Words Are Your

Roots

Profiles of Community Arts & Literacy Organizations
in the City of Brotherly Love

SPYING ON HOPE PRODUCTIONS

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At the Corner of Art and Action in Philly, 2015

Hannah Ashley, PhD

Words are your roots. That is what one Philadelphia youth says in a monologue she constructs as part of a workshop at one of the five community-based arts and literacy organizations highlighted in this monograph. These are not the only organizations in the City of Philadelphia doing this kind of work, but they serve as exemplars, just as these chapters are not the only profiles that could have been presented here. Instead, they are particular, and as such, they freeze for examination sets of practices, individuals and parts of community that are, in reality, alive and growing—but too often invisible.

I could not be more excited about this collection. Personally, I began my journey as a literacy worker soon after I arrived in Philadelphia in the early 1990's, teaching GED and Adult Basic Education. I was in my early twenties, and I knew nothing. I made many mistakes, and, I am regularly forced to admit, I continue to do so. In fact, in the course I had the privilege of designing and teaching, which resulted in this collection, my students and I read many, many pieces which enumerated the perils of attempting to do community literacy work, whether from the position of community member, university faculty, or elsewhere. The course description read in part,

> We will study 'literacy work [writ large] that exists *outside* of mainstream educational and work institutions' (Community Literacy Journal, mission, emphasis added). We have a long national history and a powerful current movement of meaning-making through textual and symbolic production outside mainstream educational and other 'approved' institutions. This course will study such movements through primary (community-based) research, as well as theory. That is, we will learn in part through studying local and regional

community-based literacy programs and projects in hands-on way, and applying what we have learned in class to theorize that work.

The profiles in this collection are a portion of the results of that hands-on theorizing and inquiry. We are calling these pieces profiles because the rigor of the inquiries was limited, given the one-semester nature of the class, the need to provide a significant amount of background to the students in the course, the need to establish new relationships and a modicum of trust with the staff at the organizations highlighted here, and produce complete, if not finished, drafts. They are more in the vein of journalism than qualitative research. Nevertheless, the pieces, in and of themselves, make arguments, and the collection, as a whole, I believe, makes an argument as well.

Voice in the City of Brotherly Love: Literacy and Arts Outside the Schoolhouse

Before proceeding further, it is worth emphasizing that everyone involved in this collection is aware of the enormous constraints placed on those who walk that road and live in that house every day— teachers inside of schools. The inordinately difficult circumstances of being a Philadelphia public school teacher cannot be overstated. The Philadelphia School District is underfunded by millions of dollars. Philadelphia was recently rated the very poorest of the ten largest cities in the United States, with the largest concentrations of deep poverty as well. Deep poverty means that a family of three would have an income of less than $10,000 per year; the level of instability around basic needs such as food and housing that this poverty brings is true for approximately 12% of our city, including 60,000 children. This in a country with skyrocketing income inequality. These statistics don't begin to address the violence that is a daily reality witnessed by many urban kids, including those in the City of Brotherly Love. Despite those adversities, Philly children and parents get up in the morning, go to school and work, try to thrive. And there are many Philly teachers who manage to find opportunity within those institutional, economic and social constraints, and who see the assets of the youth, parents and neighborhoods where their schools are situated.

However, these pieces focus specifically on literacy development, identity, voice and ownership that occur in the spaces of five specific community organizations. These are *not*-school spaces, and so some of the portraits set up school and formal education as the foe of "authentic learning." Rather than adversarial, it would be more useful to think of the practices and institutions portrayed here as interstitial, what can happen in the spaces in between when things can be more fluid, smaller or more flexible, which can occur both in- and out-of-school. These pieces exemplify what it looks like, on the ground, when community words and marginalized voices, when backed by powerful "sponsorship"— as Deborah Brandt calls the work of institutions and individuals that support this type of success and growth—aim at change. For individuals, that change often looks like positive senses of self and identity, as well as greater continuity between the experiences, values and languages of home/neighborhood with the often-removed seeming "discourses" of formal education and the pie in the sky it supposedly offers. In these organizations, the pie starts to look more reachable, and the ladder to it starts to look more lateral, more familiar, and less alienating. The pie itself, maybe, starts to change.

And that is the even greater hope of community literacy work: that it will contribute to wider-world change, that marginalized voices being brought to center will, slowly, change that center. If not, what will? *The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house* (yet Audre Lorde surely took up those tools). *You cannot solve a problem from the same consciousness that created it* (yet Einstein surely shared a consciousness with some of the origins of the problems he saw). *We make the road by walking, traveler.* And so, this collection is a small piece of the road.

Angira Pickens' piece is framed by the economic changes that Central Northeast Philly has undergone in the last fifty years, from being a backbone of manufacturing to being threatened with gentrification. Her portrait of the Semilla Arts Initiative and other arts programs in that neighborhood portray mural arts and the ownership they foster as an alternative to deepen local ownership of space, arts and educational institutions.

Spells Writing Center asks, on a sign on its walls, "Have you grown your brain?" Kyle Krajewski's chapter highlights one young Spells Writing Center participant's "reauthoring" of herself, which stands in for what is possible for participants as a whole at community literacy centers. Brianna Swartz's chapter portrays the physical and discursive spaces of Mighty Writers, creating the possibility for "hybrid" literacies to grow. Emily Mazur's chapter situates the literacy practices of Tree House Books in broader theories of literacy as a social practice and what that insight means for low-income students. In each of these cases, the concept of "third space" is useful: third space theory is a lens for seeing a literal physical space, or set of practices within an institution, a social space, as a bridge between dominant and non-dominant voices, literacies, experiences and perspectives.

These physical and social spaces help to push back on the often-negative representations of urban youth found in the media and elsewhere. When the authors of these pieces were creating their profiles and drafting these pieces, the Ferguson verdict had not come down. At this moment as we finalize publication, all over the country, including in Philadelphia and at West Chester University, urban youth and youth of color have been leading the country in largely peaceful protests highlighting racial injustice. The final piece in this collection, by Lauren Klosinski, addresses the strengths and challenges of attempting to foster authentic youth leadership at the Art Factory.

Which brings me back around to my own community literacy journey. About twenty years after arriving in Philadelphia, and after having worked at WCU for over half that time, I had the opportunity to co-found and run the Youth Empowerment and Urban Studies (YES) program. The course the students in this class took was an upper-level English seminar, but it could count as an elective in the YES program, a minor that we are continuing to grow and make mistakes in, as we think about how to use education, literacy, multimedia, history and theory to create change hand in hand with urban youth.

In Closing: Why this collection?

We need this collection because community literacies are still marginalized, because when I ask students at any level what good writing is they still talk about five paragraph essays and "good grammar" (as if there were such a thing). Literacy is not neutral but social and political. Because it took thousands of mostly people of color with some white allies marching and die-ing in to highlight the real death threat Black men of every class and age in this country live under every day. We need this collection because George Bush, Barack Obama, and Bill Gates have not solved our educational inequities, let alone our social and economic ones. As Emily notes in her essay, if all we needed was homework help, we would have solved the problem by now. We need the words, art, color, trees, growth, space, caring, and minds that this monograph points to.

We hope that this collection, written by students from a range of racial, ethnic and class backgrounds, vetted by arts and literacy workers in the community, and selected and edited by me, will be used by community organizations and educators at all levels to root a story about community voice, literacy and arts that is at the intersection of legitimacy, hope, accuracy and action.

A Challenge from the Precipice

Mike Reid

Mike Reid is the Executive Director of Tree House Books, located in North Philadelphia; Tree House is profiled in Chapter 4 of this collection.

I have had the honor of working at Tree House Books for the past seven years, and in those years I have had many conflicting theories as to why the current state of American education is the way that it is. For the purposes of this essay I will be giving my thoughts as it relates to the state of education in the various Black communities throughout America. The reason that I am doing this is because I am a Black man that lives in a neighborhood that is 76% Black, I work in a neighborhood that is 88% Black, and both of these neighborhoods are located in North Philadelphia.

One of the things that concerns me is that when we are talking about the education of Black children, we have yet to acknowledge that we are dealing with a complex situation. Often we believe that the answer lies in remedying one problem (more jobs, African centered education, parenting classes, public school funding, teachers unions – either for or against, charter schools – either for or against, etc.) The problem with this train of thought is that it deals with symptoms but not the problem itself.

While I do believe that there are a lot of schools that are unhealthy (I don't really like to use the term "bad" because I do not believe it is descriptive enough when discussing education), I believe that the bigger issue is that that the overall educational environment for Black children is unhealthy. Schools bear some of the responsibility, as do parents, civic leaders, politicians, news pundits, academics, social scientists, "average" citizens, philanthropic foundations, and yes even those of us in the non-profit sector.

Many of us have unintentionally contributed to a poverty-industrial complex. The truth is that there is no magical answer. Some are to blame but all are responsible. I have seen white non-profit workers who genuinely want the best for their Black students to succeed, but appear to feel genuinely uncomfortable when dealing with a Black authority figure. I have seen Black parents who genuinely want their children to be voracious readers, but don't appear to believe that they need to model this behavior for their children.

The challenge for us as a society is to determine how we engage in a thorough diagnosis without descending into judgment. The home lives of all of our children should be valued, so how do we start from that asset-based premise and then also support parents and families to amplify habits that support children's positive development. Teachers (and all educators) play an essential and noble and difficult role in our society, so how do we start from that asset-based premise and still not turn away from the challenges—determining which teachers need to be better trained, which need more support, and I will go out on a limb and say, which ones need to find a new career? I will turn that same lens on my own professional community: community-based organizations have an important role to play, but the unfortunate truth is that some of us may unconsciously be thriving on social dysfunction in order to find our purpose.

In spite of what might seem like a cynical tone in this piece I am actually quite optimistic about the future of all children in America, especially Black children. When we think about it, the serious issues we are having with education are not unsolvable. At various points in our nation's history, some communities were able to provide a quality public education for their children. Public education is not all equal, both here in the United States and abroad, in our large urban areas and in our sprawling suburbs. The tools exist to do this work. We currently live in the wealthiest country that human civilization has ever produced. History is replete with lists of inventions, innovations, and breakthroughs that most people truly believed were impossible, but once established were subsequently taken for granted. I believe that we are on the precipice of a major breakthrough in community development. After spending many years as a pessimist I have been blessed to learn about, and work with, many people and organizations that are transforming communities. This is a great time to be alive, and I am comforted in knowing that there are thousands of people in our city that are working every day to ensure that the ideal that we all conceive in our minds and in our hearts will manifest into a physical reality.

