



Youth Learning to Be Activists: Constructing “Places of Possibility” Together

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Abstract:

This paper draws from a critical qualitative study that took place in Vancouver, British Columbia and focused on a group of young people learning to be activists through participation at a youth-driven organization, “Think Again” (TA). In this paper, I focus on one aspect of the youths’ participation at TA—their creative action projects—and the emergent methodologies employed in this study that generated the conditions for “places of possibility” to emerge. I conceptualize “places of possibility” as literal and metaphorical spaces where people are afforded the tools and resources necessary to imagine alternative realities, identities, and systems than what currently exist, primarily through creative and activist practices. Specifically, I utilize a narrative framework to examine the ways the social relationships and practices at TA enabled some of the young people to take up an activist identity.

Keywords: *youth activism; places of possibility; neoliberalism; participatory methods*

Following Harvey (2005), neoliberalism is understood as a set of policies, ideologies, practices, ethos, and values that advocate for free trade and small government, favor privatization, and infuse market rationale into all domains of social life. The influence of neoliberalism on the field of education can be seen in the rising rhetoric of school choice, the push for privatization, the emphasis on high-stakes testing and the standardization of curriculum and assessment. The prevalence of neoliberalism in learning and education bring to the fore the need for alternative places of learning that prioritize equity and justice where innovative and creative practices are valued. Holland and Gómez (2013) articulated a “politics of possibility” to describe a way of thinking, acting, and imagining of alternative sociopolitical realities that could mobilize radical social change for the greater good. I conceptualize “places of possibility” as literal and metaphorical spaces where people are afforded the tools and resources necessary to imagine alternative realities, identities, and systems than what currently exist, primarily through creative and activist practices.

Holland and Gómez (2013) utilized Gibson-Graham’s theory of social change that “builds on possibility rather than probability,” to assess the transformative potential of social movements (p. 130). This paper explores two of Holland and Gómez’s proposed ten criteria for effective social transformation in relation to “places of possibility”: 1) “Purposeful shifts in subjectivities and identities” and 2) “Orientation to a collective and a building of community – an ‘us’ that includes reflection about power” (2013, p. 156). This dual focus attends to youths’ learning to be activists as socioculturally situated phenomenon. This reflects a central assumption of this work, which is

the understanding that humans and the social world are dialectally related, mutually constitutive, and involved in historical processes of being and becoming (Holland & Lave, 2009).

This paper draws from a critical qualitative study that took place in Vancouver, British Columbia and focused on a group of young people learning to be activists through participation at a youth-driven organization, “Think Again” (TA). In this paper, I focus on one aspect of the youths’ participation at TA—their creative action projects (CAPs)—and the participatory methodologies employed in this study that generated the conditions for “places of possibility” to emerge. Specifically, I utilize a narrative framework to examine the ways these practices enabled some, but not all, of the young people to take up an activist identity. This paper responds to the special theme issue call by elucidating the complex ways in which youth activists and youth activist organizations negotiate the cultural terrain of neoliberalism (Holland & Gómez, 2013) in order to create “places of possibility.”

This article is divided in four sections. I begin by briefly reviewing the literature on contemporary neoliberalism and youth activism. Second, I describe the research practice, and expand on three emergent methods as supporting the conditions for “places of possibility.” Third, I present data-driven narratives of participation. This paper concludes with a discussion emphasizing the ways in which creative activist and research practices generate places of possibility for and by youth learning to be activists.

Toward “Places of Possibility”: Youth Activism in a Neoliberal Era

The contemporary sociopolitical context is marked by neoliberal policies, practices, ethos, and ideology. Harvey (2005) defined neoliberalism as “a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (p. 2). Harvey (2005) argued that neoliberalism must be brought down through the linking of theory and practice that connects specific local forms of resistance in a unified broad scale social movement that is grounded in class struggle and a fight for economic equality. Holland and Gómez (2013) echoed Harvey’s call for a broad social movement and illustrated how the pervasiveness of neoliberalism actively undermines the potential for such a broad movement. They elaborated that collaboration across geographic locales and disparate movements and causes is necessary in order to effectively challenge hegemonic views of neoliberalism toward a “politics of possibility.”

For example, Gulbrandensen and Holland (2001) examined the effects of neoliberalism on local environmental activism resulting in what they called, “hybrid forms of environmentalism” (p. 124). They explained that this hybrid form of activism blurs agendas, politics, and goals through a reliance on partnerships between environmentalists, local businesses, government and non-governmental organizations, and development agencies in order to win grants and gain funding opportunities. These partnerships tended to privilege economic interests, creating what they call the “super-citizen” out of business leaders who are cast as apolitical in relation to politically motivated activists. All of which, Gulbrandensen and Holland (2001) argued, pose significant challenges to grassroots activism and “blunt[s] the critical edge of the environmental critique” (p. 124).

Central to this paper is Holland and Gómez’s (2013) later work, wherein they examined a specific feminist movement and an alternative local food movement as a means for assessing the transformative achievements of contemporary activist movements. They identified a lack of collective and structural analysis within the movements as detrimental to their effectiveness. Holland

and Gómez defined a “politics of possibility” as “a politics that not only aims to challenge the hegemony of capitalism as an economic system, but also to think about politics in a different way—as a politics of possibility.” This view focuses on the “here-and-now” as a means to construct alternative non-capitalist economies that are enacted in the present that catalyze “processes of becoming in place” (p. 132). Following Holland and Gómez (2013), I conceptualize politics and politicization as efforts to change policy as well as “struggles in inter-personal and intra-personal arenas as well” (p. 133). This reflects my interest in better understanding and supporting conditions for positive social, environmental, and economic change as interrelated with individuals’ lived experiences. I take up this concept of places of possibility below as a unique contribution to the study of youth activism and meaning making.

