UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, MERCED

“Activating Aspirational Awakening: A Youth Media Way to Right Thinking”

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Interdisciplinary Humanities

by

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2024

Dedication

Hey kid, alone in your room wishing the world would stop.
Cheer up!
Go outside and play. You'll discover the most awesome thing –
You.

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Acknowledgments

This project began in fear and ended in love. I am especially grateful to the people and departments at the University of California, Merced who believed in me, and properly guided me along the way: Robin DeLugan, Kit Myers, Anne Zanzucchi, Irenee Beattie, and Daniel Thompson; Interdisciplinary Humanities Graduate Group and affiliates, and the Graduate Division and the School of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences.

Thank you to all who financially supported my work over the years: Graduate Division and the Graduate Dean's Dissertation Fellowship; Ignacio López-Calvo and Christina Lux in the Center for the Humanities; and the Resource Center for Community Engaged Scholarship. Externally, I want to thank the Henry Luce Foundation and the Gay and Lesbian Armenian Society for seeing value in my community-engaged projects with children and youth.

I am grateful to Julia Rabig, my Dartmouth College master's thesis advisor, and to all other teachers who inspired and supported my desire to shake off disciplinarity.

I love my family who always loved me unconditionally, even when I could not love myself. For decades, they saved me from myself by always showing up when I needed them most.

I am very thankful to Michelle Brinkop, Medical Director at UC Merced, who helped me for eight years in a way no other person in Merced County was able to offer. You bought me much peace of mind and saved me time on this journey.

Most of all, I thank God for guiding and protecting me in what has been a wild and wonderful journey, so far. The experiences God has taken me to and through are brilliant phenomena to reflect upon, grow from, and to activate my spirit to continue seeking truth, love, and justice in all my affairs.

Curriculum Vitae

EDUCATION

2024 – Ph.D. Interdisciplinary Humanities
University of California – Merced
Advisor: Dr. Robin DeLugan
Dissertation: Activating Aspirational Awakening: A Youth Media Way to Right Thinking

2015 – M.A. Cultural Studies
Dartmouth College
Advisor: Dr. Julia Rabig
Thesis: Bordering on (In)dependence: Indentured Childhood in Colonial America

2002 – M.A. Human Communication Studies
University of Denver

1998 – B.A. Speech Communication
George Mason University

PUBLICATIONS

2022. How Did We Get Here, Merced? A Graphic Novel of Race, Class, and Land-Use. Oakland: Urban Habitat.
https://sites.google.com/view/hdwghmerced

2018. Book Review. Raising Children: Surprising Insights from Other Cultures. By David F. Lancy (2017). Dailyhistory.org.

2015. Growing up Rural: New Hampshire Teens Talk About Farm Life. In Myrna Katz Frommer and Harvey Frommer (Eds.). Oral History Reader, Volume XIV. Hanover: Dartmouth College.

2014. Who Needs a Homeland? Romanticism and the (Un)settlement of Modern Day Armenia. Clamantis Journal: 78-88.

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

University of California – Merced, CA

2021 – 2023: Instructor of Record
Introduction to Socio-Cultural Anthropology

2019 – 2023: Guest Lecturer
Principles for Community Engagement

Indigenous Projects: Creative and Critical Approaches for Storytelling
Navigating the Internal Review Board for Field Studies
Belief Systems and Kinship Systems

2016 – 2022: Teaching Assistant
Introduction to Socio-Cultural Anthropology
Biological Anthropology
Ethnographic Research Methods
Ethnomusicology: Music and Meaning
Photographic Messages
History of Law and Civil Rights in the U.S.

2001 – 2002: Instructor of Record
Community College of Aurora – Aurora, CO
Public Speaking

CONFERENCES & INVITED TALKS

February 2024: Reaching: Community-Engagement as Care for Youth Aspiration and Well-being. Paper presented at the Center for Ideas and Society's Care and Repair Conference. Riverside, CA.

December 2023: Resources for Community-Engaged Research. A Meta-analysis of Faculty Involvement, Graduate Student Training, and Community-engaged Scholarship Principles. This teambuilding workshop attended to anti-oppressive and anti-racist principles for diversity, equity, and inclusion in collaborating with local communities. University of California, Merced.

October 2023: A Case Study on Writing God into Community Health: One Bilingual Latinas' Use of Facebook to Tell a Hopeful Story of Breast Cancer. Conference on Community Writing. University of Denver.

March 2023: Into-Beyond-Through the Institution: Agency in Education, Health, and Labor Panel Presentation: How Latinas in Merced County Use Metaphors in Breast Cancer Survivorship. Beyond (Un)Natural Crises, Disasters, And Catastrophes: Ecologies of Care and "Other" Worlds-In Making Conference. University of California, Merced.

October 2022: Not a Cancer "Fight": Centering Latinas' Metaphors in Breast Cancer Narratives through Community Collaboration. With Dalia Magaña, Lorraine Ramos, and Ekta Kandhway. LUCE Workshop. University of California, Merced.

October 2021: Comic Book Writing as an Organizing Tool to Improve Local Communities. Conference on Community Writing. George Washington University.

October 2019: University-Community Partnerships: An Ethnographic Method for Activating Youth Voice for Social Change. Conference on Community Writing. Drexel University.

October 2019: Too Much Schooling, Too Little Education. Facilitated workshop at the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Teaching Symposium. University of California, Merced.

April 2019: The Burdens of Growing up WEIRD. Graduate Division Humanities Day Conference. University of California, Merced.

November 2018: From Apathy to Aspiration: Leadership and Agency among Youth Activists. Paper presented at the American Anthropological Association Annual Meeting, San Jose, CA.

September 2018: Outside the Classroom, We're in the Streets: The Power of Media for Youth Writing. Public talk for the Global Arts, Media, and Writing Studies Lecture Series. Multicultural Arts Center, Merced, CA.

May 2015: Growing Up Rural: The Play-Work of Farm Kids. Poster presented at the Childhoods Conference: Mapping the Landscapes of Childhood II. University of Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada.

January 2015: K-12's Linguistic Landscape and its Limits on Knowledge Production. Paper presented at the Fourth International Conference on Geographies of Children, Youth, and Families, San Diego, CA.

RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

Community Engagement: Projects, Presentations, and Evaluation of Methods
2018 – 2023: University of California, Merced
Meta-analysis team member to review, track, and document community-engaged research initiatives across the humanities and social sciences divisions of the university. Performed PI interviews and bibliography annotations.

Investigated the breast cancer experiences of Spanish-speaking women in the Central Valley of California, with a focus on the cultural logics of religiosity and spirituality in their recovery journey metaphors. Comic research and writing contributor: https://escholarship.org/content/qt2bp1j3n3/qt2bp1j3n3_noSplash_6fd5977a63d1098140e78d1d86ad8621.pdf?t=s2bro0

Interdisciplinary Humanities Graduate Group events coordination and Gateway to Merced project research focused on youth civic/media literacy. Events and research efforts advanced work on building university-community partnerships.

Radical Pursuits: Systems Change toward Social Justice. Dr. Vajra Watson, University of California, Davis, campus talk and downtown public event, with a performance by the UC Merced Step Team and engagement with local high school students and K-12 teachers and administrators.

It Still Takes a Village. Public talk to the youth activist community. Italo-American Lodge, Merced, CA.
https://yli.org/2019/03/it-still-takes-a-village-a-reflection-on-weceds-7th-publication-release/

Community-Engaged Research with Vulnerable Populations. UC Merced Summer Bridge Program on the gains and frustrations associated with collaborating on research with community organizations.

Youth Aspiration: A project with a local community of underrepresented children and teenagers focused on extracurricular community research projects to support efforts to invest in youth engagement with local public decision-making.

2020 – 2022: Youth Leadership Institute
Researcher / Writer role for a community-engaged public humanities project in collaboration with local youth writers. Developed a story about the history of race, class, and land-use that was published and disseminated in comic book form.

2015: Dartmouth College, Telling My Story
Telling Stories for Social Change was a collaborative creative engagement between students and incarcerated women in support of un-silencing women in their search for power, value, and beauty despite their at-home realities and present circumstances. Through creative storytelling and theatrical performance, a message of shared responsibility in facing imperfection, disability, and vulnerability helped break down the walls between people, opening our heads and hearts to imagining the best possible future.

Writing Research
2015: Dartmouth College, Institute for Writing and Rhetoric
Research Assistant to Christiane K. Donahue on an international project to create a web-based index of multilingual college-level writing studies research. This is an ongoing collaborative endeavor across fifteen countries and ten languages intended to support scholars and students in accessing and finding literature globally.

Community Health Research
2002 – 2005: University of Washington, School of Social Work
Assessment and Retention Specialist to maintain quality control in the enrollment, tracking, treatment assignment, data collection, and retention protocols of a randomized controlled trial for HIV/AIDS prevention. Screened and enrolled candidates, interviewed research subjects, assigned treatment interventions, followed up to assess outcomes, and designed communications.

AWARDS & HONORS

Graduate Dean's Dissertation Fellowship. 2024. University of California, Merced. $23,856.90.
Summer Institute for Community-Engaged Scholarship Fellow. 2023. University of California, Merced. $1,000.00.
Henry Luce Foundation Fellow for Community-Engaged Scholarship. 2022. $7,000.00.
Interdisciplinary Humanities Outstanding Teaching Assistant Award. 2021. University of California, Merced. $500.00.
Interdisciplinary Humanities Outstanding Teaching Assistant Award. 2020. University of California, Merced. $1,000.00.
Henry Luce Foundation Fellow for Community-Engaged Scholarship. 2020. $7,000.00.
Interdisciplinary Humanities Outstanding Research and Scholarship Award. 2019-2020. University of California, Merced. $467.00.
GALAS Scholars Award. 2019. Gay and Lesbian Armenian Society, Los Angeles, CA. $1,000.00.
Grad Slam Research Presentation Finalist. 2019. University of California, Merced. $250.00.
GRAD-EXCEL Peer Mentor Award. 2018-2019. University of California, Merced. $500.00.
Public Humanities Research Fellowship. 2018. Resource Center for Community-Engaged Scholarship. University of California, Merced. $2860.00.
Spanish Language Study Grant. 2018. The Center for the Humanities. University of California, Merced. $1,110.00.
Research Travel Grant. 2017. Humanities Research Institute. Humanists@Work Silicon Valley Workshop. San Jose, CA. $500.00.
Interdisciplinary Humanities Recruitment Scholarship. 2016. University of California, Merced. $1,500.00.
Professional Development Fellowship. 2014. Leslie Center for the Humanities, Dartmouth College. $500.00.
Graduate Research Grant. 2014. School of Graduate Studies, Dartmouth College. $500.00.

NON-ACADEMIC EMPLOYMENT

911 Public Safety Communication Center, New Hanover County
2011 – 2012, Wilmington, NC
Police and Medical Telecommunicator

Seattle Police Department, City of Seattle
2008 – 2011, Seattle, WA
911 Dispatcher

Department of Campus Safety, University of Denver
2000 – 2001, Denver, CO

Emergency Communications Dispatcher

UNIVERSITY SERVICE

University of California – Merced
Division of Student Affairs, Registrar External Review Graduate Student Advisor
May 2020
Reviewed academic, personal, and professional growth and use of technology to center students in services and resources.

Leo and Dottie Kolligian Library
April 2019
Served as a "living library book" to the university community. Discussed connections between adverse childhood experiences, coming to terms with personal identity, chronic illness, and my graduate school aspirational awakening.

Interdisciplinary Humanities Graduate Group Delegate Representative
2017 – 2019
Representative for the graduate group in deliberations on decisions made by the Graduate Student Association. Participated in discussions on issues impacting all graduate students. Voted on decisions made. Made recommendations and passed resolutions.

CARE Advisory Board Graduate Student Representative
2016 – 2020
Served the graduate student body to educate and inform about the campus climate concerning issues of sexual violence, domestic violence, and stalking. Member of the CARE Community Outreach Program Committee. Worked with CARE staff and the Division of Student Affairs to launch a White Ribbon Campaign (male advocates against sexual violence).

Dartmouth College
Bystander Initiative Volunteer
2014 – 2015
Campus leadership sexual violence prevention training. Tasked to educate and safely intervene in situations involving inappropriate sexual actions and talk using non-confrontational strategies (i.e., direct, distract, delegate, delay).

ABSTRACT

Think before you act may be backward. In childhood, most of us learned a lot about ourselves, the world, and what it means to live a good and happy life by reading children's books. We gained acceptance of the world and its people as they are rather than try to beat up on, or contest designs for living that differ from our own. Children's books taught us beautiful universal humanisms, like 'live and let live' and 'love is the answer.' In adulthood, detached from childlike principles of kindness, everyday life appears to have normalized selfishness. Living by the principle of humanity-for-all learned so long ago is not always easy. The pressures and expectations of contemporary society can block us from taking the right action. What, then, could be a way back to principled and purposeful living that supports all people? My proposition is simple: don't think, act. This ethnographic project, based on over three years of fieldwork with a youth media organization in California's Central Valley, highlights a method for staying true to the values and virtues learned in childhood. Specifically, it focuses on the unity of a group of young people acting their way into proper orientation to life. They share their personal stories, document community concerns, organize and participate in social justice events, and publish media projects based on the outcomes of their youth-action work. Taken together, action prior to deliberation supports social-emotional well-being and critical-evaluative skills building. Using the idea of 'secret sympathy,' that aura among the group that produces conformity to unity, this field research suggests that a group acting without overthinking produces a sense of belonging that young people need. The hope that permeates this research relates to the journey toward the discovery of one's true self so that values formed foster an awakening to aspirations beyond the limits presented in contemporary society. Aspiration under neoliberal ideals works either against such an awakening or stagnates growth because it locks children and youth in that status quo at moments when they are beginning to see and sense social injustice. This, in turn, produces negative thoughts such as disidentification and maladjustment to reality. Getting active in the world and taking action on literally anything in support of conformity to unity in the name of community health frees young people from dominating social constraints. This supports and activates aspirational awakening to all of life's possibilities, uncontrolled by institutionalized demands.

INTRODUCTION

Fieldwork for this project took place in the Central Valley of California at a youth media organization. Organizations, typically, operate or administer the goals of the group through a collaboration of performances by its member-participants. Organizations have institutions and produce their own core values which guide work relations and responsibilities. Whereas the organization is the entity or enterprise constructed with a mission to do something, institutions generally relate to the things that the organization values. Institutions are "complex social forms that reproduce themselves," says João de Pina-Cabral (Afterword: What Is An Institution?, 2011). We talk about them all the time in our daily lives, yet rarely do we use the word institution to define them. Families, schools, governance, languages - these are all institutions that guide our thoughts and actions. These may be clearly defined or broadly conceived, and generally change over time as changes in organizational structures take place. Or, perhaps it is better to say that organizations and institutions push and pull each other in tension toward achieving a particular outcome. They need each other to exist and to function in the name of accomplishing goals. What, then, does it mean to organize? What does it mean to institutionalize? There is a very curious word used by de Pina-Cabral: complex. What is complex and how does it mean something in the context of organizations that institutionalize our designs for living? First, let me say what I believe it is not. Complexity must not be misunderstood as a linear transition from some notion of primitive into modern. All times and places likely may be defined as complex. I would add to that dynamic since no time or place is static and unchanging. Change is a guaranteed constant. What de Pina-Cabral insists is that the complexity of an institution must be understood in relationship to other institutions. Institutionalizing the nuclear family, for example, complicates and/or directs thought and action toward best practices in our designs for living, such as what kinds of schools or houses should be built and where they should be constructed, and then sorting out related inclusions and exclusions that may or may not exist regarding access to the buidings. Looking at a list of institutions in the Stanford Encyclopedia, de Pina-Cabral says, "There is a strange coherence in the way these examples seem to line up and in what each one of them excludes by its very presence in the list" (478). Institutions, then, are hierarchical and imposing presences in all our lives, so much so that we readily accept them without question. The power to provoke in a desired direction for the so-called common good spills over into everyday reality, and then we wonder why children and youth sometimes have a hard time entering into this dominating fact of life.

The youth media group I worked with operated with a set of institutional values that they focused on as clearly delineated on their website and under the umbrella idea of improving community health. Most importantly, they adamantly stand that investment in youth must come first so they all have a chance to fit themselves for participating in the worlds they inhabit. To function, youth media did not need the help of a kindly anthropologist coming in to support their efforts. Communities don't necessarily need researchers to do the work of improving conditions (Saxton, 2021). Sometimes, academics are met with rejection. At first, I was not openly welcome to join in their

activities. I was met with skepticism, in part based on my superficial identity markers, but mostly because of doubt about the purpose of the research. Research is a bad word, especially among community-based youth organizations (Tuck and Yang, 2014). Nevertheless, I entered. I struggled a bit to find my comfort, but upon reflection I realized that was about me and my fears about being able to collect data. I was anxious. Eventually, when I sought to trust the process, things worked out better; and it is because of my capacity to trust what leadership and youth were accomplishing without overthinking my role or the data that what I present in this project was even possible.

This ethnographic field study describes and interprets the relationship between youth participation in an after-school media program and their emotional growth and skills development to evaluate the role community-based youth organizing has on children's values, hopes, and aspirations for their own lives and the worlds in which they inhabit. It explicitly looks at the actions taken as the starting place for making sense of self, unfolding in the world. That is, action is the motivator for growth rather than some form of situated learning as the primary place where discoveries begin. Here, youth have a bit more freedom for, as opposed to freedom from, expressing things in their own ways and on their own terms.

Set in a part of California non-Californians, and even some Californians, have never heard of let alone seen, this media group thrives in one of the most socioeconomically disadvantaged parts of the region. On average, the overall poverty, child poverty, unemployment, and food insecurity rates for Merced are the third highest in the state of California. This is especially so in southwest Merced and east Merced County, including the towns of Planada, Le Grand, and Beachwood/Franklin. Furthermore, as has been evidenced by a wealth of scholarship on poverty, people who struggle to meet daily demands also face intersecting obstacles in the forms of diminished social and cultural mobility, not the least of which is physical mobility in a sprawling and urbanizing society. Merced, both the city and the county, are historically rural and agricultural regions, though other businesses and industries have been growing for at least the past decade when the University of California's Merced campus opened in 2005. College campuses impact cities and regions in major ways as they grow, and often there are growing pains that emerge during expansion (e.g., rising housing costs).

Four years after the University of California, Merced was founded Merced became part of The California Endowment's ten-year initiative called Building Healthy Communities (BHC). This collaboration among local and regional community agencies, political and cultural institutions, and community members endeavored to address basic security and safety needs operated in support of many groups and their ideas. One of the goals of BHC is to support positive youth development. Over my time at the university and in the field, I built intimate partnerships with BHC and worked alongside the youth media group to weave together inspiring growth presentations and products for local consumption and use for social change. From that backdrop, though, there is much hope among young people in Merced County. As this dissertation alludes to, we can build healthy communities when we work together for the common good. When we seek to uplift all, all get uplifted. The young people have a special interest, and I would be dishonest to say helping children and youth isn't my goal. However, no group exists in a bubble. All groups interact. It is from this real-world situation that I have come to focus

on the role of *taking action in society* as the best starting point for social change that supports all people, regardless of ages, backgrounds, identities, or affiliations.

During my time in the field, I attended a *Schools Not Prisons* event at the Merced Multicultural Arts Center where panelists discussed experiences with the barriers youth face in Merced's poorest neighborhoods, and the limits dwelling in an unhealthy environment places on children. During the event, a screening of the 2016 documentary film *They Call Us Monsters* further illustrated the kinds of disparities and deprivations that can lead youth to commit depraved acts and ultimately end up in prison. In the youth context – although there are racial and gender differences in some places – prisons have been improving access to facilitate a way out of crime. For example, in the film the teenage boys were writing their own film as a way to narrate their lives, with the hope that it will empower them to change for a better future. Nevertheless, what is painstakingly real about socioeconomic inequities is that it takes the whole community to improve the conditions for people trapped on the bottom physically, and in their own heads emotionally. In other words, no individualistic effort can solve deep poverty, and no single practice of care can affect the kinds of personal growth described in this dissertation. With the inspiration of BHC in mind, this dissertation seeks to elaborate the importance of supporting positive youth development through community action. It is about how acting rightly in the world helps young people become right with themselves and the world.

Combining the philosophical underpinnings on human agency and becoming (Callard, 2018; Ortner, 2006) and fears rising about the true human condition (Critchley, 2007) with tacit awareness (Giddens, 1976 and 1979) that stimulates action, this dissertation agrees that youth ought not face placation as they work to improve local conditions (Kennelly, 2011). Action research, then, will be taken to heart but also softly challenged. In the context of youth activism, I shall argue for focus on individual changes rather than social changes as the results of actions taken. Much has been written about action research (Allen, 2013; Madison, 2012; Stringer, 2007; Tuhiwai Smith, 2021; Rao and Walton, 2004). Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2021) says, "Intervening takes action research to mean literally the process of being proactive and of becoming involved as an interested worker for change" (148). This, I believe, is what the youth journalists seek to accomplish. However, as my research suggests, outcomes sought are rarely met, but still something happens. The individual changes. From this perspective on action research, practicing social change regardless of the outcome may still be useful for youth social-emotional adjustment and skills development.

Effectively, think before you act may be backward. In childhood, most of us learned a lot about ourselves, the world, and what it means to live a good and happy life by reading children's books. We gained acceptance of the world and its people as they are rather than try to beat up on, or contest designs for living that differ from our own. Children's books taught us beautiful universal humanisms, like 'live and let live' and 'love is the answer.' In adulthood, detached from childlike principles of kindness, everyday life appears to have normalized selfishness. Living by the principle of humanity-for-all that we learned so long ago is not always easy. The pressures and expectations of contemporary society can block us from taking the right action. What, then, could be a way back to principled and purposeful living that supports all people?

My proposition is simple: don't think, act. This ethnographic project, based on over three years of fieldwork with a youth media organization in California's Central Valley, highlights a method for staying true to the values and virtues learned in childhood. Specifically, it focuses on the unity of a group of young people acting their way into proper orientation to life. They share their personal stories, document community concerns, organize and participate in social justice events, and publish media projects based on the outcomes of their youth-action work. Taken together, action prior to deliberation supports social-emotional well-being and critical-evaluative skills building. Using the idea of 'secret sympathy,' that aura among the group that produces conformity to unity, this field research suggests that a group acting without overthinking produces a sense of belonging that young people need and activates aspirational awakening to all of life's possibilities.

In this project, I talk about watching out for distractions and disruptions. However, stumbling in our own footsteps is often a part of growing up. It is also key to the processes used to collect data. It's an understatement to call my methodological approach disobedient. The process has been emergent, at times necessarily ad hoc, and many times scrapped altogether. Community-engaged research methods don't always flow out from the original plan or design easily. I dare say this is especially the case when working with children and youth, but then to say that sets them against adults as if being of a certain age prepares a group to participate in some activity or discussion. Age cannot be that different all the time. Some scholars argue that childhood as age-delineated is entirely a social invention and/or historically unaccounted for or unknown based on age (Bellingham, 1988; Cunningham, 2006; Hendrick, 2008; Zelizer, 1994). Nevertheless, my experience shows that there are times when age intersects with public policies, and resources or access to the means to participate in organizational activities may be limited. Uber. Lyft. My car. Often, they were the only routes available to physically move youth media participants around so they could get involved and stay connected.

Nevertheless, age can and does change things when it comes to acting in the community. The methods employed considered this from the standpoint of lived realities regarding safety as well as theoretically from a social constructionist perspective. Children are not passive recipients of culture. Rather, identities emerge in and through social (inter)actions entered into. This returns me to the emergent, sometimes exigent, nature of ethnographic methodological considerations. Leave the kids alone, I would say to myself. Let them be, and we will do what comes. In many ways, this is how I arrived at my argument that taking action - literally, doing anything - is a solution for situating oneself in the world, becoming comfortable in one's own body and mind, and forming and affirming values that lead to aspirations. In the first few months, I confess that I felt uncomfortable in the sense that I was worried about what we were actually doing. I proposed project ideas, community actions, and even implemented a media literacy curriculum to the group which didn't pan out. I will talk a little bit about the latter in two of the chapters on personal assessment and deliberation. I was stressed out. I was worried I didn't know what I was doing. What a relief it was for me to learn that it didn't matter what we were doing. What mattered was that we did something that pushed forth liberation of self from social convention. Anything, I discovered, can motivate that push through the secret sympathy that enveloped the media group.

Don’t think; act. The way to improve the world is to improve oneself by acting well first, and then reflecting and coming to a, albeit preliminary and always open to change, conclusion about the meaning in the action that started the ball rolling. This is the guiding philosophy by which I have come to know better who I am, how to interact with others, how to engage with the real world, and what it means to find not the purpose of life but purpose in life. I learned these things because I was willing to believe that what at first appeared to be the truth of a situation was not the case. I opened my mind through acting in the world, and this helped me to better understand how to come to clearer conclusions, however incomplete. I learned these things by watching and working with the youth journalists highlighted in this ethnographic research. They taught me that doing the right thing can be automatic, through an inarticulable conscience and spirit of care that permeates spaces where investment in youth is prized.

I came to volunteer my time to help children and youth organize around ideas important to them. As they propped up their interests, investigated, grappled with, and produced media projects about local issues and ideas at public facing events, I grew to understand how important taking action can be for feeling a part of the group and for social adjustment to the present day conditions of the community. The action helped them to feel like they belong and supported social and emotional well-being for this group of young writers who, at many times, have had the sense that the world did not want them. I can relate, and as I reflect on my journey with them, I sometimes cry.

Youth media, the focused context for this dissertation, was the platform but was not the outcome. Media literacy was a key descriptor of the fieldwork, but it was not the product. Identifying challenges to status quo social ideas centered much debate and deliberation, but raising stakes on future directions for local conditions did not wrap up this writing. If I knew how it turned out, I would tell you or at least offer hints and glimpses of what is to come. My brain cannot gather, however, because the conclusion can only be known in the present, and we have just begun to trace this story. The journey begins here, in the Central Valley of California, at a youth media organization, where children and youth gathered together to sort out things yet to come. Let's go.

Literature Review

Age entirely changes the experience of inclusion or exclusion from the political representative story of participation in public civic life. Rather than being able to state opinions and claim positions on their own behalf, people below the legal age of majority are controlled under the direction of adult decision-makers. Prolonged experiences of unfreedom remain the hallmark of childhood, partly understood as a phenomenology of development, and more so as a first phase toward becoming fully human. For all children, who may become adults, this development occurs in particular times and places, with particular contexts and attachments that make life more or less free. Children are rarely afforded voices in determining a society's norms and values. Rather, culture is insisted on children as a means to civilize them for participation in public life. Thus, adulthood is doggedly the freedom from childhood and definitively a mark of what it means to be fully human. This is a freedom to be and act as desired through following a given society's particular norms and values; but what if normativity isn't achieved? The global solution to the un-attainment of cultural expectations is obvious and written into creating separate nation-states, regional exceptions, and exclusions, competing rather than cooperating discourses, and laws that relegate some humans to bare lives or lives behind prison walls.

This is also true for children's potential future and movement into the adult phase of what may be a life cycle or life course, or to points of life conjunctures (Johnson-Hanks, 2017), or along the journey of life and, as Nadine Sieveking and and Lena Dallywater (2013) ask, "How do people anticipate the future and plan their lives when little is certain?" (2). While the contradictions of embrace or alienation are important distinctions to note in discussions about the heterogeneity of experiential becoming, the goal for this project is to recognize all children as a cultural group who are arguably the most marginalized of all social groups seeking a way into society, rather than escape from reality. Can they be included? Jennifer Johnson-Hanks (2002) wonders what happens at this point, or in "the zone of possibility that emerges around specific periods of potential transformation in a life or lives" (871). From this point of ponderance, this project attempts a brief history of children's unfreedoms, recommends a way to increase their inclusion in public deliberative processes, and explains the importance of child participation in public places and decision-making on matters affecting their real-world growth. Participatory parity, according to Nancy Fraser (2014), demands that politics and activism must not be seen as separate entities and, as Estelle Ferrarese (2014) articulates Fraser's point, "emancipation can only exist on the basis of equal participation in all spheres of life" (55). Thus, through this work, I show that children and youth play a key role on the local level in uplifting their own lives vis-à-vis actually existing and ever-changing democracy.

However, this dissertation is not a political endeavor. My work aligns with Simon Critchley (2007) who says "Politics is a disruption of the ontological domain and separate categories are required for its analysis and practice" (105). This is a cultural project intended to contribute to ecological freedoms. It is about children and youth articulating humanity as unity through working and caring together for all. The present argument relates to participatory parity, but the point of it is about participation rather than the

achievement of outcomes of social justice or change, or whatever else we might think of along those lines. In other words, the action of being involved socially and politically on matters affecting their lives liberates young people to open their hearts and minds about themselves, others, and the real world they experience. This, in turn, changes them even if society has not changed much in the process. A goal of this project is to offer insight into the role of community action in understanding the nature-culture connection, where new norms and values structured in the social cosmology obstinately entangle children and adults as co-present actors equally capable of moving the world toward a greater good – the greatest possible good, hopefully.

Because children are legally determined to be both citizens and less than able to fully participate as citizens, they become determinately one of, if not the most, marginalized groups in society. Their lack of freedom to participate politically and to express their development creatively – as existent beings like all other beings – produces social leanings, the consequences of which may not be in line with human nature. The outcome of children's prolonged unfreedoms may be the very end of life itself, though I realize I am being elaborately dramatic in saying that. A clear example of this is the one-size-fits-all policies in K-12 education where the focus on certain modes of education may oppose the natural state of humanity. Contemporary worlds oppose the human condition and seek to become something above the human condition (Critchley, 2007). As I believe, this has little to do with doing the greatest good for humanity, and everything to do with the human ego. Using egalitarian principles of entangled child-adult life, local actions performed by young people reporting on their real-life conditions can inform a better way to make decisions that shorten the nature-culture divide. Children and youth, acting on their behalf for a better life, show a way and a method for community uplift.

Local movements should not pre-empt any voices in the construction of their norms and values. Also, though this dissertation does not directly address the politics of it, it is important to become aware that what happens locally has implications on a global level. In a sense, the local-global connection following an egalitarian-inclusive process for individual liberation checks the world's pulse. Operating at the local level, shared on a global scale, and seeking to include all who have something to say and something at stake, the world-pulse centers on participatory action that is driven by the need to solve problems. In community action, more than ever, we see young people placing all their hands and voices on deck in the name of doing the greatest good for the greatest number of people. This is about the survival of the species. Humanity needs children, and children need recognition for their contributions to life. Thus, the focus of this research is on the actions taken by young people to insist that communities do a better job of investing in them – in their life courses, conjunctures, futures, or whatever – so that life carries on properly, in unity and love for all people.

A Brief Natural History of Children's Unfreedoms

Aristotle, like Plato, believed the state should intervene on behalf of children when their interests were deemed jeopardized. He also believed in public education systems albeit for different reasons. While Plato saw different kinds of education for

different classes of people as beneficial for society, Aristotle, stemming from his belief that citizenship is an individual's performance in public life through participation in legal and political processes, envisioned public education as training all people to be free individuals with responsibilities to the state. Both, nevertheless, suggest that citizenship required obedience to state affairs. With regards to children, like women and slaves, they claim citizenship is outside their possibilities because they are not yet civilized. As the social scientist of childhood, Tom Cockburn (2012) puts it, "Children's citizenship is a misnomer, as children are in some respects not citizens" (1). A child could only become a citizen by becoming something expected of them by the state, and this could only happen once a child cognitively developed into an adult.

In late antiquity and leading into the Middle Ages, Aristotle's citizenship made its way to the Roman Empire and instilled a sense of equality among people (i.e., men) through reason, albeit with obligations to obey the laws of the state. The rise of Christianity furthered the idea of equality, with St. Augustine stating that a good society should be concerned with pursuing God (Cockburn). The state's important role in the lives of its citizens served the maintenance of a civilized norm and controlled against natural tendencies toward sin. However, such a citizenry had a boundary problem, between the secular culture and the spiritual nature. How could one be both a slave and a free and equal citizen? What belongs to the empire and the emperor and what belongs to God? Rising concerns for children, women, and slaves wrought questions that divided social theory and political authority. Medieval children were supposedly sacrificed, sold as slaves, imprisoned for or sold as debt for their father's crimes, and treated like animals. Cockburn says, "In Old English poems it was argued that, no matter how carefully and livingly parents reared their children, they would have no control over them once they left home" (42). If this was true, then it partly explains why formal public education disappeared.

During the Renaissance Aristotelian thought survived through St. Thomas Aquinas' assertion that we could discover nature through reason without the use of religious texts. Machiavelli altered citizenship views when he said ideology is not important. He wrote that power, namely the power of men, the makers of history, was central to creating a civil society (Cockburn). Thomas Hobbes theorized that human nature is survivalist and that people want the power to ensure life. Because children were incapable of ensuring their own survival, they were indebted to and expected to be obedient to their parents. What Hobbes forgets to discuss is that parents may not, in fact, protect and care for their children. Children did not have rights, but the state had a right to remove children from their parents. Machiavelli reserved citizenship for land and property-owning men. Those with the capacity to write and enter into contractual relationships were the only people who could hold citizenship status.

John Locke maintained that the equality of all humans is the natural, primordial state. No person, in his view, was born a slave and no person was born subordinate to another person. Locke's "blank slate" argument about humanity, however, did not think to include children as equal actors. Rather, children's inequality was a temporary status and education could make them into full citizens. On the other hand, Locke encouraged child creativity and curiosity, which will be an important consideration throughout this

essay to explain the roles children can play in making the world a better place for all its inhabitants.

Adam Smith proposed our natural tendency to be sympathetic toward children, and in light of this, thought education to be best left to families. He advocated private enterprise through self-interest, but without greed or economic coercion. His philosophies allowed boys to learn outside of the home, but maintained that families should live together. Education was useful so long as it socialized children toward economic readiness. Rousseau also excluded women and children from public life, yet Cockburn explains his belief in the "changeability of human beings through social action" (61). In education, Rousseau saw the value of childhood for its own sake and believed political action dictated the possibilities for social action. Good governance could lead to good citizens. He saw inequality as the natural born state of human life, but that education was a way to develop moral and intellectual strength. Thus, for Rousseau children were potential citizens.

We've come a long way from the natural right of the state and of the father despite the persistence of the exclusion of children and the disenfranchisement of other groups through legal norms. Stratifications by race, class, and gender also intersect here, though they are not the present focus. Nevertheless, since at least the Industrial Revolution, women's and working-class movements have written new ontological questions to make claims for their citizenship rights, which speak to and with the present moment of children rising to make their own claims. This has been important to contemporary arguments for the rights of children, and similarly, debates about what childhood is, means, and does vis-à-vis whatever might count as out of the bounds of childhood. The 19th Century marked a turning point for the concept of childhood. Up to this period, children worked, few were educated, and their sexualities were not discussed. At the end of the century, children were not expected to work, compulsory formal education normalized, and they were viewed as in need of surveillance and protection because of sexual vulnerabilities. Marxism and feminism now aggravate capitalism and patriarchy.

Again, we have come a long way from heteropatriarchy. As Cockburn states, "In contrast to the liberal view of citizenship rights, which sees individuals as competitors for and limits to freedom, Marx provides a more sustainable view, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all" (83). This marks a starting place for our current understanding of the interdependence of life – the entanglement of children and adults in a world ecology that could operate horizontally if given the chance – where competition and violence may transform into cooperation and care so that we are not left in a battle for winners and losers. Earthly existence, adult, child, and otherwise, cannot be a zero-sum exchange. The species will not survive. Freedom for all of nature, within the bounds of the human condition, to develop as part of the whole ecology is a precursor for altering the current course of global existence in all its modes and forms. Include all, or nothing shall remain. Invest in youth so they do not divest from life. Below, I shall move into a discussion of literature that specifically relates to this dissertation's focus on young people taking part in community events and claiming space for themselves in conversations about their lives and their potential futures.

Taking Action: A Way In – Not Out

Fundamentally, doing anthropology via fieldwork offers insights into understanding ourselves, others, and the situatedness of our interactions. Because culture extends beyond the norms, values, beliefs, attitudes, and dispositions of subjects in place and time, culture is an always becoming exhibition of the actions and interactions of individuals and human networks that produce not a monolithic culture, but rather various pop-ontologies that may hold together for a very long time and yet are potentially subject to revolutionary alteration. Children do this quite well. In fact, part of the reason for their historic exclusion has everything to do with that. Lawrence Hirschfield (2002) claims,

> "In the briefest terms, mainstream anthropology has marginalized children because it has marginalized the two things that children do especially well: children are strikingly adept at acquiring adult culture and, less obviously, adept at creating their own cultures" (611).