Strokes of Hope: Paint Brushes Not Gentrification

Angira S. Pickens

Public discourse about impoverished, urban communities and the need for effective change often dismisses the power of the arts as a transformative tool for community members. This chapter takes a closer look at artistic communities and organizations in the Kensington section of North Philadelphia and examines how art promotes identity and ownership of the land by its residents. Ultimately, this piece will suggest that arts do have a transformative impact both on the members and this Kensington community itself. Among others mentioned here, Angira wishes to thank Sandra Gonzales, one of the community artists profiled here, who collaborated to share information, gave generously of her time, and reviewed this essay.

There is something charming about the Kensington section of Philadelphia. The residents dub their territory the Badlands—a title that encompasses some of the activities that occur here on any given day. Yet, this label does not completely capture the richly complex and artistic beauty of the area.

Though the boundaries of the Badlands remain disputed among residents, the Badlands is an approximately square section of North Philadelphia that meets at four points and extends to Kensington Avenue. These points are as follows: 9th & Allegheny Avenue meets Front Street & Allegheny and then Front & Allegheny meets 9th and Lehigh. Intermediate streets, in the pocket of the Badlands, and beyond into adjacent communities in North Philadelphia are Diamond, Cambria, Cumberland, Somerset, Tioga, Fairhill and Indiana, about eight blocks, excluding the predominately non-Hispanic white Port Richmond section of the city.

In their powerful blog, *This Is Kensington* created by James Sindaco, Sarah Fry and Brad Larrison, locals finish the sentence, "Kensington is_____." Residents and locals state that Kensington is: "a place where many troubled people go to find answers, but unfortunately they often end up losing their lives;" (Roger) a place of change (Will); "a neighborhood of untold stories;" an infested disaster (Wilfredo, Jesus, and Chad) and "a town loaded with narcotics and bad dreams." I spent an intensive week in the Badlands. In the day, I felt completely comfortable immersing myself there: the bass-driven music, the spiced food, the bustling parks,

the pockets of art communities, the gigantic murals, the vibrant colors, the annual Puerto-Rican parade, the mom and pop shops, and the diverse people.

But when the sun sets, the feel of the neighborhood changes. During my stay in the Badlands, I was reminded of the familiar shift in mood that occurs at night, as my own predominately African-American neighborhood, which is five minutes away from the Badlands, also changes with the setting of the sun. I am accustomed to the tensions and troubles of these neighborhoods, as the worries of residents bubble up to the surface under the glow of street lamps. Oftentimes, when I venture east or west of Kensington Avenue and walk into the adjacent and incredibly dense residential communities, I felt a sense of urgency to leave. This urgency is in high contrast with the tight-knit feel of the neighborhood in the day. When the night comes, the title of the Badlands gains weight, as the neighborhood becomes burdened by drug use, weapon use and outsiders who raid the zone looking for a fix. But the people are not the only ones under the influence of nocturnal hours; even the landscape becomes eerie, as old abandoned factory buildings, plagued with broken glass windows and stained bricks, overlook the community. The shells taunt the residents with the past, rooted in this space, as Kensington was once known for its prosperous industry and high employment rates.

Figure 1 Photograph of the El train from the corner of Diamond Street

In the early nineteenth century the Kensington textile mills and factories bustled with immigrant (Irish, English, Scottish, and German) workers who lived in the adjacent row homes (Spalding). Mass immigration from Puerto Rico into Philadelphia occurred post World War II (1950s) and the opportunity to work allowed those in adjacent African-American communities to relocate to Kensington (Whalen). As time progressed, the need for textile and factory work declined, leaving many without jobs, opportunities, and a chance for economic upward mobility. By 1960 the last plant in Kensington closed down and with it the spirit of hope and the American dream that inhabited the hearts and minds of the Kensington community, in some ways, closed down with it (Spalding).

In a 1998 interview, decades after the closing of all industrial plants and mills in Kensington, Journalist Steve Lopez notes:

>We are surrounded by what was a heavy industrial area and that was the backbone of this city in every one of these little neighborhoods. And you

can still see where there was a Mom and Pop grocery store on the corner, and there was a tavern and a funeral home and all these businesses that fed off of these factories, they were all around. And no matter how badly you might have screwed up in your life when you were done with school, and most people finished school, there was a job waiting for you at the factory. As you look around now, the factories are just shells, so the economy is gone (Nightline, 1998).

Since 1998 not much has changed with regard to job opportunities and drug use. The Badlands is a mecca for the open-air drug trade and the predictable violence that comes with it. According to *Philadelphia Weekly* writer Steve Volk, Philly's 2011 top ten drug corners were concentrated in the Kensington and Fairhill sections of North Philadelphia. Furthermore, Volk states, "Since 2008, more Americans have been murdered in Philadelphia than killed in Iraq," (Volk, 2011, 1). With this devastation in mind, how can the actively involved members of the community transform "Philadelphia's most desperate neighborhood" (Deeney, Philly's Cop-Free Heroin Zone, 1)? Moreover, how does literate activity through the arts allow for ownership by the members of the Badlands community?

This chapter will address the inquiries above. First, there will be a discussion about theories pertaining to ownership of urban communities and the formation of identity. Next, this piece will explore the program practices of the influential artistic organizations in the Badlands: The Semilla Arts Initiative/ A Seed on Diamond Gallery, Taller Puertorriqueño, and the Mural Arts Program. Afterwards, a synthesis of the organizations' program practices with the theories discussed will be offered.

"We are all SOLDIERS in this … SILENT WAR, fighting for our rights, FIGHTING to be heard, fighting to be seen. NOT PUSHED OFF into a corner, we're HERE TO STAY," read the banner hanging from the mural arts exhibit at the Philadelphia Academy of Fine Arts. These words play with an array of meanings that extend well beyond the surface text, as the question of identity and ownership arises. When we examine the discourse centered on identity and ownership from theorists and writers, it will become clear that both identity and ownership mingle with space, gentrification, urban community politics, and art; thus the transformation of a neighborhood is also linked to these ideas.
Lauren Leve looks at the term "identity" through an anthropological lens. Leve stresses that "Identity is a powerful organizing presence in social life" and gives an individual a sense of "ethnic, national, religious, racial, indigenous, or sexual, belonging honored by recognizable corporate groups" (513). According to Leve's observation one can assume that all communities, including but not limited to home and institutions, provide a space where people grow and develop a sense of self, including neighborhoods.

Steven Gregory of *Black Corona: Race and the Politics of Place in an Urban Community* begins his book with an intimate portrait of an historically black town in

Richmond Virginia. Later Gregory shifts his focus from Virginia to the boroughs of Queens and Brooklyn in New York City. In three parts Gregory analyzes race and its importance in relation to community, politics, and authority. Gregory suggests, "if the construction of identity is a political process, implicating a range of social, economic, and cultural practices and locations, it is a deeply historical one as well," (13). What this observation suggests is that the formation of identity is a long process shaped and rooted in an array of social constructs that transform with time.

These notions are validated when Gregory states that people "recollect and rework the past through social practices of memory that bring the meanings of the past to bear on conditions of the present," which results in the formation of "collective identities" (13). Hence, the act of recalling and reanalyzing past practices, methods, memories, and ideologies, in order to change the present, creates "collective identities" and helps shape complex individuals who are capable of changing their circumstance. With Gregory's and Leve's interpretation in mind, it is clear how the arts can be a major influence on the expression and formation of identity, as they allow for reflection, articulate struggle, and call for change.

Community arts activist Abby Scher, who wrote *Can the Arts Change the World? The Transformative Power of Community Arts,* questions if arts can revolutionize individuals and impoverished neighborhoods. She observes and interviews Lily Yeh, the influential force behind the Village of Arts and Humanities in Philadelphia, dancer and singer Nobuko Miyamoto who leads an art organization in Los Angeles, and Arnie April who runs a community planning organization in Chicago. Scher concludes that art can be a catalyst that promotes transformation in neighborhoods and states that as a community activist she and her interviewees understand that "through the arts, we create something new, we create safe space, and we slow down and reflect" (5,6). She continues, "arts communicates and envisions, records the past and points to the future, engages in community transformation, heals and sustains, brings spiritual practice to harsh reality, and can be a disarming process for Change" (6,7).

Scher is not alone in her ideas about art and its transformative properties, as there is a great deal of scholarship on public arts. Many theorists and researchers agree that art matters, as it can be a form of therapy to the distressed, a platform to encourage social change, and an introspective look at actions and habits. According to Elizabeth Hoak Doering of *With a Spray Can in Lefkosia/Lefkosha: Murals, Graffiti and Identity*, "Murals, even if publicly funded, arise thematically from local initiatives to express lived and site-specific experiences, social identification with place, and a desire to express aspirations for the future of the community, by the community" (147). Doering's overview of the public mural ties artistic representation with community development and individual expression.

Thus we can return to the quote "We are all SOLDIERS in this … SILENT WAR, fighting for our rights, FIGHTING to be heard, fighting to be seen. NOT PUSHED OFF into a corner, we're HERE TO STAY." With the previous perspectives in mind it becomes easier to dissect this statement: it becomes the essence of change in the Badlands. This call to action is reflected in the work and achievements of three programs: The Semilla Arts Initiative/ A Seed on Diamond Gallery, Taller Puertorriqueño, and the Philadelphia Mural Arts Program.

At The Corner of Theory and Action: "Kensington is a neighborhood of untold stories..."
As a member of *A Seed on Diamond*, a West Chester University service-learning program, I was given the opportunity to spend a week at Betsy Casañas' house and gallery on Diamond Street. Betsy Casañas is a talented and well-sought after mural artist who has turned her home, both the Badlands and her actual living space, into an art gallery that celebrates culture and identity.. During my time with *A Seed on Diamond* I volunteered to do the following: help prepare Casañas' gallery for the opening that happened on April 11, 2014, assist the administration at Taller Puertorriqueño with the content on their website and the filing of their funding documents, help mural artist Sandra Gonzalez with the creation of her mural at Sheppard Elementary, and clean the communal garden facilitated by *The Semilla Arts Initiative.* This section will discuss the program practices and observations of each organization and relate them back to the theories presented above.