In the same way that neoliberalism has influenced social and activist movements it also has shaped youths’ lived experiences. The present work is situated in a growing body of interdisciplinary scholars focusing on youth-driven social movements and activism from explicitly critical perspectives toward sociopolitical aims with a wide range of foci (e.g., Gordon, 2009; Jenkins, Shresthova, Gamber-Thompson, Kligler-Vilenchik, & Zimmerman, 2016; Kirshner, 2015; Kwon, 2013). The present work shares Kirshner’s (2015) commitment to a sociocultural perspective of learning and development that attends to the interrelatedness of social and personal transformation. Important to this work is Kirshner’s (2015) exploration of different sites of youth activism as “learning ecologies” that generate meaningful youth participation. Jenkins et al.’s (2016) work provided an overview of youth activist projects that utilized various forms of media toward “greater political participation” (p. 39). The authors put forth a concept of “civic imagination” defined as “the capacity to imagine alternatives to current social, political, or economic institutions or problems” (p. 29). They illustrated the value of the role imagination in the political sphere as central for envisioning and constructing a more equitable and just world.

Kwon’s (2013) critical ethnography of a group of Asian youth activists involved in a non-profit youth activist organization in California utilized a governmentality¹ framework to expose how youth development programs that aim to empower youth can have the opposite effect. She traced the historical deficit-based constructions of young people as “at risk” that contributed to the emergence of the field of non-profit youth activism that served to regulate and control youth of color thereby “molding them into productive citizen-subjects” (p. 27). Also concerned with youth as a social category, Gordon’s (2009) work provided an important critique of the ways in which “age constitutes an axis of social power” that intersects with and emerges through youth activism and in youth activist spaces (p. 5). Viewing age as social inequity, Gordon argued, is important for understanding youths’ organizing practices. In her research on youth activism in Canada, Kennelly (2009) found that young activists commonly experienced feelings of personal responsibility, burden, anxiety and stress associated with their activist work. She concluded that “[w]ith individualization comes the particular blend of emotional constellations associated with neoliberal subjectivity: namely, an enhanced sense of one’s own responsibility for oneself, and the forms of self-perfection and self-focus this requires” (Kennelly, 2011, p. 29).

The present work is informed by these scholars concerned with youth activism and sociopolitical participation who align in a dual focus of young people as active agents engaged in collaborative practices of identity construction and world making. This study explores how TA, as a

1. Briefly, drawing from Foucault, governmentality is a system of liberal governance or “the conduct of conduct” in which the state directly and indirectly controls individuals and collectives (Lemke, 2002).

place of learning and activism, might generate the conditions for “places of possibilities” to emerge wherein youth actively construct identities as activists through their participation and transformation of social practices geared toward a collective social movement. In this paper, I offer “places of possibility” as a conceptual and methodological tool that can enhance youth participation and activism.

The Research Practice

This paper draws from a critical qualitative study that took place in Vancouver, BC and focused on a group of young people engaged in social justice and critical education activities in a youth-driven organization, TA. Think Again engaged youths in creative social actions and as peer educators to go into schools and community settings around British Columbia to facilitate popular education workshops on a wide range of social and environmental justice issues. The educational work of TA was explicitly political and utilized a popular education framework, drawing largely on Freire (1970), to work with young people toward social change. Popular education is based on the idea that critical consciousness can be developed through group dialogue geared toward identifying root and systemic causes for problems and working together toward social transformation (Freire, 1970). This framework reflected TA’s desire to support youth in making the shift from thinking to doing something about social justice.

The Youth and Gender Media (YGM) project was first implemented in 2011 with the explicit goal of reducing violence against women and girls through education and social action. The youth participants in this study were the third YGM cohort and were involved from September 2013-September 2014. I began attending YGM meetings in October and data generation took place from April-September 2014. Participants in the study included eight YGM youth volunteers and two educational coordinators, Hermione and Veronica. Each of the participants selected their pseudonym and the demographic information they wanted to be included in this study (see Table 1). The youth committed to participate for one year in the following YGM practices: 1) popular education workshop training and facilitation, 2) mentorship, 3) monthly meetings, and 4) designing and implementing a creative action project. The creative action projects were the culminating action piece for the YGM and are the focus on this paper.

Table 1
Participant Chosen Pseudonyms and Demographic Information

Participant pseudonym	Age	Preferred gender pronouns	Participant Chosen Demographic Information
Aliza (Youth Volunteer)	19	Cisgender Female: she and her	Fem-lesbian, Queer, Filipina, Italian, Youth of color,
Amanda (Youth Volunteer)	19	Cisgender Female: she & her	Asian, Chinese, Immigrant, Scientist
Aria (Youth Volunteer)	19	Cisgender Female: she & her	Muslim, Arab, Filipina, Student

Participant pseudonym	Age	Preferred gender pronouns	Participant Chosen Demographic Information
Brenda (“Youth” Volunteer)	32	Cisgender Male: he & him	Uncomfortable with the term “youth identified” Gay, Married, White, Middle-class
Elia (Youth Volunteer)	24	Cisgender Female: she & her	Feminist, Heterosexual, First generation Chinese-Canadian (“hyphenated identity”), more Western than Asian, Can speak conversational Cantonese
Hermione (Ed Coordinator)	21	Cisgender Female: she & her	Muslim, Bangladeshi, South Asian, Youth
Sarah (Youth Volunteer)	23	Cisgender Female: she & her	Heterosexual, Caucasian, Mid-upper class, Child of early divorce
Stacy (Youth Volunteer)	24	Cisgender Female: she & her	Caucasian, Scientist
Verity (Youth Volunteer)	22	Cisgender Female: she & her	University student, Able bodied, White, Living in Vancouver, but originally from the interior of BC
Veronica (Ed Coordinator)	25	Cisgender Female: she & her	Lesbian, Romanian, Mixed-race, Sephardic Ashkenazic Eastern European Jew