I do not intend to unpack the manifold ways we might construct childhood here, but the point is well made that young people, however invented, can and do act and speak well on topics important to society as a whole. In life, and perhaps in whatever we call not life, this means opening our hearts and minds to the various ways in which people become. Cultural relativism, a core lens through the anthropology of childhood makes sense, affords growth toward knowing who we really are, so that we may become that which we should for humanity's continuance. In the context of children, it is vital that one's values be judged in the environment that one is born, raised, and extended (Lancy, 2008; Lancy, 2017). Children must be help up to standards insofar that those standards do not prescribe from one perspective the realities of children dwelling in another context. At the same time, all standards should remain open to interpretation and growth when, as David F. Lancy phrases it, "failure to launch" becomes the norm rather than the exception.

By pop-ontology I mean that human beings are not born into a blank social space. Humans enter into an already existing cultural place. The arrival of a newborn baby or a human being from another organized society changes the nature of people and achieves new horizons about human life which may be subtle and elusive at first. Over time, and this is relative, people begin to gain consciousness that things are not the way they once were while simultaneously, and this is also relative, retaining a sense of the past and its longing. Cultural diffusion explains how pop-ontology operates in the minds and on the bodies within particular lived domains. The presence of new social actors disrupts or dislocates what the nature of being was prior to their arrival. The sudden presence of someone new is the popping up of a new ontology, one that changes or adds to what subjects within the society believed and valued before. In this sense, we can ask the question as to whether a human being is ever fully developed. Does a person become fully who she is at a particular life stage or does she continue to become something other than what she was as a result of culturally diffused phenomena? In my research, human beingness can never be understood as completed.

Within a single public sphere there are counter- or multiple-publics which must be taken into account if that society regards itself to be egalitarian, fair, and just. Moreover,

even for the few who live out their entire lives in a single organized space, today it is also very likely that other social actors will enter this domain, changing the social and power dynamics of that society. Thus, ontologically speaking, humanity may be much more dependent on pop-culture than on biology. The focus, then, for this research is on the role of action in making us who we are, and what we desire to be, as we become something new each day. Using the community action technique, children can show a new course, which is often conjunctive, for growth and humanity under the umbrella of conformity to unity. In the theoretical framework below, conformity to unity will be explained using care and love through a "secret sympathy" experienced in humanity – in the real human condition.

Agency is the capacity to subvert the power that seeks to domesticate and dictate the entirety of social action and belonging. D. Soyini Madison (2012) asks, "What does it mean for the critical ethnographer to 'resist domestication'? It means that she will use the resources, skills, and privileges available to her to make accessible…the voices and experiences of subjects whose stories are otherwise restrained and out of reach. This means the critical ethnographer contributes to emancipatory knowledge and discourses of social justice" (6). Of course, subversion is not without its consequences. When individuals or groups define their values – which, in turn, determine their ways of acting in and on the world – some will be judged as contributors to society while others may be judged as diminishing communities. The so-called diminishers often imagine or experience social and political surveillance, policing, and criminalization simply for practicing their values. For example, the concept of social death, first coined in 1985 by Orlando Patterson's *Slavery and Social Death*, illustrates how laws produce criminals. This criminal production thereby prevents certain groups from being viewed as law-abiding which renders the possibility of their physical death (Cacho, 2012). In the youth media context, we may see the siren shone in the difference between policing and investing. The youth want to be seen as contributors, yet policies produce them as illegible political actors. However, in making ethnographic research helpful to communities, we can show the fallacies and contradictions inherent in life stage models for humanity. This is what makes life conjunctures a powerfully inclusive framework that ethnographers can deploy to challenge the status quo. It is my way of writing young people into public life, as they experience it and as they desire it to be. In the field, I act the part of an ethnographer who resisted placation and highlighted youth action as a worthwhile investment.

Children's connections and associations with each other, others, and public places and things marks an important associative framing for an understanding of childhood as a time and an identity, and in all the ways it may be performed. Children, as a social group, can and do live, work, and play across their differences. This reality reflects the human condition, no different from the inclusivity all people ought to enjoy as members of a particular social group. Yet, it is different because, after adult and school intervention, they learn to divide themselves up rather than unite in common humanity. Benhabib's contribution from *The Claims of Culture*, articulated below in the theoretical framework, that creating a functioning democracy requires inclusive deliberation informs and influences awareness of the multiplicity of identities and associations people avow while asserting a universalizable ethic for social processes, or what she calls "pluralistically

enlightened ethical universalism" (36). Her attention to the freedom to enter and exit ties up well with Bruno Latour's (2007) actor-network tracings where together they show how easy it is to exclude or lose sight of key factors in a deliberative process. Unity across differences is the key. In another sense, children could very well be a missing link in civic life that translates to the movement for equity, or at least equalizing systems for participation in public life. Their inclusion, following Benhabib's guiding principles of egalitarian reciprocity, voluntary self-ascription, and freedom to associate or exit, may be the intervening force needed for growth back to our true human condition. By true human condition, I am referring back to Critchley's concern that we, humans, attempt to become larger than nature and that we go beyond the threshold of humanity.

In addition to the problems with youth exclusion just mentioned, when they find inclusion their roles function predominantly as charity efforts organized by adults that do little to challenge existing structures and stratifications (Kennelly, 2011). Fixing this problem means youth voices must be taken seriously not for their protection, or to soothe them, but for their vital participation in creating social life. This research contends that children's ideologies and itineraries, as well as their avowed identities and preferences for public practices are at odds with the dominant discourses imposed on them within the free zones of the public. In a materially cultural way, childhood is filled up with a distribution of affordances and actions – free time, future preparation, family support, community integration – that rarely fall outside the status quo - the norms, customs, and values determined by others. By focusing attention to children's desires as a way to both include them as well as allow their public participation, new relations of understanding what childhood is and what children need becomes possible. As their participation currently stands, children's social identities and cultural objects – the things, places, open spaces, institutions, and meaningful relations in their lives – disappear as background to the movements and relations of adult guardians and official leaders, despite the central role young people play in giving meaning to those adults and their relationships. Finding ways for children and youth to act in and on the worlds they inhabit augments all meaning. Including young people affords them growth and belonging, both much needed for their social-emotional well-being and best chance to discover what they value and aspire to become.

Actions Change Thoughts – Not the Other Way

What culture means depends on the entangled lives of acting subjects who generally agree on some method and organization for accomplishing daily activities. Thus, anthropologists study not a culture, but rather the power-laden actions and practices that prop up particular cultural phenomena. These become the cultural logics that guide human action. This also includes the agency to question our shared ways of being and the promise that ethnography holds for deepening our attunements to how we live, and how we should or should not live. How we, in tandem, go about our days relates to taken-for-granted aspects of the social structure, so in a sense, it is all automatic. However, what are we to do when new information challenges our way of living? More often than not, we fight it. Changing the world is hard work.

How we go on living together in our globalizing world, thus, is front and center in debates about humanity and human existence, and as already explained, what constitutes the human condition. We can pose some questions. What changes the world? Or rather, what challenges the status quo, dominant ideologies that seem to hang on and hold tightly to define who we are as a species? On the one hand, humanity writ large persists via grand frameworks for social organization, locally, regionally, and globally. The connections between places form with universalizing tendencies toward a pattern of policies and practices that assume all people will be able to fit themselves. However, some groups question whether this is possible, and more so, desire other ways for humanity to grow. Changing rules is, thus, not the only way to form new designs for living in the real world. Sometimes, it takes action.

Challenging the rules increases when groups imagine they have been excluded from the decision-making process. They don't wait for change. They get active in the streets. Social activism in the name of justice by children and young people all around the world is leading a challenge to the status quo. They stand up, from their standpoints, on issues affecting their lives; and they do this to live. On the surface, it may appear that they don't want to fit into reality. What they are really saying is that the world has forsaken reality. As they look right now, social structures oppose the true human condition. How do youth come to these ideas? They live them. They get active in life and see that things don't work right. In response, they made a decision to try to save their lives.

There is no guarantee in life. Not all who are born achieve a status we call adulthood. However, life carries on no matter what and in many ways youth exemplify what it truly means to be alive in the world. Dying may not mean what we think it means. As this project attempts to show, dying is what happens when one is not living. Dying happens when what one is doing for today is not oriented toward the realities of the day. Being involved today, getting involved in producing reality, and taking action to do so in spheres of life that impact young people is a pressing social need. Global change is a chain of care, operating locally but extending globally, among children and young people all around the world. They state their positions and insist on investment in their lives today so that they may have a future.

Youth activism, via any channel or platform, promises a new design for living for those who participate in it. It takes work, and it is this work that supports young people whether or not change happens. The efforts to take action in society, I argue, is the first order change. Secondly, the actors change because they acted:

They were there. They did that.

A key philosophy youth-action projects tend to follow is one that challenges dominant political-economic ways of seeing the world. Henry Giroux (2004) and James Rule (1998) have offered critiques of economic valuing that align with youth-action. Specifically, both authors note that society should not narrowly follow a market-based notion of achievement. Success is bigger than the material possessions aquired or the degrees attained, or the vision that there is one correct way to carry on in life. Society is

about growing. Becoming is a mainstay of the human condition, so as youth take action not to escape from but to enter into society, they are challenging status quo market-driven solutions where the production of a sense of belonging and care may be what is needed. Yes, this takes money, but it is not rooted in any market. Investment in youth, they claim, is an investment in a best possible future for the world.

Market ideologies are not coherent ways of envisioning humanity-for-all. The young people don't relate to valuing money so deeply that they would prefer it over a happy and healthier self and society, self in society. Using the idea of activation to present and represent voices that were once imagined-out of the community, youth journalist-activists occupy a particular influence over adjusting how business-as-usual takes place locally. To activate is to at once claim freedom of association with dominant discourses, and subsequently to claim freedom of ideological fluidity to vary entry into and exit from associations with the already existent activities. Activation occurs when youth set aside intellectual arguments and simply live as they are, live as they wish to present themselves so that they become imagined-in to the community. However, for it to truly happen, actions must be taken. Thus, as a general guiding principle for naming and claiming for themselves a world in which they desire to belong, children and youth producing media projects through a community-based organization seek to challenge the status quo of education as well. They desire a place where the interests and concerns of young people can be expressed and considered for local changes in the benefit of community health. In a narrow vein, youth journalists argue that investment in youth is necessary first and foremost for society to grow toward the true human condition.

For children's actions to mean something to them, they ground their efforts in ideas such as human rights and values discourses about youth desires. So, as I have already rejected, the notion of "natural rights" as suggested by earlier philosophers – Hobbes' right to survive, or Locke's right to ownership over one's life, property and actions through rationality – must be understood within the human condition. For example, evolutionary processes and phenomenological understandings of the development of life dwell in a nature-culture continuum (Braidotti, 2013). Instead of thinking of all the stuff that is considered outside of humans as present because humans want and need it, we ground the role of nonhuman stuff on the same terms as humans. The planetary system is more complex and interconnected than the structures devised into human social, political, and economic institutions. Thus, this dissertation considers in a heartfelt way how children participating in local actions for community health improvement advance understanding of interconnectedness. The young people here care about things in ways that add to conversations about how to best go forth for all people and all things, outside of market-based resolutions for serving the public good.

How should we live to do the best for the most number of people for the survival of the human species? That, in my view, is the ultimate quest – the question – of cultural anthropology, and life itself. Being plopped down into the world today, (over)stimulated by surroundings both natural and fabricated, of which we may only know a little and some of which may be only partially true, one must wonder how children make sense of themselves and the cultural worlds they inhabit. I am often baffled by the things I observe and experience in my daily life, so it is no wonder to me that young people feel called to action. Culture may seem to not change quickly enough to match up with new

generational demands, so they seek to challenge what is perceived as against their reality orientation. There are many examples. Greta Thunberg has changed the face of environmental protest producing an image and an effect that normalizes youth action as a way to seek equity within political circles (Hayes and O'Neill, 2021; Scheuch, Ortiz, Shreedhar, and Thomas-Walters, 2024). Young people have stood strong against dominant forms of identity to beautify sexual minority status (Harper, Brodsky, and Bruce, 2012) as well as to confront heterosexist proselytizers (Barringer, Savage, and Howard, 2023). Also, while protesters no longer need streets and signs in the digital age (Mancera, 2023) global inequities remain intact regarding access to youth protestation (Deumert and Nkululeko Mabandla, 2023).

Such examples articulate both the hope that youth will find spaces of belonging and the call to create more opportunities for youth action, especially where physical and digital access remains limited. Nevertheless, getting active in the world through a keen practical awareness of human intergenerational diversity supports the growth of self and society, and self in society. However, excessive absorption of divisive messages may distract some people, and perhaps especially the youth. As one teenager I worked with put it, “Sometimes, there are only two sides to an issue!” While I would push against that position, I also must respect it as a reflection of her experience with the kinds of information and the frameworks used to convey information propagating around the world today. All forms of divisive media, or any media really, have private corporate interests (Orlowski, 2011). Knowing the relationship between media and the market will be an important aspect of the aspirational awakening that this dissertation articulates. Next, I shall briefly convey the overarching theoretical framework that summarizes what I said above and adds to the culture of care and love that permeates this dissertation entirely.

Theoretical Framework

This dissertation is a humanities endeavor, in recognizing that we are all humans among humans, and that is no theory at all but a fact of Earth. It also acknowledges that biology and society, the biocultural nexus, intermingle to articulate fuller pictures of who and what humans are, though I will not address this here except to point out that survival of the species is, on a basic level, the ultimate goal of humanity. To focus on the survival of humanity is important, nevertheless, and I shall reflect wherever necessary on my personal experiences and interdisciplinary awareness through cultural anthropology and human communication studies to articulate an ethnographic picture of community-based youth media and its role in supporting the lives of the future leaders of the world. This aim and approach may offer guidance, though nothing near prescriptive practices, on notions of child development as well as support for a broader picture of the possibilities characteristic of public community engagement for children. How cultural communication research is conducted depends principally on two things: the questions being asked and epistemological assumptions. In other words, it is important to ask, "What do I want to find out?" and "What will I accept or count as knowledge?" To the first question, I attend to youth well-being through values construction and aspirational awakening. The former is very much aligned with notions of action and activation of the

first question. Additionally, because I shall count as evidence some aspects of the field that are somewhat inarticulable – a spiritual essence of universal love – I request your trust, hope, faith, and presence here and now in the world as you read these pages.

To sum that up, youth well-being, values formation, aspiration development, and faith in the process shall converge to further elaborate an ontology for species survival. I shall do my best to describe this spiritual realm throughout this dissertation, which I call a secret sympathy or the cultural aura of the place, the people, and how they entangle and grow together. I also wish to specify here, theoretically, and philosophically, that the purview from which a researcher works depends on whether the goal is to explain and predict human behavior, describe and understand human behavior, or uncover hegemonic practices that offer a chance to *free or give power to* particular groups. My ethnographic challenge, then, is to participate with and observe the group to interpret, describe, and critique three years' worth of data collected in the field. To guide my actions and thoughts, I follow ideas about the aforementioned aspects of humanity using a conceptual framework that is pragmatic, philosophical, spiritual, and oriented to the role of action in supporting community-based youth media and its participants.

I shall make a quick political point only to articulate a deeper rationale for this research. However, the framework will turn away from official political engagement back to community action since that is what this dissertation shows. Writing about the special obligations people have to each other as participants in a given polity, Seyla Benhabib (2002) recommends a deliberative democratic model for advancing inclusivity. Countering critics who claim her approach is too unitary, she says, “Since the principle that the voice of all those affected by a norm, a legislation, a policy be included in the democratic discourse leading to its adoption is fundamental to deliberative democracy, this model is open to a variety of institutional arrangements that can assure the inclusion of such voices” (148). Young people dwelling in rural regions, suburban neighborhoods, and cities have a right to interact with and depend on things and places. They have rights to make use of public spaces in order to construct meaningful places. Moreover, children and youth should be considered a social group of their own, albeit a highly heterogeneous one, no different from other social groups. Benhabib clarifies this point with what she calls a “joint governance approach.” She says, “Individuals are members of more than one group, and each entity controls certain aspects of the situation by allowing input from different sources of authority” (126-127). In other words, procedures and traditions by which something is normally done could be open to other courses of action. In the case of children participating in politics, or just in public, joining multiple authorities on a subject and allowing for the flow of exchange to be unruly or conventionally disruptive would equalize citizenship. All who have something to say and who have something at stake in a decision should follow rules, but the rules must be open to those who have not yet learned them as well as those who think the rules need to be changed.

What this means, as far as the rights of children and youth to claim their place in the world and a stake in the conversation, is that everybody is welcome to get involved in research (Appadurai, 2006). Youth power aligns with conformity to unity in the process, the outcome of which is open to both desire and interpretation. It's a group effort operating on the trust of a secret sympathy permeating the shared spaces in which they grow toward becoming individual actors participating in humanity. Survival of the

species is humanity's aim, and to do the most good for the most number of people we must work together – we must hang out together – and take action in the world in ways that support that aim. This is the humanitarian code by which we can live well, and youth media offers a vision for it. Next, this section considers some foundational ideas on what happens in the real world when youth take action to claim an official voice in social growth.

Conjuncture

The term conjuncture comes from Pierre Bourdieu (1977) where he defines it as temporary as well as activating. He says, "Practices can be accounted for only by relating the objective structure defining the social conditions of the production of the habitus which engendered them to the conditions in which this habitus is operating, that is, to the conjuncture which, short of a radical transformation, represents a particular state of this structure" (78). Conjunctures amplify the moment at which social expectations and uncertainty meet. For example, we can ask how a woman can be both a child and a mother. Johnson-Hanks (2002) also adds, "A familiar example is the duration around the completion of an academic degree, when career, residence, and professional identity are all at stake…The joint evaluation of career, residence, reproduction, and consumption defines degree completion as a vital conjuncture" (871). Thus, we may understand habitus as a product of history and the production of structure, but also where life has not stages but flows of uncertainty that produced the presently operating habitus. Habitus, like memory, appears complete, but if we use the life conjuncture concept to illustrate that habitus is like the public sphere, multiple and differential, we find ourselves in a new ontological light. In this structure, social transformation is possible, but not guaranteed.

Whereas mainstream society seeks to consolidate life, containing or limiting the possibilities for social action, conjunctures reveal the narrow space and time in which we might radically alter social organization. This is where ethnography and community engagement become principally important to speaking back to politics and policing. Sociocultural anthropology opens up a space for people to assert their values against the dominant world and affords time to wait and then act in ways that move the margins closer and closer to the center. Ethnography offers a chance to challenge the status quo around meanings of community, social contribution, and resistance across our diversity of lived realities. There are no guarantees that an action will change society. Can action, however, change the individual? Absolutely! That is the argument of this dissertation, to express the power of youth media for the actors doing the work.

Action and Practical Consciousness

For young people interested in social justice, they must develop a capacity for and habit of critically evaluating the worlds in which they circulate (Ginwright, Cammarota, and Noguera, 2006; Ginwright and Cammarota, 2002). By worlds I mean the everyday social spheres and engagement and influence they live with and through, such as school, family, work, and peers. To develop such a habit requires a fine attunement to why things

work the way they do, and for what purpose. This means they must learn about hegemony. Teaching about hegemony is not hard, but it does take a willingness to interrogate social worlds, and that means getting deep down inside of who we really are as well (Orlowski, 2011).

Why is it important to act before thinking? Youth aspiration is a difficult concept simply for the fact that the status quo state of affairs about excellence and success for children and youth tend to construct narrow pathways. Schooling, I contend, is a narrow pathway. How do youth aspire without getting boxed into universalizing notions of what it means to succeed in life? My proposal is to simply take action in society, on any issue or cause, and whether it is personally meaningful or not. In my view, teaching about hegemony for a critical consciousness begins with an act. The action taken provides context for future critical reflection, which then liberates children's thoughts from status quo ideals about who they are and what they may become. Doing something, anything, for community health benefit is proposed here as a way to support open-mindedness about achievement. The meaning of the doing and the deliberation as effects of participating in helping society in some way opens the pathway to freedom in defining excellence and success for oneself.

It works. I have seen it. Youth develop, on their own, awareness of hegemony through action and then reflection. While the group is performing good deeds, the individual is internally making sense and use of the act in support of personal growth and well-being. This, too, is important because understanding the self, the true self, relates to the continuance of participation focused on the support of all people. Life should be guided by a humanity-for-all ideology, so it doesn't really matter the context of the act. What matters is the internal changes the individual experiences because of participation in doing something – literally, anything – that seeks to improve the worlds youth inhabit. I am readily concerned about ideologies of excellence and success that silo people into categories of prepared and not prepared. This opposes the kinds of care and love that unity in humanity through community action proposes. Silos effectively produce an unnatural comparison and competition among people, institutionalizing one group or more over others. Another way to look at this is to consider the role of the political-economic that is, generally, prized over the socio-cultural realms of global relations. Taking action in the world shifts thinking in the direction of conformity to unity in humanity without prescribing or predetermining what outcomes ought to be. This may sound counter to problem-solving, but below I discuss the role of values formation to understand how taking the right action should come before any plan for solving a so-produced problem. It is a chance, I believe, to see positive effects that go much farther than once imagined.

Let's look again. Why this insistence that people act prior to thinking? Within any social structure, there are constraints and liberties to agency. However, regardless of the extent of that tension, people generally have a promising idea of what they should do even if they are unable to clearly articulate it. In the youth journalism context, I might say that young people know the right actions to take even when they struggle to accurately portray and report on what they are doing. Anthony Giddens refers to this shortcoming as practical consciousness. Regarding the relationship between agency and structure, he offers a critique of Harre's position that people can 'give accounts' through discursive

practice. Giddens (1979) says, "The factor missing from Harre's characterization is practical consciousness: tacit knowledge that is skillfully applied in the enactment of courses of conduct, but which the actor is not able to formulate discursively" (57). People can and do rationalize their behaviors while at the same time may have no reason to give account for the actions taken. Explaining actions, says Giddens, "only form discrete accounts in the context of queries, whether initiated by others, or as elements of a process of self-examination by the actor. It is very important to emphasize that the reflexive monitoring of action includes the monitoring of the setting of interaction, and not just the behaviour of the particular actors taken separately" (57). On these points, I stand that thought after action supports discursive capacities for youth journalism. Young actors/writers know what to do, they just don't always know how to say it. As a group, acting on behalf of community health uplift through a secret sympathy that pervades their cultural world, they can examine what they do. I do not believe isolated self-examination is useful for youth journalism, thus I shall argue for a team approach to deliberation and assessment of self. In so doing, children and youth come to know themselves better, become better people to other people, and grow in the direction of values aligned to who they truly are in order for aspiration to awaken broadly among them.

Local conditions are always influenced by global actions. Sometimes they match up, but at times misalignment calls our attention back to what is actually happening locally. The answer is in not knowing the answer, but knowing what to do we must. This is what Giddens' practical consciousness is about. I may have hunches about what is happening, and/or what is going to happen, but to have an answer to any question posed or problem presented prior to action is doomed. By doomed, I mean subjected to my own preconceptions of a reality that I may have no clear vision of since I have yet to encounter and engage with what it to come. I used to be that person. Even when I didn't know the answer I knew the answer. I could solve all your problems, your family's and friend's problems, and yes, all the world's problems. I knew it all. I was a know-it-all. In the field with the leadership team, the youth participants, and the encounters we had doing real actions-without-overthinking I have come to a new vision of excellence. Excellence begins with admitting that we, as a group, know very little about the topic or issue. We know very little about how taking action will actually unfold. After the action, when it comes time to deliberate outcomes, we can ask whether it was a success. The answer should always be "Yes," if we are being honest to the ideas, perhaps ideals, I stated above. Success is about positive impacts made for a better self, a better community, and a better design for living. Most importantly, because of action prior to thinking, the actors were honest to themselves, to each other, and to the project, all rooted in the principles contained within their practical consciousnesses.

It is pragmatic action. Aspiration happens through doing something, rather than by thinking about things. Action - literally, taking action and performing work in the name of some good idea - does not follow bureaucratic channels along institutional lines or centers with a goal of grand policy change. Change dwells in the heart of the work, but the kind of change demanded by action-takers appears less grandiose. Dare I say children taking action for community health uplift is less childish than government-level work? I will try to make that case, but it is not the main point. The point is very much related to the building of secret sympathies among groups of young people working together to

make something better than what it was yesterday. In this sense, taking action is both emergent through whatever is going on presently and immediate in the sense that outcomes are obvious to all who participated in the action. There are no delays when taking action. It just happens, automatically, through the practical knowledge of the people involved. Literally, aspiration is simple, non-theoretical, non-metaphorical, and rooted in the basic ways all humans engage with the world: playfully, educationally, and task-oriented.

Values and Aspiration

Aspiration also arises out of the values formed through the actions taken doing real things in the real world, and more often than not with other people. So, action in the community is philosophical in the sense that aspiration is a universal human desire produced in the actions that help us form values for living. Agnes Callard (2018) offers some helpful guidance on aspiration, namely what the word means and what it is not:

> The English word 'aspiration' is a good, if not perfect, label for the concept I aim to explicate. Since I use the word to describe the process of rational value-acquisition, I end up emphasizing certain of the ordinary language features of the word and de-emphasizing others. For instance, we often speak of someone's aspiring to some career…In this kind of context, we may think that such a person's primary hope is to acquire the skills and qualifications that further enable her to secure an extrinsic reward such as status, money, or parental love. The aspirant, as I use the word, doesn't aim exclusively at any of these things. To be sure, she wants to go to medical school, to pass her exams, to succeed in her residency, to gain a position at an excellent hospital…But her desire for all these things is a secondary manifestation of what she really wants, which is to provide the kind of medical assistance whose particular nature it is the job of her medical education to convey to her…She will only really grasp the specific good she is seeking to bring about by way of engaging in the work in question (6).

Callard calls attention to the distinction between ambition and aspiration. Ambition is about money, property, and standing whereas aspiration communicates interests and values aligned with doing the work that brings about the possibility for, but never the guarantee of, outcomes such as those articulated by ambition. Similar to Appadurai (2004), she also says, "I will restrict the term 'aspirant' at the other end of the spectrum, by withholding it from people who have *too little* antecedent access to any value that they might acquire" (7). This is an important consideration and conditional reality, as I see access to certain forms of personal growth near impossible for some groups around the world. However, attention to deficit modes of aspiration (Davidson 2011; Tuck 2009), while important to uncover so that we may properly ally with struggling young people, may miss the role of action in values formation. As Callard points out, and I agree with, aspiration relates to values formed in the act of doing something.

A final note on values, which are necessary to aspire, involved responsibility. Callard ponders how "we can be responsible for being the kinds of people we are" and says, "who we are either is or flows from our values" (13). Can we choose our values, though? Callard says no because to choose means we are already in line with valuing something under the roof of that value-based choice. So, this returns me to the role of action in value formation. I contend that aspiration must come from action – literally, any action – using practical consciousness. This, in turn, makes articulation of what was once impossible to comprehend real and part of the growth process. It is part of how aspiring takes place.

Care and Love

A secret sympathy pervades the life of this youth media group. It relates to a deeper understanding of character, characteristics, and character-building, in line with something that I hope shines through the entire dissertation: emancipation from social constraints and growth in love, kindness, and tolerance of other people (LaMay, 2016; Duncan-Andrade and Morrell, 2008). Characterization is not an isolated, internal practice. It happens in concert with others. Anthropologically, we are always becoming something, or creating something new that changes who we are. How we see ourselves, others, the world, the universalizing tendencies toward an unknown, yet hopeful, future is alive and awakening through secret sympathy. This is why taking action is important for youth development. Humans are not born to get up and carry on in the world with purpose. Ability develops, and purpose gets constructed, and discovered in groups through the actions we take. This relates to the role of values in developing our aspirations Callard talked about. When values emerge through social interactions, care and love also emerge. What, however, makes care and love stick? I suggest it is somewhere in practical consciousness and may or may not be tapped. The youth journalism group shows how it can be tapped and then embraced in that cultural aura called secret sympathy.

The secret sympathy also rallies youth to challenge status quo ideals about growth. They claim their place and voice. Lawrence Hirschfeld (2002), in *Why Don't Anthropologists Like Children?,* addresses a research paradigm that believes children are unequal to adults, receivers rather than creators of culture, actors who need to learn the ways of adults, or extensions of the adult experience and thus not necessary to study. He makes a distinction between childhood and adolescence by noting that there is research on young people but not on children. He calls youth and adolescence "an age that by definition is at the borders of childhood" (612). However, he never delineates the terms, and rightly so because defining child and childhood requires context.

In this dissertation, I avoid defining those terms, for age is not the only way to explain how a life develops. Nevertheless, Hirschfeld argues that childhood is worthy of scholarly inquiry, and takes up two analogous experiences: children's experiences with cooties and adult's experiences with race. He found that children and adults construct culture through group identifications, the differences of which augment or diminish systemic forms of power. Tom Cockburn (2013) says, "In order to combat the excluding

discourse of ‘universality’ and ‘rationality’, it is necessary for groups to form together and be taken as a group in itself” (186). His position is well-known among childhood scholars who see children as their own social group, with all the heterogeneity and diversity common among other social groups. Apart from considering children as a heterogeneous social group, as this research claims, they are effectively not otherwise categorizable. They aren’t easily classifiable, not as the property of their parents or the state, not with fixed identities, and not as directionally able or unable in their pursuits. They classify each other, in the company of one another, through a secret sympathy that extends beyond the exclusionary boundaries that they sometimes construct for themselves. Theoretically, this demonstrates significance of youth voice in society, and for interpreting outcomes of the actions young people find as the result of their community work.

When acting in spheres of public life that tend to count them out, or at least perceptively exclude them, youth take action. Gloria Anzaldúa (1999) writes about the struggle for aspiration in the context of a biocultural framing of identity through historical border constructions. She argues that humanity's struggle has always been psychic. She says, "The struggle is inner...our psyches resemble the bordertowns and are populated by the same people. The struggle has always been inner, and is played out in the outer terrains. Awareness of our situation must come before inner changes, which in turn come before changes in society. Nothing happens in the "real" world unless it first happens in the images in our heads" (109). Anzaldúa 's remarkable insight dovetails Giddens' as both frameworks elevate that actions help us see and achieve visions of reality, and visions for what we want to be real. This may be a chicken-and-egg scenario, but I want to suggest that in some cases action (the outer work) may precede psychic effort (the inner work). Moreover, sometimes that action extends beyond perception and becomes the cultural and spiritual essence of the outer. This, as I argue in this dissertation, makes inner change possible. Youth participating in the world supports their growth toward what they truly value, thus awakening aspiration.

My fieldwork, without denying the fact that people hold particular awarenesses about themselves, suggests that setting aside psychic awareness for a moment in order to take action on the world produces a more truthful understanding of self, others, and the "real" world. That is, youth media starts by doing something – literally, anything – In society and then reporting on the events that took place. This supports the personal well-being and growth toward unconditional self-acceptance of children and youth engaged in community-based journalism because it frees them from themselves to observe openly and then formulate discursively what happened. I think Anzaldúa and Giddens are both correct, and my research suggests that together their ideas help explain how the inner world and the outer world of individuals support personal growth and community growth in the direction of what I am a proponent of: humanity-for-all projects enacted, produced, and disseminated by young people.

To sum up the theoretical ideas running through this dissertation, I want to highlight a connection between the pragmatic and the philosophical as they interact with the secret sympathy of the youth journalists. Vijayendra Rao and Michael Walton, two economists who edited the volume *Culture and Public Action* (2004), insist that we must reframe cultural questions and ask how culture matters in processes of development and

globalization. They say, “Culture is concerned with identity, aspiration, symbolic exchange, coordination, and structures and practices that serve relational ends [and that] culture is part of the set of capabilities that people have” (4). This, among other definitions they use for culture, leads to questions about what individuals and communities value as well as who gets to make valuing decisions. Conversely, the authors insist we can coordinate cultural processes to transform social life “through their influence on aspirations, the coordination of collective action, and the ways in which power and agency work within a society” (4). The way we might best see culture to achieve transformation could be dispersed and hidden from view while it simultaneously retains dominant influence on all facets of interaction, illustrating the need for interrogating organized society through what Pierre Bourdieu refers to as habitus. Habitus relates to the set of guiding principles, practices, beliefs, representations, languages, and sensibilities that shape and sustain a given space. This is not a static existence as culture changes over time. However, the very slow pace of cultural change produces the mirage of a culture standing still. While culture acts as the lifeblood of other social processes, it also moves too slowly for us to easily envision it as affecting our dispositions and behaviors. That is how hegemony works. Thus, we need a plan of action to educate children about how power operates in their lives. Ethnographic research, I believe, is vital to showing the best reasons why we must change how we live.

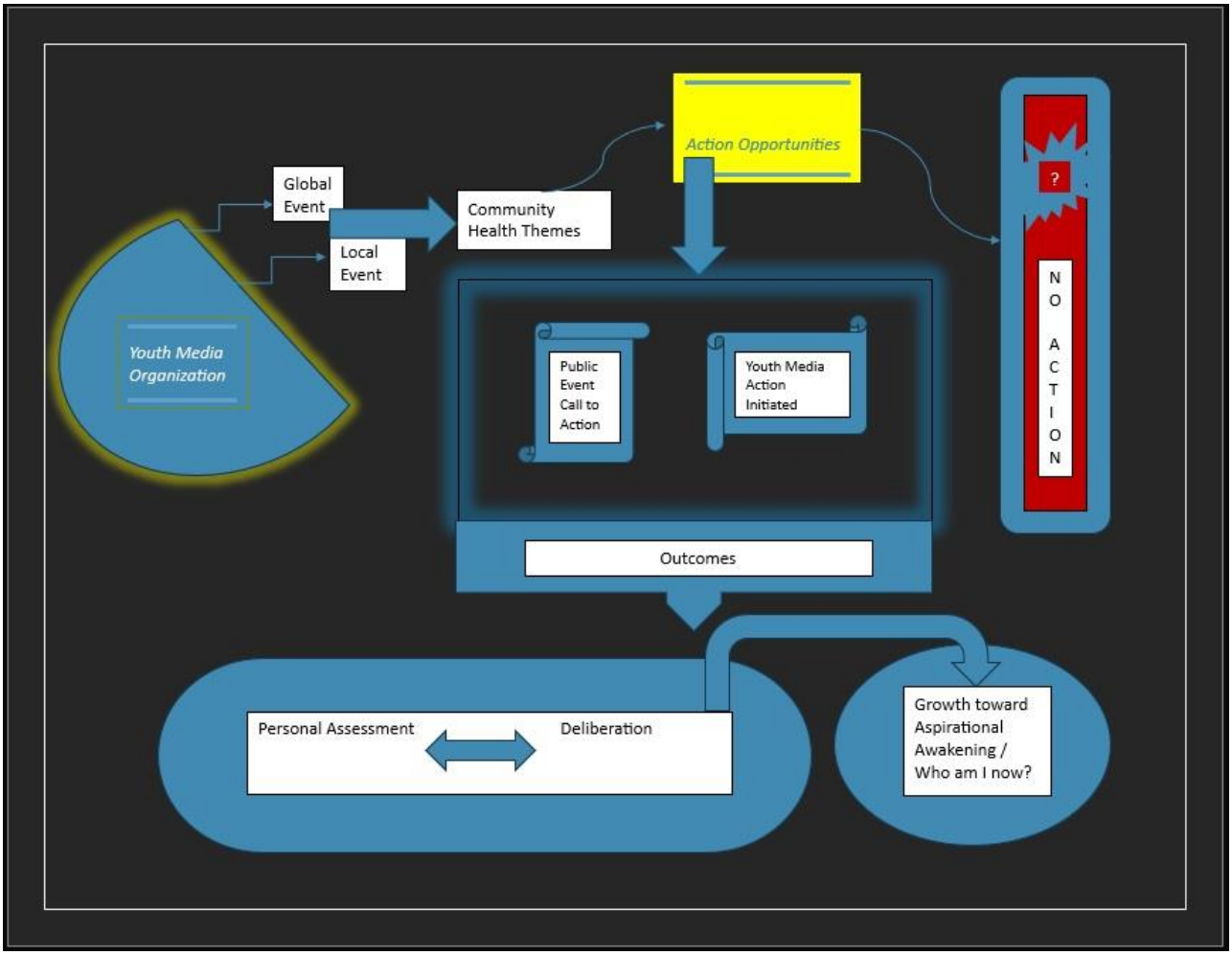
Childhood experiences must not be studied and delineated outside of the ecology in which maturation takes shape, or without considering whether growing up occurs differently across lived domains. Ethnography provides a lens through which we can investigate and interrogate power relations and policy decisions that may or may not support the practices and processes of structured life across place and time. However, it is not enough to end with a local project for the fact that most research on children has been conducted in Western societies. For example, most cognitive science research informing educational policy decisions has looked at samples in Western cultures, but they poorly represent young people all around the world (Lancy, 2017). Since we live more globally and transnationally than ever before, the next step ought to be linked to global citizenship and cultural pluralism (Benhabib, 2007). Likewise, Arjun Appadurai (2006) insists on every society’s right to research as a means for equalizing the research field and supporting the sometimes harsh realities of non-Western peoples. Whether conducted in Western or non-Western locations, ethnography extends the limits of psychological and cognitive research. This is not news. As Stephen Wilson (1977) explained decades ago, “Extensive research has been conducted that demonstrates the importance of the influence of the setting and the often divergent findings that result when the same phenomenon is studied in the laboratory and in the field” (247). Life is experiential, a journey, and unfolding, a becoming. To aspire children and youth must be offered chances to express their worlds in the classroom, and then take that remixing of knowledge back to the real world. This is where personal growth and social change hope dwells.