THE SEMILLA ARTS INITIATIVE/A SEED ON DIAMOND GALLERY

The Semilla Arts Initiative, founded in 2007 by Betsy Casañas and former collaborator Pedro Ospina, is a grass roots organization that "uses collaborative art as a means for empowering individuals and communities in underserved areas" (betsycasanas.com). In 2010 Betsy Casañas opened *A Seed on Diamond* gallery,

Figure 2 West Chester University Participants of *A Seed on Diamond*

which showcases the work of local and culture-conscious artists: painters, musicians, writers, etc. This communal space allows for conversations concerning identity and society which resonate with residents.

In addition to the gallery space, Casañas also facilitates the *Semilla Arts Initiative Children's Garden* located at the corner of Fourth and Somerset Streets. By placing paintbrushes and gardening tools in the hands of residents, and more importantly the youth, Casañas is planting seeds, *semillas,* for change.

In accordance with her mission, Casañas has transformed the Badlands neighborhood into a gallery, for her bright murals occupy several city walls. Each mural reminds visitors and community members of their cultural roots, their ongoing quest for prosperity, and their voices, which are often hushed by the effects of

marginalization. More importantly, community members treasure these murals, as to deface these works of art is to dismiss the hopes and dreams of the young and old.

According to Dr. Linda Stevenson, Political Science and Latin American Culture and Politics professor at West Chester University and a collaborator with Casanas, residents love these paintings, for community members helped with the creation of these masterpieces; therefore, these full canvases are reflections of the people (Stevenson). Furthermore, Stevenson states, "Everyone knows Betsy. They respect her and they respect her mission so these murals are taken care of by the community" (Stevenson). Stevenson's comments are supported by the absence of graffiti on these murals in comparison to the adjacent walls and surfaces that are saturated by spray paint tags and markings. This respect for Casañas and community murals suggests that this art supports Kensington residents to be conscious of and own their space, landscape, and voice.   It is apparent that these murals are telling the stories of the people and enabling community representation, ownership and bonding; there is a need to preserve these paintings for the sake of preserving the dream of transformation for which residents continue to advocate.

Figure 3 Poetry Reading at Taller Puertorriqueño Bookstore

TALLER PUERTORRIQUEÑO

From the moment I stepped into "the Puerto-Rican workshop," known as the cultural heart of Latino Philadelphia, I felt a grand surge of energy throughout the narrow three-story building. At the commemorative poetry reading, titled *The Legacy of Julia de Burgos with Magda Martinez,* the audience members occupied every inch of the first floor. Listeners were jammed into the nooks and crannies of the bookstore under a string of national flags hanging from the ceiling. This is Taller Puertorriqueño, a pillar in this community, an avant-garde organization that praises the artistic achievements of the youth living in the Badlands.

Taller has been a part of this community since 1974; its mission is to "catalyze social change towards community advancement" with the aid of art and literacy (Damast, Tallerpr.org). As of today, Taller has the region's only bilingual bookstore and is committed to teaching youth foundational art skills that help express their situations in society and promote their search for self-identity.

Taller offers two low-cost programs that serve local youth. The first, the Cultural Awareness Program serves children ages eleven through fourteen, which

introduces children to basic art skills in drawing, painting, sculpture, dance, photography, drama and more with the assistance of bilingual artists, tutors and staff. The second program, the Youth Artists Program, is a two-year afterschool arts training workshop for high-school sophomores, juniors, and seniors who want to create a solid portfolio for college and other post-secondary pursuits.

Both programs instill a sense of determination and inspiration in the youth, as their worldviews and evolving identities can be explored and celebrated in a safe environment. Furthermore, the presence of after-school programs provides students with the opportunity to engage in productive activities that benefit their futures. According to Glynda A. Hull and Michael Angelo James, writers of *Geographies of Hope: A Study of Urban Landscapes, Digital Media, and Children's Representation of Place,* after-school programs in the US are "designed to fill the gap between school turning out and parents returning home, [after-school programs have been] motivated by reports which designate after-school hours as 'at risk' time" (2). That is, the lack of after school programs encourages negative and sometimes delinquent behavior in youth. Thus, Taller Puertorriqueño is part of a transformation of the Badlands community by reaching out and motivating the young, helping children and adolescents understand that their hopes and dreams are attainable and supported by their communities.

It is imperative to note, with regard to ownership, that Taller is able to sustain itself because of the encouragement and participation of community members, as donors and corporations in turn are willing to sponsor Taller Puertorriqueño because the residents support the organization. This strong bond between residents, the Latino community of Philadelphia, and Taller Puertorriqueño was evident in the impressive number of audience members at the poetry reading on March 15ᵗʰ 2014, as well as the growing number of youth participants in the after-school programs that are offered.

PHILADELPHIA MURAL ARTS PROGRAM

The Mural Arts Program began in 1984 with a mission to eradicate the graffiti crisis "plaguing the city" (muralarts.org). Under the leadership of Jane Golden, mural artist, The Mural Arts Program was able to transform some of Philadelphia's bleak neighborhoods into luminous landscapes.   According to the organization's website and an often-told Philadelphia history, Jane Golden befriended the graffiti writers and was impressed by their raw artistic talent and their self-taught knowledge of art history. She recognized the amazing creative force they represented, and she began to provide opportunities for them to channel their creative talent into mural-making. Mural painting also provided a support structure for these young men and women to refine their artistic skills, empowering them to take an active role in beautifying their own neighborhoods. The murals they created instantly added color, beauty, and life to an old, industrial city struggling with decades of economic distress and population loss. The physical results of the program are known nationwide now. But from the beginning,

Figure 4 Artwork of students at Sheppard Elementary

Golden witnessed how mural-making changed lives and how the murals themselves began to mend the aesthetic fabric of the city (muralarts.org).

Recent graduate of the master's program at Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and mural assistant for the Philadelphia Mural Arts Program Sandra Gonzalez gave West Chester University students the opportunity to help her in the mural-making process at Isaac A. Sheppard Elementary School located on Cambria Street. In December of 2011, Sheppard Elementary was threatened by potential school closure after educating local youth for approximately 114 years (Kourkounis). Yet, with the support of the parents, this public K-4 school is still open. Parent Stephanie Rivera stated, "Sheppard is one of the few remaining institutions left helping to hold together an otherwise struggling community" (Kourkounis).   Therefore, the installation of a brand new colorful mural incorporating the artwork of students and faculty, directed by artist Sandra Gonzalez, serves as a gift of appreciation for the great accomplishments of the elementary school and its pupils.

West Chester University students spent a week going from classroom to classroom, hands full of painting equipment and buckets full of water, to encourage students to paint something that reflected who they are and their interests. The students of Sheppard Elementary produced an array of colorful masterpieces that were linked to their cultural identity, as there were countless Puerto-Rican and American flags, often side by side, and portraits of their home islands, complete with iconic images of ocean, sand, coconut trees, and flowers. The students were not only aware of their heritage, but also proud of their roots, as they were eager to talk about their work and their ethnicity. Some students focused on their future dreams, such as one student who painted a dollar sign and said that he hopes to one day make a lot of money. Sandra Gonzalez's design allowed the children to explore their identities, past, present, and future.

More importantly, the children *own* these paintings and their content. They own their heritage, their culture, their dreams, their hobbies, and they are beautiful. This sense of ownership may be transferred to the neighborhood and the world outside of Sheppard Elementary. Thus, the children at Sheppard Elementary are exemplary models of how the residents of the Badlands involved in community art take their identities, own them, and use them to mold their neighborhood into a region that reflects the beauty of its residents.

"You can't rush perfection," says a fourth grade student as he stares at his blank canvas with his paintbrush cradled in between his thumb and index finger. The reformation of the Badlands will take time. Betsy Casañas writes in *Semilla Arts Initiative works to create something from nothing,*

> We pick up trash on the street and turn it into beautiful things. We use whatever we have. It's not about what we need to buy; it's about what we already have. And that's the point because in this neighborhood it can become an excuse—there's no money, there's no this, no that. Why do we have to wait for somebody else to save us? (Stoelker, 1).

In the introduction, the following questions were proposed: how can the actively-involved members of the community transform "Philadelphia's most desperate neighborhood" (Deeney, Philly's Cop-Free Heroin Zone, 1) and how does activity through the arts allow for ownership by the members of the Badland community?   In this chapter a brief profile of three prominent arts organizations was offered: The Semilla Arts Initiative/ A Seed on Diamond Gallery, Taller Puertorriqueño, and The Mural Arts Program. Each program supports youth and adults' positive identity development and ownership of their community, which in turn can be the catalyst needed to promote transformation in areas such as the underserved Kensington section of North Philadelphia. In specific, the arts allow for expression of identity, community building, ownership of land, and direct aesthetic improvement of spaces that are in need of revitalization. Thus, by targeting youth in after school and alternative learning programs, arts organizations are able to encourage community members to find their voice and become agents of change.

This ownership is crucial now more than ever, as the fear of gentrification and assimilation looms over the residents of Kensington. Five minutes away from the Badlands stands Northern Liberties, once a dilapidated neighborhood, which has recently undergone a major face-lift as the area is now saturated with trendy restaurants, art galleries, stores, high-priced housing and a mass migration of young white professionals and entrepreneurs into the space that once belonged solely to poorer members of the community (Stevenson; Relyea; Leverett).

The fate of Northern Liberties may cause anxiety among members of Kensington community, as residents question, are we next? Will our land be taken from us? P. A. Redfern's *What Makes Gentrification 'Gentrification'* addresses the demand issues in gentrification and the distinction between class and status. Redfern states,

> If gentrification were not a threat to identity and status, among those left behind, as much as among those displaced, and if this did not highlight anxieties created by the condition of modernity generally, which gentrifiers hope to solve via gentrification, it would not pose a threat, it would not

Figure 5 Mural by Betsy Casañas as backdrop to garden (http://www.betsycasanas.com/#!untitled/zoom/cdot/image1up1)

attract attention and it would not therefore be called 'gentrification' So, on the one hand, we have a new source of supply of housing—improvable housing—and on the other, we have anxieties about identity and status… (2364)

Redfern reiterates an important notion; gentrification takes away ownership, challenges identity, and promotes unwanted change in the environment that was once at the center of the lives of those who are often displaced. Blogger and recording artist Homeboy Sandman mentions in his article *Black People Are Cowards* that gentrification is a "thinly veiled insult" as the root "gent" is a British word that refers to a noble and graceful gentleman. Additionally, Homeboy Sandman says "If we accept and use a term the very definition of which suggests that communities are becoming more noble and graceful, what does that say about the people being pushed out?"   Redfern's and Sandman's insights on gentrification urge those in communities at risk for great economic change and displacement to develop agency in an effort to restore a sense of ownership into the heart of their neighborhoods. The Badlands, with its rich culture and dedicated tight-knit community, has the potential to not only restore its neighborhood but grow stronger with time, care and art.