Methods

This paper draws on data from my dissertation, a critical qualitative study utilizing ethnographic and participatory methods. The research design was grounded in two related commitments: first, a commitment to recognizing youth as active agents within and across sociocultural contexts; and second, a commitment to learning from and with youth as we co-constructed narratives about their participation in TA. These commitments provided the foundation for the participatory methodological contributions that emerged through this research practice. The assumption that young people are both holders of valuable knowledge and experts on their experience reflects epistemological commitments held within the collaborative and participatory research paradigm (Ayala, 2009; Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). These researchers employ various qualitative and quantitative methods, frequently citing a need for flexible and creative research designs that are ideologically congruent with the youth participants (Cambre, 2009; Cammarota & Fine, 2008). Researchers working within the youth participatory action research (yPAR) paradigm often position themselves as collaborators working alongside their participants, rather than the traditional objective/expert researcher position (e.g., Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Fine, 2009; Ginwright & James, 2002; Pritchard, 2004; Wright, 2015). Wright’s (2015) work unpacked the explicitly pedagogical nature of yPAR and provides a resource for understanding the teaching and learning that goes on throughout the research process. The yPAR tradition provided valuable tools to think with and through TA’s youth-driven framework, as well as their focus on supporting youth to take action through praxis.

This was not a yPAR study, but the methods I describe are novel participatory methods that I designed with the youth in this study. I was interested in how the youth made meaning of

their participation in youth-driven social justice work. Toward that end, I took on a participatory and collaborative stance with the youth and provided opportunities for collaboration throughout the process. This collaboration was based on reciprocity and I worked alongside the youth to support their learning and CAPs and they had the choice to also work alongside me as I studied and made sense of their participation. For example, on the least active end of the participatory spectrum each youth had the opportunity to review and revise their interview transcripts and on the most active end they co-analyzed the data with me. This flexible design allowed for the youth to participate in research activities as their interest and availability varied throughout the research process.

This critical qualitative study took place over ten months with a total of 10 participants between 18 and 32 years old from diverse social locations (Table 1). The participants in this study constituted what Torre et al. (2008) refer to as the “contact zone” as a “space where very differently positioned youth and adults are able to experience and analyze power inequities, together” (p. 28). Data was generated using various qualitative methods, including: participant observations of the monthly meetings, experiential interviews, cultural artifact elicitation interviews about the youth-produced creative action projects, gathered and generated cultural artifacts. The interpretation and analysis of the data was conducted using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Based upon the themes, and informed by Bruner (1990, 1991, 2004), I then constructed narratives of participation from the data. Additionally, I conducted two iterations of participatory analysis with the youth in order to attend to both youths’ lives and experiences as well as the structural constraints that mediated them (Weis & Fine, 2012). This paper focuses on the cultural artifact elicitation interview and participatory analysis #1 (PA #1) as productive methods for generating the conditions for “places of possibility.”

Cultural Artifact Elicitation Interviews

The CAP was a new component to TA’s programming and I agreed to take a lead role in supporting youths’ projects at the beginning of our research partnership. The CAP was framed as a way for youth to take action in their own communities with the underlying premise that creative processes provide a safer space for youths to express their ideas and experiences with gender and violence. Veronica, the educational coordinator, described the CAPs as a way to extend TA’s work beyond the classroom and into youths’ communities, thereby creating a broader network that might enable more long-term action and engagement (personal communication, April 11, 2014). The CAPs were youth-driven, based on a topic or theme of their choice, and were open to any creative format: visual and/or textual compositions, public art, social media, zines, social action, performance, song, dance, group dialogues, and so on.

I drew upon artifact mediated research methods (see Cole, 1995; Pahl & Roswell, 2011) to engage participants in a cultural artifact elicitation interview. This method extended Liebenberg’s (2009) claim that visual research methods are considered valuable tools for researchers working as “border crossers” in communities and cultural contexts that are not their own, in that they enable different ways to confront issues of power, representation, collaboration and participation in research contexts to cultural artifacts. This approach shifted the interest from the image or artifact as a static representation of meaning to a view of cultural artifacts as mediational means (Pahl & Roswell, 2011). Drawing on this idea, I used cultural artifacts to elicit stories from participants about their creative action projects that occurred within TA and community settings. This focus on artifacts in relation to participation shifted agency to the youths and foregrounded their processes of meaning making and identity construction. In this way, the participants’ cultural artifacts

were cultural tools that constituted and expressed ways of knowing and identities in the making that moved with youth across their various communities. Another strength of elicitation interviews is the potential for participants and researchers to develop a collaborative relationship and negotiate power by having the participants decide the focal point of an interview (Clark-Ibanez, 2007). I encouraged them to sketch their meaning making practices through a focus on something that was important and relevant to them by inviting the participants to determine the initial content for the interview.

The cultural artifact elicitation interviews took place toward the end of the YGM project after the youths had completed their CAPs. I asked each participant to bring a cultural artifact that they felt represented their CAP to the interview. I invited participants to tell me about their artifacts and followed up with probing questions aimed to solicit information about the meaning of the artifact in relation to their CAP. The goal of this interview was to examine youths' meaning making in practice: the participants' acting with mediational means (cultural artifacts) across the contextual layers of their participation (the CAPs). Cultural artifact elicitation interviews were conducted with Aliza, Brenda, Elia, Sarah, and Verity. The interviews lasted between a half an hour to two hours and were audio or video recorded based on the participants' preference and later transcribed. Descriptions and images of the creative projects are presented in the following participation narratives.

Participatory Analysis

Weis and Fine (2012) advocated that researchers utilize a “critical bifocality” when investigating people's lives and communities by paying equal attention to the structural constraints that mediate them. Fine (2014) described participatory analysis as a means for practicing bifocality that could potentially destabilize dominant narratives and result in co-constructed counter-narratives. A participatory analysis is a method of analysis whereby researchers engage with their participants as experts and co-researchers to help refine understandings of the research and data (Fine, 2014). Particularly valuable to this work is the potential for participatory methods to destabilize dominant narratives through the co-construction of counter-narratives, such as a “youth activist.”