For the ethnographer, the entirety of a community’s geography and temporal logic is the laboratory. Ethnographic research is a highly intimate, complex, and creative practice for unveiling worlds that otherwise might never emerge in the consolidated public sphere. I chose ethnography for my research project because I am very concerned

that contemporary Western ideals about childhood have become too prescriptive. In the United States, public policies have not kept pace with changing demographics and cultural values. For young people, this translates into a growing social, emotional, and cognitive division that catalyzes potential for success in school and the community for some children while setting others up to feel excluded. As an educational ethnography, my research field begins with the understanding that schooling has been conflated with education to the extreme point of relying almost solely on public schools to provide formal instruction that is supposed to support the future chances of all children. Unfortunately, schools lack the viewpoint diversity necessary to make success happen for all children, and this is where ethnography provides a needed perspective on educational practices and processes. Moreover, fieldwork can also be an intervention. Community-engaged learning by acting in the public square presents an exciting opportunity for liberatory education and personal development.

Agnes Callard recently wrote an essay for *The New York Times* where she provokes us with her claim to not know the value of a humanities education.[1] Of course, she knows well the significance of making inquiries into who we are and how we live. Her point was to provoke proper thinking on the topic of cuts to the humanities in higher education. That is, the values of humanities learning centers on the inquiry. As I comprehend that, inquiring is an action taken without overthinking the process or worrying about possible outcomes. Also, she says what she offers others is her "surprise and delight of finding that people thousands of years dead can be one's partners in inquiry." The inquiring action with others, alive or dead and real or fictitious, holds the key to supporting children and youth in their proper orientation to life. They learn through the secret sympathy of the group that working together to make a difference in local conditions for youth also helps each of them grow. Taking action – literally, doing anything in the community – is always an inquiry into self and society, self in society, in line with possibilities for changing the individual actors so that they may then participate fully in changing the world. Inquiry, with an open heart and an open mind, seems to be key to the value of humanistic investigations. Using the cultural aura of sympathy in the group, feelings of belonging and care rise up in this semi-open youth media organization. They always know what they are doing, and that the doing is right, even if the right words for their actions elude.

Concept Map


Action Opportunities
Global Event
Local Event
Community Health Themes
Youth Media Organization
Public Event Call to Action
Youth Media Action Initiated
?
NO ACTION
Outcomes
Personal Assessment
Deliberation
Growth toward Aspirational Awakening / Who am I now?

CHAPTER 1
RATIONALE, PROBLEM, AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Rationale

Past research on youth experiences and their capacities to dream about their futures has been treated in a variety of contexts to understand the limits and supports that influence movement into the adulting phase of life. In recent philosophy on youth aspirations, we can reason that they relate to the things valued in life, yet also understand that the things valued change over time (Callard, 2018). However, sometimes social and political expectations do not match up with youth dreams and it can be a burden on them to fit rigid models for success. Elsa Davidson (2011) looked at the context of two high schools in Silicon Valley, concluding that family style and socioeconomics lead some young people to manage (i.e., limit) their aspirations. Likewise, Annette Laureau (2003) considered inequalities that stem from certain backgrounds that inform parenting practices where some parents cultivate their children while others take a hands-off approach. Kim Case (2016) articulated a definition for disidentification that relates to the findings of both Davidson and Laureau and determined that, from a pedagogical standpoint, young people claim to de-value certain things that they actually desire for their lives because they seem out of reach.

What if, as I propose in this dissertation, reaching were all that was necessary to inspire hopes and dreams among children and youth today? What if we had a method that helped them reach, the outcome of which could not only not be known, but may in fact be irrelevant to the action of reaching taken? We have such a method, and it is called, simply, taking an action. If it is the case that we want all young people to find success for themselves – and I believe we do, although what success means varies – then we should take cues from scholars who have asserted that both cultural practice differences and community-engagement with democratic forms of expression are vital to raising children (Lancy, 2017; Longo, 2007).

All of these thoughts point the way to social and political transformational capacity both inside and outside of the classroom. Inside the classroom, Bronwyn Clare LaMay (2016) used personal narrative writing as a way for young people to articulate their individual agencies in order to elevate intellectual and emotional learning for improved literacy. This dissertation follows from LaMay's insistence that learning does not happen in a vacuum and that education must find a way to connect with personal experiences. In partnership with an afterschool youth organization, I want to know what learning outside of the classroom does for young people as they aspire to whatever comes after high school. I draw a connection between taking action on current issues and personal history as a useful way to instill aspirational thinking in children and youth. Community-based organizations play a role here as a way to connect youth with each other and to produce space for building up "the reach." By the reach, I mean the move away from disidentification and toward interest in taking an action on something - literally, anything - in order to change the way young people see and think about themselves as producers of the local cosmology.

There is another side to reach as well. That is, reaching out into the real world so that change actually moves in the direction of inclusive humanity for all people. Youth, as the future leaders of the world, must have a capacity to reach, to aspire, without disidentifying with that which they actually do identify. Then, and only then, will social change be possible. Reach begins with identifying and going for the aspired goal. Whether or not it is achieved is irrelevant, or at least less relevant at this point. However, going forward, the reach holds great hope for reaching audiences who need to hear what young people are saying and dreaming about for their futures and for the future sake of the world. Reaching, then is also about communicating against/to/with the world in ways that move us all toward doing the greatest good for the greatest number of people. In a community-engaged philosophical way, this is related to opening up dialogues across differences, and seeing how best to live in unity. Balazs and Morello-Frosch (2013) discuss reaching in the context of community-based participatory research (CBPR) as sharing. They say, "Reach encapsulates the degree to which knowledge is disseminated to diverse audiences and translated into useful tools for the scientific, regulatory, policy and lay arenas" (2). While my project is less concerned with that aspect of reaching, it is fruitful to note as hope for change. Without hope, youth cannot identify to aspire. Hopes and dreams are not the same thing as aspiration in this context. They are related ideas, but hoping and dreaming must arise from somewhere within before they awaken to aspiration. Hope connects to value formation, which then connects to an awakening. To awaken is to aspire.

Some things are true even if I don't believe them. Sometimes, belief takes an action to become real. While reality happens through mental imagery, mental imagery becomes possible through the activities we perform. Youth who get active in projects to improve local communities understand this movement from action to thought, even if they don't start off that way. The lessons learned, nevertheless, are true across groups. Activating a particular aspiration for community benefit influences thoughts, the outcome of which may be a better way of imagining what the community could become.

What actually activates a new way of seeing the world, a new way of thinking about self in the world? I propose that a secret sympathy permeates the culture of youth activist spaces. In this sometimes focused and most often willy-nilly attention to an issue or idea there exists an aura of social-emotional support and practical accountability to the tasks at hand. This dissertation seeks to show examples of that aurora as experienced by myself and the youth participants. Secret sympathies relate to group cohesion, to unity of actors who otherwise might not have even known of each other were it not for the presence of a youth media organization enabling their presence and participation.

What constitutes this secret sympathy? If I knew, it would not be a secret. Dare I call it a spirit? I do! I find growing spirituality in this place, if by spirituality we can mean a sense of service and responsibility to unity and care for the whole group. In this semi-open space, young people feel a sense of freedom from the servitude to family, school, and society. They let go of the pressures and expectations that demand them to fit neatly into what they challenge: the status quo. It is quite wonderful to watch them express themselves in ways that relate to who they really are and what they truly desire for themselves, each other, and for the world to become.

Cooperation with professionals is also part of the purpose of this project. I shy away from making any claims that taking action in the community solves mental health problems. I will stand for solving environmental problems such as social pressure to fit into the status quo. I draw a connection between mental and environmental only to the extent that I want to pose the question: Are mental health care issues truly mental, or do they manifest as the result of trying to find ones place in the world? I rationalize that this is something for the professional health care community to contend with, and I make it known that I wish to offer my awareness as it has been unfolding through this ethnographic research. I seek conversations with anybody who wants to consider the role of acting as a solution to social-emotional thinking problems. I am raising questions of origin here. What is the true origin of a mental health problem? Origins are significant to critique and contemplation about humanity, and I extend the questions of their role, purpose, and value to child and youth development.

My critical research approach is a process of action, then reflection, evaluation, and judgment. Research from this perspective involves evaluating a particular cultural communicative context, whether that be someone else's research or particular situations of action and interaction, based on a chosen set of criteria. Primarily, the goal of critical research is to uncover situations of domination and subordination in hopes of emancipating marginalized groups. In this case, the group is children and youth who participate in an afterschool media production program. Critical work is most important when considering whether to believe something about another culture. Sometimes we learn things about cultures which may or may not be true" The important thing to remember is that we ought not accept everything we hear as accurate. Also, knowledge about a culture that is less than accurate impacts how we interact with others. Thus, we should not assume things until we discover they are representative of the culture. Of great importance is our conception of right and wrong. Indeed, our cultural values and beliefs will differ from other groups. We must learn to respect other cultures and not judge them based on our own criteria. Instead, we need to consider the languages and social structures of other cultures as the basis for our assessments. This may be further complicated since young people grapple with growing pains of individual and group identity. What appears to be belonging is not always felt as such. The depth and breadth of data gained using ethnographic cultural communication approaches shall aid in uncovering some aspects of the youth media organization and its people so that I may state my case for the primary objective of this project: to promote community action as a method for improving social-emotional well-being and belonging among children and youth, who may or may not be experiencing mental health issues.

Statement of the Problem

Expecting young people to have carefully considered and planned out ideas prior to acting may be backward. It may set them up for not failure, but for thinking that if some effect is not produced then they must have failed. However, it is never a failure. It is always an opportnity for growth. It may simply be a F.A.I.L.: First Attempt In Learning. Honestly, that is what it is. Additionally, in order to center the well-being of children and youth, leadership, and more specifically youth leadership, this research

contends with some of the major institutions that impact how people arrive, grow up, and participate in social structures. Young people are by default contained by institutions, the processes that institutionalize the breadth and depth of what they can do and in response how they can respond. Sometimes responses become (over)reactions, especially when youth feel pressured to fit in to something they are not. Places like community youth media organizations alleviate the pressure, and this I believe is vitally important to their ability to act their way into proper thinking. When the pressure is down, youth activate an inarticulable knowledge that feels like freedom and love. I have experienced this. So, do thoughts change actions or do actions change thoughts. It is sort of a chicken and egg scenario, except that children are born into an already existing structure which, to me, is an already existing thought. It is up to them to sort out how to best act based on this thought not of their making.

Also, while I insist that children make up a social group in themselves, they are just as diverse in experience, attitude, and adjustment to society as any particular group. Supporting all young people means being inclusive without prescribing actions. Centering their well-being means taking seriously all their lived experiences, and then realizing that all are valid and logical ways of seeing and feeling things. Reiterating the media point above, literacy around the sights and sounds propagated in society becomes a necessary launching off point to support the well-being of children. Thus, they need to be well-equipped with critical resources to navigate and evaluate the strength, honesty, and completeness of messages. The youth media organization here is a place where that happens.

It is important that I point out this dissertation does not directly speak on or to issues of mental health. Candidly, I am not quite sure I fully understand what people mean when they use that phrase. Personal well-being and belonging are important for people to fit themselves with themselves, and to situate themselves with others. Those ideas, I believe, are addressed in this project. In its own way, by way of the group getting active in the community, I think this work indirectly says something about notions of mental health, suggesting ways in which all people might become more comfortable with themselves and others as they grow toward their always becoming humanity. Effectively, shifts in attitudes and outlooks on life may take form as the result of changes in behavior through social change actions in the local community, regardless of one's social-emotional state at the time of the action. This orientation to fitting children and youth into dominant society while also challenging status quo designs for living through media production builds a pathway along which authenticity and honesty in our social variations may be scaffolded, welcomed, accepted, and never hidden or locked up.

The problem with society's relationship to youth media is that it is sometimes discounted from dominant structures and institutional discourses. Voices ought not to be pre-empted, people ought to have freedom to associate and freedom to exit, and children and youth are no exception to inclusion on issues in which all or most people have something to say and have something at stake in the outcomes. Nevertheless, the problem addressed in this research also asks whether the outcome is the goal for youth media, or whether something more personal to the youth involved solves a social problem. This dissertation promises the latter as the goal and provokes us all to think whether that is

also the desire of all groups bound up in deliberating how to best live together. Do we not need to change ourselves first so that we can start to change the world?

Research Question

How has the youth media organization encouraged and/or supported its youth participants to get active in the local community on issues affecting their lives? What roles did the youth participants actually play in the actions they took? Do the outcomes of the actions really matter? What does participation in local social change efforts do to change the individual who took the steps to get into action?

Why is this important?

Youth freedom of expression and public inclusion supports personal well-being and belongingness…a necessary forerunner indicative of community health that may lead to social advancement in the direction of a humanity-for-all mentality. Believing that what we do today sets up the road we travel tomorrow, I am inclined to theorize that action is more important than mentation for youth aspiration. One can desire to achieve or one can act to make achievement happen in the real world. Platforms such as youth media organizations create cultural realities that enable the action. They produce an aura, of secret sympathy, a form of social support that one does not get in isolated therapeutic settings or lecture halls detached from real-world social interactions. Society ought not to attempt to shield children and youth from the realities of everyday existence. Sometimes, they are the ones experiencing the things institutions try to block them off from; and any system that seeks to hide the truth is destined to revelation of that truth. It's like believing that someday the cat running inside from the rain will never go back outside to experience another storm. What I hope to solve is a problem of fitting into reality. I hope that this dissertation shows how acting in the real world helps children and youth see the truth and accept the truth without stumbling too much along the way.

Questions this dissertation seeks to answer:

1. How has the youth media organization encouraged its young reporters to get active in the community?
2. What roles did the youth actually play in the actions taken?
3. Do the outcomes of their actions really matter?
4. What are the inner outcomes, changes in the youth themselves, as the result of participating in community activities?
5. Is the outcome of the issue the goal? Or, is changes to individuals who participated in deliberating outcomes the goal? (Which comes first - inclusivity)

Numerical list of hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Youth who participate in after-school journalism will have a richer understanding of local conditions - the politics, the poetics, the problems and the proposed solutions - than their peers who do not participate in after-school programming.

Hypothesis 2: Youth who participate in after-school journalism will be more socially and emotionally well-adjusted to the local conditions than their peers who do not participate in after-school programming.

Hypothesis 3: After-school journalism provides a place and a platform for youth to stand up for, against, and with people occupying official positions of local influence.

Hypothesis 4: After-school journalism supports the social-emotional well-being and critical skills building for youth that schooling cannot and does not provide or accomplish.

Hypothesis 5: Hypotheses 1-4 afford youth participants growth opportunities in the direction of values development and aspirational awakening.

The dependent variable is aspiration informed by values and its development as the result of participating in after-school programming. The independent domain includes, as named in hypotheses one through four, introduction to local conditions, adjustment to local conditions, engagement with official power, and stimuli encountered inside the program as well as outside in activities where the program enables participation.

An overarching concern I hope to address relates to the ideas, perhaps ideals, of excellence and success. What does it mean to be excellent? What is success? If I am willing to work on myself so that I can improve my relationships with others, am I not working toward excellence? If in the process of moving toward excellence, I discover that success means something other than payments, properties, prestige, and all things superficially material, am I not revealing my true nature as a member of humanity? To be grateful for living in reality, and to have gratitude for seeing and feeling who I really am are the most excellent expressions of life. How to get there, though, remains open to discussion, description, and interpretation. I hope to illustrate through the real-world experiences of children and youth taking action-without-thinking that good things come to life inside those taking the action, and at the proper time results in a new vision for living that supports their well-being and the well-being of the lives they touch. This is the heart of excellence. Success relates to the way we touch the lives of others, enabling others to reach back and forth toward their own success.

CHAPTER 2
METHODOLOGY, LIMITATIONS, AND CHAPTER OUTLINES

Methodology

Our world's most pressing problems need interdisciplinary solutions. A methodology for seeing the bigger picture in all of life is to build community-university partnerships. To address intersecting social and technological changes taking place in contemporary society, interdisciplinary approaches through community-engaged research are crucial, particularly to support culturally appropriate and inclusive thinking with rich methodologies that make transformative outcomes possible. Having studied across fields and the research methods they employ; I have found ethnographic approaches ripe for illuminating the breadth and depth of very specific locales and their inhabitants. This may especially be the case when trying to unravel the hearts and minds of children and youth.

The fruits of ethnographic work flourish from an awareness that theories cannot know real-world events. In a book chapter, *Bypass Surgery: Rerouting Theory to Ethnographic Study*, Mats Trondman (2008) uses a heart metaphor to articulate the vitality of ethnography for learning about people's social worlds. He calls ethnography the heart and theory the blood, where they "should be considered as two 'unavoidables,' informing each other through the whole research process" (116). Because theory does not know everyday life, Trondman says we must use it before, during, and after research to both "surprise" and "be surprised" by what we unveil in the field. Furthermore, because my research on the anthropology of childhood insists that it still takes a village to raise a child, I likewise argue that ethnographic stories can help us achieve the return to raising children communally. Ethnography, being a family of methods (Willis and Trondman, 2000), supports familial return to the interdependent nature of human social organizing where all children can be equally nurtured. In a world organized by power, ethnographic fieldwork shows a way through the structures that control our everyday lives. We can then use the ethnographic products to challenge structures that harm or show disrespect toward those who get blinded or blindsided by society as it is presently organized. The surprise, of course, may be that society is not really what changes but rather that people change, and this changes society. It's a chance to see truly what we are: humans.

One area in which interdisciplinary attention could get us moving in the right direction is education. With a focus on the belief that children inherit the earth, inquiry begins with the understanding that schooling and educating are not the same thing. Whereas schooling accomplishes the domestic work of the State, education promotes critical thought and social acceptance. The format for this work is founded on community engagement, highlighting the value of university-community partnerships. By connecting with children and youth through a local youth organization, this dissertation aimed to support the organization's current community-based curriculum as well as offer ideas that educate for critical consciousness and self-reflection. The results will hopefully show that middle and high school students gained aspirational strength and vision by deepening their understanding of themselves and the worlds in which they inhabit. Through action and reflection, community-university partnerships facilitate setting up all local youth for a successful future.

This ethnographic research project using participant-observation as a primary method explored how a community-based youth media organization operated in service of social change using justice-oriented actions performed by children and youth in the Central Valley region of California. It details the role of organizational support and taking action in the community to awaken self-awareness and help young people form values that broaden and deepen personal aspirations. Much of the ethnographic material arrives quite ad hoc in partnership with the youth media group at their regularly scheduled meetings. During meetings, we review agenda items, plan or schedule to attend events and report on local community health issues that interest youth participants. It is not my intention to disaggregate the overall experiences but rather to evaluate program effectiveness in conjunction with specific projects, community activities, and growth in the attitudes and outlooks of the youth journalists. The rest of this chapter details the methods, participants, and procedures used in the field.

Methods

My overall approach is necessarily a bit unruly, dare I say sometimes unmanageable and rebellious. Doing research within the organizational processes of a youth-led and youth-focused community nonprofit puts the researcher at the mercy of what is actually going on with the group as youth journalists, social justice workers, extracurricular participants, and individuals juggling their shared albeit socially and emotionally dispersed lived experiences. Being at the mercy of delays and cancellations meant doing much more observing than participating, but when events unfolded in the local community there was much work to get done in short frames of time. To say most work was done at the last minute is an understatement. However, that is part of the methodology of this group and thus an approach I discuss as beneficial. Not overplanning and not overthinking the work was, in fact, a supportive methodological reality even if it operated without intention.

During twice-weekly regularly scheduled meetings, the media leadership team presented and sometimes followed and agenda. This included an opening check-in, sharing personal stories of the day or week, a review of upcoming local events, and a review of tasks assigned and where youth are in getting them completed. They took a break halfway through the meetings to perform an “Energizer.” I want to say the leadership team had a book of these, but sometimes the youth made them up or knew them from other contexts. I recall the first energizer in which I participated. It was called “Ninja,” which was either just silly, culturally inappropriate, or both. In a cluster, we took turn taking one step in any direction while making a chopping motion with one hand to cut off part of another person’s body. From then on, until the end of the energizer, that person had to participate as if that part of the body no longer existed. I think I remember losing on purpose just to get out of the mess.

Nevertheless, storytelling and group energies as methods in the context of a secret sympathy position youth media participants in a growth space without the pressures to conform to whatever is happening in the outside, real world. That is, they get out of themselves, out of what they say is felt as demands by social convention to which they often struggle to see themselves as fit for, or right for. Whether they actually experience

some form of exclusion is debatable, but this dissertation alludes to without actually confirming, changes in feelings of adjustment to the real world (i.e., outside present-day conditions). I quickly developed an understanding of the role of personal storytelling and energizing activities for the youth participants. They function as peer support and social influence through the secret sympathetic culture. The stories and energizers raised an important sense of belongingness.

By secret sympathy, I mean the cultural air of the organization produced in the socially supportive expressions of care shown in meetings and in events they travel to and participate in together. As a contextual interpretation more than an actual method, I make use of secret sympathy – a classical concept in anthropology – as an additive spirit of group gatherings. Borrowed from Sir James George Frazer who, in *The Golden Bough* (1922), explored the relationship between and journey from magic to religion, and then to science as an explanation of human progress. He dismisses magic and religion for science, claiming that things in the world have no influence on other things and that magic is a form of false thinking. Nevertheless, I intend to reclaim his phrase "sympathetic magic" and translate it for this dissertation as a secret, an aura, that gets expressed in and through the interacting youth journalists to function as meaningful social-emotional support. Whether we call it magic, culture, spirit, essence, or just plain connectedness I believe it is all semantics articulating the same thing. The children and youth in this community-based media organization feel with and for each other, even at a distance. Don't we all?

As explained above the methods for this dissertation became focused on two main aspects of the organization: regular meetings and current events. As a media organization, I chose to rely on sources from current media, local and from around the world, to complement my theoretical and philosophical anchors about childhood and culture. Local events refer to the usually free, open public activities taking place at various times throughout my time in the field. Additionally, I will share the experience of community-engagement with a local activist comic book project which the organization received a substantial grant to produce. Because I had been contracted as the writer of the comic, along with a local illustrator, this book will serve as a supplementary component to the overall dissertation.

Event participation as a method had the greatest impact and served as the leadership team's focus for training participants in the various opportunities of journalism, personal narrative, creative writing, and media production. Evidenced in their web publishing and annual tabloid, the young writers demonstrated the power of youth media for their own lives and offered ways in which other young people could get involved in community activist event participation. In the end, youth journalists show that their roles as activists across a variety of causes and ideas is not about abandoning the status quo entirely but related to acting upon it to push against the walls so that the norms for society become broad and roomy enough to include their participation in decisions made on issues impacting their lives.

Another context for my research plan involves a project funded by Urban Habitat, a non-profit organization based in Oakland, CA that works to horizontalize power in order to uplift marginalized communities. Specifically, the organization is tasked to plan, develop, research, and write a comic book about the history of race, class, and land-use to

show how particular communities became marginalized through practices and policies that changed the physical and social landscape. To take on this project, the plan is to work with local archives, photograph the region, deliberate story ideas to produce illustrations for the comic book and conduct environmental auditing to get a sense of how people are enabled or disabled in their efforts to navigate the local terrain. Finally, archived and contemporary local media sources may also be informative for the research process.

My methods also directly align with supporting youth literacy. My plan involved, or intended to involve, the introduction of a community teaching program on media literacy and personal growth, using the production of the comic book as a guiding focus. COVID-19 and a lack of support, however, compelled me to put that aside and focus on what the group was already doing in the field. While collecting data through participant-observation, interviewing the youth involved, and following them in their pursuits of aspiration through community actions, I observed their actions and interactions during public events where much of the organization's efforts occurred.

Events were useful in describing, analyzing, and interpreting what participants valued and sought to have changed in the local community. The defining characteristics of the population involved were primarily teenagers and young adults participating in an after-school journalism program. The social problem to be solved is related to supporting them in their thoughts and actions about what they will do to succeed as they transition from school to whatever comes next. However, as this dissertation finds, it was the observation of actions that formed thoughts about their lives that provoked the direction for reframing this research. Discovering that they acted without overthinking what they did became the fruit to picture and pick up on as we journeyed together in search of community uplift for children and youth.

Methods follow what Karen O'Reilly (2012) calls iterative-induction. She says, "This is a practice of doing research…in which data collection, analysis and writing are not discrete phases but inextricably linked [because it is] the best way to capture the sense that ethnography moves steadily forward, yet forward and back at the same time" (30). Thus, aggregating the overall experience of the program in conjunction with specific projects and events, including reference to a community-produced comic book, will provide insight into how the youth media organization – and youth media as a publicly engaged educational opportunity – is linked to the youth media participants' personal development as they navigate their growth from child/home life to adult/independent life without reproducing the process as an age-graded binary.

Following O'Reilly's approach, the methods employed here are strongly pragmatic. My proposition is simply that action rather than thought is the pathway to aspiration that aligns with who people really are as the result of discovering their true values. Rather than being directly theoretical, I use a theoretical framework to guide understanding of the actions taken, and not to theorize that the actions themselves arrive at a theory beyond the utility of taking action. Likewise, this project is not strictly dogmatic since the pathway is open to taking any action. The method is getting into action, and there is no specific action that must be taken to aspire. I am interested in the moment of experience, the expression of growth in and immediately after the action taken by the youth media producers. Thus, if there is a theory to be proposed here, it would be

that practice makes pathways that may grow or broaden as more action is taken. Sustaining the practice, then, becomes the challenge for youth aspiration as they must be presented with more opportunities to take action – literally, any action – that interests them.

Participants: Youth – Media – Organization

What is it that's so powerful about these three words, together? Sometimes, media organizes youth. It identifies and socializes the limits to what youth can be, do, and say in public. Sometimes, organizations mediate youth. They intervene or draw a line between ideas and groups to prescribe what youth ought to be, do, and say. Even more, the institutionalization of ideal notions of children and youth tend to determine what they believe about themselves, others, and the worlds in which they inhabit. Because this research describes and interprets the ways in which a group of young people organize to produce media projects on their own behalf, and in their own words, using social activist methods, I argue for community engagement as a method to broaden ideologies about young people so their voices may be included in local issues affecting their lives. In so doing, this work also seeks to broaden what academics think constitutes rigorous research, and may suggest that doing the real world work to help people may, in fact, be the most rigorous form of scholarship (Warren, Park, and Tieken, 2016; Warren, Calderón, Kupscznk, Squires, and Su, 2018).

Youth: I could tell you about their identities – perhaps politicized categories such as sex, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, ability. I could tell you that they speak about (i.e., dwell on) mental illness and its proliferation among young people growing up today. I could cite statistics to offer a global picture of community health. That would do little to articulate the point, purpose, and argument of this project. None of these details, however, would do justice to explain the changing assemblage of youth media producers and what they accomplished to address locally some of the world's most important issues for young people. In terms that make sense to them, and in hopes of challenging status quo dominant ideals about what it means to be a child and to experience a period of life we call childhood, they present story after story detailing intimate experiences of loss, growth, and love. Their stories, alone, ought to speak to/with/against any category I or anybody else could come up with to attempt to name them. Their stories, too, ought to speak to professionals working in social-emotional health. A key argument I am making here is that taking action to improve society rather than talking about individual hardship or maladjustment supports youth development in the direction of right thinking (i.e., well-adjusted to face reality).

Categories of identity and senses of social-emotional (mal)adjustment show in the efforts the youth make, and in the relationships they build with each other. These shine through their actions, and subsequently, their changed attitudes, values, and hopes and dreams for themselves and each other. A few broad ideas they contend with clearly relate to who they are. For example, they see that a problem that has long been solved in and for one community may appear in another community. Moreover, so long as we construct aspects of life to be problems or solutions, as opposed to simply referring to all activities as aspects of reality, then there is an obvious tension that needs to be let loose. Thus,

conforming to unity as a guiding philosophy, through a secret sympathy that permeates the group, becomes a norming opportunity where differences are set aside in the name of uplifting the entire community. As the youth journalists explore and implore, life is in the actions we take. They insist on being judged by their actions and good deeds performed, and not by what they look like or by the actions of others around them. As one youth always says, "We are not criminals." The collective action by this group also institutionalizes, or ought to add to existing institutions, the fact that young people cannot be silenced. They refused to be placated where public deliberation takes place. All people have a right to stake claims in and on public life in the public square. Not just these people or those people, but all people, deserve an equal chance at taking action from the standpoints of their real lives. The youth media activists accomplished that.

The actions are obvious and articulate who these young people are and want for the community. It is not my place to identify them for them anymore than it was my place to implement a teaching program at their organization. I realized I was overstepping only when I saw the value of taking action. They can and do claim their identities through the actions that interest them, and this has been an eye-opening experience to watch and take part in. Action, not identity, determines best how to live, and it supports the well-being and skills-building of this hodgepodge of young people writing about self and society – self in society. This is how we can and do arrive at humanity-for-all using youth media organizing actions, surrounded by a secret sympathy.

Media: Is it a medley of ideas producing melodies about the world? Does media seek to tell the whole truth about a situation, group, or idea? Probably not, because corporate media has corporate interests (Orlowski, 2011). On the other hand, we confront people on the street performing journalism every day, documenting what they experience as witnesses and interventionists (Allen, 2013). Often, citizen witness reports appear self-seeking, for attention and perhaps to monetize the encounter as in the case of what we today know as social influence. However, guerrilla journalism may offer alternative viewpoints documenting injustice, plain bad behavior, acts of kindness, and experiences with destruction or aesthetic appeal. Today, we can also see turning points in what constitutes official reporting.

To comprehend the word media, we might juxtapose peer-reviewed work and social media. On academic terms, published works contend with multiple viewpoints to situate a conversation or argument based on evidence of some form using already established methods of production. Moreover, scholarly works, supposedly, ought to be free from external influence, whatever that means. Perhaps objectivity is seen as a goal, but in anthropology, we know that is an impossibility. Subjectivity, at least in the humanities, is quite the norm, not an exception to the rules of engagement and academic production. If that is acceptable, then we can consider popular forms of media production as worthy of consideration and interrogation. Citizen journalism like youth media engages with reality, considers what is 'out there' and grapples with how to report it. However, how does popular press media fair on the terms of peer review? Well, their peers read it and determine its worth. My initial attention in this dissertation was to understand whether young people comprehend when a message is missing parts or when it masquerades as something other than journalism. Did they have the kind of media literacy necessary to free themselves from external influence to write effectively? Did

they know when external forces are living inside the media reports they consume? Also, did they know how to differentiate investigative and events-based journalism from breaking news and personal opinions?

Does any of that matter? I thought this was the work they might be performing at the media group. They were not. As I detail in the pages below, what they accomplished became less important than the growth experienced by the youth participants as a result of their roles in the organization. The value of youth media is in the platform's ability to enable participation in activities that can and do change the attitudes youth have about themselves. Wherever possible, I will present cases of successes and shortcomings in the context of media consumption and production. Mostly, though, I attended to the value of being a part of the group, the power of unity among the group, and the overall impact both had on well-being and professionalization.

Organization: The tension discussed above, problems and solutions shifting between groups, further relates to what it means to organize. While divisions persist, and youth hold onto their personal identities as mush as they let them go in the name of positive action, the organization itself performs a public/private tension. An organization sets course to be of service to its internal constituents while the interns must work to serve a greater good beyond the walls of the organization. The tension may be understood as service based. Self-serving internal desires while selflessly serving the community are important for community-based organizations to survive. They thrive, however, because all the work is selfish, in the sense that serving others, and serving the community, is always a selfish act. It helps the person who is helping improve local conditions in the sense that the individual actors feel good and feel better about themselves.

Being community-based with a mostly open-door policy for participation and visitation, it's quite fluid in its identity. A disorganized organization in some ways, while on the other hand, it is doing exactly what it is supposed to do as a community member and partner in social uplift for youth. It is a community project of a larger entity that spans the entire state of California, and for a period of time functioned as the local youth hub for a 10-year community care network. During my fieldwork, the organization experienced growth and decline in its efforts to transform education by offering community action opportunities to children and youth. While I am convinced all participants got something out of their time spent here – such as being a part of a new network of peers – not all of them took action for community health improvement and social justice for youth. However, they all challenged the status quo.

It has meant different things to different people. When I asked the youth journalists to explain what it is, they had different ways of describing it using social frameworks that best align with who they are and who they are not. For some, they insisted that the organization serves to define participating youth as "not criminals." For others, it is understood as a "safe space" to freely express personal identities. Some used it as a "drop-in" space after school. Some came and went as they pleased while a handful showed up consistently and for the full period of meeting times. However used and understood, elemental responsiveness to the community-based organization is assurance that group identity is aligned with unity of the diversity of ways youth appeared, identified, and expressed love for each other. A "secret sympathy" permeates the aura of the culture produced at this place. The idea of secret sympathies explains how and why

this particular organization succeeded even when/if community actions fell flat. In the end, it was clear that nobody ever failed since a fail is merely a first attempt in learning something new. Always becoming, always growing, is a mindset that unites humanity across our differences. Taking action in the community illustrated in the youth-activist work was sometimes a mess, but never to be messed with. Youth-work is serious business, even when they didn't take themselves too seriously. None of it made sense then; it all makes sense now.

Procedures

The procedures for this dissertation involved nearly three years in the field between 2017 and 2021. Fieldwork was mostly continuous, with one four-month break and a period of inconsistency due to the COVID-19 pandemic. I participated in two general business meetings with the leaders and the youth participants twice each week for about two hours each day after school. During meetings, if there was something noteworthy from the news, it often became an agenda item brought forth by either the leaders or a youth journalist who wanted to talk about it. Most local events occurred at night or on weekends, and as a group we either participated in them as spectators, marchers, or speakers. Finally, from time to time, youth participants tabled at events to promote their work and to recruit new youth media participants.

The organization operated in what it called cycles. They usually followed local school calendars and were seasonally named. So, there were fall, spring, and summer cycles with breaks in between to mark when they began and ended. Each cycle started with an onboarding session for newcomers. The first day of each cycle began with the institution of some guiding principles, called Community Agreements. On this day, one of the staff leaders posted a large sheet of paper on the whiteboard with quadrants: 1) what youth want from the community, 2) what youth want from youth, 3) what leaders want from youth, 4) what youth want from leaders. I think that's how it was laid out. I am not exactly sure. The importance here is to have a chance to stake a claim to the workings within the organization, to how we interact, and to take responsibility for oneself as a member of the group. That sounds nice. I am not sure we ever truly attended to those principles for engagement. Nevertheless, they got expressed well most of the time in the cultural aura, that secret sympathy of unity and love within the organization.

Beyond regularly scheduled group meetings, community events and actions on weekends and holidays supported the goals of the organization to uplift youth voices. I also made a few attempts to institute an additive curriculum to the one they already had in place. I intended to offer critical and creative pedagogical practices that aligned with the practical skills-based learning they had in place. Following a few attempts, including a day when one of my PhD committee members presented a lesson, I had a sense that interest waned with most of them. I believe the lessons were successful, but for some, it felt too much like school and I didn't want them to feel pressured to conform to something they perhaps were escaping from by coming to the youth media space. Setting that aside, I continued fieldwork by participating in meetings, actions, larger public events, ceremonies, and the like to gather data about the role of the youth media organization in the lives of young people looking for a place to belong, to feel like they

matter, and to build networks of lasting relationships based on raising the voices of all of them to make the world a better place for children and youth.

Limitations

This dissertation seeks to add to conversations about supporting youth social-emotional adjustment and critical skills-building through community action as a means by which values form in the proper direction for aspirational awakening to take place. It was inspired by many ideas related to debates on how to best help young people come up in the world. Nicholas Longo (2007) says, "It seems evident that the problems of community deterioration, democratic disengagement, and academic underperformance are not being successfully addressed by government policy, schooling, or by other potential mediating institutions, such as colleges, universities, or community-based institutions" (128). I want to speak to this so-called gap, and hopefully some of what I describe offers practical ways in which to scaffold growth in young people. Nevertheless, I can only say so much, especially in light of a two-year *pause without ever returning* break in this research due to the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown.

This is a project about action. Taking action is related to learning about how to situate oneself in reality. Being active in the world means accepting the world. However, acceptance does not mean everything is well and does not mean things are as they ought to be. Ask any group of young people and they will surely insist that changes are needed. Acceptance, then, means the capacity to fit into the world even when one seeks to challenge its current setup and course. Being based on what children and youth are actually doing in the world, the sociocultural theoretical foundations of it deliberately do not address some key aspects of humanity. Nevertheless, it is my hope that this work speaks to/with/against some of the following realities of our lives.

