’ ethos of Y/PAR. Any description of methods in YPAR is distinct from the ethnographic methods used in this study of youths’ politics.

Political Ethnography

This study is a political ethnography that engages various methods both quantitative and qualitative to better understand the political orientations of youth participatory action researchers. Schatz (2009) explicates the value of immersion to the study of the political. Political science, he argues, is traditionally opposed to ethnography; the dominant perspective is that ideal methods and design should imitate those of the natural sciences, which are understood to be more rigorous. In this way, qualitative studies in the political sciences often rely on the kind of qualitative data that can be quantified, ultimately leading to generalizability and the promise of predictive theorizing. Political ethnography, however, recognizes the inherent value of participant observation in the study of the political. Ethnography’s value to political science allows for further interrogation of generalizations and findings produced in studies using other research methods by offering detailed insights into how people understand their lived

experiences with abstract concepts like “justice, freedom, [or] democracy” (p. 10). Ethnography also invites more expansive notions of the political and expansive considerations of materials and contexts that we understand as “politicized” (Schatz, 2009). In this research, I consider YPAR (an explicitly political context) among various other contexts in which individual youth researchers are situated in my attempt to understand how they come into political orientations.

Setting and Participants

This study takes place primarily at a community college in a mid-sized city in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. This secondary campus is located about twenty minutes west of the larger, nicer, rural/suburban main campus, in a largely Black (50%) and Latinx (37%) city with about 26% of its residents living below the poverty line. The youth participants are high school students in a federally funded college-access program, Upward Bound (UB). UB recruits students who attend or who are about to attend (i.e. rising 9th graders) high school in this city and a handful of students who attend schools in nearby suburbs. My project draws on one year and four months of field experience-- between July 2015 and November 2016-- with high school students enrolled in the UB pre-college program while I was employed there as an instructor of a course titled ‘Research’ and eventually transitioned into being a volunteer, in both roles, facilitating youth participatory action research (YPAR). UB is one of several federally-funded college access programs created under the Higher Education Act to reduce disparities in educational and life outcomes by offering financial advisement and support, educational opportunities, and extra-curricular activities to prepare young people for college. UB’s praxis is what many scholars refer to as youth work or out-of-school community-based education (Baldridge, 2018). In these spaces, youth workers are often tasked with demonstrating both educational and culture competency in their work with marginalized young people.

Upward Bound operates a six-week summer program that meets Mondays- Fridays, in addition to a Saturday program that meets an average of three Saturdays a month during the academic year, all hosted at the community college campus. Both summer and Saturday classes began at 9:05am and ended at 3:00pm for a total of four hour-long academic classes for each student (Algebra I, II, Trigonometry, Geometry, Composition, I, II, III, Creative Writing, Computer Applications I, II, III, IV, Spanish I, II, III, IV, Literature I, II, III, and Research), lunch, and one hour-long counseling session to complete the day. Summer program Monday- Thursday are instructional days while Fridays are dedicated to “cultural” and educational field trips.

The population of high school students in UB and those who participated in YPAR reflects this racial/ethnic breakdown. All of the action research students that I work with identify as Black American and/or Latinx, except one who was Egyptian, though his mother reiterated to me that she consciously identifies her family as ‘African’. Participants in this study are the fourteen-consenting youth in my elective course of nineteen called ‘Research’ (i.e. YPAR); however, six are focal students. Their ages range from 14 – 18 at the time of the study. These students’ pseudonyms and their relevant background information appear on Table 2.1². This includes the grade they were entering at the beginning of the study, their race/ethnicity, gender, and the type of school they attended.

Table 2.1: Youth Researcher Background Information

Name	Grade	Race/Ethnicity	Gender	School
Kumar*	11	Black	M	Excelsior Charter

² All names of people and municipalities are pseudonyms

Shante*	11	Black	F	Milton West (Public)
Beauty*	11	Black	F	Milton West (Public)
Justice	12	Black	M	Milton High School (Public)
Selena*	10	Honduran and Mexican	F	STEM Charter
Jonae	12	Black	F	Milton Day/Night (Last Chance School)
Ebony	12	Black	F	Milton High School
Rosada	10	Puerto Rican	F	Milton High School/ Visual and Performing Arts (Public)
Faylah	12	Black	F	Private Catholic
Cindy	12	Black	F	Private Catholic
Gustavo*	9	Mexican American	M	Traditional Public (nearby suburb)
Maria	9	Latina	F	Milton High School/ 9 th Grade Academy (Public)
Salim	9	Egyptian (identifies as African)	M	(not available)
Hector*	12	Mexican American	M	Milton High
* indicates focal student				

During the 2015 summer, one-hour, four days a week were dedicated to the Research class. My formal inquiry began during UB's six-week summer program in the course titled, 'Research,' that I designed to facilitate YPAR; however, I also taught three distinct literature courses. The director of this Upward Bound program gave me full autonomy over design and recruitment for the Research course. My first and only recruitment effort was at a parent/student orientation several weeks before the 2015 summer program began in which I described my research and explained Y/PAR (and the difference between them) as best and succinctly as I could, given the few minutes I was allotted. Each student in Research elected in though many more students expressed interest both before classes began and throughout the summer program, but many were unable to join for scheduling reasons. Research was an official part of the six-week summer program schedule during the summer of 2015, but was phased out of the official curriculum during the 2015-2016 academic year, essentially continuing on as a "special" or a "club" that met outside of UB on campus for one-hour on Saturdays after the program let out. We met, on average, two times a week during the summer of 2016 also at the community college after students got out of their final UB counseling session. During the academic year 2016, we continued meeting for an hour on Saturdays following the UB program schedule until mid-November.

Data Collection

The data collection instruments used in this study were determined based on the research questions that guide this work. These are: "How do Black and Brown youth participating in a politically left, structuralist, race/ethnicity-affirming, action research group develop politically in relation to questions of race, inequality, and social change? How is this political development shaped by people, processes, and practices both within and beyond the action-research setting?"

In what particular ways does the omnipresence of neoliberal ideology influence political development? How do youth negotiate and appraise the various (possibly divergent) political messages and information to which they are exposed? Data collection consisted of: (1) **participant observations** during their time in YPAR, (2) **student-produced materials** in Y/PAR, (3) **intake surveys** and **exit surveys**, (4) **semi-structured interviews** with students and student-identified influences, and (5) **prompted journal writings**.

Participant observation. I audiotaped forty-seven meetings except four meetings during the 2015 summer program—one, due to a tape-recorder (or user) malfunction, and three were cacophonous meetings in which me and the youth researchers were attempting to piece together our research findings in the final days of the summer program. I did not record several days of community building exercises as well, however, I drafted field notes to account for those meetings. I recorded one city council meeting attended by me and a youth researcher, and two conversations with young people as I drove them home —beyond that, our time together was spent exclusively in the community college. I also made frequent journal entries to recall research meetings, highlighting both moments that seemed to be of particular importance and the general tone and direction of the meeting. Facilitating YPAR while conducting ethnographic inquiry proved useful as it allowed me to demonstrate reflexivity in my action research practice. My journal entries helped me to reflect on how students responded to my facilitation style, the curriculum, and the particular techniques I engaged to move them toward structural analyses of inequality.

Student Documents. Throughout our time in Y/PAR, students produced a number of written documents including items like written responses to current events, identity pie graphs, illustrations of their ideal city, and a formal proposal for a teen center solicited by city planners.

Initial and exit surveys³. Surveys contained Likert and open-ended items and were given to assess **1)** students' perceptions of their community (for example: "My community is a great place to live"; "the people here are generally good people"), **2)** the strength of their buy-in to the ideas of American meritocracy and personal responsibility (for example: "One of the biggest reasons that most minority communities look different than suburban white communities is because the residents in suburban white communities do a better job of taking care of their community"), **3)** their subscription to structural explanations of race and class disparities (for example: "The poverty rate here is 26%, which is 2.5x more than the state average. Why do you think that is?; There are many opportunities in this city for me to learn and earn money legally) and, with the exit survey, **4)** the extent to which those ideas persisted in students and the degree to which they were conscious of any changes in their views after one year. The scale intentionally offered four response options (i.e. totally agree, agree, disagree, and totally disagree) as opposed to offering a fifth, moderate, selection, in order to push young people to take a hard stance either way; however, when I actually administered the survey, I allowed youth to take a middle ground at their request. The exit survey explicitly asked students to indicate with a star if they felt like their answer, today, on a particular item, is significantly different than how they would have answered a year prior. Students were given \$10 gift cards to Target or Dunkin Donuts for completing their exit survey.

Interviews⁴. I interviewed each of the focal students once or twice depending on if their schedule permitted. All interviews served two primary purposes—to understand youths' politics and to determine their political influences. Second interviews happened in Fall 2016 as my research closed and served as points of comparison to initial interviews, specifically to determine

³ Appendices A & B

⁴ Appendices C & D

if and whether youth's perspectives changed on any of the topics mentioned in the first interview. In all interviews, I gathered information about young people's perceptions of UB, their personal experiences as a community member, and gained further insights on the four specific areas explored in the student surveys by asking them to relay personal experiences. Some questions include: "Do you want to live [in this city] as an adult? Why or why not?"; "What is racism [followed by] based on your definition, do you experience racism? If so, how?"; "What have you learned in school from your history, social studies or civics classes about your community? What would you want to know?"; "How often do you interact with other racial groups? Where are some of the primary places you come into contact with other racial groups? What is the nature of these interactions?"; "When you think about Black people in this country, do you think they have it harder than other groups (primarily white people)? What do you think is responsible for that?"

I interviewed student-identified influences to gain clearer insight into their political orientations and the explicit values and knowledge related to race, class, and social change that they sought to transmit to youth researchers. Students and I collaboratively designed the interview protocols for their outside influences. Some items include: "How would you describe [this city]? What things do you like/dislike? In your opinion, how did things here get the way they are?"; "If you could sum up in a few sentences the main message you want to get across to young people from this community, what would it be?"; "Do you think it's important for students to learn about racism and injustice? What do you think students should know about these things? Who do you feel is primarily responsible for teaching students about issues of racism and injustice? Do you think that those responsible are fulfilling their responsibility?";

“Who or what people/institutions were primarily responsible for teaching you about racism and injustice? What kinds of things did they teach you?”

Journaling

Journaling gave students the opportunity to reflect on and respond to prompts I created to understand how they positioned themselves in relation to their city and the politics of social mobility, with the added benefit of soliciting opinions during our meetings from less vocal co-researchers. They responded to questions including: “What kind of life do you imagine for yourself as an adult? What do you think it would take to have the life you imagine? Does where you grow up influence your ability to have the kind of life you imagine?” Participating youth responded to between three and seven journal prompts throughout the sixteen months.

Data Analysis

This study engages discourse theory to understand youth researchers’ “speech” (i.e. written, oral, intentional silence, and body language) as well as the speech of individuals within their spheres of influence, understanding speech to be a product of discourse and language. I take the position that discourse is a social, political construction and that language is an inherently political exercise, grounded in culture and context that ranges from the local to the international (Gee, 1999; Howarth & Stavrakakis, 2000). Howarth & Stavrakakis (2000) explain that discourses confer politicized identities to things (e.g. house) and people (e.g. home owner) by giving meaning to each—meaning that is a product of history and bound to the systems and processes that govern relationships in a society. The notion of “politics” used here to describe the language and discursive activities in which humans engage draws from Gee’s (1999) definition that calls attention to social interactions, human relationships, and their implications for the distribution (or potential distribution) of “social goods” (p. 2). Elaborating, he writes,

When we speak or write we always take a particular perspective on what the “world” is like. This involves us in taking perspectives on what is “normal” and not; what is “acceptable” and not; what is “right” and not; what is “real” and not; what is the “way things are” and not; what is the “ways things ought to be” and not; what is “possible” and not; what “people like us” or “people like them” do and don’t do; and so on and so forth, again through a nearly endless list. But these are all, too, perspectives on how we believe, wish, or act as if potential “social goods” are, or ought to be, distributed (p. 2).

This research takes the view that discourse is a structural phenomenon while the everyday language practices engaged by individuals within society articulate their positions in relation to this structure with implications for the future of that structure.

I position my data analysis within interpretivism as the aim of my work is to relate youths’ voices, in the fullest context of selves that they offer in my presence, to *prevailing social discourses* (Schatz, 2008); it is not to make causal claims or to explore the truth-value of their testimony. Interpretivists caution against the idea that social observations can tell us about reality; rather, they describe “performances” under the premise that there is no/little objective reality for the researcher to uncover. In this way, “participant [v]oices are less usefully understood as... accurate or inaccurate; rather, each voice can be interpreted for what perspectives, practices, and assumptions it reveals” (Schatz, p. 13). I also situate my understanding of youth voice in posthumanism as an *agentic assemblage* (Mazzei & Jackson, 2016), recognizing voice as the production of an intra-action of forces beyond what is spoken (or heard), and not entirely reflective of young peoples’ internal truth.

Coding and memoing. All transcribed data from interviews, my journal, to class sessions were organized and upload through Dedoose qualitative research software. Text files were originally coded using parent codes derived from my research focus (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Codes such as “Focus on Structure”, “Personal Stories/Insights”, and “Perspectives on Community” guided my early coding efforts. Child codes developed soon after as certain

patterns emerged in the content nested under parent codes. For example, under “Focus on Structure” are the codes “race/racism/culture”, “class”, “opportunity”, “gender”. As data collection persisted patterns were revealed in students’ speech and writing that showed students and their influences relaying neoliberal discourses-- this produced several parent and child codes related to neoliberalism and specific neoliberal manifestations in students speech. Non-type-written documents were coded by hand using the same coding scheme in Dedoose and 3”/ 5” notecards. Memos were used for synthetic purposes – to trace across documents and define patterns or raise questions in relation to possible patterns that emerged in coding.

Validity. The validity of this research was assured in three primary ways. First, data for this project comes from multiple sources: observations, interviews (with youth researchers and identified influences), journals, and documents youth created in YPAR sessions. This variety of sources and perspective provides an initial validity check in the form of data triangulation (Creswell, 2007). Second, memoing and coding in an ongoing way provided me with the opportunity to consider my perspective, consider alternative interpretations, and direct data collection so as to look for disconfirming evidence. Additionally, I periodically discussed my work with colleagues, further allowing the exploration of alternative interpretations. Finally, I engaged in member checking with youth researchers to ensure the accurateness of my interpretations of their statements. Interviewing student-identified influences added another level of member checking and offered a unique opportunity to ask follow up questions about particular issues related to students’ politics outside of the YPAR context. I also worked with colleagues and advisors to ensure that the conclusions I am drawing are substantiated by the data and intellectually plausible.

Positionality

Although I am not from the same city as my youth co-researchers, my work in urban schools and communities with students and their families over the past several years has affected my own identification with this community and others like it. I've worked with this particular Upward Bound program for over three years and served as a counselor, literature teacher, and instructor/facilitator for the Research course. My students and I shared a connection through music, and other Black youth cultural literacies. As a Black American male that grew up in a Black community less than thirty miles away, my lived experiences overlap with some of the experiences of students or their parents. However, growing up in a middle-class suburban Black community to parents who would eventually obtain graduate degrees positioned me at a distance from them in some ways that created tensions throughout the project. These connections and tensions also revealed themselves in our work together and in my ethnographic pursuits. I would find out several months into my research that that Milton youth were quite familiar with my hometown, referring to it in both utopian terms and comparing it to Milton as a "soft" or "weak" place. Mr. Phillips, a local public high school teacher working for TRIO at the community college the year before my study took place, explained that he (and possibly other teachers) would describe my hometown glamorously to their students positioning it as a place they should aspire to live, and that was attainable for "hardworking" Black folks. Phillips even went as far as driving his Black male students through my town to show them the suburban homes and landscape. One student, Mr. Phillips relays, peering out the window of the vehicle, exclaimed, "Wow, Black people really live here?!"

This study reveals several of the missteps I have taken attempting to connect with students, and the false assumptions I developed about who they were and desired to be, and the nature of their political orientations. It also points to false preconceptions I held based on my

own myopic understandings of Blackness and urban culture that I brought into this work, which were informed by my limited experiences in urban Black contexts in addition to the narratives conveyed in research texts about urban-living youth.

Beyond just my relationship with my participants, my overall interest in and approach to this research has also been affected by my own experiences as a Black youth. As a typical American child, I was exposed to vast amounts of hegemonic media and cultural experiences without tools for critiquing racialized images and experiences that socialized me into understanding Black folks as less meritorious than white folks. Additionally, my k-12 schooling, like many other children in the U.S., was devoid of race and class analysis, yet provided formal and hidden curricula (Jackson, 1990) that reaffirmed the U.S. was a meritocracy, and framed socioeconomic mobility as solely dependent upon an individual's work ethic. Unchallenged, these framings made the transition from secondary education in neighborhood schools, to postsecondary and graduate education in racially heterogeneous, primarily white environments, much more complicated for me. As an "academically successful" relatively middle-class Black student throughout my secondary and undergraduate years, noticing the academic fate of my Black peers, I fell victim to internalizing a great deal of racism because I had limited tools for understanding racialized patterns of academic achievement as something other than an indication of racialized differences in work ethic. I lacked tools to interrogate highly racialized and socially constructed notions of intelligence and hard work, and many times, failed to consider the roles played by differences in K-12 preparation and experiences of structural and interpersonal racism both on and off campus in facilitating racialized outcomes. At the same time, I was also bombarded with messages in media and American cultural discourse that suggested internal deficits in Black culture and individuals were responsible for Black Americans' social position.

My goal entering this research was to disrupt that pattern and to offer Black and Latinx students tools to help them resist internalizing racism as they embarked toward higher education and likely attended PWIs (primarily white institutions).

CHAPTER 3: BACKGROUND, SETTING, AND PARTICIPANTS

Overview

In this chapter, I will review relevant background information related to this study, including what led me to this research. I offer an overview of the setting of the research that includes a historical account of the city in which it takes place in addition to my observations of the present-day school community. I describe the Upward Bound context including the program structure and my relationship to the staff at the outset of this research. I also discuss the Research class context: its structure during the 2015 summer, and my reflections on it at the time the study began. I do not discuss how YPAR transpired after the 2015 summer as I will do this in detail in chapter 5. I conclude by describing each of the focal participants of this study, providing brief and relevant details about them and their lives that offer insight into these youths from which I will draw in the data analysis chapters: 4, 5, and 6.

Background

Prior TRIO Experience

This research project is, conceptually, over a decade in the making. I say that because several fissures that initially erupted in my experiences as both a college student and youth worker years prior to my writing this manuscript, eventually influenced the context for this work and became the questions that currently drive this study of marginalized youths' political orientations. I am, in some ways, a product of the Educational Opportunity Fund program (EOF), which like other TRIO programs-- including Upward Bound—is an appendage of the Higher Education Act of 1965 (HEA), which belongs to the suite of Great Society social reforms created under the authority of President Lyndon Johnson. TRIO federally funded college access

programs operate on college and university campuses throughout the U.S. providing academic and “cultural” support in service of college admissions, attainment, and post-graduate enrollment. Each program has a specific mission and programmatic structure under this larger umbrella. My decade-long relationship with TRIO revealed several unreconciled tensions between framing at the federal level and how programs, at the site level, interpret and execute this frame through particular cultural and curricular practices.

As an undergraduate student in the EOF program, I experienced firsthand the dissonant identity of TRIO, and again as a fulltime “counselor” for nearly a year with the Talent Search (TS) pre-college program. Although the exclusively Black and Latinx staff had high hopes for us as pre-freshman college students, the pathway to “success,” they often refrained, required us to be able to transcend ghetto, anti-academic behavior. Like most TRIO programs, my EOF cohort comprised mostly of Black and Latinx students, many of whom were from local cities between 2 and 20 miles from the university, with only a few students of color (including me) hailing from suburban, middle-income, and/or majority white communities. This class disparity between me and most of my Black peers alone was disconcerting for me as a younger person grappling with my own Black identity in ways that I have only come to terms with recently. Beyond that, it was my first experience of prolonged exposure to a context wherein older Black and Latinx folks casually and routinely pathologized Black and Latinx youth. I vividly remember our first orientation (without parents present) my freshman year; without so much as a “hello,” one of the program counselors got on the microphone and yelled to an auditorium of nearly one-hundred 17 and 18-year olds to “sit down act like [we had] some sense.” She then went on to tell us that we were not in the ghetto and that we needed to act like it. This was followed by a directive to remove hats and hoods from heads and a warning for young women to abstain from wearing

revealing clothes and for young men to stop sagging. The message that our personal styles and academic orientations ran counter to what was acceptable at the university level remained consistent throughout my freshman year and led to my departure from all EOF programming by the end of that year (though I was still officially a member of the program) until my final year when I was granted awards at an EOF ceremony. My time in the program raised several questions for me about the nature of college access programs that remained with me for years; the one most relevant to this research being, “How are students involved in these programs perceiving and/or responding to the racial, political narratives that programs engage in their attempt to socialize youth into college entry and persistence?”

Despite these concerns, as a newly minted M.Ed graduate of an educational foundations program armed with a novice critical pedagogy, but, without a teaching certification, I was eager to work with Black students from divested school-community contexts similar to my EOF cohort. Unsurprisingly, TRIO sprang forth as the most promising opportunity for urban education work. Two years after graduating from EOF and literally the same day as my last M.Ed class, I began working as a “counselor” for the TS TRIO program. I was the second hire on a new grant after the director, who, very much like me, was looking for direction and feeling her way around envisioning how this program would *actually* function on a daily basis to support youth in some consistent way. We needed to recruit over 200 students from area public schools across six grade levels in 3 months to be in good standing with our grant *and* we had to offer some number of “services” to students within that timeframe to support their college attendance. This burden loomed large in all of our minds. My director and co-counselor, both of whom were Black, spent much of their time brainstorming in conversation ways to recruit that were “culturally” palatable to young people, their parents, and the community, which often relied on

deficit ideas about Black and Latinx folks. My concerns about recruitment, however, were eclipsed by my eagerness to work with young folks; although it was unclear whether my job or the program structure actually required (or allowed) us to do anything in the way of traditional subject-area teaching. My director's own lack of clarity and the lack of direction regarding the daily services aspect of this work combined with my eagerness to offer a critical education to students of color, was the perfect storm I needed to autonomously (and somewhat secretly) organize a rudimentary version of a promising educational approach I had recently learned about during my master's program—YPAR.

As a novice facilitator, my practice was far from ideal and perhaps not YPAR at all. The most salient aspect of YPAR in my read of the literature at the time was that young people engaging in action research were “radicalized” or became radicalized as their awareness of systems of oppression was raised. This aspect seemed most important as my master's program had inspired in me a more sophisticated understanding of structural inequality that made me, at the time, feel personally liberated from internalized racism and politically fired-up, attributes I thought would be exceedingly valuable for young people in a school-community that was fundamentally sabotaged at a structural level. As I facilitated YPAR, however, the student directedness and action components of the literature conflicted with my conceptualization of the work that could be done through TS. Furthermore, my job as a TS counselor was not to get students to take direct action, it was to help them get to college; therefore, I reconciled this tension by emphasizing activities to improve writing and critical thinking skills which spoke more directly to the kinds of services TRIO programs traditionally offer. YPAR with my TS students became an opportunity to immerse them into critical perspectives through dialogue, group activities, mini-lectures, and writing exercises. To my surprise and contrary to most of the

YPAR literature I had read up to that point, the students with whom I worked were not always compelled by structural narratives of inequality; rather they entered with personal responsibility and cultural deficit frameworks that persisted to some degree throughout our time together.

These experiences encouraged me to believe that I could and should organize a YPAR group through a TRIO program and that TRIO, for better or worse, was a context in which contentions around race and identity could actively be explored, particularly as many federal programs like TS and EOF serve a primarily Black and Latinx population. Furthermore, my early experience leading young people in a YPAR-adjacent endeavor proved to be much more challenging than the literature had portrayed, leading me to question if/how youth involved in activist or critical spaces truly developed radical or even progressive political orientations in those spaces. For all of these reasons, I chose the Upward Bound TRIO program as the context for this study. Upward Bound had been, for the four consecutive years prior to this study, a faithful summer employer when graduate teaching and research funding stopped in June. It was ideal in many other ways as it kept me in a classroom close to youth with whom I had come to love working and it offered me experiences to draw from in my practice as a pre-service teacher educator. The relative autonomy I had over the content I taught over those four years suggested to me that it would not be far-fetched to propose facilitating YPAR for the study I was conceptualizing.

Setting

Milton

A brief history. This city that I call Milton, like many other cities in the Mid-Atlantic region, has been shaped by 20th century industrial decline, tangential commercial divestment, and white flight. Milton's legacy as a major manufacturing hub is firmly situated in the 19th century,

which saw Milton become one of the nation's leading iron producers and manufacturers as the railroad industry expanded in the northeast (Cumbler, 1989). Growth of iron and steel mills accelerated the population growth as the demand for factory workers increased more than 100% by the 1880s and did not slow until the end of the century as the depression drew closer. Along with these growth industries, Milton became home to a vibrant artisan economy of ceramic and pottery makers among other skilled workers. Milton's economic descent officially began a decade prior to the Great Depression in the 1920s as larger corporations absorbed the smaller manufacturing markets, mechanizing labor that diminished the need for many factory jobs.

WWI briefly revived pockets of the manufacturing sector in Milton and New Deal programs offered temporary relief. Despite these safety nets, job scarcity and economic decline heightened "racial tensions." The language of "racial tensions" brought on by the economic insecurity of the depression era in Milton and across the country obscures the reality of white supremacy. The population of African Americans in 1920 Milton was less than 4% while the population of ethnic whites from places like Russia, Poland, and Italy, including third wave immigrants, was just over 96%. Across the country, throughout the depression era, a locally controlled social welfare system with minimal oversight ensured that white social workers almost exclusively offered relief to others of European descent (Fox, 2010). In addition to the unequal distribution of welfare benefits to qualifying Black families and individuals at the local level, Black and Mexican Americans across the country were insidiously excluded from unemployment insurance and old age insurance (present day Social Security) justifying the growing consensus among Black folks that the New Deal was, in fact, a "raw deal" (Trotter, 2004). As the New Deal expanded rights and protections to labor unions under bills like the Wagner Act of 1935, Black Americans were simultaneously being killed and threatened for

attempting to join unions or for entering the manufacturing labor force. Much of the pro-labor legislation and collective bargaining rights gained during the depression era evaded provisions that would bar local and national chapters from blocking Black Americans from equal access to those unions.

One former Milton resident turned big city mayor describes his time growing up there as an African American boy and young adult during the 1930s and '40s, highlighting the dearth of struggling factories and recalling the poverty that his family and other Black friends experienced. Offering a glimpse of the neighborhood of his youth, he writes:

“There was a smattering of black families on Spring Street. We didn’t live in a ghetto. From my father’s barbershop, all the way down a couple of Blocks to the shoemaker was mostly white. There were two black families on the 200 block. Mrs. Hence, an African American, ran a little tea room, but most of the families in the immediate vicinity were working-or lower-middle-class white folks. No one locked his door, not during the day, not at night. We all knew each other. It was mostly black in the stand-alone wooden homes on West End Avenue, a little mixed on nice Montgomery Place. There was not much crime to speak of” (Dinkins, 2003, p. 4).

Despite what might seem like a picture of rosy interracial harmony, the author goes on to describe the inequality he and others experienced growing up Black in Milton during the depression era. Along with segregated primary schools, Milton’s high school-- the school most of the youth from this study attended-- had no Black teachers during the depression era. Theater seating were segregated in Milton, and the city held segregated YMCAs, with only the Black YMCA being free and operating out of an old townhouse. He writes about the low expectations held by white teachers and guidance counselors, who steered Black youth with college ambitions toward wage work, saying:

The most enlightened of them encouraged some few of us to be nurses or teachers, but college and then medical or law school was outside their idea of reasonable career paths for black youth. Every generation preceding mine—and I am not just talking about high school counselors in Milton—was directed away from higher education. The result was that many people who might have thrived intellectually and economically never had the

opportunity to succeed” (p. 22).

This portrait of Milton is both strange and familiar to what youth and other residents in this study described. My years spent in Milton getting to know young people revealed how much they yearned for a connection to this past, and the possibility that their city was once as harmonious and sanitized as the initial quote from this former big city mayor. Several inquired about the past to older family members-- grandparents and great grandparents who lived during the civil rights era who often told stories that suggested unity, social cohesion, and strong public and private institutions once defined the city. Upward Bound program staff who grew up in Milton also described a ‘90s and early ‘80s era in which Milton was in much better shape than what youth were experiencing. This perception of the past was not lost on youth as many believed deeply that what once was-- according to these elder residents--could be restored to its “former glory.”

Present-day school community. In my 2-year relationship with Milton, I found the community to be, in many ways, culturally vibrant. Throughout the year, Milton hosts several events that are *heavily* attended for local food, entertainment, and arts vendors with names like “Melanin Market” or “Milton Art Crawl” that highlight Black or African and Latinx heritage. Less than a month after the musical artist Prince’s death in April 2016, a mural went up in his honor right outside of my English Literature classroom window on a large downtown building next to the community college. Walking down the street one can hear Haitian Creole, Jamaican Patois, and Spanish dialects spoken by the various individuals and families. Evidence of the manufacturing hub Milton once was has mostly disappeared. Exploring the urban landscape of the city’s downtown reveals various ethnic restaurants, chain retailers like *Kicks USA*, and *Dunkin*, and smaller locally-owned bargain fashion, furniture, and consignment shops. It is worth mentioning that the nonprofit sector in Milton is also thriving part of the city’s economy with an

abundance of benevolent grant-funded services scattered throughout the city. Many of these non-profits are dedicated to youth and families and have formed alliances to share resources and coordinate services. Corner stores and liquor stores appear in residential neighborhoods. Seeing downtown Milton is somewhat of a unique visual as it does not break neatly from poor residential neighborhoods, which is the case in many cities. I observed on my walk to the college campus and train rides to Milton, Black and Brown residents strolling to and from homes alongside white bureaucrats working for the state government (e.g. lawyers, judges, politicians, staffers, EPA officials, lobbyists etc.) who desperately avoid contact with Black bodies that dare walk near them on busy sidewalks.

Milton is roughly eight square miles, and is divided into several residential neighborhoods: West, East, South, and North Milton, each with distinct characteristics. My understanding of these differences is fueled primarily through my students. North Milton is the smallest neighborhood and was once known for being the most violent. Most of the city's middle schools are in this neighborhood, and it's also where the only hospital is located. It houses a Polish enclave, with a Polish bank, and other Polish-owned shops. South Milton is largely Latinx and poor Italian families. Its residents own smatterings of local Italian bakeries, bodegas, and other family-owned small shops throughout Milton. East Milton is considered the most socially disorganized and unsafe, and houses an area which young people refer to as "The Section" known for heightened neighborhood gang activity. Paradoxically, it is also the place where many people across Milton come together, hangout, and enjoy one another's company. West Milton mirrors the visual contradiction that is characteristic of Milton: it houses the projects; however, it is also home to a section of large early 20th century mansions visible from a major highway. Across these neighborhoods are longstanding "beefs" that manifest in sporadic, violent,

sometimes deadly, retaliation. My students made clear to me that people-- men, women, and children—from one neighborhood, even if they are not involved in gang activity, must exercise caution when entering another section, especially if those neighborhoods are embroiled in conflict. These conflicts have been known to spill over into school and amongst youth from different neighborhoods.

Milton has several traditional public schools, charter schools, and a private catholic school just outside of the city (Milton Catholic Academy). At the time of this study, Milton was experiencing a wave of charter growth. This was expressed both by students and Upward Bound staff. Several of the young people I taught in English and in this study attended charter schools with reputations for being more functional and rigorous than the three non-charter public high schools in Milton. One of these charter high schools was STEM focused and began in 2014 with a freshman class, and another charter high school named *Excelsior* which was founded in 2007, unofficially held the title as the best school in the city. Several Black students who attended one of the two traditional public high schools anecdotally referred to those schools as the “Black” or “Spanish (i.e. Hispanic)” high school, and mentioned on occasions that Black students in the city were tracked into the high school that was in most disrepair. The third public high school was a last chance school.

The state governor had been promising for years prior to 2015 to direct state funds into updating and rehabilitating the main campus high school. Around this time, it made national news on outlets like the *Huffington Post* that displayed photographs taken inside of the school of decaying walls, flooded hallways, and exposed inner-wall material in the cafeteria. This \$155 million project was approved by the state school development authority in January 2014 after pressure from local activists on the governor. Development began in 2016 and was projected to

be complete by June 2019 and open that fall for classes. As the project began to take shape some two years after approval, students at the main campus were broken up over four learning communities with specific foci: visual and performing arts, STEM, hotel, restaurant, and tourism, and a 9th grade academy.

Beyond the organization of the school-community, youth generally expressed concerns about their quality of schooling, regardless of whether they attended a public or a charter. Adults interviewed in this study typically conveyed skepticism about the quality of Milton schools for various reasons, however, some were more reluctant than others to explicitly and openly share those opinions. There was a deep sense among most people that there was an inextricable, perhaps causal, relationship between school quality and/or outcomes and the vitality of their city, such that school failings (whether the fault of students, teachers, or the institutions themselves) created or exacerbated the poor condition of the city. The idea that if schools or students excelled, the community would thrive, was prevalent among most youth and adults. In this way, Upward Bound was seen as pivotal part, not only in supporting the positive direction of individual students' life courses, it was held as a valuable institution within the Milton community, with the potential to positively shape its trajectory into the future.

Upward Bound

Upward Bound tasks itself with enhancing the high school academic enrichment of its students in addition to supporting their college enrollment and retention, and entry into graduate education. Among other areas in its broad curriculum that ranges from STEM, foreign language and literature to mentoring and financial aid literacy, UB identifies “cultural enrichment” as one component of advancing its mission toward increasing the rate of postsecondary enrollment and retention for students whose families are low-income and neither parent holds a bachelor's

degree. Although Black and Latinx youth represent 63% of UB, the most recent data shows that they lag significantly behind their white counterparts in the program (National Trio Clearinghouse, 2000; Myers et al., 2004). Statistical analysis of UB's impact on college enrollment comparing a control group of demographically comparable UB eligible students (i.e. low income and/or would-be first generation in their family to graduate from college) to UB students finds that UB increased the enrollment of white students from 58% to 69%, while Latinx students—for whom UB made the greatest impact -- only enrolled at 50% (Program Studies Services, 2004). There was no significant difference between rates of enrollment for Black students in UB compared to those who fit the demographic criteria of UB eligibility. Additionally, for students who were both low-income and first generation, UB held no statistically significant difference on rates of four-year enrollment.

The community college that housed the UB grant in this study is in the same city that all but one of the youth in this study reside. In downtown Milton, the college was a block away from the local library and government buildings, and down the street from a Crown Fried Chicken (also known as “The Chicken Shack”) that youth often visited before coming into UB. Upward Bound's offices had transitioned from the second floor of the community college directly opposite the computer lab and classroom area, into the basement sublevel along with the offices of the other pre-college grant-funded youth programs. Classes, however, remained on the second floor. Students in the program were majority Black American with several students identifying with Caribbean or African nationalities. Several students were Chicano and other non-white Latinx ethnic-national backgrounds and very few are white (one or two). Most of these young people were between 1.5 and 2 generations removed from their ethnic-nation of origin. Students' ages range from fourteen to sixteen.

My history with this UB program started a couple of weeks before my wedding in June 2014 when I was interviewed and hired on the spot working in the capacity of a “counselor”. During that interview, I spoke with Mrs. Pryce about my interest in doing research in the future with the program. Her response was surprisingly open, as she indicated that a number of researchers had come through this Upward Bound program to conduct what seemed to be studies related to student learning in traditional subject-area classrooms at UB. Throughout the 2014 – 2015 year, I developed relationships with Mrs. Pryce the program’s director, Mr. Chesnutt, the full-time program counselor, and Ms. Brown, a part-time counselor like me who would eventually become a full-time counselor alongside Mr. Chesnutt. Mrs. Pryce, is a Jamaican woman in her early forties who emigrated to the U.S. in her childhood, grew up in the city and attended the very program she now directs; Mr. Chesnutt was the assistant director/counselor, a middle-aged Black American man originally from Harlem, NY and; Ms. Brown, is a Black American woman in her early thirties who also grew up in the city and went through this very UB program as a high school student some 15 years ago. Staff members consistently demonstrated a deep care for the UB students and their futures in the warmth they showed toward young people. Despite only having worked there for a year prior to this study, they came to see me as a “long-time” staff member. This may, perhaps, have reflected a pattern of high turnover. Nevertheless, when a new teaching and counseling staff was hired during the 2015 summer, at the start of this study, Mrs. Pryce would ask me to explain things to them about the program and referred to me affectionately as an “old” employee.