In this study, I conducted two iterations of participatory analysis of the data. The first is referred to as PA #1 because it was conducted first chronologically at the August monthly meeting with Brenda, Elia, Hermione, Sarah, and Verity. It focused on the experiential interviews and contributed to an evolving understanding of an activist identity within the TA framework. Participatory analysis #2 (PA #2) took place after the youths' commitment to TA was complete and focused on the video data of the monthly meetings. It was conducted with two participants—Brenda and Sarah—over two coding sessions. In this paper, for the sake of brevity, I focus on PA #1.

The experiential interviews took place at the beginning of the research with the aim of getting to know the participants and began with an invitation for them to tell me a story of how they came to social justice work. The interviews were the first time I sat down one-on-one with most of the youth and they were invaluable to relationship building. The timing of these interviews coincided with Veronica's resignation and Hermione's appointment as the interim educational coordinator, which situated me as the constant for the group. The timing of and the interviews themselves created a strong relational foundation with the youths that is evidenced in the following participation narratives. The change within TA and the YGM leadership created an additional layer of complexity to this work. I was not a part of TA, yet I found myself feeling responsible for the youths' participation experiences. I grappled with this throughout the final months of the research

and reconciled it by prioritizing my relationships with the young people. Participatory analysis #1 took place after all of the experiential interviews were conducted and transcribed. I provided the participants with their interview transcripts to review, edit, and clarify them as they wished. I then conducted two close readings of each interview transcript and additional readings to identify themes and stories across the interviews. Based on these readings, I constructed two emergent themes: 1) the value and role of community, and 2) social justice as a learning process. These themes provided anchors for the opening dialogue in PA #1 while being vague enough in the aim of opening up broad discussion and debate in a relevant and meaningful way.

I brought the initial findings to the August monthly meeting and conducted an hour-long participatory analysis with Brenda, Elia, Hermione, Sarah, and Verity that was video recorded. The purpose of PA #1 was to check my own emergent understandings of the data with the participants' understandings and to co-construct meanings together with the participants. This participatory analysis included three distinct activities: 1) analysis dialogue, 2) writing reflection, and 3) dialogue. I presented the two emergent themes as prompts to guide the analysis dialogue. Through this conversation, the participants clarified TA as a particular kind of community—to be in relation to and with others—and elaborated upon what it meant to them as a place of activism and learning. I then began a ten-minute writing exercise by reading the following prompt: "Write a letter to anyone, dead or alive, about either or both of the narratives and how you hold them in your body." With this prompt, I aimed to engage participant reflections on their embodied experiences in order to link their consciousness with their actions (Bruner, 2004) toward a deeper meaning of the data and their participation. After the letter writing session, Brenda and Verity read their letters out loud to the group while we listened, responded, and shared ideas. All of the participants discussed their personal experiences and unique activist trajectories.

I took extensive field notes before, during and after the participatory analysis. After the meeting, I watched the video of the participatory analysis while taking notes two times to examine the dynamic process of the group as we co-constructed and negotiated new meanings and understandings of the data together. I used these field notes to revise the initial findings according to the participants' reflection and dialogue. At this stage, I also drew upon cultural artifacts (i.e., organizational documents) to elaborate upon and develop the narrative findings.

The research design and participatory methods generated "places of possibility" with the participants. I prioritized relationship building in the experiential interviews which provided a solid foundation between the youth and me. The timing of the leadership change centralized and privileged my role and relationships with the youth. The PA #1 then provided an opportunity for the youth to do important relational work together as we made meaning of their participation. Relationships were key to both of the emergent findings and something all of the youths hoped to gain from TA. The reflective activity shifted the focus to the embodied aspects of social justice work and prompted affective responses. Immediately following PA #1, Elia shared a personal story about her strained relationship with her brother. For the first time in their 10 months of participating at TA, the youth shared about their personal lives and struggles with taking on an activist identity. Around the table, we all shared stories about feelings of isolation and alienation from loved ones due to our engagement with social justice work. This conversation would not have taken place if it had not been for the relational work that had come before it through the research practices.

Fine (2008) argued that in participatory projects, expert validity must include "plural and subjugated expertise" to the traditional standards of expertise because there is an explicit commitment within the paradigm to support, honor, and develop varied knowledges and explicitly trouble

traditional and hegemonic notions of who is the expert (p. 223). This research practice was designed to recognize and elevate the youths' local knowledges as research practices through conversations, contestations, and agreements. The data, interpretations, and meanings that were constructed through these emergent methodologies provide the foundation for the descriptive narratives that follow.

Narratives of Participation

This analysis draws upon the data corpus to explore how youths' participation at TA and in this collaborative research practice generated the conditions for "places of possibility" to emerge. This analysis was guided by the following question: To what extent did participation in TA generate the conditions for "places of possibility" and catalyze youths' emerging activist identities? I present three data-driven narratives of participation: Sarah, Verity, and Brenda². The narratives include descriptions and reflections of their CAP and focus on youths' identity construction at TA. This analysis generated two key themes related to a youth activist identity: 1) the importance of relationships and community, and 2) the value of taking action. I maintained the informal tone and loose grammatical structure of the youths' speech in order to provide a sense of their voices. The narratives are told from the first-person perspective of the participant. These co-constructed stories bring to the fore the "places of possibility" that emerged through the intersections of neoliberalism and youths' participation.

Sarah

My creative action project was very personal and it was a way for me to not just think it, but move towards expressing it. The goal was to work against the identities that society sanctions and assigns. We (Aliza, Sarah, and Kristen) created an event called, US: Un/limiting ourSelves. I'm really interested in the idea of "passing" which comes from the idea of being able to pass as the dominant race, sex, gender and so on. To me, passing implies failure because it means we are "trying to be" and fit into narrowly defined "norm or acceptable (passable)" identities, rather than just being. When we are trying to pass we are reinforcing yet another binary or criteria in the multitude of prescribed identities. I wish that we could stop trying TO BE and we each just WERE.