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If I Were in Charge of the World: Empowering Urban Youth through Self-Representation

Kyle Krajewski

Common misconceptions regarding literacy education revolve around the idea of structured, school-based methods of reading and writing. In this collaborative investigation, we take a closer look at one out-of-school youth program, Spells Writing Lab in North Philadelphia, through volunteering, observations, and interviewing to highlight its empowering tactics that transcend the sphere of structured education. This project attempts to explore how the empowering literacy education at Spells Writing Lab is employed through self-representation and student identity. Ultimately, this project concludes that out-of-school programs can work towards empowering students by prompting "reauthorship" and blurring the boundaries between work and play. Kyle wishes to especially thank Elizabeth Encarnacion, and the entire team at Spells, who collaborated to share information, gave generously of their time, and reviewed this essay.

The Value of Literacy

The common public impression of what literacy is, until recent theory over the span of the last several decades, has been chiefly identified with the formal schooling of reading and writing. New Literacy Studies theorists Schultz and Hull conclude that literacy, as a socially organized practice, "is not simply knowing how to read and write a particular script, but applying this knowledge for specific purposes in specific contexts" (Schultz & Hull 20). This conception envisions literacy not only in its scholarly applications, but as a necessary component to fluency and understanding of the complex social relations that compose a surrounding community, as well as an ability to explicitly negotiate and participate in the public discourse of that community (Finn). Deborah Brandt notes that literacy, in this sense, is a valued commodity in our society and a key resource in gaining empowerment and opportunity. She continues on to state that "literacy, as a resource, becomes available to ordinary people largely through the mediations of more powerful sponsors" (Brandt 12). In stating this, she claims that our ability to read, write, comprehend, and apply through participation and

negotiation is largely attributed to "sponsors" of our literacy who are essentially enablers to our acquisition of these capacities.

Schultz and Hull evoke the "continuity-discontinuity" theory that points toward the fact that children are socialized in different contexts and this, in turn, leaves them unequally prepared as students to participate in school (Schultz & Hull). It is key to view this theory in correlation with Brandt's idea of "sponsors" of literacy and to note that the disproportionate distribution of powerful sponsorship among different social classes is a driving factor to the uneven distributions of opportunity for those of limited socioeconomic means, and, more specifically, urban youth. While sponsorship refers to enabling and supporting agents of literacy, sponsors are also described as agents that suppress or withhold literacy (Brandt 2), which in the view of some New Literacy Studies scholars, would refer to schools. Carter claims that schools fail to treat literacy as social practice, and falsely grade students on blurred "skills" over an ability to "weave knowledge into coherent patterns" (Carter 95) which can affect student success and interest. Essentially, the ideological constraints placed on the work of young writers in an academic setting of literacy education ignore the self-incorporation and contextualization necessary to produce meaningful texts and achieve an education that can be applied to the real world context of their communities. This institutional neglect of out-of-school contexts in a student's education leaves the formalities of structured schooling as the sole focus in a student's education, while studies have shown that it is, in reality, only a part of the process of cultural transmission that education is meant to be (Schultz & Hull). The following profile created in collaboration with an after-school program in North Philadelphia explores some of these key components of effective education, which are self-representation and contextualization of student literacy work that employs empowerment.

The Neighborhood

North Philadelphia is a section of the city with high rates of both crime and violence. The area's college attendance rates serve as an example of its disengagement with the education system, or perhaps, vice versa. With only 3% of the area's students enrolled in a university and 2.1% of all adults holding at least a bachelor's degree, this neighborhood has a lower rate of college graduates than 98.4% of all American neighborhoods (NeighborhoodScout). This detachment from education is coupled with a lack of other resources for youth. After a recent shooting of an 11 year-old boy on a basketball court, one community member voiced the belief that a large concentration of youth accompanied by a lack of outlets for them to let off some steam is a problem. "You might have 100 or so kids right here on Gratz Street, but no community centers around here, no rec centers, no comprehensive programs to redirect their behavior and understanding," he

With only 3% of the area's students enrolled in a university and 2.1% of all adults holding at least a Bachelor's degree, this neighborhood has seen a lower rate of college graduates than 98.4% of all American neighborhoods.

asserted, outraged by the shooting (Gambacorta). About two miles south of Gratz Street is *Spells Writing Lab*, an organization trying to provide one such outlet.

The Lab: Have You Grown Your Brain?

Spells is an after-school non-profit organization that helps develop the creative and critical writing abilities of school-age children through free and imaginative writing programs. The program operates on the foundation that literacy is a cornerstone for future success, and that personalized attention and unconventional learning opportunities can inspire students to greater triumphs, both in the classroom and in life. What Spells offers students is after school tutoring sessions as well as writing workshops that include writing short stories, poetry, travel guides, banners, and whatever else the student may want to write. There is great importance here in a "beneficial shift from more teacher-centered to more student-centered instruction" (Luehmann 52).

Nestled in the corner of slim Alder Street, just off of Germantown Avenue, *Spells Writing Lab* operates in a single, very narrow, two story building that resembles the many homes of its surrounding residents. The inside of the lab, about fifteen feet wide and longer back, are rows of tables with surrounding chairs, suitable for a capacity of twenty-two children at a time. The walls are lined with books, games, paintings and a whiteboard prompting activity for its after-school program: *"Before you ask to do stuff, have you: (1) Eaten fruit? (2) Finished your homework and/or enrichment? (3) Read for at least 20 minutes? (4) Written and/or edited a story/poem/essay in your journal? (5) GROWN YOUR BRAIN UNTIL 5:15 pm?"*

Located on the campus of the program's partner *The Village of Arts and Humanities*, right across Alder Street, lies Ile Ife Park. The park, a project of *The Village*, is filled with mosaic sculptures, benches and arching trees. Overlooking the mosaics is a 35-by-90 foot wall, the focal point of the park, with every inch covered in a strikingly colorful mural. Protruding from the mural's wall is a wooden stage where kids can sometimes read their work aloud and practice public speaking.

Story Telling as Social Capital?

The first time I entered *Spells* was in March of 2014. Through a mutual connection I share with the program's director, Elizabeth Encarnacion, or "Ms. Liz" as the kids call her, I was able to gain access to the program. Initially I was unaware of the specific nature of the texts produced in the writing lab, I approached to observe the workings of three key ideas proposed in Hull and James' *Geographies of Hope*: (1) that these after school programs act as "activity systems" that blur the boundaries between work and play, (2) all semiotic systems (language, writing, images, music, dance) give us a means of embodying a sense of self in relation to others, (3) through positioning youth to tell stories, we help them develop senses of self as powerful, capable, and successful communicators (Hull and James). The expectation is that through this motivation and sense of identity, students would acquire the sociocultural capital necessary for the beginnings of empowerment within their community. Sociocultural capital is

described by Linda Charamaran in *Congregating to Create for Social Change* as the durable networks of relationships within social structures that facilitate action and benefit along with cultural knowledge and skills that offer advantages. She follows by stating that "in resource-poor communities, young people may have particular difficulties finding opportunities to feel valued and accepted as engaged citizens" (Charamaran 103). I approached hoping to find that the operations of the text production at *Spells* would harness young students' sense of identity to produce the capital which would instill this value. Attending both after school tutoring and a writing workshop, I had the opportunity to observe through volunteering, editing and working on texts with the students, asking questions about experience, and generally witnessing *Spells* at work. Through this project, the work of one young girl in particular, who we will refer to as Student A (for privacy purposes) stood out in producing meaningful texts and behavior that captured the essence of the program's mission.

Student "A"

I met A. during my first visit to *Spells*. The bright and eccentric fourth grade girl who rarely sits or keeps to herself is a regular at the writing lab, seldom without a smile on her face. She stood out to me at the beginning of this first visit during a period in which students were playing outside before I had even read any of her work. Coloring with chalk outside Ile Ife Park, she etched across the broken sidewalks a colorful display that read: "*At Spells it doesn't matter what size, shape, or color you are 'cause everyone is a star.*" In doing this, she displayed genuine engagement with the program and a positive identity entwined within the themes of the program's practices. I made sure to work with her during my time in the lab.

In A's work appeared several instances of what Jeanine Staples refers to as "reauthoring," which she defines as "a self-reflective process of naming and ascribing personhood" (Staples 380), generally pertaining to answers of questions such as "Who am I?" and "Who will I be?" The first instance was during an after-school session. With quite an enviable confidence in sharing her work with a stranger such as myself or anyone else in the lab, she proudly shared with me some of her short stories which were compiled into a series about her imaginary adventures time traveling. They were a completely original set of ideas, written out in a hyper-natural, stream-of-consciousness fashion. The girl's most recent addition, that she seemed most proud of, was a story about her traveling back to the time of dinosaurs. She eventually had to fight off a couple of dinosaurs and ended up making a dinosaur sandwich for her lunch.

When prompted to continue with her free-write for the current session, she opted to continue on with her series. The idea that she wrote about that day was what seemed like the most effective and stirring thing that she could have written about as an elementary level student exploring the idea of time travel. This time, she wrote about traveling into the future to see what her life would be like twenty or so years from that moment. The way she had envisioned herself in the future was as a college graduate who had become a lawyer, bought several cars, and a dream

house for her mother. It had become clear how the program had prompted this student to inadvertently consider the possibilities that the future has the potential to hold. While a traditional, structured education system that does not value the inclusion of such self-reflective work may label a rambunctious student like A. as a 'troublemaker' or regard this opportunity as irrelevant to literacy education or as trivial pre-adolescent play (Staples 380), *Spells* provided positive reinforcement in this reauthorship of A. as "future lawyer" as well as a provider and supporter of those around her.