In that first year, several of the concerns that I previously mentioned regarding how TRIO programs positioned their Black and Brown students were both confirmed and disconfirmed at this UB site. It was often politely implied that parents were not intelligent

however, they *were* considered a highly involved group, invested in their children's futures. Parent orientations, closing ceremony, and "Winter Fest" were meticulously planned occasions for this reason. Despite her reputation among the students as (overly) stern and authoritarian, it was very clear that Mrs. Pryce and Mr. Chesnutt loved the students. She and Chesnutt both held the opinion that many students were not there to work and that too many just wanted to come into UB to socialize. Their suspicion was that youth were primarily interested in what they described as the "cultural" experience of UB (i.e. trips to colleges, museums, and other educational contexts) and devalued the academic side of the program. A common refrain was that the academic side of UB was primary, even if many of the structural aspects of the program contradicted this notion. This Upward Bound site was easily the strictest one I had experienced ever since I began working for Upward Bound programs in 2011. Mrs. Pryce was big on rule following; silent hallway movement was preferred, especially when people like the provost or some other high-level administrator was in the building. I would often see Mrs. Pryce walking through the common area where classes were held, peeking into classroom windows while I was teaching. When she entered a loud and active room, it immediately fell silent. Knowing how easy-going and humorous she often was outside of her preoccupation with student-behavior, I would often make fun of students for being afraid of Mrs. Pryce. Her cheerful demeanor also confirmed that her sternness with youth was not a personal disposition, rather, it stemmed from a pedagogy I argue that was specific to working with these particular young people. A sizeable portion of the burden of ensuring that students always remained orderly fell on counselors. Perhaps even more so, my presence as a Black male counselor, meant that I was looked at to be a bulwark against misbehavior. (I was not.) In spaces where UB staff and students congregated like lunch or the common area near classrooms, Mrs. Pryce would loudly and tersely exclaim

that a particular grade level was not behaving appropriately and publically call out their grade level counselors to address this misbehavior.

The role of an Upward Bound counselor is very similar to that of a high school guidance counselor with the exception of few additional responsibilities and the luxury of having only 15-20 students under one's purview, instead of the 491+ common for some urban school counselors⁵. I enjoyed my time as counselor. Counselors each had one-hour sections of a class they led four days a week during the summer and on Saturdays throughout the academic year during the last hour of the 9am - 3pm day. We also pulled young people from their academic classes in the program to hold 10-20-minute impromptu counseling sessions wherein we would ask a series of questions about their school, social, and home lives and tick the appropriate boxes on our intake form. On Fridays during the summer program, we chaperoned trips with young people along with Mrs. Pryce, and Mr. Chesnutt. That summer, I was assigned to the sophomore class and was tasked with facilitating career development and exploration while counselors for other grade levels similarly focused on singular college-preparation areas like the SAT, applications, and financial aid. Instead of following the traditional career counseling curriculum, I reoriented our focus on local economies, narrowing in on jobs that paid a living wage and the imperative of thriving commercial sector to contribute taxes that support local infrastructure. I did this in addition to offering traditional Myers-Brigg-esque career inventories that came in the 5-inch binder I was given when I was hired. It was in this cohort that I met and taught Beauty, Shante, and Kumar, three of the focal students in the current study.

After my year as a counselor, I transitioned into teaching for Upward Bound to facilitate

⁵ Information from the *2012 National Survey of School Counselors True North: Charting the Course to College and Career Readiness*. Retrieved from: http://www.civicerprises.net/MediaLibrary/Docs/2012_NOSCA_Report.pdf

YPAR. Mrs. Pryce allowed this but warned me about the pay decrease that came with this move. The circumstances involved in getting approval for action research are an illustrative example of the primacy that UB places on the academic front, and the extent to which that it's facilitated by concerns about oversight. UB submits an annual report to the federal government and the curriculum must be in line with its mission for college preparation, otherwise it places the renewal of their grant in jeopardy. In May 2015, I met with Mrs. Pryce to explain in detail the research I was attempting to do. She was open to my research as I explained my interest in students' political development and the idea of creating a class for critical YPAR; however, she wanted and explicitly asked for language to reframe the political nature of YPAR into something more palatable to her program officer, which spoke to more traditional academic college preparation. I responded by emphasizing the importance of students learning research methodology and conducting a formal social scientific inquiry. This eventually satisfied Mrs. Pryce who ultimately signed off on this addition to the curriculum. Knowing that a common practice in YPAR was to deliver a presentation of findings, I promised her that we would do this. My insisting this was reactionary in many ways, serving to both validate the rigor of this endeavor and to assuage what I perceived as reservation on her part with what might have been considered an experimental (grant jeopardizing) exercise.

While leading Research, I also taught 3 sections of Literature courses. This meant that I was lesson planning for 4 total courses and teaching Literature consecutively between 9am and 12pm and Research from 1- 2pm, throughout the 2015 summer. I developed my syllabus from scratch and had complete autonomy over how these courses were taught. My senior literature class read the young adult novel, *Paper Towns*, while my freshman through juniors read selections from *Octavia's Brood* anthology of social justice, science fiction short stories. These

stories offered an excellent opportunity to discuss the real-life issues of inequality and injustice from which the science fiction element drew. Many of the students I worked with in Research were also my students in Literature, and conversations across the classes often spilled over into one another, specifically in the classes reading Octavia's *Brood*. Tensions arose as debates and arguments that originated in Research spawned rifts that brought themselves into the Literature space. Even as Research was phased out of the official UB curriculum after the 2015 summer, I continued to teach three sections of literature for the duration of the 2015-2016 academic year, and meeting for YPAR at 3pm after the counseling session ended.

Research/YPAR

My first official mentioning of YPAR in the Upward Bound context, outside of my conversation with Mrs. Pryce, was at the June 2015 UB parent orientation. I was allotted a few minutes by Mrs. Pryce to deliver a spiel about YPAR and my research. I wrote down a few things that I wanted to say, but I ultimately ended up improvising my pitch/information delivery. I introduced myself by talking a little about my past with TRIO and this UB program. I spent most of my time discussing the difference between YPAR and my research, emphasizing that in YPAR we would be talking about and studying issues related to race, class, and gender (which I ultimately did not spend much time focusing on). I briefly talked about the research aspect and social scientific inquiry, highlighting that the process would culminate in a presentation. I discussed the self-directed aspect, mentioning that they would ultimately decide what we researched and presented. Describing my study, I went on to say,

“The students who are in my class that agree to participate in this study will be part of my research and I will write about their time and my time with them in the class. That work will eventually become my dissertation. No one's real name will be used for the sake of protecting your identities as minors. The research I do will hopefully help teachers and the general public understand your perspectives so that they can be better teachers, which I hope, improves our society and our schools. Even if you are assigned to my class, you

don't have to participate in the study. The people who are interested in participating will be interviewed throughout our time together, separate from our class. You and your parents will have to fill out consent forms. Also, any parents of students that are interested, I'd love to interview you too, and I have consent forms for that as well."

Prior to this, I was told by Ms. Brown-- who was by the time this study began, a full-time counselor-- that all students would have the opportunity to choose among the electives available for that summer, which included Research (i.e. YPAR), Computer Applications I, II, and III, and Spanish I, II, and III. The staff designed schedules for youth based on the courses they were taking in high school, but with the electives, young people would reserve authority; however, as she explained, it was inevitable that some students would be placed in elective classes if not enough students opted in. This concerned me considering that I was not sure how effective my spiel was in communicating what I considered the fun aspect of YPAR, and because of what I perceived the previous year with my counseling cohort as exasperation with and indifference toward conversations about race. However, on the first day classes started after the July 4th, holiday, Ms. Brown communicated to me that an overwhelming number of students opted to be in Research, so many that a significant portion were steered into other electives. I confirmed this with students in the class on the first day by asking them to raise their hands if they opted into this class, which was followed by a unanimous raising of hands. At some point in the first few weeks, Mrs. Pryce communicated that the students who did enter Research were ones she thought could handle the class.

The YPAR curriculum I designed for the 2015 summer operated in three phases lasting two weeks each (6 weeks total). Throughout that time, I gathered information about students' politics on race, class, and inequality in addition to their beliefs about their community, I taught them about policies throughout the 20th and 21st centuries that exacerbated racialized structural inequality, and I prepared them to empirically research a community issue of interest to the

majority of the collective—the findings for which would be presented on the final day of the summer program to a group of staff, students, parents and family, and other community stakeholders. During Phase I, my goal was to raise questions that invited students to explore their own thoughts on issues/questions about themselves, race, racism, urbanization, class, their community, inequality, and social change. I crafted lessons to engage students in debates around issues often cited in relation to residents of urban contexts like: reliance on social welfare programs, individual and community poverty, drug use and sales, crime and criminal sentencing, protests and rioting, etc. I provided very little feedback about the ideas students entered with during this phase, as my explicit goal during the next phase was to interrogate some of these correlates more closely.

In Phase II, I provided direct instruction that framed inequality as socially reproductive and maintained through laws and policy. I lectured on federal housing policies during the mid-twentieth century that created the white middle-class while simultaneously concentrating Black folks in apartheid communities (Massey & Denton, 1993). Our group explored short academic articles, and pieces from popular press like *Vox* or *The Atlantic's City Lab* that destabilized ideas like: Black on Black crime, poor people do not work, most poor people are Black and most Black people are poor, racism is an exclusively interpersonal phenomenon, Black rates of imprisonment are commensurate to the amount of crime Black folks commit compared to other groups, etc. We watched media like TED talks on issues like environmental racism, and interrogated media to explore problematic arguments or to identify potential racial biases. We invited guest speakers from places like the entertainment industry (a Black producer at VH1) and the juvenile justice system (a former teacher at a juvenile justice facility) to talk about inequality in those areas. We also looked at community justice work from youth grassroots organizations

like BYP100 and the Newark Student Union. Although my explicit goal during this phase was to get students to think structurally and resist analyses that focus exclusively on individuals to understand social problems in their community, many students throughout the duration of our time together continued to rely on some degree of individual level analyses in their speech and writing. In addition to the other methods of data collection, during Phase II, I also conducted formal class discussions that served as focus groups.

Phase III was chaotic. It involved identifying a research question, learning research methods, and carrying out empirical research in service of delivering a presentation at the Upward Bound closing ceremony. Reflecting on that time, I was quite nervous about a few things related to this study and the potential for a great many other issues to arise in the future. By the time that we were a couple of weeks into the summer program, Mrs. Pryce was casually and routinely talking about her anticipation of our presentation. This I perceived as both genuine and as a loaded reference to accountability, considering how often she would peak into our room with a skeptical gaze when she saw us in an uproar, or in a chorus of laughter or when neighboring teachers knocked on our door and told us we were being too loud. I remember feeling overwhelmed by the thought of taking on three roles: as researcher, YPAR facilitator, and Upward Bound teacher; having to conduct a thorough, organized study with a rigorous level of consistency in data collection, while also being a facilitator whose practice was good enough that youth felt empowered to engage in radical self-directed action work, and making sure that I maintained enough of a formal structure that young people learned relevant history, sociology, and policy to produce deliverables that would evidence this learning. The stakes felt high for each of these roles. Most importantly, I wanted the YPAR experience to be transformational and believed in its power to be as long as *I* cultivated an environment and experiences that were

sufficient to foster conscientization. This all weighed on me throughout the 2015 summer. I was also aware that I was operating from a very different set of ideas and principles about Black and Brown youth and about what an ideal classroom looked like than the program director. For instance, I let my students curse, I cursed, and the environment was generally more laid back. We played games and engaged in a lot of group activities. This ran contrary to the orderly environment Mrs. Pryce encouraged and hushed classrooms that were common amongst some of my teacher colleagues.

Participants

Focal students in this study were the six for whom I was able to conduct an exit interview and/or an exit survey. Some of the other eight students have initial interviews without exit surveys or interviews, and their participation ended with the 2015 summer program. The six were students who participated in YPAR with the most consistency after the 6-week summer program ended in August 2015. I refer to all youth participants in this study interchangeably as youth, youth researchers, students, and young people considering that they assumed each of those roles simultaneously given the context that this research took place. As mentioned previously, I had a one-year relationship with Beauty, Shante, and Kumar prior to the beginning of this study. It was unsurprising that of all of my counseling students, these three wound up in my Research class, considering that they were among the most active participants in counseling the year prior. They also happened to be the ones I developed a relationship with outside of the classroom through personal conversations, however, not always organically. Impromptu counseling pullouts allowed me to open dialogue with students about their private lives in a way that is atypical for someone who serves in the capacity as their teacher. In the same way, YPAR invites deeply personal discourse about personal experiences of trauma, injustice, or exclusion

unencumbered by the walls of alienation between students and teachers created by the formality of traditional school settings. What follows is a brief personal description of the six focal youth researchers based on my sixteen months (two and a half years for Beauty, Kumar, and Shante) with them in Upward Bound and YPAR.

Kumar

Kumar was a junior at the time of this study and worked at a local barbershop sweeping hair and doing other maintenance work. He was a handsome, skinny, extremely smart kid. He wore the latest youth fashion trends and simultaneously maintained a clean cut, mature image. Kumar had a laid-back persona that made him popular with his peers. He was one of the two consenting Black male students in this study, and attended one of the city's charter schools—*Excelsior*-- which had a reputation as the most rigorous school in the city operating under a “No-Excuses” pedagogy (Yeh, 2017). For the year prior to this research, I had come to think of Kumar as a younger brother and we became close. I was/am personally invested in his success, and we often talked about his plans for the future, which I pushed him to clarify for himself and gave him lots of direction to boot. In my private conversations with Kumar (which still happen), I was often very candid about my past naiveties and mistakes I made in relationships (romantic, work, and otherwise), school, and with family that I regretted. I did this in part, as a warning, because I saw many similarities between him and me, and potential that exceeded my own. Some three years since we met, Kumar followed my higher education advice verbatim to: double major, enroll in a state college, and to make one those majors African American Studies.

Kumar's parents were together when I met him in 2014, but then separated at some point during our research in 2015-2016. He split his time between his father and mother's homes and shared with me his opinion that his mother was too nagging, and he appreciated the freedom he

got when he stayed with his father. I responded by pushing him to consider his mother's position on many of the issues he presented related to what he perceived as nagging. I remember when I was his counselor and Kumar was a rising sophomore, his mother phoned into Mrs. Pryce's office to speak with me. She wanted me to push Kumar, and to not let up on him. She did not mention any specific area that she was concerned about, but just generally wanted me to know that she could always be reached if Kumar ever presented a behavioral problem. She knew he was smart but felt that he was too complacent and needed to be encouraged to excel academically. This call was unsolicited as Kumar was rarely in trouble (despite being just as cheeky and boundary pushing as his adolescent peers, some of whom *did* get into trouble, and noticed that Kumar often evaded punishments they had received for similar infractions).

He and I did not always see eye to eye and at one point in 2016, Kumar stopped attending research meetings, and would not speak or pay attention during our Literature class sessions. I cannot quite remember what the impetus was, nor can I prove that it was the true impetus for his leaving, however, this was perhaps around the time his parents' relationship began to deteriorate. I often found myself having to verbally reprimand Kumar and him rebelling in a way that was very uncharacteristic of him up to that point.

Beauty

Beauty, like Kumar was a rising junior at the time this study began. She was friends with both Kumar and Shante. In class, she and Kumar would often recall playing the *Call of Duty* video game with one another, remotely, from their respective homes, via technology that let them connect over the web. She was closest with Shante of all her other UB counterparts. They often sat together and conversed throughout class sessions. Beauty was a star student at UB and her high school, and prided herself on being a hard worker both in and out of the classroom. She

maintained multiple jobs over the course of our time together and balanced her work responsibilities with her school work. She took AP and honors classes at her school. Throughout the study, Beauty was employed at Burger King working 30+ hours a week. She often described feeling overwhelmed while smiling, in a way that showed she was quite pleased with her industriousness. She was well-liked by her peers and regarded as a really nice person. I held the same opinion of Beauty. After she met my wife for the first time at the 2014 closing ceremony BBQ, she went on for years after telling me every so often how pretty and smart she thought she was based on that encounter and inquiring about how she was doing. Of all the UB students in this study, Beauty came across as most mature, and as having an old soul. This may be, in part, the result of how family-oriented she was, and how much time she spent with older relatives. Her mother, grandmother, and aunts played a big role in her life. My last memory of her was at the UB senior graduation ceremony in 2017, she was surrounded by these women who looked extremely proud of her and handed her flowers to celebrate this accomplishment.

Shante

Shante was among the most outspoken young people in this research group, and the most outspoken of focal youth. A junior like Kumar and Beauty and former counseling student of mine, she was among the students with whom I felt closest. She was being raised by her maternal grandmother and had a close relationship with her younger sister who spent most of her time with Shante's mother. She had a twin brother who, because of some tension with a local gang, was sent to live in Texas with an uncle. This weighed on Shante, and I would every so often check-in with her about her brother. Also, like Beauty, she worked a tremendous number of hours. She was employed by the local Boys and Girls Club and would often spend 30+ hours working under a supervisor who, to her consternation, was not considerate about her time and the

fact that she was a minor when assigning her hours. Shante was thoughtful and kind but did not present an affect of sensitivity. She was argumentative, often playfully-so, but was not afraid to engage in debate to defend her position.

Selena

Of all the focal students, Selena was the one with whom-- on a political level-- I connected most at the time of the study. Selena is the only young person in this study that has three interviews; one from the 2015 summer, the 2015-2016 academic year, and an exit interview that took place during the 2016 fall. She was being raised by her grandmother and did not have much of a close relationship with her mother or father. At the time, she identified as pansexual and was in a relationship with a Black American boy—a relationship that she would talk about every so often to describe their political ideological tensions, and that remained on and off throughout the time of this research. She had a strong left-leaning political orientation and was knowledgeable in all manner of social justice, anti-oppressive identity-based discourse. Selena was a devout student but often expressed anxiety about falling behind in school, or that despite her best efforts, she (and others from her community) would not be able to compete in the world against white Americans. Her anxiety stemmed, in part, from periods where she was unable to complete schoolwork because of her bouts with depression—a depression that stemmed from a series of traumatic experiences in her past brought on by a stepfather and grandfather who sexually abused her as a child, and who (the grandfather), at the time of the study, was still occasionally present in her home. She received in-patient and out-patient therapy at a local institution throughout the time of our study to manage her depression. Selena felt passionate about social justice and actively curated and participated in political discussions online and with her personal friends and myself. This is what primarily attracted her to Research.

Gustavo

Gustavo was the youngest of the youth researchers. His participation during the 2015 summer was tepid at best. Although he remained engaged, and participated in small- group discussions, he rarely spoke in open class discussions. He and another student in the research class that did not consent to this study often joked around at the back of the room and I would have to bring them back on track. Gustavo's participation increased after the summer program ended. Several of the 2015-2016 YPAR meetings, were attended by Gustavo alone or Gustavo and Hector. He attended every meeting and would stop me in the hallway between my English classes to ask me if we were meeting, often corralling other students to make sure that they were attending too. On many occasions, I drove Gustavo home after our YPAR meetings to a suburban working-class town adjacent to Milton which is when I learned most about his personal life and interests. He was a huge hip-hop fan and often wanted to talk about "conscious" hip-hop artists and their music. He lived with his mother, father, and sister. His family spoke primarily Spanish at home.

Hector

Hector was the oldest youth researcher and had a reputation as having the best sneaker collection of all the other students in UB. He was *extremely* quiet, not just in his reservation to speak, but also in the tone of his speech, possibly having to do with English being his second language. (This changed somewhat as we spent more time together in research.) During the 2015 summer program, he, like Gustavo, rarely participated, but afterwards became the most consistent meeting attendee. Hector's latent participation, at least initially, may have been facilitated by convenience: he had a younger sibling who was also in a grant-funded enrichment program at the community college that let out one-hour after Upward Bound, which was

typically when we ended our YPAR meetings. He and this sibling would walk home together after our meetings ended. He loved sports: basketball and soccer in particular.

Conclusion

Chapter three identifies my background in TRIO as informing for my selection of Upward Bound and its students as the setting and participants for this study. It elaborates on the focal participants' backgrounds and offers a historical overview of the school-community in which this study takes place. I developed a YPAR course entitled Research through the Upward Bound program, one over which I had complete autonomy over the goals and structure. As Research began, the primary function of its first phase was to generate potentially provocative discussion about race, class, and social change to capture youths' initial political orientations.

CHAPTER 4: BLACK RESILIENCE NEOLIBERALISM

Overview

The following chapter is a narrative account of the early stages of Y/PAR, and responds to the question, “What political opinions do youth action researchers hold in relation to questions at various intersections of race, class, and social change, at the outset of YPAR?” I explicate themes that capture the political discourses and ideas with which young people entered this work. This chapter endeavors to disrupt as much as possible the common practice of relaying narratives that paint action research groups with a broad brush in order to grant individuals and smaller groups within this cohort of youth some degree of differentiation. Although I’ve identified themes throughout this early stage, I avoid universal descriptors that suggest something about “all” youth was consistent.

In this chapter, I describe moments throughout Phase I (the first two weeks) of the six week summer program that underscore the race, class, and social change discourses youth engaged the outset of YPAR, and where my goal was to raise questions that invited students to participate in metacognitive exploration of their own thoughts in various areas, including: their personal values and motivations, race, racism, Blackness, whiteness, individual and community poverty, welfare reform, the culture of their community, inequality, meritocracy, individual mobility, personal responsibility, respectability, social change, social power, rioting, policing, police violence, community violence, crime, drug use and sales, and criminal sentencing. Some of the questions were structured into my lessons and research tools (i.e.: surveys, interviews, and journal prompts) while others emanated naturally from the flow of organic conversations. I crafted these early lessons to engage students in debates around issues often cited in relation to

urban contexts and their residents by presenting what could be seen as opposing views on particular issues and then inviting students to share their opinions of what we read/watched, and pushing them to explain their perspectives and the reasoning that underlay political theories they wrote or vocalized. If most perspectives in the group seemed to overlap, I would offer my best version of an opposing argument in hopes that it would allow other, possibly contesting, voices to emerge. This would, at times, prompt responses like, “Well, whose side are you on?” I attempted to provide very little feedback about the ideas students entered with during this phase, as my explicit goal during Phase II of the summer was to interrogate more closely some of the correlates associated with Black and Brown folks and urban communities. For this reason, this chapter reflects exclusively on insights students provided during the initial phase, considering that it is the phase in which I intentionally sought to minimize my influence over their thoughts on the issues raised in YPAR.

I describe youths’ receptiveness to my study and the groups’ focus on race, class, and social change, in these early days. As far as receptiveness goes, young people demonstrated simultaneous excitement and caution. In our conversations and interviews, they meandered between discourses that elevated the role of structure in social outcomes and ones that highlighted the primacy of agency. Indeed, while many individual young people engaged personal choice/meritocratic discourses, the same youth also appeared to have experience explicating arguments that highlighted the primacy of structure in social outcomes. More than anything, most youth were eager to engage dialogue around politicized issues and social problems, as several students commented that they rarely talked about these issues in their school.

Data analysis of Phase I reveals three focal findings. The first is that YPAR provided space for youth to engage in conversations about race, class, inequality, and change—discourse that was significantly lacking in their schooling experience. The second, most youth engaged both critical and/or structuralist discourses around social problems and deficit-based, individualist discourses. This chapter's final and focal contribution is its introducing of a theoretical construct, called Black Resilience Neoliberalism, to describe a specific politicized discourse engaged by many youths which served as both a rationalization for inequality and tangential positioning of racial obstacles or racist experiences as positive (negative) reinforcement for Black or poor folks to work harder, endure, and prove themselves against these odds. More specifically, youth researchers positioned the structural and historical obstacles experienced by Black folks and the Milton community as normal (i.e. acceptable) while repositioning Black Americans' or Milton residents' resolve and responsibility to overcome these barriers through personal effort (e.g. making good choices, proving themselves to naysayers, etc.) centrally in conversations about individual and social progress.

These findings suggest that youth coming into action research or activist contexts on their own accord, who express and demonstrate interest in exploring issues of race, class, and social change, to produce or effect school-community change, enter this work with various political-philosophical orientations related to these topics. It demonstrates that the act of entering action research or youth organizing communities, is not itself an indication that each young person involved has internalized radical or even progressive political ideologies. While this finding may appear obvious to some, it marks a departure from many CYS and YPAR accounts where it is often implied that voluntary association with progressive advocacy groups is sufficient evidence

that all involved youth similarly perceive change value in “social justice” work as it is typically defined.

Early Political Dilemmas & Debates

Engaging the Taboo

Early on in the Y/PAR process, it was clear that the young people —each of whom elected to be a part of Research-- were very interested in having conversations about racism and inequality, even if only because those topics were rarely approached in their classrooms at school, which signaled to some that their schools or teachers either did not care enough or felt topics centering racial injustice were too taboo for the classroom. One student even remarked that a teacher told him it was “illegal” for teachers to discuss current events around police shootings in school after Michael Brown’s death. Interviews during the first phase revealed that formal schooling left gaps in students’ knowledge of the racial past--particularly as it related to Milton-- that they desired to have filled in, or were seeking out opportunities elsewhere to engage these topics. When I asked, “What have you learned in school from either history, social studies, or civics classes, about Milton?,” Kumar, Shante, and Ebony each responded, abruptly: “Nothing!” Following up on those responses, most students indicated an interest in learning about the past, specifically, how the past shaped the present and the ways in which race factored into historical processes in their community. Responding to my inquiry about what he felt young people in the community were not learning in school, Kumar said, “About themselves. What’s going on around them. Do you want me to elaborate?” He continued, “...because black people, we have so much history. We do not know that though. We don’t know that.” Beauty expressed similar frustration around educational gaps when she conveyed her contempt for one particular piece of community history. “I would like to know more about Milton. Thomas Milton was a

slave owner and [this city] was named after him. He was a slave owner, why was it named after him!?” Reflecting on why her school might not engage these topics, Selena felt that the white teaching force’s perceptions of Black and Latinx students stood in the way of education around certain issues. “Teachers, they think that we have a handicap, which is true, I guess. They all just treat us different. Like we're fragile. Like they're afraid. Not of us but ... I don't know, they don't really know. In our charter school, there's mostly white [teachers], and they're just like, they don't want to push us or anything.” Aside from her echoing what other students said about teachers falling short in providing a satisfactory education, Selena’s allusions here point to insights about the politics of race, teaching, and, white liberalism that deserve further unpacking. Although comments like the ones above are critical toward understanding the role of schooling in young people’s political development, this chapter does not focus on schools. The purpose of underscoring these comments is to demonstrate why some youth may have opted to join the Research group in the first place. Research (i.e. YPAR) offered an opportunity to engage in dialogue on subjects like race, community, and inequality, that students perceived as critically relevant (Clay & Rubin, 2018), and I made as much clear in my comments to parents and students at the 2015 summer program orientation.

In the midst of the 2015 summer, several high-profile cases of police murdering unarmed Black victims were still active in the news cycle. These cases include (but are not limited to) victims: Freddie Gray, Sandra Bland, and Walter Scott. Consistent with each of these cases and many others like it involving the untimely deaths of Black folks, police were video recorded using unnecessarily hostile force with victims, yet none would go to trial or face a conviction to be held accountable for their crimes. Conducting this research was timely in other ways as well: as the prevalence of police violence in Black communities became higher-profile news, Black

Lives Matter, social media “activists”, and mainstream news as well as left and right leaning publications brought conversations about racial injustice into a public spotlight. Phrases like “white supremacy” and “systemic racism” which, I would argue, before Trayvon Martin’s death were relatively obscure in mainstream news reporting, had entered the national political discourse, allowing for the expansion of generalist media consumers’ lexicon. However, without learning opportunities to buttress media consumption of critical discourse, these phrases and their meaning had the potential to be weakened or misconstrued.

The confluence of the political zeitgeist and lack of engagement with these issues in school made discussions about topics at the intersection of race, policing, poverty, and urban contexts in YPAR particularly lively with youth researchers. In our first two weeks together, I was able to rely on some formal indicators like surveys, social identity pie graphs, journal entries, and interviews to assess youths’ viewpoints in these areas, however, conversations in our meetings offer the best insight into some of the tensions and debates that emerged in these early days.

Interest and frustration. Action research would prove to be fertile ground for both myself and youth to explore their political orientations. From the very first day, in fact, the value of the YPAR space (in all its imperfection) was revealed, as youth acknowledged having to think about issues that they typically did not engage or clarify thoughts that they had only partially explored. They raised questions that unmasked unreconciled power issues in both the YPAR process and my study. These tensions ultimately forced me to reflect on how I proceeded from that day forward.

On July 6th, at our very first meeting together as a group, I began by introducing myself to the young people in the Upward Bound Research class, and spending time discussing the

course objectives- which primarily involved explaining both the three phases I had conceptualized for that summer, and YPAR, as best I could at the time, in language that was not confusing or overly riddled with academic jargon. "...It's called youth participatory action research," I explained to the twenty or so faces looking up at me with equal amounts of intrigue and caution. "Essentially, what it just means is that you—as a group of students—have the opportunity to direct a research project, [in relation to a topic] that you're interested in. You're gonna be self-directed..." In the ten minutes that followed, I went about differentiating the Research class from my study and offering students who were interested, the opportunity to participate in the study and to take home consent forms.

Faylah and Cindy showed discernable interest as I spoke glowingly about what being a part of my study would mean. They also raised questions that challenged me to reflect on my claims to be turning over authority to the youth in this process—challenges that would reappear again and again throughout my study. For example, as I was explaining how the action research process unfolds, Cindy asked, "So, do we have to work as like, one big group, or [can we work as] like individuals or little groups?" I told her that it's typical for a group to work as a cohesive unit on one larger project and that I would prefer it, but concluded by saying, "You have the authority on this; if you all come to the conclusion, 'we don't want to do one project, we want to do two,' then I'm about that." It was not clear to me at the time, however, my lukewarm receptiveness to this idea stemmed from concerns about the difficulty of managing multiple projects. Describing the stages that would eventually lead my research to be published as book in the form of my dissertation prompted Faylah to rightfully ask with mild indignation, "Are we getting paid from that?" which generated a few murmurs among her peers. Questions like this forced me to question throughout my entire study if I was truly disrupting neocolonial and

hegemonic paradigms against which YPAR scholars firmly stand. I told the group that electing to participate in my study would require the assignment of pseudonyms. Faylah replied, “What if we *want* our real names used?” I responded jokingly to her question without considering the thread of self-determination it carried: for all of my assertions about the centrality of youth-leading, shouldn’t young people get to decide whether their names are attached to their words and ideas appearing in print? Nevertheless, I was constrained by IRB, and I decided not to go into too many details.

The syllabus I created provided a rough course description and offered broad objectives for each week. These include: Week 1: Community Building and Reflection; Week 2: Discovering Our Personal Politics; Week 3: Defining Our Research I & Understanding Inequality; Week 4: Understanding Inequality (cont’d) & Research Plan; Week 5: Research Plan & Data Collection; Week 6: Data Analysis & Presentation Preparation. It was a loosely constructed guide because so much of what we would do was tentative. I had not created lesson plans for anything beyond the first week. These themes primarily served as guideposts for me as a researcher, to keep in mind for when I did lesson plan during weeks 2-4, so that I would organize activities to capture the most robust data in relation to each week’s theme. I also inserted images on the syllabus that I intended to reference in an activity where students would draw their ideal version of Milton. Perhaps, the only content that mirrored a traditional syllabus was a disclaimer written in all-caps in the middle of the second page, which read, “****NO CELLPHONES ARE PERMITTED TO BE OUT UNLESS OTHERWISE INSTRUCTED.**”

After going over logistical points about the class and my research, I invited students to play a jeopardy game I developed the night before with my wife and then passed out a

Likert/open-ended survey I had developed to probe for: their views on meritocracy/individualism, their perspectives on various matters related to Black folks, their community and its residents, and their buy-in to structuralist framings of inequality. Participating in the survey, many youths acknowledged having to think about things in ways that they were not typically accustomed or to clarify thoughts that they had only partially explored.

Minutes in, I noticed the young folks had some trouble answering the questions as several vocalized frustrations and conundrums to themselves while filling out the survey, and others asked me directly for clarification on some items. “What makes doing something like this hard,” I asked. Justice replied, “Some of the questions you don’t know about, to answer it. You just have to guess.” Here Justice pointed out that gaps in his prior knowledge made the survey difficult. Jonae responds to my question about the challenging aspects of the survey saying, “I’m in the middle, like, it could go both ways.” Justice and many others agree with her evaluation that it was hard to take a position on some of the Likert items. I ask them to give me an example. He offers the first: “It says, “people here work hard.” Some people work hard, some people don’t work hard.” Jonae continues, “Then it says, “the people here are mainly good people.” I don’t know everybody here. Some people are bad, so I’m in the middle for that.” Several students chime in pointing out that there are bad people all over the world, and in all communities. While these comments may illustrate some technical issues students’ had with the Likert, I suspect that they may also allude to an ambivalence with blanketly describing their community and its residents in positive terms.

The general consensus among the group was that completing the survey was challenging. Most students responded in the affirmative when I asked if the survey made them think about things that they normally never thought about. “I don’t think about *these* things,” Cindy asserted.

I [didn't] know how to answer these questions with words, you get what I'm saying? Like [I'm] trying to say something and [I] don't know how to write it down on paper." Cindy's statement points to a fundamental challenge for the execution of this study (and political ethnography)—that is, how to understand and describe participants' politics beyond their individual articulations, especially when youth may be engaging with political questions and topics that introduce ideas for which they do not yet have language to adequately unpack. Although Ebony agreed that answering the survey questions posed some degree of challenge, her agreement was much milder than her peers. She followed Cindy's statement with, "I'm not gonna say I think about it *all* the time, but it's something I think about, like when it comes up in the news and stuff. There's nothing I ha[d] to second guess like I never thought about it."

Young people were entering YPAR demonstrating excitement about engaging the process and conveying various concerns related to both my study and the YPAR process that pushed me to reflect on my approaches in both areas. This large swath of excitement would eventually transform and dissipate as time went on. Nevertheless, their relative inexperience with the topics I was engaging or the ways in which I engaged them, suggested to me that YPAR might be a valuable experience for many of them to clarify their perspectives and explore unfamiliar political questions and information. It was also clear that youth came with various prior knowledges and viewpoints about matters of race, and inequality, evidenced by their survey responses and early debates and conversations, all of which I will discuss in detail in the sections that follow.

Theorizing Race/Racism, Inequality, and Social Change

Structured conversations during the first two weeks provided an opportunity to understand young folks' positions on matters of race, class, inequality, and social change.

Dialogue concentrated on one of these areas often spilled over into one or more of the others. By the tail end of the two weeks studying youths' perspectives, I had put forth my best effort to conceal any concrete details in my political beliefs around the topics we had discussed, however, I was not always successful and truly, never could have been. Nevertheless, young folk's positions in relation to these issues in our meetings showed significant variation from one another and they invited new political discourses to the group.