We set up a space at an Arts and Craft Market and invited people to write their identity statements on pieces of muslin and then put it in a jar and afterwards they could reflect and paint on the mural structure we had and/or make buttons with Aliza. I wanted to reach as many people as possible and I just envisioned like passers-by either being like: "Oh, it's just another bunch of those activist groups or whatever" or really kind of straight ahead people approaching it and being intrigued, even if they're not going to contribute to the art.

I choose this *journalllll*, which is very *emmmpty*, as the artifact that represents my CAP because it speaks a lot to my, like, I think when I first brought this idea to Kristen and I was like, I'm all about ideas and abstract thoughts and I am always thinking and I'm very insular and I never put anything into action. That has been every journal I've ever started. Despite knowing how cathartic it can be for me and how I love writing and I love poetry, but I never make the time for it as strictly as I would school work or whatever. This one is the only one where I kind of was like: "don't put guilt on yourself for not filling the pages." And so I have three or four things in here, but they're super meaningful. Tying it in to this project, like, this is the first time that, with a little

² These narratives were selected to highlight the breadth of forms and topics of the CAPs and their potential to illustrate Holland and Gómez's (2013) criteria in relation to "places of possibility."

bit of encouragement from Kristen, that I put something into action and I think that's really, for a lot of us at TA that may be the harder part for our personalities; that shift to actually doing it. I think a lot of people were like: "I can't believe I could do that, you know?"

I was reflecting on the CAP a bit and there were stages along the way that felt super empowering. Getting rejected for the grant and from certain people, but then getting connected to others and meeting with the city and even building the structure all felt empowering. It didn't feel as good on the day of the event. I thought that maybe once we hung up the web of identity statements (see Figure 1) I'd have more of a feeling of success or accomplishment. What I did get from stringing up the statements was that people who came by wanted to contribute and that made me think that maybe if we had done the project in a different setting, like by ourselves or not in such a kind of contrived setting of an arts and crafts market where people are more focused on consuming, rather than creating, then maybe we would have been received differently and I would have felt differently. It just *needs more*. It needs a little bit more confidence and development and a different setting and...I compare it to what I think a public art installment is "supposed to" look like. I definitely have that "supposed to" perfectionism thing. I mean, I don't even know if there's a standard for public art installations, but there was something that I can't put my finger on that was missing. The big thing for me was that this was the first time, with a little bit of encouragement, I put something into action and I think that's really what I got from TA.



Figure 1. Sarah hanging 'web of identities' after CAP.

I'm very much in my own head so TA has really been about building my own self-awareness. Right now I'm practicing being honest about what I know and don't know and what I'm good at and not good at. I want to educate myself and reach out to other people that maybe don't have an in-depth knowledge, but don't want to admit it. There's a difference between saying and doing. I'm just at the point where I'm starting to do. I'm becoming an advocate. The YGM group and TA was a space for me to be around people that share my curiosity and love of learning. This is the first time I've been part of a group where we have these kinds of conversations and just be in a group of likeminded people. I got the sense from most of our group that we all just wanna know more about diversity and meet new and different people.

I don't feel like I've been able to commit as much as I had thought I would or wanted to. Just in terms of like work and availability and timing. So, that's made me feel a bit removed and

distant from the YGM group. I'm still glad I did it. I definitely learned and grew from the experience so I'm happy. I ended up getting a lot of facilitation experience at work because of my participation, which was really my main purpose for joining TA. I got to co-facilitate a group that was focused on employment-related skills for "at risk" young people and once that group was over I was allowed to co-facilitate a group on social entrepreneurship. Both of these were great experiences that I feel good about and that I think will help me towards my goal of becoming a counselor.

To me social justice is about ideals that we're just working towards, but will probably never attain. I'm really excited about raising awareness and just prompting people to think about things differently. To be like: this is cool and it's OK to talk about. I think that's the only way we're gonna make diversity and tolerance acceptable is by educating ourselves and modeling. I think TA is great exposure to that and then showing and teaching that kind of tolerance in schools and with younger kids.

Places of possibility. The narrative of Sarah's participation was centered on learning as a process of self and social transformation. Sarah's activist trajectory was one of personal growth and raising awareness toward a goal of acceptance and appreciation of diversity, which also reflected her values. TA was a significant juncture in Sarah's activist trajectory where she constructed knowledge about social issues and methods of action that shifted her from a place of thinking to doing and becoming an advocate. While she narrated her participation as peripheral, she attributed her membership to the YGM community as central for negotiating the inherent risks involved in her shift toward action.

Sarah's participation narrative reflects the nuanced influence of neoliberalism on youth participation. While Sarah's motivations for joining TA were driven by her ideals of social justice and a love of learning she also was driven to participate to advance her academic and work goals. Also evident in Sarah's narrative are the burdens of responsibility that Sarah has taken on for her own and society's well-being and success. The neoliberal ethos of individuality, competitiveness, and achievement had severe consequences for Sarah and she developed a chronic medical condition during her undergraduate career because she "pushed herself too much." Through a market-focused discourse lens, TA was a volunteer opportunity that would make Sarah a competitive graduate school applicant. Through her participation she also gained evidence of her facilitation skills that enabled her to successfully acquire a desired role in her workplace. At the same time, these neoliberal influences intersected with the social practices and relationships of TA that generated "politics of possibility" (Holland & Gómez, 2013) particularly through her CAP. The CAP generated a distinct shift in Sarah's participation narrative whereby she actively embodied social justice and became an activist. As a metaphor for her participation and a place of possibility, Sarah's CAP was about creating a space where people could "be" their many selves and together they could co-construct identities. Although Sarah was initially motivated to join TA for individual gain and career advancement, which she accomplished prior to her CAP, she was compelled to engage in a deeper more personally meaningful way. Sarah's motivation for personal transformation coupled with the relational and embodied nature of the CAP created the conditions for a place of possibility that enabled Sarah's identity construction. This is an inherent contradiction to neoliberal ethos and exemplifies how youth spaces like TA are important because of these generative moments.