An even more compelling instance of A's self-representation through reauthorship came several weeks later during one of the program's Saturday poetry writing workshops. Prompted by Ms. Liz to write a poem similar to Judith Viorst's *If I Were in Charge of the World*, A. imagined the changes that she would make if she were to be named the supreme leader of the world. What she wrote was the following:

> *If I were in charge of the world,*
> *I'd cancel vegetables, bullies, and drugs.*
> *If I were in charge of the world,*
> *There'd be candy makers, imagination makers, and a bigger Spells.*
> *If I were in charge of the world,*
> *You wouldn't have homework,*
> *You wouldn't have noisy siblings,*
> *You wouldn't have gallons of trash,*
> *Or "don't eat so much candy!"*
> *You could eat as much candy as you want.*
> *If I were in charge of the world,*
> *There would be sweet for breakfast and a program that is only for kids.*
> *All chores would be easy.*
> *And a person who sometimes watches shows for adults,*
> *And sometimes argues with her siblings,*
> *Would still be allowed to be in charge of the world.*

What Korina M. Jocson speculates in *There's a Better Word: Urban Youth Rewriting their Social Worlds through Poetry* is that students often mold perceptions of themselves as critical members of society through poetry. This is essentially what A. has done here. She was able to visualize her context from the outside looking in. She acknowledged a possibility of the world without the evils of drugs that have afflicted her community and the world. She envisioned an end to bullying and an end to "gallons of trash" and the potential clean up her neighborhood. She looked forward to creating a "bigger *Spells*" and more programs for empowering youth. By focusing on her experiences outside of the traditional restrictions of school, while expressing and developing her sense of self in relation to such through her poetry, which Jocson states "can play a role in achieving social justice" and be distinguished "as a form of political and artistic empowerment," she was able to make her cultural knowledge relevant to her learning process and

literacy development (Jocson 700-702). This is an early example of which Jocson says "non-school based writing becomes a 'refuge' to speak about experience related to poverty, violence, crime, and drugs." (Jocson 702). The "conscious-raising tool" that Jocson notes this type of writing can be may have not yet empowered this student to the point of action, but it has certainly exhibited its potential of forming her perception of herself as such at a young age.

At the End of the Day

Each day, at the end of a session or workshop, Ms. Liz practically has to throw the kids out the door to go home. It became obvious very quickly how connected, not only A., but each of the students had become with the program and what they were doing there. It was very captivating to see this connection, as one may believe that many children may take these types of opportunities for granted and disregard them as unimportant or boring. The fact that the engagement of the students was authentic rather than forged, lead to three conclusions about *Spells'* workings: (1) these types of programs do, in fact, act as activity systems that blur boundaries of work and play for students which in turn creates more effective education possibilities, (2) through reauthorship and self-representation in writing, urban youth are able to contextualize and discover new senses of self, (3) the new sense of self holds the possibility of viewing oneself as a critical member of society able to problematize enactments of social structures, thereby possibly becoming empowered through such alternative out-of-school educational settings. It therefore remains clear that it is necessary to stand behind the man outraged by the shooting on Gratz Street in a call for these types of empowering programs to redirect the understandings and energy of urban youth.

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Superhero Toolkits: Providing a Space for Flight and Roots

Brianna Swartz

Previous research has shown that writing centers create spaces for children and young adults to learn and socialize with one another. This project is a collaborative inquiry with the community literacy organization Mighty Writers; the question this project attempts to explore is how the physical and social space of Mighty Writers shapes the students' behaviors, their learning, and their literacy, and, ultimately how the young members also influence and help create the space. Brianna would like to especially thank James Owk, and the entire team at Mighty Writers, for collaborating with her, giving generously of their time, and reviewing this essay.

Arriving in South Philadelphia, the Mighty Writers' building blends into the surrounding community. The brick houses solid, the buildings updated, the streets relatively clean. With books out front, two men socializing outside, and a bright and inspiring sign, the house, or rather the Mighty Writers' space, melds into the community that surrounds it. This community literacy organization is a program that provides the youth of Philadelphia with opportunities to think, learn, read, and write with clarity and with their own voice. Daily afterschool programs, writing classes, reading and writing workshops, mentorships, SAT Prep courses, and college prep classes bring the youth into contact with new ways of developing their literacy skills. Writers, teachers, journalists, artists, and other interested volunteers help teach and mentor over 2,000 children and young adults each year, helping to battle the 40% drop out rate of Philadelphia students and the high number of youth that are functionally illiterate *(Mighty Writers)*. Mighty Writers is a physical and social space where young members' literacy and behavior are influenced by the learning and mentorships that take place there. This chapter reflects on my observations of and participation with Mighty Writers, with the onsite collaboration of staffer James Owk , using "third space" theory to portray how the physical and social space that the organization provides shapes the students' behaviors, their learning, and their literacy, and how they, in turn, shape it.

Community Writing Centers as Third Spaces: Housing Hybrid Discourses

Over the past few decades, research concerning the idea of a "third space" has been helpful in terms of considering literacy and youth academic development. When thinking about the different groups that youth are a part of, for example, home, community, and school groups, there are different understandings and knowledge that participants have about each of those areas. The "first space" is considered to be the home and/or community space. The second space is typically academic or school (or sometimes work), where youth are expected to have more understanding of complex and "elevated" knowledge. Merging the knowledge and discourses from individuals' home and community networks or the "first space," and blending them with the "second spaces" of work and school creates "third spaces." Thus, a "third space" bridges the perspectives of home and community worlds with the understanding of more "elite" knowledge.

To understand this concept, hybridity theory (Moje) helps support it by stating that "people in any given community draw on multiple resources or funds to make sense of the world and… to make sense of oral and written texts." Hybridity emphasizes and problematizes the notions of "competing knowledges and discourses; to the texts one reads and writes; to the spaces, contexts, and relationships one encounters; and even to a person's identity enactments and sense of self" (Moje, et. al. 41-42). "Third spaces" thus are hybrid spaces, connecting many different facets of everyday life with each other.

While there are many different views of how this space is perceived, Soja places a distinct emphasis on the role that the physical and socialized space has on the interactions of the people, arguing that "we are becoming increasingly aware that we are, and always have been, intrinsically spatial beings, active participants in the social construction of our embracing spatialities" ((42)?). Soja emphasizes the idea that social spaces shape the physical. Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, Alvarez, and Chiu argue that the third space is "a bridge between community or home-based Discourse to school-based Discourse" and that it's not a place where new knowledge is generated but more a space that promotes current development and "better honed academic or school knowledges" (Moje, et.al. 42).

Writing centers and community literacy programs can be seen as areas that are considered to be these "third spaces," bringing many different communities of discourse and literacy together to create relationships and environments where learning is promoted. In her dissertation, Beth Godbee describes how at one time she thought of writing centers as a "free tutoring service," only to realize that instead writing centers were places to develop social skills and relationships, a place to spend time creating an identity of being a writer, and a space to set aside time for "listening closely, reading and re-reading, rewriting and revising, talking away from the text, bringing ideas back into a draft…" (Godbee x-xvi). Community literacy programs and writing centers provide a space where these actions and developments are performed and improved.

At Third and Mighty

According to Ritzo, "Students still need to be inspired to learn. Children and adults

need places in the community to support their social and intellectual life" (82). In the South Philadelphia neighborhood, this inspiration to learn starts for some at Mighty Writers. From a physical standpoint, the building is a maze of creativity, coziness, and comfort. The different levels of the building affect the learning and the atmosphere, which I sense after spending a few short hours there during my first visit with my collaboration at Mighty Writers. Downstairs, the space is larger and more open. Upstairs, the space is more intimate and quiet.

When I first walk into the building, I see a big bookshelf that divides the front of the building, or the foyer type area, from the workshop areas. There are so many books of all different ranges. I see *The Giver* and *A Wrinkle in Time,* as well as other younger children's books. In the foyer, there is a shelf full of games like Connect Four and checkers next to a table with paper on it for students to sign in. There are chairs where people can wait. There is a sign that says "All the cool kids are writing" and some magazines about local artists, musicians, restaurant owners, and writers in the Philadelphia area who have become successful and who are being recognized.

I look around the downstairs of the Mighty Writers building. There are lots of big windows with red curtains on them. Pictures of Spiderman and other comic book material are hanging, framed on the walls. Interspersed among the comic book heroes are pictures of Barack Obama, a piano player, and a girl who looks like she is involved in some sort of protest. There are crates of pencils, markers, scissors, rulers, pencil sharpeners, and tape. An easel, which is almost grey because of the faded words on it, has its place against the one wall. On the one wall there is a small white board with handwritten slogans on it, which say:

Don't Erase!!!
You can't stop time."-N.
"Show it, don't tell it."-J.

There are two boys— they look like brothers— who are sitting at a table across from me. They play checkers, UNO, Connect 4, and Jenga. As soon as they are done with one game, they put it on the shelf and grab another one. In the workshop area, there are some students and a mentor. They are talking affably and walking around the building. In sum, the downstairs reveals a space dedicated to providing an open social meeting area..

There are three areas upstairs. Pictures of well-known people dot the walls, and many works of the Mighty Writers' students hang on the walls for everyone to see. Upstairs, in the one workshop room, there are pictures of Angela Davis, Tina Turner, Beyoncé, Cat Woman, Mohammad Ali and the 76ers. The room is yellow and there are two round tables and a long square table where instructors can have workshops or where mentors can help students. There are shelves that are filled with 8x10 black and white photos of Mighty Writers students, in the community and working in the workshops. This room has hardwood floors and a sink and refrigerator.

Along the hallway that bridges the bigger room to the smaller rooms, there is a vibrant and colorful mural. It is outlines of people in all different bright colors like hot pink,

bright orange, and lime green. When I look closely at the mural there are words, cut out from magazines that were glued onto the people. Some of the words are "fresh," "defiance runs deep," "addicted to life," and "confidence."

The other room upstairs is much smaller than the yellow room, and bright green. There is a rack full of comic books for anyone to read, and there are pictures of comic book heroes on the wall. James, a staff member, tells other members of my group from class and I that this is intentional, relating to the "mighty" in Mighty Writers. I notice that there are computers in the room, two of which are Macs. There are essays on the wall by students, entitled "Artists I Admire."

In this room, a mentor and a student are working on math. Many volunteers come and help students for different periods of times, and I learn that usually volunteers stay with the same student for at least six months. They meet once a week for at least an hour and a half. In sum, this upstairs space is much more intimate and quiet. The interactions that happen here seem to be more one-on-one, and foster a more personal experience.

The mix of intimacies on the various floors help reveal a place where students can find the one-on-one attention that they need, while also providing a place for social interaction and discussion. The mix of the murals, photographs of famous people, photographs of students, writings of students on the walls, and inspirational quotes help to demonstrate not only an area where students can find inspiration, but also an area where the students have played a part in the creation of the building as well.