Race/Racism. One example of this variation was during an exercise where I asked students to define the following words: racism, inequality, citizenship, oppression. Definitions of racism tended to emphasize the word "discrimination," the point that "anyone" could be racist, and, as I expected, hinged heavily on the interpersonal side of racism. Justice offered, "Discrimination against another group". Salim responded, "Discrimination on the color of your skin," while Beauty said, "Belittling someone because you believe they're inferior to you." Kumar offered a definition that disrupted this line of responses, saying in a contrite voice, "Racism...is just for white people because..." which was quickly and predictably met by a slurry of laughter and confusion. One voice exclaimed, "Stooooop" and another loudly questioned, "What!?" Kumar, frustrated by this response retorts, "Can I finish my sentence?! Damn!" "Like, white racism," he continues, "because whites... whites made that." "No, that's not true," someone quips. I ask Kumar to clarify his comments, however he hesitates and retreats, saying, "Never mind." I reassure him that I think his definition is important and actually closer to my own than he would think. He continues. "It's like only whites can be racist because of...white supremacy." Prior to this conversation, the phrase white supremacy had not been used by me or any other student in our meetings. I asked him to clarify how he understood what white

supremacy meant, to which he replied, “That's different, that's different, right? I did not mean to say that. It's something about only whites can do it.”

Shante jumps in to complicate Kumar’s analysis saying, “But what about what the Dominican Republic is doing with Haitians? They’re not Black and white. That’s racism, right?” Between 2013 and 2015, The Dominican Republic voted to renounce the citizenship of its Haitian immigrants and began deporting Haitians, many of whom had been living in The Dominican Republic for generations, oftentimes making judgements about who was Haitian based solely on appearance (i.e. dark skin). Her comments in response to Kumar drew in a relevant current event to reposition the concept of racism outside of the Black/white American dichotomy while attending to racism as a mechanism of the state (beyond the interpersonal), yet she seems to also imply that Blackness and whiteness are exclusively a reflection of skin color. I reply to Shante’s comments with excitement, and ask the group if they were aware of the situation that was actively happening on the island that the two countries shared. After I relayed the events, many of her classmates took even stronger opposition to the notion that only white folks could be racist arguing, “Black people can be racist, too!” and “I'm pretty sure other people were slaves before black people. There were Africans that enslaved other African people.” These responses foreshadowed later occurrences of some young people taking liberal/diplomatic and often defensive positions in relation to critiques of whiteness-- positions that were not taken up quite as often or fervently when accusations of cultural deficiency were leveled at Black folks, other groups of color, or poor folks.

Class and inequality. When I asked for their definitions of inequality, as before, youth produced a range of responses which included, “People not having equal rights when they deserve them,” “One group not giving [rights] to other people,” “the state of being unequal,” and

examples like, “Like on a sports team, everybody tries out for the team, but somebody ends up getting cut and being the water boy.” Justice replied, “placing other people at a higher level. It doesn't just have to do with race, though, it could be inequality in like power, middle-class, upper-class, lower-class.” He continues, “The upper-class [is] like all the way up there, and then lower class [is] like all the way down there.” Justice’s response introduces social class as a context for inequality while other students primarily defined inequality in terms of civil rights or general terms that spoke to “difference.” To reign in their responses, I offered a scenario to the group and invited them to respond to whether it was an example of inequality:

So, let's say Justice and Beauty, they come here to class early, right? And they're like, "Mr. Clay, I need \$50 to go take care of something for my family. Now, I know Beauty's family's got mad money, right? And I know Justice's family is dirt poor, and I say to both of them - or excuse me, I say to Beauty, "Nah, I'm not giving you any money, I know y'all are caked out." And I say to Justice, "I'll give you the \$50 because I know y'all are broke." Is that inequality?

This scenario is met by a flurry of “No’s,” “Yes’s” and back and forth between both camps with various qualifications. Kumar argues, “Yeah, if he gave it to you (referring to Justice) and you ain’t give anything to her (referring to Beauty) that’s unequal, even if...,” to which Jonae quickly rebuts, “But she’s broke!” Out of the excitement emerges an insightful response from Selena, “There’s a difference between equality and justice.” Without a pause, I ask her to “say more.” Selena continues, “Like, equal is that you give both of them money, but justice is like giving...the poor one money, not giving money to the one that has more money than she knows what to do with.” I ask the group for their thoughts on Selena’s comments. The room was hushed for a moment before Jonae exclaimed “Ouhhhhh!” and Kumar said “That was good!” Still others disagreed. Selena’s remarks in this moment about justice were the first time I suspected her level of political analysis was sophisticated and conspicuously progressive.

Though this conversation did not reach the level of a full-on analysis of the class structure, it does allude to how young people might position themselves in relation to real-life on-going debates about the distribution of resources. Some youths' perspectives in response to this scenario complicated my early inferences about their political orientations, as someone like Jonae, who often expressed conservative respectability views, defended the fairness of my actions in the previous hypothetical scenario, while Kumar, who typically landed on "critical" sides of many issues, found this hypothetical action inequitable, though his response may also have reflected his stance toward the definition of the word "inequality" rather than his feeling about whether what happened was right.

Social Change. Students engaged in theorizing social change during the first phase of the summer program, especially after being introduced to some area of systemic injustice. This theorizing was at times spontaneous and at other times was in response to direct lines of questioning from me. After watching a film short about the health hazardous impact of toxic facilities and landfills on the primarily Black, Chester, PA community in the 1990s, and the community's civic fight against the systematic poisoning of their city, we talked about what it might take for Chester to see change. I asked young people how toxic facilities and landfills wound up in places like Chester in the first place? "Because they feel like *we're* trash," and "Because black people there, so it doesn't matter," said Jonae and Kumar respectively. We talked about the responsibility of public officials and the ways in which they may fall short, or how possibly well-intentioned efforts to bring jobs to city or to reduce the tax burden by bolstering commercial infrastructure may result in issues like the one we saw in Chester. I ask them if they think the public experiencing these challenges should play any role in confronting these issues,

particularly when governments fall short. This prompts the following exchange between me and Jonae:

- Jonae:** I mean, if the people don't really want it there, it won't be there, like how they was going to meetings and stuff, saying how they didn't want it there.
- Me:** Yeah. So, you're saying it wouldn't happen if people protested?
- Jonae:** Yeah, just like they was protesting [by standing in front of facility's entrance in the film to block it], and you see that truck drove away, right?
- Me:** Mm-hmm (affirmative). But they didn't win ultimately, they won some fights, but you saw they were still fighting that battle.
- Jonae:** But I mean, all wars start with battles, I mean, you can't just [win] a war, you know, it don't work like that.

Jonae highlights the value of organizing and continued protesting as demonstrated in the film we watched, even in the face of setbacks, to ultimately produce community change. Kumar responded, “But people, they won't take the time out of the day to go and protest. It doesn't really matter to them.” Kumar’s response here is a sentiment he echoed periodically throughout our time in YPAR—what he perceived as a failure in Black community residents to engage in civic action. He continues, “Yeah, cuz say if this toxic factory was right there in central downtown, [they're] not going to protest.” Shante and others agreed that people in Milton would not care enough to engage in protests if they did not feel like the issue was effecting them directly, in their particular home or neighborhood. In response to this assertion, I raise the question, “So, when we look at some of the things we've been talking about throughout the past week or so, do we think it's the *people's responsibility* to do something about [these issues], to take time out of our day to try to address it? Whatever addressing it means.” Seemingly contradicting his earlier

indictment of Milton folks, Kumar answers, “No, because the mayor is in charge of the city, so that's his responsibility. We're his backup, we're his help, we should advocate whether we agree with him or not, but that's it.” I followed up asking if everyone in the room would protest if a toxic facility were to move to their community, to which almost everyone who replied echoed some version of, “Yes.”

Aside from what this suggests about youths' perceptions of other people in the community, their comments also point to an understanding of *real* civic action and change in relation to protesting. This however was not the case for everyone: one person suggested they would move to get away from such a facility while another replied, “I'd burn it, I'd be an arsonist.” Change theories that spoke to direct action however were not typically celebrated by students early on. Both leftist and moderate forms of civil disruption were, at times, not seen as useful by some youth.

For example, on our third day, we read a think piece that related the Baltimore riots following the death of Freddie Gray to the Hunger Games.⁶ The piece questioned the fleeting empathy of those who would side with “The District” in the movie but would critique the civil disobedience in Baltimore the days after Gray's death at the hands of law enforcement. I began the lesson by inviting students to relay the events that led to the death of Freddie Gray and asked them about the news coverage related to the protests and rioting; Shante discussed the one-sided coverage of “rioters” and Rosada described her feeling that citizens have no power to disrupt police violence:

Shante: It was a cover-up. The news only puts- I believe that the news only shows what everybody in Baltimore was doing instead of what was going on with the cops that caused Freddie Gray's injuries because they know that the cops was wrong and they don't like putting that out there; “Oh, the cops

⁶ Retrieved from: <http://www.attn.com/stories/1554/empathy-for-black-protestors>

was wrong so we just gonna show what the other people are doing to the cops.”

Me: Ok so, how do you feel about the rioting; do you think the rioting served any purpose? Do you think it was valuable in any way? Do you think it was a bad thing? Do you think it hurt the cause ultimately? How do you feel about rioting?

Student: I think it helped a little bit, because now [they] know not to mess with black people.

Me: You think they know that?

Student: They should! Look at what they did. They’ll mess it up again!

Rosada: So, with the whole riot thing, I think for me it was a waste of time, because I think at the end of the day, *they know that police are gonna do what they want and the government is not gonna stop them. It’s just—there’s no point. You can try and keep trying, but then again, these are policeman, they’re not gonna do anything* [emphasis added].

Rosada’s feelings about the hopelessness of resistance are not uncommon. Between 2014 and 2016, many unarmed Black men, women, and youth died at the hands of law enforcement without police facing any charges or convictions. After we read the piece, I asked students to reflect on parallels between the Hunger Games and real life. Like Rosada, Justice and Faylah express some hesitations about the merits of organized civic action.

Me: When we look back at something like the Hunger Games, what do you think it would take for the people in the District to get equality?

Faylah: Not do nothing. Cause they supply the government. So, if they don’t do anything, the government can’t happen.

Justice: I think that’s gonna hurt you and the government. ‘Cause let’s say... let’s put it to real life: if we were to stop, like, going to stores and stop, you know, just buying stuff in general, you’re going to have a...let’s say grocery stores, for example: you stop buying food from there-- the business is getting money to give to the government and at the same time, you’re not getting any food from them.

Me: Faylah, so what do you think about that, how would you respond to what Justice said?

Faylah: I was just going off of the Hunger Games. [All laugh.] The Capital don't know what to do but the people know how to fend for themselves.

Me: So, if you had to apply that to real life, do you think that model would work?

Faylah: No, not now. No. It might, but I don't know how it would.

I responded to the Faylah and the other youth researchers by asking them if they were familiar with the Montgomery bus boycotts during the civil rights movement and explaining to them the effect it had on public busing and desegregation efforts in the south under Jim Crow.

Conversations and interviews that followed in the succeeding days of Y/PAR illuminated many students' limited exposure to successful (or partially successful) revolutionary and reformatory movements for human rights and liberation both in the U.S. and abroad. They also demonstrated that some youth action researchers did not inherently perceive change value in certain forms of social justice work.

Theorizations of social change are a critical dimension of youth activism. The early stages of this research provided a window into youth's politics of change as they entered YPAR. This would allow me an opportunity to study if and how those politics of change evolved during our time together. As the topics of race, class, and social change emerged in our conversations, young people also debated the root causes of disparate social outcomes. The following section explores these political discussions and the various arguments youth leveled in defense of their positions.

Arguing Structure vs. Agency

Considering that students described rarely having opportunities to discuss race or community issues in school with any regularity or in a structured format, YPAR was an experience where lively debate and disagreements occurred on a consistent basis. Throughout our two weeks, individual youth found themselves on both sides of debates about the primacy of structure vs. agency, in conversations focusing on inequality in both their city and society at large. Tensions and debates made clear that many young people held on to deficit views of their community and Black folks', though many also had experience leveling structuralist and other kinds of counternarratives in response to arguments that reduced problems in their city to residents' cultural or personal maladaptation. Although YPAR allowed me to observe conversations about political topics to understand youths' perspectives, these were issues that *I* was particularly interested in hearing discussed as this method allowed me a very direct avenue into hearing their viewpoints in the areas around which my research questions were formed. Despite having initiated the structure of conversations, many young people often took it upon themselves to change the topic of conversation.

Healthy eating and schooling outcomes. A complicated debate ensued on our second day between Kumar and others, when he argued that corner store bodegas were strategically located near schools in their neighborhood to sell “junk food” to students with the intended purpose of giving them a “sugar rush” to incapacitate them so as to facilitate their academic failure. It was evident early on that Kumar had developed a reputation amongst his peers for “blaming” white people and white structures, as he understood them, in his evaluations of inequality—which several other students wrote off as hyperbole or found amusing. The dispute began while students were sharing out what they had discussed with their partners after having participated in an Identity Pie Graph activity. This activity that I used with undergraduate pre-

service students at Rutgers, asks participants to create a pie chart using certain identity markers, assigning weight to each identity based on how conscious they are of that identity throughout a typical day in their lives. Working through this activity with Black and Latinx high school students living in concentrated poverty was very different than it was in my university class of primarily white middle-class women in their twenties. In addition to race, social class, gender and gender orientation, religion, and sexual orientation that I typically ask students to rank in their pie graphs, I gave this group: worldview/politics, family member, student, and hobbies, as identity markers for which they could assign value in their respective pie graphs. Beyond banal self-reflective aspects of this exercise, the purpose of the activity is to generate conversation about social power and to raise awareness to folks who may have never considered their power relative to others. It was an opportunity to point out that our inattentiveness to certain aspects of our identity was typically a sign that it is an identity for which society confers us power and privilege relative to minoritized identities.

As one student was sharing out places in her graph where she and her partner converged; laughter erupted at the back of the room, with Kumar as the subject. In a tone that conveyed underlying jest, someone in his group says to Kumar, “talk about the corner stores.” Kumar emerged from the laughter that followed stating very deliberately, “I came up with this theory. So, they put corner stores by the schools, and then they sell you all of these unhealthy snacks, that gives you a sugar rush, and it leaves you tired and then you’re fucked up.” Kumar’s comments seem out of place for a conversation about salient aspects of identity, but given that he is one of the few students to give “race” and “worldview/politics” prominent placement on his pie graph, his theoretical offering to the larger group likely stemmed from of an earlier conversation within his small group related to one or both of these pieces. That students did not

highlight race on their graphs was not surprising to me nor does it signal that their race was a privileged identity; growing up myself in segregated Black community, I rarely thought about white folks or about my racial difference (because everyone looked like me) yet racialized housing processes are what, in many ways, determined how my family and my students' families likely ended up in our respective locales. The room burst into laughter as soon as Kumar finished. I immediately spoke up to cut through and to identify legitimacy within this insight. "Okay. Now the thing is, I don't think you're too - y'all are laughing, but like, there's some merit to what you're saying." Elaborating, I continue,

"I mean, it's funny, but like, when you look at a place like Milton, or you look at places like Midtown City, Cantwell, and Brickhaven [urban Black and Brown cities], there's not a lot of grocery stores, but you do find a lot of bodegas and corner stores, right? And that's an interesting thing. Why is that happening? And I mean, some people will argue, you get healthy grocery stores in neighborhoods that can afford them, and other people would argue that these chains only desire to cater to a certain population, but either way that's a real issue that people debate. I mean, I don't think of it necessarily as a conspiracy to make students fail, but I think that it does happen, where you don't eat healthy, and don't have access to good food, like the potential for you to not do as well in school is there."

I invited other young folks to share their thoughts on the topic. Although I offered more of my opinion at the end of this response than I intended to at this stage in the study, young people still pushed back against this framing. In response to my asking, "What do other people think?" Jonae said simply and abruptly in a low voice, "Literally, bullshit," which was received by her classmates (and me) with raucous laughter. The debate picked up quickly from there:

Me: *(while laughing)* You say bullshit? I'm interested, I'm really—

Student: People are lazy!

Me: Jonae, I want to hear what you think. Why do you think that's bullshit?

Jonae: I thought what he said, that was a bunch of ...

Kumar: No, but it's true!

Me: Are you, so you don't—

Ebony: It's true *for you!*

Student: Right?!

Ebony: If you eat junk in the morning and decide to go to school and you tired and you fail, that's on you!

Jonae: I didn't know food decided at all.

Kumar: It *is* their fault!

Jonae: No, it's not, if you didn't take yourself inside the corner store then it wouldn't be a problem!

Ebony: No! It's your fault.

A melee of overlapping voices continued back and forth arguing who's to blame, most of them agreeing with Jonae and Ebony saying things like, "You failed, you're stupid, I'm sorry. I kind of agree..." and "That's on him. You stupid," referring to the failing student in the hypothetical scenario. In the middle of this one-sided argument, Shante attempts to offer a dissenting opinion.

Shante: I agree with Kumar though.

Me: (*cutting through the on-going debate*) Wait, wait! Shante, why do you say that? Shante, what do you think?

Shante: No, because, like, what Kumar said—not to put nobody out there, but when [students] go [to the corner store] early in the morning, they go get candy. They eat all that candy every morning, and then by the second class, they like so energized, but com[ing to] their third class, they're tired because they done used all their energy for the second class.

Kumar: True.

Ebony: *(to Justice)* You agree with this?

Justice: I do.

Student: No, it's your fault.

Ebony: I don't agree with that.

Shante: *It is the student's fault for going to the store but he was only going to the store because it was right next to the school.*

Here Shante aligns herself with Kumar on the point that junk food can adversely affect academic performance, however, as other voices push back, she lands on the point that a student's poor choice to eat junk *and* the proximity of the store to the school are both partly to blame for poor outcomes. Justice begins to take a similar diplomatic position but ultimately lays blame with the school, arguing, "It goes both ways, right...Alright, I'll start with why the school is at fault...some people don't feel like paying the \$2.80 for some BS lunch, so they go to the corner store and they're buying food..." He continues, "and at the same time they'll buy candy and snacks and other stuff to have with their food, which they also eat, and they get tired. So, it's really the school's fault." The poor quality of school lunches, Justice suggests, is pushing students toward corner stores and unhealthy options.

Young people's conversation about health and schooling outcomes was multidimensional; on one level, youth were contemplating whether diet actually influences academic outcomes, and the other level was a debate concerning who or what was at fault if the former was true. Some youth took a hard stance about the centrality of structure in this debate, focusing on the location of corner stores near their schools, while others took a hard line declaring personal responsibility to be the only consideration of import. Interestingly, an undercurrent of moderate voices emerged at the close of the debate, attempting to bridge the

polarization. Not only does their debate reveal students' various levels of exposure to political discourse around academic outcomes, it demonstrates their willingness to challenge my perspective and their ability to effectively respond to arguments against their position. This range in political discursive maneuvering reoccurred throughout our time in YPAR.

Surveying individualism and structuralism. Survey data showed students vacillating between supporting ideas that imply the U.S. is a meritocracy or that individual choice and effort (or lack thereof) was essential to mainstream success, and support for ideas that emphasize the role of systems, structures, and American cultural practices in social outcomes. Youngsters, taking this survey on their first day in Research appeared to be navigating heteroglossia within themselves around questions of meritocracy and structural inequality. In practice, I did not establish a clinical survey environment where students responded in isolation; some youth actively spoke with their other students seated nearby about their answers while others kept relatively to themselves. Six of the twenty Likert items included statements that embodied a neoliberal worldview while two of the Likert items resisted these framings. The short answer portion of the survey invited students to respond to questions that offered insight into their political positions and background knowledge with respect to relevant racial history and sociology.

On items that asserted the primacy of merit toward social outcomes youth, mildly, agreed. Assigning Likert responses number values 1-5 (i.e. "Totally Agree" = 5, "Agree" = 4, "Neither Agree nor Disagree" = 3, "Disagree" = 2, "Totally Disagree" = 1), students' responses to items that suggested the validity of U.S. meritocracy averaged 3.5. Young people's scores were lowest on the item "When I see my classmates being lazy or disruptive, I think that their attitudes will be the primary reason why they won't become successful later in life," yielding an

average of 2.6, indicating general disagreement. Their mild, however, positive relationship to statements supporting meritocracy was accompanied by a similarly mild reception to items that resisted the notion of meritocracy with 3.15 being the average agreement to the following meritocracy-resisting statements: “Hard work is *not* the primary (or most important) factor determining success” and “The government plays the biggest role in determining people’s future success.”

While these averages may suggest that young people are careful not to assert the primacy of either agency or structure to social outcomes, these numbers also reflect political divisions between the action researchers in these early stages. For example, in response to the statement, “One of the biggest reasons that most black communities look different than suburban white communities is because the residents in suburban white communities do a better job of taking care of their community,” of all responses, there were five “disagrees”, 4 “agrees”, and 1 “totally agree.” Similarly, in response to the item, “Most people’s financial status is a result of how hard they worked and the amount of effort and dedication they put toward accomplishing their goals,” five students selected, “agree”, four selected “disagree,” and one circled the middle space in between agree and disagree, indicating that they took a middling position.

Their agreement was most consistent in response to the question, “If I work hard in school I will achieve my career goal;” where responses averaged a 4.3. While these results indicate an expected optimism that youth carry about their futures, they also raise important questions about how young people see themselves in relation to members of their community. In other words, if they believe academic success would lead them to achieve their career goals, how were they understanding the life and career outcomes of other Milton residents. Responses to the item, “The people in Milton work hard,” generated a 3.1 average. This difference may suggest

that young people saw themselves as more meritorious or hard working compared to people in their city. In fact, throughout these early weeks, several youths described the people in their community from a deficit perspective, often speaking in generalizations about “people” who they “knew” that did things like cheat the welfare and disability insurance systems, and traded food stamps in for things like Michael Jordan sneakers. When I asked them if they knew any stories of people who transitioned out of public assistance programs—some recalled people in their respective families. I followed up by asking if the majority of people they knew on public assistance cheated, to which most replied, “No,” and Jonae, one of the most ardent critics of welfare scammers, replied tersely, “I don’t know everybody.”

The politics of helping. Beyond group averages, reviewing individuals’ total responses revealed underlying conflict in relation to questions of structure vs. agency, evidenced by variation in their responses between Likert items and short-answer questions. Additionally, several young people showed a predilection toward theorizing inequitable social outcomes in both their community and urban communities writ-large in ways that centered the lack of outside “help” and “caring” for Milton *or* that placed blame squarely with Black folks and urban residents. I argue that these reflections on the causes of urban poverty and segregation are, in part, the discursive outgrowths of common sense neoliberalism rooted in tacit ahistoricism, that ultimately avoids and undermines engagement with *structural inequality*.

Several young people delivered responses to open-ended questions that conflicted with their responses to Likert-items, particularly as it relates to the tension between structure vs. agency in their understandings of social outcomes. Ebony, for example tended to respond positively to Likert items that emphasized the role of hard work in individual and social outcomes while her open-ended responses were critical of government inaction. Responding to

the following items, Ebony answered with either “Agree” or “Totally Agree.” “The black people who live in suburban white communities are more hard working than black people who live in the city”, “Most people’s financial status is a result of how hard they worked and the amount of effort and dedication they put toward accomplishing their goals,” “Most people who work hard will make good money and most people who don’t work hard will not have a lot of money.”

Additionally, she marked ‘Disagree’ in response to the item: “Hard work is not the primary (or most important) factor determining success.” Salim also tended to agree with individual-level meritocratic statements on the Likert portion of his survey. In addition to mirroring Ebony’s responses on the previous items, he also agreed with the following statements: “One of the biggest reasons that most black communities look different than suburban white communities is that the residents in suburban white communities do a better job of taking care of their community,” and “When I see my classmates being lazy or disruptive I think that their attitudes will be the primary reason why they won’t become successful later in life.”

While these answers indicate that Ebony and Salim look at social and individual outcomes primarily through the lens of individual agency, their responses to open-ended questions reveal their awareness of larger structures at play. In response to the question: “The poverty rate here is 26%, which is 2.5x more than the state average. Why do you think that is?” Ebony answered: “We live in a city where they would rather see us dead than help us up. Last time I checked the state doesn’t help us at all.” When asked if in the past the U.S. had done anything to influence whether Black American’s today experienced successful outcomes, she replied, “No, there is nothing in the past that they did to help us. They’re not doing it now either. All they are doing is bringing us down and we’re letting them.” Ebony interpreted this final survey question to be an inquiry into the positive role that the U.S. government has played in

shaping social outcomes and responds by firmly negating that the U.S. had done anything positive for Black folks both now and in the past. In fact, she goes on to say that she believes the government is “bringing us down.” Salim responded to the same question with, “There are not as much good paying jobs so they lose their money and become poor.” He answers the question, “Why do more white people live in the suburbs and own their homes?” stating, “Because of racism and how white people have better jobs and more money.”

Her open-ended replies suggest that Ebony finds government complicit in Milton’s poverty and Black oppression, yet her Likert responses find her supporting the primacy of individual hard work. Salim focuses on an unequal opportunity structure and access to good paying jobs in his open-ended responses, yet he similarly elevates personal effort on the Likert portion of his survey. The difference in responses to Likert vs. open-ended items point to a phenomenon identified by Schuman & Scott (1987) who find constraints with both methods of studying public opinion. They argue that “closed questions” force respondents into prescribed boxes that often do not fully or even partially articulate their actual position on a particular issue. While open-ended may seem to resolve this challenge, their experiment finds, “that the wording of the open-question may constrain respondents by not legitimating types of responses that the investigator had intended to include” (p.958). In other words, the wording of open questions elicits certain kinds of responses while obscuring other sufficient, possible (yet likely more uncommon) responses. Beyond the limitations of a surveys’ ability to accurately capture “pure” political positions, youths’ dissonance in response to items about their political values is natural, as most people hold conflicting political views (Zaller & Feldman, 1992) and, as I will argue in the next chapter, the YPAR environment (and political organizing spaces in general), naturally promote and expose dissonance and contradictions.

Despite what may seem like incongruence between some students' Likert and open-ended responses, there is in fact a common thread at the heart of their positions. Most young people's responses to open-ended questions, even when they invited a structuralist perspective, still subsumed neoliberal undertones in the form of "help" and "caring" discourses, that is, when they were not explicitly critical of Black American's and Milton residents' respective work ethics. Inquiry into their thoughts on why Milton experienced such a high poverty rate generated responses like, "I think because of the economy and people that don't want to work" (Faylah), and "the black people don't care" (Kumar). Going even further, Shante surmises, "I believe it's because we don't apply ourselves. Everyone already labels us, and we constantly give them other reasons to do so. We are "poor" because we don't try and change our bad habits or lifestyle." While these responses may place some form of direct blame on the community, other responses indirectly position the community and its residents at fault to the extent that the community requires a "helping hand" to see improvement. Ebony's earlier response to the question about Milton's poverty rate is one such example of this, invoking the lack of state "help" to explain impoverished conditions. Similarly, when I interviewed Ebony and asked how Milton became what it is today, she responded, "Lack of help." Pushing her to elaborate on who needed to help and what was in need of help, she explained, "I feel as though, from the city officials, if you see your city struggling you shouldn't necessarily try to put them down...instead you should give them a helping hand and we weren't given that." Selena and Jonae, respectively, answered the question about the poverty rate in almost identical ways, "Because people generally don't care about us" and "Because they don't care about us." While this may appear on the surface, a commonplace appraisal of society's or government's lack of empathy for racial minorities or the poor, both critiques of Black work ethic and the centering of external "helping/caring" do similar

ideological work as neoliberal discourses that rebrand individuals and communities that experience systemic class-oppression as people and places that—through their own doing—put themselves “at risk” (Kwon, 2007).

This helping discourse does the work of tacitly implying that the communities are in some way undermining their own positive outcomes and that inequality can be *reduced* if the state, the private sector, or volunteers engaged in benevolent actions—often through measures like community service, mentoring, charity drives, etc. In this way, a focus on helping poor communities--particularly in reference to state “help”-- implicitly and necessarily relies on a pathological characterization of poor citizens to explain inequitable outcomes, thus evading engagement with the structures both presently and historically that created urban poverty in the first place. Engagement with these structures would reveal that “help” from the state, charities, or nonprofits was insufficient, considering the role of: the FHA in redlining, processes of urban renewal, regional contribution agreements⁷, and public divestment in local infrastructure that led much of the local industry to abandon Milton for neighboring suburbs, all of which either created or help to maintain the poverty on a structural level. The transition from seeing the city and its residents as “in need of help” to being “owed recompense” requires an understanding of how racial capitalism shaped the American landscape and the lives of Black and Latinx city dwellers therein.

⁷ A way in which a state mandate requiring each municipality to take on an equitable share of low-income housing units is evaded by suburban communities. Wealthier municipalities offer their low-income housing obligations to poorer municipalities, thus increasing the availability of housing for the poor in those communities, and in-turn, reducing their own stock of affordable housing and as a result, decreasing the number of poor families that can reside in suburban, higher-income places.

Black Resilience Neoliberalism

Throughout my time in YPAR, several young people framed racial inequality through the lens of neoliberalism, even as they acknowledged inequitable structures. However, the neoliberal discourse in which they engaged was of a very specific yet common nature, and served as both a rationalization for inequality and tangential positioning of racial obstacles or racist experiences as positive (negative) reinforcement for Black or poor folks to work harder, endure, and prove themselves against these odds, which I have termed Black Resilience Neoliberalism (BRN). More specifically, youth researchers positioned the structural and historical obstacles experienced by Black folk and poor folk in their community as normal (i.e. acceptable) while compulsively re-centering Black Americans' and residents' resolve and responsibility to overcome these barriers through personal effort (e.g. making good choices, working hard, proving themselves to naysayers, etc.) in conversations about individual and social progress.

Central to BRN is the philosophy that Black bodies are especially fit to endure racialized trauma; a trope rooted in the racial capitalism of the 18th and 19th century to justify the exploitation of enslaved Africans. It is a political ideology of social and economic progress that places a premium on Black folks strategically navigating structural racism on the pathway to mainstream advancement. The primary distinction between it and meritocracy, classic liberalism, and traditional neoliberalism is in the normalization (and romanticizing) of all manner of Black struggle and suffering. Whereas I would find neoliberal/meritocratic logic in exhortations like, "hard work pays off" or "you have to make sacrifices to move up the ladder," BRN logic proclaims, "It doesn't matter if your community is poor or that your teacher is racist or that the police raided your neighborhood last night, [insert neoliberal truth claim]." While typical neoliberal triumphalist stories may champion individuals overcoming personal odds, BRN

normalizes Black Americans having to overcome deeply entrenched systems, structures, and practices evincive of a racial caste society.

There are three overlapping tenets of BRN; (1) the elevation of human capital to overcome structural barriers (2) the normalization of structural inequality and oppression, and (3) (re)centering Black cultural pathology/deficits as a rationalization for inequality. These three tenets are the backbone of Black Resilience Neoliberal politics and its related logics and discourses. Each reflects a distancing from ideas that direct grievances about inequality toward the state and white supremacy and redirects focus toward marginalized people and their relative (in)ability to overcome-- emphasizing resilience, endurance, and proving oneself in the face of obstacles.

Findings produced from the data that I compiled over the first few weeks of my work with youth researchers revealed that many young people entered YPAR voicing political opinions characteristic of Black Resilience Neoliberalism. Their BRN discourses were often leveled in the context of discussions about Black Americans' social progress or lack thereof, particularly Black folk in their community. Although in the context of their full ideas, some youth may have acknowledged structural elements of inequality, their focus remained on Black effort, resilience, and savvy to overcome these barriers. The sections that follow track students' BRN discourses in YPAR into the three tenets of the BRN theoretical framework. Although BRN is organized into three categories, students' speech and writing reveal the extent to which these tenets overlap in real time dialogue.

“It doesn’t really matter with race:” Elevating human capital

On our 6th day in Research, students and I discussed poverty and its causes. I asked them in a group discussion about dominant images of the poor, how people typically become poor, and

to describe what poor folks are like. I got a range of answers to all of these questions; many students talked about people falling on hard times, Cindy described people who hold dear and take care of what little they have. Without much interjection on my part, students very quickly asserted that the prominent image of poverty was a racialized image--specifically, a Black image. Shifting our conversation and attempting to get them to think structurally, I asked the group, "Why are whole communities poor and not just individuals?" considering that poor whites are much more likely than poor Black folks to find affordable housing in mixed-income or higher income communities (Troutt, 2013; Massey & Denton, 1993). After a brief pause and some overlapping debate amongst students over structure vs. agency, Ebony's voice emerges saying,

I don't necessarily think it's the government's fault. I mean, you know, well, we know for *our* communities, they're not going to do anything, so why not try to do something yourself, as a community. Like, this is where you live, this is where you lay your head at night, so, if you don't like the way it's looking or if it's poor then you should try to make it better. You can't just blame it on the government.

Faylah agrees, and elaborates on this sentiment, "It's kind of our fault because government sends out the census to see how many people are in the town and people don't fill it out. They don't know how much money to give." Ebony's comments reveal her position that blaming the government for the conditions in poor communities is futile. She averts her gaze of criticism to community members who she feels should do something themselves to make the community better since they knew the government wouldn't intercede. Her statement, "...this is where you live, this is where you lay your head at night, so, if you don't like the way it's looking or if it's poor then you should try to make it better" illustrates a discursive attachment to neoliberal governmentality (Kwon, 2013), an attachment that I argue, has roots in a set of popular racialized and classed conceptions of personal responsibility and the ethic of self-reliance. This is especially salient when Ebony says, "well, we know for *our* communities, they're not going to

do anything, so why not try to do something yourself.” The racialization of neoliberal governmentality is legitimized by ahistorical and astructural accounts of Black communities that subsume a culture of poverty rationale to explain visible signs of spatial neglect (e.g. litter, commercial and residential abandonment, un-kept and under-resourced public spaces etc.). In other words, if a community culture of deviance and mismanagement created the problems, then shifting remediation responsibility to government may be misdirected; except perhaps, if that community is white. The growing rate and visibility of heroin addiction in white suburbia followed by the onslaught of public resources for drug treatment and prevention, and calls from elected officials to decriminalize offenses related to drug-use, disrupts that logic (Seelye, 2015; Siemaszko, 2017).

Faylah’s statements here also point to a not uncommon understanding that community or concentrated poverty is facilitated by residents’ failing to report household information in a census survey. “It’s kind of *our* fault” she says, at the same time that she positions the state as a dormant yet benevolent force for change that just needs the right data before it can work on behalf of the community. The government’s inability to accurately determine how many people live in a city and their needs prevents it from properly allocating resources, according to her argument. Faylah and others are typically unaware of the primary role that local property taxes play in perpetuating inequality between municipalities. Both Ebony’s and Faylah’s comments elevate human capital by reinforcing the idea that people (Black people in particular) and their choices are ultimately the culprits to blame for concentrated poverty.

As our time together continued, human capital continued to be a major theme that emerged. Resolve, ingenuity, and private choices were central to understanding Black social outcomes according to many students. When asked to name three “things” that would explain

how someone they identified as successful got to where they were, seven of the eight students interviewed exclusively highlighted personal attributes or individual characteristics that promoted success, e.g. “hard work”, “dedication,” etc. Responding students also identified a successful person according to their career, which was usually a traditionally high status career like a medical “doctor” or “scientist”. Even as I pushed students to think about more systemic or ecological factors, many students found ways to reassert the primacy of people’s effort. Their surveys also reveal the extent to which they bought into this notion of human capital. Six out of seven students agreed with the following survey item: “Most people who work hard will make good money and most people who don’t work hard will not have a lot of money” while only two students completely disagreed with the statement, “When I see my classmates being lazy or disruptive, I think that their attitudes will be the primary reason why they won’t become successful later in life.”

In concert with the notion that personal effort was a primary factor in determining life outcomes, some students emphasized the idea that race and/or racism was irrelevant to the discussion. The following interview exchange with Faylah demonstrates this.

Me: Does the government impact whether or not people from your community become successful?

Faylah: Uh, I think the government impacts anybody... ummm

Me: What role do you think the government plays?

Faylah: Like, the money distribution. Like if you... if you... even if you’re Black, White, Hispanic, if you have ideas that’s worth millions, they would give it to you. So, it doesn’t really matter with race, but, if we *actually* made this city a money-making city then... If we had like better...like higher, higher educational programs, higher educational schooling then we... the government would give us money because more people would want to come to [our city] to better their lives.

Me: So, you think that the people should develop programs? And if the people develop programs then the government should...

Faylah: Support, yeah

Me: ...support them in trying to get better?