The personal identities of the youth involved in this project will be quite obvious, based on the work they do and the ways in which they engage with the world. I do not, however, address who they are beyond noting here that they come from all social group(ing)s: minority identities and majority identities, overrepresented and underrepresented depending on where we are talking about; all sexes, genders, and sexualities; and with varying levels and kinds of educational and spiritual affiliations. My intention is to avoid controversy over labeling people, especially young people who may be in the process of coming to terms with knowing who they truly are and how they wish to be seen by society. I am also concerned about political essentialisms that attempt to label people as something other than who they are, or who they are becoming. As this is a humanity-for-all project based on the experiences and efforts of a diverse group of youth, their work speaks for who they are better than any label placed on them.

I also will not be talking directly about mental illness, but rather mental well-being through new attitudes about life through action. As this dissertation articulates, adjustment to realities of the world may suggest something I call environmental illness as an alternative explanation for what is often called mental. That is a lay theory only and relates to my own non-understanding of what mental illness really means. Whether I am right or wrong in proposing environments rather than minds as the problem I will leave up to others to contend with, as it is not an area on which I hold expertise. The question I

raise is more about what we mean when we say an illness is mental? I am not sure what that means, for mental processing does not take place in isolation. The mind interacts with others, in the world. Thus, this research is about the role of taking action in supporting youth adjustments to (i.e., acceptance) and relationships with (i.e., dis-agreement) their social worlds.

Statistical data on suicide rates, for young or old, will not be presented here. Likewise, I will not discuss substance use disorders. I am aware of substance use and abuse locally and beyond as being more prevalent in the post-COVID-19 lockdown time period, but they are also aspects of personal growth better left to professionals more knowledgeable about how they progress among particular groups. It is my hope that this project will be additive to conversations about care and support practices for youth as they make their way in the world. I hope my proposition that taking action as a solution for personal growth and unconditional self-acceptance will line up with other methods for achieving humanity-for-all.

Finally, as I just alluded, COVID-19 pandemic realities limit the outcomes of this research. In the midst of this project, all research had to cease due to public health concerns. Wherever possible, I have confirmed my belief in action as a method for improving thoughts about self and society. In some instances, the events and changes in the youth journalism participants will be clear. There are situations in which the usefulness of taking action in and on the world may be left unknown or questioned. Regardless, I stand that helping children and youth get active in the community, as a way of investing in their lives, significantly impacts adjustment to and well-being of the participants. In return, they contend with the current state of affairs, locally and sometimes on a larger scale, to make meaningful contributions to community health.

Chapter Outlines

In my ethnographic descriptions, I seek to typify youth media and the role of action in the rises and falls on the journey toward aspirational awakening. By action, I mean quite literally going outside and seeing what needs to be done and then doing it. While I intend to globalize how aspiration takes shape in individuals as the result of community work efforts, I am not by any means promoting or suggesting the discovery of what one ought to do in life as aspiration develops. That would be ambition, and this research is about becoming through the not-knowing. Aspiration, then, is practical, hopeful, and ethical as it manifests through the secret sympathies expressed among the media producers within the organization. Aspiration is kind and concerning without being universally directed. Aspiration relates to what is valued, which is to say what is cared about, though we will not clearly understand until practiced how it actually looks and feels. Values form beginning with the decision to enter the world, grow when something to be done is discovered, and then overtake the lives of the action-takers to produce that to which they aspire. Thus, I have authored this dissertation as a call for community engagement – communication and action – as education, and a warning to classroom-based one-track-minders. Doing anything – literally, anything – supports self-awareness, self-care, self-love, and community belonging. Going outside and working with others in the name of justice for all moves the body toward an awakening I refer to as aspiration.

To be perfectly clear, I am arguing that the best way to help oneself become the person one truly wants to be, the basic ingredient is simply going outside and helping someone else to become something that person truly wants to be. Neither of them has the answer. They must work together to discover their inner truths. We might call that peer-to-peer work, the outcome of which cannot be known until their joint action concludes and they share who they have become as the result of what they accomplished together. That is the secret sympathetic aura of youth media plus the awareness that action must come before concerned thought the young writers have discovered as a method for activating aspiration. Finally, the chapters as outlined below and detailed thereafter, make it obvious that human interdependent action demands investment in youth programs that expand beyond schooling. It doesn't really matter in what context youth participate. Participation in any socially expansive project stages the needed work for inner change that awakens aspiration.

3: Entering the Real World

Every culture, by its very nature, embodies particular norms, beliefs, and ideals. These are the things that create, or are supposed to create, a structured way of life. What do we do when we discover this way of life's precarious features? How ought people to respond when they feel excluded from the structure? Of course, we should work together to fix the problem. How to come together and fix the situation, or what methods to employ for solving problems, is not always clear. Consider, in simple philosophical terms, whether the problem is actually the problem. If so, one should be able to observe the phenomenon to see what is working and what is not, and then rearrange the picture so that everything works as it should. However, unless I have a conception of the picture, of what the grand image of reality should be, I won't know what to observe, record, and fix to fit into the social cosmology. Where shall I uncover what is important for this picture of society? I propose here that getting active on anything in the name of social uplift supports the production of a better image. Doing something – literally, anything – is proposed to move society in the direction of humanity-for-all. The solution is rooted in my belief that 1) we cannot know the picture prior to its seeking, 2) we can do something to construct a better vision for humanity, 3) what to do is not always clear, and 4) social change is not about the grand scale but about the changed individual participating in making society. This idea presumes the natural formation of society as people doing something together to institutionalize an inclusive design for life.

To institutionalize simply means to scaffold and hold up (de Pina Cabral, 2011). Institutionalization, then, is about the production of social reality. People design life to suit particular desires. Youth acting in the public square for positive social change should be part of that. Children seek entrance into society, and not escape from reality. The problem sometimes is that public life imagines them out, and so they think reality is something to fight. Youth programs, outside of and socially beyond the classroom, afford their entrance into reality. Thus, though the youth in this project are tasked to challenge the status quo in their efforts to find a place to belong, what they are actually doing is entering into it – the real world which is the status quo – and then discovering themselves by pushing the bounds of the presently institutionalized social world. Aspiration has to

come from reality, from knowing the practical world which opens up hope for a better world and discovering one's true self. Then, social change makes its beginning.

4: Hopes and Dreams

Let's play a game. Let's play it outside. The outcomes cannot be controlled, and the outcomes will remain open to interpretation. The freedom that comes from acting prior to thinking is inarticulable, as evidenced by the aura youth journalists produced in the field. They claimed to be challenging the status quo even as it appeared they entered into it quite comfortably. It seems they didn't care whether they did either, and that is because of the hope they carried through their joint efforts to take a position on social issues impacting their personal realities. They uplifted each other and found ways to fit into society. Their victim-oriented thoughts transmuted into hope by being actively vulnerable by sharing their truths with each other and the world, publicly. As action in and on the world took shape in public spaces, youth social justice seekers began to experience their belonging place. It is from this effort at worlding through acting that community work supports the formation of proper human values about self, others, and society. This is the youth media way to right thinking.

5: In the Company of Others

Why does the word "spiritual" get a bad rap? I heard resistance to it by leaders at the media group's meetings, but I also heard the opposite from some of the youth media participants. In my view, to be spiritual simply means to do what is right, based on present circumstances, and in so doing hoping that it produces a positive effect. It also relates to proper motivation. If the motives are good, such as in the name of helping the group rather than just oneself, then I would call that a spiritual act. Together, the youth media producers highlighted in this project showed that seeking social justice was, in fact, spiritual action. Whether they called it that or not didn't matter. In good company, a secret sympathy permeated the cultural logic of the group. Acting for each other using a practical awareness of the social interdependent nature of humanity, they extended reality beyond the material. Conscious of each other, in good conscience, they choreographed interactions with the community to support their public interests.

Chapter 6: A Public Place; A Public Curriculum

Together, the youth media participants set out on their own terms to make a difference in the world. They followed their own paths, created or participated in actions that aligned with their identities, affinities, and hopes for a healthier local community. Here, I showcase the curriculum they used and discuss the ways in which they supported each other to get the work done, even when sometimes motivation or comfort in doing so waned. A key opening here is to the awareness that perhaps they are not changing the world. Do they know that they, individually, are changing? That question lingers and

carries forth to deeper discussions about how they assessed themselves, others, and the actions performed.

Chapter 7: Personal Assessment: Deliberation and Literacy Growth

One of my concerns, overall, was that personal bias influenced by a lack of media literacy results in polarizing thoughts. A divisive public view of reality can produce divisive feelings inside which limits the possibilities for aspirational awakening. Using a humanity-for-all ideology, all people regardless of background or influence may free themselves from who they presently are to act on the world and stake a claim in something that matters to them. While it appears the youth journalists succeeded in walking tall and strong in reality at times, they also perpetuated the very popular, and false scheme, that sometimes there are only two sides to an issue. Personal assessment and deliberation after acting, then, helped them form a truer picture of all things. The result hoped for was a truer picture of self, guided by a philosophy that all human beings are equally important, and that humanity's survival depends on working together.

Chapter 8: Watching Out for Distractors and Disruptors

Media literacy is a challenge for all people and not just children and youth. What, then, could be done to augment understanding of the messages we all encounter? Youth journalism has an answer. Community journalism makes revision fun. It's like the relationship between love and struggle. Both help people grow toward gratitude for what is, for what we have, for where we are, for who we are with. Nevertheless, children and youth may get caught up in publicly circulating ideas intended to distract them from proper growth. Growth takes place only when willing to grow. For children and youth – again, all people really – that willingness to stay on the pathway of self-discovery often contends with fake news, partial truths, and messages of despair. The media group showed that while they still fought against listening to people and ideas with which they disagreed, they also lit up inside through the actions taken. This tension between refusal to listen and accepting the challenge to participate in public highlighted the chance to get into a growth mindset while also demonstrating some limitations in their capacities for aspirational awakening.

Chapter 9: A Death and More Death: Finding Hope in Hopeless Places

This is not a chapter. This is reality. Humans spend too much time trying to be above humanity, and then cannot fit themselves to face it through that effort to escape. There is no escape from humanity, and part of that is the losses experienced. This project was disrupted twice by death. First, there was the accident that injured one of our own, and killed that person's spouse. Then, the COVID-19 shutdown also changed the efforts youth journalists were making to awaken to their new selves. These disruptions and delays highlighted the ways in which the local and the global connect. They also placed a demand on everybody to reevaluate how to best grow forward together.

Chapter 10: Aspirational Awakening

As they engaged with the world, young people active in the community had to contend with forces that pulled them away from their emerging values. Fighting against the status quo rather than fighting for youth investment and inclusion may have disrupted their efforts. Formed in action, in the company of others, values expressed through the organization and its efforts to uplift children and youth inevitably faced interruptions. They arose from outside, or sometimes from a single participant, from lost focus among the group, or from a place of unknown origin. Not everything in life is articulable. Moreover, humans don't dare articulate everything they experience. We have the capacity to comport (de Pina-Cabral, 2017), or hide parts of ourselves we imagine unappealing to others. Thus, this section discusses youth actions that contended with outside sources of influence while they sought to discover more deeply who they are and what they desire, aspirationally speaking.

What I have been seeking to articulate is a pathway to the right thinking. Born into a particular distribution of power relations – and the roles and statuses occupied – within a social structure influence the navigational capacity to act (Appadurai, 2004). In life, all people design projects and practice to achieve their completion (Ortner, 2006). Some key influences on how we live relate to other actors which, in turn, support our entry into the real world so we can successfully participate in structural reproduction. We, the producers of the social, prop up and keep the status quo going. However, we also challenge it through the ever-so-subtle changes made in how we practice social interaction. That is, we change the world because we, the actors, have changed.

Conclusion: Staying on the Pathway to Success

Action before thought changed everything for the young media actors in this project. We are humans among humans, doing the best we can for the survival of our species. What did youth need to know about themselves, others, and the world to form proper orientations to reality that support their values? Nothing. They simply entered into the world, stood for something, and changed themselves in the process. As people change, society changes, almost automatically as the result of living with the right attitude. That was the youth media way to right thinking. As a public interest ethnographic project, it would be unethical of me to write this work and not take a stand in the name of supporting children and youth everywhere. Proper investment in youth would support their entry into the real world – the status quo – as well as empower their leadership roles in the social reproduction of the structures by which we hopefully agree to live. If the places where children live and learn better included them in civic activities, then they might not fall apart inside their heads over events taking place around them. If it is true that many more young people today struggle to fit themselves into the status quo, then creative, cultural, critical, community-engaged youth programming ought to be set in motion in every town, and all around the world.

CHAPTER 3
ENTERING THE REAL WORLD

In 2009, the Arden Fair Mall in Sacramento, California deemed hoodies and saggy pants inappropriate, creating a policy unquestionably targeting fashion predominantly popular among children and youth. On December 26, 2016, the mall went after all young people, banning unaccompanied guests under the age of eighteen (Solomon, 2019). This policy was later softened to enforcement only on busy holiday shopping days. In the name of safety, such policies get enacted by homogenizing children and youth as troublemakers not contributing to the purpose of mall space. I am not sure how the policy stands today, but it is not unique to Sacramento. Child exclusion from public participation ebbs and flows using arguments across time and place to suit the immediate desires of those who feel threatened by their presence. Whether such policies might be racist can and should be debated elsewhere. However, by definition and design such exclusions are first and foremost ageist, and a matter of great concern for the fact that malls and other shopping centers function as social havens for adolescents and teenagers. If we can also agree that age is a category that makes up a political classification, the policy is likely illegal and certainly unethical. Mall officials defend the policy and claim it is only enforced on heavy traffic days and during holidays. Questions about policy effects may arise from such defenses. What policy is in place to protect children from adults? What is the response when adults create trouble in the mall? Are there exceptions for children living on their own, who may be the primary shopper in the family, or who live outside of the standards of a nuclear kinship system?

Policies seek to contain the population. That is the point and method of creating order within a geographic structure. The idea is to produce space in such a way that we may all, hopefully, enter, feel welcome, and get along with each other. Were it not for some structure, we might not be able to see the forest for the trees. For many young people, that forest includes the mall, a place where they together can meaningfully participate in community-based lessons about getting along with others. Moreover, the mall serves as a social interactive space for the production of meaning, not unlike the way it supports social interaction for many elderly folks. The dynamics of the production of youth-desired structures are too immense to cover, so to enter into the world of young people I shall just make the point that this social control policy is backward. Exclusionary policies are bandages on deeper issues that set youth up to not fit into the real world. If policies focused on including them so that they can feel like they fit in the status quo, then we might find that on the other end, life is better and more meaningful for everybody. Would the writers of this policy disagree that children make some of their most significant early memories when the mall is busy? Regardless of the future of this policy, many like it have been created in public spaces across the country in the name of safety, although safety for and/or from what remains elusive. What's clear is that excluding children from one of their most meaningful hangouts without say in the matter highlights one of many limits to their participation as citizens and community members. In this case, the issue is especially urgent because of its direct impact on not only their lives, but their future livelihoods. Exclusion of one hurts us all, so how to include

children and youth across social structures is of great interest to this project's journey and goals.

Every culture, by its very nature, embodies particular norms, beliefs, and ideals. These are the things that create, or are supposed to create, an idyllic way of life. What do we do when we discover this way of life's precarious features? Of course, we ought to endeavor to fix the problem. How to fix the problem, or what methods to employ for solving problems, is not always so clear. Consider, in simple philosophical terms, whether the identified problem is actually a problem. If so, one should be able to observe the phenomenon to see what is working and what is not, and then rearrange the picture so that everything works as it should. However, unless I have a conception of the picture – of what the grand image of reality should be – I won't know what to observe, record, and fix to fit the ideal social cosmology. By conception, I mean a beginning and not knowledge of how to best go forward with policy or procedural changes. A beginning relates to inclusion, to not pre-empting those who have something at stake in the picture. Youth, who seemingly claim to not appreciate the status quo more with each generation, ought to have a voice in society. This project sees their inclusion as a way to help them fit into the status quo while also challenging the boundaries of it. To enter into the real world is to see that most, if not all, of us belong equally, and that we can feel as if we belong no matter the circumstances; and no matter if some individuals or groups challenge our belongingness. With this process and attitude, children and youth may discover that the status quo is not so bad. If the notion of population control included all people in deciding how to best contain us all, we may learn to see and feel that life is beautiful.

Where shall I uncover what is important for this picture of society? I propose here that getting active on anything in the name of social uplift supports the production of a better social image. Doing something – literally, anything – is my basic proposition for moving society in the direction of humanity-for-all. The solution is rooted in belief that 1) we cannot know the picture prior to its seeking, 2) we can do something to construct a better vision for humanity, 3) what to do is not always clear, and 4) social change is not about the grand final design but about the changed individuals participating in the (re)making of society. This idea presumes a natural formation of society as people working together (i.e., serving each other) to institutionalize ways of life that benefit everybody. To institutionalize simply means to scaffold or to hold up (de Pina Cabral, 2011). Institutionalization, then, is about the production of social reality. People design life to suit particular desires. What young people today are often asking is whether those desires are inclusive of the changes they seek so that our institutions better reflect human nature. In light of the above points, human desire ought to serve all people, not just the individual. However, by acting in the world together, we change as individuals in the direction of caring about each other, to desire to help everybody and not just ourselves. Youth acting for positive social change asks whether the current design for living, The Status Quo, is the best it could be. They think not.

The Status Quo, by definition, is unproblematic. It simply means the present state of some thing, idea, practice, or relationship. I point that out because my starting place for discussing it is to suggest that life in our increasingly globalized society is better today than it has ever been, in most respects. Setting aside local-first arguments where

perhaps life might be better if we had never achieved ‘cultural contact’ there is more tolerance of difference, people are more likely to accept even when they don’t understand, and caring for communities has broadened to include all of Earth. Where we still have work to do is in the name of principles for living across the diversity of moral application of such principles. In other words, it’s hard to argue against the idea that we are all best when we work together in service of everybody, but how to structure that varies because morality is a relative concept.

For an act to be moral it must be within the bounds of the sociopolitical structure. Moral being is based not on reciprocity, but on responsibility to principled adherence. Generally, principles for human social life are universal and can be applied everywhere in the world. Morality looks different around the world, however. Thus, we are obliged to acknowledge each person's differences, needs, and capabilities through guiding principles, but we do not have to agree with those differences. Disagreement, however, does not mean rejection. We can accept differences, interact with them, and use them to grow toward the best possible societies. Benhabib (1992) states, “the standpoint of the concrete other...requires us to view each and every rational being as an individual with a concrete history, identity and affective-emotional constitution" (159). Standpoint theory, as I understand Benhabib, asks that social organization decision-making includes complex wholes and not flattened views of people and places.

A possible warning here might be to shift power polemically as if all people of a particular group are the same. Recent feminist scholarship offers insight into seeing how to (re)envision societies through a more dispersed authority. Joey Sprague (2016) says, “Adopting standpoint epistemology increases the salience of questions about how power interacts with authority. It prompts us to ask how the distribution of power in a society influences who can be a legitimate creator of knowledge and how their social position influences what kind of knowledge they create. Feminist social science researchers who find standpoint epistemology persuasive have been centrally concerned with how to respond to the distortions created by power imbalances due to gender/sexuality, race/ethnicity, class, and nation” (63). Sprague notes that standpoints do not privilege any particular person or group, but rather point to a perspective by which to conceive of social influence as a factor in constructing knowledge. She continues her point and says, “I describe the subjectivist reading of standpoint epistemology and two stereotypes of feminist methodology that follow from it: transferring authority completely over to research subjects, and/or privileging "insider" research. I argue that these strategies carry substantial conceptual, pragmatic, and political limitations. Then I show how subjectivism, by which I mean the idea that a standpoint is a matter of individual psychology, is a misreading of the argument of standpoint epistemology. I argue instead for a social perspective on standpoint epistemology in which the epistemic advantage goes not to a specific group, but to a specific strategy for designing an inquiry” (64).

For there to exist a just and good society, public deliberation must include the voices of all persons affected by a decision whereby agreement is the outcome. However, as Sprague seeks to elaborate, neither the most privileged nor the most marginalized ought to have control over society. Rather, both groups offer standpoints from which to conceptualize. Why must an act be personal for it to be moral? A fundamental significance lies in the historical divisions of groups, a distinction between the public and

the private where children have been confined to the invisible private sphere, at least in Western societies. Action research would say this is a community problem to be solved. My proposal, while in agreement with action research, suggests another layer to the problem to be solved. Whereas action research seeks to solve a community problem, this project proposes that taking action is also a method for solving social-emotional issues by getting out of oneself and getting involved in doing something for the community. In turn, it solves an *orientation to reality problem*, thus changing the inner workings of the individual to better fit with society as a whole. Effectively, the effort to change The Status Quo is all that is necessary to change the individual to better see The Status Quo, to enter into it, and to see more clearly what actually needs changing. With this new vision, any potentially needed social change becomes simpler to solve.

I wish it were that easy. I entered the field on shaky ideas, believing that things were already running well and that I would be welcome to contribute. Ethnography is messy, but I have come to learn and accept that reality. The ethnographic process results in *an ethnography*, the formed text or the product that results from doing fieldwork. An ethnography may be only written words that describe and represent a community, but it can also include images, videos, archival documents, artwork, and any other mode of communication one can think up. Alan Bryman (2001) offers some key developments occurring in ethnographic research that illustrate the movement from the process to the product. First, researchers must become members of the community under study. Second, ethnographers need to gain a clear description of the field site. Third, we must understand the culture of the people from their internal meanings, perspectives, and logics. Only after doing that can an ethnographer condense field notes into a legible collection of knowledge and practices that other researchers and readers can understand as meaningful. From the incompleteness of the human animal to the environment that changes us, the variety of human life all around the world makes ethnography vital and central to knowing about our existence. It elevates an opportunity to reverse cultural consolidation that has been occurring for at least the past five hundred years in the West. Ethnography articulates the messiness of human life caught up in social relations of power, and doing the fieldwork and producing texts is our chance to talk back to dominating power that attempts to universalize knowledge, police how we should be living, and prescribe how children should be raised.

Fieldwork today can be done anywhere, within and across domains, and among any group or multiple groups. I chose to do mine with children, teenagers, and young adults participating in a community journalism program in hopes of uncovering the diversity of dispositions about the world they hold. In so doing, I intended to help them understand how power operates around them and to let their worlds speak back to that power. Ultimately, as another ethnographic situation among many ethnographies of childhood, this is a chance to show to the public that policies don't serve everyone equally, that expectations have become too rigid and age-graded, and that schooling can't do all the work. Working to serve the aspirational goals of youth, my research orients toward recognizing our unique intersectional identities by way of the cultural pluralism found in anthropology.

Premised on everybody's right to the towns and cities where they live, this project grapples with the ways children and youth are both included in and excluded from

citizenship activities. This essay does not claim that children and youth have no say in politics, but suggests it is more relevant to reveal and understand how and when they are. For example, scout movements may involve engagement with environmental issues such as refuse clean-up, survival skills building, and water conservation. Likewise, youth collectively and civically engaged may participate in Model United Nations, human rights campaigns, and support efforts for war veterans and the homeless. All of these politically charged, but not primarily political activities, afford children opportunities to help in the local community. However, such engagements sometimes include youth in their making. The voices of the youth may not be counted in the sphere of liberal democracy and the goals for their participation tend toward their development as "good citizens" rather than as contributors to social structure and meaning. Thus, youth citizenship, understood generally as participatory parity in making decisions about things that matter and affect people's lives occurs personally on the margins and stands as a dependent institutional substitute for democracy. By including children and youth in social and political activities they are in fact excluded from self-organizing action on their terms and for their own sake. It is what Jacqueline Kennelly (2011) warns as the placation of youth by way of excluding them inclusively. Exclusion through limited, adult-constructed inclusion is both a physical barrier and an ideological absurdity if the goal is to associate children with political actions so that they may successfully enter the real world of the status quo.

Why do I insist on youth entrance into the status quo? My primary concern is that without such movement, young people always already conceive of the status quo as something to fight against rather than participate in. I want children to be a part of, and not separate from, the world as it is. Then, and only then, might growth in the direction of humanity-for-all be achieved. The best possible outcome is our goal. By best possible, I mean that aiming to do good or to achieve a greater good is not good enough. Our attention ought to be toward inclusivity aiming to do our best, while also recognizing our human limitations. The best is better than the good, and it happens when everybody begins in the same place – in reality, within the status quo. Cockburn's (2011) articulation of Rousseau's stance on the role of political action through social engagement is useful. For example, we may consider practices such as participatory action research (PAR). Youth participatory action research (YPAR) has grown up as a methodology for child inclusion in public practices. It has been an opportunity for children to not only get involved in local community change events but also to show their capacity for social and political mobilization on their terms using their narratives about themselves and the world. YPAR, as one of many forms of community-engaged scholarship focused on solving local problems, has proven to be a useful approach for children to describe and interpret the world and make a stance for how the world might best go on. This does not mean change will happen. The status quo, life as it is, may also occur. What's important here is to not lose the rhizomatic flavor of public action. As will be shown in the cases discussed below, participating in community action events plays a key role in how youth journalists see themselves, the world, and what it means to live in the status quo. Do they imagine their inclusion, or do they feel like they don't fit in? It may be both, and as stated above, it may not be their total blame if they have not been offered a fair chance to enter into the status quo in the first place.

Childhood is constructed as a time of life that includes incompetence or uncivilization, and perhaps a lack of development or knowledge. Adulthood is constructed as a period of competence and full development. There is an originating problem of ideology when lines are cut based on age, between children and adults. Even when children are given rights, for example under Article 12 of the UNCRC, Cockburn says it has to be proven. Article 12 affords rights based not just on age, but also maturity. A child must prove that he or she is mature enough to make a particular decision. On the contrary, adults have to prove nothing – they are automatically equipped for public participation based on age. A point of pragmatic relevance to PAR is John Wall's (2010) premise in *Ethics in Light of Childhood* that children are full human beings, capable of acting and interacting in the world. Should not a full human have full autonomy? Children's freedoms through PAR unfold the overarching issue of the structures and functions of the world. The idea is that regardless of age, all people can affect the ideologies that guard and guide the existing state of social and political affairs. Keeping in mind that the diversity of life means also a diversity of needs, children participating in local sociopolitical life supports their social-emotional well-being and entrance into reality.

In arguing for reasons why multiple public spheres may be necessary for inclusivity, Nancy Fraser (1990) discusses why assumptions about what counts as public versus private are problematic for some groups of people, particularly in stratified societies. She maintains that the common good is what's at stake, and says, "The ideal of participatory parity is better achieved by a multiplicity of publics than by a single public" (70). My orientation to Fraser is through the lens of conscience. If one public's conscience engages with other public consciences, then good can be achieved through discursive contestation so long as universal human principles guide groups without preempting any voices. To focus that on this research, what matters is that "children's research" findings be considered in decision-making processes, whether that be via participation in formal or informal publics. Assembling the PAR work of children can show policymakers around the world what's going on presently and within contexts that impact real lives. Multiple publics certainly exist in fellowship and affinity groups. My interest in children as a social group is that they cut across all of these publics and make the case to, as Rosi Braidotti (2013) says, "think global, but act local" (177). Principled living across moral diversity, I want to argue, demands that children as a social class must be part of the conversation. The future of humanity needs children. Obviously!

Obviously, there is no future without children. My work must carry on. Where should I go and what should I do? Looking around the cubicles and office spaces, where my advisors and colleagues are busy working on their own research projects, I was struck with trepidation about what I actually set out to do with this project. Many of my fellow PhD students work with communities who exist only in archives, appear only virtually, or come to life in ideas only. How was I going to seek to not only venture out into the real world, but to ask permission to invade the lives of children, adolescents, teenagers, and young adults? Would they accept me? It was time for me to enter the real world, to discover how they do it.

I called up a California-based youth organization that, at the time, was affiliated with a now defunct youth media group. I had been given the name of the new program

leader by the previous leader whom my advisor new from previous community work. Actually, I first met the previous leader at a local coffee shop to discuss what my plan was and how I could possibly help while doing my own dissertation research. She liked the idea and told me to whom I should talk. When I arrived at the office a few days later to discuss my plan I was greeted by Lisa, who at the time was the only member of the leadership team. I could tell immediately that she was at least skeptical, perhaps preparing to be adversarial toward anything I was about to say. How did this make me feel? I was not ready to embark on this fieldwork, yet there I was about to take the leap into a new social world. I should have known better, that it would be a huge mistake to be forthright about why I was there, and yet I did it anyway. "I am here because I want to do research on the journalism work at your organization." That word, research. What a nightmare that word has been for too many communities who want nothing to do with it, who want only to be left alone because of past practices of taking and never giving back. Resistance was immediate. She asked, "Why does it have to be research?"

Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (214) remind us that “Research is a dirty word among many Native communities (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999), and arguably, also among ghettoized (Kelley, 1997), Orientalized (Said, 1978), and other communities of overstudied Others” (223). They insist we re-evaluate what we mean and intend when we call our work decolonial. At the same time scholars claim to act for liberation they sometimes re-enforce the fact that some individuals, groups, and communities are different and potentially less than because of this difference. Tuck and Yang say, “The ethical standards of the academic-industrial complex are a recent development, and like so many post–civil rights reforms, do not always do enough to ensure that social science research is deeply ethical, meaningful, or useful for the individuals or communities being researched. Social science often works to collect stories of pain and humiliation in the lives of those being researched for commodification” (223). These stories are also used for popular consumption, and as today’s social media enterprise exemplifies, for profit. They continue, “However, these same stories of pain and humiliation are part of the collective wisdom that often informs the writings of researchers who attempt to position their intellectual work as part of the decolonization process. Indeed, to refute the crime, we may need to name it. How do we learn from and respect the wisdom and desires in the stories that we (over) hear, while refusing to portray/betray them to the spectacle of the settler colonial gaze? How do we develop an ethics for research that differentiates between power—which deserves a denuding, indeed petrifying scrutiny—and people? At the same time, as fraught as research is in its complicity with power, it is one of the last places for legitimated inquiry. It is at least still a space that proclaims to care about curiosity" (Tuck and Yang, 223, 2014).

How would I enter the real world of youth journalism without a colonizing gaze? I had to be vulnerable, but without acting like a victim. If I played the victim, I would be feeding their victimhood. If, however, I showed who I truly am and how I feel at peace with and like I belong with the world, then maybe they would also grow to appreciate what can be gained in the status quo. It took time, a lot of it, but I grew toward sharing honestly my head and my heart, and how I came to terms with a world I used to think rejected me. They grew a little less, but they grew. Time takes time, and as I reflect on my own journey of self-discovery I can maintain hope that they will also find their ways

in the world on the other side of this project and the work they accomplished together as media producers seeking to challenge the status quo.

The ethnographic descriptions below elaborate how I would grow to appreciate, despite having ambivalent feelings about, what they did on a day-to-day basis. I would do more than that, actually. I learned to accept what they did as an organization. I grew to love the physical place and the social – natural and artificial – space they constructed. I had to grapple with and discover this organization, which is to say I had to grapple with and discover myself so that I could truly understand youth media, ethnographically. That took me deeper into social organization literature, to understand what youth organizations are all about and what they intend to do. Organizations are working places where workplace relationships are built. It is also that the relationships build organizations, so together the two are always becoming each other (Aldrich Ruef, and Lippman, 2020). I also asked myself what it means to work place relationships. How does one work at relationships in a place? How does it happen that people work at becoming themselves through their relationships in a particular place? Organizations evolve like people because organizations are people. An organization is the physical, the natural, the artificial, all in one coming together to address a problem or groups of problems, to fulfill a need or group of needs, in service of the organization itself. The primary goal of this particular youth media organization, according to its mission statement, was to challenge the status quo. I presume it still is.

The organization as an entity changed over time, with new roles and responsibilities that I will later discuss, particularly in relation and evolution under a new parent. A new parent organization, that is. To start, however, the idea of organizing is a basis for understanding any organization. People, places, things, and ideas must come together in some form to begin the process of putting something together, and the people add to this form via the already existing social structures in which the work takes place. Does this mean a new organization is always already a challenge to the status quo? Perhaps we could make the case for that argument, but I want to remind the reader that my goal is to claim that the status quo can only be challenged once it is clearly, truthfully, known to those who seek its transmutation. An organizing effect changes the structure while also adding to it by becoming an entity we call an organization. It lives. It breathes. It talks. It gets talked to. It addresses and responds to the world as the world addresses and responds to it. Here we can understand organizations as socially constructed by a group of people working together to achieve some effect or goal. To accomplish anything, they must share knowledge. Where, though, shall this knowledge come from? It arises in and through human interaction. Engaged with each other as equal organizational participats individuals, people bring knowledge, mix and remix knowledge, and scaffold to create new knowledge in the process.

Organizations also form and represent unique languages, policies or agreements, practices, and images and representations that produce their culture. There are ethical, political, social, and universalizing beliefs and actions to consider. In the case of newly formed organizations, which I suggested may always already challenge the status quo, tendencies toward a whole culture present challenges and opportunities. We can call these growing pains, but also hopes and gains. Through concerned thought followed by decisive actions? No! Through action followed by reflection and thought about those

actions, organizations can and do induct themselves into society as contributors and contenders, collaborators, and community builders, and as culture makers and destroyers. Acceptance, or rejection, of the organization often depends on fitting in with common knowledge that communicates with a common sense of the society, though acceptance is not necessarily agreement. This is true both inside and outside the group. There is a social distribution of knowledge affecting the flow of activities within organizations. Knowledge is structured in terms of what is generally relevant and what is relevant only to specific roles or statuses. For example, the leader of a project is not in the role to prescribe the task through the application of a particular method or theory. The manager resolves problems by filling in gaps left by the task performers. Effectively, a manager brings together ideas to make an outcome possible, and hopefully useful.

Organizations present themselves fundamentally as tools for use by humans to accomplish particular objectives or processes which vary over time. However, they only exist because humans came together to decide they should exist. Youth organizations – perhaps all community-based organizations – serve a dual purpose. On the one hand, they provide a space for people to become and belong. They also showcase social possibilities as one of many of the publics Fraser talks about, adding to the diverse milieu by which to implement guiding principles across moral diversity in our ever-globalizing worlds. Since the focus of this research is a youth media group, of course there will be discussion about media literacy as a means by which to discover what is real and to know the status quo. Those discussions are forthcoming. For now, I shall wrap up with the fact that entering into anything – real or imagined – means entering into a greater awareness of humanity. Entering the real world is about entering into a relationship with one's true self. In discovering who one is and what one's purpose in life ought to be, individuals build a sense that perhaps the real world is not so bad after all. Fitting oneself to fit into society as it is may be the most important first step in moving the status quo further along the lines of equity and justice. Before one can change the world, one must change oneself to fit with the world as it is right now. It can be a great sense of relief to not get trapped into thinking one does not belong here. The joy that comes from knowing that one is right where one is supposed to be is inarticulable. With this attitude, I entered the field of youth journalism.

CHAPTER 4: HOPES AND DREAMS

On my first day at one of the organization's regularly scheduled meetings, I was hit with a challenging question right off the bat. Not knowing the aura of the room, I answered off the hip in a hoped-for humorous way to build rapport:

> "What are you afraid of?" asked one of the youth reporters, directly to me.
> "Bears," I said.

She had just spoken about anxiety and what it feels like under the pressures of contemporary society as she experienced it. A dialogue ensued among the youth as they checked in about their days. I didn't like my answer. I only said it because I had recently watched one of Mike Birbiglia's stand-up comedy routines where that was his answer to a girl he was dating. How childish. It was my first day entering the field and I already didn't fit in. I had to chime in again.

> "I change my answer. I am afraid of the nightmares that seem like they will never go away, and the dreams that never seem to come true."
> "That's very relatable," chimed in a teen boy.

That was the truth for me at the time. I felt somewhat lost and hopeless, and nothing I wanted would ever appear in this lifetime. Upon reflection, I was experiencing the same thing the teen girl spoke about, but I was too afraid to speak the truth. From where do such thoughts and feelings emerge? One way to comprehend fear is through past experiences that set some people toward feeling as if the world is against them. Małgorzata Kossowska, Paulina Szwed, Ewa Szumowska, Jolanta Perek-Bialas and Aneta Czernatowicz-Kukuczka (2023) discuss fear in times of war noting that "social support is common in emergencies" (1466). In discussing wartime social support, they say:

> Our findings are in line with the social identity approach suggesting that, in emergencies, processes contributing to shared social identity predict helping behavior. Thus, from this perspective, we may claim that the basis of widespread helping in this particular emergency is due to the emergence of a new social identity among people, arising from a feeling of closeness to the people in need, and perceptions of a common fate, in such a way that shared experience causes previous social group boundaries to dissolve (1470).