Mighty Writers' physical set up produces a third space where there is a constant active creation in the physical space. Having a physical structure where students can find the resources they need, one-on-one interactions with mentors and leaders, and where they can combine their knowledge of home and community (such as comic book heroes, magazine ad slogans, the Sixers, Beyonce, and pictures of themselves) with elevated knowledge (such as Angela Davis, classic children's literature, Barack Obama), makes Mighty Writers a "third space" (that can include youths' own successful writing and learning in all areas).

Mighty Discourses: "Words Are Your Roots"

Gee, as cited in Hull and Schultz, defines the idea of discourses as "ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and often reading and writing that are accepted as instantiations of particular roles (or 'types of people') by specific groups of people. . . . [Discourses] are, thus, always and everywhere social and products of social histories." Individuals use Discourses to connect with and present their membership to particular groups, creating identity/identification. Discourse helps to reveal "learning, literacy, and identity construction in and out of schools" because it helps structure understandings of the connections between culture, literacy, and identity (Hull and Schultz 585).

Paolo Freire, an educational and political theorist, focused some of his work on how and why education and literacy should help individuals in examining and shaping their

worlds. His connection between behavior and learning helps to support Gee in that Freire acknowledges how youth learn various discourses. He has said, "Reading the world always precedes reading the word, and reading the word implies continually reading the world . . . " (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 35). This is an important concept in understanding how writing centers help promote within them an understanding of the influences of culture on literacy and literacy on culture. Mighty Writers, as an organization, understands and promotes this learning by providing the space for learning discourses that are available, that might not be available in any other space.

My experiences with Mighty Writers helped demonstrate a number of the connections between home, community and academic discourses and vernaculars. Mighty Writers provides the space where young members are exposed to activities that help support their home and community understandings through reading, writing, and discussing in various workshops.

An example of the blending of community and academia was during one of the poetry workshops that was held for kids that were between 4th and 6th grades. This workshop was a six-week program, and my experience with it helped demonstrate the connections that Mighty Writers makes for their students between different discourses. The leader of this workshop was Jordan and he had an assistant, Mara. When I went to visit, Jordan, Mara, and (this week only it was particularly small) two children, M. and S. were a part of it.

The four of them had just been on a nature walk throughout the surrounding blocks. Jordan tells us that he wanted the kids to look around and realize what they saw, felt, smelled, tasted, touched, and heard. When they came back, he wanted them to write about their experience of the nature walk through their community. M. and S. are shy of us and hesitant to speak at first, but they come in the room and start drafting their poetry pieces, which include line breaks and a title. That is, it looks like they know what is expected of them.

Jordan tells me that poetry workshop was a six-week program. In the previous weeks, he had the students think of a feeling and describe its taste, feel, smell, sight, and sound. Another week, they had to bring in a picture of themselves from the past and think of a setting, like a beach or the woods. They then had to create a poem incorporating what was happening in the picture with the setting that they chose. Another time, he had them read poems that were already written, specifically "Fog" by Carl Sandburg and "The Red Wheelbarrow" by William Carlos Williams. After they read them, they had to rewrite them according to what they felt the authors left out. Another time they had to think of a particular memory that they had and write about it.

Jordan wanted the students to push their creative writing and find their creative voice. After they were done writing, M. and S. had to read their poems aloud. They were complex and interesting, combining many of their memories with academic and thematic detail and expression. Jordan also passed around booklets, which had a collection of all of the poems that the children involved in the workshop had written.

Each of us present for the workshop took turns reading the poems, and said what we liked about them.

This "Mighty" workshop helped to bridge the students' home life and experiences in their community with academia. By incorporating the knowledge and memories of their community and their past experiences, the Mighty Writers space allowed for the young members to reflect and understand their worlds in a more complex way through critical thinking and through writing. The nature walk allowed for them to become more aware of their surrounding neighborhood, and find their voice to tell others about what they have experienced and learned. Furthermore, learning about other poets and poems helped further their knowledge by exposing them to what other people have experienced, and connects Mighty Writers with the discourse of school in that the poets they learned about are some that are predominant in many English curricula. This connection between school and home helps the students to not only learn about how to write poetry, but also allows for them to learn in environment that combines personal ideas with academic learning.

Another workshop that I was able to watch that helped demonstrate the connection between various discourses was the Carpe Diem workshop for youth who were between fourteen and sixteen years old. The teacher's name was Khalia and she had two teaching assistants named Aubrey and Chris. When I was present for this workshop, it was the final week and the students delivered monologues that they had written at a podium in front of their parents and peers.

The workshop was one in which the youth discussed real life problems that young adults go through. Khalia said that they discussed and shared experiences, problems, hardships, and joys that they had been through, and then they each chose one thing that interested them. They then had to turn that experience into a monologue of any sort. The monologue could be fictional or true. It could be in poem form, in music/rap form, or they could be in the form of a story.

There were seven students. They went in order and each one stood up and went to the podium to read their monologues. Some were poems about who they were and what they want to be when they were older. Some were about their lives. Many of the monologues incorporated different concepts and styles into the pieces. One girl did a rap through the entire alphabet.

B.'s was entitled "Driven" and talked about her motivations and that "Words are your roots." J.'s "Diary of an Aspiring Writer" talked about how she is a wallflower, but shouldn't be underestimated. N.'s "Most Likely Outspoken" talked about how she was weird, different and unique, and said "Be louder than the crowd." S.'s was fiction, about a family being taken away from a young boy, and talked about how things can be taken in the blink of an eye. R.'s "Different I Am" talked about how sometimes people wish they were different and how there are stereotypes about people. R.'s was untitled and in it she said "Either way you look, I'm gonna be real."

R.'s was untitled and in it she said "Either way you look, I'm gonna be real." ...The leader asked them "What are you scared of?" and the kids began to talk.

Through this workshop, Mighty Writers helped to provide a space for the students to feel like they could talk about things like their home lives or the struggles they have had with fitting in, that they probably couldn't express at school because of curriculum schedules or testing mandates. Mighty Writers provides the space where the youth can feel comfortable talking about these hard issues and it is a space where they could learn from one another. Mighty Writers offers a space where the youth can present their identification with a complex and mixed group of individuals, which is different from any other community. By connecting their experiences with critical thinking in this workshop, the students were able to create works that reflected a deep understanding of their home and community life, as well as their talents for writing moving pieces that they presented to their peers and parents. The presentations of their thoughts in their own discourses helps to further establish the newfound community and vernacular of Mighty Writers in that the presentations gave their discourses credence because they were shared with others.

A final workshop that connected the students' discourses was the Project Speak! Workshop, designed for students ages 10 to 13. In this workshop, students had to find a story to tell and learn how to tell it. The instructor was Lisa Nwankwo, and there were about six children for this workshop. When I walked in, they were talking about how to think of what story they wanted to tell. When I walked in, the leader asked them "What are you scared of?" and the kids began to talk. The room became a place where they could speak freely about anything that they were thinking about or anything they wanted to say. They began to digress and started talking about scary movies, especially a new one with Halle Berry in it. They talked about homework, school, their peers, teachers, and siblings. They talked for about fifteen minutes about what bothered them or what they liked and about how annoying homework was. They talked about *The Hunger Games.* The teacher didn't interrupt or push her agenda.

After about fifteen minutes of discussion, Lisa said that "You are all really good storytellers" and that she knew that they all could tell her a story with the same enthusiasm. One girl talked about a cat in her story, while another one talked about how he won an award that he didn't think he would win. One boy talked about how he got his first phone because the Lakers won a game. Another girl talked about her 10th birthday at the Poconos.

The students had to write least one sentence each for the beginning, middle, and end of their stories, and she prompted them about theme, saying that many of the good stories she has were ones where she learned something. She said that this workshop was "more about learning how to tell the story then coming up with the story." They played a game called "Why Are You Late To School," and in it, one of the kids would pretend to come into the room as if he or she was late for school. They had to come up with an excuse for why they were late and the rest of the students would use hand movements to help them create a story. They played this for about fifteen minutes and they came up with some interesting stories. One girl said she was late because a bus

almost hit her. Then they played a game called "Slow Emotion," where each student had to pick a piece of paper that had an emotion on it and they had to act out that emotion in slow motion. This workshop was a mixture of discussion and writing exercises. It was a quiet space that provided time for thinking. It was also a place share stories and experiences, to hear and learn about others, and to spark ideas for their pieces. It included building blocks for more formal writing, such as sentence writing, or the reflective component of a memoir.

Dreambuilders, Toolkits

Third spaces are critical in the growth and development of youth, perhaps especially urban youth. Mighty Writers not only provides a physical space where students can combine the discourses of the home and school life, but it also provides a social space where students are exposed to positive behaviors, interactions with other peers, and visions of success. Studies have shown that "that after-school and community programs are associated with a decrease in school drop-out, a decrease in the likelihood of experiencing depressed mood and anxiety during adolescence, a decrease in delinquency and substance use, an increase in self-esteem, and an increase in prosocial behavior" (Wright et. al. 77). This may be because after school programs become the spaces where students are witnesses to their peers' positive actions, where they become enactors of prosocial behavior, and where the supportive relationships between one another foster future successful interactions with others (Wright et. al. 77). Another workshop included a "Dreambuilder Toolkit.," where the students could write down all of their dreams, wishes, and hopes for the future. The workshop leader also told them to create a vision board, which is a board that has pictures or words that show what they want to accomplish or do in the future. The workshop leader said that "thoughts are power" and talked about how if they can see their dreams and hopes for the future every day, they will become a reality. Superheroes do not just cover the walls of Mighty Writers. They exist within this building. The youth are the superheroes. Mighty Writers helps provide them with the tools and discursive spaces to learn how to wear their own capes and conquer the world.

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Demanding Hope: Growing Literacy Outside of the Academy

Emily Mazur

Previous research has shown that working class students face social disadvantages when acquiring and internalizing literacy skills in a traditional educational context. This project explored an after school program aimed at improving literacy among those students. This collaborative inquiry with Treehouse Books examines the question, "How do empowering and progressive social practices in an after-school program improve literacy acquisition?" Emily wishes to thank Michael Reid, and the entire team at Tree House, for collaborating with her, giving generously of their time, and reviewing this essay.

Conversations about the Philadelphia educational system usually lead to discussions about failing schools and low literacy rates. While casual conversation often drifts to criticizing the system currently in place, the often unheard story is about some of the places where the residents of Philadelphia turn to address the "literacy problem," a few of which are portrayed in this collection.