Faylah: Yeah

Here, Faylah asserts that government influences *everyone's* capacity for social mobility. She follows up this statement saying that government is willing to invest in good ideas, regardless of race. A recent Bloomberg (2013, April 29) report on the racialized nature of lending and investment in the private sector offers a stark contrast to Faylah's comments, showing that Black and Latinx startups are much less likely to receive funding than their white counterparts. This defense of the state's "colorblindness" and overall fairness, Flannagan (2013) argues, sustains particular youth, like those admitted into Upward Bound who navigate a degree of academic exceptionalism within a community of structural poverty. She says,

"In part, their support of the system is based on a need to...feel validated in their actions...[:] [t]hus disadvantaged youth who apply themselves, studying hard in high school and aspiring to college, have to believe that their efforts will pay off-- that the rewards of a meritocratic system will accrue to people 'like them'... Legitimizing the system restores a sense of confidence and control, especially for those who are confronted by and do not have other ways to manage uncertainty" (p. 157).

In this way, Flannagan might argue that the politics represented in Faylah's claims that center human capital and position government as unbiased, idealize control over one's own social class fate, essential to which is the necessity of a fair system. These assertions make sense given Faylah's community context; however, I argue that the espousal of such ideas is also facilitated by limited access to a language of system critique and resistance. The notion of human capital may prove plausible for young people who otherwise may not have many ways to understand and describe how their socioeconomic position will ever change.

Consistent with BRN politics, Faylah also puts forth the idea that the citizens of this primarily Black and Brown city are responsible for improving the conditions of the city's educational institutions. "If we actually made this city a money-making city..." and improved the quality of education, *then*, she argues, "the government would give us money." The assertion here is that the provision of a quality education is not a guaranteed right for students in her community, it is a privilege that must be earned. Faylah's comments about the privatization of education, particularly in relation to "making [her] city a money-making city" resonate with current neoliberal coordinated efforts to expand charter schools in divested urban neighborhoods paving the way for gentrification (and Black displacement), land development, and capital accumulation (Fenwick, 2013; Lipman & Haines, 2007). Interestingly, she is one of two students in YPAR attending a private Catholic school in the city. Her status as an Upward Bound student *and* private school attendee distinguish her from other youth in this community in ways that may allow Faylah to more readily advance a human capital explanation of community change.

"Everyone was a slave!" Normalizing Structural Inequality/Oppression

Approaching our second week into YPAR, my goals for our time remained consistent, though students demonstrated varying levels of interest in continuing to unpack their thoughts about challenges often associated with urban contexts. One of the ideas that came out of our discussions was the view some students held that the obstacles Black Americans face are inevitable obstacles, universal obstacles, or that they are not as substantial as some may suggest. Interestingly, this discourse was accompanied by the notion that Black people should work hard to overcome these obstacles. For example, I recorded in my notes on weeks two and three both Beauty and Kumar casually mentioning Black folks have to work twice as hard as whites but neither pinpointing this as a problem that deserves any kind of intervention; rather, they say that

inequitable conditions should serve as motivation for Black Americans (and themselves) to work harder.

Shante talked about a Black history teacher, Ms. Lincoln, as one of the primary influences on her thoughts about race and racism. She describes an emotional day in class when Ms. Lincoln explained to students the significance of Juneteenth. In relaying her takeaway from this lesson, Shante ends on a point that touches upon the logic of BRN. She says,

When she was speaking about Juneteenth, um, she actually cried, ‘cause that was our first time learning about it. We never heard of it; that was our first day. And she, like...this was our actual day of being free and this was the day that all the... I’m not gonna say that all the racism stopped, but this was the day that we were actually free from being slaves and although we encounter people who still feel those types of... or still think nothing of us, we actually have to show them that we can be better and do better.”

Shante’s comments find her embracing the significance of Juneteenth to Black Americans and the passion conveyed by Ms. Lincoln. They also reveal a familiar post-emancipation trope—that Black Americans have a moral obligation to prove to “people” (i.e. white society) that they “can be better and do better.” For naysayers who would deny the humanity of Black Americans or their ability to truly walk in social parity to white folks, freedom from bondage was not the same human right guaranteed to everyone, it required the demonstration of deservedness (Muhammad, 2010). Shante states that, “although we encounter people who ... still think nothing of us, we actually have to show them that we can be better and do better.” Her engagement with BRN discourse here shifts focus from the violence of the continued denial of Black humanity post-emancipation and asserts the primacy of Black folks proving otherwise. Shante’s conclusion positions racism as something to take-for-granted and to endure. The leveraging of BRN in this way is often attached to a romanticized ideal of widespread Black respectability that optimists like Booker T. Washington hoped would stave off white racism and vitriol.

Our co-researcher, Ebony also echoed similar sentiments; however, arguing that overcoming structural barriers was a testament of a racial group's strength, and that Black American's inability to do so was an indication of failure in her eyes. I asked Ebony, "When you think about Black people in this country, do you think they have it harder than other groups. Primarily... by other groups, I mean white people?" Ebony responded:

[6 second pause] "I...um...I don't know. I think they do, some moments, sometimes. But then I don't want to just say like "oh, you should feel guilty for us," because we went through our past, and all this other stuff like... But everybody was slaves, that's the way I see it. Cause you could go all the way back in history and white people were slaves at one point, Spanish people, Black people, everyone was somebody's slave. Black people had Black slaves. You can't necessarily say well, "you should feel bad for us" because it's like, we had this opportunity and we got the hand we were dealt with so why not turn that around. But it's just like our race, our race as a general, it just couldn't do that, it couldn't get past that slavery point. So, I feel as though that's what brung us downhill."

Ebony's response here minimizes the extent to which American slavery plays a role in Black Americans' current social position. Talking about African enslavement in North America. She says, "You can't necessarily say well, 'you should feel bad for us' because it's like we had this opportunity and we got the hand we were dealt with so why not turn that around." Not unlike many people who espouse conservative *or* liberal worldviews, Ebony argues that slavery is not an excuse for stifled Black progression today, because, according to Ebony, "all the way back in history...white people were slaves at one point" in addition to "Spanish people", implying that these groups have been able to overcome structural barriers, unlike Black Americans. Black youth socialized into neoliberal logics making comparisons between their segregated communities and suburban White ones may interpret differences in conditions of life as a racialized pattern of Black failure.

Cohen (2010) argues that while Black youth may have knowledge about structural inequity, it is the attractiveness of bootstrap myth and how it's pervasively reinforced in popular

culture that helps to explain why these ideas resonate so much with young people. She argues, “The problem is that a structural analysis has little traction today, especially as it is pitted against the stories of real authorities—the Obama narrative in particular but also other black people—who have “made it” against the odds” (p. 46). In other words, young people are tending toward neoliberal ideas of social progress and economic mobility, in part, because they find them more “compelling”. While I certainly agree that this narrative is made more compelling through popular culture, I have concerns about the content of Black youths’ knowledge related to structural and historical injustices. Specifically, to what extent (if at all) are youth exposed to coherent narrativized accounts of the ways in which past and present federal, state, and local policies and practices have shaped current social and economic outcomes in Black communities? To put it in other words, I have no doubt that young people have heard or even learned some things about Jim Crow, and chattel slavery, or even that they’ve witnessed (or experienced for themselves) racist bosses and hiring managers, and have had racist encounters at grocery stores and shopping malls; however, as *Ebony*’s comments demonstrate, questions still remain about the content of that learning-- particularly, how and if it endeavors to explain the relationship between the structural past and present and processes that diminish Black Americans’ quality of life, today.

While parts of *Ebony*’s assessment of history may be convoluted, I find that it reveals the extent to which BRN is afoot as she positions slavery emancipation as an “opportunity” to “turn things around”. Focusing on racial group differences in resilience toward overcoming structural inequality, she not only validates the naturalness of structural oppression, she valorizes the experience of overcoming slavery. Narratives like this subsume an expectation of state violence that there is pride value in successfully navigating.

“Black People Save for the Weekend; White People Save for a Generation:” Black Pathology as a Justification for Inequity

Consistent throughout our time in YPAR, a theme in some students’ writing and speech was that Black Americans, particularly Black folk in their community, had a unique predilection toward self-sabotaging behavior, or were deficient in ways that were uncharacteristic of whites, which they argued, facilitated their inability to make social or economic progress. This discourse was especially prevalent in their talk about social progress and economic advancement. When I asked Jonae if this city would look different if mostly white people lived there, argued that White folks were more inclined to care for their communities and take action to ensure their well-being. She provides an example of specific way in which her community would change:

“I feel like the streets would be cleaner. Yeah because I've noticed that white people, they take pride in where they live...they want it to be clean, they want it to look nice, because it's a representation of them. Because you reflect your city just like your city reflects you. So, I feel like that would change. And if white people have a problem they will speak on it. People, like, Black people, they bottle it all in. And then once they explode it's just like... [trails off and shakes head in disapproval].”

Jonae’s comments attach preferred qualities to white social and civic behavior and imply tangential Black deficits. Differences in characteristics assigned to Black and white folks are used to parse out why these groups experience divergent social outcomes. Supposedly white qualities are “band[ing] together”, “tak[ing] pride in where they live”, and civic advocacy. Without knowing the racialized history of housing subsidies that created white middle class suburbia, it may appear as if those communities are solely a product of some pattern of meritorious personal effort in white America that is absent in Black Americans.

When I asked Beauty what three factors were most important for someone to be successful she said, “hard work, determination, and having a love for it.” To probe her to think about social or structural factors, I gave her an example about how important family support can

be for some people. I asked her if she thought external factors, occurring outside of individuals, like family support, also play a role in how people become successful. She agreed that family support is important and elaborated mentioning that this particular factor reflected a major difference between Black and White people.

She asked me if I had ever heard of the saying, “A lot of White people save for generations and a lot of Black people save for Saturday night.” We laughed, and then I told her that the phrase was new to me, but that I had heard the sentiment before. She continued,

“Not trying to be funny, but I know what they mean. Black people, we’re amazing but they always on the bandwagon all the time; they want the new J’s (Michael Jordan sneakers), they got to keep their hair done, got to keep their nails done. But a White person, they’ll wear some bobos (cheap non-name brand shoes) quick to put some money in the bank. They’re thinking about generations. My kids are gonna have this in the bank. And he’s gonna rebuild this, and his kids gonna have this. Seeing someone selling drugs and using drugs is gonna push you to want to go. There’s a lot of people I see sitting on the corner waiting for the bus, and I see boys with their pants half off their behind and they’re selling drugs, and the women are just ghetto. I hate to define it like that, but it’s ghetto. White people can be ghetto too, don’t get it twitsted...but yeah, take care of your kids, do something.”

Beauty’s remarks show her engaging a BRN explanation, centering Black cultural pathology in her calculation of stifled Black social/economic progress (Cohen, 2010). She places Black culture in direct contrast to white culture. The leveraging of this discourse in this way, Cohen (2004) argues, ignores the agency and intentionality behind forms of “Black deviance” in many cases, that serves as a counterhegemonic micro-politic to disrupt/stand in defiance to the normativity conferred to white *middleclassness*. In Beauty’s response here, she finds a racialized pattern; White families work hard, save money and pass it down to their children, while Black families are spending their money frivolously or behaving in other ways that do not promote success. The notion that Black Americans are less adept at saving than their White counterparts has been challenged by research that finds parity between both groups after controlling for

income (Wolff and Gittleman, 2004) and that denies altogether that these kinds of purchases affect class mobility (Warren & Tyagi, 2004). Interestingly, her language shifts in this same statement from “we” when she celebrates blackness to “they” when she offers criticism. Beauty also mentions that seeing community members engage in illegal activities should push others to “want to go,” an attachment to a neoliberal paradigm of negative reinforcement that I argue is highly racialized. Fascination with “making out of the ghetto” has traditionally precipitated inquiry into personal attributes of Black and Brown people to resist cultural pathology, such as their abilities to “escap[e] the routine ghetto brainwashing” and “learn... to direct the rage over being disadvantaged into strategic actions effectively designed to fight one’s way out of the ghetto” (Ross & Glaser, 1973). Evading inquiry into the structures that create concentrated Black poverty, the logic follows that Black folks should avoid succumbing to the culture of poverty and find strength and purpose in “fight[ing their] way out of the ghetto.”

Working with young people during these early stages I noticed that BRN was often accompanied by a deficit perspective of Black folks in their community. This makes sense considering that if the U.S. is a meritocracy, as neoliberalism suggests (Harvey, 2011), my students live in a community that verifies Black people are overwhelmingly less meritorious. Taking into account that recognition of and intervention into structural inequality receives significantly less attention in our public discourse, it would be naïve to assume that students could evade BRN.

Conclusion

The first two weeks of YPAR were best characterized by the consistency with which individual students fell on either side of debates about racism, inequality, and personal responsibility, depending on the day or even the topic. Youth, even, at times, revised their stances in real-time

during debates. Individual students vacillated between ardently system justifying narratives and counter narratives that were critical of society and white folks. Young people displayed skepticism about my study and about the YPAR process in the beginning but ultimately approached Research with excitement and our debates with passion, considering that the topics we discussed were relevant and these were issues that they found their schools tended to shy away from.

Despite where students fell politically on matters of racism and inequality, many young people engaged a Black Resilience Neoliberal discourse that rationalized (or romanticized) inequality and tangentially positioned racial obstacles or racist experiences as positive (negative) reinforcement for Black or poor folks to work harder, endure, and prove themselves against these odds. As phase one came to a close, I was eager to disrupt some of the narratives that I'm now calling BRN, by diving head-first into sociological and historical data with these young people to make plain the utility of understanding racialized social outcomes through the lens of structural inequality. I presumed that by exposing young people to relevant policy, sociology, and history to support a structuralist worldview, I would lead them toward critical consciousness. The following chapter explores these experiences grappling with structural inequality in YPAR in the context of critical consciousness development.

CHAPTER 5:

SUMMER 2015: SEEKING POLITICAL CLARITY THROUGH NEOLIBERAL DOGMA

Overview

This chapter focuses on the entirety of the 2015 Upward Bound summer program, which includes the transition from the initial phase into Phases II and III of the YPAR curriculum I designed. In these sections, I balance more narrowed accounts of focal youth in this study and analysis of their individual political reflections, while also providing a sky shot narrative of the larger YPAR group, its activities, and overarching themes related to youths' politics within the YPAR context. I do *not* suggest here that any youth "progressed" in some linear way or that YPAR itself was the direct and sole cause of any particular change (or nonchange) in the politics young people espoused, rather I attempt to fully describe young people and their views in temporal coherence. I highlight several themes that emerged in data analysis related to youth political identity, and fully explore themes that were alluded to in Chapter 4.

During Phase II, I engaged youth in activities and direct instruction focusing on issues of identity and power, local history, the racialization of welfare-state policy, and urban sociology, to facilitate critical political development. Tensions emerged as we moved from Phase I, when I offered very little feedback on their views, into Phase II, when I evaluated their positions on issues that were raised in our meetings. In Phase III, we pursued an action research project—one that offered youth very little opportunity for critical reflection about social change, which I argue prevented them from developing a meaningful attachment to the project. Using Beauty and Kumar as lenses through which to view the political socialization project of YPAR, this chapter argues 1) that youth leveraged new (and old) structural insights in service of their pre-existing political orientations and 2) youth were able to grapple with new information in ways that gave

rise to class consciousness. This chapter ultimately reveals how young people processed the critical/structuralist educational experience of YPAR against neoliberal logic to reconcile their own political views.

Unpacking the Structure: Analyzing Race/ism, History, and Social Outcomes

Starting Phase II, I moved toward a more activity and direct instruction-oriented curriculum to situate the looming research project within a structuralist framework. The objective was to close out Phase II by choosing a research topic from which we could develop research questions and engage a rudimentary exploration of research methods during Phase III. One of the first parts of Phase II involved focusing on identity, as I believed a focus on identity, particularly race and class, would allow us to peel back the structural layers that underlay everyday common-sense deficits of poor folks.

Students were most energized and captivated during this phase of summer program, more than any other, at any point in our time together, despite this being the time when they had the least autonomy and it being the last time they would hear me lecture. This is also the time wherein YPAR became most popular throughout the entire UB program, and the larger community college. In fact, it had grown so popular that parents had called Mrs. Pryce to let her know how much students in my group enjoyed this aspect of their UB day. Some of these parents along with Mrs. Pryce walked by my classroom to wave and look in the window. Mrs. Pryce frequently peered in the classroom window with expressions that indicated cautious, reserved interest. Ms. Brown approached me on two occasions to tell me how popular Research was with students in the program and that she was constantly overhearing zealous young people in her counseling section rehashing issues we had discussed earlier in the day. This led to an impromptu visit from her one day, when she sat in like a student and dominated the discussion of

a passage from Beverly Tatum's *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria* [which frustrated several young people]. Students from my other classes, hearing about experiences in Research from their friends, began to lobby me in the hallways between classes to say that they had originally selected Research as their elective but did not make it in, hoping that I could let them join. The popularity of the class culminated when the college provost summoned me and Mrs. Pryce to her office for a meeting wherein she offered me the directorship of a faltering pre-college grant program, citing the excitement Research had generated throughout the pre-college environment on campus as influencing her decision.

“These are hood facts, you don’t know.” Race and class analyses would figure centrally in our meeting discourse during Phase II, as I endeavored to organize activities to “deconstruct” the racial deficit curriculum Black and Brown youth are often exposed to through their schooling experiences and to “reconstruct” the curriculum by exposing the fallacy of colorevasive and liberal-democratic framings of the social order (Ladson-Billings, 2008). To do this, I facilitated an exercise called ‘The Figure Activity’ which was introduced to me by two colleagues and that I have since adopted into my own college teaching with pre-service students. For the activity, I crafted stick figures on large construction paper and assigned these figures the following identity markers: “African American teenage boy”, “African American teenaged girl”, “white teenager”, “Latina teenager”, and “Latino Man.” Students broke into groups and were required to list everything they “knew” about the figure they were assigned. This included **F**acts, **S**tereotypes, and **E**xperiential knowledge. After writing down everything they knew, students then went back and labeled the information with F, S, or E, to indicate which “knowledge” category the item belonged. Facts in this activity are research-based information about a particular group while experiential knowledge represents information based on prolonged and

Like most groups with whom I have worked doing this exercise, young people were drawn to stereotypes, especially ones about Black teenagers, though they were adept at listing the stereotypes of other groups too. Discussing what students wrote about the Black male teenager figure, turned into a debate about what constituted a “fact” in this exercise. While I was insistent on adhering to the rules I had established when I had done this with other groups, Ebony, Shante, and Jonae insisted that I was out of my depth, suggesting that because of my background, not coming from an urban context, I could not know what was “factual” about their community. The following conversation ensued when reviewing their posters.

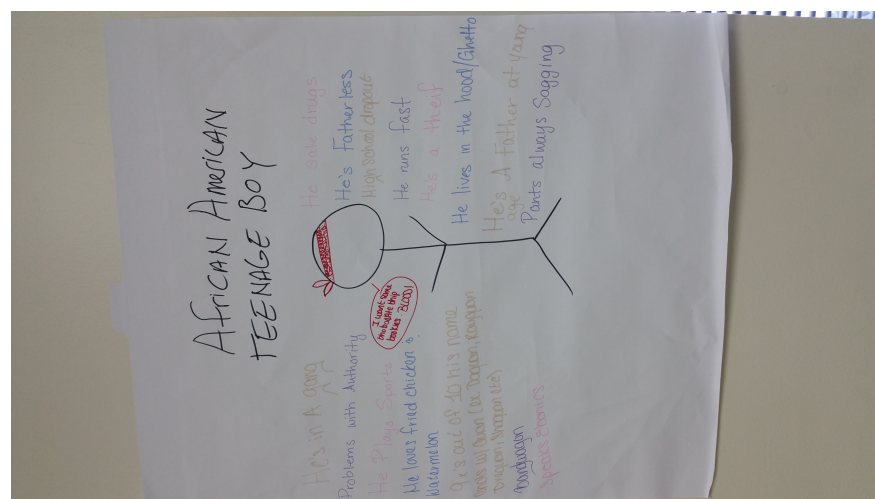


Figure 4.1: “African American Teenage Boy” Poster

- Jonae:** I thought some of the stereotypes were more like facts because it's something that we see. It's something that we see
- Ebony:** Yeah, it's something that we see everyday
- Jonae:** It's a stereotype, but it's like the urban fact, I guess you could say.
- Me:** *(laughs)* What? What'd you say?
- Shante:** Like, Urban Dictionary it's not the truth but it could be counted as the truth
- Ebony:** It's like an urban fact, but the hood knows.
- Me:** ...All right. Let's look at what you said about African American teenage boy. *(reading)* He's in a gang, has problems with authority, he plays sports, he loves fried chicken and watermelon, he's bandwagon? He speaks Ebonics, he sells drugs, he's fatherless.
- Jonae:** I didn't write that.
- Me:** *(continues reading)* High school dropout, he runs fast, he's a thief, he lives in a hood/ghetto, he's a father at a young age, his pants always sagging. How many positive things are on here?
- Ebony:** Ain't none of them positive, but it's real. It's true.
- Me:** So, I'll tell you the Black men I know, most of this wouldn't be true.
- Ebony:** But in our generation, half the Black men we know- it's true. These are facts. Right? These are hood facts.
- Students:** **(Cindy & Shante)** These are hood facts.
- Me:** Well, this is true from *your* perspective.
- Ebony:** These are hood facts. You don't know 'cause you're not from the hood.

Me: I'm not saying some of these aren't true where you live. These are your experiences and that's real but...

Jonae: It's the generalized hood, anywhere!

Me: But more important than that, are any of these positive things?

Ebony: No, Mr. Clay-

Beauty: Why'd you skip that one? "Nine times out of ten his name begins with Quan"

(all laugh)

In the previous light-hearted exchange, youth argued that the items they listed were facts while I resisted the idea and tried to draw attention to the abundance of negative ideas they had assigned to the African American Teenage Boy figure. While on the surface, it may have appeared that the tension was primarily about differences in how we understood what constituted a fact in this exercise, what lay beneath was the young people's push for the authority to determine who got to decide what was "true" about their community. This exchange reveals youth setting insider/outsider boundaries based on our class difference, i.e. "You don't know 'cause you're not from the hood", even as I moved to assert my authority as a racial insider, i.e. "the black men I know, most of this wouldn't be true."

My persistence in rebutting the idea that these notions about Black boys were facts stemmed in part from my frustration with having remained silent during Phase I when similar topics came up. Although organizing the curriculum for Phase I in such a way to capture youths' opinions unfettered by my own made sense for this study, I questioned whether spending two weeks talking about social and political issues without checking false assumptions and misinformation limited my ability to effectively generate buy-in to structuralist accounts during

Phase II. I wanted, in Phase II, for our group to start to analyze racial messages and to expose dominant narratives as manufactured for the purpose of justifying inequitable structures. I noticed and pointed out to the group that they tended to list stereotypes about minoritized groups that for the most part, spoke to some inferiority or cultural pathology while several of the stereotypes reserved for the “white teenager” figure were mild and sometimes, positive:

Me: So, what did ya’ll say about white people?

Cindy: We got Starbucks-

Jonae: They wear Uggs all the time.

Faylah: Shorts. In. Wintertime. Shorts in the wintertime.

Me: Shorts in the wintertime.

Shante: They looove black boys.

Ebony: Yeah.

Cindy: *(reading)* Blond hair, blue eyes, shoot up schools...

Students: *(Faylah and Gustavo reading)* They get Spanish people to mow their lawns (laughs)

Cindy: *(reading)* Kill their parents, slits wrist, emo, rich, disrespectful, do all the rich drugs, starve themselves, take bullying to the extreme...

Me: Now let me see your pen, Faylah. [Begins checking off items].

Cindy: (laughs) Go back to hard drugs!

Me: You don’t even know why I’m checking these off yet!

Cindy: Because you know they get down and dirty with some coke. They be in their grandparents' house and they don’t care.

Me: So, let's look at all the ones that I've checked off. All the ones that I've checked off: these are not negative points. When we went around for all of

these [pointing to other posters], some of it was factual and some of these were negative stereotypes, negative perceptions. We had no *good* stereotypes. We have a ton of good ones for them!

Faylah: Ohhh, you're really right!

Me: *(reading)* Good credit, they go to Starbucks.

All right. Now-

Shante: *(annoyed)* They go to Starbucks? Why is that a good thing?

Cindy: Yeah, how is that good!?

Gustavo: They get Mexicans to mow their lawn.

Faylah: I mean, but it's not bad.

Me: It's not a negative reflection on them. Not necessarily a negative reflection on them. It might be negative-

Shante: But that has nothing to do with anything for us.

Me: Our stereotypes, the stereotypes listed for people of color have something to do with lack of intellect, they have something to do with our sexual promiscuity, they have something to do with us being ugly. Stereotypes of people of color are about... All of these types of... all of these negative characterizations relate back to, like, us just being inferior people. *(Pointing to an item on the poster)* This might show them to be spoiled but-

Jonae: "Rebellious children" should be up there too. They only date black boys because they're rebelling against their parents.

Me: But do any of these characterizations show them to be... some of them do, but there's a lot of characterizations that don't necessarily reflect *them* poorly?

Ebony: I think they do

Me: But a lot of ours, they do, though. A lot of ours, they do.

- Jonae:** I don't think they do.
- Ebony:** I mean, no. Not really.
- Jonae:** I don't find nothing wrong with it. There's just nothing wrong with it. If you like it, I love it.
- Shante:** There's not a lot of stuff on this list (*pointing to African American Teenaged Boy poster*) that we find to be wrong with anything. “Speaks Ebonics?” I mean, everybody got their own language.

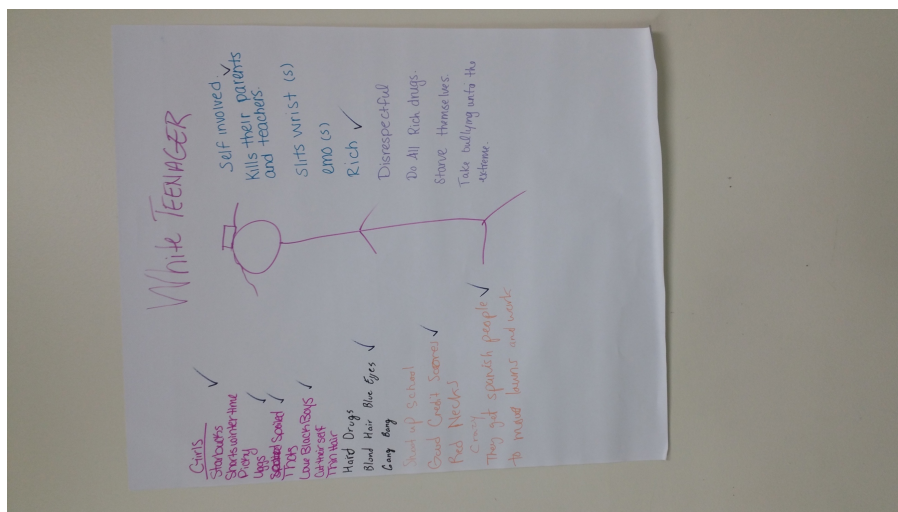


Figure 4.2: “White Teenager” Poster

My perspective that students had identified many more positive or mild stereotypes about white teenagers compared to what I perceived as harsh stereotypes about other groups, was met with pushback from some but sparked a revelation in others. I thought it important to discuss and unpack perhaps how something like this could happen but ended up defending my observation instead (which in retrospect, I could have been wrong about). That students would list more or harshly negative attributes about Black, Latinx, or Arab folks was hardly surprising to me understanding the reality of being socialized in white supremacy and western imperialism within

a settler colonial society (Fanon, 1952; Tuck & Yang, 2012), and considering that I would likely have done the same thing at their age.

Direct instruction in YPAR: Power and policy. Immediately after the Figure Activity, we delved into Beverly Tatum's *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria* and listened to and analyzed lyrics from Kendrick Lamar's – "Blacker the Berry" off of his then recently released *To Pimp a Butterfly* album. Transitioning into these texts positioned us to further explore identity and power. I spent three days total during Phase II lecturing on 20th century historical process that, in effect, "legislated the ghetto. On our final days, before we began exclusively pursuing our own project, I invited two guest speakers to speak with youth researchers about the racial structure as it related to their professional careers. This was the extent of my instructional activities during the summer program, however, throughout most of these lessons, I carved out opportunities for us to have discussions around all of the material.

Reading and discussing Beverly Tatum. I introduced youth researchers to Tatum's (1997) book after our Figure Activity to facilitate further unpacking around the power of identification. I drew on two excerpts in particular to facilitate discussion about the relationship between dominant groups and subordinate groups. From these excerpts, students and I engaged in a discussion about the ascribed identities of minoritized groups and the work that these ascriptions do in shaping their life chances. We also attracted a visitor in Ms. Brown who became an integral part of our conversation. I followed up the readings by asking, "What is [Tatum] saying about our identities and how conscious we are of aspects of our identities? Why are some people conscious of certain aspects of their identity that other people aren't as conscious of?" This generated a range of responses.

- Rosada:** Probably because they're afraid of other people judging them over something like being gay or being a certain race.
- Jonae:** They feel no need to state the obvious.
- Me:** That's true. That's definitely true. But think about this: white people rarely ever mention that they're white. Or when there's men and women in a classroom, men rarely ever mention their being male, but women mention that they're women.
- Jonae:** But that's clear.
- Me:** Take some time to think about it. Why might that happen? There were some patterns that she was recognizing. Men didn't say that they were men, people who were Christians—"protestants" was the word that she used. People who were heterosexual—if you were heterosexual, you don't write down, "I'm heterosexual." Why is that not happening?
- Selena:** Because people *think* you're heterosexual... they just think you are-
- Cindy:** They say stuff that's different-
- Selena:** They think it's natural-
- Cindy:** They say stuff that's kind of like not usual
- Student:** I think it means, like, umm, like, you know how everyone thinks you're you straight
- Me:** Mmhm
- Student:** So, if you're straight, then you obviously don't have to think about being straight.

Here, youth and I began unpacking Tatum's passage and the idea that certain identities are considered normative or "natural" in relation to others. People who fall outside of normalized identity groups are cognizant of these identities in a way that is not typical or required of dominant groups, and as such, they list these identity markers. Tatum also introduced the language of "dominant groups", and I pushed young people to explore the meaning of this term.

Me: Go ahead, Kumar

Kumar: Umm, the group that's the most dominant group, like—

Ms. Brown: She just gave you the definition

Me: [chuckles nervously]

Kumar: (*tersely*) Umm, but it's obvious what I'm trying to say. So then, um, ok: the one that got the most... Well she lives in The United States, right?

Me: Yeah, she's in the U.S.

Kumar: So, they are the dominant group. Because there are so many, that's why they don't need to say, "Oh, I'm white," because they're the dominant group and this country is mostly white.

In the previous passage, Kumar ruminated over the meaning of "dominant groups" and, to his chagrin, Ms. Brown abruptly (and condescendingly) interjected, "she just gave you the definition." While both Kumar and I were frustrated with this intrusion, I was also concerned about the potential ramifications that her response to Kumar would have on his participation and willingness to openly explore the issues in our meeting, *and* about the tension it might cause between me and my colleague if I were to challenge her intrusion.

Despite the interruptions, our discussion continued and elicited critical analyses from youth. I pushed the conversation around dominant groups further as Kumar's response suggested that dominant groups were dominant because they were a numerical majority. The following conversation ensued wherein youth were able to uncover the centrality of "power" and "control"

Me: Now Kumar, you mentioned something that was interesting. You said, because there are more white people in this country than Black people, then they're a dominant group. So, does it always have to be a numerical majority? Meaning, is it a dominant group because they have more people, or the most people, or is it something else that makes them a dominant group?

- Student:** Yeah, because they have more people...
- Jonae:** It's like a little bit of both. Like, there's something else that makes them more dominant. It's like, education-- I feel like that makes them a dominant because it... like there are more white people that have like degrees than people in other groups.
- Me:** Ah, so you're saying that it's something else that's attached to their identity. Like the fact that they have another added piece of --they call it cultural capital--something that gives them status.
- Jonae:** Yeah, status
- Kumar:** Um, financially.
- Me:** Financially, ok. In our country, women are the majority group in number. Does that make them the dominant group?
- Jonae:** Not necessarily.
- Me:** How is it that- if there are more women in this country than men, how could women be a minority group then? How is that possible?
- Kumar:** Oh ok, so...
- Jonae:** Men always get the best jobs.
- Me:** Men always get the best jobs? Ok, I agree.
- Kumar:** But when you say dominant...when you say dominant, it could be-
- Me:** So, unpack that then, what does dominant mean?
- Cindy:** Which one has more; we thinking of dominant in numbers.
- Me:** Is that the way she's talking about it though?
- Cindy:** I don't know how *she's* talking about it.
- Jonae:** The one has more *value*?

- Me:** The one that has more value, I like that word-
- Cindy:** That's probably the way the white people think about it, that's probably why they don't write it on their papers. Like, you get what I'm saying?
- Me:** Say more, Cindy.
- Cindy:** You know what I'm saying, you know how Black people write Black, Spanish people write, Spanish or whatever—white people probably don't write white because...they probably think that they're too good to write white. You get what I'm saying? I don't need to write white, everybody knows I'm white. You get what I'm saying?
- Me:** Yeah, yeah.
- Jonae:** I mean, that's obvious
- Me:** So, you're saying that it's so taken-for-granted because they're from the dominant-
- Jonae:** They're the most important, powerful or influential
- Me:** What's that word?
- Jonae:** [repeats]
- Me:** 'Powerful' - I think is an important, key word to think about. When we think about whether or not a group has power—that's what we wanna be thinking about when we're talking about dominant groups and subordinate groups.
- And how would we define power? When we say that white people have power in this country, what does that mean?
- Jonae:** They started the country, they're always going to have power.
- Me:** So, what does power look like, and what does it mean to have power?
- Cindy:** Control

Me: Control over what though?

Cindy: Everything

Ms. Brown: The people that make decisions for a large amount of people. Those few people that have power make overreaching decisions for all the rest of us, they're taking power over us because they're making decisions for us.

Me: *(mild sarcasm, laughing)* Thank you, Ms. Brown

[Jonae and Cindy exchange looks of annoyance at Ms. Brown's interjection]

Young people and I wrestled with Tatum and this notion of dominant groups. They produced important analyses and introduced critical conceptual language from which to carry on a unit about structural inequality. Understanding, “power,” “control,” and who is, “value[d]”, as central aspects of dominance would allow us to explore the ways in which identities are given meaning and signified through mechanisms of the state. As we closed out our close reading of Kendrick Lamar’s lyrical metaphors in “Blacker the Berry” that explored themes of Black identity, white supremacy, and social power, an unusually exuberant Jonae, chirped, “I love this class.”

Exploring PBS Resources on Race and Housing. PBS offered an important resource in its *Race: The Power of An Illusion* film and related online toolkit that I used to teach about structural inequality. One of the most comprehensive reviews of tangible policies is an article by Larry Alderman, *A Long History of Racial Preferences for Whites*. From his article, I fashioned two separate documents⁸; one that looked more generally at policies, treaties, and laws dating back to the 17th century that either directly benefited whites at the expense of Black, Native, and Latinx populations or that had the indirect effect of this outcome; while the other more

⁸ Appendices E and F

specifically reviewed housing and real estate policies and practices that advantaged white folks while relegating Black folks to housing projects and divested city neighborhoods. My primary goal for reviewing both of these documents with young people was to illustrate how this history *explained* present day wealth disparities between white folks and Black and Latinx populations. I also wanted youth to understand the extent to which Black oppression was/is indeed a *function* of white wealth accumulation, supported by a 20th century “whites-only” welfare state. I spent two days reviewing how the federal government directly fostered generational advantages for white Americans while symbiotically fostering generational poverty and perpetual segregation on Black Americans.

I began by asking youth to write down three things that I wanted them to reflect on as we jig-sawed these readings together as a group. These were:

1. Government and corporations are always making choices. Nothing they’ve done is accidental or arbitrary.
2. The patterns of those choices throughout history have had a multi-generational impact.
3. Individual people’s life choices and circumstances are constrained or improved by government and corporate action and inaction.