It may seem extreme to call growing up and feeling like one does not fit in as war, but that is how it often gets experienced. I know all too well what this feeling is like, and I sought to fight the feeling most of my life. Yet, here we are, in a youth organization supporting each other across differences in search of a way to belong. Fearing reality may be experienced as an emergency, and one which many trained professionals seek to

combat through mental health repair. I do not intend to enter a dialogue with mental health professionals but I do wish to suggest a way out of fear that may need no therapy or medicine at all. What this research highlights is the youth media method of social action as a way to support youth, let them speak on their terms, and find a way to fit into society. Whether they feel as if they fit in is questionable, but the action taken is undeniable. Getting active – doing anything – helps people develop sensibilities about themselves and the world so that they have a chance to form values that relate to their hopes and dreams, free from fear.

Extending the war against reality metaphor, Sarah Mahler (2013) explains how fear and war create communities. She says,

> People want to feel they belong; we are social creatures, after all. Bonds cemented during warfare are among the most intense we feel as human beings, perhaps second only to family bonds, so it is no wonder to me that many of the virtual ways we create community involve simulations of warfare (62-63).

I am suggesting that youth activism through the afterschool media organization is a form of simulated war. It is a war for youth inclusion in public life. Very often, it emerges as an argument against categories of human social life that do not fit who they believe they are, and so they get active in the name of hope for a better future but also out of fear of not belonging. Fear invades and overwhelms humanity in many respects. More people likely experience fear than will readily admit if they can even identify such feelings as trepidation about the status quo, or perhaps their futures. Here I was, in an open and seemingly safe space for young people to honestly share their hearts with each other. I needed this. They didn't need me but soon I started to fit in and I started to feel like I fit in. We would embark on a number of social actions partly out of fear and largely in hopes of making local conditions better for young people.

If Michel Foucault (1982) is right that there is no truth and that our symbolic interactions can only operate through constructed discourses, then Mannheim's Paradox points us in the direction of human understanding. According to Clifford Geertz (1973), the paradox is this: "Where, if anywhere, ideology leaves off and science begins has been the Sphinx's Riddle of much of modern sociological thought and the rustless weapon of its enemies" (194). Moreover, the presence of ideology – of hegemonic power through which truths are produced – eludes us even as we stand against social hierarchy. For example, on family bonds, we may have thoughts and actions that intend to counter certain idealizations of the family while simultaneously reproducing others. We are unaware that the work of the social does not exist outside hegemonic controls and constraints, thus producing common-common sense even as we rally to transform society. Geertz further makes the point that mentation is inseparable from culture. I want to argue here that mentation requires action as well as remembering past actions, and then being honest in our reports of our actions.

We are left carrying on with our cultural analyses by guessing at what seems to make the most sense, but much sense-making happens on somebody else's terms. Of

course, there is everyday resistance, or everyday navigability, that allows us to reorganize common sense through our practices. The question here remains whether we are so constrained by ideology. Actions speak louder than words, and this has been the mainstay of the work youth journalists produce within the bounds of the media organization. They do not overthink much. Rather, they take action based on their practical and lay understanding of themselves and the world. This agential capacity relates to ideas already well articulated in literatures about culture and action (Appadurai, 2004; Ortner, 2006).

Sherry Ortner (2006) is unconvinced that macro-level hegemony without consideration for individual agential forces at the micro-level orders how people practice their everyday lives. With regard to power and resistance – and all that they entail, including when an engagement isn't even about gaining power or resisting – what's at stake is not achievement of that state for position, status, ego, and so forth. Like Pierre Bourdieu's *habitus* (1977), Ortner says our agential-seeking ways are about the pursuit and completion of our projects. Ortner works through this via practice theory, and says agency is about power and intentionality where power and intentionality are not different things. Thus, power relations are not wholly about structures but about contexts as people perceive reality, enter into and engage with it, and take action based on present perceptions. Her term for understanding this is 'serious games.' She says, "*the anthropology of 'agency'* is not only about how social subjects, as empowered or disempowered actors, play the games of their culture, but about laying bare what those cultural games are, about their ideological underpinnings, and about how the play of the game reproduces or transforms those underpinnings" (152). This is her on-the-ground re-interpretation of culture where culture constructs people, but people also have the power to reproduce or change the culture that made them. In carrying out practices that seek to accomplish intentional projects, the serious games in agency designate ideology as the terrain through which we can play, where play operates on two levels. First, we have on-the-ground tasks to get done. Second, in doing things, our efforts function to reproduce or transform cultural games.

If youth journalists working in the world is a form of cultural game, then it reasons rightly that *action prior to thought* supports the social-emotional well-being of children and adolescents as they grow into the world by playing games of their own making. Do they need to fully comprehend structures of hegemonic control before doing something in the real world? Do their mentations about habitus really make a difference in what they do? This research speaks along the lines of Ortner and pushes further to say, "Who cares what the rules of the game are?" As evidenced by the work accomplishes, youth media producers create their own games and don't worry about whether what they are doing is following or challenging the status quo. What matters is that they believe they are challenging the status quo, and this in turn changes their attitudes about themselves and each other. Doing literally anything in the name of youth inclusion and justice for their communities of belonging supports their sense of reality, fitting into it, and the hopes they have for their future selves.

Certainly, ideologies take a long time to change at the macro-level, but we have had a long time and can see Ortner's point in the philosophical thought of Simon Critchley. In *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance*, Critchley (2007) agrees with Ortner that we do not perceive the world with some kind of

Kantian disinterest. We act in and on the world with great interest. Critchley's starting point for philosophy is not from musing about the world, but in seeing the world and finding that we are disappointed with the present state of affairs. He says, "there should be a conception of ethical experience at the heart of morality based on the exorbitant demand of infinite responsibility…Ethics should be infinitely demanding" (69). If it is the case that we are charged with infinite responsibility, which I liken to 'care for the Other' as articulated by Emmanuel Levinas (1979), and we peer outside and feel a sense of disillusionment, the outcome or outcry becomes a politics of resistance. Critchley says, "disappointment is the response to a situated injustice or wrong that provokes the need for an ethics" (88). Michel de Certeau (1986) similarly articulates ethics in a way that relates to these ideas that produce forms of resistant action. He says, "Ethics… defines a distance between what is and what ought to be. This distance designates a space where we have something to do" (199). Thus, ethics is both a responsibility and a practice, and the challenge here is to avoid falling into dogmatic traps, some of which may be the reproduction of greater inequalities or the division of groups that exacerbate inequities. Let me now turn to the role of interpersonal influence on the relationship between action and thought.

Anthropology, and more specifically sociocultural anthropology, entails studying human beings and their various ways of organizing society as it is informed by past and present cultures all around the world. This overview also suggests what it means to do anthropological research. Fundamentally, doing anthropology via ethnographic fieldwork, as I have done with this project, offers insights into understanding ourselves, others, and the situatedness of our interactions. Because culture extends beyond the norms, values, beliefs, attitudes, and dispositions of subjects in place and time, culture is an *always-becoming exhibition* of the actions and interactions of individuals and human networks that produce what seem to be monolithic cultures, but are actually better representative of pop-ontologies. That is, cultural ways of life pop up and may hold together for a very long time through our shared conceptions of who we are. However, they are potentially subject to revolutionary alteration. We use our senses, sensibilities, social roles, and powers and positionalities to produce cultural logics.

We also can come together across our different social positions to interrogate what we share and ask whether we ought to continue to share it or seek its transformation. When our views differ, we must take responsibility for understanding the logical connections made by others. As it emerges ethnographically, culture as power or a power relationship exists in the minds and on the bodies of material beings but has a future orientation that no single actor can know before entering and engaging with other actors within the social domain. What culture means depends on the entangled lives of acting subjects who generally agree on some method and organization for daily life. Thus, anthropologists study not a culture, but rather the power-laden actions and practices that pop up and prop up particular phenomena. This includes the power of questioning our shared ways of being and the promise that ethnography holds for deepening our attunements to how we should live.

How can we best live together? How we go on living together in our globalizing world, thus, is front and center in debates about humanity and human existence as actors play serious games to accomplish their projects. If not already clear, by pop-ontology I

mean that human beings are not born into a blank social space. Humans enter into an already existing cultural place. The arrival or departure of any human being changes the nature of people and achieves new horizons about human life, however subtle and elusive at first. Over time, and this is relative, people begin to gain consciousness that things are not the way they once were, and can find themselves satisfied or disappointed with changes. Cultural diffusion explains how pop- ontology operates in the minds and on the bodies within particular lived domains. The presence of new social actors disrupts or dislocates what the nature of being was before their arrival. The sudden presence or disappearance of people means the popping up of a new ontological world.

At this point we may ask whether a human being is ever fully developed. Humans are only partially neurologically cooked at birth, they need help to get up and get going on their own. Do they ever stop depending? Does a person become fully who one is at a particular life stage? Does one continue to become something other than what one was as a result of diffusing cultural phenomena? I am confident to claim human beings can never be understood as completed. In a globalized society that is expanding still, it seems unlikely that very many people dwell entirely within a single public sphere. Within a single public sphere, there are counter- or multiple-publics that demand our accounting. Any egalitarian, fair, and just society accounts for all its inhabitants. Moreover, even for the few who live out their entire lives in a single organized space, today it is also very likely that other social actors will enter this domain, changing the social and power dynamics of that society. Thus, ontologically speaking, humanity may be just as dependent on pop-ontological culture as on biology.

I say all of that to say this: every action is also a reaction. Every utterance is a response to previous utterances (Mikhail Bakhtin, 1993). Children are not plopped down into nothingness. They are born into an already operating social structure, into already uttering discourses – a brilliant and radiating thought – and they must find in themselves a way to fit into this reality to accomplish their projects. When power eludes them in the face of being tasked to utter something remarkable, what choice do young people have to stand on their own, and for themselves? Sometimes, hopes and dreams must emerge from disappointment with the status quo, resulting in resistance forms of action, and producing something unknowable until the actions are complete. Action first, then thought. It is the youth media method for changing the world, which I argue they don't actually accomplish. Rather, what they do is change themselves to better fit into the status quo so that they grow in capacity to change it. For this to work, they need help. They must ask for help. Lucky for them, the institutionalization of youth groups makes asking for help easy. It is like when one feels lost, alone, and left out in the cold and rain; and then all of a sudden somebody brings the person indoors, offers a hug, and says, "Welcome Home." That feeling of belonging somewhere – literally, anywhere – highlights the difference between selfish independence and human interdependence. The latter is our goal. Obviously!

Hopes and dreams find uplift when and where fitting in feels real. With help extended, freedom to express vulnerability grows as the sense of victimization fades. As action in and on the world takes shape in public space, youth social justice seekers begin to experience their place within something to which they belong. It is from this worlding through acting that I argue for doing things as a way to form proper human values about

self, others, and society. This is the youth media way to right thinking. Action before thinking equals values formation properly aligned toward the achievement of aspirations not yet even dreamed of. Dreams emerge automatically because hope has been restored, and because interdependent action in the name of doing good has produced within each actor an inarticulable knowing that "having been there and having done that" is what aspiration is all about. Aspirations are not the same as ambitions or achievements. Aspirations relate to principles by which all of humanity ought to agree.

True power, then, lies within. What arises inside someone to arouse hopes and dreams about living a happy life? Here, attending to derailments of such hope will be just as important as the pathway to truth itself. Dreams emerging from hope can get caught in the business (busy-ness) of conformity to the wrong principles. The work-a-day world may prescribe modes of life that cause internal misfiring in some, thus producing possible harm to self or others. This is why asking for help and offering help – human interdependence – is vital to proper thinking about one's present and one's potential future. Young people grow through deliberately focused decisive action followed by concerned reflective thought, and not the other way around. Acting in the world is how people best form their thoughts about that world. This is how we *get real.* Getting real means living the way one hopes the world will turn, acting following one's hopes for a better world, and then augmenting thoughts about that dream world so that it may become reality. We can call this human interdependence an actor-network.

In *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, Bruno Latour (2007) says "network is an expression to check how much energy, movement, and specificity our own reports are able to capture. Network is a concept, not a thing out there. It is a tool to help describe something, not what is being described" (131). Thus, the network is not seen, but the actor in the network leaves traces of it via outflows through time and space. In the context of this project, we may say that children leave traces of their public service activities. However, sustainability may wane. The duration and extension of youth action tend to be so minimal that most vanish, perhaps because they began as placation, but also because policy structures endure. Busy-ness as usual carries on despite their efforts to stake a claim.

Using a network approach, such as Latour's actor-network theory, a new vision of childhood can emerge and take seriously the conditions and concerns young people have about society. With full rights to participate in public life, children can be not only better served as full human beings. They can add important social and political ideas to the existing modes of decision-making. Some may argue child political inclusivity is radical, but in fact, it may be the right thing to do. Latour says, "We have to resist the idea that there exists somewhere a dictionary where all the variegated words of the actors can be translated into the few words of the social vocabulary. Will we have the courage *not* to substitute an unknown expression for a well-known one?" (48). For youth action, this means keeping an open mind and a willingness to update our positions when we find that they are no longer working to produce interdependent humanity. What are the youth journalists in this project saying about this? As far as I can tell, nothing. They do not care. By do not care, I mean they absolutely care about acting, no matter what. They care so much that they carry on whether or not others care to take them seriously.

Including all the voices who have concern and a stake in a decision creates opportunities for seeing and addressing differences while finding ways to build connections and solve problems. However, the production of child politics – a way to fit youth in official politics – remains elusive. An allusion here would be that children and youth produce their realities in the company of each other, working together to help find a way to fit into the world as it is. To reiterate, whether they challenge the status quo or fit into it does not matter as much as the action taken which they believe is always a challenge to the world as it is. The effect is always the same: growth in acceptance of self, with hope that the world will improve. Public kids, youth media producers, articulate their hopes toward dreams via the networks they leave traces of in the very act of participating in justice-seeking projects, playing by their own rules.

The youth public action projects are often like hit-and-run accidents. They just happen and then everybody disperses. As the actions end, aspirational awakening begins and it appears in their changed attitudes and behaviors going forward as they maintain interdependence. By changed attitudes and behaviors I mean the way doing work in the community helps the youth media kids become honest with themselves and each other. No longer do they have to hide in silence about their pasts, about what they are experiencing, or about fears. Hopes and dreams relate to the things believed and valued, always unfolding as youth become who they are through action.

To wrap up the tension between maintaining hope and potential impediments from the positive changes that come from justice-oriented action, I shall remind the reader that I am not trying to change the world just as the youth activists are not changing the status quo even though they think they might. It is inner work that changes the world. When one has a belief it becomes real, whether others believe it or not. That communicates a value that takes one in proper aspirational direction. Concerns that groups may essentialize each other are real. Binary politics gets in the way of human principles. Advertising mental illness solutions produce thoughts in individuals that they must have mental illnesses. I have nothing to say on these topics directly. My focus is on the fact that actions in the name of doing positive things in the community does positive inner work for individuals brave enough to enter the world and see what happens from their efforts.

Differences of belief, which is to say differences in visions of reality, do not have to be problems. They are the way to progress. Adults may say society needs more rules to keep kids in line. The youth journalists here say, “Invest in youth, and not in prisons, so we may become the citizens you desire us to be.” More rules? Less rules? Those binary questions are traps, perhaps stuck between quantitative cerebralism and qualitative disappointment. The communitarian question is what I seek to answer: If children are disappointed with the world and they have useful designs for social order and organization, then why not let them speak on topics that matter to them and their youth constituents? Helping young people fit into the status quo ought to be a worthy endeavor if adult leaders of today wish to produce a world in which everybody feels like they belong. I hardly think what they say will be more harmful than the circulated politics blasting across corporate media right now.

Corporate media has what? It has corporate interests (Orlowski, 2011). What hope is there for humanity is everything is about money? I can’t help but think of Margaret

Mead's incitement in Seth Kramer, Daniel Miller, and Jeremy Newberger's film *The Anthropologist* (2015) when she says food is not about economics, it's about people eating! This is the kind of thought that comes from action, from being in the world and participating in the lives of others. I relate this back to the secret sympathy that permeates the aura of the youth media group and their shared sense of wonder about how they together can challenge the way the world operates. The secret sympathy keeps them together. It facilitates their capacity to reach out to each other as they reach within to discover their inner truths. In this reaching, which is also a research method, human interdependence emerges and more action takes place. Carolina Balazs and Rachel Morello-Frosch (2013) discuss reaching in the context of community-based participatory research (CBPR) as sharing. They say, "Reach encapsulates the degree to which knowledge is disseminated to diverse audiences and translated into useful tools for the scientific, regulatory, policy and lay arenas" (2). Children already have the lay tools for social change, or as Anthony Giddens (1984) calls it, a practical consciousness for right human action. Their participation in social advancement to form a stronger bond with themselves, each other, and communities supports inquiry about how to best live together. Thus, reaching by taking action on issues and at local events offers opportunities to get thoughts right.

How, then, can they be right with themselves through action without feeling like they have to agree with each other? Let's consider a way there. I propose intellectual humility. I am quick today to proclaim that I know only a little and that even in my strongest convictions, I may still be wrong. Do children and youth think this way? Do they even know that it's perfectly okay to not only not know, but to say openly and honestly to others, "I don't know"? They do, sometimes. Sometimes, they don't. In that sense, they are no different from adults, or at least those who are truly honest with themselves. This is a problem of social convention – expectations that people never make mistakes. My concern is that children come up in a world that expects them to perform a certain thing in a certain way when they haven't yet developed the capacity to even know what the thing is they are supposed to try to accomplish. Oh, humanity, what are you? Humans are everywhere and yet impossible to see. When we look, it is only to call out or put down, and then in the name of justice cancel that person from humanity.

That is not humanity in action. That is wrong thinking without action. I have hopes that when people act in the world they are nearly always trying their best to do good. I believe that for myself, so I must believe it for others. Humanity is forgiving and offers redemption. This gets us to an important point about control. Recall that society is very much about controlling populations. That's how a human civilization operates. It attempts to bring all people into one place and follow a particular pattern of life. When some struggle to fit into that prescription, cancel culture does not let up on trying to make everybody fit the mold. Consider that if something has to be controlled, then it is out of control. Well, is humanity out of control? Or, are particular societies out of control? That depends on one's attitude and perception of reality. What's useful for this research is the fact that children and youth have visions of reality that solve some of these problems. They say, "Invest in us. Don't lock us up." Freedom from social constraints so they may leave traces of their networks holds hope that youth today will develop the right thinking as the result of their efforts to participate in public life.

A mantra among the youth media organization's leaders, participants, and supporters is "Get Loud!" I have often heard similar ideas such as "speak up" and "don't be silenced" as ways to claim public space and voice. I know they hope to challenge the status quo. I hope they enter it to find that it's not so bad and that from within it they can continue to grow while pushing its bounds. This is where I see possible movement from values into aspirations. It's a useful way of looking at the relationship between taking action and landing mentally on solid ground. It can be easy to experience so-called failures as character flaws. First attempts in learning (F.A.I.L.), however, simply demonstrate that action was taken to do something good. Values propel us to keep trying because we aspire to live by the principle of human interdependence. The trick is to not get stuck in self-deprecating thoughts. If they are our values, then we will try again. An important aspect of action is understanding that wins and losses come in the same package of life. We are human beings in all our successes and failings, and those characteristics of ourselves that we love and despise are both equally real. Getting into action supports us in thinking we love ourselves more than we dislike any part of ourselves. Action as a step in personal growth helps youth grow to be who they truly are and away from the despised inauthentic busy-ness-as-usual sometimes produced. Action makes unconditional self-acceptance the most real thing because we experience it, and we like it.

CHAPTER 5: IN THE COMPANY OF OTHERS

People are ordinary and they do ordinary things because it is what we know we are to do in given contexts. Even extraordinary experience, if we conceive it as such, calls for ordinary actions or responses to the phenomena. Effectively, everything tends toward the ordinary because human cultural life demands conformity to our general ways of knowing and being in the world. Such simple yet provocative ideas about how we coordinate humanity were written by Harvey Sacks in 1984. His essay, *On Doing 'Being Ordinary,'* shows how his training and engagements with ordinary experience can carry us away and bring us back down to earth at the same time. J. David Velleman (2015) says, "Sacks belonged to a group of sociologists who adopted the name of ethnomethodologists, because they sought to catalog the 'methods of ordinary life'. Ethnomethodology is a look at ordinary people doing ordinary things, including in extraordinary situations (53)".

People do ordinary things, and they do them together. In this chapter, I elevate growth of hope toward dreams by looking at peer influence. Peer-to-peer engagements are central to the production of culture, and the cultural ordinaries that constitute a day at the youth media organization. Regularly scheduled meetings are always quite ordinary, even when non-ordinary things happen. Surprises are few, and the people mostly appear bored without anticipation that things will change. This is commonplace, but it is a production and a performance of sorts. Together, people create the aura of space. How does this happen? Mary Jane Collier (1999) proclaims that "when we begin inquiry about intercultural communication, we are studying how we do, be, and know ourselves and others as cultural beings" (17). She goes on to note that "our cultural identities are constructed in relationships with others inside our own groups and with members of other groups." It is a "relationship process that refers to the quality of connection or bond that emerges in communication" (26). Collier's (1998) discussion of avowal and ascription of identity is also notable. Avowal has to do with in-group members perceptions of themselves, whereas ascription deals with how ingroup members perceive out-group members as well as how in-group members see themselves being seen by out-group members (132-133). These concepts, which are not unique to any single discipline, are important to the ways we grapple with fear, and how we interact with people of so-called different cultures.

For example, avowed identity facilitates our interactions with particular others. If a particular culture holds a strong opinion about something or has a tradition or a particular pattern of interaction, conforming and adapting to these can improve the relationship process. Ascribed identity also helps us in several ways. If the people of a particular culture have a negative perception of us, we can seek to correct this in our interaction. This perception is the identity that has been ascribed to us by people of another culture. Also, for the same reasons, it is helpful to know how other cultures believe we see them. Does this produce power relations? Or, does it help people get to know differences and grow toward dialogue across those differences? Both are possible when it comes to social structure and social interactions within and across identities, roles, and statuses within any given domain. Likewise, the concepts we use to know self, others, and society influence the ways we avow and ascribe meaning. Concepts, however

useful for humans to engage in meaningful dialogues, may fall short of their intended utility. What, then, is ordinary about coordinated action if we are using the wrong words to describe and interpret others? The ordinary resides in the action, for action may be better understood across differences than the words we use to attempt to name and identify things. This is not to say that actions may not be misunderstood, or that eyewitness accounts are accurate (they often are not!), but rather that people can and do act in the world in a coordinated way that does not always require verbalization.

Velleman discusses ordinary ways of being bored. I find that useful since I was often quite bored in the field at the twice weekly meetings I attended with the youth media group. There was a lot of hurrying to get there on time just to wait because program staff was ready. Or, the growing culture of youth journalists always arriving thirty minutes late; or last minute changes to the daily tasks because people just didn't feel like making an effort; or the silence or the loud noise that rippled through the "safe space" sometimes in the form of inappropriate presence or action. These are teenagers mostly, so use your imagination or personal experience to contend with those presences and action. However, a day in the meeting was never just boring or garrulous or contentious. The cultural aura of care and belonging always pervaded the space, and it invaded my perception of this group of youngsters in ways that were always ordinary. I found that extraordinary. I came to the organization expecting a bustling media production crew ready and willing to hit the streets and make some reports. What I discovered was something beyond skills-based learning. I discovered love, and in experiencing that, I grew to love them all. I would be lying, and I am crying as I write this, if they did not teach me how to love myself. That's the most beautiful thing about being in the company of others. We can always be for each other, be present to care for others, to make ourselves useful and helpful to the world, one person at a time.

In the company of others, we discover who we really are, and accept that we are all good people no matter our experiences, feelings, insecurities, anxieties, or downright senses of brokenness. No matter what our present lives seem to be, our experiences together benefit us, each other, and the whole group. This is how human interdependence across individual differences can flourish. I also found it to be advantageous as a launching off place to get into journalism and media production. Their stories, co-produced under an aura of care for the whole group, highlight the power and value of personal narrative, oral history, and engagement with the world. Is this kind of work challenging the status quo? Maybe. Regardless, it most certainly elevates human social life for this group so that they can better comprehend themselves. I am still crying, because they also helped me to better know myself and that is a reflection of the value of participating in the world by doing something – literally, anything – that supports other people. The social support that uplifts communities and extends belonging of this kind speaks to the value of a humanities education. The value is in the *doing being ordinary together* so that we may come to know truth, love, and justice, and these are vital principles for the arrival of aspirational thought. Recall that aspirations relate to principles by which all of humanity ought to agree. Thus, ordinary humanity relates to human values that give us an aim, an aspiration. Just being in the world, together, activates aspiration.

CHAPTER 6: A PUBLIC PLACE; A PUBLIC CURRICULUM

Returning to pop-ontology – the idea that human beings enter an already ongoing world of reproducing structures of hierarchical power that seek respect from those under influence – and seeing it through a multiplicity of social organization frameworks, my ethnographic research illuminates interdependent realities in planetary existence. Tangentially, I also wonder how, in our increasingly globalized society, we are not achieving coordinated action in more interdependent and solution-based ways. As both philosophy and practice, my approach to fieldwork seeks to trace themes of social-emotional well-being that emerge from youth public action. The idea of tracing the actions of youth follows from grounded theory, understood as theory discovery, first articulated in 1967 by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss in *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*. I appreciate this approach because theory is something that manifests in the always emergent social interactions and then achieves its conceptualization only after the phenomenal experience. That is, action precedes thought. Karen O'Reilly (2009) says of their work, "The discovery of grounded theory results from an interplay between researchers and the data, where the researcher is not afraid to draw on his or her own experiences. The theories that are produced are seen as modifiable, qualifiable, and open (in part) to negotiation, but because these theories are grounded in data, researchers are confident about their validity" (94). On the one hand, theory from data suggests a stronger attachment to reality than theory from mere musing or observation. On the other hand, all theorizing is subject to correction or updating because objective reality is really just a version of subjective perception. Grounded theory begins with understanding that an objective world exists apart from the perceptions and constructs we produce, but that no kind or amount or mode of data can arrive at its whole. Reality is but one or a combination of perspectives that occupy spaces that Foucault refers to as regimes of truth (Lorenzini, 2016). Effectively, power is everywhere because people produce reality everywhere, which is always a power-laden perception of what is, what should be, and who gets to say what is and should be real(ized).

Things realized are things made true, and public. Reality as a performance is a public display and a public action that seeks its own reproduction. However, the value of action in the community is that the boundaries of our shared perception of reality may be pushed. Children and youth can and do operate in the company of each other to make a point, or to point society in a new direction in which they would like to see the world turn. They have desires that relate not only to who they are becoming but also to how they are coming up in society. Regardless of background – the so-called advantaged or the so-called underrepresented – they can and do work together in the name of doing something and doing it differently than their elders. Youth media is a mostly public place for action that inspires those coming up to form values that relate to their aspirations about human social life.

A simple Internet search for youth groups or organizations would turn up a wealth of entities. They are popping up everywhere – rural, suburban, urban, oceanic – and it is hard to keep any young person interested out. Unity, and a welcoming spirit of conformity to principles that support social-emotional well-being hold strong. Helping young people see the truth, that they are perfectly imperfect and belong, supports

aspirational capacity as they complete their projects on their terms, playing their own games, and acting as if they hold all the power. It's great stuff! Some youth action groups, media-focused or otherwise, dwell in a specific physical place; some are more ad hoc emerging only on the streets; and some exist solely in virtual space. No matter where they are in the world, the children are out there, asserting their significance as voices of hope and freedom for their lives and the lives of their peers.

Melvin Delgado and Lee Staples (2008) say, "The extensive number of books, as well as government and foundation reports, attesting to the importance of this paradigmatic shift speaks well to the popularity and future of youth development and youth-led movements" (7). They further discuss the work of others, including Finn and Checkoway who name youth action, also called youth organization, as a political idea aimed at supporting and representing the young generations. Previously, Janet Finn and Barry Checkoway (1998) took a stand on the role of youth action for youth, emphasizing that nobody advocates better for youth than youth. Obviously! It should be as such, yet adult intervention today continues to placate youth in the name of their protection and saving grace. Young people redeem themselves by acting and then thinking through their actions. I stand to argue that mistakes are always opportunities, and that there is no failure in life. There is only growth, and sometimes growth comes on the other side of negative feelings and public blunders.

Whether using personal reflection, self-assessment, or peer-level assessment, works to make a difference across the youth group will be a point of critical discussion in the next chapter, along with the role of media literacy in coming to terms with reality. The present focus shall now move from recognizing youth organizing as public action to looking specifically at the public curriculum the youth media group I studied with followed in order to complete their projects.

The Curriculum

Youth media doesn't think, pause, reflect, and then proceed with much. They just do it. They enter the world and take action on projects that matter to their lives, based on what they have experienced and witnessed, with hopes aimed in the direction of dreaming bigger about what is possible for humanity. I have stated a few times above that I do not believe they are changing much in the world. However, they are changing by acting in the public square and that is what this dissertation is all about. *Acting as if* they are changing the world changes who they are and how they see themselves, others, and society. The practice of acting as if has been applied across ideas and disciplines including business, psychology, and human development. Inge Bretherton and Marjorie Beeghly (1989) say:

> In pretense, children perform actions not to achieve everyday objectives but to create alternative social and physical realities. This ability to operate in the subjunctive mode is acquired surprisingly early in development. True, 1-year-olds are limited to pretending that they are asleep or are drinking juice when, in reality, they are not. But soon children can playfully assume family or occupational roles

> that they do not have to perform in everyday life until adulthood, and later still they can create impossible worlds through enactments in which physical and social causality as well as natural laws are suspended or turned upside down (239).

"Fake it until you make it" is another way this idea has been colloquialized in human interaction. The method by which to achieve social change is to get active and to produce new knowledge about people, places, and ideas through action. *Acting as if* becomes the key that unlocks the soul, in a sense, because it liberates children and youth from the noisy mental constraints all around them. The busy-ness as usual gets in the way, but youth media actors have discovered that the way to achieve their dreams is to ignore that noise and act as if they already hold the power to change the world. Thus, I do not think they are pretending or faking anything. What I see happening is that they believe in challenging the status quo and making it happen. What they don't know is that the change is inner. It is happening inside each of them as the result of their actions. Thus, another way to conceive of action is that it's a method by which youth perform important social roles until they and the people in the community believe that what is happening is good. No faking!

The youth media project met every Tuesday and Thursday after school in the downtown Main Street offices of the youth leadership organization. Previously a member of a now defunct youth media hub, the group is a project of a parent non-profit that oversees the media group's work. It dwells in the heart of a Central Valley, California city, on the top floor of an old brick building attached to a restaurant, a hair salon, and a tabletop gaming shop that specializes in something called *Magic: The Gathering*. I imagined many of the youth here would have frequented the game shop, though I never heard any of them mention it. During my time with the group, which occupied lucky Suite #13, I experienced a mix of activities when participants arrived. If many of them showed up, it tended to be quite loud and tactile as people joked and moved throughout the office, with the occasional piling up of beanbag chairs into which youth would flip and dive. The kinesthetic learning was well established, and took the form of outdoor energizing activities as well. On days when only a handful showed up, the office felt dispirited as nobody was motivated to showcase their wit or talent. Participation – understood as showing up, in this case – waxed and waned between 2016 and 2019. The office was abuzz nearly all the time in my first year of field research. This faded in the months leading up to the COVID-19 shutdown. I asked the leadership for an explanation of the drop off. They claimed to have no explanation for why some youths stopped coming. Attempts to keep the group going online during the pandemic were futile. Nevertheless, during my years here, great events unfolded. The youth grew through exhilarating award wins and through distressing losses.

The umbrella focus for this innovative afterschool youth journalism program was *community health through a hyper-local lens*. Key areas for journalism and media production covered eight broad categories: community, education, family, health, mental health, incarceration, identity, and safety. Generally, the program attended to the personal narratives of the youth to uplift their voices and the voices of their peers to say something meaningful about larger issues. Personal identity and personal storytelling appeared

centrally in documenting, writing, and illustrating their public actions. The curriculum the youth media group used was a clear and simplified version of more complex research methods familiar to scholars, for the most part. As provided to me by the leadership team, the training opportunities offered to participants included all of the following:

Social Media	Journalism	Video Editing
How to Run an Event	Photography	Reporting 101
Time Management	AP Style	Writing on a Beat
Op-Ed Writing	Interviewing	Finding a Story
Profile Writing	Personal Narrative	Visual Essay Writing

In addition to the above, I observed a lot of interest in writing poetry, and over time some youth began podcasting and experimenting with other forms of digital media. All youth journalists participating in media production worked as independent contractors for the organization. They earned stipends for producing media content for the organization's website and annual print publication. Stipends were the same for all participants, but youth journalism as idealized in the program followed a three-step promotional model, moving from apprentice to journalist, and then to mentor. I perceived no significant difference between apprentice and journalist, but mentors held some responsibilities to the group.

I understood mentors as those with the most time in the program as opposed to any technical and/or content expertise. However, most mentors also showed a greater capacity to lead and support others in their projects. The program afforded mentors a platform to lead "weigh-ins." A weigh-in involved reviewing a currently mediated event, offering a perspective on it, and then asking youth to respond to one or two questions about the article. Leading a weigh-in occurred during regularly scheduled meetings and sometimes the leader facilitated a conversation on the news topic before people responded in writing. Weigh-ins were regularly published on the media group's website. The last weigh-in I remember occurred at one of the last in-person meetings before the world closed public doors due to COVID-19:

If you could write a poem to COVID, what would you want to tell it?

The youth participants presented heartfelt and provocative reactions to what was happening in the world, and articulated them with hyper-local eloquence. One response was as follows:

A new kind of fear of strangers
My body is alive, but what's inside is dying
The city never sleeps, but its heartbeat has slowed
Change is pain

After everybody who wanted to participate responded, one of the leaders published the youth's answers on the project website for public viewing. It's not clear what volume of traffic the website received, and maybe that is less important than the strength of thought and emotion the youth articulated with this question. My argument remains one of individual change rather than social change. I have understood weigh-ins to be quite powerful for the youth in terms of personal growth in identity and belonging. Furthermore, since the group is interested in hyper-local space, would not inner growth be a hyper-local change? Their social-emotional attunements of growth through completing projects have helped them draw healthy connections between themselves and build meaningful relationships with others and the world at large. They did not always vocalize this, but the practical consciousness of the group was nurtured in the way they engaged. As people who often felt like each day was either the worst day of their lives or the best day of their lives, it took time for them to find where truth in the real world dwelled. Some things are best kept in-house for a while before broadcasting to the world.

Or, as many youth participants have stated, some of *what happens here stays here*. LaMay (2016) articulates very well what other teacher-scholars have done, and says, "Jeff Duncan-Adrade, a professor of education who opened Roses in Concrete, an elementary school in East Oakland, California, argues that most schools fail to provide adequate resources for addressing social-emotional needs of students in high-trauma communities" (68). Furthermore, schools that address such attunements in youth seem to do so with bandages, rather than with heart. Schools are not getting to the heart of what's the matter with youth experiencing daily hardships. The significance of the youth media group dwells at the intersections of education, social support, and feelings of belonging in the world. It is very easy to feel like one does not belong in the world especially when everything has felt hard. In and through public action, young people can and do find ways to fit into the status quo while pushing against its walls. At present, I think of youth media as an intersectional pedagogy where what is lacking in public schooling can be made up for through community-engaged programming. LaMay says, "Teaching for social-emotional and academic engagement…*rebuilds students' relationships with school*" (119, LaMay's emphasis). This is how aspiration may find its activation. Youth media "Gets Loud!" and stakes a claim in personal growth and community health. On the other side, they have become something that promotes self-love.

Going Public

Generally, the public sphere of life is understood to be social and political and where democratic participation takes place. The public ought to concern and be of concern to a whole society to augment improvements in the everyday lives of all people. However, at least in the United States, the public sphere has a long history of classism, racism, and gender divisions that have always privileged bourgeois immigrant groups. The public sphere as an already constructed location for deliberative thought and action, thus, imagines the exclusion of certain groups from having a voice – though this exclusion is actively being challenged today. Children and youth, being automatically disenfranchised by age, have always already been unfit for public decision-making, yet

they must live through the decisions that have been and continue to be made in their so-called best interests. Putting aside that counter-publics have always existed, and that using the notion of counters may still make sense today, I put forth a reframing of the public sphere as articulated by Jennifer Clifton (2017), which I shall elaborate on below. Clifton suggests that *going public* is something anybody can do within official public spheres, where to go public automatically means that one has a stake in the outcome of a deliberation, and thus, must be heard. A concern for youth, however, has always been adult-constructed opportunities to do so. Herein lies the power of community-based youth media: affording the disenfranchised a channel through which to speak with, speak back, and speak up on issues impacting their lives.