Verity

For my CAP I created a workshop called “Let’s Read-efine YA Lit” on diversifying young adult literature. I choose these documents as artifacts that represent my CAP (see Figure 2, next page). The first was my original project timeline printed on recycled paper that have essays of mine that I’ve submitted for class, um, and the other was the email exchange that I had with the librarian that was like my pitch for the project and her response. It’s really hard to live up to my own standards of what it means to accomplish something. I basically wanted to kind of show a comparison of what I had initially thought the project would be and then what it eventually became.

I tried to relax and just roll with the momentum for my CAP. I’m lucky that what I study—English and Gender Studies—is so close to what I like, live and feel and, and breath every single day. It’s what I’m most interested in and my friends would tell you I talk about them all the time. So partnering with the library to create a workshop on diversity in books was in a way a representation of me and what I am passionate about. When Hermione first suggested I contact the library I was totally apprehensive, but I am so glad that I did. I’m still elated that the library was so awesome to work with and the folks at the #WeNeedDiverseBooks Campaign were totally on board. I could not have imagined it any better. I think this project was successful, and I feel good about it because I do value teamwork and working with people you can trust. It was really fun and I think having [author] and Hermione there to, um, assist with the development of the workshop itself was extremely valuable because that was the part that was mostly new to me. This experience kind of showed me the value of working with others as also worthwhile helps me resist my impulse to do everything by myself.

I was a tiny bit disappointed that there were so few people at the workshop, but I feel like this is just a starting point and it doesn’t have to stop there. This doesn’t have to be the only time I talk about or do this kind of thing so it doesn’t really feel like the end. So, yeah, I’m really proud. I know that at the beginning of TA I talked about how I was reluctant to identify myself as an activist because I feel like I hadn’t done anything yet; this feels like I actually did something. Now I’d tentatively call myself an activist and that’s pretty cool. I’m totally thrilled with the entire project. Another really cool thing is that now I have these connections to the Library and to the #WeNeedDiverseBooks Campaign. Being a teen librarian or building a Canadian counterpart to the #WeNeedDiverseBooks Campaign would be total dream jobs! I do think that being a part of TA has been a really valuable experience, and I’m glad that I did it. I would consider being involved with it in the future or will probably do something similar.

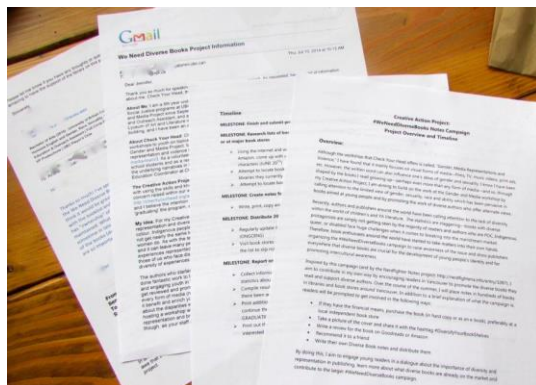


Figure 2. Verity's cultural artifact for her CAP

My first foray into activism is embarrassing, and I think about it a lot when I'm working in schools or with young people. I wish some teacher or adult would have sat me down and said: Look, this is why what you are doing is wrong, it's bad. I kinda feel a responsibility to do that now. To explain to kids the ethics behind issues and why certain types of activism and campaigns are actually wrong. It makes me want to put up warning signs on how to not have a white savior complex. It's really subtle, but so important with activist work that there is explicit attention to power dynamics so that we don't just go into situations with the attitude like: I know what's right and I'm here to save you. Cuz, ya know, that's really dangerous and oppressive, but just in a different way. That's part of why I joined TA. I really wanted to make an impact with the students and young people who participated in the workshops. Over time, I ultimately came to see the value in the workshops as social action and as a place where we were able to build skills and confidence that enabled us to go out and do our own thing.

I'm beginning to see how I might be able to blend my values and my passions toward a potential career or future opportunity. I love books and I appreciate those books that generate a community of readers. For example, a book might be aesthetically good, but I'm really impressed by books if there's really great community that builds up around it or a lot of people that talk about it or connect to it on a personal level. I want to be the kind of author not so much that people would say like: "Oh, this author's a genius," but rather: "I really connected to this." Being able to create that for other people is really important for me, like, building community and make people feel welcome and that they have a place, whether that's through a book or a space.

As a writer and lover of young adult fiction a metaphor for my activist trajectory is like a superhero in the movies who is just realizing his powers and he does something unexpected and then he just stands there looking at his giant hands being like, what? I'm still learning so much and I feel like I have this unwieldy power. I feel clumsy in the way that I potentially deal with things and I worry about that. Then I try to think about how I could carry that differently, and instead of looking down at my hands, once in a while look up at the rest of the world and take a step forward even if it does involve some risks. Trying not to worry about learning everything first before you jump in. That's something I'm still working out.

Places of possibility. The narrative of participation crafted for Verity illustrates how books and stories are tools for creating connection and community, or a "place of possibility." Verity described her activist trajectory through her participation at TA and in the stories she told about herself. She talked about the power of stories in shaping our perceptions and identities, and she used books and stories to communicate and connect with others. By talking about herself through stories, Verity articulated that her participation in TA bridged different aspects of her selves toward an activist identity that centered around values of fairness and loyalty.