On the first day, we read through the first policy document about the long arc of federal structural inequities. Within the one-hour time frame, we covered the Indian Removal Act and the 1862 Homestead Act, both of which robbed Native Americans of their land and forced them onto smaller and smaller parcels of land while giving that land away to white settler-colonists to build on. We discussed the economic implications of slavery and Jim Crow. We talked about the ways in which the New Deal insidiously excluded Black and Latinx Americans from social

welfare protections during the Great Depression. Here I integrated information from Fox (2010) who looks more closely at the way local social service agencies played a role in subjugating Black and Mexican Americans while offering almost exclusive support to white ethnics. We discussed the ways in which the Wagner Act of 1935 and other unionization triumphs purposely allowed for the exclusion of Black Americans, and how in practice, white unions operated as a cudgel to suppress Black folks attempting to enter trades, let alone their unions.

To review this piece, we practiced corporate reading and I offered commentary throughout to offer support and contextualization. You could hear a pin drop as young people listened to their classmates read. When I interjected to elaborate on policies, the faces in front of me looked up unanimously with a collective gaze that spelled both awe and anger. I wrote in my notes that Cindy said, in quotes, “See, that’s why I’m telling ya’ll we need to be in the streets!” I remember looking at them and thinking about how much responsibility I had in that moment. After the reading, with a few minutes left, I asked young people to write down one question and one statement and used that as a platform to carry out a short discussion. The few comments shared made it clear that some perspectives began to shift, even if only for that moment, toward more system critical notions. Beauty raised her hand to comment on the threads of the reading the addressed generational wealth, saying:

Beauty: [I]t’s passed down in families or whatever, because, like, you had a head start or whatever. So, this is white people already have a lot of winnings, basically. When their kids can go to college, they can just get money or whatever. African Americans aren’t able to do that. What I found interesting, too, was like the third one. They say in 1865, just after the freedom of slaves in the south, it is not surprising that African Americans owned only 0.5% of the total wealth in the United States. But by 1990, 135 years after the abolition of slavery, black Americans still had only 1% of the national wealth. That’s sad;

Kumar and another student addressed Beauty's comment by reflecting on what they read about white employment and labor unions, replying:

Kumar: Because, well, first of all, they're able to get all these good-paying jobs, they're able to increase their wealth over the years and we didn't have that same opportunity, you understand

Student: Yeah, it was only for white people, because they got to discuss a good paying job with their employers, but it was only for whites, not black people or non-whites.

The anticipation for the follow up discussion and reading was high as we entered the next day. Everyone was engaged. We worked as a cohesive unit through the article. I was able to pair them off or put them in small groups and did not have to look over their shoulders to see if they were on task. They were. They were reading, and debating, and discussing the material. The reading would cover the Federal Housing Administration's role in redlining, white flight, and block busting tactics of realtors. I elaborated on the complicity of city planners like Robert Moses and the interstate highway system paving the way for concentrating Black folks in smaller denser neighborhoods, and the exclusionary zoning practices that carried over into the 21st century that continued to facilitate segregation. We discussed the connection between public infrastructure and property taxes, and how the concentration of the wealthy in exclusive communities supported resource hoarding. I would draw on resources to ground some of these processes in Milton's experience with these policies and practices. We explored how businesses left; automotive factories and other major manufacturers moved out of Milton and relocated in nearby suburbs. What started on the previous day as a kindling fire, grew into a roaring flame as the discussion seemed even more relevant to their lives and community circumstance. I also drew in

an additional resource offered by PBS which graphically illustrated the process of neighborhood decline, called “The Downward Spiral”⁹ clarifying the systemic process of how ghettos are formed.

Responding to this lesson, Kumar and Faylah echoed each other, reiterating a point that came up in the article, “Even without being racist, they still win anyway.” Faylah talked about colorblind threats to repeal affirmative action, saying that they ignore “all the advantages they got in the past.” Selena raised her hand and shared that she had been frustrated previously with not being able to speak back to some white friends and their parents with whom she would argue about political issues, but “now”, she said, she felt like she had what she needed to effectively respond to them. The whole two-day ordeal *did* feel transformational; almost like I physically saw young people’s bodies and consciousness shift and become more alert and attentive. I wondered if this moment was in fact the embodiment of conscientization. Indeed, instruction around this history as an undergraduate is what initially set me on my current path. Shante exclaimed, “They got all of the opportunities and we didn’t!” In a moment that relentlessly sticks in my brain, Beauty raised her hand to talk about a video she saw online wherein a man said that “he didn’t like Black people” because “they always think they’re owed something.” Her verbatim response was, “Well, after learning all this, we are!”

Grappling with Structural Inequality Amid Neoliberal Common Sense

As Phase II of the summer program immersed youth in conversations and new information about structural racism, youth would embrace structuralist views to varying degrees and in unique ways that found them grappling with neoliberal dogma. Using Beauty and Kumar as lenses through which to view the political socialization project of YPAR, I find a complex relationship

⁹ Retrieved from: http://www.pbs.org/race/006_WhereRaceLives/006_03-spiral.htm

to political structuralism; that youth leveraged new (and old) structural insights in service of their pre-existing political orientations and 2) youth were able to grapple with new information in ways that gave rise to class consciousness.

New information, same political orientation: Beauty's political development. Despite her acknowledgement of structural inequities, Beauty consistently expressed conservative and neoliberal views throughout or time together. She was an active participant during the 2015 summer program but her participation waned significantly after the summer ended as she spent most of her time outside of UB working at Burger King. Her presence was also scarce during the 2016 summer program as she would be elected to participate in a four-week science program at a nearby elite university that partnered with UB. Beauty's political development reveals several insights about the political socialization project of YPAR, specifically, young people's agency within YPAR to draw unique meaning from critical/structuralist lessons. Beauty leveraged key insights from our lessons and conversations during Phase II in service of arguments that supported her political orientation, demonstrating that just understanding or recalling examples of structural inequality does not necessitate that one adopts a structuralist point of view.

She, like several other students were aware of Milton's past as a thriving industrial hub and longed for a return to the days when Milton was a shining city. Her understanding about Milton's structural decline was embedded in a neoliberal framework, particularly BRN discourse. This was demonstrated when Beauty recalled her mother, grandmother and a fellow named "Mr. G", talking to her about the old entertainment and industrial sectors. She remembered:

“Yeah, they talked about how it was a movie downtown, when it was *nice*. Yeah, like, you know, my mom told me that a lot was going on in Milton but it changed. It was a lot more stuff to do. Yeah, it was a movie, a drive-in movie theater.”

She also recalls Mr. G telling her,

“There used to be so many steel factories. He just talk[ed] about how the steel factories was here. How Milton was just so nice and beautiful and the meaning of [our city slogan] and just how the people were. How West State street, those houses were so nice because that's where the high class white people used to be and they just all picked up and left one day. The steel factories left. Milton went down with it.”

Reciting the yesteryears of Milton, as told by community elders, including her grandmother, Beauty's view on this past is exceedingly positive. The entertainment infrastructure and blue-collar industry flourished, and “high class white people” lived in big houses on West State Street. Beauty recognized Milton's downfall coincided with white flight, something that we discussed in Research at length; however, to Beauty, white flight was not a legitimate excuse for the city's socioeconomic condition. She continues,

... They left. Milton just wasn't the same. Because Milton [was a big raw materials producer]. We were just factories. There were a whole bunch of factories. We made everything. Once they left, Milton kind of went down. That's not an excuse for how the city is today...but yeah.

Reiterating her earlier comments about Milton, she landed on the note that despite white flight and tangential industrial decline, blame for the current state of the city should *not* be located with these structural changes. Elsewhere in her final interview, Beauty articulates where blame *should* be located. When I asked her, “How do you think Milton became what it is today?” she replied,

Something went wrong. Something seriously because all that, the white people picking up and leaving. They left nothing here. We still could have made something out of nothing. That's no reason for the people to be how they are today. Like I said, PTA meetings and stuff, maybe one or two parents come, but the minute you take that person's child's phone, parent up there like this [*snaps*]. But you couldn't come to a parent teacher conference?

What is to blame, Beauty suggests, is the citizenry's inability to "make something out of nothing." Not only that, folks in Milton made poor decisions, like not attending PTA meetings and only showing up for parent conferences when their children had their phones taken. While her criticisms of residents' personal values were a common refrain, Beauty expressed the BRN logic, that against the failing infrastructure, Black residents "could have made something out of nothing." My last moments with Beauty found her deeply immersed in the politics of BRN as she described problems in the city and called up solutions to challenges that required citizens to take on personal responsibility for fixing problems created and maintained at structural and institutional levels. Indeed, even as Beauty acknowledged inequitable structures, she continued to land on notes that highlighted personal responsibility *or* that diminished or mitigated the primacy of those structures.

Beauty made it clear that her opinions were hers alone. Responding to my inquiry into how she reconciled new information with inconsistent past ways of thinking or how she knew when it was time to change her beliefs about social issues, she said, "I go off what *Beauty* thinks. I think it's both... environmental and I think it's within one's self." Here she claims that her opinions on community issues and issues that came up in Research reflected a combination of being influenced by her environment and beliefs that were in some way hard-won, longstanding, and relatively impermeable self-evident truths. This was demonstrated most clearly when she took an issue I had communicated during Research or when I was her counselor -- school teachers in Black communities not being a part of Black communities and the value of teachers being personally invested in the well-being of their school-community-- and cited it in relation to a criticism of Milton resident's lack of hard work. It started when I asked her, "Is lack of hard work to blame for why so many residents of Milton are poor?" to which she answered,

- Beauty:** Yep, 'cause I just don't think that they try hard enough. For example, I know I am always going to use this example. Like for example, was it from you? I know I heard it from somewhere. But you said, you go to certain neighborhoods ... white kids live next door to a teacher or a teacher right around the corner. Like it's not enough Milton residents that work I noticed.
- Me:** I may have said that
- Beauty:** Yeah, like going across the bridge ... to Pennsylvania ... it's so packed, it's so much going back and forth because all those white people who coming from Pennsylvania come here to teach us, be our social workers, psychiatrist, and then they go home. It should be more Milton residents that are the doctors and the nurses.

I had made comments like this periodically throughout my time in YPAR, however, a focus on local economies was central to my curriculum as a counselor for UB when Beauty was in my group. Considering my experience in urban centers, Milton included, I intended to raise questions about monetary returns and investment in local infrastructure. How does a place like Milton sustain itself when most of its white-collar labor force lives and pays taxes in other places while low-wage service jobs are typically reserved for much of its own tax-base? It was apparent that Beauty understood and relatively accurately recalled this example; however, she leveraged this example in service of an argument about Milton folks not working hard. According to her, labor is pulled from "Pennsylvania" *because* locals do not work hard enough. This discursive move demonstrates that Beauty was not just passively absorbing information; rather, she was interpreting information in ways that aligned with her own political orientation. It also lends credence to the notion that understanding and belief are separate conceptual structures (Chin & Samarapungavan, 2001) as far as political identity development is concerned. Although Beauty understood and could recall my comments, the "spirit" of my analyses had been lost when she integrated this information into what appeared to be her own political belief schema.

This example serves as a testament to the power and pull of neoliberal logics even as youth become aware of structural inequalities. Beauty demonstrated this tendency to land on critical notes about residents of her primarily Black and Brown city even when she could articulate the structural and institutional obstacles that underlay. Despite feeling justified in standing up against wrongs in her personal academic life, her theory of change when it came to her peers and her community addressing institutional challenges, pulled on neoliberal governmentality and respectability. For example, Beauty talked at length about several institutional flaws at her school; feeling like her teachers *and* guidance counselors didn't care enough to make sure students apprehended instructional material or knew about their post high school options. She felt many teachers were disrespectful toward young people at Milton High, and didn't have high expectations for them, saying:

Ms. Reshma, Indian woman. She told one of the students he wasn't gonna graduate. And he graduated! Why would you tell a student that? A lot of those teachers, I don't like them. I feel like a lot teachers try to oppress us. I don't know if it's just me, but I feel like they do. I feel like they take advantage of their authority sometimes. Like I said, I go to the main office if I have to. You'll suspend me. I don't care if I'm an honor student or vice president of National Honor Society, when it comes to certain stuff, I just don't care about that anymore.

Beauty describes a willingness to buck against authority and to speak truth to power, even when it meant possible suspension. Her comments about guidance counselors and teachers run parallel to what Black students experienced in Milton during the 1940s (Dinkins, 2013). She continued, this time, about the indignity of having to ask to go to the bathroom at her school,

I feel like as students, I don't think we should have to ask to go to the bathroom. Because honestly, if a teacher tells me no; you can't tell me I can't go to the bathroom. I'm going to the bathroom. I don't even see the purpose of asking the teacher anymore. Seriously. Especially once I turn 18. Oh my God. I'm sorry, I don't care if you think I'm being a rebel or being defiant.

When I asked her if she interpreted the kind of defiance she was describing as a kind of political action, she didn't agree and said that it was "regular". She went on to discuss her grievances over the condition of her school's bathrooms and the way that the larger school was ran; vacillating between describing poor conditions at the institutional level and locating blame with students for not doing a better job of maintaining the school, and reiterating that the drab environment was no excuse for doing poorly in school. Beauty theorizes, that if Milton High students took better care of the institution, school authorities would notice this effort, and would build better facilities.

Beauty: I think it's regular. It's just how I feel, you know, because I doubt a lot of people feel like that. I think that's just me but ... I wish I could bring a change, seriously, 'cause I don't know, the way Milton High is ran, it's sad, seriously. Just going to other schools, just to take my SAT at Bridgeton [a high school in nearby suburb], I'm like, "Wow this is Bridgeton." I used to talk junk about other schools, "They're no better than Milton High", but that's a nice school (*laughs*). Seriously! *Sometimes, it is about you and what you do [emphasis added].* Like Milton High bathrooms, the girl's bathroom looks terrible... Seriously they're nasty at Milton High and *if you treated our bathrooms better, maybe they'll put an effort into making our bathrooms like Bridgeton [emphasis added].* Milton High girls writing lipstick on the mirror, why would you do that? Why would you do that? You know?

...Bridgeton ... that was a great bathroom. It's nice, you know ... lockers nice, not all chipped up and broken down, classroom nice and organized. Floors clean ... main office ... everything is just so organized and nice. *They really take pride in their school and Milton High [students] don't; it's sad [emphasis added].*

Me: Do you feel like it's the students that primarily don't take care of the school, or do you feel like ...

Beauty: I think it's the students ... the janitor is not the one that messing the bathrooms up like that. You know? The students, they really just ... because it's Milton High, they just treat the school any kind of way. You know, sometimes I don't even want to be in that school, 'cause I feel disgusted. I feel like I'm too good to be in that school. Seriously. You come to Milton High, you're like, "Jesus!" You go to Bridgeton in the

summer, the [students are] on Facebook complaining it's too cold, we at Milton High burning up! I'm so happy this is my last year of high school. All four years, the summer time ...

Me: Hot as hell?

Beauty: Yeah, Kids falling out and stuff...Gotta be early dismissal. You shouldn't have to do that. They're finally installing AC's but its only going to be in the cafeteria, the auditorium, and certain class rooms. That's not fair. It's really not.

In the previous exchange, I underlined all areas where Beauty identified her school, as an institution, to be lacking in some area or underserving Milton students compared to Bridgeton high school's infrastructure. Portions where she theorized individual level solutions that spoke to personal responsibility in relation to these issues were italicized. Beauty previously saw the need to challenge teachers and guidance counselors who she felt were uncaring and communicated a willingness to face the consequences for standing against what she perceived as injustice; however, she did not frame the poorly maintained school building as a politicized issue, it was an issue that rested with her peers' maintenance of the building.

For all the institutional grievances Beauty listed, she focused on students taking pride in their school and putting effort into making it look nicer, stating that this would likely prompt the school to reinvest in beautifying. I responded by asking Beauty whether she thought a structural change might influence some of the individual outcomes she was concerned about? Her response shows her willingness to grapple with the neoliberal logic to which she had previously so strongly adhered.

Me: Hmm... Do you think if over the summer... the school was completely cleaned up, like, outside and they made it ... beautified the lockers, replaced the chipped things...

Beauty: Made it like Bridgeton?

Me: Yeah, made it beautiful. Do you think that would have an impact on how students, 1) treated this school, and 2) their motivation to learn in school?

Beauty: I think so. I think it would have an impact on them because you in a school like that ... it's kind of hard ... I don't know. It shouldn't be an excuse to like ... it's just ... I don't know ... school is just ... I don't know how to explain it. No matter the environment, you should be willing to learn but I think a lot of people just ... it's Milton High. They had to shut the main campus down after this all time, because it became dangerous. Mice and stuff running around, that's ridiculous, seriously.

Beauty goes back and forth here in a verbal display that is illustrative of serious contemplation and thought revision. She holds onto the idea that students should be able to learn regardless of the environment, yet she points out that conditions have been so bad that the main campus high school had to be shut down.

To assess the extent to which Research influenced her politics, if at all, I asked her about takeaways from YPAR in her final interview. She was slow to respond. What she eventually described was more of a change in feeling and exposure to new ways of seeing things more than anything that penetrated her political identity. “Nah I just know ... like I said ... definitely [I’ve be]come more pro-Black but it definitely made me be aware of social problems and race issues. I think it actually made me distinguish the difference between prejudice and racism.” She continued, “Stuff like that, different classes, it gave me a broad view of everything. It made me

realize certain stuff, like I would be out and [say], "Okay, that's what Mr. Clay was talking about." ... That was a good class. Seriously." Although Beauty's analyses of community problems remained largely at the individual level, she highlighted Research as influencing her general awareness around issues and refining her language.

What her final interview demonstrated ultimately was that Beauty's neoliberal politics were firmly held as she left YPAR, UB, and readied for college the following fall. She was considerate of structural issues but underscored the need for personal resilience in the face of these obstacles, and the deviance of marginalized groups and individuals that lent to the inequitable conditions. Indeed, this is where Beauty began her journey in Research and this is where she was ending it. Her July 2015 journal entry in response to the question I raised in Research, "Does where you live impact your ability to have the meaningful life you described? Why or why not?" was, "I totally disagree that where I live impacts my ability to have the meaningful life I described. I believe everyone has the chance to reach their riches in life. If anything, where I live pushes me to fulfill my every dream...".

Beauty challenged my own views on conscientization in YPAR, namely, the idea that mere exposure to critical political information, by which I mean, naming and making visible to youth unequal structures, was sufficient to disrupt common sense neoliberal ways of understanding disparate social outcomes that impede the development of an activist orientation.

YPAR and class consciousness: Kumar's political development. Kumar's early days in YPAR saw him engaging political analyses that were highly critical of Black folks' work ethic and cultural values, while also articulating a view of white supremacy as characteristically insidious, sneaky, and almost mystical. This kind of talk did not escape his initial interview in the heart of Phase II. Kumar's responses to my questions in this initial interview generally

invited a mix of burgeoning critique of the social structure *and* neoliberal discourse. This is illustrated in his response to my inquiry about how his city became “what it is today.” New information allows Kumar to grapple more fully with the complexity of his community reality, calling on both the elements of racialized structural inequity at the same time that he invokes BRN, and other familiar discourses.

Me: How did Milton get to be the way it is today?

Kumar: What you said, the other day. Yesterday.

Me: What did I say?

Kumar: Like, I remember everything you said. Basically, like, it’s a lot of things, but I would like to say that they try to condense us into, like, these little neighborhoods. And we actually been mistreated for hundreds of years. And they, like belittle us on why we act like this, but we don’t really know any better. We don’t really know any better! That’s not saying, everybody acts the same. That’s not true; we’re all not like that. There are some Black brothers that do good and try to change, but as a whole, we aren’t really doing much. And, I mean, they see that, so then they don’t really have to do much because, we’re doing it to ourselves. And then, you have a lot of communities around the entire country that’s like this.

Me: Yeah, that’s interesting... I’m trying to get a sense of whether you think the people are the problem or... or is it something else?

Kumar: I mean, we are the problem in terms of how it looks. *But how it’s formed--* the white people did it. Because how it looks, like, trash everywhere, shootings, things like that—we’re doing that. But, how it’s formed-- we have one library open in Milton, a lot of abandoned buildings-- the white people did that. So, yeah, it’s a lot of factors.

Kumar’s explanation sees him drawing on his interpretation of elements of my teaching about urban housing policy, and the relationship between property taxes and public infrastructure. He combines these ideas with other familiar ways of talking about challenges in his community to draw some conclusions about the current state of his city. Even as Kumar mentions the structure,

i.e. “how it’s formed,” in the commercial and housing abandonment, the city’s very small and under-resourced library, and the consequences of racist housing policies, he also pulls in discursive elements that center neoliberal governmentality seen as the actions or inactions of “some good brothers” vs. a majority who “aren’t really doing much” to make change.

Kumar’s recall of my teaching in other areas would show him grappling with new information and integrating it into old ways of understanding. This was revealed when I asked him for his definition of racism. “Racism, probably the same definition as everybody else. When different ethnic groups ... they characterize people on what they hear. But most of the time when racism occurs [it] is between black and white.” I follow up asking him, “Who or what is your primary source of information about issues of race and racism?” to which he replied, “You.” I was surprised at the interpersonal nature of his definition, especially considering that Kumar identified me as his primary source. “What have I taught you?” I asked.

Kumar: *(dryly)* You know what you taught.

You basically taught us how as a black person, in general, you had to work harder than what the white person has to do. This is not a country for us. There are many laws out there, many acts or whatever that is primarily for us but just not going to... they say it’s for everybody but in practice, it’s really for the white people. But the school systems and stuff, the lunches, [limited] activities that we can do in the city. There’s not much of them... It does affect me and it is going to continue to get worse as I become an adult... Then it’s going to be harder because you’re grown. Then you’re black. Then you live in the United States. Then you come from an urban community. It’s a lot of things bestowed upon us that aren’t going to get to the white people.

Me: Yeah. That’s interesting because your first definition of racism was like, different than what I ... what you described as what I taught you. Like one group has an issue with another group. Then you talked about racism being...sort of talking about how the system is unfair.

Kumar: Yeah. That’s not the true definition. That’s not what you told us.

Me: I mean, it’s interesting that that’s what happened.

Kumar: I mean, you told us something different. But then again that's just how I think of it. That's how a lot of kids think of it.

While Kumar explicates an interpersonal power-neutral definition of racism that he admits would likely sound like his peers', he then went on to discuss how racism operated at a structural level. He mentioned the idea that "Black people have to work twice as hard" came from what I taught him about racism. Considering that this was certainly not something that I would have intentionally normalized, I was curious about how he arrived at this conclusion. As Kumar exited YPAR, his reflections on the race and class structure would become even more sophisticated; though he would retain some of his neoliberal views in relation to Black Miltonian's work ethic. This time however, the views he articulated appeared hard won, deliberate, and fully considered.

In his final interview, 14 months after the first, Kumar talked about a number of things including his concerns about affording college, student loans, and the insecurity he felt about landing a job to pay back his debt. It seemed as though his approaching collegiate and financial independence carried with them a burgeoning critique of meritocracy. Kumar described the project of schooling as concealing the false nature of meritocracy, "School hides it, like, "You'll be okay. Just do your work." Teachers know, that even if you do good work, there is still a chance that you won't be alright." He illustrates his point in a story he tells about a recent encounter with a high performing college student,

It's funny. Not funny, but it's crazy because ... I was with one of my teacher's [and] we were doing community service and we were in a group circle. One of the people that were there, they go to Notre Dame. They have a 3.8 and they're not even in the top 10%. So, when they put that on their application, you got a 3.8 but you're not in the top 10% like ... that's crazy. And it's really like that, too.

Kumar also reflected on our time in YPAR, and his thoughts about some of the issues we discussed. When I asked him how Milton became "what it is today," his response included

relevant historical allusions to white flight and urbanization, and a class analysis grounded in a personal insight about his own parents.

Kumar: The white people left and then they made projects where we gotta live in, they put all the uneducated people in one spot ... you can be educated but if you don't have no degree, you not educated, you get it? So, neither one of my parents have a degree. They'll never get one.

Me: Why do you think that is?

Kumar: They have to work, they have to provide for four kids. Plus, two of us, I'm going to college this year, [my sister] is going to college in three years ... she a freshman so in like three years, my other one is about to go to high school next year, they in eighth grade, so they are gonna have to work so that's crazy.

When I asked him if racism played a role in the quality of life people in Milton experienced, this time, his response honed directly in on structure, describing the racial make-up of Milton's school board and mechanisms of the bureaucracy that effectively silenced parents. He connected these issues with the school board directly to the problem of the curriculum offered to Milton students, suggesting that the absence of critically relevant civics is facilitated by racially divergent interests.

Kumar: Because Milton Board of Education is all white people. I been there, I used to live right by it. It was right next to my house. (*demonstrating with his hands*) This was my house, it was right here. All white people making decisions about Black people's education. Makes no sense. None of your children would ever go to one of these schools, you know that you're never putting your children in any one of these schools but you gonna make a decision?

They' pockets' fat though.

Me: Yeah.

Kumar: But it's just that they don't care. And they know the parents work, a lot of their parents work, they don't have time to go to PTO meetings and discuss how they really feel. Even if they did, I still feel as though ... you may get a little more parents but it's not gonna be a clear difference ... so I just think that if you have all white people working in office governing what the black kids learn, of course you gonna tell them to teach them the stuff that you want them to know but you're not gonna tell them nothing that they really *should* know. That's a way they keep us down too.

Kumar's response here is based in evidence. He is able to pull together events and experiences from his life to form a coherent analysis of how the state reproduces docile Black citizens through schooling. Kumar also invited a class analysis into his response, recognizing that it's difficult for working-class Milton parents to make it to a board meetings or PTO meetings to voice their concerns because of their work commitments.

Kumar cited Research as partly responsible for the shift in his structuralist political analysis. His exit survey asked, "What impact, if any, did Research have on you?" He replied, "Probably the most informative class I've taken during this program. It's different because the knowledge in this class is actually valuable, and you can take it with you." He characterized his own shift in responses from his initial survey, responding to the question, "Do you think your responses to this survey are different from your responses to the survey you took on the first day? Why?" saying, "Oh I know for a fact they did [change]. You've opened our eyes to many things in this world. I believed that slavery was dead, whatever you learn in school is enough, and you can get whatever you want with hard work." He continued, "Everything is looked at from a different perspective now..."

Despite Kumar's shift toward more class-based, evidence-based, and historical analysis of inequality, and a disillusion with the logic of meritocracy in his own life, what remained from his earlier days in YPAR was his attachment to the idea that Milton folks were not hard working

enough, particularly with respect to producing social change and individual prosperity. For instance, I asked him if there were moments in research that he disagreed with me or a lesson. His response indicated that while he was on board with structuralism, he believed that Black folks' apathy played a pivotal role in oppression.

Me: "Throughout that time [we were in Research], were there any things that you feel like ... were there moments where you were like, "I don't know if I agree with what you're talking about. I kinda feel like the real problem is, 'whatever' and not what you're saying."

Kumar: Like how the system is and ... I see what you're saying, it's designed to keep us down but then again ... I strongly agree with you but then I strongly believe that our people just don't care for the majority. Like yes, that plays a part definitely, but I think for the most part it's because we don't really see it, we don't really care.

Earlier in the interview, I had asked him what kind of life he imagined for himself in ten years. He talked about completing a Ph.D., working in business, and having a nice place in a big city like Chicago. I followed up asking, "Would most people from Milton, ten years from now, be able to have the kind of life [he] envisioned for [himself], or at least a nice life?" He responded, "I don't think so. There is no dedication any more, there is no work ethic any more. A lot of us, we expect it to just come." He continued, "At times, I'm not saying I never thought of it like that before but a lot of us, we have no work ethic. If we don't get it the first time, that's it. Keep trying, do it again, you know?"

Kumar's responses indicated that he was able to recall new insights about the race and class structure as they related to his community, however, he still held on to some meritocratic ideas in relation to how he understood the trajectories of members of his community. Kumar's participation in YPAR dropped off significantly after the 2015 summer program. He would attend slightly less than half of the scheduled meetings during the next academic year.

...

Kumar's political identity development demonstrates that greater understanding of structural inequality may facilitate the development of class consciousness. Any efforts to engender conscientization that don't engage the interrelatedness of race and class strike limitedly at the interpersonal, anecdotal, character of racism, and fail to fully capture the role that law, policy, and governance play in the reproduction of the social order. It is crucial to remember the spirit and historical context in which Freire conceptualized critical consciousness to begin with; that is, the revolutionary struggle between the ruling class and the peasant class in 20th century Brazil and other parts of South America, and between the Western colonial empire imposing capitalism on South America and revolutionary forces across the continent. Among other things, critical consciousness *is* at its heart, a class-based analysis.

Action Research Project Without a Theory of Change

Phase II closed with youth learning about structural inequalities borne out of the 20th century but not before we explored potential topics for our research project and presentation. Young people came up with a number of issues that they wanted to focus on during our group sessions. I had showed them the results of several YPAR and PAR projects that I was fortunate enough to have witnessed: spoken word poetry, a rapped PSA on human trafficking, a presentation on the results of an empirical study of teachers' and students' experiences with a standardized test, and a community study that captured a neighborhoods' experiences with Stop and Frisk. Over the course of two days, we produced and synthesized a list of the areas around which young people were interested in developing a presentation.

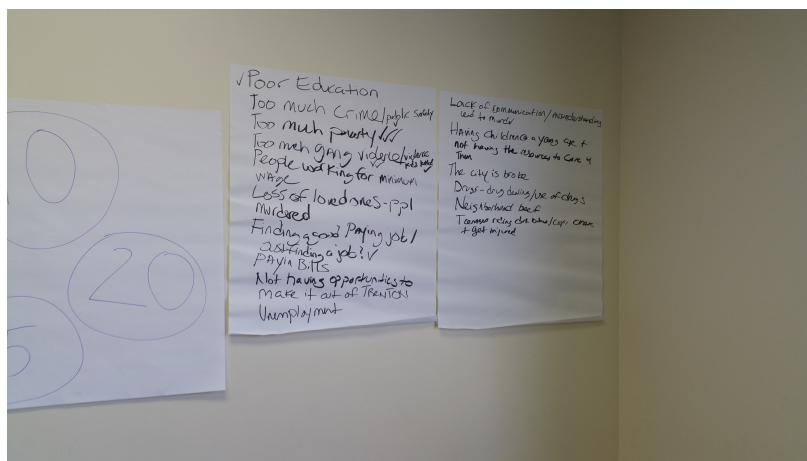


Figure 4.3: List of Potential Action Research Topics

Choosing a topic involved a lot of contention. Some youth researchers did not like the idea of having to spend time pursuing issues that they didn't care about or that they felt weren't as pressing as the ones for which they advocated. With the votes landing in favor of conducting a project around educational inequality, we began a chaotic Phase III. After much deliberation and further synthesis, we refined our research question to, "What are the primary issues impacting students in Milton?" This question was broad enough to allow researchers with divergent interests to pursue, for instance, the ramifications of gang violence on student populations in Milton. We began working on developing a research question and discussing appropriate methods. Along the way, youth made the decision to focus part of our analysis on drawing comparisons between key differences in the infrastructure of Milton vs. Crest Ridge. The purpose of drawing this comparison was so that we could ground our analysis of student outcomes in an analysis of the divergent community infrastructures supporting youth in both districts. With these foundational areas covered, our group began designing the empirical part of the study in preparation for our presentation at the close of the six-week summer program.

This work was challenging. Many young people who had spent their time gathering demographic, budgetary, and schooling outcome information had fully stopped working and used our time in research to socialize. I pushed them to remain on task anxious about our ability to execute a presentation. I had resorted to bringing in food (even though our meetings started not too long after their lunch period ended) to help them concentrate and to bribe them into staying on task. At one point, I checked on what had been included in the presentation to realize that someone had accidentally deleted all but one of our slides. I lost it. I screamed at them, partly because I had labored over these slides in genuine collaboration with individual co-researchers, to ensure that their ideas came through clearly, and all that work was lost (or so I thought). My frustration mostly boiled over when I tried to retrieve the history and restore the presentation but it initially did not work.

From that point forward, several of the seniors would, in resistance, disengage from every aspect of this work. Rightfully so. As the young people say-- it wasn't that serious. I would eventually retrieve the presentation. Several seniors feeling bad about what transpired continued to work and more diligently, while other students didn't bother to show up to research the last two days. What occurred to me in retrospect is that this was the first time that our group worked to produce a deliverable—and for someone else. YPAR had become a neoliberal project of symbolic social justice, disconnected from meaning and personal investment to the participating youth. Up until weeks five and six, we functioned primarily as a discussion group about race, inequality, and current events and their participation was voluntary (i.e. they weren't being graded). To change all of that in such a hurried manner was a bit arbitrary. On top of that, youth had no say in the matter. We began pursuing “action” in the form of creating the presentation because that's what I decided, despite having told them action research was a student-directed

process. Reconciling the need to produce a deliverable for Mrs. Pryce with the need to engage a form of action, I made the decision for our entire group that we would produce a “social-scientifically sound” research presentation for the closing ceremony.

On the day of the presentation, over half of the students did not come up on stage. We presented our presentation titled “Where Dey Do Dat At? Educational Inequality in Milton, USA.” Students who had barely participated ended up talking through slides that they had not designed. Other students who had done significant work but were too shy, stood up on stage but did not participate in talking through their findings. Despite these challenges, the research they had done was so compelling, it drew cheers and looks of intense interest from parents, community stakeholders, their UB peers, and the program staff. Ending the six-week summer program on this note was bitter-sweet. As far as conscientization and this study are concerned, we were working on our presentation without discussing what impact it would have on producing some kind of material effect. What were we taking action for? What were we trying to influence? Was action research legitimate without an underlying theory of change?

Conclusion

Chapter 5 highlights critical discussions and learning in YPAR in which political positions were articulated, contested, and defended by focal youth and students from the group at large. I find that the organizing space can expose unreconciled tensions in relation to divergent ideologies, positionalities, and goals between youth and adults. This chapter also demonstrates that young peoples' responses to learning about structural inequality are complex. Political education can resonate with youth in ways that challenge common sense neoliberal frameworks and expose the class structure as functional and reproductive. However, sociopolitical development does not occur on a linear path; sometimes consciousness develops and sometimes

it is submerged by pre-existing beliefs rooted in the same system that is being critiqued. Indeed, Taylor (2016) urges, “The development of consciousness is never linear—it is constantly fluctuating between adhering to ideas that fit a “common sense” conception of society and being destabilized by real-life events that upend “common sense” (p. 213). Critical lessons and discussions may facilitate greater *understanding* of inequality but don’t necessitate that youth adopt a structuralist view of social problems.

CHAPTER 6:

FALL 2015 – SUMMER 2016: POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT & CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Overview

Chapter 6 explores youths political development during the second season of YPAR in the 2015-2016 academic year and summer, during which the action research group convened outside of the UB program, though still at the community college. Moving into the fall, I resolved to commit to a model of youth-led practice that I felt was absent during our summer together. With youth at the helm of our project in many regards, we developed a comprehensive and exciting agenda for community engagement, much of which did not move beyond cursory planning and discussion stage. We did however, have potent and generative discourse about the larger national political climate and pursued a project to develop a teen center in Milton.

This chapter understands youths' political development through their approaches to civic engagement and conceptualizations of the public good in YPAR. As YPAR became more fully-youth centered, it allowed youth to approach civic engagement in ways that were both personally and politically meaningful to them. Moreover, as we reflected on the national climate of activism and electoral debates occurring at the time, I argue that these young people drew inspiration from the larger political theater to inform their respective stances on issues of race/ism, class, and social change. Through analysis of Hector, Selena, Gustavo, and Shante's political development, I suggest that 1) youth developed politically in relation to popular conceptions of social justice embedded in the political zeitgeist, 2) tensions and dilemmas in the pursuit of social change pushed youth to explore the contradictions of the state and challenge neoliberal frameworks and, 3) these tensions and dilemmas also resulted in a tendency toward progressive pragmatism in

some youth. This chapter ultimately reveals how youth reformed and articulated new political orientations within the organizing space of YPAR as they exercised increased agency.