A guiding theme at this media group that corrected child exclusion was *investment in youth*. The organization and the media production leaders took very seriously the insights young people offered about things in their hyper-local lives. They considered whole-person insights – intellectual, social, and emotional. Probably spiritual as well, though there was some misunderstanding about what that word means among leaders and some youth. Investing in youth, and using their ideas, was strong across the board. Gray Group International (2024), a Las Vegas-based humanity and technology company, explains the value of youth inclusion:

> Investing in youth is not just an act of benevolence, but a strategic choice to shape the future through empowerment. By recognizing the unique potential and power of young generations, we can create an environment that enables them to thrive, contribute, and lead. Strategies for youth empowerment should be comprehensive, encompassing education, employment, entrepreneurship, health, and civic participation. Governments, organizations, and communities must come together to create an enabling environment that nurtures the aspirations of young people, harnesses their innovative ideas, and builds bridges across cultures, nations, and generations. By investing in the youth today, we are investing in a brighter and more prosperous future for all.[2]

Many promises come from after-school youth media programming. By promoting youth investment, the media group prioritized youth voices and found strength in their participation in public debates and dialogues. One such issue stemmed from the Black Lives Matter movement which I shall showcase later. Namely, they offered the notion of defunding the police. I am unsure whether the leaders or youth participants fully understood what police defunding means, or how the movement defined it. We could probably reason that BLM participants all around the world understood it differently. The idea of defunding anything continues to be a hot topic for debate. Nevertheless, they clearly articulated the desire and need to reallocate law enforcement resources to social support programs for local people, especially youth programming. They also understood with critical depth that preempting violence through youth investment truly has the power to create healthier communities. In this sense, youth engagement with a public issue confirms the value of community-based educational opportunities.

On the other hand, not investing in youth has historically produced negative representations of children on the streets. When seen as a nuisance rather than a blessing, an understanding of being youth-in-public creates an already branded image: public charge. It is this notion of going public that the youth media organization challenges. Youth have a strong desire to participate in local decision-making and local politicians might be wise to invest more in youth groups. I have already stated that the personal identities and affinities of the youth are not my primary concern, but I shall make it known as they are important for future projects interested in supporting social-emotional growth through community-based media or other skills learning. Most of the youth participants were non-white and from families on the lower end of the economic ladder. Some were recent immigrants, bilingual in English and Spanish, some youth were in foster care, and some were either facing expulsion or nearing high school completion and at risk of homelessness. Many came from religious families. Many, too, identified as gender non-binary or had a concerned interest in or identified along the LGBTQ+ spectrum. The intersecting identities of the children and youth here set them up to be at once public charges in a system of cracking safety nets, but also as seekers of truth and justice with personal stakes in challenging the status quo.

Becoming public as the voices for social change by literally being out in the streets as well as being caught in public welfare or juvenile justice programs made the mostly non-white and poor and queer media youth highly visible for social and legal policing. This reality was analogous to what Mae Ngai calls "impossible subjects." Speaking in the context of U.S. immigration policy, Ngai (2014) says, "Immigration restriction produced the illegal alien as a *new legal and political subject*, whose inclusion within the nation was simultaneously a social reality and a legal impossibility…barred from citizenship and without rights" (4-5, her emphasis). The conundrum here – visibility because socially active media youth are politically invisible, and imagined desire for their invisibility makes them targets for surveillance – is that social and political transformation depends on their participation in public civic engagement. Since public policy values social control over investment in youth, it becomes crucial for the future of all people that young people get active hyper-locally to seek the change they desire.

Good youth mentoring, thus, supports youth development in such a way that we could turn off the cameras in anticipation of them being criminals, and turn on the cameras to showcase their achievements in the name of doing good for their hyper-local communities. Ultimately, the program leaders afforded a mostly safe platform for youth writers and media producers to be out, loud, and proud about the work they accomplished. It is a policy implication of this project that we can and should create more community-based youth opportunities. Schooling can't handle it. Young people want it. Let's do it. Action comes first; reflection and concerned thought about what took place makes inner growth possible.

Educational Opportunity? March For Our Lives Example

On March 24, 2018, in a youth-led movement for stricter gun control laws, "March For Our Lives" captured hearts across the United States. Millions of people, including a coalition of youth groups and adult allies in the Central Valley, demanded an end to gun violence in schools. The march and rally proved powerful and contentious for the Merced attendees. Youth activists read poetry and names and argued for and against gun ownership. The peaceful and hopeful gathering showed that people can have productive dialogues across position differences. For example, when a middle-schooler argued that schools need more security and metal detectors, audience groans swelled. Nothing happened, and people were most interested in productive education about the comment rather than attacking the messenger. Nevertheless, this shows the potential for false solidarity in circles of social protest. People may participate in the same action yet have different motives or plans for moving forward together. A key takeaway is that public action need not be in the direction of legal change or argument against an idea or a group's representative ideal. Rather, action can focus on reaching to form possibilities for future action. Reaching, which I noted above is also a research method, is related to hope for interdependent humanity regardless of differences or outcomes.

The public can be further elaborated through what curriculum and instruction scholar Jennifer Clifton (2017) names "critical incidents." She says these are the "specific dramatic moments when…difficulties play out" (29). As a public pedagogical opportunity for seeing from the perspectives of others, she recommends writing different frameworks for making sense of a situation. In the classroom, Clifton says, "I ask each student to consider one stakeholder and to give a one- or two-word response to 'The problem is…' Rather than talking about the critical incident along binary lines that suppose there is a singular point of stasis, a clear impasse – an oversimplification that often impedes dialogue, we instead consider how different stakeholders might construct points of stasis" (102). I find this useful and applicable to youth activist writing and media production. From these constructed points of stasis, youth journalists could begin a discussion about how each stakeholder arrives at their particular stance or interpretation of the critical incident, and then proceed to do the challenging work of understanding the incident from the perspectives of others. What lingers, however, is whether the media group with which I focused my fieldwork ever had an interest in considering others' perspectives. Moreover, did the leadership team consider their program to be an educational opportunity for youth?

I often argued that the youth journalism and media production program was an afterschool educational opportunity. I would constantly get back, "It is an afterschool program." The leaders reasoned that the youth hated school and so they did not want to refer to youth media as education. Nevertheless, that is what it always was to me, and I imagine it is today a powerful mode of learning social-emotional healing and growth along with media production and writing skills. Also, on the important point Clifton raised, I am skeptical that anybody in the organization thought much about listening to arguments that differed from their own. I learned through several attempts to engage in critical dialogues with them that they only wanted to hear things (i.e., ideas and people) with which they already agreed, often reproducing the false binary of opinions found in popular media. Sometimes "there are only two sides to an issue" one youth reporter remarked early in my days with the group. I had to decide how to best proceed. On the

one hand I wanted to help them gain critical awareness of corporate media's influence. However, they also deserved agency to attend to the world on their terms. Thus, this is partly why I focused on action before thought as a method of *reaching,* which is also a method, of solving social problems for the youth and their communities of belonging. Another case of reaching occurred in the same year as "March For Our Lives" and it attended to LGBTQ+ inclusion, an issue close to the hearts of many involved youth.

Case Study: Merced's First Trans & Intersex Rights March

In the Central Valley town of Merced the first "Transgender and Intersex Rights" march took place on November 17, 2018. Respect for identity inclusion and resistance to silence highlighted hope that society could restructure to better support all people, but also frustration that dominant identity discourses continue to hinder growth. LGBTQ+ youth and their allies spoke of invisibility and underrepresentation, even as what they resisted remained unclear. What they were reaching for through a discourse of resistance may have been better terms of recognition. The effort here shows a reach to change meanings of sex, gender, and sexuality and to promote the value and legitimacy of naming and claiming one's own identity. It illustrates a movement from victim to a reach for the courage to express vulnerability in the public square. A key takeaway is that asking for help may not be easy but is precisely an argument to be made when searching for social support and safety in the name of inclusion for personal growth.

I never asked, but many offered, to share their sex, gender, and/or sexuality identities. Gender pronoun use has become commonplace, though I remain a skeptic that asking for such markers of identity is always progressive, in line with a few lay opinions and with some critical gender and sexuality scholarship (Murphy, 2019). Likewise, not all people participate for the same reasons or with the same aim in mind. Mary Bernstein, Anna Maria Marshall, and Scott Barclay (2009) raise and interesting distinction in the context of LGBTQ+ activism. They say, "We use the broad term 'LGBT' movement when referring to the panoply of organizations and activists that are seeking to improve the lot of lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transgendered people. Yet, reference to a 'lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender' (LGBT) movement have often been a case of wishful thinking or a hopeful gesture toward inclusivity for a movement in which there have been numerous divisions among these various subgroups" (2). Equally important, they ask whether changing a law or challenging a law is most influential for social change. Recognizing that within any given social movement there are differences in positionality and desired determination, any attempt at achieving real change must publicly acknowledge internal drives and differences among the movement's actors.

Youth activists getting loud in the public square can sometimes misunderstand points made by some of the group's actors. They may see internal differences and disagreements and turn to anger or potentially violence against voices with which they think they disagree. In my time working with the youth media group, they never got violent but there was some kind of disappointment. Maybe it was merely deflation in the post-activist moment. Regardless, those were always short-lived experiences because the takeaway from youth action is that they are continuing to change inside – to see more

with each action who they are, to better fit in the world, and to join in its hyper-local uplift. A concern came up at an awards banquet, however, when an attempt was made to placate the efforts of youth. Earlier, I suggested that this holds back youth activism. Who knows better than youth what youth accomplished in their public actions? Consider my conversation with one of the program leaders at a celebratory event:

> Me: Your manager is asking the youth to speak today on the projects they have individually been involved with.
>
> Program Leader: They can't do that! I have not had a chance to prep them on what to say.
>
> Me: The youth were the ones that did the work, so they probably know best what to say on their projects.
>
> Program Leader: That's too much pressure. They don't like being put on the spot like that.
>
> Me: I think that's probably a good thing. You don't like pressure, but how do you know how they feel about it?
>
> Program Leader: I know them. I have to prepare them to say things. He should not have asked them to do that.
>
> Me: Do you think sharing an experience is pressure? They will probably do great, and may be good practice for reflecting on what they accomplished.
>
> > *We are sitting next to each other, avoiding eye contact. I am feeling annoyed because I interpreted what the leader said as a kind of silencing or squashing of the youth agency. Then, I sense a lean toward me, and…*
>
> Program Leader: I understand what you mean about them being able to speak on their own experiences. Thanks for always reminding me that the youth need to be in charge.

Going public affords speakers the chance to be acknowledged on their terms, in their words, and without being directed in what to do or say. However, more often than not I observed the leadership team *leading* youth participants in their thinking processes about topics or events, which may be a challenge to youth literacy growth in its own right. The youth may internalize the expressions and experiences of program leaders as their own. Youth participants probably have their own opinions and engagements with ideas that aren't necessarily the same as the leaders. If this is an education program and these are educational opportunities, then the young participants ought to be included in a way that facilitates their critical analytical growth as well.

This is an education program. I am certain of that, despite unyielding opposition from program leaders. Based on my field observations, I not only saw educative actions, especially in the context of public events participation and reporting. I also saw a desire among the youth for training to grow as writers and illustrators. "Program leader, when are we going to…" and "Josh, are we going to learn about creative storytelling projects again today?" is quite memorable to me. The insistence that we are not educating and youth are not learning is tied to what I understood to be a culture of *opponent points of*

view. I say opponent, instead opposing or oppositional, because it articulates an actor-centered position that there are real-world people the youth journalists should work against. This was not education, but an unprincipled belief in an us-versus-them mentality. For example, the president of the United States at the time, Donald Trump, was an ongoing target. Unlike well-intentioned critical anthropologists who use the anthropological perspective to triangulate constructs and their meanings, a strong social-emotional desire to resist what appeared in popular media as social justice antagonism pervaded the media group. Opponent points of view appeared in the words and actions among leadership and trickled down to the youth participants.

In a sense here, at least for the leadership team, their parent organization manifested also as an opponent. On the one hand, opposing oversight showed their interest in having autonomy over the media group. On the other hand, this opposing point of view produced a lack of organizational understanding that I saw trickling down as a limit and perhaps even a disservice to the youth they were supposed to be educating. A primary concern here, as I saw it, was that minds were made up before engagement with the topic or issue they sought to understand. They protested at the thought of considering the views of others. They did not want to listen to people who see the world differently, and they were always certain that the beliefs and values they held would be what way they viewed reality forever. Program leaders knew everything they needed to know, did not seek or need help or oversight, and youth learned from this behavior. What an analogy! Parent organizations must be opposed because they know not what youth need. Program leaders through tantrums, and the media participants sought education where they could, sometimes confiding in me that they were not learning journalism.

Social-emotional support and belongingness were always present at meetings and outings. I wonder if some youth journalists did not need that as much as others, wanted to learn more skills, and thus stopped joining the group. How does a youth media organization with an officially manufactured curriculum claim to not be an educational institution? As noted above, youth participants move through three steps in the program: *apprentice, journalist, and mentor*. As youth media producers develop technical skills training, they advance into roles with increased opportunities and responsibilities, or at least that is the idea. However, at least two cultural phenomena placed limits on advancements. First, leadership hesitated to "put pressure" on the youth to, one, produce content, and two, to even show up consistently to team meetings. Thus, they held them back from speaking too loudly when that is precisely the opportunity this platform afforded. Second, because of leadership hesitancies to articulate youth participant responsibilities within the organization, team meetings almost always turned into a socialization and social-emotional support endeavor, with media interrogation and production taking a backseat to mere hanging out. Effectively, they reproduced rather than challenged the status quo. What, then, could be a way to advance community engagement in ways that are both educative and transformative for youth struggling to be included on their terms? The next chapter experiments with thinking before acting, and highlights my attempt to create a critical curriculum focused on media literacy.

CHAPTER 7
PERSONAL ASSESSMENT: DELIBERATION, AND LITERACY GROWTH

In education policy and practice, there is often a disconnect between how literacy and writing are taught, and the realities experienced by young people. And no place feels more like punishment for marginalized youth than school. Schools consolidate – they achieve the domestic work of the state in a place where marginalized youth see themselves excluded. Young people struggle to translate what they are taught into something meaningful for their own lives. The basic problem is our legitimation of schooling as the principal of education. Notions of failing schools and achievement gaps articulate a path that ignores the cultural aspects of students' lives at home and in their communities of belonging. However, schools are not failing. When students fail in school it's because the school was designed to fail, so schools are successful at producing a zero-sum effect: some students succeed while mostly marginalized youth fail (Duncan-Adrade and Morrell, 2008). That sounds heavy, and it sounds true. What is the purpose of schooling, who ought to be in charge of schooling children, and what ought they learn? Since this project is about aspiration; and since schools don't seem to attend to values formation but rather on bringing young people into the status quo, a universalizing humanities education is probably the best bet for helping people learn the most important fact of life: that they are alive in a world not of their own making, but that it can be remade if necessary. Moreover, no matter what happens, all people belong and can fit into the world by taking the right action and growing in mindset by forming values that support all of planetary existence.

What are universalizing humanities? As I neared completion of this dissertation in Interdisciplinary Humanities, I was confronted with a thoughtful question I posed to the personal integral to creating the program eight years ago. What is an interdisciplinary humanities program and what is the value of a humanities education? Wondering if people actually worked across ideas, theories, and methods, I was always intrigued because it is something I've sought to accomplish my whole life. I can't speak authoritatively about others, but I can say that I have learned a lot about myself, others, and the world around me by reaching across global cultures and philosophies to grasp reality. From a very young age I was reading Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning* while listening to the haunting realities poetically articulated by my favorite gothic rock and death metal bands. I had to get a grip on my own existence, and these things helped me. Fast forward to this moment, I reflect on how helpful it has been for me to stick to my guns as both a cross-disciplinarian and a humanities lover. I noted at the start that Agnes Callard (2023) alluded to not knowing the value of humanities. Simon Critchley (2007) warned us of the dangers associated with trying to be above humanity. Humans are not beyond nature, but a part of nature in all its curiosity and glory. The fact that humanity demands humanities learning is obvious, so why does it become the site of aspirational debate? Callard would never have penned her opinion if it weren't for divisive discourse about the role of humanities in higher education. Humanity doesn't need to study humanity? Humanities educational opportunities show the way to true human values formation, and that is how the field achieves its significance. By studying

all the ways, past and present, that humans have contemplated, civilized, and organized social reality we come to know ourselves and how we fit into the world.

I hope that the youth journalists – and all people, young and old, for that matter – gain such awareness that they fit themselves to be a part of the status quo even as they seek its transformation. Maybe always knowing how and when new values of hope and aspiration form is not needed to begin a journey toward unlocking the truth about self, others, and society. Being open to growth through learning across ideas may be all there is to reaching inward and outward for the formation of human values that support what we commonly call today's notion of acceptance of diversity, in the name of equity, for the inclusion of all people. This is how we survive as a species, and how we thrive as social animals. Homo sapiens will not survive if we continue to strive to be above or beyond the natural ordering of the universe.

In this chapter, I shall present a few community-engaged curricula ideas I attempted to teach at the youth media group. The goal was to support media literacy through critical thinking, deliberative dialogues, and the application of ideas discussed to real-world experiences and/or current events from around the world. This was the fall of 2018, and I set the stage for a community-based teaching component as supplemental activities to the ongoing media and personal growth work youth were already activating. Using examples from past and current media events, I drafted a list of topics that connected with what I perceived to be conjunctive with the personal feelings and identities of the youth participants. Using conjunctions as nodal points for holistic (i.e., whole-person) teaching, I created activities on topics using very basic concepts that would not demand exhaustive attention, but would promote deliberative critical thought. The overarching idea was to discover where the youth media producers' true concerns and values landed on issues of globalizing significance.

As a starting place for entering into an aspirational mindset, I created a modified version of an online aspirations quiz[3]. I had no expectations in doing so, and I certainly had not aimed to see if they were self-motivated, or if they had personal goals in mind. My intention was about achievements. I wanted to see if taking the quiz would support developing a growth mindset without aiming for a particular outcome. In other words, the quiz spoke to the same mode of engagement the organization followed for media production. By taking the quiz (i.e., doing something on the topic of motivation) the youth writers might grow in their capacity towards hope for the dreams they are developing. It was not the questions, but the participation in taking the quiz that mattered. Following Callard, I have no idea whether they got anything out of the quiz but they all took home a copy of it along with the score they achieved, including an explanation of the score as well as the other scores they might have landed on if they had been more or less motivated.

That was a point of community-teaching arrival. Next, I prepared to talk about the growth mindset in terms of journalism. It was all planned and ready to go. I had been excited to deliver my first workshop on media literacy called “How to Think Like a Journalist.” It did not happen. Since each regularly scheduled meeting began with individual “check-ins,” offering all participants the chance to share how they feel and/or something new going on in their lives, plans tend to always be open to change. Sometimes, the changes are quite radical and pervasive. On this particular October day,

the check-in was heavy and lasted the entire meeting. I do not recall where the conversation took us except to note that it dwelled on the problem and failed to search for a resolution. I wonder if we had shifted to the educational opportunity that day, then perhaps the struggle of the moment may have been sorted out, if only for just a few hours. Going public demands that actors have some level of critical literacy about the topic or issue under scrutiny, as well as how that topic relates to the larger national and global understanding of it using local knowledge. Crucially, connecting the ideas to self so that growth toward conformity to unity in humanity has a chance, learning about the world is fundamentally related to learning about the self. As a semi-public group, youth media and its producers need opportunities to see from multiple perspectives. Afterschool journalism affords such an opportunity. They simply need to stay on course, to seek answers to questions, and to see solutions to problems, from beyond individualized perceptions. Nevertheless, this experience was not an obstacle. There are no obstacles in the real world. There are only opportunities to grow – to continue growing toward becoming that which we have never been and cannot know until we get there, reflect on it, and see differently. This is the youth media way. It relates to action first and thought second. Youth action journalists act their way into right thinking.

Concerned Critical Thinking

Eventually, I received an opportunity to begin leading workshops. On December 4, 2018 "How to Think Like a Journalist" finally happened. I opened the conversation with a definition of conjecture and the metaphor, *Can you see the forest for the trees?* By connecting the local to the global and discussing the various ways media pundits leave things out, report so-called fake or misleading news, and misrepresent people or ideas. For example, in *Social Death,* Lisa Marie Cacho (2012) discusses media representations of racial groups where blacks were considered looters and whites were called finders of resources in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Since most of the youth reporters grapple with issues of poverty, racism, and public action representations, this example highlighted for them concerns they already shared and experienced locally.

We discussed how "breaking news" and stories that go viral can feed fake news reporting. We also had an in-depth conversation about what we mean when we say "status quo." What emerged was a provoking dialogue focused predominantly on racialized representations and how they influence interpersonal relationships across affinity groups. I asked them how mediated representations of groups as differentiated so that discrimination and segregation might carry on over generations takes place all around the world:

"The systems are not equal."
"Is this happening in other countries?"
"Who says what I am other than me?"
"Capitalism keeps it going."

Inquisitive and insightful, the practical consciousness the youth journalists displayed showed that they have concerns and critical insight into the concerns. What they lacked in solutions to the problems, they gained in personal growth toward seeing what the status quo is and what it could be. The fact that one young participant understood that systems of inequality "keeps it going" exemplifies where youth media activists stand on the perpetuation of negative aspects in the status quo. The propping up of some people at the expense of others was not new to them. Many of them have been living that for generations. However, it was a key mark of critical awareness that they could see the bigger picture and that institutional inequity could be challenged from within the status quo when they think like journalists.

Throughout the workshop, I reiterated and reinforced that understanding power dynamics is their chance to elevate their capacities for critical thinking and media literacy. Appadurai (2004) says, "The better off you are (in terms of power, dignity, and material resources) the more likely you are to be conscious of the links between the more or less immediate objects of aspiration" (68). Capacity, as a navigational force, insists on going public in intemperate times across differences in points of stasis. Furthermore, I argue that media literacy as a means for understanding hegemony through a community-engaged teaching program offers the chance for marginalized youth to make moves away from apathy and toward aspiration. By aspiration, I mean *the doing of things* that influence what we value, and that begin organically based on present awareness with roots in values presently held. Values formation is ongoing, for a lifetime.

Following Appadurai, "Aspirations certainly have something to do with wants, preferences, choices, and calculations. And because these factors have been assigned to the discipline of economics, to the domain of the market and to the level of the individual actor…they have been large[ly] invisible in the study of culture" (67). Thus, our valuing is central to aspiration, but the choices made are contained in our social relations of reproducing economic models for it. Marginalized youth do not know the systemic barriers, and they need to in order to build capacity for seeing that the horizon extends beyond market-based dreams. Appadurai says this is a navigational capacity that relates to "the terms of recognition" – the adverse terms by which the poor negotiate with the "norms that frame their social lives" (66). Like material resources, aspirational capacity is unevenly distributed. In this sense, we can understand that acquiring the capacity to aspire requires a transformation of the terms of recognition.

As we neared the end of the workshop, I sensed that some of the youth reporters might be wondering what they are supposed to do if they aren't supposed to support or participate in capitalism. They also seemed perplexed about the status quo. Do we live in it, do we change it? How can we do both? I explained to them that we all participate in capitalism, and that we cannot live outside of reality (e.g., the status quo). We participate because that is the current order of socio-cultural and political-economic life. I attempted to leave them with the understanding that capitalism has done a lot of social good (e.g., medicine, technology, stores), and that as we participate in the market-based characterization of life we can also seek to transform its production.

I observed glances from leadership which I interpreted to mean that capitalism itself was one of their opponents. I pushed on with my thoughts and explained how we can *go public*, we can respond to those with whom we have held contention without

becoming argumentative. We can insist on our inclusion in dialogues about injustices affecting our lives without fighting those who seek different modes or formations of inclusion. This is very much an anti-capitalist group. "There is nothing good about capitalism, and white people get all the stuff" has been exhaustively expressed by some people present. On the other hand, the interests of some youth participants speak precisely to their desire to work in the status quo. Where does this leave the youth journalism program? Growth is experiential and ongoing. Gaining a critical consciousness is revelatory and revolutionary, giving young people the navigational capacity to demand new models for social organization. That happens when they can see how the hyper-local connects with the global. They do this by taking action on matters affecting their lives and then reflecting on the experiences to form new values by which to envision their places in the world.

Reflective and Deliberative Dialogues?

Neoliberalism posits that market-based projects and ideologies of individual effort and self-sufficiency are the best way to organize the world, and yet we know from its contradictions that basing all sites of life on the market hurts everybody (Tomlinson and Lipsitz, 2013; Orlowski, 2011). Similarly, we know that capitalism is a failure since we are trending toward 1% of the population possessing 99% of the world's wealth (Collins and Bilge, 2016). The rationality associated with neoliberal also produces what Barbara Tomlinson and George Lipsitz term "insubordinate spaces," understood to be all spaces outside of the market where counter-hegemonic work is taking place. One of those sites is in the community, in everyday public life where people gather to fight for socio-cultural and political-economic justice. Challenging the status quo and the methods for critical education are both anti-racist pedagogies that require dialogue. Jeffrey Duncan-Andrade and Ernest Morrell (2008) say, "We contend that an anti-racist pedagogy ultimately strives to create humanized agents who advocate for racial equity and justice (Freire, 1970). For this reason, it must be *dialogic*; it should engender conversations among students and between students and the social world…it should promote reflective action upon (and against) a racially unjust world" (137, their emphasis).

I agree with the idea of reflective action. Young people may take up an idea and, however loosely, pose a question and then reflect their way into acting upon it. This is not quite the process observed in my fieldwork. Certainly, our pop-ontological statuses mean we dwell in some existing idea and that we have experiences on which to build knowledge. However, as I understood youth media action and production, dialogue prior to action was minimized in favor of just doing something – literally, anything – in the name of justice (in some effort to challenge the status quo). Dialogues were few, as were post-action deliberations. Action before thought held strong, and the leadership team saw no need to change this since the young journalism team seemed mostly satisfied with the outcomes. Once the action was completed, deliberation generally focused on gathering media documents to produce the final pieces which took the form of some of the above-mentioned publication choices (e.g., photo essay, social media documentation, personal

narratives, articles, etc.). All action, a little deliberation, no reflection. However, practical consciousness continued to grow. I was convinced that was true.

Literacy/Growth

Action first did not always work. Most actions discussed never took place. That's perfectly fine because it shows the freedom youth felt to throw out suggestions that in other social circles, they may have been afraid to express. The sacred aura – that secret sympathy – was alive and well in the media group. That sense of belonging to a group of people who don't know what they are searching for, and in the process discover that they are seeking themselves through engagement with each other, articulates the conjunctive power of practical knowledge and unifying awareness that challenging the status quo, or simply being in it, works best when we come together to figure things out in the moment, at the moment. I am not sure the leadership team knew in advance that's what they were accomplishing, but maybe that is also part of the point and an added nuance to this dissertation. Not knowing is a great starting place for acting in the world to make something happen.

Young people are not taught about hegemony, and they are told to avoid controversy (Orlowski, 2011). However, for the child dealing with misrepresentation and misrecognition, life is bound up in domination and public disagreements. For these reasons, critical ethnography using community teaching must seek astonishing transformation. Ethnographic research is always an intervention (Madison, 2012). There can be no observing without participating, and when we participate in the everyday practices of other people, we are intruders in their lives. Sometimes ethnographic invasions operate quite benevolently, yet even the most benign of research endeavors changes the relational dynamics and production of knowledge of the group being studied. They undoubtedly see themselves differently after having been the subjects of study by people from outside their group. Rather than merely acknowledging and reflecting on its impact, my work suggests the need to create a consciousness-raising intervention in the lives of all people. Media literacy, after all, is not an age-graded problem. I, too, may fall into the trappings of fake or biased messaging. Also, who is to say youth more than adults struggle with media literacy? It may be the opposite since young people are much better equipped to navigate social media than older adults. This is where human interdependence across age groups becomes vitally important to literacy. We all know only what we know, and the little bits we each contribute support building a world – a new status quo – on which most of us could all agree. How beautiful that could be!

What produced the "failing schools" and the one-size-fits-all schooling of children anyway, and why are young people disengaging from these educational programs? Do they feel disempowered in school, or does the idea of schooling itself always already appear to be an obstacle to freedom and literacy? In *Personal Narrative, Revised: Writing Love and Agency in the High School Classroom*, Bronwyn Clare LaMay (2016) quotes one of her students:

> "Why I think a lot of kids don't change is because I don't think you realize how big of a change you're asking." – Diego Rosales, 11th Grade.

LaMay captures quite eloquently the significance of centering students' lived experiences in the classroom. Public literacy begins with the personal, in understanding that for some students' achievement expectations means asking for a big change. The change sought by teachers is academic, and yet the demand is profoundly personal for children and youth living through things most people don't imagine to be real. If we take the personal first and develop a process of change, then students can elevate not just literacy but development of human values that could be universally applied to people regardless of identity, affiliation, or past action. What might this say public literacy looks like for children and youth who are on the streets reporting about events in their local communities? On the one hand, youth may not have a voice in producing most events, yet they live through the processes and deal with the consequences of public activities not of their own making. Youth journalists insist sometimes on being the producers of reality. The Trans & Intersex Rights March, for example, highlighted their capacity to aspire social change. They articulated a reality, that they are who they are and thus society must move properly to universalize humanity that includes them as they insist they are and as they intend to be. Literacy grows because values have changed, through acting into right thinking.

What has been gained? Recently, I walked into the media group's office and excitedly asked if the director saw that Chantera Walton, a youth participating in another youth media hub of the parent organization, published an article in the Long Beach Post. She replied no and exclaimed, "I don't read any of the emails that come from them." I was confused. Did she not understand that this was an important milestone for the writer and that it could inspire youth writers at her Hub? I insisted on sharing it with the reporters. She said we would discuss it during the meeting. We did not, and we never did. This once again revealed one of my greatest challenges as I sought to transform the lives of these young people. Ethnography is always interventionist. I felt like leadership was participating in status quo reproductions and not even realizing that's what they are doing. They reproduced apathy and disengagement in space where the desire is liberation from schooling and growth toward hopes that dreams can come true. It felt personal to me, I confess. I am certain that it was, since leadership engaged in antagonistic rather than diagnostic dialogue with me anytime I had an idea.

Leadership seemed to lack the preparation to lead. In not reading Walton's article, which is very much connected with the lives of youth media participants here, I recognized that the leaders didn't have any intentions to challenge the status quo. I interpreted this as resistance with nowhere to go, much like the slogan of the Trans & Intersex Rights March: "Respect Our Existence or Expect Our Resistance." What, precisely, were they resisting? It was unclear in the march, and it remains unclear in the way leadership sometimes engaged the youth journalists. If there wasn't an idea or a person to fight, then it wasn't productive work. My hope was that they would find a way to be productive without fighting anything or anybody. My vision was one where the status quo could be enjoined with youth media ideas that contribute to its growth toward their inclusion in public decision-making. Despite being welcomed into the group, they

seemed to not understand why I was there and thus, persisted in making it known that I was an outsider not welcome to equally participate in the group's projects. I could be wrong.

Central Valley, California youth are caught between two worlds: one of poverty and feelings of isolation from society due to a lack of social support for who they are, and market-based schooling in a resource-limited region that presses them to lift themselves out of marginalization. Most of the youth journalists here are poor, non-white, and have limited access to the means needed to navigate daily life without some extra effort. Conversely, the journalism program is intended to instill in them a sense of leadership as they work for social justice. The problem is how to start: how does a teenager start the movement from apathy to aspiration? I have shown that partnering with community organizations that serve young people creates the space for a community-engaged curriculum focused on teaching about dominant discourses for literacy growth. Speaking against contemporary schooling's high-stakes testing model, Longo argues for a shift in focus. He says, "This involves shifting the center of civic learning toward the many places where the most powerful personal and civic growth takes place – the entire community" (5). He goes on to say this also generates a shift in thinking about education, from reproducing the notion that schools have too few resources to properly educating, in realizing the community has an abundance of resources. His turn to the community relates to universalizing humanities – to right thinking through values formation – that facilitates the translation of the status quo across life domains but see all helps us all see the wonders of the community and how they can be used to transform children's experiences with self, others, and society.

I accepted Longo's call and sought to challenge myself to implement a community-engaged teaching curriculum for socio-cultural growth and political-economic transformation, civic-mindedness, and aspirational capacity. Seeing the forest for the trees – connecting the local and the global – is related to education and challenges the status quo schooling model for raising children. This further relates to what Elsa Davidson (2011) has termed "aspiration management." She says that limiting hopes and dreams "highlights the active roles people play in defining self-expectation, hope, and a sense of the possible as well as the paradox of self-limitation and desire inherent to all aspirations" (13). This raises the stakes for schooling and educating children and youth. I have little hope schools will turn to teaching about hegemony and controversy, as Walton's newspaper article that was never read suggested. What, then, must we all do *in our villages* to raise children? A community-based teaching program for the promotion of a creative and critical consciousness may offer some answers and hope for broadening status quo ideals. Finding a way to tap into the abundance of resources in our local terrains and within and between our communities of belonging offers the chance to transform local, regional, and global relations of participation, and where what that looks like remains unknown until we deliberate with love for each other in the public sphere.

CHAPTER 8
WATCHING OUT FOR DISTRACTORS AND DISRUPTORS

Media youth have a practical consciousness of growth. They have been building it up amongst themselves in all their activities in meetings, on the streets, and in their reflections. Sometimes it comes quickly as if naturally, and sometimes great effort is necessary for them to apprehend the truth: that actions change their thoughts. Nevertheless, they also lack the depth of critical curiosity about seeing things differently, and even refusal at times to consider exploring ideas with which they disagree. They believe what they believe and claim that they will always believe what they believe. I don't blame them. Remember, corporate media has corporate interests (Orlowski, 2011). Young people do not learn how hegemony works, and so they say:

> *Why do we have to listen to them?*
> *Nothing is going to change my mind.*
> *Sometimes, there really is only one side or another.*
> *Why are we watching this?*

When offered the chance to learn from other viewpoints, they immediately turned away from consideration. This reflects a refusal to buy into the power of misleading messages, but it also blocks them from seeing how that power works. I don't know who said it first, but I shall give credit to Malcolm Gladwell (Popova, 2014) and John C. Maxwell (2018) for simply, and poignantly, remarking that people have an ethical obligation to update positions on things when further information about a group, place, or idea becomes the norm. Even when not the norm, nascent news about anything requires our careful attention. Thus, a refusal to listen is a missed opportunity to learn even if one maintains a previously held idea.

Learning how power operates is a lesson in itself. It's like when Dolly Parton remarked that she once had an "innocent ignorance" about using the word *Dixie* at the time *The Chicks* dropped that part of their music group's name. Prior to this, Parton had already dropped the word from the name of a restaurant.[4] To listen even if to still not believe what is said must be part of human growth toward unity. I used to refuse to listen to messages I didn't like. However, I would sustain ignorance if I didn't attempt to understand from the perspectives of others. This is why I love to say to people, and to myself, something I have had to grow to understand:

> *I know what I know, and I don't know what I don't know. I must keep an open mind and a willing heart to be able to understand before judgment, and to be able to reflect on that judgment before coming to any conclusions, however short-lived such conclusions may be since the latest information is always, ever so gently, emerging.*

I don't always articulate it precisely in those words, but the point is relevant to this ethnography. Ethnographic research is as much about the search for self as it is to learn about others and other ways of life (Luhrmann, 2023; Rabinow, 1977). Listening to understand – and never listening to counter, to react, or to retaliate – is the basis for practicing cultural relativism. It helps me avoid the pitfalls of binary and divisive human interaction and protects me from believing everything I read in the news feeds that permeate the pages and scrolls of popular and social media. Mental illness, as it is often called, may – for some and maybe most people – originate in the environment and not in the head. That's my opinion, based on what I have learned from the field of youth media activism. They jump to conclusions, and they get angry and want to retaliate. However, community-based youth journalism affords opportunities for children to sense the world and share freely how they experience it through social justice activities. It is after the action that they seem to grow the most toward truth of self, others, and society. Yet, if they still stumble through the divisive thinking, then young people without an afterschool media program might have an even harder time knowing the difference between a deceptive spin and the whole truth about a person, place, or situation. This is further evidence from the field that investment in youth programming is vital to future possibilities of conformity to unity in humanity. Let them out, let them speak!

What is often taken for granted as the truth of an idea, a group, or a situation is not essentially so, but rather known under certain conditions via social constructions that inform us of how to attend to particular phenomena. While personal and political attention to lived experiences has shifted toward greater equality, arguments that certain moral codes ought to prevail over universal human principles continue to pervade the popular press in all their forms. The case of transexual and intersexual rights – and the very fact of their existence as categories of identity – can be called again as an example of convincing truths, even as some groups seek to dismantle them in the name of conformity to morality. Since my argument is that youth journalists seek conformity to unity, then what we may conceive in this case is a difference in values between morality and humanity. One person's morality may be another's inhumanity. Who is more literate in this case? Youth media producers hold great power through their convictions that aim to create a joyful life for all people. Fluidity in gender and sexual identity is quite convincing, yet moral deception and population control attempt to disrupt human nature by convincing the masses to believe against humanity. Practical consciousness speaks loudest, and youth media producers have always had that capacity. They came to the community with it.