TA served as a critical point in Verity's activist trajectory where she shifted from telling stories about activist as a future identity (hope, wish, someday) to telling stories about herself as an activist. After her CAP, Verity tentatively spoke about herself as an activist because she felt she had done something, which was how she defined activist. The tentative nature in which Verity took on this identity highlights that identities are inherently dynamic and contextual as is reflected in her metaphor of an activist as a superhero with giant hands that became tools over time and through practice. Verity exemplified her activist trajectory through her CAP, which was about building connection, and community through art/books. Verity came to see her participation at TA as valuable through her CAP, which she relied on, and applied her workshop facilitation skills in overlapping valued social communities: the library and the #WeNeedDiverseBooks Campaign.

For Verity, TA actively organized and created “places of possibility” whereby she negotiated access to valued social communities and envisioned desired futures. Evident in Verity’s narrative was a sophisticated critique of the structures of domination, especially schooling, that shaped TA (Holland & Gómez, 2013). Verity drew on valued aspects of her participation, especially the facilitation and workshop experience, in order to create a CAP that analyzed power structures in traditional education and contributed to a broader social movement.

Brenda

The CAP was really not my thing. It actually created a lot of anxiety for me, and I didn’t finish it. I might finish it later, but I don’t know. I took this class on film and research and I really loved it. I thought this would be a good opportunity to practice those skills. I met with all the TA staff and we decided I could make a short film about the CAP and about social action in general. I only wanted to make something that would be useful to them otherwise it would feel like a waste of time. I choose the bag that I used to carry the film equipment in as the artifact that symbolizes my CAP. It was a gift from a friend’s wedding that I really love and it says: “Have a Nice Day” on it and makes me smile, which is the opposite of how I felt whenever I looked at it with the cameras and stuff in it.

A few things contributed to me just fizzling out on this. It was originally Amanda’s idea, but then she quit. The revisions on my thesis were a bit unexpected, and so I pushed everything else in my life to the side. I’m a perfectionist and the film equipment I have access to is so shitty. I mean, really, I don’t want to make a shitty film that TA isn’t going to use. What’s the point of that? I went to a few of the folks’ CAPs and they were all pretty cool. But when I watched the footage that I shot at the US event (see Figure 3) I realized just how shitty the equipment was and how bad the film might be. Then I also just started to lose interest in this whole thing. I want to facilitate workshops. That’s what I’m interested in and that’s what I want to do. So, my film for the CAP, we’ll see, whatever, I may finish it, but I doubt it. The only thing that is motivating me to do it is that I told TA that I would do it, and they are excited about it. I don’t want to disappoint them, and I do want to practice filming, so we’ll see.



Figure 3. Brenda working on his CAP at the US event

I’ve always felt very deeply that the world is an unjust and fucked up place. It’s taken me a long time to figure out my place and role in social change. I mean, the activist community is not

the most welcoming especially for a middle-class white dude, yeah. I don't necessarily see activism as necessarily being a catalyst for social change, but it's also just the idea that registering dissent is powerful and important. When we moved to the Westside [neighborhood], I started to get more involved in the queer community and randomly going to marches and stuff. Sometimes, I would go to protests that would have absolutely nothing to do with me. I wanted to be there, so I'd just go and stand there and scream and get mad and be in solidarity with people.

I like being in service of people. In a way, I feel that's a way of getting around a lot of the problematics is by being in solidarity, you're supporting instead of leading, which to me is also a safer space. I've learned from my membership to other communities the value and importance of the background work. Setting up chairs and cleaning bathrooms are just as important as being the face of a movement. Well, maybe not as important, but pretty damn close.

I was looking for a way to be more active and I wanted to have a commitment to a cause that I believed. A friend of mine from school told me about TA so I applied right away. At first TA rejected my application because I'm a grandpa. Seriously, because 32 is too old! Then they were like: oh, join us. You're youth-identified! I was like: no, I'm not. And they were like: well, whatever. So, I showed up and decided that I would go ahead and do it. Anyway, it was so awkward and that was the first time I was branded as "youth identified," it was also the first time I'd ever heard that term before I had a visceral reaction to it. What the f--- does that even mean, youth-identified? I have never and would never call myself a "youth." That set the tone for my whole time with TA; I felt like an outsider or interloper.

It's funny, but I came full circle with TA. They were hiring for the educational coordinator position and at one time that would have been my dream job, but the whole age thing kept me from applying. I absolutely love facilitating the workshops. I hadn't been in a high school since my own shitty experience back in the day and I was totally blown away by the students and everything. It was amazing to see what would happen working with young people – it was really inspiring! I've actually thought about becoming a teacher. The cool thing now, though, is that I'm going to continue to volunteer and facilitate workshops at TA, which is what I always wanted to do. Who knows what will happen in the future, but this definitely looks good on my resume!

I reflected a bit about my experience with TA and besides the age thing it has been an amazing opportunity. So, I decided to call Hermione to talk to her and I was like: congratulations on the job, I'm kind of jealous cuz it's a dream job, but I want you to know what's happened. I told her that I've been made to feel uncomfortable because of the fact that I'm 32 and like, apparently, that's really old and I told her about a negative experience I had with Veronica. So, I had this conversation with Hermione and she was like: yes, that is really awkward and we've had a few other people talk about this with us too and she said that she would talk to Jacelyn [TA Executive Director] about it. Anyways, she came back to me later and was like: it's about ally-ship. And I was like: yessss. I can say that: I am an ally. So that was great! I love what TA does, and I've really enjoyed getting to know and work with Hermione who I feel is a really special person.

Places of possibility. The narrative of Brenda's participation centered around feelings of in/exclusion and finding a place within the activist community and TA more specifically. TA's loosely defined criteria for participants to be "youth identified"—which he was vehemently averse to—resulted in him feeling like he was on the periphery or an outsider. Implicit within Brenda's resistance to "youth" as a social construct was a critique of what it means to be a young person living in a neoliberal era and included having access to valued participation opportunities. Brenda's participation narrative illustrates how neoliberalism generates significant feelings of

burden and anxiety for individuals. For Brenda, these feelings related to the “youth” classification and what that means in today’s society; as well as his uncompleted CAP, which made him feel guilty and anxious. Brenda’s activist trajectory arched toward his identification as an ally who works in solidarity with others and this paralleled his participation at TA.