Transitioning from Summer to Fall

The timeline of this chapter extends from fall 2015 through summer 2016, during which time, our group met, on average, three Saturdays a month during the academic year, and twice a week during the summer program. Our return to meetings began in October 2015, some two-and-a-half months after our presentation at the 2015 summer program. We met on Saturdays roughly three times a month. Our meetings were held on the second floor of the community college building in a small room with no windows that was only large enough to sit roughly 6-8 people total. This room was designated to us by Mrs. Pryce, who had officially taken Research out of the UB curriculum by the fall of the academic year. The room we were assigned by Mrs. Pryce in the fall had one computer and it was designated for members of the community college's student government. Between the sole computer, my laptop, and young people's smartphones, we were limited in our ability to execute any tasks that required us to be online collectively. Not officially in Upward Bound, we were essentially squatting in borrowed space and were not allowed to conduct any work using the computer labs or use an official classroom.

During the summer, Mrs. Pryce, because of the class' popularity, persistently asked me to take on "more students," for the academic year, which I interpreted as asking me to take on a larger section of a class that already had 19 students. The thought of leading a 20+ student section of Research on top of teaching 3 sections of Literature felt overwhelming to me as a full-time graduate student, so I just as persistently declined. In retrospect, I realize that she may have been asking me to take on more sections of Research and to stop doing Literature or to reduce

my Literature load. Upon learning the news, I was disappointed but I also realized that this granted us more autonomy and detachment from the pressure of producing a deliverable.

Nearly half of the students would return for our first meetings: Rosada, Hector, Gustavo, Selena, Kumar, Shante, Beauty, and Justice. Rosado would bring her boyfriend to the first meeting, but then by our third time together, she politely dropped out (i.e. stopping by before each subsequent meeting for several weeks to explain why she couldn't stay) along with Justice. Slowly but surely, Beauty would eventually stop coming as well but would sporadically drop in. The core group, for the duration of our academic year consisted of Hector, Gustavo, Kumar, Shante, and Selena. Both Kumar and Shante would at different points pull back their participation YPAR. Two students from my Literature class, twins, joined us on a few days once they realized that the kinds of conversations that we engaged in that class around race also came up in YPAR.

Reemphasizing Youth-Direction

Evacuated from the confines of the Upward Bound program model, I desperately wanted us to take on a project that involved street-level grass-roots organizing activities. I wanted us to connect to other local organizations doing justice work in particular areas to see what they were doing and explore the possibility of joining their work or having them teach us a few things about organizing. I was a novice myself in organizing, and wanted some guidance and, admittedly, to alleviate some of the pressure that came with being the only adult attached to what I had envisioned would be a grand effort to buck against the system. I had done some reading in between the summer and fall that helped me to reflect on how I was thinking about change in the context of YPAR. I was greatly influenced by Soo Ah Kwon's (2013) *Uncivil Youth* and wanted to avoid as much as possible, engaging neoliberal "social justice" work that required our group to

take a patronizing view of the community and position ourselves as “helping,” particularly as I had come to see this as the project of Upward Bound. I was also cautious about us becoming a mechanism of unpaid labor, filling a role neglected by government. I communicated some of my desires and concerns with youth but was careful to scale back my comments out of fear that I would assume more of a central role in this work than I was supposed to, adhering to the youth-directed nature of YPAR as I had understood it.

Youth-led, to me, meant not lesson planning as I pushed youth to guide each of our meeting sessions based on their interests. I came to YPAR each day, for several months, with no agenda but to follow young people’s lead, collaboratively brainstorm, and execute research and action tasks. If they suggested an activity or form of community engagement, I followed up with questions to help clarify their ideas and wrote notes. My goal was to help them explore the details of executing something and to help them think about what steps we might need to take to achieve a particular goal. Facilitating youth-led praxis did not preclude me from trying to reel them back in when it seemed as though nothing was getting accomplished, though not too often, lest that I discourage necessary and legitimate community building. Youth-led meant *not* steering youth away from formulations of change that went against my own principles after I had communicated my perspective on the matter. In other words, after I said my piece, I did whatever they wanted. Concerned about how little we had accomplished over several months, I would eventually rethink how I understood youth-led praxis and began lesson planning. I started sharing articles or videos that I thought were important with young people to inform our orientation as an organization and to encourage their analyses of the state. I would also offer suggestions about local issues that I thought were suitable for us to address and invite local

stakeholders to support our vision of change. This reconceptualization of youth-led invited structure but allowed youth legitimate and meaningful authority over the product of our work.

Youth-led political dialogue. Our first days back in October 2015 found us joking and reminiscing about our time together over the summer. Though our break was short, our reconvening felt long overdue, and like a reunion of family. Young people talked about what they learned over the summer and how some of our activities emboldened them in certain areas since our final days of summer. They also discussed current events including the growing prominence of #BlackLivesMatter, the presidential primaries, and potential areas for the group to pursue change. I argue that these larger political moments provided a foundation from which youth could express their growing political awareness. In a departure from the first Phase of the 2015 summer program, I invited them to frame the topics of political importance. These conversations revealed youths' ability to offer critical analyses of moments in their lives and current events, and to draw on historical evidence and policy to assert their positions on matters that they deemed politically significant.

Beauty, for example, talked about how our time in YPAR resonated when she had recently pushed back against her teacher. When I asked the group if in any instances our conversations over the summer had been called into their minds since that time, she responded, "Me and my teacher was arguing." I asked about what and she continued, "Yeah. Sorry, because I was taking a Dynamic Self, Care, and Society class, and he kept talking about how black people feel like we need an apology. I told him, "It's whatever, because you benefit from white privilege," and he got mad."

Me: (laugh).

- Beauty:** (laugh). It's this thing he told me about. I thought it was so funny. I really wish you was there. Cause when we talk about race, I'm just funny
- Me:** You were schooling him!?
- Beauty:** Yeah. Because we're talking about socio-economics and stuff, and the factors of it, and we was talking about it, and he said, I forgot what it's called but it was something that they gave back to minorities and stuff. I forgot what it's called.
- Me:** Reparations?
- Beauty:** Yeah. Yep. He told me to look that up or whatever. I had heard a little bit about it. But I said, "I don't care if...
- Me:** But we never got reparations. So, was it reparations? It might have been that or it might have been affirmative action.
- Beauty:** Yeah! It was affirmative action.

Beauty's rebuttal was important because it demonstrated her willingness to speak back to power. Although the circumstances weren't fully contextualized in her story, it was clear that she felt as though Black folks' experiences were being misrepresented or trivialized in her school and she decided to say something about it. If Y/PAR played any part in that, I was happy. Beauty and others were excited to talk about race and politics, and the national political scene had offered more than enough content to explore.

The intersection of party politics, race, and class were at the forefront of the news cycle, and the climate had grown even more tense and worrisome during the presidential primary season, which saw then-candidate Donald Trump engaging both thinly veiled and openly racist rhetoric to emerge as the most formidable Republican contender. There was also a split within the ranks of Democrats; a significant number of millennials favored one of the more leftist major

party candidates in recent history, Bernie Sanders, over Hillary Clinton, who represented the old guard of Democrats and an extension of the Barack Obama, Bill Clinton legacy.

Selena: [You know] about how Donald Trump demanded that all the Muslims... wear a tag to show that they were Muslim?

Me: Yeah.

Selena: Yeah. That's the same thing that Hitler did with the Jews.

Me: Yep. Exactly.

Kumar: What?

Selena: Donald Trump wants all the Muslims to wear a tag saying that they're Muslim. That's the same thing that Hitler did with the Jews, like the Star of David. You're just putting them as targets. People already hate the Muslims.

Kumar: He winning, though. He got today's lead.

Selena: Exactly. He does.

Kumar: It was 36% yesterday. It was 36% and the closest tonight was ... Who was the closest one? Rubio. Rubio had 16%.

Selena: Who's Rubio?

Me: Marco Rubio? You talking about their percentage in the polls?

Kumar: Yeah. It don't really mean nothing now, but that's the big indicator of how it could go.

Selena: I don't understand why he has so many followers [when] his main ideas [are] immigration and deporting immigrants, and... he made fun of a disabled person.

Kumar: Because it's mostly white people in this country.

Young people took these early unstructured convenings as an opportunity for them to share information with the group about issues that had come up during the primary season. Selena and others were anxious and concerned about how someone like Trump who engaged such hateful rhetoric could be so popular. Kumar didn't overstate the significance that white voters would play in the 2016 election. White voters overwhelmingly supported Donald Trump over Hilary Clinton. Kumar displayed some bit of clairvoyance too during this meeting when he raised the hypothetical question to the group, "What if he got a second term?" which alludes to a presumption that Trump would have a first! Selena and Kumar's conversation about the presidential primaries continued, this time in relation to Bernie Sanders. Selena informed the group that she had been spending time talking with friends about one of his proposals and then clarified some information for us by searching on Twitter.

Selena: We were talking about like, how Bernie Sanders wants to spend like \$8 to 10 million on free education, college education, and healthcare, and how Donald Trump wants to spend \$30 million on a wall to keep immigrants out.

Me: Bernie Sanders wants to spend 8 to \$10 million dollars for free ed-

Selena: Every year, yeah for free education.

Me: For free education? How is that gonna work?

Kumar: Like free college?

Me: Well yeah, eight to ten million is not a lot of money. Is that money supposed to just cover tuition costs, or ...

Selena: Let me see, 'cause it was on Twitter, he said it.

Kumar: That's not... that's not... how many people is that?

Beauty: All our them should come together and pay for all our tuition.

Selena: \$10 billion over eight years.

Me: \$10 *billion*? That makes more sense. Yeah. That would be dope.

The affordability of college was a big deal to students, and something that came up in a number of exit interviews in response to the question, “Do you have any concerns about life after high school?” Kumar, Beauty, and Selena each mentioned being able to afford college and potentially having to work to support themselves through college. It made perfect sense that this was something on Selena’s mind that she was paying attention to during the primary season.

#Blacklivesmatter was also drawing increased attention in the national conversation and had become a litmus test of the nation’s racial polarization. Talking about the politicization of the term “Black lives matter” young people had a number of thoughts critical of those who rebutted the claim with “all lives matter.”

Selena: I hear people say that all lives matter not just black lives. I've heard that from so many white people like when we talk about Black Lives Matter. Like, "No, all lives matter."

Me: Yeah.

Kumar: Like, okay, all lives matter, but what are you doing? All lives matter, but is that really in practice? If you think about it. It's like you can't really say all lives matter. I'd rather say Black Lives Matter because if you think about it, everything is blamed on us and it just isn't right.

Me: Yeah.

Kumar: You can say that everybody's lives matter, but that's not really true. I think because if everybody's lives mattered, then that hashtag Black Lives Matter wouldn't be needed at all to isolate ourselves from everybody else, and I think it's really crazy because ... I don't know, the country is *based on not exactly everybody matters*. ...[E]verybody hasn't seen like riots and stuff... if you think about it, in society, that definitely isn't the case. It's really the white man or white woman, but it's never really the Black. #BlackLivesMatter had become a rallying

cry for activists in the wake of police shootings of unarmed victims of color. It was also the name under which locally-based grassroots organizations across the country had organized. Youth were keenly aware of this and aware that “all lives matter” was reactionary, and not a genuine appeal for inclusion and multiracial solidarity.

At the tail end of a conversation about perpetual instances of police violence in the national media, Justice described what he felt was a tendency among the teachers at his school to suggest that change was impossible, and that both measured and confrontational direct action were futile.

Justice: Who else has that history teacher that always says history repeats itself? Everybody, right? My history teacher says history repeats itself so I think that's sort of a sign saying that there's things that's going to start happening pretty soon that you know is going to happen over and over again and there's nothing we can do to change it.

Me: I disagree. There's a lot we can do to change it. We have to do something that we haven't done before.

Justice: No, I'm saying that's what they're putting in our minds.

Me: You feel like that's what they're putting in your mind? That nothing's ever gonna change and we gotta accept it?

Justice: There's gonna be slavery. It's gonna happen again.

Me: That's so interesting. I didn't even think about it like that. I hear that kind of thing a lot, too... thinking about how it's making [us] feel about what real change can look like.

Selena: Yeah, that's what my grandma says, like, if Donald Trump got elected, the savior's gonna come back

Justice: Even if...for example, like they say like nothing barely has changed. People try to protest peacefully. We've tried to protest violently, and still

nothing's really changing, I guess and it's making us feel like there's nothing we can do about it. We're just gonna let it keep happening and happening again.

Me: What do you think? Do you think something can be done?

Justice: Yeah. Hell yeah. *If they stop telling us that nothing can be done.* I don't think violent protest is like something that we should really do because they outnumber us more than, you know...but I still think it's like ... Even with peaceful protest it's pretty good, but I still feel like there's no reason to tell us that whatever protest that we do is not gonna work. You know what I'm saying.

Me: I hear exactly what you're saying.

Here Justice elaborates on what he felt was a problem in teachers discouraging young people from seeing the movements that had been galvanized in the wake of police violence around the country as productive. Despite their attempt to represent both measured and disruptive forms of civic action as futile, Justice conveys that he still believed in the usefulness of peaceful protests, but not violent protests.

Moving forward with our own reflections on how the group would approach civic engagement, I encouraged us to set a tentative agenda and wanted to discuss potential areas to explore. Selena offered a policy proposal that our group might pursue to facilitate law enforcement accountability in which she demonstrates her attention to international policy.

Me: ...I interrupted you all, but was there anything you wanted to do? Any ideas you had, anything I said that got you thinking about something?

Selena: I was thinking about it late last night. You know when you're thinking in bed, you have all these ideas?

Me: Yeah.

Selena: It was a crazy idea. A law for Milton. Every shot a cop takes, he has to pay for it out of his own paycheck.

- Me:** Every shot he takes?
- Selena:** Like with his gun. If they kill somebody, they're not going to jail. At least they can make them pay for it.
- Me:** Right. That's interesting. That's interesting. [pause.] I wonder if there's a way to keep-
- Kumar:** There might be ways to loop around that.
- Me:** Yeah, I mean to keep that ... cause you're mainly talking about being accountable for who you shoot or who you kill.
- Selena:** Yeah, cause in Russia and Canada, or whatever, I think they only shot five shots that year. Like with their guns, they didn't even use their guns, and they still have the least crime rates.

Selena demonstrated her attentiveness to international policy around law enforcement and their use of firearms. Indeed, Canada saw twenty-five police shootings in 2015 compared to the U.S., which saw fifty-nine police shootings within the first twenty-four days of 2015.¹⁰ Her insightful and creative suggestion that our group organize around a policy to make Milton cops pay out-of-pocket fees when they discharged a firearm to disincentivize shooting citizens was informed by the knowledge that in other countries, policies limited police powers to shoot citizens and that this corresponded with lower rates of crime.

The broader political climate offered important fodder for us to get back in the swing of our own work in Milton as we re-committed ourselves and our group to action research. Initial meetings generated lots of discussion around the notion of change; the possibility of social

¹⁰ Information from the report: *By the numbers: US police kill more in days than other countries do in years*. Retrieved from: <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/jun/09/the-counted-police-killings-us-vs-other-countries>

change, contemporary examples of civic change, potential avenues for our group to pursue change, and analysis of the motivations that undergird social change work. Young people were excited to discuss what they had been seeing on the news and social media and talking about with their friends.

Social Justice and Popular Culture

Young people's increased authority in YPAR allowed for participation in ways that were personally significant and that coincided with a larger thrust in popular culture toward online activism, and celebrity social awareness. Reflecting on Hector and Gustavo's political development, I argue that the enhanced synergy of social justice and popular culture at the time were reflected in the way in which these young people approached YPAR and extracted personal and political significance from the action research experience. These youths' interests led them to prioritize hanging out and having fun and activities like social media posting, coming up with a group name, designing a group logo, and making a group t-shirt.

Gustavo's political development. Gustavo embraced the comradery of his peers and the community we had built in YPAR. His engagement reflected the personal significance he found in YPAR through bonding and having a laugh. Although he committed to a version of social media activism, his interest in these activities varied. His participation in action research brought a youthful energy however, his political development reflected very little of the structuralism I had hoped most youth would embrace.

Gustavo joined the study during Phase II of the summer program after our lessons on structural inequality. Gustavo came up to me in the hallway before class and asked to be a part of my research. During the summer program, Gustavo was relatively quiet with few exceptions. In corporate reading, he willingly volunteered. He also participated sporadically in group

discussions to chime in on certain topics that generally didn't require much in the way of revealing one's political orientation, like when the entire group was joking about something someone said in the room or that we watched. Gustavo participated in the small groups that convened to develop our research presentation. He primarily liked to joke with another male student in Research and they were often grouped together.

Though unbeknownst to me at the time, during our meetings, Gustavo engaged in quite a bit of joking, poking fun at Mexicans specifically. Reviewing audio files and transcripts of our meetings made this clear. For instance, during the Figure Activity over the summer, Gustavo was in the group that worked on the "Latino Man" figure. He, like others, generated mostly stereotypes, however, he took special delight in reading off the list of stereotypes and awaiting the laughter of his peers. Additionally, a planning meeting later in the academic year, in which we discussed organizing materials for one of our projects, Gustavo made several self-deprecating jokes about Mexicans, Tacos, Cinco De Mayo, and his family. This kind of humor was a pattern with him. As the youngest member of the group, it was interesting to see how much play and laughter were a significant part of Gustavo's orientation toward YPAR. One example of this is when we tried to rope Beauty and Hector in on a Hangout call to make some decisions on one of our projects. Gustavo jokingly sabotaged the call with his friend, Hector.

Shante: Why would you ruin our...Why would you ruin our call, Gus?

Gustavo: Because I can.

Shante: No, you can't. Gus, get out. He said he could join our call, so that's what he did.

Me: He joined in the call on the Hangout?

Shante: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Wait, what? Can you stop, Gus!?

Gustavo: *(laughing)* I'm not doing nothing!

Some of the other activities that Gustavo enjoyed included developing a group name, a group t-shirt and logo, and developing a research group playlist. Talking about musical artists, J. Cole, Kendrick Lamar, and Drake, were second to Gustavo's penchant for joking and having a laugh.

When he came into YPAR meetings, he would immediately jump onto the computer and onto Facebook and Instagram. This was not completely off task. Initially, as a fun activity, I had encouraged youth to create social media accounts for our group and to assign us each one account to man. They liked that idea and spent a *significant* amount of our time in the early months setting up those accounts, distributing roles, and discussing the things they had seen (e.g. videos, news stories, etc.) Eventually, we talked about the purposes of having social media accounts. Youth suggested that sharing information about local issues or updating people on our activities were important. We did not do much of that. However, after weeks of unguided discussions about life and current events, and potential areas to explore, youth researchers suggested looking up an "unfair law" and spreading awareness about it via social media from our recently created Twitter account. The following exchange during this activity demonstrates Gustavo and others' participation in this activity.

Me: Gus, what you doing, man?

Gustavo: I didn't search, "laws" ...

Me: You searched the word, "laws"?

Gustavo: No, I searched up laws in [our state]. And there's this website where it says DumbLaws.com, and it shows every state and you can click on it and it shows you--

Me: Oh, that's dope.

- Gustavo:** Right now, click on dumb laws in [our state]. One says, "Drivers must warn those who they pass on highways before they do so. Spray paint may not be sold without a posted sign warning juveniles of the penalty of painting graffiti." This one says you can't pump your gas.
- Me:** That's not a law.
- Gustavo:** Well, it says laws-
- Me:** It says it's a law you can't pump your own gas?
- Gustavo:** The majority of time when I go they do it for you.
- Me:** People do it for you here but I don't know if it's illegal to do it for yourself.
- Shante:** Oh.
- Gustavo:** It says, "You cannot pump your own gas."
- Me:** Does it give you a link to the actual law on the state government website?
- Gustavo:** It says in May 2010 they made it. It says, "Oregon and [our state] are the only two states in the United States that require attendants to pump gas at gas stations. There are many arguments for it but many are not well substantiated."
- Me:** Is that something y'all really care about?
- Gustavo:** No

Identifying unjust laws to inform the public about on social media, our group went to Google on my computer, their cell phones, and on the room computer. While Gustavo was behind all of us on the room computer, he found a website that listed state laws that had drawn controversy. I questioned the legitimacy of a particular law (and the site to an extent) and how invested youth were in actually pursuing that cause. Youth demonstrated limited interest in this civic engagement exercise. Gustavo was correct, I later would learn about the gas law, however moments like this illustrated how our group meandered through identifying an area of interest and significance. I was concerned about the emphasis on action efforts conducted through social

media, nevertheless, we continued. While researching laws to inform the public on our social media account may have been boring for all of us, Gustavo and Shante liked the idea of growing our social media following.

Me: What are you doing?

Shante: Who?

Me: Gustavo.

Gustavo: Nothing. I don't see... I don't know why I got locked out of that Instagram account. I was about to just text Hector right now because that woman, Crowd Winner, she could like shout us out.

Me: What happened?

Gustavo: That person Hector told you about, Crowd Winner ...

Shante: Rasheeda. Her name is Rasheeda Smith.

Me: Oh yeah, what about her?

Gustavo: I forgot her name. She could shout us out at the page.

Me: Why do you want her to shout us out?

Gustavo: Because ...

Me: What will that do for us?

Gustavo: I want to see how many followers we can get

Me: Why would you want more followers?

Gustavo: So, we're gonna get more ...

Shante: So, people could know that we're here.

Gustavo: I don't know.

Rasheeda Smith was a local celebrity known as Crowd Winner. I met her during my year as a counselor for UB when she was invited as a guest speaker for the entire program. She had a significant online following of Milton youth mostly, who tracked her professional career playing basketball internationally. She had a clothing line that Hector, Cindy, and Faylah each owned items from. Hector, in particular, was a big fan of Rasheeda's and would eventually join her team of local youth brand ambassadors. Her celebrity was surprising to me, as someone who was not from Milton, I didn't understand how she had generated so much fanfare with relatively little name recognition outside of Milton. Nevertheless, Gustavo thought that getting connected to her via social media would help grow our following online.

One of the noteworthy things about the time during which this study took place was the emerging consensus among millennial youth around the country that one could be an activist online (Stornaiuolo & Thomas, 2017). Among movements that went viral at the time was an Ice Bucket challenge to raise money and awareness around ALS (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis). The phrase #BlackLivesMatter's primary written form is a hashtag, exemplifying the magnitude of legitimacy granted to digital activist orientations. Other notable hashtag campaigns at the time included #ICantBreathe #IStandWithAhmed, and #SayHerName, all of which drew significant media attention and spirited participation from young people voicing their solidarity with victims of racism and police brutality. In our group, several young people's interviews showed that they perceived our work in relation to these movements. When I asked Gus in his exit interview if he understood our work as "activism," like all other youth, he concurred that it was, and subsequently drew a connection to #BlackLivesMatter.

Gustavo: Yes, because if we decide one day just to step up we'll have knowledge of how we look, how we all know how society's working. We could all join up and probably get other people from different places to team up, and we could tell them, I wouldn't say riot, [but] something [like]

#BlackLivesMatter ... like a movement. We could probably start a movement and we could tell them what we see, which you guys are hiding from us. We could all research because this class ... We could all ... Like how we do, that we did with making The Plug (our group's name). We're all teaming up trying to help... Milton [be] a better place, trying to make it more the environment to be more satisfying and less poverty, no more poverty, but less violence.

Gus saw the work we had done as preparation for future movement building or progressive activism. In this interview, Gustavo also mentioned arguing with a group of friends that Black Lives Matter was an appropriate statement because other groups weren't experiencing the same kind of police violence.

Despite Gustavo's impression that YPAR had prepared him for future activism, many of the analyses he made in regard to racism or inequality in his last interview drew on interpersonal and rather innocuous understandings of racism. Attempting to gather what, if anything, he took away from YPAR to influence his perspectives on society, I asked, "Have your thoughts about racism, poverty, or inequality changed over the course of this year since we started doing [YPAR] together?" He responded,

Gustavo: I've always known racism was around because you always hear jokes getting cracked on by a white kid on a black kid or a black kid on a Hispanic or a Hispanic on white or a triangle, it'll go either way.

Me: Right.

Gustavo: Me being, because I know it's being bad being racist or people get annoyed or they won't take it, they'll take offence they won't take it as a joke, I was never really the racist type. I'll probably crack a racist joke by a specific ethnicity that's not around us but if they were around us I wouldn't cracked it. It's just making fun because we're all around. If I'm hanging out with a bunch of friends that are black and Hispanic and one of them looks Chinese I would crack a joke probably of them looking Asian or something.

The significance of racial joking took precedence in Gustavo's reflections on how he had changed since we began doing this work. His thoughts on topics of racial significance in relation to his takeaways from YPAR bounced around between something as seemingly banal as racial joking to the significance of #BlackLivesMatter.

Gustavo's penchant for having a laugh in YPAR and building a bond with his peers took precedence. Understandably so, considering that Gustavo and many other youths noted that there were not many spaces outside of school for them to hang out with friends. This was something that came up frequently in my counseling section with individual young people the year prior to this study. Between outside spaces that they weren't allowed to go, and their hectic schedules with Upward Bound, school, and other activities, it left very little time to be around friends and just chill. Gustavo, being the youngest researcher, seemed to enjoy hanging out with the older UB students and the community we had built. He kept account of who was in UB most days and would go upstairs to track down group members to bring them down to our little meeting space. He would ask me when he walked by my Literature class if we were meeting and flagged down his older group mates to ensure that they were coming. Although we all loved to joke and play in YPAR, Gustavo it seemed was exceedingly connected to this aspect of our time together, and as such, his analysis of his own political development, revealed only fragments of the kind of structuralist discourse we had engaged as a collective throughout our time together.

Hector's political development. Hector was also invested in community building activities, as he took the lead in designing our logo and developing T-shirts for our group, "The Plug." His political development in YPAR revealed a connection to popular culture which I argue facilitated an emphasis on a neoliberal model of social change-- "inspiring" or "motivating" young people to overcome obstacles.

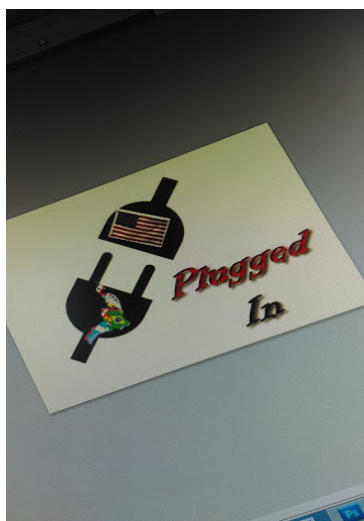


Figure 6.1: “The Plug” Action Research Group Logo

Hector was the quietest youth researcher of all. Though quiet, traces of his thoughts about Milton can be found throughout the early stages of YPAR. Several days throughout the 2015 summer program, Hector kept his head down on his desk during our sessions. Although Hector’s participation was scant during the summer, Hector’s presence during the academic year was as consistent as Gustavo’s until the last several months when he got a job and scaled back his participation in both YPAR and UB. In the winter of 2016, Hector approached me in the hallway outside of my Literature class to ask for my thoughts on what he and many others interpreted as a politically charged awards show performance from Kendrick Lamar that aired the night before. In the performance, Kendrick wore a prison orange jumpsuit and performed songs from his *To Pimp A Butterfly* album which had generated significant acclaim for its political commentary. I made a note in my field journal about how big a deal it was for Hector to have approached me because of how quiet he was and because of his seeming disinterest in Research over the summer. I said, “it was crazy, right!” responding to his inquiry about Kendrick’s performance, and I asked him, for his thoughts. He was visibly electrified discussing the performance. Hector was mostly shocked he said, by the powerful message at such a formal venue and “in front of all

those white people!” Lamar’s performance seemed to have energized Hector into wanting to participate in YPAR. He asked me if we were meeting that day but we were not. He seemed disappointed and asked me to rope him in whenever we met. Soon after, I would ask Hector if he wanted to join the study, and he agreed.

Seemingly inspired by Kendrick Lamar, Hector became a consistent meeting attendee, but as the 2016 summer program drew near, he would be graduating from high school and leaving UB. At the same time, the larger national climate saw a heightened coalescing of celebrity culture around “social justice” issues. Kendrick Lamar, in particular released what many believed was the most politically provocative album of the year, generating widespread acclaim from critics and fans alike for touching on police brutality and positively affirming diasporic Blackness. The popularity of hashtags like #OscarsSoWhite and the increased media attention around diversity in Hollywood in 2015 illustrates the growing synergy between celebrity and social issues at the time. It is within the context of the mainstreaming of social justice that it is most useful to frame Hector’s political development in YPAR.

One particular instance illustrates Hector’s approach to YPAR alongside the celebratizing of social justice. During the 2016 summer, Hector reached out to me to say that he would be coming to visit the next meeting day and wanted to confirm that we would be meeting, but he also wanted me to keep it a secret from the group. His visit would be a welcome surprise because we had not seen him for a while at that point. He updated me on the job he had gotten for the summer working at a local CYO (Catholic Youth Organization). He described wanting to open a soccer program for the kids in Milton, to give them an “opportunity” that he felt was missing since he was a young person. This was a point he had made before, but now he felt even more committed. He mentioned wanting to “inspire” young people and how important it was for

them to have “someone to look up to” to keep them out of trouble. Before we closed out our conversation, Hector stated his desire for me to play theme music as he entered the room when he came for his visit. He also sent a link to a song for my approval. I didn’t respond. When Hector arrived that next meeting day, it was a big surprise and the group was very excited to see him. As he walked in slowly and triumphantly, he was playing a song from his phone. It was not loud enough for me to distinguish and I’m not sure if anyone else picked up on it. As the room settled down, he pulled me aside and asked if I had heard the song he sent. I said that I had not listened and asked if that was the song he played when he came in, and he confirmed this. As comical a moment as this was, it was demonstrative of the way Hector positioned himself as a youth action researcher. Several months prior to the previous occasion, he and Kumar engaged a somewhat lighthearted debate over being YPAR “captains,” and asking me to chime in on who I thought was most fit to serve as our group’s leader.

Hector demonstrated a genuine desire to see real change happen for the next generation in Milton. He was exiting YPAR thinking about social change in Milton as motivating people to do better and simultaneously changing the environment to sustain motivation. He saw himself as being someone to lead the charge; that youth could look up to as a positive role model to keep them inspired to follow their dreams and stay out of trouble. Before he took his exit survey, I asked him whether he thought his answers would be different than the answers he wrote on his first survey. Without hesitation, he gave a dramatic head nod, up and down, and said, “Definitely!” indicating that he thought his reflections on survey items had drastically changed. Responding to the question, “Since [YPAR], what people, groups, or occurrences in your life have had the biggest influence on you, and what impact did they have?” Hector wrote, “Work[ing] at the CYO. [The] kid’s backgrounds, struggles they go through and still motivated

to grind. That influences me to try to change our city.” Responding to the question, what is the biggest issue impacting Milton residents, Hector said, “Everything around them. [N]othing is positive to motivate people to go after their dream and make it out.” Motivation was a key part of Hector’s responses to questions about the issues in Milton and the mechanisms for change he was interested in pursuing. Reflecting on the mission of The Plug and how we would accomplish our mission, Hector wrote, “To impact the lives of the youth so they can be motivated to be successful, [and] change the way they see life for the better.” He saw us getting there by “expand[ing] our movement, [and] reach[ing] out to the youth program[s] to see if we can come and talk to the... [children].”

This emphasis on “motivation” and “grind[ing]” to “make it out” in Hector’s theory of social change represents what Spence (2015) describes as a neoliberal politic embedded in celebrity culture and threads of mainstream hip-hop that emphasize human capital solutions at the expense of engaging with structural analyses. In other words, entertainers champion hustling hard, motivation, and “grinding” to overcome inequitable community structures not of their own making. The best indicator of change, then, is one’s ability to activate entrepreneurial modalities in service of personal advancement. Hector’s political development reflected a similar neoliberal stance as he emphasized the centrality of motivation and personal ingenuity in his view of social change for Milton.

In the Thick of It: Detangling Progressivism and Neoliberalism in YPAR

Once we progressed beyond brainstorming, youth conceived of 4 major projects and wrote them out on a large poster board with dates for completion. We would only work toward two of them however, one –the teen center—became our primary focus between February and August 2016. The other project was to generate an anthology of Latino/Latina history and

experiences in the U.S. that we would ultimately submit to the school board to be entered into the official high school curriculum. The teen center project originally began as an idea to obtain a building, initially for non-specific reasons. Students would eventually decide that it should become a teen center that offered comprehensive public health services.

Challenges arose in action research as we began collaborating with the city council and a local nonprofit on a project to construct a teen center in Milton. I argue that these challenges pushed youth to articulate and refine their social change politics in relation to the teen center project. Analysis of Shante and Selena's political development reveals that dilemmas in the pursuit of social change pushed youth to articulate the contradictions of neoliberal frameworks (i.e. gentrification). They also facilitated a tendency toward progressive pragmatism.

Getting a teen center: Government synergy and social justice. Working on the building project would be where we spent most of our time. What emerged from those initial meetings about the space was the idea that the building should be some kind of teen center. Young people described the importance of having a separate space for teens in Milton, a place for youth to hang out and have a safe fun time. By this time, Zuri and her twin sister Kenya had joined us from my Literature class once they realized that the kinds of discussions being had in that class were also being had in our YPAR group. They would only join for three sessions but their voices were a welcome presence. Shante and the Kenya went back and forth, with Shante chiding that the YMCA was already that space, and Kenya arguing that the YMCA was for both children and teens, and that it was dilapidated, and staff treated youth like prisoners and criminals.

As ideas for the center swirled, I was concerned that we had entered the stagnant space that we occupied with previous project ideas, despite the increased level of excitement. To carry

the energy forward, I reached out to a community stakeholder who was aide to a local councilman to support our class in the execution of our plans. I was connected to Jenice Gouche by a colleague who had met her through his own research in Milton. At the point I had reached out to Jenice, I was unaware of her position with the councilman. I was only aware of her as someone who was community-engaged through work at the Salvation Army and other local organizations that worked to connect poor and homeless folks in the city to food, financial, and employment resources. I invited her to come speak to us so that we could get a better sense of the landscape of community work going on in Milton, and where we might fit into some of the work that was already going on. Her visit generated much excitement. Before she spoke with young folks, I filled her in on our work up to that point, and the current project ideas they had envisioned, including the teen center project. When youth arrived, I (re)explained to young people why I had invited Ms. Gouche and she told them a bit about herself. They talked shyly about some of our plans at my coaxing. This is when she also identified herself as an aide to a city councilman and her thoughts about creating synergy between our group and the council.

Ms. Gouche: I'm Councilman Myers' aide, so he was looking for some kind of team to maybe sit down with, to help do something. That'll be good to plan, give him something to listen... these are the issues that we're having. How do we get you involved, or maybe even having them come to sit in the city council meetings? Just to see how those meetings are ran, and maybe we could do a city council kind of youth team, stuff like that...Maybe even sitting down and talking to the councilman and figuring out how it is that you can be engaged. Maybe just coming to the city council meetings.

I felt ambivalent about what Ms. Gouche was alluding to. On one hand, it seemed important that young people “get involved” by learning about the government and some of the issues that the local leadership was working on. It also seemed important for them to meet with and discuss issues with the city leadership as most young people did not get opportunities to interlope in government institutions to see how decisions were made regarding resource distribution;

however, I was concerned that this would be the genesis of transforming our group into a neoliberal community service arm of the local government. I wanted us to transcend an approach to community work that required synergy with local government, but young people seemed very impressed by this bit of information and even more on board with the idea of working with the city council. Selena's countenance in particular, abruptly shifted to become more serious and attentive.

Ms. Gouche stayed with us for over an hour and talked with young people. After hearing from youth directly about the building project she filled us in on a local CPO (community planning organization), Milton250, that was designing redevelopment plans for Milton, and explained that she would connect us with the leader, Mr. Richard Greene. If youth were excited by Ms. Gouche's other information, they were floored by the idea that we could actually participate in city redevelopment plans. They listened closely as Ms. Gouche spoke about some of the projects she was involved in and initiatives the local government was trying to get underway. Their energy and excitement brought me fully onboard. After her exit, there was a new vigor in the room, and over the next few days, young people approached action research with confidence and unified commitment.