Where they tripped up, however, is when they became like those they opposed. In other words, when others oppose them, they oppose back rather than accepting their opposition and then carrying on with their truths. The youth journalists represented in this research know what's right. They established that fact through the secret sympathy of their togetherness. They scaffold their collective, practical consciousness and seek inclusion in public life. I was concerned they sometimes scaffolded retaliation rather than care. Thus, my introduction of a community-based curriculum for critical consciousness sought to guide them on the path they already knew but sometimes got distracted away from by divisive media representations. I wanted them to stay on the pathway to success, where success is understood as that emergent knowing of self through the formation of

values through right action-taking. Taking the right action, then, facilitates aspirational awakening. I hope it had some success despite how difficult it may be to face the messages (i.e., partial truths) circulated by corporate media. Nevertheless, the goal was not to shield youth from public lies, but rather to help them differentiate honesty from spin factories. Media distractions and disruptions to right thinking may be overcome by entering the world, opening hearts and minds to what is there, and proceeding together in the search for truth, love, and justice.

Youth journalists have the capacity to enter this world. The stumbling blocks are more inner than outer, though. As I am trying to introduce it here, the status quo is not the problem. The problem is entering angry rather than entering to listen for understanding across diversity and differences. Since LGBTQ+ rights has been strong among this group, it makes for a good example to carry forward. Dominant positions have outshined minority rights for a very long time. Dominant conceptions of gender and sexuality, and the normativity of compulsory heterosexual identity reproduce the male-female binary. The world's dominant sex and gender systems have been mostly imperialistic, the ethics of which have mostly gone unchallenged. Identity control indoctrinates individuals into systems that are not natural but are assumed and presented as natural, dominating the process by which individuals come to know what it means to be sexed and gendered. Effectively, people don't fit and feel as if society is against them. I understand that, and the young journalism group feels it. If they feel other than male or female, masculine or feminine, who is to say that is not the truth? The point: if they are not truly experiencing non-binary identity, then how would they, through their practical consciousness, understand the nature of humanity and the false nature of dominant discourses about gender and sexuality? Clearly, they know something about this as they have not fallen into the binary trap. That is literacy!

There are no complete humans. We are all always growing toward something unknowable until we get there, and upon arrival at something – usually, anything – we reflect upon our actions to understand who we are, how we ought to proceed, and with whom we can best align to help others achieve the same growth. I call this the *freedom effect*. The freedom effect is that change of perspective on self which subsequently changes one's perception of reality and liberates one away from falling too deep into popular and divisive false analogies (e.g., LGBTQ cultures harms other cultures), false equations (e.g., popularity reflects reality; group-think in one sphere of life illustrates the amassing of a single culture across the board), and false propositions (e.g., challenging the status quo is dangerous to social order and destabilizes our structures for living). The freedom effect elevates open minds and nurtures the opening of hearts, and it happens quite easily within the nexus of a secret sympathy of human interdependence. The effect is always toward the true spirit of humanity. It is all-inclusive and available to everybody with enough willingness to see the true human condition.

In 1958, Raymond Williams published the short essay, *Culture is Ordinary*, which articulates in a matter-of-fact way that culture is common and exists everywhere all the time. It is from this article that I drew the fallacies just articulated. Rejecting most of what he believed were the noteworthy perspectives of Marxism and Leavisism, and rejecting beliefs of the time that culture was a status to be sought and maintained, and that working-class people could never attain, Williams painted a picture through theory,

narrative, and strong held confidence that culture is an everyday experience produced and reproduced through shared meanings and new experiences or insights offered to be tested as possible new directions for the currently constructed culture. Culture is life; life is culture, and it is constantly changing.

Through secret sympathy, and using their shared expression of practical consciousness, the youth media actors have shown that while they have much to learn, they are not completely overrun by dominant constructions of people and society. They get distracted by them at times. We all do! Sticky situations and disruptions in action will come, but the method of action before thought even in *hit-and-run activist* scenarios supports their capacity to journey toward truth, love, and justice. They have a method that works, even if it is a one-time action without post-thought of that action. Still, they have become aware even if they aren't fully aware that they are, in fact, following a method to challenge status quo ideals. This is due to the freedom effect's capacity to change the actor toward self-truth.

Williams writes with conviction, sometimes sounding annoyed as if he is trying to convince a world that doesn't side with him that he is right, and oftentimes respectful of, yet disappointed in, the perspectives he ultimately rejects. He does so out of necessity, for his family, for the working-class culture from which he came, to which he has a sentimental attachment. The youth journalists sound much like Raymond Williams of the 1950s. I wish I could explain that somehow to help young people today understand that people have always been challenging the status quo, even as we enter into and participate in its reproduction. Humanity was never monolithic, even as societies increasingly sought to contain everybody under a single system and design for life.

Thus, it follows that if culture is constituted by the everyday goings on of lived experience, then no class or group can lay claim to being cultured. No one center of power has a right to claim that power. There are multiple centers of power, across multiple publics (Fraser, 2014). Power resides less in a person and more so within a particular domain where people may be afforded finite power. As the conditions evolve, so do the actors involved in its evolution. The distractions to watch out for, however, grow stronger and faster so it is important that the ongoing discovery of self with others and society not be disrupted by things that have nothing to do with the production of reality. Youth media affords unity so that truth may emerge, but it also fell short of goals since most of their actions stemmed from anger rather than interest.

Speaking about the rise of industrialization, Williams writes, "In the new conditions, there was more real freedom to dispose of our lives, more real personal grasp where it mattered, more real say" (97). The hegemonic placement of culture in a special place and time for a special group of people no longer fits after the Industrial Revolution. Importantly, Williams says that it never fit, but that it was merely a construction most people accepted in the pre-industrial segregated communities. Whether the Industrial Revolution or the technological growth happening in the world today, the more people integrate ideas about self, others, and society, the greater we have to grow toward conformity to unity in humanity. Thus, back to the example, the seemingly impenetrable myth of a sex and gender binary, definitions of which are spatially and temporally contingent and constituted in and through social institutions, no longer holds specialized power to produce and reproduce obligatory categories of acceptable behavior for

assumed categories or groups. The freedom effect is alive and well when youth media gets loud, on the streets where they live and work, and stake a claim for themselves as members of the new society. They have hopes for achieving their dreams. They imagine a world, a future, that includes them in all their varied colorful modes of expression. However, they must be extra careful to learn the value of letting go of believing they will never change their minds.

Making Mistakes and Learning to Grow

I once had a graduate school colleague who insisted the "All Gender Restrooms" on campus were exclusively created for transgendered persons. I, and many others within our circle, voiced concern over this belief. Relentless, the colleague never backed down and thus, highlighted a mistake I experienced about youth activism in the media group. The setup was always one of *us against them*, even when there was lack of clarity that there was something or someone to oppose. It was selfish behavior in search of opposition. They were still only seeing trees that appeared directly in front of them. Conformity to unity in humanity simply articulates the value that we are strongest as a species when we work together. Learning to let go of selfishness opens hearts and minds to the forest, to be able to see the beauty within the status quo before deciding whether there is something in need of change. Persistence is an excellent human value, but only when it is in the direction of helping all people to be alive and well in the community.

To persevere with oppositional action, I believe, potentially shuts actors off from the pathway to success. It may block some of the truth, understood presently as the discovery of one's true self by way of entrance into the status quo. However, as always becoming humans, growth is ongoing. I must remind myself of what Lisa often feared:

> *They don't like to be pushed.*
> *You can't push them.*
> *And don't push me.*

Pressure to see that there are more than two sides to a story, or that acceptance trumps resistance, may sometimes be too strong on the hearts and minds of people, and perhaps but not always especially so for children and youth. At the same time, the secret sympathy and growing practical awareness within the media group held strong, supporting their curiosities through community experiences. They grappled with who they are, they came together to share, and they activated their inner worlds to make space for themselves in the outer world. Getting active – literally, doing anything – together helped individuals gain a glimpse of themselves through the perspectives of others (Luhrmann, 2023). Together, in the name of doing the greatest good for the greatest number of people, youth journalists found themselves transformed through new ways of seeing what is actually there, and what is possible. Who am I to claim resistance is wrong? It is a place to start. It's where I started. Growth shall be ongoing, for a lifetime. I have moved from resistance to acceptance on my terms, and the youth media actors may

find the same happening for them so long as they remain connected (i.e., active in their sympathetic consciousness).

Taking seriously the notion that the public sphere is not a stable place but rather an emergent space, we may conceive of publicity as an open forum for dialogue across difference. In this way, we can understand that the commons gets summoned, and this summoning happens in a variety of ways. We summon the public sphere in order to articulate concerns and to seek answers to problems. In this space, stakeholders engage in difficult conversations, including internal contradictions or antagonisms in the process of opinion-formulated expressions. In this sense, the formal may in fact manifest in informal ways. Nancy Fraser (2014) says, "The public sphere, in short, is not the state; it is rather the informally mobilized body of nongovernmental discursive opinion that can serve as a counterweight to the state" (75). However, what is one to do when people respond to each other in disparaging or negating ways? Indeed, deep divides persist in the commons, and perhaps the commons itself is a structure that needs interrogation and transformation. This could be a shortcoming I observed in my fieldwork, both in research and in action. Going public ought to be an opportunity to listen from viewpoints with which one disagrees. However, what I heard most often from both leadership and youth were complaints about having to listen to oppositional sides to an incident or problem, thus suggesting they were not actually motivated to engage with the stakes and potential outcomes. I believe this may be related to a bombardment of mediated soundbytes, often taken out of context, and pointing to the difficulty all people have with media literacy. I interpreted this to mean that the program leaders and the youth participants felt the need to have an opponent, yet that seems to be an ever-expanding problem with propagated soundbytes. Nevertheless, I observed that leadership and youth participants had a need to identify real-world actors to argue with instead of focusing on understanding the common issues from multiple perspectives.

Instead of entering the public with an open mind, with consideration for all stakeholders who have an interest in the topic, the media group worked by naming the problem to be addressed before engaging with the competing points of *stasis*. Going public, thus, produced a fight when it could have been a chance to dialogue for resolution. This is an ongoing problem in popular media and community journalism for all people. At moments where engagement rather than *talking past* should be foundational to public conversations, I have recognized that there is perhaps a shortcoming from all voices to fully appreciate that all stakeholders have a shared interest in doing what's best for the commons.

Media literacy struggles exist for all individuals and may be one of our most significant deficits in contemporary stratified society. In the context of this youth media group, failure to engage critically with the context and origins of propagated messages further entrenched the group into divisive and opinion-based media production. Furthermore, as a program that ought to be educative, individual perspectives lacked engagement with internal inconsistencies of identity, role, and status within the media group itself. In the next two sections of this chapter, I consider the media group's self-identity and the presented individual and group contradictions. Then, I move to articulate a path for teaching in the community for the promotion of literacy and social change,

including a comic book group assignment (discussed in the next chapter) as an example of status quo perpetuation instead of status quo transformation.

Perfectly Imperfect

I was standing at the counter shuffling a bunch of paperwork as the man on the other side did the same. He reviewed his documents, asked for mine, and proceeded to direct my attention to a wall far behind him. I had to pass an eye exam. He asked me to cover my left eye and read a line; then the right eye and another line. As I read the next line my gaze drifted to the line I first read and I corrected a mistake I had made with one of the letters. "That's okay," he said. "You don't have to get it perfect." My whole life I always thought I needed to be perfect. I thought I had to be number one, the winner, at everything in life. I carried the weight of needing to always be right for so long that I forgot how to be human. In a moment of simple action, this man taught me an important lesson. I learned that imperfection is a natural part of life, and an important starting place for growth in the direction of perfection. However, the experience goes much deeper. I learned that while I should work in the direction of doing good and being good at all the things I do in life, it is impossible to ever achieve anything we might call perfection. What a relief. I am human, after all!

The world wants us to be perfect. *Get it right the first time or be canceled*. There is no room for error, and redemption is not yours to claim but ours to potentially offer if you follow the status quo and complete all the steps in order and on our timeline. Young people experience this. They really do! I see it, I feel it, they share it, they wonder why they are always getting things wrong. What's wrong is the bureaucratic control, not the children. At a time when we know more about human population diversity than ever, and that human beings are born the least complete species on the planet, societies increasingly attempt to bring everyone under one umbrella, to envelop all of humanity to follow what the youth journalists oppose and name: The Status Quo. As a hope for opening up this narrow pathway to success, this project proposes experiential learning. Service learning, public interaction, and engagement with corporate and community-based organizations are prized opportunities for leadership training and personal growth in higher education, so why wouldn't we extend the same chance for real-world education to children? Interacting in and with communities helps people to see that perfection is impossible, that the scope of success is not so narrow as it appears, that work life can be meaningful on farms and in board rooms, and that team building involves starts and stops - trial, error, and improvement - in our shared journey to fulfill needs and solve problems. Learning in the community, then, offers opportunities to better assess who we are and what we desire for our lives.

> "We are not criminals," constantly proclaimed one of the youth reporters when asked what the program showcases to the community.

Whether some people are born with mentally ill brains is not a discussion point for this project. Rather, I am attending to the way children and youth develop right thinking

through action. Do all youth learn “right” values and virtues in childhood? The chance is there for all, through books and schools and families. Is “conformity to unity” key to these right values and virtues? Absolutely! Unity does not mean we are all the same. It means humanity has a social contract to make the species live. A key aspect of unity is the notion of *live and let live*. Humanity ought never to make anybody die. Conforming to unity means we agree that all people have the human rights to personalize while interdependently supporting the social domain we all desire to share. *You do you; I will do me*. We can all agree to that. That’s how conformity to humanity happens without the need to divide even as we may organize the specifics of our daily lives differently. Moreover, because of unity, we learn to grow by experiencing the lives of others which may offer ways in which we want to change/improve how we navigate the world.

"We can't save them all," says one of the program leaders.

Such awareness, the truth of human growth individually and together, communicates a key contradiction in this dissertation. While conformity to human values of truth and love may scaffold in this youth media space, feelings of uniqueness and independence also have a hold on young people grappling to fit into the dominant society. What can be said about conforming to kindness while at the same time rejecting notions of unity? We may all be in this journey of life together, but it does not mean children and youth grow to think of others first. Returning to the mistakes we make and the obstacles, both mental and physical, we face I believe the secret sympathy of community-based youth organizations still offers a strong opportunity to uplift humanity through conformity to unity. Community groups can and do promote unity as the best chance to "save them all."

How Can Children Learn from Mistakes?

It was another day at the youth media offices, and the start of another meeting. It was time for everyone to check in with a positive reflection from the day.

Why does it have to be a positive reflection? Sometimes, I don't have anything positive to say. Maybe I want to vent about something.

Human growth requires aiming for the best. It is not about settling for good enough. It is trying always to perform the greatest version of myself. This is growth that goes on for a lifetime, as I suggested in the preceding chapters. Moreover, it happens through hope achieved in the world through actions with others who also seek to become the best versions of themselves. Our task is to grow in interdependence that produces human values that activate aspirations, also known as right thinking about self, others, and society. When a youth journalist announced at the beginning of a regularly scheduled meeting a desire to wallow in self-pity, as I understood it, I immediately recognized the attitude and its impression. I used to love self-pity and I would seek attention from others to no end by demanding that they, too, pity me. My life was so terrible – so much worse

than everyone else's – that I deserved to complain about it. I have learned, however, that venting as the youth put it is unhelpful. Self-pity is a dangerous place to be and a damaging expression.

> *I have to* _____
> *My dad is going to* _____ *so that means I have to* _____.
> *By the time* _____ *there will be nothing to* _____.

I couldn't keep up with the rant, and perhaps I wasn't supposed to. I wondered if anybody else understood, followed, or had insight into what this teen girl was experiencing.

> "Thank you for checking in," replied a program leader.
> "Wait," I said. "Do you think we should look for a solution rather then just sit with the problem just expressed?" Of course, I did not know what the problem was, but I thought it was right to ask.
> "That's a good idea," said the program leader.

What followed was a brief inquiry and quick rebuttal from the teen girl who said she would figure it out and didn't need help. Perhaps that is the reason it should be a positive reflection. On the other hand, anything is better than nothing. Also, anything is in the direction of becoming our best, whereas nothing is not even close to the notion of good enough. Academic work wants everything to be extra - extra-planned, extra-though out, extra-designed, extravagant, extra-ordinary. What's wrong with being or doing ordinary? Average means in the middle, and don't people like being in the middle? Apparently not. Everybody wants to win and to be better than other people. In that sense, the best is just another version of better – better than you. The true best is the middle, where conformity to unity relates to self-discovery in the company of others. This also is further evidence that investing in youth programs that support personal growth, group activities, and engagement with the status quo offers children the chance to develop an awareness that average is perfect, that helping others helps ourselves, and that asking for help is an amazing feeling when done from the heart of the middle. The middle – unity – leaves nobody out. Moreover, it supports understanding that mistakes are really just opportunities to grow…again.

The first danger here is youth feeling as if they must achieve perfection based on old ideas of what that word means. It may be tied to social expectations – the production and policing of *the social* – that box children into one way of being in the world. The best must relate to being in unity, in the company of others where they can feel free to listen to learn, and open to change their minds, and open to realize they may get things wrong, or that others may be wrong, and then concluding that it is all okay because wrong is another word for growth. Regarding the single path idea, and perhaps just as dangerous as past perceptions of perfection, is the pressure placed on children and young people to seek achievement based on one view of the world. This dissertation suggests another way, which is to activate aspiration- the acquisition of human values – so that young

people may find their own paths toward success. What perfection ought to look like relates to "acting otherwise" (Giddens, 1984). Recall that there are ordinary ways of doing the extraordinary, meaning that a mistake youth power often achieves is a dominant version of resistance.

Activating aspirations, on the other hand, is about acting other than what dominant forms expect. Acting in conformity to unity and not out of selfishness means acting otherwise is radically different from an individualistic society that expects each person to sort life out alone, and in isolation, from the company of others. That is a major distraction to watch out for when it comes to challenging the status quo. The status quo needs engagement if it is to be challenged, so youth media actors may be wise to rethink their strategies, their united fronts. Using their secret sympathies, they may uplift unity to act otherwise than what dominant society wants them to do, and then find the pathway to live truly in freedom. Giddens insisted upon “the freedom of the acting subject.” The actor is an embodied unit and, as such, a possessor of causal powers that she may choose to employ to intervene (or not) in the ongoing sequence of events in the world. This makes her an agent. He says (1976), “I shall define action or agency as the stream of actual or contemplated causal interventions of corporeal beings in the ongoing process of events-in-the-world” (75). Furthermore, and this is crucial to Giddens' whole argument, it is antithetical to the concept of agency that a person (i.e., an agent) “could have acted otherwise” (75). This conception in which an actor can “act otherwise” ties agency to power and it is precisely according to this criterion of being able to “act otherwise” (and thereby make a difference) that Giddens distinguished humans from nature.

We are plopped down into an already existing thought, free to enter or exit nature. However, it is the very fact that we may seek to be above nature that we get into trouble. Unity in humanity is natural, and I seek to argue for a return to it as a stasis for identifying assets and defects of human existence. Attention to where one has been wrong and where one has succeeded within the status quo helps youth journalists get back to values formation so that aspiration may awaken from within. Upon reviewing one’s life so far and developing a sense of one’s true self in the company of others, awakening to feel a sense of belonging in the world becomes natural.

A few years ago I had a student in my discussion section of Ethnographic Research Methods, an upper division course required for Anthropology majors. He was fully engaged in the classroom, yet he failed. He was an excellent student in terms of participation and insight into the ideas presented. However, he did not do the assignments. A year later, he was in my class again, the same class. The same thing happened, except this time he "passed" the class with a D+ grade. I am not sure whether that grade counts as passing, but I know he did enough during his time at the university to graduate because he came to me asking for a job recommendation. I was torn. What should I do in this situation? On the one hand, he was an excellent thinker and performed well in the classroom. Yet, he didn't show his work on paper. How would he be on the job?

I grew up believing if I made an effort, I would perform well in anything put before me. That's how I was as a child. Since graduate school, however, my reality has changed. What is true has changed. While that approach worked for me, I have come to understand it may not work for everyone. In this instance, my self-assessment would not

suffice to answer whether I should recommend this former student for an international teaching role. I turned to help from a real-world actor who I believed had some experience and practical advice on the matter. I presented the situation to Lisa, and without hesitating she delivered the answer to my dilemma. "Just do it. Help the guy out!" That is a secret sympathy permeating youth media, and a practical understanding of conformity to unity. Why had I even questioned whether to help another person, regardless of past actions? He was insightful. He deserved redemption for not having jotted those insights down on paper.

In that instance, I had become distracted by the pervasiveness of meritocracy in humanity's growing individualism. Lisa helped me get back on track using the secret sympathy that human interdependence means doing the right thing even when my first reaction is that it seems wrong. That's the power of saying "I don't know." That's the power of asking for help. There is another revelation here as well. Overthinking! Imagine deciding without thinking. Imagine acting on something because you know it's the right thing to do and you never even had to debate and deliberate over it inside your head. Lisa delivered the right answer, without overthinking, while I was dizzied inside my head over what I should do because dominant social expectations disturbed my ability to think right.

Another example comes straight out of a regular meeting of the youth journalism program. One of the reporters discussed an ongoing problem with a neighbor, and the problem went like this:

> *He is always revving his sportscar's engine in the driveway early in the morning and it wakes me up. I think he has a problem with his manhood. His inferiority complex. I was thinking of writing a note about that and putting it on his garage door. He should grow up and stop bothering us.*

I was the first to say anything. I have my own complex, and it is one of thinking I know more than I do. As a grown up I am working on that, still. Nevertheless, I believe I approached it well, and within the scope of our hope for youth journalism. "If you write that, what will be accomplished? Will you solve the problem, or will it create more trouble with your neighbor?" She saw my point and thanked me for it, and then asked herself whether it really even matters what the neighbor does with his car in the morning. Learning how to interact rather than to react to the world about them has been a great lesson I have experienced in the program. While this case shows anger or annoyance, it also highlights the role of reflection. The action here was asking for help, and the outcome was learning how to respond appropriately.

My issue, and the issues of the youth, speak loudly to dealing with moments where we throw up our arms and proclaim, "I don't know." It's not always easy to say. It's also important because it shows growth away from distractions since no regrettable action was taken in these situations. How to handle moments of not knowing what to do or say supports the well-being of children and youth. It highlights action where sometimes asking for help serves as an action as well. Acting first as a way to get right with one's thoughts and feelings and dealing with "I don't know" does the same thing. Healthy doses of confusion and contradiction ought to be recognized for how they

function in humanity: as opportunities to grow in the right direction. Taking action does not always mean to act right now. Sometimes, a moment of consultation and reflection aids young people in their efforts to do the best thing for themselves and society. As a friend of mine recently put it, "If it's a good idea now, it will be a good idea later." Deciding to do something nearly always means deciding against other choices available at any given moment. This does not mean the ideas compete, but they do set the course for priorities in action. As an outcome, this should alleviate any fears that danger lurks if the wrong choice is made. All outcomes are opportunities. No outcome is the end. There are always more outcomes. Making mistakes is both normal behavior and a chance to show who we are as perfectly imperfect beings. What matters most is our motives in conforming to unity: doing the greatest good for the greatest number of people.

Popular media, probably mainly social media, is full of distractions that disrupt the growth of young people. Recall that Malcolm Gladwell has argued that internal contradictions are useful for growth. Debating with oneself over the right decision to make can be healthy. At the same time, simply making a decision is also healthy, whether the outcome be favorable or not for the individual. In the media, the constructions of reality tend to bend toward whatever gets the most traffic and thus, earns the most advertising revenue. Young people, in fact most people, may not fully understand that reality of corporate media. However, once that awareness is attained and attended to, people can and do see more clearly the options available to them. They may also see that the very opposite conclusion made from the arguments in one article appear in a different article. The point here is that contradictions without media literacy stagnate the growth of children. In this sense, it is not so much the pressure of social convention that hold up young people from achieving. It's the helplessness they feel inside as the result of contradictions they have not been able to understand. The solution to this is found in the practical consciousness Giddens speaks about. Young people know, but cannot fully put into words, what to do. This is why I am arguing that getting active in the community produces a broader view of things so that aspiration can be awakened without too many disruptions. Through worldly action, young people become something anew and elevate their capacities to better know what actually exists in the environments where they dwell. This makes articulating self, the true self, easier and open to the changes taking place inside and outside. It is a way to find comfort in discomfort, to be ready and willing to accept the outcomes of situations regardless of whether it is what the person initially desired. We act. We make mistakes. We learn. We grow. We may now get on some track to activate a different world and vision for the future of humanity. Aspirational awakening has become a possibility.

In Conclusion

Life for the human species is not an isolated and independent experience. Neoliberal self-sufficiency has persisted as an ideology that represses the natural human animal. Aspiration, as it emerges through conformity to unity in humanity, affords humanity’s return to sociocultural livelihood. As we learn, grow, and dwell interdependently with other humans and the whole of our planetary ecology, we

experience our real selves within and across domains where truth uplifts us all in our honest relationships with each other. From a community engaged educational standpoint, interdependent realities reveal that *it still takes a village to raise a child*. A one-size-fits-all model for educating children is counter to cognitive changes associated with social structural differences and human ecological diversity. How, then, does it the technological individualist construct of humanity persist? We're WEIRD. Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (Lancy, 2008). Most research projects on, and thus our models for educating, children are conducted in the standardized West, but the demands of WEIRD worlds do not reflect all children. For example, we know from developmental psychology that our environments change the physical structure of our brains (Tooley, Bassett, and Mackey, 2021). However, following Western structural standards is assumed to be progress.

The WEIRD experiment is not working, and this is especially the case for young people born into families with generations of social and economic marginalization. The WEIRD experiment has boxed children into a world of extraordinary expectations and unachievable aspirations that produce the burden of aspiring altogether. Elsa Davidson (2011) calls it *aspiration management*. She says, "It highlights the active roles people play in defining self-expectation, hope, and a sense of the possible as well as the paradox of self-limitation and desire inherent to all aspirations" (13). This raises the stakes for schooling and educating children and youth. It limits hope among youth who desire the kinds of learning YPAR and other community action projects offer. In WEIRD worlds, schools shy away from teaching about hegemony and controversy, as Walton's newspaper article suggests. What, then, must *we all do* in our villages to raise children? I have argued that a community teaching program for the promotion of critical consciousness may be the answer and the hope for resisting the meritocracy and individualism dominant in the West today. The youth media group has found its own way, whether they know it or not, but taking action in the local community to complete projects important to them. Finding a way to tap into the abundance of resources in our local terrains and within and between our communities of belonging offers the chance to transform our local, regional, and global relations of participation in a mode and scheme of ecological existence. What that looks like remains unknown until we meet, share, and act on the issues of importance.

The youth media participants believe what they believe, and they will never change their minds. They said this, but I do not believe them. I used to believe things that I no longer believe, and that is because I have grown as a person. I have grown toward the truth about who and what I truly am. What I used to believe was based on facts I bought as real, even though cultural anthropology has taught humanity well that reality is perception, not facts. Paul Rabinow (1977) understood this when he reflected, "Anthropological facts are cross-cultural…made across cultural boundaries…made into facts during the process of questioning, observing, and experiencing" (152). This is analogous to the notion of expert opinions. Who is the expert in a given area of inquiry and in any span of time? That depends on who is asked and who is asking. Human development does not happen in a vacuum-sealed body. Humans grow among all of the ecological wonders of the universe. Such wonders are neither good nor bad; they simply are forces that enable or constrain within the pressures and conditions present. Science

and culture, operating together, make for a more useful approach to establishing how we ought to live together and how parents and communities should attend to and raise their children. All facts are social and need updating, over time. Let's not make the mistake that nothing changes. Everything is always changing, and it is our responsibility to humanity – to each other! – to perceive changes as best as possible so that humanity survives for another generation. Not ambition, but aspiration is our goal.

CHAPTER 9
A DEATH AND MORE DEATH: FINDING HOPE IN HOPELESS PLACES

A Dirge: From Depths to Heights

JOSHUA EISEN
BORN: January 23, 1991
DIED: December 1, 2019[5]

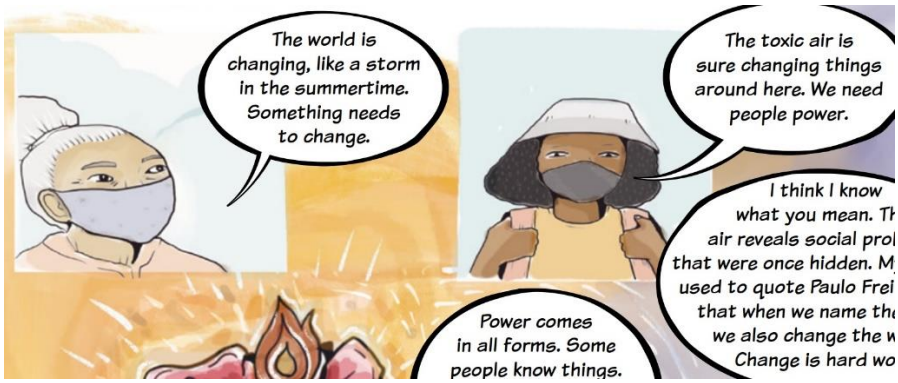
Paul Ricoeur (2004) talks about the depth of the fault and the height of forgiveness. Another way to envision how this works is to reflect on a time when resentment held so strong that it prevented movement out of grief and mourning, or loneliness and misery. The depths of the issue compel an even higher growth toward forgiveness. Simply put, this is the case of moving out of darkness and into light. My understanding of this transmutation relates to entering the real world, for it is upon us all to stand tall in the face of hardships and grow in such a way that we become stronger because of the experience.

This is also similar to when Michelle Obama proclaimed, *When they go low, we go high*, which was reiterated years later by Hillary Clinton (Galanes, 2018; Scipioni, 2020). It reminds me, too, of blues artist Sass Jordan's song "High Road Easy." She sang, *Take the high road easy, When your face begin to crack; Take the high road easy, Cause you won't be coming back*. Low is easy because that is holding onto ego and pride, and living with or instilling fear. High is difficult because it asks us to let go, forgive, and seek meaning in and through the difficult experience. The high comes from one's focus on solving the problem rather than dwelling on it and then claiming that everybody else is to blame for my feelings. The high communicates that there is a best way forward, and it is to be sought in only one direction. That is precisely the response the family off Josh

offered to the person who caused the accident. They did not wish to see him imprisoned, and they forgave his fault.

Love may call up times when we failed to love. Death may remind us of birth, and re-birth. Love and death highlight perceptions of life. Then, we ponder once again what we mean when we speak of reality, and the status quo. Is life so bad that we must fight everything and everybody to get our way? To win? Life is not a battle, but a journey. From the accidental death of one to the pandemic death of thousands globally, we might do ourselves well to find joy in this very moment – in the reading of words on this page and by living in the words of forgiveness expressed. Hope comes to those of us who are willing to not give up on the joys of life. However, to find joy one must have the capacity to accept reality, to forgive others for their mistakes, to learn from our own faults, and to see that there is more beauty than darkness to be experienced. All we have to do is live. Live! Today, we can all aim to be the best possible versions of ourselves by simply find something in this very moment to be happy about, to be grateful for, to be shared with our fellow humans and non-humans.

A Delay: From World-Pause to Pray for the End



COVID-19 PUBLIC HEALTH EMERGENCY[6]
START: Late 2019
LOCKDOWN: Spring 2020
RE-OPENING: 2022-2023

Hugh Gusterson (2020) has provoked us with his cultural wit about the relationship between faith and recovery. In true anthropological form, it's not clear whether he is also poking at people, or simply laying out the claims of miracle-cure possibilities. Perhaps we can pray, drink a potion, or believe it will "magically go away" just as it seemed to magically appear. Magically and miraculously, it seems, has turned out to be not far off the mark. When popular print, radio, television, internet, and social influence stopped speaking about COVID-19, all of a sudden, and from out of nowhere it went away. If that isn't magic, then what is it? Oh, yes, corporate media has corporate

interests (Orlowski, 2011). Pandemic death stopped making money, and so people moved on to other dramas that offered continued and greater rewards.

It's not just youth media that operates on a hit-and-run basis. All media and commentary tends toward unsustainable deliberation and growth. If broadcast-and-go is the norm, then youth media was always already keeping up with the status quo procedures for journalistic investigation. Perhaps a key difference is that the youth, too, tend to stick around only as long as their stories are riding on top of the storm. When the hubbub dies down, so does the interest of youth media makers. Another norm, then, is likely that 80% of the media was produced by 20% of the participants. Some only hung out in the background. However, they all played crucial roles in building and sustaining the aura and awareness of the group, especially during the cultural experiences of regular meetings. That’s magical!

In less than one year, the local and the global connected across death and more death. The youth media group experienced the life-changing injuries of one of their leaders and the split-second loss of that leader’s spouse. Months later, the world shut down as hundreds of thousands of people lost their lives to a pandemic that drove many into depths of hopelessness and loneliness. Seemingly from out of nowhere, and making its way into the homes of nearly all people, to be alive in this world took on new meaning. We have grieved near and far, and we have connected in previously unimaginable ways across that grief. On the other side of it all, global transformation has once again wrang true. People everywhere have become more intimately connected than ever, highlighting the necessity and power of human interdependence.

What had the youth writers experienced? My hope is that they found a way to transmute dark days into creative opportunities for continued growth; local and global loss into growth of self. The truth is that I simply do not know. While I had every intention to return to the field of youth journalism, that return never happened. The organization, too, had changed. My experiences have suggested that the aura and awareness held strong and that they felt tighter bonds with each other that extended beyond the individual grief. The varieties of social-emotional well-being achievement I knew before the lockdown may have led some of them toward more activation in aspirational awakening. I have had the pleasure of knowing that at least two of the young media-makers accepted enrollments at my university. Where is everybody now, though, I do not know. Human interdependence, if it has worked, tells me they are all doing just fine.

CHAPTER 10
ASPIRATIONAL AWAKENING

When we act, we see differently, supporting transformative possibilities for humanity. We must always be updating our positions on things experienced in the world so that we maintain momentum toward the best possible outcomes. However, outcomes must never be the final goal when aspiration is in focus. After all, more outcomes remain possible. To awaken aspirationally is to know oneself well enough to have the capacity to act properly within the status quo, and to see what is truly there in order to make the next right move. In other words, actors in the community must regularly revise their own lives to have a chance at revising and writing the world they envision. However, many people, stubborn as we may be, do not enjoy revising their work They think they already have the right answer and that their beliefs will never change. In the high school classroom, LaMay (2016) says, “Revision is a chore” (67). She succeeded with students because they developed a vision of revision that centered students in the effort. “We drew from Paulo Freire’s description of revision as a form of praxis, whereby we can learn to increase our perceptual capacity and act creatively on the world” (67). Community journalism made revision fun. As an action for justice, revision became an opportunity for youth to see the world differently and from more than one perspective, thus aiding in transforming themselves. Youth writers know the lay areas for growth. They hold it through a practical consciousness. The action was done, so now it was a chance to revise what they did through reflection and deliberate thought through recording what they did. Youth media works! It accomplished inner changes that manifested in the outer spaces for ongoing service to the community, which is toward an aspirational awakening.

Not all action prior to thought succeeded. The leadership team had a responsibility to communicate clearly with the youth journalists. I would include myself in that responsibility. However, when time passed with no movement on a mental health awareness art project, I wondered what was happening. Eventually, finally, the youth came clean with the truth. "I didn't understand what we were supposed to be doing," confessed one of the mentors. That showed growth, too. When we do not understand something, it is our responsibility within interdependent humanity to tell people that we are confused. Leadership took the easy way out. The project was scrapped, and that is perfectly okay. We can only try, never knowing whether our efforts will make the difference intended, or accomplish anything at all.

I learned some great lessons about deliberation from my time in the field. While it is an ongoing process, sometimes linear and sometimes cyclical, it also has no clear beginning or end. What I used to think was a clear way of coming to conclusions is quite obscured today. Deliberation is perhaps best understood as a start and an end, yet those beginnings and endings are also not always so clear to me. I have articulated an argument that action before thought supports youth well-being, relationship skills, and technological ability, but even that is not always clear. Recall that we are pop-ontological beings, plopped down into an already-existing thought. That already existing space then contends with newly arriving actors who seek to carve out awareness and articulation of it on their

terms. What that is, or could be, and grows toward depends on multiple personal, perceptible, physical and historical dimensions of location (Anzaldúa, 1999).

Nevertheless, I maintain that starts and stops along the way are normal and emerge not from knowing but from doing something. For these youth journalists, learning and growing happened in the community action first, and not after a so-called lecture or lesson in the classroom. The world as it is became their classroom. The action, the experience, taught them much about themselves even as they sought to teach the world how to transform in the name of truth, love, and justice. Learning was unrelated to memorization of so-called facts. The youth learned through action that supported their growth on multiple dimensions, and because they applied secret sympathy and practical consciousness to the cases of interest. They produced a new reality – inner and outer – full of hope because they believed they changed the world, whether they changed it or not. In the end, they changed and that has made and shall continue to make the world better for now, and in the direction of the best as each new generation enters the status quo to seek its transformation.