Similar to Verity, Brenda offered an overt critique of the “structures of domination” that influenced TA. His narrative highlights the nuances of how neoliberalism has influenced youth participation, generally speaking as well as specifically at TA. Brenda told stories about his desire to be a part of something bigger, “an us” or a broader social movement that was working toward the ideal of social justice (Holland & Gómez, 2013). At the same time, he recognized the value of TA as a volunteer opportunity that would result in individual benefits and a stronger resume. Through his participation, Brenda understood learning as transformation—“changing the way people think”—and the workshops were exactly the kind of social action that he wanted to do. It was in the local places of practice, the workshops, that Brenda found an opportunity to work in solidarity with youth toward social change. Brenda also actively took on the role of co-researcher and participated in all of the data generation as well as both rounds of the participatory analysis. The activist and research practices generated a place of possibility for Brenda where he was able to do things he loved—researching and learning—while gaining skills and experience that would make him more competitive in the neoliberal era.

Discussion

The participation narratives are woven together with two of Holland and Gómez’s (2013) criteria for assessing the transformative potential of social movements, first is youths’ constructions of identities and subjectivities, and second is an orientation to building a community and broader social movement. Most yPAR and youth activist scholarship focuses on specific campaigns or projects (see Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Jenkins et al., 2016; Kirshner, 2015) while much of the civic participation literature tends to address either the impact on individual development or the ways structural factors influence youth engagement (Camino & Zeldin, 2002; Youniss et al. 2002). This work builds upon and extends this body of scholarship with a perspective that focuses on the potential of youth activist and research practices for generating individual *and* social transformation through a lens of “places of possibility.” I defined “places of possibility” as literal and metaphorical spaces where people are afforded the tools and resources necessary to imagine alternative realities, identities, and systems than what currently exist, primarily through creative and activist practices. Conceptualizing TA as a “place of possibility” began with the youths’ shared “love of learning” and desire to connect with others to create change.

TA provided a place where youth grappled with identities and subjectivities *in relation* to the broader activist community that extended beyond TA. Both Sarah and Verity’s CAPs were framed by their desire to generate connection and build community. Simultaneously, the CAPs enabled Sarah and Verity to construct their activist identities by taking action toward creating a collective “US.” Brenda’s participation involved contentious negotiations with TA and other activist communities, but over time he constructed an activist identity based in solidarity and allyship where he was “in service” to the broader collective. As a “place of possibility,” TA was a space where youth explored who they were and who they could become as activists.

Perfectionism and high standards were issues all of the youth at TA struggled with and the CAPs heightened this for many of them. The narratives illustrate how the relationships, dialogue, and learning practices of TA enabled the youth to make meaning of those challenges through their

participation. Importantly, in the neoliberal era “places of possibility” also provide youth opportunities to develop skills, experiences, and expertise that translate to job and education markets. These “places of possibility” are significant in that they center youth experiences, foster learning and identity construction, and contribute to the imagining and building of a broader social movement.

Conclusion

The youths’ participation narratives shed light on the multiple, fluid, partial, and situated nature of youth activism and participation. They elucidate what it means, feels and looks like to be an activist in neoliberal Canada for the young people in this study. Together, with the youths, we explored many different renderings of social justice, including: what it means to be an ally and in solidarity with others, advocacy, tolerance and acceptance, art as activism and artist activists. The YGM group co-constructed stories about the benefits of an activist identity that entailed expressions of hope, joy, inspiration, excitement, and determination. Throughout this study, participants described the various struggles and challenges along their activist trajectories. During PA #1 the youths articulated their similar experiences of alienation and isolation in particular, from their families. This moment of sharing was an emergent “place of possibility” where the youth connected around their vision for different more socially just world that contributed to the creation of a collective “us.” Their stories reflected the idea that to be an activist involves understanding that you can never learn enough, know enough or do enough. Occupying an oppositional stance to the status quo required critical thinking, reflection, action, and provocation. Also evident were traces of burden and guilt that Kennelly (2011) associated with youth activist culture in Canada from situating responsibility solidly on individuals for making themselves and the world better. This privileging of the autonomous individual reinforces the illusion that individuals are fully agentic beings while denying the reality of structural and contextual constraints. These constraints and pressures imposed on youth by neoliberalism expose the need and value of “places of possibility” for young people to survive and thrive.

The participation narratives illustrated how research practices can reinforce youth activist spaces and youths’ lived experiences. Moments of connection and community emerged through personal sharing of experiences and contributed to the conditions of a “place of possibility” were enabled by the research practices. Although TA failed to provide all of the participants with access to a community where they built long-term sustainable relationships, it proved to be an important and valuable “place of possibility” for the youths—some more than others—to reflect upon, discuss, envision, experiment, and practice to construct a personal understanding of an activist identity. In particular, the CAPs enabled some of the youths to take up an activist identity as they translated their vision of a better world into action. The emergent methods described in this paper provide a way of thinking through the ways in which research that is explicitly relational and participatory in order to generate “places of possibility” with young people.

In this paper, I have argued that in the current neoliberal era “places of possibility” are increasingly rare, yet increasingly important for diverse urban youth. This work points to the significance of narratives, relationships, and creativity in creating fissures in the neoliberal conditions. Narratives are tools that enable us to build relationships with others and to make meaning of our learning in relation. Through these relationships with others we are able to face the risks involved in imagining and creating new narratives, identities, and possibilities. Building social movements

that challenge oppression and work toward justice relies on our ability to connect and build relationships with others. It is these relationships that will support creative risk-taking in places of learning and the kind of critical engagement that can create new opportunities and “places of possibility.”

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