Working with Milton250. Soon after meeting with Ms. Gouche, I contacted and introduced myself to Richard Greene. This initial call took place with youth in our small room. I asked young people if they wanted to talk and all seemed reluctant and shy but wanted to hear our conversation, so I put it on speaker and let Mr. Greene know that he was on with our whole group. Mr. Greene informed us of Milton250's work as a CPO and that they had been contracted to develop a comprehensive report of ways to strategically improve Milton's infrastructure. They

had apparently held meetings before they started an ecological survey of the city infrastructure and invited the community for input.

We (I) spoke with Greene about young people's vision for the center and he welcomed the idea of us drafting a proposal to go alongside their report; however, he also asked that before we submitted our proposal to them, for us to review the materials that had already been produced to identify points of synergy and to see if there were areas where our interests were already being addressed in their tentative proposal. Greene had voiced subtle reservation about the teen center being its own building when we spoke because of the existing YMCA and nonprofit programs that catered to youth. He suggested looking at the youth services dispersed throughout the city and using existing space like a school building to facilitate any new programming that would be framed as an afterschool club, for the sake of efficiency (i.e. not having to hire additional staff because teachers run afterschool clubs). He lamented the tight budget of the city and wanted to fulfill our vision in a cost-effective way.

Youth were uncomfortable with this idea as we had already begun brainstorming a grand vision of the teen center. We talked for days upon days about what they wanted it to look like. I became so enamored with this visualizing that I couldn't help think about what I would want in such a space. They articulated a vivid portrait of a one-stop spot recreation, academic support, counseling and social service institution for young people in Milton, whether they were college bound, pushed out of high school, dealing with trauma at home, wanting to learn a trade, or taking a class in something that their schools didn't offer. A range of imaginative ideas came out of our conversations about what the center should include: Self-defense classes, a video game room and a music studio, a place to read magazines, a computer room, an African American Lit class taught by an African American teacher, vending machines, protein bars, fruit smoothies,

and guidance counselors. Selena went on to describe a place with lots greenspace for walking and lamented the lack of trees and grass offered by the city, no real places to just take a stroll and enjoy the day. Youth talked about free meals and healthy food options that could be offered by the center. Hector and Gustavo talked about a gym and basketball courts.

Their visions for center emanated from many concerns about Milton teens, not the least of which was their view that violence between young people in Milton was a product of social distance. What Greene was suggesting disrupted this original purpose. Nevertheless, we took Greene's advice and looked across documents to see areas where Milton250's plans compared with our own. Eventually, however, we would commit to stay our course for pursuing a centralized location. Much of the reason for this stemmed from Shante's concerns about the redevelopment plans that were outlined. A significant portion of the 'Opportunities' section of the "Issues and Opportunities" report highlighted areas where strategic investment should be targeted to attract homebuyers and new industry. Milton250 had identified many of the areas tagged for beautification and redevelopment almost exclusively downtown and not in the neighborhoods in which young people lived. This led to several conversations about the distribution of services, the threat of gentrification, and an ambivalence about linking with Milton250. Discussing the areas of the proposal that addressed redevelopment, Shante voiced concerns about the plans dispersal of services.

Shante: I feel as though, as I read through it and see where they want all this money to go towards, they just want to spend too much money. You can put all this stuff into one place.

Selena: It's like they want to put it all around.

Shante: It's not benefiting nobody but them, especially if they getting money off it.
It's not benefiting nobody but them.

Me: Well, the goal is to ... I think the city contracted them to develop a plan that's going to help the city attract people with higher incomes. They want residents who make good money, and they also want businesses to come so that they can contribute to the tax base. That goal doesn't always have to align with what's best for the community. Right? It sounds like what you all are saying. You all are saying y'all want something that's going to benefit the people directly. Not so much make...make Milton more prosperous, or attract new business...

Shante: My thing isn't to attract the people to want to move here or to open up a business here. That's not what I'm aiming for. I'm aiming for getting our kids out of Milton. Giving them somewhere to go so they can think bigger and broader. Give them thinking space, so they won't be just in the house thinking, "Well, yeah this is how I'm living for now."
Give them somewhere where they can interact with people so that way, oddly enough, they get the public speaking aspect of how life really is. They get to talk to different people that they don't know. Stuff like that. I'm down for my people that I know live in Milton. I'm not really worried about the outside people yet.

Shante's comments in our conversation about the "opportunities" highlighted in the proposal suggested that she felt Milton250's leap for efficiency was actually not efficient at all. She also asserted a skepticism around the organization's profit motive. I was not concerned about this and did not believe that Milton250 would get any kind of unsavory kickback from developers. However, I along with young people, was concerned about gentrification and what that would spell for the community of poor folks who were already living there. On several occasions throughout our proposal drafting we would discuss gentrification and its ramifications

Shante: *(looking at a graphic on a Milton250 document)* Is that Miller Homes?
That's the new houses they're building.

Me: Really?

- Shante:** Yeah. These are the new houses that I was talking about she lived in. These over there by the police station, down the street, that bridge.
- Selena:** Ohhh.
- Me:** The goal is to get rid of a lot of the older stuff in there. Get more stuff like this in here. They're trying to attract new people-
- Shante:** Who make money.
- Me:** Yeah.
- Shante:** That ain't going to do nothing but push us out because we can't afford ... I know that a lot of them ... When I was, what, my sophomore year, around the time a lot of those houses got made. When people first moved in I noticed that we had a lot of people who had upper jobs and had more money. When I told that to the kids I was in class with, they was like, "No, because on the other side is old people. It's section 8." I'm like, "What? That can't be because on this side you see all these upper [class] whites and Blacks who got money and can pay \$1600 for rent." I'm not doing that.

Shante had just told us a story about a woman living in a newly remolded apartment building that had been in disrepair for a while where recently, faulty electrical work led to her floor catching on fire among other things. Miller Homes, which she identified here from an image in the proposal was apparently where this issue happened. Shante told us this story about the woman to illustrate how resources were being mishandled. Continuing to reflect on gentrification, Shante points out the dangers that come with consolidating people in new neighborhoods of the city.

- Shante:** I mean, that's what I feel like all this is going to do. It's not going to benefit us. As much as they want it to because that's what they're telling us, that they want it to benefit everyone, it's not. Like I said, it's going to benefit them because, it's a nicer neighborhood. Okay, I want to come spend my money here. Yes, but I'm not coming to spend my money here if *those people* who *ain't* spending too much money [are] still here. They got to go.
- Me:** They've got to move further away.

Shante: Back to the gang stuff, now everybody is in one neighborhood. Now we all live in one neighborhood. Nope, I got more people who want to come.

The emphasis on neoliberal change seen in the potential for gentrification and focus on efficiency in Milton250s plan, and the prospect of losing out on their vision, led Shante toward greater apprehension about working with Milton250. What Greene had proposed was improving or enhancing the nonprofit youth services across Milton that youth wanted in their lone building. To reconcile the task set forth by Greene with their own desire for an individual building, we drafted our proposal in such a way that it highlighted the areas that Milton250 identified as problems in its Issues and Opportunities Report and explained how the teen center systematically addressed many of those areas (Appendix G).

Shante's political development. Of all youth researchers, Shante was most hands-on with the teen center project. Like others, her investment piqued after our conversation with Ms. Gouche. It was different for me to see her become one of the most progressive youth researchers in some respects, considering Shante's political identity as we began the summer prior.

Race/ism, inequality, and social change. Shante entered YPAR engaging deficit discourses about her community and neoliberal frameworks to explain the overrepresentation of white folks in U.S. suburbs. Her entrance survey asked, "Why do more white people live in the suburbs and own their homes?" Shante replied, "I believe that they were dedicated and hardworking while growing up, resulting in them having more opportunities." As stated in chapter 4, she replied to the question about Milton's poverty rate writing, "I believe it's because we don't apply ourselves. Everyone already labels us and we constantly give them other reasons to do so. We are "poor" because we don't try and change our bad habits or lifestyle."

In some ways, her race and class analyses would shift significantly. Her response to the exit survey item, “Most people who work hard will make good money and most people who don’t work hard will not have a lot of money” is middling, as she shades the area between ‘agree’ and ‘disagree’. What is most interesting is that her response adds the written caveat beneath, “*Minorities, yes, but what about white privilege.” Her views about race and class as we were exiting were also demonstrated in one of our final days of YPAR during a reading discussion. I reintroduced reading short research pieces from places like *The Washington Post* and *City Lab* to inform our practice but also to facilitate structuralist political development. The text titled, *Poor kids who do everything right don’t do better than rich kids who do everything wrong*,¹¹ generated a lively discussion among young people, and found Shante standing in fervent agreement with a structuralist view of inequality. The article presented research that revealed very much what the title suggests, “rich high school dropouts remain in the top about as much as poor college grads stay stuck at the bottom” among other findings.

Me: This is an interesting piece. This is the chart that they refer to in the paper. This bar represents rich high school dropouts, poor college grads who were born into low-income families. The percentages here reflect how many people within this group end up at the top income quintile. Income quintile is you divide the U.S. population in fifths. The people who are at the top fifth, or the top 20%.

Then you look, when you go down a little bit further, it seems like much more of the poor college graduates remain at the bottom than rich high school-

Beauty: Because a lot of those white kids, they got their family members to rely on. Like all of them already own businesses and everything. They can just work for their uncle, and stuff like that.

¹¹ Retrieved from: https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2014/10/18/poor-kids-who-do-everything-right-dont-do-better-than-rich-kids-who-do-everything-wrong/?utm_term=.aa0065a2562d

- Me:** What do y'all think about that after y'all read that? What were some of the thoughts you had while you were reading?
- Selena:** It's not fair.
- Beauty:** Nothing new to me.
- Gustavo:** Same
- Me:** Here's my question, because I think a lot of times when we think about places like Milton, we think, "If the people here would just get it together, Milton would look so much better."
- Beauty:** That's about right.
- Me:** "Milton would be such a better place."
- Beauty:** That used to be my thought.
- Me:** That used to be your thought?
- Beauty:** Yeah.
- Selena:** Uh-huh.
- Me:** Beauty, it sounds like that's still the way you think, right?
- Beauty:** Well yeah, but I already know they're not going to get it together.
- Shante:** Or some of them can't. I guess that's why it all changed. When we first started doing Research, I used to think, "Well, if we all just got it together and started doing what we're supposed to do, then maybe Milton could get better." Then, through the years, I realized that not everybody's living situation, or any situation, is what they chose. It's just what happened.
- Me:** Right.
- Selena:** Yeah. We really only get to do so much, like that the government allows us. Like, "Oh, we want to do this, and this, and this to make this a better city." We go see the government, "Oh, you can't do that, though." Like, "Okay, then what can we do?"

Even as Beauty recognized and agreed that class and wealth created an unfair opportunity structure, she was still pulled by a personal responsibility theory of social change. Shante challenged that analysis, stating that she once held a similar opinion but that it had since evolved as she was taking Research. Selena's comments reflected our collective's frustrations at the time collaborating with Milton²⁵⁰ trying to establish a youth center. I was excited by this analysis especially as I held reservations about our synergy with the nonprofit arm of the city and the potential limitations it would impose on the realization of the grand vision that young people articulated.

We continued to unpack the article and Shante's views about inequality shone through with more incisive structural analyses. She reflected on the article's findings related to social capital and the wealthy giving their children jobs, including a finding that in Canada "70 percent of the sons of the top 1 percent [of earners] ... inherit the family estate [and] don't need a high school diploma to get ahead" (p. 2).

Shante: People with advantages like that have other folks out there who have set stuff aside for them just in case they don't have ambition to go to school. I could actually see that happening. Some white man had got the law firm, and his son needs a place to work at because he didn't go to college. He's going to offer him that job. If it was a black person who did go to college ... and not even to make it a race thing. If it was a black person who didn't go to college, that internship still would've went to his son.

Shante reflected on the intersection of social capital and social reproduction and tried to disentangle race from her analysis of class. We continued to engage the conversation about wealth and inequality, and our attention turned to Milton. Beauty brought up lack of motivation as the key to understanding inequality and this prompted a swift debate wherein Shante pointed to an unequal opportunity structure:

- Me:** Yeah. What were you saying, Beauty? I'm sorry, you were saying you feel like a lot of people just aren't really motivated?
- Beauty:** I don't think so.
- Me:** You think the central problem that would sort fix a lot of the ills that you feel like are going on here is if people just became more motivated? What do you think people need to get their stuff together?
- Beauty:** I don't know. I really don't know how to put it, seriously. I just know the people here that just really aren't motivated. Even the guys here, they just live off the women. It's crazy. Seriously.
- Me:** Do you think people in other places are more motivated? If you go next door to Crest Ridge? Those people, because they're rich you think they're much more motivated?
- Beauty:** Definitely. They've got kids doing stuff that I'm not even doing, and I'm about to be a senior.
- Me:** Now do you think that's just because they want to do it or because they got the opportunity to do it?
- Beauty:** I think both.
- Gustavo:** It's probably both. Some probably got the opportunity some were hardworking
- Shante:** I don't think so.
- Me:** You said you don't think so, Shante?

- Shante:** When I think about stuff like that, I just think they were all given the opportunity. Our counselor, she always says you can't choose your zip code
- Beauty:** They take advantage of that opportunity, though.
- Shante:** Yeah, but we're not offered those opportunities to take advantage of! We were offered Upward Bound, and you see most of us, we still here. Yeah, we accepted the opportunity that was given to us. We're doing something with it, but a lot of us don't get this opportunity. They (Crest Ridge students) get opportunities to do internships at these big colleges, and law firms, and stuff like that [while] still in high school. We never, not once, got one of those opportunities before. I just feel like they were given opportunities that ... "Okay, well my parent got me this opportunity, so I'm going to do it to make my parent happy." I don't think a lot of them are motivated to do that stuff.
- Selena:** I feel like people here are motivated.
- Me:** People here are motivated?
- Selena:** Yeah. They just don't have any way to show it. I have a lot of friends at my school and outside of school ... I don't know. I don't be on the street, so I can't say it's like that all around. I see everybody like, "What's your dream?" "I'm going to go to college." "What's your dream?" "I'm going to go to college." I'm like, "Okay, everyone wants to go to college." Then, once you're outside of school, we're like, "What do we do now?"

Both Shante and Selana pushed back against the idea that Beauty articulated in the lack of motivation being the driving force for inequality in Milton. I also raised a few questions attempting to trouble Beauty's analysis that rich folks next door were more motivated than Milton youth. Shante articulated a critique pointing to the opportunity structure as the source of inequality. It wasn't that Crest Ridge young people were more motivated, they were exposed to more opportunities, whether they wanted them or not. Selena similarly defies this notion that Milton folks were unmotivated. She relays a narrative of young people with dreams and desires

to live out their potential who feel uncertainty about how to bring goals into fruition that seem out of reach, perhaps because of limited social capital or material resources.

Shante's departure from YPAR saw her taking more social-structural positions in relation to issues of race, class, and social change. However, her exit survey showed that neoliberal ideology still resonated with Shante to an extent. Of the eight items that assessed attachment to neoliberalism, Shante supported four. However, of the items that supported a structuralist view of inequality, Shante was in agreement with all of them. She was the leader on our project to obtain a building and raised some of the most critical questions that forced our group to reevaluate our relationship to the CPO. Shante became unrelenting in her view that we maintain our autonomy and decision-making authority over what the teen center would be, even as Milton²⁵⁰ attempted to steer us into an alternative that would compromise youths' progressive vision.

Selena's political development. Selena entered YPAR with a significant amount of experience having conversations about race and identity and articulating views that showed her to be truly progressive. In many respects, her politics were set apart from her peers. Analysis of her trajectory in YPAR as it relates to her theory of change shows a "market-pragmatism" that remained consistent throughout her time. Although Selena may have learned history and policy in YPAR, her politics remained relatively consistent, or in her words, "I still feel the same, I just have the facts to back it up."

Race and class. Selena and I were in relatively on the same page about a great many issues. Of the Likert items on her intake survey that assessed her agreement with neoliberal discourses, Selena did not agree with any. Hard work and meritocracy affirming statements landed in "Totally Disagree" and "Disagree." Responding to the question, "What are some of the

biggest ways that the government has impacted Black people's lives today, she answered, "Building bigger jails." Even in early meetings during the 2015 summer, when we discussed the Baltimore riots, Selena was the only one of the focal youth to say she thought rioting had benefits, specifically, to draw media attention to issues and to make the government pay attention. Her response to the article that analyzed the Baltimore Riots through the lens of the Hunger Games included a definition of white supremacy that registered the centrality of class and power:

Selena: She's trying to say if you choose to see the rioting and all that other stuff, then why can't you choose to see white supremacy in what's going on?

Me: Hmm. Okay. But let's ... What is white supremacy? I don't want that to become a word we just use.

Selena: It's like ... when people ... White people are the ones in charge. Most of them control the government, most of them own shops and stuff like that.

Her understanding of terminology and ability to communicate complex ideas around issues was a great benefit in our meeting space. I had relied on her a lot throughout YPAR to insert her voice when the discourse in the room had become one-sided, airing on deficit tones about poor and Black folks, particularly those in Milton. She cut through the deficit discourse on a few occasions but made clear to me in her first two interviews that she was not typically interested in being the only dissenting voice. In fact, my reason for interviewing her a second time before her exit interview was motivated in part by her level of interest and experience engaging structural analyses of race and class. She was the only one of her peers to respond to the question, "What is your definition of racism" with an answer that did not couch racism exclusively in the interpersonal. She replied, "It's like when you oppress an entire race... look

down on them. I do not think black people can be racist or Latina people or any other person other than white because we can't oppress them. They're the ones in power."

Selena displayed a penchant for telling stories or using analogies to illustrate points about racism. She was also acutely aware of how her ethnicity was racialized via stereotypes and limited opportunities that impacted the experience of Latinxs in America and her personally. Responding to the journal prompt, "What is the experience like in America for people of your racial/ethnic background," she wrote:

The experience for Hispanic people is that people don't expect you to do anything. Like there are no expectations for us. Whatever happens, happens. No one cares about us. There are no protests against or for us because people generally don't care or don't think we have a problem. I don't know any Hispanic people who went to college or any Hispanic American heroes in the media. We're just expected to be maids or do yard work. Or to be outgoing or speak our minds. All people know about our culture is Tacos and burritos and rice and beans. People are like this because we generally don't have a place in modern America except to work and not be smart. If we were to change we would have to address these problems and stop accepting them.

The concerns that Selena expressed about how Latinxs are perceived, represented, and treated in society point to an anxiety about her own future as a college bound Latina.

Toward the end of her YPAR journey, Selena's race and class politics remained consistent, centering a critique of whiteness. She articulated views similar to the ones she had espoused when I had met her. Her exit interview points to this consistency. In November 2016, seventeen months after her first interview and nearly a year after her second, I asked, "Do you think that lack of hard work is to blame for why so many residents of Milton are poor?" to which Selena replied,

No. We have ... there are a lot of hard workers, but they get the minimum wage. I could go to work all throughout the whole week and then I'd be making like what white person makes in their job that they went to college for or whatever in a day. We have to work twice as hard to live."

Selena remained staunchly against the idea that lack of hard work facilitated impoverished outcomes and consistently talked about inequality in relation to the opportunity structure. She also continued to talk about white advantage in the context of government sympathy and housing quality. When I asked her if things would be different in Milton if it were primarily white, she responded with some local current events story to illustrate her point,

Selena: Did you know that there's fire going on ... All right, so there's a ... my cousin's charter school, right? And right across the street there's a bakery, like a church. And on this whole street there's a fire.

Me: Oh, my goodness.

Selena: Yeah, it would have been like ... because our houses are right near each other and all that stuff.

Me: Oh, I heard about that on the news. A row of homes caught fire. I did see that. I saw it on the news, yeah.

Selena: And it was on the morning. I think if we lived in the white place, like where white people were living, the houses would not be a row. They would be individual places. That's, I don't know. I feel like we would not just be on the news just a little side story. Like something that pops up and goes away.

Me: Right.

Selena: I feel like we would have been ... I don't know. [We would get] the same amount of attention a little white lost kid gets. Like, "Oh, we're still looking for this white lost kid," or whatever. Who cares? For real. I feel bad for them, but who cares? There are *real* things going on.

To her, row homes (and the way in which they facilitate the spreading of fire) represented government neglect of Black and Brown folks, and a caring government would install single family homes for white folks. Single-family homes being a hallmark of the suburbs and the advent of suburbia being symbiotically connected to the reification of whiteness (Hayward,

2013), Selena's comments weren't far-fetched. Selena's criticism also extended to racial disparities in media coverage, which was a common refrain of hers throughout the sixteen months we were together.

Social change. Selena's change politics were rooted in what is best described as a progressive pragmatism (Sitaraman, 2014, Baker 1992), which may have been an extension of how she understood the nature of oppression. Talking about progressive pragmatism, Sitaraman describes "a belief in real-world limitations, in the need to assess carefully the costs, benefits, and unintended consequences of actions" (2014). In her December 2015 interview, Selena clarified some of her views on racism and inequality and discussed how she understood oppression. I had asked her what constituted an oppressed group and she replied with two telling analogies.

Selena: Yeah, [it's] [I]like if a baby hits you, you're going to be like, "Oh that's so cute."

Me: Right.

Selena: Yeah, they won't take it seriously like, "Oh, I got to hit that baby back."

Me: Right. That's an interesting analogy...If you think about a baby as someone who's relatively powerless, sort of at the mercy of adults.

Selena: Yeah, like a puppy. Like when you have a new puppy and it's gnawing on your fingers. You're like, "Oh, it's not going to hurt. Just let it gnaw on your fingers."

This view of oppressed folks as having no power in relation to oppressors, is what, seems to have driven her change theory. Selena tended to lean into progressive positions before reeling back and asserting the need for more pragmatic solutions-- solutions that at times, reflected a

movement toward centrism. The idea that oppressed folks or truly progressive solutions on their own could not significantly move the needle toward liberation came through subtly in her political discourse. For example, in her second interview during the academic year 2015-2016, I asked her directly about her change theory and if she thought that marginalized people could advance their goals in direct action, she agreed but with a caveat.

Me: Do you think that activism is a useful thing? If groups who you feel don't have power in society, like Latinos, African-Americans, gays, women, these sort of disempowered groups...try to like fight for their rights, do you think it's a worthwhile cause since we don't have any power?

Selena: I do.

Me: You do?

Selena: Yeah

Me: Do you think that change can really happen?

Selena: I do. It would have to be not just one particular group coming together, like if you see a gay parade, and there are some straight people in the parade, you understand they're there for support. If you see a black parade, I don't know how I'd feel about white people being in a black parade. Sometimes it's okay. Sometimes, if they have like family members there, or like their boyfriend and girlfriend are like black or whatever, you can be invited, but ... I don't know how I feel like, some things are just like for just the culture.

Me: Yeah.

Selena: Yeah. I saw ... Did you see the thing where there was like shootings going on in this college, and apparently the KKK was in this college, and they were harassing black people who went there?

Me: This happened recently?

Selena: I believe so. It happened a month ago I think. Yeah. It wasn't on the news or anything, but like people on Tumblr were talking about it.

Me: Hm, I didn't hear about it.

Selena: Yeah, and they showed pictures, like the KKK was on the front steps. They were harassing black people and stuff. Then, yeah, and then after news spread on Tumblr, white people, they were like, "Oh, we need a white people wall." I was like, "That sounds crazy. You know white people are not going to do that. They not going to protect you against the KKK." Next thing you know they have a wall of white people all just like that, like a bunch of white people just protecting black people. Like black people going to college, like white people from the community who heard about it on Tumblr or whatever, they were all just like that. Like with their arms chained together, like protecting the black people.

Here Selena offers two examples that illustrate her view on change. Both examples highlight the importance of marginalized groups having the support of folks from dominant groups. Though, Selena's view on change included a view that activism was useful, these stories illustrate that she wasn't completely sold on the idea that marginalized groups could do the work on their own.

Her progressive pragmatism was on display in the waning days of proposal writing when we discussed the presidential primaries. All throughout primary season, Selena and most other youth had articulated staunch support for Bernie Sanders saying things like, "he cares about the people." Selena in particular was among the most fervent of Sanders supporters. Several youth highlighted Clinton's "super predator" comments as turning them off to Clinton. Though none of them were eligible to vote, if they had been able to, it would have been a strong turnout for the Vermont senator. Selena asked me if I would ever want to be president, to which I replied, "No. You?" She said, "Yeah." I asked her if she would be more like Bernie Sanders or Hillary Clinton and she replied:

Selena: I'd be a combination of both, but more realistic.

Me: More realistic?

Selena: Yeah. He said about free college, but I don't know how he's going to pay for it.

Me: You don't think free college is realistic?

Selena: *No. I think it should be more, affordable.*

Me: More affordable?

Selena: Yeah, instead of just being free because Germany did that, and their taxes are through the roof.

Selena's retrenchment from her position on Bernie and free college in particular coincided with a similar expression of progressive pragmatism in YPAR related to the teen center and its fiscal solvency. As we submitted our proposal, Greene informed me that he would include it with the Milton 250 plan and send it directly to the Mayor's Assistant who he said, "works on My Brother's Keeper and youth projects." Wanting to quell any concern that our proposal would not be fiscally feasible, some youth began to dream up ways to pay for our grand vision. One of our final days proposal writing, fiscal solvency became a focal issue for Selena and other youth in ways that illuminated her progressive pragmatism. Selena would reveal her own underlying views about how the center could generate money, which included selling unhealthy food through the center-- despite one of our goals for the center being to enhance access to healthy food-- *because* of how profitable it would be.

Selena: [The teens] could make their own clothes.

Me: Make their own clothes?

Selena: Yeah, their own clothing to sell.

Gustavo: A basketball court

Selena: Yeah.

Gustavo: Yeah.

- Me:** So, is that Healthy Lifestyle or is that Socialization/Relaxation? I guess it doesn't matter where we put it as long as it's there.
- So, a basketball court, okay. Did you include what you said about the outdoor space, Selena? About what the outdoor space would have? I know you said a garden, or parks. Hector said a soccer field.
- Selena:** Is that okay for the vending machines?
- Me:** (*reading Selena's additions*) "Provide healthy food bar and the option of greasy and meaty food such as pizza, only available with the choice of healthy food." So, you're saying you can only get that if you got a healthy food option at the same time?
- Selena:** Yeah.
- Me:** What do you think?
- Selena:** [pause]I think it makes sense. Like [pause] I, [pause] like, this is going to be nasty, but I'm eating it.
- Me:** Yeah.
- Selena:** I don't know. I feel like if we have a healthy food option on a plate, [people are] more likely to eat it, than if it's not on [their] plate.
- Me:** So, why even offer unhealthy options at all?
- Selena:** Because you still have that craving. It's still in your systems. Like, "Oh, I want this bag of salty chips, but I'm also gonna eat this."
- Me:** Alright. No, I get it.
- Selena:** And we could say ... You say we should offer unhealthy options because people are always going to have cravings and they'll pay for it.
- [pause]
- Do we even have to mention the unhealthy options though?

Me: I mean, that's what you're saying. That's what I'm saying, because I understand what you mean but I feel like ... Well, remember, this is you all's thing, I only want to just challenge some of your opinions. But, ultimately, what you all decide is what we write. But, I think my thing is, when I think about this place, I think about it as a place that's supposed to be transformational. Right? We're trying to bring people together in order to stop some of the bickering and beefs between neighborhoods. So, it's not just like a recreational place, it's a place that's serving a good for the community. So, if we recognize that there's a challenge in the community with not having healthy food options, then maybe this place is where we only give them good food, and we definitely wouldn't want to make money from that, right?

As discussed earlier, Selena envisioned having *unhealthy* food at the center to generate money, even as her goal was to encourage youth to eat healthier. Progressive pragmatism in this case saw Selena move toward a more centrist solution to address the dual challenges of a public health concern related to access to healthy food and a teen center that needed money to run.

...

Selena exited YPAR, having learned about the state's role in structural inequality.

Selena responded to my inquiry specifically asking what she learned in YPAR highlighting the role YPAR played in helping her to understand "government."

Selena: I learned more than I expected to. I thought we were just going to go over things I already knew. I didn't know anything about the government. I thought it was always how we saw ourselves. It was in our head. And now it's just like I know there are things stopping us from actually getting better. We want to get better, but there are barriers.

Me: Yeah.

Selena: I didn't know about the whole tax thing. I mean not the tax thing, like how you can't get a suburban home, how you couldn't get a suburban home when you want to. I didn't know all that stuff about how ... oh I did know kind of. But I thought everybody had it. Like how we have factories near where we live and it's bad for our health. And I didn't know that. I thought it was everywhere.

Here Selena recalls lessons about redlining and suburbanization that we discussed during Phase II. That she walked away feeling like she better understood structural historical barriers was a great accomplishment for her, especially considering her response to the question, “Why do more white people live in the suburbs and own their homes” on her intake survey on our first day together. She answered, “Because most of them are born into that life or are more privileged, have more opportunities, and people baby them.” While her initial answer offered a critical take, her most recent answer demonstrated a more sophisticated knowledge about the racialization of the welfare state.

Conclusion

This chapter demonstrates the complexity of reconciling political orientation to civic orientation as YPAR offered young people the opportunity to pursue civic engagement on their terms in ways that they found personally and politically significant. Opportunities for meaningful engagement illuminate fissures between the civic and the political as the scope and character of civic opportunities may misalign with youths’ political values in ways that may lead to compromise or retrenchment. Young people saw the limitations of working alongside the state to produce community change. For progressive civically-engaged youth, critical consciousness development can expose the nuances of the neoliberal state and civil society that have emerged in the modern era under the banner of “progressivism.” The unmasking of neoliberal “progressivism” can serve to complicate or clarify their social change politics.

CONCLUSION

This study raises the question, “How do Black and Brown youth participating in a politically left, structuralist, race/ethnicity-affirming, action research group develop politically in relation to questions of race/ism, inequality, and social change?” Using a mixed-method political ethnographic approach, I paint a nuanced picture of Black and Latinx youths’ political identity development, acknowledging that Black and Latinx youth (even those who voluntarily join progressive civic groups) are not uniquely invulnerable to neoliberal discourses that emphasize individual effort and personal choice as the sole or primary determinants of individual and group quality of life outcomes in the United States. This study also reveals the multiple, nuanced, and fluid stances individual Black and Latinx young people hold toward inequality, individualism, race/ism, and social change in service of the public good. Each chapter responds to this study’s central research question by offering a temporality linear analysis of the action research group’s activities in relation to individual focal youth researchers’ political development, offering new insights for research on youth activism (YPAR and CYS), critical consciousness, and youth political socialization.

Although there is an extensive body of literature around YPAR, many studies leave questions unanswered about how Black and Brown youth *enter* projects understanding problems in their communities and problems faced by members of their racial in-group in the U.S. context. Attention to young people’s political orientations as they enter social justice organizations offers a starting point from which to analyze their political identity development over the course of a movement, campaign, or project. Chapter 4 underscores the complexity of youths’ political orientations at the outset of YPAR demonstrated in their engagement with both structural and personal responsibility analyses and the complicated synthesis of both seen in their reliance on

Black Resilience Neoliberal framings. That youth offered analyses which included both critical and neoliberal elements demonstrates the nimbleness and nuance of neoliberalism and its fundamental symbiocity to Western thought. Black Resilience Neoliberalism in particular is demonstrative of the flexibility of neoliberalism to withstand subversion by attaching itself to triumphalist “empowering” discourses.

While belief in one’s capacity to navigate negative life circumstances to produce favorable personal outcomes is important for personal development, the unintended consequence of BRN is that it obscures the need for organized resistance. Elevating the act of overcoming structural racism personally tangentially normalizes the conditions that one is required to overcome. Narratives about individual resilience foster competition and exceptionalism, which in turn fracture Black community. Educators of marginalized youths must commit to unhinging from the inclination to elevate personal resilience at the expense of destabilizing the taken-for-granted nature of the social structure. This trend has incubated an environment where “grit” has emerged as one of the more viable solutions to overcoming obstacles, academic and otherwise that undergird gaps between Black and white, and poor and rich youth. I say this while acknowledging that I am complicit in the reproduction of BRN discourse; therefore, I offer these recommendations for the community of scholars, practitioners, and Black community members, including myself, in the spirit of reflexivity.

Y/PAR and CYS studies highlight activist youth contexts that are generative and supportive of sociopolitical development. Y/PAR scholarship may, at times, romanticize young people’s experience in Y/PAR, implying (often through omission), a smooth upward trajectory toward critical awareness and action. It may also lead readers to assume that the Y/PAR process itself is primarily or exclusively responsible for the advent of young people’s critical awareness.

To better understand critical consciousness development in YPAR, chapter 5 analyzes young people's relationship to the political education offered in YPAR. It illustrates two ways youth engaged with the political education offered in the Y/PAR context through analysis of Beauty and Kumar's trajectories of political development. During the 2015 UB summer program, I facilitated direct instruction in YPAR to expose the ways in which U.S. law and policy throughout the 20th century gave rise to the Black ghetto and attempted to relegate Black folks to permanent underclass status. I focused on this area in particular, believing that tangible knowledge of state's role in Black oppression might kindle radicalization in youth researchers who were unaware that Black and Brown neighborhood poverty was engineered by the government. Kumar's political development demonstrates that structuralist political education can resonate with youth in ways that challenge common sense neoliberal frameworks and expose the class structure as functional and reproductive. Kumar entered Y/PAR attached, in many ways, to personal responsibility, neoliberal governmentality politics and deficit ideas about his community; however, he was able to leave YPAR challenging the meritocratic worldview and making class analyses rooted in his understanding of things like inequitable housing and school policy, yet not completely unhinged from critiquing (lack of) hard work in relation to members of his own community. Beauty's trajectory in YPAR revealed that her political learning experience allowed her to integrate new insights about structural inequality into her pre-existing conservative politics. Though she could articulate the process of white flight and tangential neighborhood decline, she elevated the primacy of human capital and the responsibility of the community to "make something out of nothing" in relation to her understanding of her community's status. Beauty's development illustrates that critical lessons and discussions may

facilitate greater *understanding* of inequality but do not necessitate that youth adopt a structuralist view of social problems.

Chapter 5 also reveals the ways in which tensions around ideology, positionality, and authority can emerge in the organizing space between youth and outsider/adult facilitators. In hindsight, these rifts were in part due to the way that I approached political education in YPAR. I entered YPAR angry—angry about the poverty and social distress I encountered every time I walked through Milton. Moreover, I was angry that the history and institutional structures that created and maintained these conditions was obscured through systematic miseducation in public schools that emphasized meritocracy, personal responsibility, neoliberal governmentality and goodwill politics of “helping” to address inequitable outcomes. My goal entering YPAR was to overwhelm young people with so much evidence of the state’s role in Black oppression that they would adopt a revolutionary agenda. Although young people had demonstrated familiarity with critiques of the “system,” I suspected that some of the previous analyses to which they were exposed were amorphously constructed, deemed conspiratorial, and generated fleeting buy-in. I would come to realize that the mere presentation of evidence was not a sufficient impetus for radicalization and that my approach as an educator and friend and the giving of mutual respect meant a great deal to youth in relation to their attachment to the organizing space. In hindsight, I recognize that it is crucial to explore positionalities and power differentials. Despite believing that my Blackness granted me the clout I needed to speak authoritatively about race/ism and Black identity in young people’s community, youth drew attention to the differences in our class backgrounds to challenge my authority to frame their community reality.

The complex relationship between political learning and the advent of critical structuralist politics demonstrated in this research reveals that young people distinctively

considered information of political relevance from the youth organizing space in relation to the forming and reforming of their political identities. While the youth organizing space was a critical opportunity to facilitate conscientization and critically relevant learning, it was not a panacea for socializing youth into radical politics. Viewing progressive youth organizing as *producing* critical citizens undermines the extent to which youth exercise incredible agency over their own political development process.