Tree House Books, located in the North Philadelphia neighborhood near Susquehanna Avenue, is a local after-school literary program. While after-school programs are easy to find in the busy city of Philadelphia, Tree House Books has a goal that reaches beyond pushing kids through the educational system with supplementary homework help. Tree House challenges the conventional definition of literacy and embraces the idea that "community" and "literacy" are essential to the other's success. Observation at this community organization allows for a sense of hope in a system that is seemingly broken. Simple, but often ignored, program practices that Tree House implements in their program help to support students in learning literacy skills where traditional schools and sometimes other after school programs have been unsuccessful.

Understanding Literacy

If we are going to discuss Tree House books and its relationship to literacy, it is important to understand what we mean when we use the term. Literacy is a concept that is more difficult to classify than simply the ability to read and write. Literacy scholars refer to "literacy as a social practice." For example, Courtney Kelly discusses her findings about a program called PODER-YES, in an article titled, "Recognizing

The 'Social' In Literacy As A Social Practice: Building On The Resources Of Nonmainstream Students." She points out that literacy "is not a set of discrete and neutral skills but is instead comprised of socially situated literacy practices" (Kelly). Literacy is heavily situated in the social interactions of the learner. Through working with students in their respective communities and studying the factors that promote literacy, many scholars have drawn similar conclusions.

Another study examining the different practices of after-school tutoring groups was conducted by Bruce Saddler and Merry Staulters. Their scholarship explores different approaches to teaching literacy to children from low income families. Their approach to literacy focuses on the need to divert teaching methods away from skill acquisition and toward the need to convey an overall "mindset" to students. Rather than focusing on the need to teach specific material, many groups, such as The Reading Partners program Saddler and Staulters worked with, focus on trying to promote a positive image of literacy that is gained through individual attention. Promoting a sense of self-efficacy, or forging confidence in the student's perception of their own skills, was one of the group priorities. They explicitly state that, "We [the program coordinators] did not seek to create a program and fit it to the students' needs; rather, we encouraged each of our tutors to create an individually tailored program that met the needs of their student tutee" (Saddler). Another study published in *Reading Research Quarterly* last year examined different tutoring practices applied to a group of first graders. Students who didn't respond to large group learning or "tier 1" teaching were given three days a week of small group attention, or "tier 2" tutoring help. The results showed that students who were at risk for falling behind in "tier 1" and were given supplemental help in a small group setting improved over the seven week course study (Gilbert). This individual approach begins to unravel what literacy means: literacy is a social practice and thus, paradoxically, can vary drastically among different individuals and, in turn, the methods used to teach literacy must also be flexible.

Finding the "Person" in the Student

Beyond understanding the social nature of literacy practices, being mindful of where literacy skills begin to take root is an important factor to consider as well. Literacy is gathered from all different facets of life: from the home, to school, and everywhere in between. Exploring the factors that contribute to interest and learning outside of school is an important approach to understanding the process of literary acquisition as a whole. Why some students struggle and others seem to adapt without hesitation to different teaching methods is not an isolated disconnect in a working education system, but is instead, inherently resulting from a lack of attention to the social world of the students involved.

One discussion about the relationship between home, school, community, and learning by Lyn Tett argues that students require their educators to acknowledge their lives as a whole. She explains that, although school is perceived as the main dispenser of literacy, home-acquired literacies and community identity are just as valuable when it comes to building an intellectually empowered individual. "If the language of the home and community is unacknowledged then coming to voice is particularly difficult." Linking the identities that children already understand and relate to, even if they are not

traditionally valued as "academic," seems to be a crucial step in facilitating the self-efficacious mindset that Saddler and Staulters point out.

Even though acknowledging identity in the community has repeatedly showed itself to be an important part of literacy, many educational approaches view alternative identities and community values as insignificant and at times detrimental to the transfer of knowledge. In Tett's words, "…schools latently recreate cultural and economic disparities." When class or race differences from mainstream schools allow non-school literacies of the community and home to be disregarded, the rift may bar students from having more than minimal investment in their education.

The Disconnect

Tett is not alone in the belief that literacy is a social practice and is certainly supported in her belief that the current school system, as a whole, tends to perpetuate an oppressive and failing system. University of Buffalo professor, Patrick J. Finn, in his book *Literacy with an Attitude*, discusses this conflict between education and literacy specifically among working class communities. His book pulls together multiple theories that explain the phenomenon that Tett touches.

While schools struggle to unify curriculum across the board to keep funding, students simultaneously struggle to connect with the distant teaching practices that come with standardized learning.

Finn summarizes studies that show dramatic differences between educational practices aimed at the working class versus upper-middle class students. The proven success of "empowering education," where education is practiced as an arena of negotiation and inquiry between students and educators, is rarely applied to working class communities. Instead, in many working class schools, Finn argues education is a teacher-to-student one way street of discipline and expected obedience. The attitude associated with educating less economically privileged students seems to lean toward pushing them through a system where they feel they have no place. If school is a place where students are obligated to go to learn concepts that don't seem to apply to their world, the logical conclusion to be made is that school simply is not important.

While schools struggle to unify curriculum across the board to keep funding, students simultaneously struggle to connect with the distant traditional teaching practices that come with standardized learning. When a student who grew up in a home that may not have even had the luxury of books is handed canonical novels to unravel, it's easy to understand how these texts feel awkward and out of place in their realities. As the literacies of the home and community are disregarded by the traditional school system, students may lose interest in reading and writing skills that seem to be void of any resemblance to their own lives (Finn).

This "resistance" toward education that is commonly ascribed to low income and non-white groups is more accurately described as, according to Finn, "oppositional identity." In short, when students feel education is so far distanced from the reality of the world they live in and the histories that brought these worlds into being, they may

not just disengage but may even rebel against the typically white, upper-middle class approach to education. In sum, research suggests that changing educational practice is as or more critical than changing those being educated.

Demanding Hope More than Homework

To emphasize this point, Kelly's work with PODER-YES reinforces the idea that traditional education seems to demand that working class students relate to un-relatable material. "The ability to articulate such connections [between personal experience and reading] is a valued academic skill that nonmainstream students are often considered to lack yet are too rarely encouraged to develop." Literacy isn't "lost" among low income youth. The disconnect between literacy skills and working class students lies beyond the mechanics of decoding and literary devices and is, instead, deeply rooted in the longstanding oppressive ideas about literacy education that are interwoven with traditional schooling.

In an article about attendance in North Philadelphia schools, Greg Toppo writes, "Half the kids who drop out are waving their hands in the sixth grade. They're ... saying, 'Help! If you don't intervene, a bad thing's going to happen. I'm disengaged and I'm on the path of dropping out already. I'm 12 years old.'" His statements about student interest are simple yet powerful.

To return to the introduction, in an attempt to mend the literacy gap in the city, many groups have taken up their own approaches to teaching literacy practices. All over the city of Philadelphia, after- school programs and homework help centers set out to supplement the often underfunded, overcrowded public schools that still rely heavily— by necessity, habit or training—on traditional education practices. These after-school programs do their share in an attempt to improve the educational community by providing homework help; yet, it seems hard to believe that applying *more* traditional practices toward material that does not facilitate interest in learning can help the city's literacy problem.

If a city like Philadelphia, which comes up with hundreds of online results for after-school tutoring programs, is so far behind when it comes to overall educational success rates, there must be a need for a different approach. If there wasn't room for a change of approach, after-school homework help would have been the save all for the city of brotherly love.

Yet still, in communities where poverty and years of socially-constructed oppression leave children starting behind their middle-class counterparts, the previous discussion of what makes literacy "happen" becomes imperative. If homes have no books, if schools have given up on students whose attitude toward traditional education is preserves their positive communal- and self-identity but may therefore be resistant and oppositional to the culture of schooling, how can helping students through homework have any value?

Forging a Bond

The social empowerment of youth in these working class communities is entirely interconnected with their willingness to engage in literary practices. In other words, when the young people in a community believe they have the ability to become competent at reading and writing and that the practice is something that will benefit their lives in the future, the skills required to read and write become more appealing. It is here that literacy begins to release itself from the grips of formal schooling and into the hands of the community itself.

Tree House Books sits at the point where reality and academy meet. The small building on Susquehanna Avenue houses an after-school program that strives to integrate literacy into the lives of the students enrolled in the program. Executive Director Mike Reid has helped to formulate a way to teach literacy to the students who are often left behind by traditional education. His understanding of, not only academics, but the importance of community bonding and individual attention to students had led to a program that produces thinkers and readers in a way that many schools alone cannot, or at least, do not. Along with Program Director Lauren Popp, and other staff, Mike has worked to shape Tree House Books into a place where the home, community, and school meet and interact to benefit the students who participate in Tree House's activities.

The content of Tree House's Program changes every day of the week; each day focusing on a different skill aimed toward literacy. Tree House still covers the essentials for literacy, or the "basic" skills that schools aim to convey. On Mondays, students receive individual help with phonics to improve their academic skills. While this practice seems similar to school's approach to teaching, this practice of individual tutoring is more valuable than group learning for students who are struggling to keep up. As explained previously, individual attention plays a key role in learning for students who haven't yet engaged easily in group teaching practices. Tree House Books is using exactly this practice with the students in the program. If school learning is "tier 1" then Tree House fills in the gap where "tier 2" learners need additional support. The Gilbert study goes on to discuss that students who needed further help beyond "tier 2" may benefit from intensive, long term, individual help. Similar to Staulter's and Saddler's approach to after-school program practices and the Gilbert study, Tree House provides individual help for students who need the extra attention or need a different approach to learning. This flexibility and willingness to personally engage in student learning builds the foundation for literary comprehension.

However, Tree House Books has more to offer than individualized school support. Moving through the program, Tuesdays are less focused less on traditional phonics and school work and more on another aspect key to literacy. Instead of a class-like lesson, students engage in "culturally situated" readings that are often, in this program attended almost entirely by African-American youth, supported by a visit from an African American professional who talks with students about their career choice and how books helped them achieve that position. This interaction with successful African American figures in the community is something that builds on student's perceptions about education.