What I have been seeking to articulate is a pathway to right thinking. Born into a particular distribution of power relations – and the roles and statuses occupied – within a social structure influence the navigational capacity to act (Appadurai, 2004). In life, all people design projects and practice to achieve their completion (Ortner, 2006). Some key influences on how we live relate to other actors which, in turn, support our entry into the real world so we can successfully participate in structural reproduction. We, the producers of the social, prop up and keep the status quo going. However, we also challenge it through the ever-so-subtle changes made in how we practice social interaction. That is, we change the world because we, the actors, have changed. Take, for example, morality. Morality is personal and open to perception and interpretation within a given structure. Also, morality informs whether things stay the same or transform outside of a structure. Morality infiltrates and diffuses sometimes beyond its designated area. Should we police morality? I think not, for the culturally relative aspects of moral states can be aligned with universal human principles, such as truth, love, and justice. Thus, personal moral codes are but one of the many public spheres of influence, and as long as our versions of morality remain open to growth using principles of humanity then everybody may see how everybody else fits well within any status quo.

A bigger idea to contend with, and this is a philosophical grounding of this work, is how all people can achieve right thinking so that society achieves the highest level of kindness and equity across multiple spheres of engagement. By right thinking, I mean the way people grow out of selfish behaviors and toward human interdependence. I am talking about the growth of universal human principles for living well together. When humanity agrees, and I think it always has, that life means the most when we all can enjoy our aliveness, together we reproduce a world partly of our own making as we jointly work to create truth, love, and justice for all. Thus, right thinking is a social-emotional comfort with self, others, and society that uplifts principles aligned toward humanity's return to the interdependence it has always known and desired. This is about the survival of humanity, and the growing out from true humanity found within each of us leads to care for the world and all its inhabitants. The key is to know self well enough to unlock human interdependence. When we work together – through secret sympathy,

using practical consciousness – the pathway to success opens broadly, activating aspiration for all who join in social advancement efforts, which begins with entrance into the status quo.

The Black Lives Matter movement will be the third and final case example of how getting active supported the media youth's social-emotional well-being as they entered the real world to make a change. At the same time the youth journalists were planning an action, I was approached by a University of California, Merced sociology professor who asked about coordinating a rally with local activists. She knew I worked with youth in the community, and we agreed that it would be a wonderful opportunity for us to exemplify university-community partnerships around this action. The idea of university-community partnerships has grown up quickly over my time in graduate school. Namely, community-engaged scholarship has enveloped new modes for acting and thinking about solving problems that includes voices from outside of the academy. We have grappled with the gains and frustrations in doing this work, asking many questions to support ongoing efforts:

- How can the university be a partner in/for/to/with local communities?
- Who ought to have access to the research results?
- What are the implications associated with reframing research with community members?
- How will we know if we have been in service of the communities in which the university is situated?
- Can results speak across the world to improve local conditions everywhere?
- What ought we to do at the end of a project?

Regardless of the answers to these questions, community activities in partnership with local organizations afford practical application of cross-disciplinary ideas aimed at building healthier communities. Community engagement has served this project well, and offered bigger hopes that dreams will come true in the new reality.

By new reality, I mean a new vision of society, through new versions of the youth actors, that resulted from getting active on projects meaningful to their present selves. Broadly speaking, the methodology here relies on starting with a community problem instead of the research question. The question then emerges from the problem that needs to be solved. Thus, multiple dimensions of personal experience and identity strung together with others within the status quo helped youth sort out a simple plan of action. Using their sympathetic consciousness, projects important to their conceptions of and orientations to reality guided action as a starting place for making something – literally, anything – appear as the new desired reality. Whether the status quo changed remains open, but the youth changed. Moreover, from that change they constructed outcomes they disseminated to audiences through their writings and public performances.

Action, reflection, and dissemination of results is ongoing. In the community, remember, revision is fun! It also speaks to the need for new modes of writing that include all who have something at stake. Michelle LaFrance (2019) notes the case of the history of writing studies. She says, “The field has often been preoccupied

with…discourses that tend to standardize, generalize, and even erase the identities, expertise, and labor contributed by diverse participants" (7). Extrapolating that to community action and engagement, we may see how public policies that seek to control the entire population feel as if they have left some people out of the desired social design. For example, there is the case of single mothers caught in a system that demands they either get a job or go to school if they want continued housing support, and yet they are offered no childcare assistance (Silver, 2015). Also, let us look at differences in the questions that emerge between quantitative and qualitative, and community engagement. Consider three approaches to asking a problem-solving question regarding the surveillance of children communicating with each other in class:

Community work illustrates truths that otherwise do not appear in the data of other research models or appear in limited ways because the research questions sometimes do not account for the full scope of the problem. My approach to community-engaged research begins with identifying stakeholder organizations already working in communities seeking to improve conditions. Wherever possible, it may be fruitful to create space for groups to share their interests to identify commonalities on which to work together. This is an iterative process. The outcome may seem distant, impossible, or elusive until project completion. Nevertheless, it is always inspirational and aspirational when groups work together, conforming to unity for the best possible community design for living. Don't we want all people to feel included and to have a sense that the world is in their best interests, in favor of their survival?

This shift from question to problem, to problem into question, relates to the Black Lives Matter movement and its focus on getting loud enough to proclaim that policies have not always been implemented in such a way that people feel like, well, people. Silence is not an option. Personal well-being in the direction of humanity-for-all demands that young people speak up, or as they sometimes put it, "Get Loud!" Working with universities and communities, children and youth gain entry into themselves – to get to know who they are – by participating in these growth opportunities. The Black Lives Matter march and rally here in the Central Valley of California exemplified a cry for freedom, which is to say a search for true self through action. Action changes thoughts in the direction of knowing who we truly are, making an awakening to a new version of reality possible.

The Black Lives Matter march and rally was also a chance for me to perceive the role of action in changing how people feel about themselves and the present state of the world. This quote really opened my mind to the role of action:

> *It takes something really awful to get me outside of my own head…at some point you have to be willing to put your own body on the line.*

What we don't live, we cannot teach others. That is why action, and experiences within community actions, support social advancement and fitting into its present structure. I had been attentive to the role of positive action, but here I got to experience from the perspective of a youth media producer the power of negativity. When life appears to be dire, it may also help young people get out of their negative thoughts, even as it also has the potential to reproduce fighting without resolution. Nevertheless, rallying for black lives exemplified the corporeality of awful that supported youth aspiration. If it got them out of their heads, even if performed as a fight, it still supported their inclusion in the community and their potential for principled growth. When negative thoughts transformed into positive action where resistance functioned as a place to start, they entered the status quo with which they thought they were against. Whereas I wanted them to stop fighting and stand up for what they believed, they fought their way into improved thoughts. This is aspirational to me. It awakened me to the value of the fight, if only as a beginning action. It showed their aspirational awakening because the youth fought their way out of negative thoughts through positive action.

University-Community partnerships in research ought to continue. Some key recommendations for fostering collaborative research relate, again, to conforming to unity and understanding that values rather than expectations move teams forward together in doing work that accomplishes the greatest good in society. Finding support across the university and its curriculum promotes alignment with aspirations that faculty and students can buy into. Community members are likely to appreciate university work more when it includes local participation in support of local growth efforts. Developing partnerships that bridge K-12 and higher education form platforms for creative placemaking and team building. Community organizations already have an interest and become strong advocates of work that solves local problems. Most importantly, writing self-reflection as well as care and love practices across community-engaged projects keeps the work moving forward regardless of how it ebbs and flows.

Regarding the questions posed in this dissertation, activating aspirational awakening has been difficult to directly confirm. This project was abruptly disrupted by a nationwide disengagement. COVID-19 marked an exigent experience in the lives of all people. It caused the shutdown of work across nearly all public-facing functional domains. It lasted for years, and on the other side of the pandemic, field research never resumed. Thus, the results of this project are based on what could be gleaned from the years of participant observation with youth media actors. Specific, deliberate validation of individual youth journalism experiences, and the changes in themselves based on their actions, rarely manifested. These are the ideas, mostly philosophical, I assembled from time in the field.

Research Question Answered

How has the youth media organization encouraged and/or supported its youth participants to get active in the local community on issues affecting their lives? What roles did the youth participants actually play in the actions they took? Do the outcomes of the actions really matter? What does participation in local social change efforts do to change the individual who took the steps to get into action?

- Actions changed thoughts. Negative thoughts often prompted the actions taken. Disappointment with the status quo pushed youth to fight against ideas with which they disagreed.
- Sometimes the youth joined efforts already taking place in the community. Rarely, they created their own projects and acted on them in the community. An exciting area for universities and communities to learn from is how they can dialogue with each other to support hyper-local social change.
- I was curious about whether the outcomes of action mattered. My hunch was, and remains, that outcomes produce the possibility for new outcomes. There is no end. Work is about being of service to the world. Love is showing up for that opportunity to serve. Success is measured by growth in and through service, regardless of its outcome. More outcomes, after all, remain open and possible. Service never ends.
- Through serving local communities, youth journalists in this research developed deeper understandings of who they are, facilitating the possibilities for aspirational awakenings.

The growth mindset is alive and well in community-based youth media production. These young journalists have narrated a rich understanding of local conditions through politics, poetics, and problem-solving. They have demonstrated an interest in social inclusion and justice for youth, which supported their social-emotional adjustment to the status quo even as they worked against it. Community-engaged after-school journalism gave interested young people a platform when official politics would not and permitted them to occupy the public square to claim standing on issues impacting their lives. Finally, community journalism did for youth what schooling could not: support social-emotional adjustment to self, others, and society on their terms, using their words, free from the punishing sensibilities of conformity to public domestication. After-school journalism did not domesticate. It liberated children and youth in the direction of human values formation that are necessary for the promotion of truth, love, and justice. This is how aspiration awakens.

What I can absolutely confirm is that doing something – literally, anything – in the name of helping people and communities helped the youth journalists to feel a sense of belonging and moments of relief from falling apart inside their heads. When they acted in the world for good, they felt good and were able to set aside the anger, resentment, and emptiness that so many of the young people had been experiencing. Effectively, they got active to get out of themselves and into a growth mindset. Whether that was sustained is

open to interpretation. However, as I have expressed, this project sought only to offer a method that will slowly, and sometimes begrudgingly, help children and youth come to terms with who they really are and to find that when they did that, could see that the world is beautiful and welcoming of them as they are.

Growth toward the truth, toward holding onto the hope that dreams will become reality, can take years. This project took years, and it shows that taking the right action on projects that matter to the lives of these young people supports social-emotional well-being while offering the chance to learn and practice media production. Below, I shall attempt to explain how ethnographic methods supported youth and revealed deeper truths about how the activation of aspiration works. Then, I will highlight some examples of awakenings that I noticed during my time in the field. Unconfirmed, but still very much movements in the direction of truth, love, and justice, these moments of growth stand as only a few possibilities emerging from investment in community-engaged youth projects and organizations. Their power, their voices, and their hopes can make dreams come true.

Ethnography seeks to interpret and illustrate culture, or the ways in which groups enact and perform shared ways of life. We could not know about the particular practices of groups if we did not go beneath the surface to uncover something they believe, value, and hold up as some kind of reality. Also, in return to cultural relativity, I want to be clear that cultural differences in our practices do not necessarily suggest differences in values. People can and do arrive at the same meanings in very different ways. For example, I pose this question: What is the reason why a person should feel happy to be alive? Some possibilities may be:

- A believer in one of the Abrahamic religions might say, God is with me and He gave life to me here to do important work which makes me happy.
- A person who views life as random or a chance occurrence might say, We are all just stardust and our time on this planet is very short. Since life is pretty meaningless, we should enjoy it while we can.
- A person who believes the value of life resides in our joint actions might say, There is no meaning of life; there is only meaning in life, and so let's work it out together.

While particular lived domains must be understood on their own terms, we ethnographers must also be careful about our interpretations because there is no reason to think that one process can have only one output. Ethnography works precisely because it is messy, unruly, everchanging, dynamic, in-between based on shared albeit contentious understanding of the world. Humans, being the least complete animals at birth, are very messy, so ethnography continues to be of high value to the study of civilizations.

Awakenings

The secret sympathy that permeated the media youth's regularly scheduled meetings functioned as the cultural logic of the group. They listened in support of each other, and proposed ways into and through experiences that needed discussion or action.

Whatever the case, there was always a solution to be found because the logics of the groups permitted freedom to engage without censorship. Sometimes, the answer was to enter into the norm and perform a role within the dominant society. Sometimes, the answer was to question and/or challenge social conventions that seemed stifling. Either way, it was an attempt to reach out for help. Reaching, again as another method for promoting the secret sympathy, showed that caring for others did not only work as self-care. It also created the possibility to transform victim mentalities into vulnerable sensibilities. Effectively, the hodgepodge of youth media workers got brave and asked each other for help. That's cool!

Patience: Waiting is a learned and practiced skill. Also, normative social influence is not always negative. After all, did the youth media participants not end up forming their own version of norms within the organization, in their organizing activities? Of course, they did. They developed ordinary ways of doing what they initiated as challenges to the ordinary. Thus, what started as challenging the status quo became its own version of it. The difference may be in the way it changed the actors and not in any effect it had on society. This, I have suggested, is how social change takes place. Yet, I believe they did change the world. It's just that we have no way of ever knowing precisely how they did it. It's an inarticulable change because their secret sympathy has become so pervasive that it is unseeable and untouchable. We simply feel it.

Action: Humanity has a job for all of us. Having developed a true sense of self, having identified strengths and weaknesses of mindset and character, having made a beginning toward seeing what the world is and what it could be, youth journalists expressed themselves and contributed to the making of a new reality. How did they do that? Whether they knew it or not, they became something they had never been before the actions they took, and then upon reflection saw themselves differently. They worked at changing the world, and in so doing changed who they were – who they thought they were – by acting in the name of truth, love, and justice for young people everywhere. By living better, they produced a better local community than the one they dwelled in before, entering into an aspiration development program of their own making. Who says youth can't make the world? Pop-onotology may be real, but so is the possibility of turning ontology on its head and proclaiming – Loudly! – that we are not who we think we are. The human condition cannot be overcome, and young media actors and producers have shown a way out of thinking that humanity is bigger than nature. Personal growth, then, is a rediscovery and a return to who we really are, as seekers of the truth so that justice may be done for all of Earth. Ecological awareness through human interdependence is how youth acted their way into right thinking. They aspired to show that they fit into the world even as they fought the world, and activated something that remains open to understanding.

Awakening: When a new reality of our own making becomes our norm, we awaken. Youth journalists produced a new ordinary, and they saw the world anew because they had become something else. Aspirational awakening is inarticulable, untouchable, and dwells in the hearts and minds of every person who seeks its activation. Investing in youth projects, in the communities where they dwell, supported an activation of this inarticulation through the cultural logics of their shared experiences, past, present,

and emergent. They have shown that the world as a whole, through interdependent action, grows best using the guiding principles of truth, love, and justice. Participatory action, as research and as the basic way to care, has grown up through the sympathies and consciousnesses of youth media activists. Their narratives follow a new cultural system that respects the natural order of things – of a humanity that respects its own condition.

Aspiration awakening relates to doing the right things which then influence the formation of values that reproduce more actions, and moving people into right thinking. Right thinking follows the path of truth, love, and justice through human interdependence. It is always a reach, and reaching (as an aspirational method) may or may not be effective. As humans, we may stumble in our footsteps, but we never fail. In saying that, though, I must reflect on my struggles coming up in this world. I didn't believe it possible to ever be a useful or helpful person, because I had become angry at the world to the point where I wanted out of reality. I remember the times I faced rejection – from schools, from jobs, from fellows, from life itself – and thought I must have done something wrong. Perhaps I was wrong. Perhaps I just stumbled inside my head. Today, through my actions, I have gotten right in my thoughts and I understand the truth of situations because I have come to know myself. Now, when things don't go my way, I accept the outcomes because I believe I wasn't supposed to get my way. The outcome was right insofar as I took the right actions.

The growth mindset is vital to my aspirational awakening experience. I know to be vulnerable without being a victim. I know comparing myself to others is a waste of time. I understand that retaliation for harm done to me harms me more. I know that doing good in the world supports social-emotional well-being. I engage with and never avoid these ideas to conform to unity. Every moment together is a chance to foster learning. Most importantly, I know solutions to my troubles lie within me – in discovering more each day who I am so that I can treat myself well and fulfill my role of growing in service to humanity. Happiness is not to be chased; it is a byproduct of growth. Care and community building are essential. It's about the survival of humanity, happening one person at a time as we journey together in sympathy and practical awareness of reality. It's liberating to wake up, look out into the world and to the ground at my feet, and proclaim, Yes, I am in harmony with all things.

This is the message I carry today as the result of my time in the field living, loving, learning, and aspiring with youth journalists. We sought justice for youth and for the welfare of the local community, and we found personal growth in those efforts. Regardless of outcomes, they never failed. As argued above, failure aligns with the acronym, F.A.I.L. The growth mindset pronounced achievement through first attempts in learning something never tried before. Try they must, and trying is the only requirement to make a move in the right direction, which is toward the achievement of right thinking. They wanted change and they got change. They changed. Growth is ongoing.

Developing a capacity to act is about awakening to a new vision of reality. It begins in the search for social change and shines in the discovery of who we truly are within the status quo. Since the status quo ought to be humanity-for-all focused, sympathies and awarenesses of how power operates supported youth growth toward seeing the best actions for human interdependent thinking. In this awakening, which is always becoming that which one has never been and cannot know until it arrives,

aspiration comes into view. To awaken to our best-case understanding of reality is how the young reporters aspired. In this space, they do not fall backward. In the aura of unity, they are always supported and moving toward aspirations of hope that humanity will arrive, thrive, and survive for another generation.

In conclusion, the awakening is about doing the greatest good for the greatest number of people, for the survival of humanity. Every aspirational awakening is a great leap forward; and it is simultaneously an expansion of reality that forms another platform for the next great leap forward. They never fall back. To name success or failure would limit and miss the point of this research inquiry. Moreover, both are temporary experiences as well as growth opportunities. This is the point of activation. Any community-based effort may activate something inside a person to produce better thoughts. This supports improved future actions always in search of the truth. Public action is not resistance when aspiration is involved. To act is to lead by example, and to demonstrate aspirational capacity for a life without fighting anybody or anything. It is a life overflowing in truth, love, and justice that emerges from action. In an aspirational awakening, there are no winners or losers. There are no enemies because there is no fight to be entered into. To live by the values of humanity for all, and for all times, is to enter into the world as it is, and to welcome others to join in making it the best possible world.

CONCLUSION: STAYING ON THE PATHWAY TO SUCCESS

This project stood on the position that people below the age of majority constitute a social affinity group. Regardless of backgrounds, identities, interests, and initial perceptions of self, others, and society, children and youth in this afterschool journalism and media production organization held each other up by working together using a secret sympathy scaffolded by practical awareness of what they believed they needed, and based on what they saw in the world. Action before thought guided the social change efforts of participants. The public-facing activities they enacted began largely in disappointment, in recognizing that something was missing from the local story. Projects took shape at various locations within the local town – streets and venues – based on relevance and feasibility. Many projects started by joining already-constructed local events. Infrequently, the youth activists initiated their own projects and stories. Much of their writing and media work took the form of personal narratives and was often connected with larger social justice issues experienced by young people all around the world. Their goal, broadly understood, was to challenge the socio-legal policing of children by highlighting that investment in youth is a better way forward for building healthy people and communities.

As the youth writers sought to author a different story of self, others, and society, they also struggled to escape negative thoughts of the same. My aim was to activate states of mindfulness where hope would develop. Getting active in the community served as a mechanism for alleviating moments that could have been on the depressive or self-pitying side. Public action supported their ability to tap into that inner space where hope dwelled. Sustained or not, actions in the community helped youth develop greater awareness of who they really are, and to have enough strength of mind to dream of a future that imagines their equal participation. As an added method, *reaching* multi-directionally supported the activation of what aspiration is truly about – revealing interdependent human principles for living that awaken the true inner self. The youth journalists wanted to change society for more investment in youth and their inclusion in public decision-making. They accomplished much more. They learned that to change society the individual must change.

As people change, society changes, almost automatically as the result of living with the right attitude. How, though, can action into thinking work to help all people be who they are supposed to be, which is to see that humanity demands interdependence? As a public interest ethnographic project, it would be unethical of me to write this work and not take a stand in the name of supporting children and youth everywhere. Foremost, schooling relates to domestication, and there is nothing characteristically wrong with that since we are all plopped down into some already existing structure by which we need to navigate. However, after-school education programs possibly relate to liberation from following the status quo, which is characteristically about growth. Both are worthy investments. Both, I believe, are necessary for raising healthy children. Nevertheless, if it is true that many more young people today struggle to fit themselves into the status quo, then creative, cultural, critical, community-engaged youth programming ought to be set in motion in every town, and all around the world. Remember David Lancy (2017) and Nicholas Longo (2007), namely that we ought to be concerned about one-size-fits-all

modes of education, and that the community has an abundance of resources and we can make use of them all. Proper investment in youth would support their entry into the real world – the status quo – as well as empower their leadership roles in the social reproduction of the structures by which we agree to live. If the places where children live and learn better included them in civic activities, then they might not fall apart inside their heads over events taking place around them.

In *Ethics in Light of Childhood*, John Wall (2010) articulates the idea of childism to challenge adultism as the normative state of humanity. He seeks to elevate children as equal human beings capable of contributing to the building of our social structures. Why social structures? He says:

> The reason for social structures, from an ethical point of view, is to expand systems of interdependent relations as diversely as possible. The worth or value of social systems should be judged by the degree of their other-responsiveness. Social justice is measured by the extent to which social systems multiply the centers of meaning through which they are created (104).

Undoubtedly, these children and youth have always participated in social life. Let us recall their Trans & Intersex Rights March, self-initiated, and performed on the public square. Thus, in the vein of childism, youth participation in public life speaks to their capacities to liberate themselves from the chains of media consumption focused on divisions. Youth media production can be about writing conformity to unity in humanity in creative ways that illustrate their growing human values as they journey toward an aspirational awakening. Youth media writing has shown the way to stay on the pathway of success, where success is about seeking the production of the best possible world. Our futures depend on including everybody, siloing nobody, and opening up new ways of worlding (de Pina-Cabral, 2017). Children, as a social group, dwell well across their differences. Why, then, do adults mess this up by creating divisions of identity, by constructing false differences? It is because growth has gotten off track, gone against nature, by seeking to overcome the human condition (Critchley, 2007). Children, on the other hand, have developed sympathies and group awareness that, while in danger of being adulted, support the propping up (i.e., institutionalization) of unity (de Pina-Cabral, 2011). That is, the whole community ought to care about the whole community and then connect with other local communities to extend that care globally.

Is that too grandiose and idealistic? No! It is a principled way to live. It is a way to let go of individual power and elevate the power of groups to support societies. I wrote a comic book a few years ago in consultation with some of the youth in this project. It asked the question, as its title, *How Did We Get Here?* (2022) and told a story of a town, which could have been any town, from the viewpoint of a teenager. It sounds easy enough to trace histories to understand how the world became what it is today, but history is also contentious with limits based on what can be known from the available archives. The significance of the comic may be that it is now part of the historical record, and so the ideas of the young people I worked with will now live on for future generations. To enter the real world, to see what is there, and to ask whether it needs changing, demands

public participation of all who have something to say and at stake in the future of existence. The power of youth media is that their work becomes part of history, so it makes complete sense to activate and then archive youth work everywhere. The point is simply that hope for humanity breathes deepest through the inclusion of everybody's story. Social justice demands social change, and for society to transform somebody, or some group of interested people, must act. The outcome of action is more on the side of personal change than it is directly tied to societal change itself. However, for a society to exist it must have people, so as changed people we change society. Becoming is constant, as everything is always on its way to somewhere else.

The popular press and social media are filled with lies. The media speaks in partial truths. Much of the media work masquerades as journalism and, upon investigation, proves to be something more akin to status quo marketing. One might argue that public media is always some form of promotion. Corporate media has corporate interests (Orlowski, 2011). Nevertheless, there are new possibilities for press and media constitution, and youth stories offer hope that telling the truth using anecdotes from experiences in the world could move humanity toward unity. Youth journalism, rather than reproducing socio-cultural or political-economic divisions, could diversify and unify humanity since children constitute a social group. Effectively, youth news illustrates realities of future leaders so that society might solve problems with their lives in mind. Whether or not what youth media produces is researched or fully data-driven might matter less than the fact that they produced something meaningful to them. In so doing, children and youth have claimed a voice in the public square and have decided to grow toward becoming something better than what they were before having participated in the mediation. This is how young people activated their aspirations in the community. This was their awakening to new versions of themselves, which supported social change in the process of having grown toward truth, love, and justice.

The way out of media lies and half-truths was to seek the answer within. Youth media actors thought they are supposed to challenge the status quo to change the world. What they did was grow toward self-honesty and self-acceptance. I think they still stand up for a fight, but they also found a way to seek the whole truth across their diverse lives, in the name of inclusion, so that justice may be done for all of them. The youth journalists worked together across their diverse backgrounds and showed how they could socialize and materialize hope for society. The differences youth journalists experienced were simply inspiring gestures that show how wonderful humanity can be, and what a joy it can be to grow toward human interdependence, to awaken to see that life is beautiful. I do not for a second believe they struggled inside their own heads as much as they sometimes led on. The creative works they produced told other stories as well.

The permanent effect of an action is the capacity to discover one's true self through effort. Reflection of the experience and group-level deliberation improved their self-appraisals in the direction of awakening to reality, living within it, and then seeking growth. Knowing reality, I hope the youth journalists have seen that the status quo is not particularly bad. In fact, much of what exists in our globalized society is an improvement on what previous generations experienced, so I hold hope that their actions have shone a light that we might call spiritual. Activating aspiration is a spiritual awakening because it is growth in the human spirit. "Spiritual Activism" – where the spirit is inward-looking,

and activism is outward-facing – is a powerful way to re-see social justice. When seen as inextricably tied to each other, reality comes into clarity for those who take action in the world to complete projects meaningful for them and the communities they dwell in, care for, and desire to see transformed. This, in turn, speaks loudly first to the community but also to the self which seeks to know its place in society. That is, the action for the community makes inner change possible, thus producing an aspirational awakening. Youth activism – the work of this group of budding journalists – is always an inward search for social-emotional well-being and belonging, and it takes shape through collaborative action within and on the status quo. This does not mean the status quo is all bad since we are born into it and must seek to fit ourselves to participate in it. However, there is always more work to be done within self and among others, and in local communities across the globe, so that values may be properly formed and aligned to activate the aspirations of all people.

What is success? It is an attitude toward self and reality orientation. Success is in the details that produce feelings of belonging, security, and worth to society. Achieving a particular level of education, economic status, number of children or pets, or even owning so-called dream products such as cars, homes, and time for vacations to the beach are not markers of success. All of those things can be, but are not always, byproducts of success. Success is an experience that may happen every day, achievable through taking the right actions for oneself as a member of society. As argued in this dissertation, one must get active in something - literally, anything - for success to become possible. By taking action in the community, for anything, children and youth grow in their capacities to see larger truths about self, others, and the world. In this sense, conceptualizing action-taking may be irrelevant. Does it matter what is being done, so long as it is in the direction of being for the community's good? All that matters are the values participants gain by having proper attitudes about doing good for society. Conformity in unity to promote humanity-for-all is emancipatory no matter the work being done.

It is the hope of this dissertation to construct an understanding of how taking an action – literally, any action – builds capacity to accept reality as well as gain the capacity to be a part of it. Whether we like the status quo of society or take issue with parts of it matters less than the attempt to make entrance into the social structures and institutions we find ourselves plopped. This argument opposes a deficit model of youth development and proposes to look at the ways in which children and youth can and do find meaning in a world they sometimes feel dismisses their contributions. A method of action – where attempting to reach to/for/with something is also a method – has been proposed as a way to right thinking for the future official public leaders of our worlds. Focused on what children and youth desired for their lives and for the societies in which they live, a method of action in local communities supported conformity to unity in humanity. Humanity is for everybody, and the young actors in this project has shown how to get up and get out into the world so that the greatest good may, hopefully, be achieved.

Nevertheless, young people also have a responsibility to accept the world into which they were born. Staking a claim because something important is at stake supports the capacity for youth to awaken to proper aspirational thought. For authenticity to form, though, children and youth must also desire to accept the world as it is presented to them.

Liking, to be clear, is not the same as accepting. Acceptance is simply about not letting things that happen produce mental obstacles on the aspirational pathway. Instead, we can see the gains and pains all the same, accept them, and continue our journeys within the bounds of reality. With this newly formed attitude, as the result of community action, the youth have established among themselves an approach to world-making, toward a better place, by doing the greatest good for the greatest number of people. Effectively, this is freedom that never lets up on the social expanse opportunities emerging. Youth activists can and do use wins and challenges to expand across social locations. Wall (2010) calls social expansion a response to whatever appears as different:

> A good and just society is therefore a matter of its expansiveness, its ability to respond to difference. It is one that contains practices and mechanisms of disruption and decentering that enable it to expand itself to include its own greatest possible creativity by otherness. It is something like this kind of expansiveness that Martin Luther King Jr. argues from his jail cell in Birmingham, Alabama is the ultimate goal of social justice: "to create the kind of tension in society that will help men rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood."[7] The goal of justice is not simply to oppose power, but to turn destructive social tensions into creative social tensions that are more radically inclusive of difference. As societies reproduce themselves in response to their actual lived diversities, they are able to transcend narrow abuses of power and stretch themselves toward their own more fully shared humanity (104).

We have learned a lot about ourselves, the world, and what it means to live a good and happy life. We have grown to accept the world and its people as they are rather than to beat up on or challenge ways of life that differ from our own. I hope we are all people trying to do the best that we can to enjoy life and to allow others to enjoy their lives as we seek the kind of expansion Wall imagines. However, when young people don't feel that to be the case, some of them speak up. Some of them drown in the solitude of their heads. In 1974, medical doctor Marvin A. Block said, "The difference between the mentally healthy person and the unhealthy one is the ability to face the realities of life." This dissertation follows his assertion, and thus helping youth enter into the world without fighting against anybody or anything became of great interest. I attended to how they helped themselves enter reality and face it. Taking action was about serving others, but it was also about helping youth serve their own interests which sometimes supported their social-emotional well-being.

Service to humanity takes many forms. Whether it be making coffee, bringing donuts, roadside help, a cause, an event, or generalized hope, every act of goodwill for the promotion of community health is always an action that helps us. We can all be the givers of service to humanity. Serving humanity gets people out of their heads to clear away negativity, and subsequently produces good feelings that change negative thoughts into positive thoughts (Nazario and Quayle, 2017). Does life get easier? Does the world look better? I don't know. Perhaps it waxes and wanes, or ebbs and flows, as people grow

in their senses of self-fitting into reality. People can and do improve themselves, which should direct experiences to be easier and better. It's a change of perception, and a growth in awareness of the value of interdependence, as one human among many humans. All it takes is the willingness to take the right action today.

An especially key point to reiterate, following Block above, is that mental health problems are really social problems. I am often quite stumped by the seeming overuse of the phrase "mental health" as if everybody knows what that means. The phrase gets tossed around as if everybody ought to understand mental fitness, or what people intend when they say they need to take care of themselves today. My firsthand experiences in the field of youth journalism validate that most of what people call mental health problems are actually environmental adjustment problems and that getting active in reality to help others is the best form of self-help. Suppose I over-activate an area of my life, my natural instincts get out-of-whack, and I find myself living in, for example, a social media debate loop for days on end. What caused me to get caught up in that cycle? Was it the fact that the social media channel exists, and so a decision must be made to regulate social media? Was it modeling the behavior of my family or friends, and so I need to find new social networks? Was it mental health problems, and so I need medication to check my instincts? While all of these things may hold some truth, the real reason for falling into social, emotional, and/or mental wackiness was most likely due to my failure to get active on things that matter to me most. In other words, living in reality, using the terms of life as they unfold before me, becomes a solution to my only real problem: not knowing myself.

Taking an interest in social change, getting active on projects aimed at attracting social inclusion, and then doing something – literally, anything – supports community health and belonging. Do anything! When we change ourselves to meet the questions posed by society rather than try to change the questions to fit our selfish ends, life gets simpler. I don't know if life gets easier, but it certainly gets better as a result of living with a growth mindset. Fitting ourselves to fit into the world is not giving up, and it is not believing in the status quo. Today, I think that fitting into the world, as it is, makes room for and perhaps is the best first step to challenging the status quo. By challenging, I mean living rightly by taking the right action as a human being and then letting that social gift grow out to others who are still searching for ways to fit into a world they imagine either doesn't accept them or downright seems to exclude them. *Acting as if* we belong gets us into the right headspace to ensure that we are welcome. It doesn't need to be over-thought. It just happens, automatically, because we have believed we fit in wherever we go. Belonging, conformity to unity in humanity, is for everybody. All it takes is a willingness to see that there is more good than bad in the world and that feelings of abundance can overwhelm any sense of deficit. Then, social-emotional well-being and critical-evaluative skills building combine with this attitude and belief that everything will be just fine. It just happens, through action. Doing anything feels good. It feels best when it is good.

I am not trying to change the world. I am offering a solution to change the self, which can then be a starting place *to help others to help themselves*. The secret sympathy then grows outward producing the freedom effect so that the status quo meets its challengers without too much resistance because the truth has become the norm. A recent

graduate student conference call for submissions asked for proposals that address the theme "War & Society" broadly. I immediately reflected, *Does everything have to be a fight?* Can we find a way to challenge ideas that don't require going to battle? I think so. When young people get active in the public square, they can and do share their positions and why they have stakes in seeing social shifts. They say, "Get Loud!" They like to get loud. My research experiences show that they may not need to be too loud, but rather just loud enough to enter into the real world. Listening to understand, even if we still differ in perspective, is also important. That remained a challenge in this project as they professed a lack of desire to hear opinions with which they disagreed. Nevertheless, they did something right. They didn't over-plan or overthink their work. They simply got active and let the outcomes speak through them, in a shared sympathetic awareness, that they later reflected in their journalism. In the end, it was a trivial matter whether change took place in the world. What mattered was the change that took place in them as the result of acting in the world. This formed a pathway toward a better life – a progression of the spirit of the individuals – that has made global change possible, youth group by youth group.

I have been speaking about principles of truth, love, and justice as vital to aspirational awakening. Action that seeks these outcomes is really about seeking them from within. Thus, the effort to transform the world begins by transforming oneself. Erich Fromm (1956/2006) has plainly stated this as a search for self, which is also the search for *not-I*. He says, "The more I know what God is *not*, the more knowledge I have of God…God becomes truth, love, and justice. God is I, inasmuch as I am human" (65). I understand this to mean that we are all humans among humans and that to seek to be something other than human would set a course against what is human, toward humanity's end. It makes no difference if we call it God, Spirit, Creation, or Universe. What matters is that we teach children that global change begins with growth toward discovering who we truly are. The best possible world, as far as we can discover reality, requires daily efforts to be a part of humanity as it is, and then grow more each day to improve ourselves so that the world grows, person by person, interacting interdependently. We truly are members of a species troubled by a lack of self-knowledge. We were born uncooked. However, when we conform to unity in humanity, and as ecological players in Earth, Spirit, Guardian, Universe, social change perceptibly becomes inner work.

Life on Earth has great meaning because we have a purpose in life. We have found not the meaning of life, but great meaning in being alive. That purpose in life is to do the greatest good for the greatest number of people for the survival of humanity. Our species depends upon investment in it, and not separation of it. Youth know this. It's precisely why investing in youth makes a whole lot of sense. By investing in youth, we can help them stay connected to Earth, and awareness of humanity's hope. This does not mean that any person is special, for none of us are uniquely more built up to be better than anybody else. However, important we all are. Unity in humanity, through that secret sympathy that permeates our beingness, our becoming who we truly know we are or can be, confirms not specialty but importance. Investment in all children means we have a chance to survive. There are no guarantees, but there is hope, a chance, that we will live on.

Children and youth aspire because their lives have been changed through action. They developed values that speak to their hopes about themselves, others, and society. No longer, as I used to worry, do they have to be stuck in that liminal space between self-inflicted nightmares and impossible dreams. Nightmares of the past transmuted into dreams. Or, if you will, darkness showed them the way to a brighter future. Action, because the status quo was good but not the best, changed thoughts. So, the real effect of action is the changed individual who may now go out into the world and seek its continued transformation. This marks the difference between settling for the better and aiming for the best. Human interdependence asks that we seek the best for all. We are stronger together is not quite right. Strongest together is our goal, and it happens with ease when we know more deeply each day who we really are and what we have the hope to become. Working together, across differences of identity and perspective, the world improves; and that improvement starts with me.

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