Chapter 6 demonstrates the importance of making the qualitative distinction between what is civic and what is political as youth ultimately confronted having to reconcile their political beliefs to their civic actions, as YPAR offered young people the opportunity to pursue civic engagement on their terms in ways that they found personally and politically significant. Studies of youth political socialization often conflate the meaning of civic and political and measure/analyze that which is best understood as civic behavior. Youth political socialization in this respect is defined as socialization into formal civic knowledge and civic participation, and the scope of this research is to determine whether socialization happened. When young people's actual politics are studied in YPS research, it is often an inquiry into political ideologies and values, party allegiances, and civic trust. These texts in YPS literature offer little descriptive exploration of *how* youth are socialized in particular contexts. For youth like Gustavo and Hector, their participation in YPAR and related political development followed popular conceptions of social justice reflective of the national political theater at the time of this study. Hashtag campaigns, online activism, and celebrity-inspired civic engagement played a critical role in their political development. For Hector, this meant emphasizing “inspiring” and “motivating” community members in his social change politics, reflecting a line of celebrity discourse in relation to supporting “underserved communities.” For Shante and Selena, dilemmas

related to working with a nonprofit planning organization influenced their social change politics and analyses of the state in complex ways. Shante's political values were not reflected in the civic engagement opportunity presented to our group by the nonprofit and pushed her to articulate criticisms of what she understood as the CPO's underlying agenda to gentrify and push out current residents to make room for wealthier residents. Aspects of our collaboration with the nonprofit tested Selena's politics in other ways that moved her to compromise from her progressive political values in favor of a centrist pragmatism. Concern about the fiscal solvency of our teen center proposal, Selena suggested that the center might sell unhealthy foods because it would be profitable, even though Selena was the architect of the center's agenda to promote healthy eating, recognizing Milton as a food desert.

Chapter 6 illustrates that opportunities for meaningful engagement illuminate fissures between the civic and the political as the scope and character of civic opportunities may misalign with youths' political values in ways that may lead to compromise or retrenchment. The kind of civic engagement pursued by a youth organization can shape individual youth organizers' political development. Greater understanding of the tensions between civic engagement and political identity in youth organizing can contribute to greater insight about how the goals, directions, and ethos of a youth-activist group can take shape over the course of a movement or campaign.

This study's limitation, however, is that its apprehension of youths' political development in relation to YPAR was predicated, in part, on my effectiveness as a YPAR facilitator. In other words, it is possible (and likely) that youth would demonstrate a different level of resistance to personal responsibility and respectability politics and greater attachment to structuralism if I engaged more effective practices or if there were a different more experienced facilitator in my

place. Throughout this process, I was undergoing my own political identity transformation. Despite having a relatively clear picture of the structures that reproduced community poverty, my change politics were unrefined when I began YPAR. Reading Soo Ah Kwon, Lester Spence, Bianca Baldrige, and Michael Dumas throughout my time in action research helped me to reflect on the complexities of neoliberalism in relation to the political socialization and educative projects carried out in urban, minoritized, and social justice spaces; however, I was unclear about how to navigate this as our group was connected to the neoliberal pedagogical program of Upward Bound. I was also learning how to be a facilitator through trial and error and about the challenges of being an educator in a space with limited resources and no clear roadmap to follow. I was imperfect as a facilitator and the process I facilitated was not without error caused in part by my blind spots. Despite this fact, young people found ways to meaningfully engage in youth participatory action research.

We are living in moment that many have dubbed the new civil rights movement, and like its predecessor, young people are playing a central role in the political developments of this era of humanist revelation/revolution ([Else, 2017](#); [Harris, 2015](#); [Allen, 2015](#); [Demby, 2014](#); [Onion, 2015](#); [Logan, 2018](#)). Unlike the movement of the 1950s and 60s, current forms of youth political action are taking place both on-the-ground *and* online. In addition to the spaces in which youth exercise their activism, there are other “somethings” qualitatively distinct about past youth activism and current movements. One of the most glaring differences between the 60s and now, illuminated in this paper, is the omnipresence of neoliberalism and its immeasurable hold on the internal world of human thought and the external world of human relationships. Neoliberalism emerged in the 1970s as the civil rights movement came to a close, and therefore, previous youth activists were able to form political identities in somewhat more direct opposition to state forces

of dehumanization. Today's youth activists must contend with developing counterhegemonic politics within a neoliberal state that has partnered with benevolent institutions (e.g. nonprofits, philanthropic sector, NGOs) to open government-sponsored, government-approved pathways to social change. In other words, the same system responsible for creating communities of concentrated Black poverty funds organizations that seek to help poor residents manage their poverty and create opportunities for them to adjust to poverty, offering a glimmer of hope that these resources might propel them out of the ghetto into the elusive "middle class."

Logics of personal savvy, personal choice, hard work, human capital, efficiency, fiscal pragmatism, and entrepreneurial virtue have become as taken-for-granted as breathing air. It is also within this context that youth must reconcile an understanding of the public good, social justice, social change, race/ism, and inequality. Neoliberalism has demonstrated flexibility in relation to these concepts, offering modified versions of itself as lenses through which to view each of these areas. This transformation has not only managed to change the landscape of social change work but has also influenced the way that youth perceive themselves as agents of change. All of this complicates the projects of youth activism, political education, and critical consciousness development in the current moment.

While the logic of neoliberalism seems unimpeachable, this study demonstrates young people's ability to question its legitimacy and form new logics. The value of direct instruction in YPAR is demonstrated in young people like Kumar, Selena, and Shante who were able to recall critical policy history in ways that rebutted common sense neoliberalism. However, political learning in progressive advocacy groups cannot just replace neoliberal ideology with structuralist or progressive ideology; rather, truly impactful learning assists young people in wrestling with

issues and questions they deem pertinent, drawing from their own lives, experiences, and communities and proceeds in complex, unpredictable and non-linear ways.

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Appendix A

Name: _____

Survey

The following pages contain a number of statements with which some people agree and others disagree. Please rate how much you personally agree or disagree with these statements--how much they reflect the way you personally feel or think. Indicate where you stand by circling or checking the appropriate box on the following scale:

Totally Agree	Agree	Disagree	Totally Disagree
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1) My community is a great place to live			
Totally Agree	Agree	Disagree	Totally Disagree

2) The people here are generally good people			
Totally Agree	Agree	Disagree	Totally Disagree

3) There are many opportunities here for me to learn and earn money legally			
Totally Agree	Agree	Disagree	Totally Disagree

4) If I work hard in school I will achieve my career goals			
Totally Agree	Agree	Disagree	Totally Disagree

5) If I never left my community and didn't go to college I would still be able to get a good job here and earn enough money to support the kind of lifestyle I imagine for myself as an adult			
Totally Agree	Agree	Disagree	Totally Disagree

6) The people here are good people			
Totally Agree	Agree	Disagree	Totally Disagree

7) When I think of my community, I don't have many good things to say			
Totally Agree	Agree	Disagree	Totally Disagree

8) People here don't make a lot of money			
Totally Agree	Agree	Disagree	Totally Disagree

9) Black communities generally have less money than white communities			
Totally Agree	Agree	Disagree	Totally Disagree

10) Most black people live in the city in apartments and most white people live in the suburbs in houses			
Totally Agree	Agree	Disagree	Totally Disagree

11) The black people who live in suburban white communities are more hard working than black people who live in the city			
Totally Agree	Agree	Disagree	Totally Disagree

12) More crime happens in black communities than white communities			
Totally Agree	Agree	Disagree	Totally Disagree

13) One of the biggest reasons that most black communities look different than suburban white communities is because the residents in suburban white communities do a better job of taking care of their community.			
Totally Agree	Agree	Disagree	Totally Disagree

14) Most people's financial status is a result of how hard they worked and the amount of effort and dedication they put toward accomplishing their goals.			
Totally Agree	Agree	Disagree	Totally Disagree

15) Most people who work hard will make good money and most people who don't work hard will not have a lot of money			
Totally Agree	Agree	Disagree	Totally Disagree

16) Hard work is <i>not</i> the primary (or most important) factor determining success			
Totally Agree	Agree	Disagree	Totally Disagree

17) The government plays the biggest role in determining people's future success			
Totally Agree	Agree	Disagree	Totally Disagree

18) When I see my classmates being lazy or disruptive I think that their attitudes will be the primary reason why they won't become successful later in life			
Totally Agree	Agree	Disagree	Totally Disagree

19) A lot of the parents in my community don't care about their kid's education			
Totally Agree	Agree	Disagree	Totally Disagree

- 1) Why do more white people live in the suburbs and own their homes?
- 2) Why do you think your city and others like it consist mostly of black and Latino residents?
- 3) The poverty rate here is 26%, which is 2.5x more than the state average. Why do you think that is?
- 4) Why do you think there is violence and drug crime in the city?
- 5) What are some of the biggest ways that the government has impacted black people's lives today?
- 6) Do past government actions still impact black people's ability to be successful today?
Why or why not?

Appendix B

NAME: _____

RESEARCH EXIT SURVEY

The following pages contain a number of statements with which some people agree and others disagree. Please rate how much you personally agree or disagree with these statements--how much they reflect the way you personally feel or think. Indicate where you stand by circling or checking the appropriate box on the following scale:

Totally Agree	Agree	Disagree	Totally Disagree
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PART I

1) My community is a great place to live			
Totally Agree	Agree	Disagree	Totally Disagree

2) The people here are generally good people			
Totally Agree	Agree	Disagree	Totally Disagree

3) There are many opportunities here for me to learn and earn money legally			
Totally Agree	Agree	Disagree	Totally Disagree

4) If I work hard in school I will achieve my career goals			
Totally Agree	Agree	Disagree	Totally Disagree

5) If I never left my community and didn't go to college I would still be able to get a good job here and earn enough money to support the kind of lifestyle I imagine for myself as an adult			
Totally Agree	Agree	Disagree	Totally Disagree

6) When I think of my community, I don't have many good things to say			
Totally Agree	Agree	Disagree	Totally Disagree

7) People here don't make a lot of money			
Totally Agree	Agree	Disagree	Totally Disagree

8) The way things are here will probably never change			
--	--	--	--

Totally Agree	Agree	Disagree	Totally Disagree
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9) If I had to explain to a stranger why things are the way they are here, I would say that the government is primarily responsible for the problems my community faces.			
Totally Agree	Agree	Disagree	Totally Disagree

PART II

9) Minority communities generally have less money than white communities			
Totally Agree	Agree	Disagree	Totally Disagree

10) Most minority people live in the city, in apartments, and most white people live in the suburbs in houses			
Totally Agree	Agree	Disagree	Totally Disagree

11) The minority people who live in suburban communities are more hard working than blacks and Latinos that live in neighborhoods without many white people			
Totally Agree	Agree	Disagree	Totally Disagree

12) Black on black crime is a bigger problem than police killing unarmed blacks			
Totally Agree	Agree	Disagree	Totally Disagree

13) One of the biggest reasons that most minority communities look different than suburban white communities is because the residents in suburban white communities do a better job of taking care of their community.			
Totally Agree	Agree	Disagree	Totally Disagree

PART III

14) Most people's financial status is a direct result of how hard they worked and the amount of effort and dedication they put toward accomplishing their goals.			
Totally Agree	Agree	Disagree	Totally Disagree

15) Most people who work hard will make good money and most people who don't work hard will not have a lot of money			
Totally Agree	Agree	Disagree	Totally Disagree

16) Hard work is not the primary (or most important) way that people become successful			
---	--	--	--

Totally Agree	Agree	Disagree	Totally Disagree
---------------	-------	----------	------------------

17) People who blame the system for their problem are making excuses			
Totally Agree	Agree	Disagree	Totally Disagree

18) When I see my classmates being lazy or disruptive I think that their attitudes will be the primary reason why they won't become successful later in life			
Totally Agree	Agree	Disagree	Totally Disagree

19) A lot of the parents in my community don't care about their kid's education			
Totally Agree	Agree	Disagree	Totally Disagree

20) One sign of a good person is that he/she makes sacrifices in his/her personal life to achieve career goals			
Totally Agree	Agree	Disagree	Totally Disagree

PART IV

21) Racism will be a real obstacle for me in my life after high school			
Totally Agree	Agree	Disagree	Totally Disagree

22) The best way to deal with racism is to avoid situations that could lead to racial tension			
Totally Agree	Agree	Disagree	Totally Disagree

23) The thing that keeps racism going is racist people			
Totally Agree	Agree	Disagree	Totally Disagree

24) The more we talk about race and racism in school, in the media, and other places, the more likely we are to have racism in the world			
Totally Agree	Agree	Disagree	Totally Disagree

25) When I <i>usually</i> think about racism, I'm thinking about society (e.g. the media, U.S. culture, our country's history etc.) and institutions (e.g. banks, government, real estate, job market etc.)			
Totally Agree	Agree	Disagree	Totally Disagree

- 1) Do you feel like society respects African Americans or Latinos? Why
- 2) Does being Black or Latino matter to you? Why? Would you care if you belonged to another racial or ethnic group?
- 3) More than 1/4 of the population in Milton lives in poverty; that is 2.5x more than the state average. Why do you think that is?
- 4) Do injustices from the past, like slavery or any other laws or customs in this country that you're aware of still impact black people's ability to be successful today? Why or why not?
- 5) Since you began taking Research at Upward Bound, what people, groups or occurrences in your life have had the biggest influence on you (e.g. church, after school clubs, sports, the presidential race, parents, music artists, Research, Mr. Chesnutt, Upward Bound)? What impact have they had?
- 6) Do you think your responses to this exit survey are different from your responses to the survey you took on the first day of research? Why?
- 7) What impact, if any, did taking Research have on you?

Appendix C

Interview Protocol

- 1) What is your name and grade level?
- 2) Why did you join Upward Bound? What do you think the purpose is of Upward Bound?
- 3) How would you describe your community? What things are good and what things are bad?
- 4) How did your community become what it is today?
- 5) Do you want to live here as an adult? Why, why not?
- 6) Would it have been different if mostly white people lived here? How so? Why?
- 7) What have you learned in school from your history, social studies or civics classes about your community? What would you want to know?
- 8) Did you learn anything from other places (like your family or your church or music) about your community? What did you learn?
- 9) How often do you interact with other racial groups?
 - i. Where are some of the primary places you come into contact with other racial groups (e.g. post office, school, work, in your neighborhood)?
 1. What is the nature of these interactions?
- 10) What is your definition of racism?
 - a. Who or what is your primary source of information about issues of race and racism? What did [they/it] teach you?
 - b. Based on your definition, do you experience racism? How?
 - c. Does racism impact people in Milton regularly? How?

- 11) When you think about black people in this country, do you think they have it harder than other groups (primarily white people)? What do you think is responsible for that?
- 12) When you think of black culture what comes to mind?
 - a. Do you feel a part of black culture?
- 13) What does it take to become successful? Think of a career that someone successful would have. What are the three most important factors determining how they got there?
- 14) Does the government impact how people from your community become successful?
How?

Appendix D

Interview Protocol

PART 1

- 15) What is your name and grade level?
- 16) What are some of your concerns about life after high school?
- 17) Do you think Upward Bound or school will prepare you for life after high school? How so or why not?
- 18) Where do you see yourself 10 years from now?
- 19) Who were the 5 most influential people in your life this past year (can also include music artist)?
- 20) What 5 places did you spend the most time?
- 21) Do you think all of these people would agree with the way we talk about issues in Milton when we're in Research?
 - a. Who would disagree? What would they disagree with?
 - b. How do you decide which way to think about things?
- 22) Have your thoughts about racism and inequality changed over the course of the year?
How so?
 - a. Can you remember a specific time where you felt convinced that your old way of thinking about these things needed to be revised, either in or outside of Research?
- 23) Since you began taking Research, have any of the issues we discussed ever come up in an experience with another person or in another place? Can you tell me what happened and how you felt?

PART 2

24) How would you describe Milton?

- a. What things are good and what things are bad?

25) How did Milton become what it is today?

26) Would it have been different if mostly white people lived here? How so? Why?

27) Will most people from Milton be able to have the kind of life you want for yourself (or at least a nice life) 10 years from now? Why or Why not?

- a. What do you think it would take for people here to be able to have a “good” life?

28) Do you think racism plays a role in the quality of life people from Milton have? How so?

PART 3

29) When you think about black people in this country, do you think they have it harder than other groups (primarily white people)? What do you think is responsible for that?

30) Do you think that lack of hard work is to blame for why so many residents of Milton are poor?

- a. What other factors do you think may be at play?
- b. How do you think (one of the most influential people) would have answered the question about hard work?

PART 4

31) What did you like and dislike about Research?

32) Would you define our work in Research as activism?

33) Is there anything you do in your life in or outside of school that you consider political action?

34) What could I have done differently to make it a better experience?

35) What did you learn in Research?

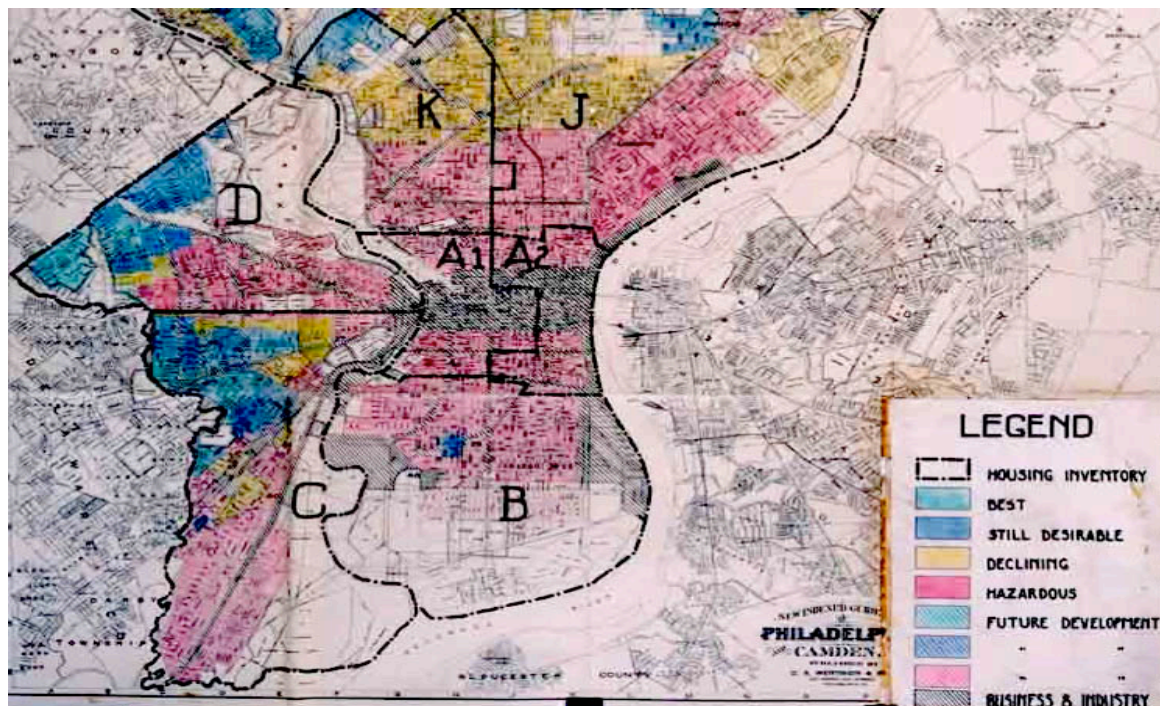
- 36) Is there anything our research group can do or could have done to make things better in Milton? Why or why not?

Appendix E

A Long History of Racial Preferences For Whites: Housing Edition (edited)**By: Larry Alderman**

Many people don't know about government racial preferences, first enacted during the New Deal, that directed wealth to white families and continue to shape life opportunities and chances today.

The Federal Housing Administration helped generate much of the wealth that so many white families enjoy today. This New Deal program was revolutionary and made it possible for millions of average white Americans - but not racial minorities - to own a home for the first time. The government set up a national neighborhood value system that openly based a family's ability to get a *mortgage* on their race. Integrated or racial minority communities were valued as financial risks and were ineligible for home loans, a policy known today as *redlining*.

TABLE 1: REDLINING

Between 1934 and 1962, the federal government backed \$120 billion of home loans. More than 98% went to whites. Of the 350,000 new homes built with federal support in northern California between 1946 and 1960, fewer than 100 went to African Americans. *Most Blacks and Latinos who could afford to pay for the home or who qualified for a loan were denied entrance into the suburbs by the developers.*

These government programs helped to create today's segregated white suburbs in this country that sprang up after World War II ended. Government money also went into municipal services to enhance these suburbs further (e.g. police, fire department, and schools etc.), which led retail

and employers to invest in these communities. Highways (like Route 1) were built to connect these new suburbs to central business districts, but they often cut through and destroyed non-white neighborhoods in the central city.

Today, Black and Latino mortgage applicants are still 60% more likely than whites to be turned down for a loan, even after controlling for employment, financial, and neighborhood factors. According to the Census, whites are more likely to be segregated than any other group. ***As recently as 1993, 86% of suburban whites still lived in neighborhoods with a black population of less than 1%.***

Impact of Housing Inequality

1) One result of the generations of special treatment for whites is that a typical white family today has on average eight times the worth of a typical African American family, according to New York University economist Edward Wolff. ***Even when families of the same income are compared, white families have more than twice the wealth of Black families.*** Much of that wealth difference can be attributed to the value of one's home, and how much one inherited from parents.

2) As legal scholar John Powell says in the documentary series *Race: The Power of an Illusion*, ***"The slick thing about whiteness is that whites are getting the spoils of a racist system even if they are not personally racist."*** But rather than recognize how "racial preferences" have tilted the playing field and given us a head start in life, many whites continue to believe that race does not affect our lives. Instead, we chastise others for not achieving what we have; we even invert the situation and accuse people of color of using "the race card" to advance themselves. Or we suggest that different outcomes in life may simply result from differences in "natural" ability or motivation. However, sociologist Dalton Conley's research shows that when we compare the performance of families across racial lines who make not just the same income, but also hold similar net worth, a very interesting thing happens: many of the racial disparities in education, graduation rates, welfare usage and other outcomes disappear.

3) ***"Colorblind" policies that treat everyone the same, no exceptions for minorities, are often proposed instead of affirmative action. But colorblindness today ignores the hundreds of years of unfair advantages of laws and practices that have enabled white Americans to accumulate much more wealth than people of color.*** Isn't it a little late in the game to suddenly decide that race shouldn't matter?

Appendix F

A Long History of Racial Preferences - For Whites (edited)**By: Larry Alderman**

Many middle-class white people, especially those of us who grew up in the suburbs, like to think that we got to where we are today because our merit - hard work, intelligence, and maybe a little luck. And while we may be sympathetic to the struggles of others, we get upset when we hear the words "affirmative action" or "racial preferences." We think to ourselves: "We worked hard, we made it on our own," and then we look at other groups and say, "why don't they?" After all, it's been over 40 years now since the Civil Rights Act was passed.

What we don't acknowledge is that racial preferences for *whites* have a long history in this country. Below are a few ways that government programs and practices have given wealth and opportunities to white people at the expense of other racial groups.

Early Racial Preferences

- 1) Some of us know this history, but it's still many of us who are unaware of the magnitude of white racial preferences. Affirmative action in the American "workplace" first began in the late 17th century. White indentured servants (or contract laborers) - the original source of plantation workers (before slavery) were replaced by African slaves. If the white contract laborers supported and enforced slavery they would earn citizenship rights (e.g. the right to vote, the right to own property etc.).
- 2) White Americans were also given a head start with the help of the U.S. Army. The 1830 Indian Removal Act, for example, forcibly removed Native American tribes from their land to make room for white settlers. The 1862 Homestead Act *gave* away millions of acres - for free - of Indian Territory. In total, these Acts gave away nearly 270 million acres of land to white settlers.
- 3) The 1790 Naturalization Act permitted only "free white persons" from Europe to become citizens of the United States. Only citizens could vote, serve on juries, hold office, and in some cases, even hold property. Laws passed in California and other states, reserved farmland for white growers by preventing Asian immigrants (because they could not become citizens) from owning land. Immigration restrictions further limited opportunities for nonwhite groups. Racial barriers to U.S. citizenship weren't removed until 1952! And the U.S. gave preference to white immigrants until 1965!
- 4) In the South, the federal government never followed through on its promise to plan to divide up plantations and give each freed slave "40 acres and a mule" as reparations. Only once was money given for slavery from the government. Officials paid up to \$300 per slave after emancipation - not to the slaves, but to local slaveholders as compensation for loss of property.
- 5) When slavery ended, its legacy lived on not just in the impoverished condition of Black people but in the wealth and prosperity that passed on to white slave-owners and their

descendents. Economists who try to place a dollar value on how much white Americans have profited from 200+ years of unpaid slave labor begin their estimates at \$1 trillion.

6) Jim Crow laws that started in the 1800s were not overturned in many states until the 1960s. They gave the best jobs, neighborhoods, schools and hospitals to white people.

The Advantages Grow, Generation to Generation

Most people don't know about more recent government racial preferences that began during the 1930s (i.e. the New Deal era), which directed wealth to white families and continue to impact the racial differences in wealth we see today.

** The New Deal is a set of programs and policies started by President Teddy Roosevelt in the 1930's to help the country during tough economic times*

1) In the midst of The Great Depression, the U.S.'s worst economy, The Social Security Act of 1935 provided a safety net for millions of workers, guaranteeing them an income after retirement and in the event they were unemployed. But The Act specifically excluded two occupations: farm workers and domestic servants, over 85 % of who were African American and Latinos. As low-income workers, they couldn't save money to retire. They also couldn't pass money down to their children. Their children actually had to support them in old age.

**Between 350,000-600,000 Mexican Americans who attempted to receive any social services were deported. Social service workers showed preference to Italians, Polish, and Irish immigrants that were working to get on their feet after they emigrated to the U.S.*

2) The 1935 Wagner Act established an important new right, but only for white people. It granted unions the power to bargain with employers for better/fair pay. But the Wagner Act allowed unions to exclude non-whites and deny them opportunities for better-paid jobs and benefits such as health care, job security, and retirement money. Many blue-collar unions remained all-white until the 1970s.

Reaping the Rewards of Racial Preference

1) One result of the generations of preferential treatment for whites is that a typical white family today has on average eight times the worth of a typical African American family, according to New York University economist Edward Wolff. Even when families of the same income are compared, white families have more than twice the wealth of Black families.

2) Much of that wealth difference is a result of how much a child inherits from their parents. A family's net worth is not just the finish line; it's also the starting point for their children and grandchildren. Those with wealth pass their assets on to their children - by paying for college, lending a hand during hard times, or assisting with buying a car or a home. Children also inherit their parent's social groups, which indirectly helps them on the job market when they have connections to people in the same wealth bracket. Some economists estimate that up to 80 percent of lifetime wealth accumulation depends on how much each generation can pass down. White advantage is passed down, from parent to child to grandchild. As a result, the racial wealth gap and the head start enjoyed by whites have grown.

3) In 1865, just after the freedom of slaves in the South, it is not surprising that African Americans owned only 0.5 percent of the total wealth in the United States. But by 1990, 135 years after the abolition of slavery, Black Americans still possessed only 1 percent of national wealth!

Appendix G

The Plug, Teen Center Proposal

To: Milton250

Cc: Richard Greene

Section I: Who Are We?

Section II: Teen Center Proposal

Section III: Synergy to Housing, Health & Food, Education, and Economic Strategies

The following proposal outlines key information about our organization, provides an outline of our proposed teen center, and highlights points of synergy between the proposed center and the goals documented in Milton250's strategic redevelopment plans.

Section I: Who Are We?

The Plug is a student-led community organization that originated in the Upward Bound program at the Milton Campus of Regional County College. Current members of The Plug began as students in Kevin Clay's Research course during the summer of 2015. Everyone of our members except for Kevin Clay is a resident of Milton, NJ. Our group discussed community issues and learned about public policy history and its particular impact on urban-living Black and Brown residents. We exposed several sociological myths related to these groups and uncovered various forms of inequality that structure the lives and livelihoods of citizens in Milton and places like it. Our members range in age from 15 - 28.

We are dedicated to improving our community through public policy advocacy, teaching, and learning ourselves about ways to make Milton the best place for its current residents, spreading awareness about injustice, and advertising our solidarity with people affected by some of the social ills that take place here. We reject the idea that fairness means everybody gets the same thing and believe in justice (equity), which means that everybody should get what they *need*.

Our past work includes a presentation at Upward Bound's closing ceremony during the summer of 2015 about educational inequality in Milton in which we compared the resources between Milton and Crest Ridge, NJ communities and school districts. We conducted empirical research (i.e. interviews and surveys with current teachers and students in Milton schools) in addition to reviewing relevant financial and news reports. Our work spread awareness about inequality and helped explain the disparity in academic outcomes between these two places. Since then we have been planning and strategizing new interventions and learning more about social problems in the community. We've also met with some community leaders, attended city council meetings, and discussed our goals with one another.

Section II: Teen Center Proposal

In recognition of several parallels between our goals and the goals outlined by Milton250, we propose a teen center with three goals in mind: 1) ***relaxation and socialization*** 2) ***academic support*** and 3) ***promoting a healthy lifestyle***. Teens in Milton do not have many places to socialize collectively and build community between neighborhoods. One of our many concerns as an organization is that conflicts arise between teens from different neighborhoods because of past issues between those neighborhoods and we see the center as a way to facilitate conflict resolution and develop relationships. Although there are other spaces available for teens such as

the YMCA and Boys and Girls Club, we wish for Milton to create a place for only teenagers. Recently, the Boys and Girls club has moved all their teens to their Lawrence center in hopes to create an exclusive place for teens, however they included little children into this move which took away from the teens. For example, if the teens were playing in one half of the arcade and the younger kids happened to join in, the teens would have to leave. Additionally, the challenges facing teenagers in Milton at this critical stage in our lives are very different than the challenges young children are experiencing-- challenges that need to be resolved in an setting specially created for communal relationships to develop. For this reason, we desire a place that offers all activities in one location, though we understand that Milton250's proposals intends to maximize the efficiency of Milton's resources, which may mean offering services in different locations.

However, in an effort to stay green and re-invest in our community, it is our hope that this teen center be constructed using an abandoned building space (or spaces) within the city in a location that is easily accessible for Milton youth (i.e. it should not be too far from an existing bus stop), and be located near open outdoor spaces with a lot of natural sunlight, trees, and grass. It should train and employ staff made up exclusively of residents (teens and adults) and it should be funded through state, federal and local tax revenue in addition to other sources of revenue (some of which are mentioned here). Milton city council in concert with The Plug should seek out grant funding from an organization like The Ford Foundation and petition the White House for funding through President Obama's My Brother's Keeper Initiative.

What follows is a descriptive outline of the center.

Relaxation and socialization. The center should have physical spaces that are conducive to relaxation. It should include an area in the building with couches or chairs, where students can chill and talk to each other and where people can socialize with one another and make new friends. Some spaces should also be quiet spaces. It should have a video game room where students could hang out and play video games. Considering that many teens from Milton have interests and passions related to the recording industry, we also want a music studio where youth can practice their music, record songs, create digital or physical copies, and even perform their music or poetry or dance routines, under the supervision of professionals. Considering that access to internet and computers with up-to-date software and hardware are hard to come by here, we also would like a room with computers for social media and other recreational uses (with restricted access to certain kinds of websites).

Academic support. The center should offer tutors and guidance counselors on a part-time or full-time basis. Guidance counselors can help students with social and emotional issues and provide academic advisement and pre-college counseling. Counselors can help with college admissions essays and explain the Fafsa process. Upward Bound offers similar services but on a much smaller scale (60 students approximately), high school guidance counselors are often

dealing with too large caseloads to be as effective doing these things, which leaves many students in the lurch. These gaps create a need for the center.

Center tutors can offer academic support to students. They can also support students in SAT preparation and standardized tests. Graduate students from area universities can teach electives like African American Sociology, Hispanic Literature, or Environmental Justice--classes that our schools don't offer but that many of us would be interested in taking. The center should provide a library exclusive to teens and alumni. Even though there is a Milton Public Library, the teen center library will be seen as a safe place (unlike TPL where many young women, particularly those in our group, don't always feel safe). There should be a space with computers for people to do homework or work on research papers (separate from the computers used for recreational use).

Promoting a Healthy Lifestyle. The center should allow people the opportunity to make cultural connections and to learn about their ethnic, racial, and community background. To do this it should have a relaxing environment with ethnic artwork, cultural artifacts, and local historical items. The center should also encourage people to be active in the community. To do that, the center should have guest lecturers and speakers talk about issues in the community and how young people can get involved in doing something about these issues.

It should serve breakfast and lunch and have healthy food options in addition to some junk food. Healthy food should be free and consist of prepared meals that are tasty. Meals should challenge the notion that healthy food is bland. Raw vegetables and fruit should be offered as snacks in addition to junk food. Junk food for sale can be in vending machines or the cafeteria can provide pizza and other comfort foods. The center wants to discourage bad eating habits and encourage good ones, but it also wants to offer less healthy options so that people don't have to leave when they have a craving.

The center should invite teens to get in touch with nature and have ample green space with area for gardening and casual outdoor hanging out like a park. Outdoor activities can be structured and staff can facilitate games or other structured outdoor events. It should have a space for soccer and basketball.

Section III: Synergy with Housing, Health & Food, Education, and Economic Goals

Housing Report

Goal 2: Vacancy and Abandonment

"In an effort to stay green and re-invest in our community, it is our hope that this teen center be constructed using abandoned building space/s within the city that is accessible for Milton youth

(i.e. it should not be too far from an existing bus stop), and be located near open outdoor spaces with a lot of natural sunlight, trees, and grass.”

Health and Food Systems Report

Goal 1: Create healthy food options in Milton

“It should serve breakfast and lunch and have healthy food options in addition to some junk food. Healthy food should be free and consist of prepared meals that are tasty. It should include raw vegetables and fruit as snacks. Junk food for sale can be in vending machines or the cafeteria can provide pizza and other comfort foods. The center wants to discourage bad eating habits and encourage good ones, but it also wants to offer less healthy options so that people don’t have to leave when they have a craving.”

Goal 2: Increase physical activity among Milton residents

“The center should invite teens to get in touch with nature and have ample green space with area for gardening and casual outdoor hanging out like a park. Outdoor activities can be structured and staff can facilitate games or other structured outdoor events. It should have a space for soccer and basketball.”

Education Report

Goal 1: Pre-K - 12 (9th -12th grade)

“Center tutors can offer academic support to students. They can also support students in SAT preparation and standardized tests. Graduate students from area universities can teach electives like African American Sociology, Hispanic Literature, or Environmental Justice-- classes that our schools don’t offer but that many of us would be interested in taking. The center should provide a library exclusive to teens and alumni. Even though there is a Milton Public Library, the teen center library will be seen as a safe place (unlike TPL where many young women, particularly those in our group, don’t always feel safe). There should be a space with computers for people to do homework or work on research papers (separate from the computers used for recreational use).”

Goal 2: Workforce development

“[The center] should train and employ staff made up exclusively of residents (teens and adults) and it should be funded through state, federal and local tax revenue in addition to other sources of revenue (some of which are mentioned here).”

Goal 3: Personal Enrichment

f

“The center should allow people the opportunity to make cultural connections and to learn about their ethnic, racial, and community background. To do this it should have a relaxing environment with ethnic artwork, cultural artifacts, and local historical items. The center should also encourage people to be active in the community. To do that, the center should have guest lecturers and speakers talk about issues in the community and how young people can get involved in doing something about these issues.”

Economic Development Report

Goal 1: Overall

“In an effort to stay green and re-invest in our community, it is our hope that this teen center be constructed using abandoned building space/s within the city that is accessible for Milton youth (i.e. it should not be too far from an existing bus stop), and be located near open outdoor spaces with a lot of natural sunlight, trees, and grass. It should employ staff made up exclusively of residents (teens and adults) and it should be funded through state, federal and local tax revenue in addition to other sources of revenue.”

Thank you very much for the opportunity to contribute to Milton 250's proposal!

Sincerely,
The Plug

Shante Wilson
Selena Ramos
Hector Gomez
Gustavo Mejia
Kumar Jones
Beauty Livingston
Kevin Clay, M.Ed, Ph.D. candidate