A discussion I had with Mike about the students at Tree House led to a conversation about black identity and the local community. He emphasized the importance of bringing relatable cultural figures into the Tree House program because black students in Philly and black students from cities across the country are not a monolith; they are vastly different. Yet, he also talked about how African American students in the Philadelphia area are often labeled with a preconceived "other" identity by (mostly white, upper-class) people looking into the city from the outside. He pointed out that many of those people wouldn't expect children from North Philly to like what the kids they know like; yet he laughed as he described how all the girls in the program love Hannah Montana. Still, he emphasized that black students need to have a pride in the culture of their community in a world where many people will still view them as "different." Tree House's program creates an atmosphere that allows black students to be around various role models for success that aren't far from their own identities and communities.

Working with successful community figures, as well as the promotion of African American-centric texts, are two of the practices that Tree House uses to create a positive identity intertwined with culture and learning. As seen in the previously reviewed research, Tree House is not alone in the belief that cultural identity is crucial to long term internalization of literary and literacy concepts in children. In another article discussing "Black Story time" in an Oregon library, librarian Kirby McCurtis talks directly about the importance of culture in academic identity. "At first, the idea of offering a story time specifically for African-American children seemed regressive. But why? We know that every child needs to feel that his culture is respected and valued" (Arnold). Using culture to facilitate learning, rather than employing academic practices that disregard culture, may help to prevent Finn's oppositional identity phenomenon in students from classes and races outside the mainstream of education and canon. If students value their culture and educational institutions actively use examples and personally relevant works to learn the skills of literacy, learning is no longer a force to oppose but something that can be attained.

Thus, as we move through the Tree House schedule, Wednesdays incorporate a creative art and writing workshop surrounding a selected book, and Thursdays are Book Club. During observations of Book Club, Tree House's particular literacy practices emphatically showed. While the day consists mostly of scheduled group reading and concludes with an art project or craft that relates to the theme of the book that day, the interactions during that time between volunteers and students show how much Tree House accomplishes. During reading time, students work in groups of similar reading levels and engage in reading, conversation, analysis, and reflections on the books they read. The facilitated reading aloud helps to encourage kids to challenge themselves and enjoy reading. As I watched one group of boys reading during Book Club, they fought over who got to read first and who read the longest. Seeing them so engrossed in the book they were reading was proof in itself of the effectiveness of Tree House Books' methods. "Wait. Don't tell me," as one student struggled with a new word he was determined to figure out, "… gracious! I got it!" The awareness of vocabulary and what words mean in a sentence is another attention to detail that Tree

House Books incorporates into their recreational reading time. Another group of girls gathered around me as I walked near their reading area. Ecstatic at the prospect of telling someone new about what they were reading, they all talked over each other to be the first to convey the story they were so proud of reading.

These kids, the same kids that are stereotyped as having a "lack of motivation to learn," or even as lazy or unintelligent, are far from it. The same students who could be a part of the failing statistics and absent chairs in school were unable to contain their excitement about reading. Tree House, further, creates a welcoming atmosphere that extends beyond the children in the program. During my time with Tree House Books, many siblings of participants and friends passed by to look in the windows or stopped in to see what was going on inside. The battle to keep attendance in schools seems to have skipped the small community bookstore.

Beyond the atmosphere and engagement present at Tree House, students are given more than the tools to read. When disputes between children occur, Mike, Lauren, and or volunteers guide students into solving the issues through communication. The opportunity to teach practical communication skills happens often. Two boys caught Mike's attention when he noticed them arguing with each other. As he walked up to the boys, Mike was calm. He asked them both what was wrong and when they both claimed the other was at fault, Mike simply asked, "If you can have anything happen in this situation, hypothetically, what would you want to happen?" The arguing stopped as both kids thought about the question. When neither could give an answer, Mike simply said that if they don't know what they wanted how could anyone else fix the problem for them? Allowing children to communicate and think about real life problems gives them some control over their world and over their space. As Finn pointed out, working class education methods often leave students with no practice in negotiation when it comes to problems that occur in educational settings. One sees something very different at Tree House.

The most valuable aspect of Tree House books, aside from its integration of literary practices that work with students in that specific community, is that all the practices Tree House promotes are able to be recreated. Fixing the issue of disconnection requires a link be made between the reality of the working class individual's life and the skills of literacy. In an article about improving literacy by Shawn Jenkins, a struggling student was asked to provide researchers with recommendations that would be most helpful when teaching other kids to engage in reading and writing. The student revealed five seemingly obvious suggestions. Teamwork, acknowledgement, relating school and life, student involvement, and consistency are the general concepts the sixth grade student believed he needed to engage.

Tree House is a gem; yet, it isn't so rare that it cannot be used functionally to help students beyond the doors on Susquehanna Avenue. Giving individual attention, promoting cultural pride, integrating enjoyment and education, as well as teaching communication skills in real life instances are all practices that can be used to benefit children in struggling communities. Tree House is small. It does a lot to help the community but, in the end, it is a piece of a largely unfinished puzzle. More shared

understandings of literacy development and understanding children in any particular community can lead any program down a similar path to Tree House Books, and some of the underlying asset-based practices are of course being enacted elsewhere.

Philadelphia social worker Maisha Sullivan reinforces this idea when she talks about how young people react toward intervention in the educational system. She describes how "Young people are more likely to overcome adversity when they can draw on protective forces," rather than be labeled a "risk" (Youth See Opportunities as Key to Prevention). All the excitement at Tree House builds the atmosphere of learning up to something more engaging than a traditional classroom. The wealth of individual attention, cultural exploration, and social skills available to the children involved in the program showcase what learning can amount to if a space is built around youth engagement. While the Tree House of today stands strong as a house of literacy, it was once a small homework help program at its roots. As Mike stood to the side of the activities going on all around the small building, he pointed to a mural on the wall of a tree and an enclosed balcony that hovered above the bookshelves. "Do you know why this place is called Tree House Books?" Mike's pride is evident when he talks about the small building on Susquehanna Avenue. He tells me that when they first got the building, a tree was growing out of the floor in the spot where the mural was painted. That tree on the wall hasn't left the hearts of the volunteers and coordinators who work with the children. Like the tree, students come and grow in Tree House Books. They extend their roots in the community and hopefully, as Mike and all the volunteers hope, they come back to make the community better with all that they've learned.

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Youth Supported to Hold the Reigns in Norris Square, but Beyond?

Lauren Klosinski

Previous research has shown that youth-led organizations are the most successful when adult influence is included in a positive way that does not inhibit the leadership potential of the youth. This project, through a collaborative inquiry at the Art Factory, a sub group of the Norris Square Neighborhood Project, highlights a set of benefits and challenges in a youth-driven literacy and arts organization.   Lauren would like to thank especially Althea Baird, and the entire staff and youth at the Art Factory, for their collaboration, time and review of this essay. Upon review of the essay, Althea wanted to emphasize: "We want people to know, firstly, that the issues brought up here are bigger than being just about youth; it's about all art. And secondly, youth-led perspectives are not extra. We need the youth perspectives not because it's fun but because it is necessary."

Welcome to Norris Square

Balanced between Fishtown and North Philly, wedged in between a row of weathered row homes, across from a community park is the home of the Norris Square Neighborhood Project. Through a large green and purple doorway, up a set of narrow stairs with painted railings and walls covered with murals, visitors and participants climb up to the top floor to enter the world of the Art Factory. The physical space of the Art Factory is a seamless reflection of the organization's central message and theme. The space is alive with creativity, colorful and inviting. The room itself holds a large table which members of the group gather around during the span of the meeting. The atmosphere is instantly democratic, everyone sharing the same space and meeting together to accomplish the same fundamental goals.

As stated on their website, the Norris Square Neighborhood Project (NSNP) is "an arts and gardening organization, serving youth and adults in programs focused through the lens of Latino culture." The Art Factory is a sub group of NSNP: "Art Factory serves youth ages 14 to 20, using arts instruction, self-expression, youth leadership, social justice collaborations, and professional development to

build job and life skills, and to create a pipeline to the creative economy." The Art Factory mentors youth in a wide range of multimedia arts, such as graphic design, poetry, animation, song writing, drawing and video-making. The youth of the Art Factory

> are becoming a new generation of arts administrators, teaching artists and youth leadership experts that are focused on building up their local arts scene. While Philadelphia has thriving arts opportunities for adults, Art Factory is bringing the creative economy to its urban youth. Also, youth program participants generate revenue by conducting arts-based workshops, performing and selling both art and art services such as website design and video creation (NSNP).

Youth-Led Organizations: Key Features

In many cities, organizations exist in order to promote literacy or to provide an artistic outlet for youth. However a growing trend in this field is the existence of youth-led organizations. Leadership within these organizations can be defined as "a relational process combining ability (knowledge, skills, and talents) with authority (voice, influence, and decision making power) to positively influence and impact diverse individuals, organizations, and communities" (MacNeil 29).

In youth-led or "youth-driven" (Larson) organizations, when youth are given more opportunity for leadership roles in an organization, "the assumption is that when young people hold the reins they become active participants and learners. The more that youth are in control, the more it is thought they will learn" (Larson) and therefore succeed in the future. It is often argued within this field "that youth leadership is a necessary and essential ingredient of a quality program."(Larson). A youth-driven program is beneficial because it allows the youth to foster leadership skills while providing an opportunity for their voices to be heard. Their issues, questions and concerns are brought to the forefront instead of being filtered through the lens of adult perspective. By participating in youth-led organizations youth are

> engaged in a real life-cycle of learning that includes continual analysis, action and reflection; develop an expanded vision of their potential and deep community with each other; gain powerful organizational and community leadership skills; are supported in their personal development and healing; and learn valuable skills in organizational and program development and management. Additionally because most youth-led and youth-driven organizations are multiracial and multi-issue, they help to establish deep relationships among youth of different identities and backgrounds (Making Space 20).

However, some research contests this theory by arguing that an adult presence is needed in order for the youth to be pushed to their fullest potential, or for the youth to be taken seriously as an organization. Adult-led or "adult-driven" (Larson) programs are those in which the youth are still the central focus but maintain little to no leadership roles. While a strong adult presence can in some cases stunt youth development and creativity, the right kind of adult influence can

have both a guiding and stimulating effect on youth. "The Search Institute (2010) says non-parental adults can help provide the supports, boundaries, and expectations critical to positive youth development"(Lively). Adults within the program recognize youth potential and foster youth creativity with their greater range of knowledge and experience. However, in the case of adult-driven organizations the greatest concern is "the threat of adults' control undermining youths' ownership" (Larson). What this means is that while the adults present may mean to be acting in the best interests of the youth, they are still speaking and making decisions for them instead of allowing them to voice their own opinions and concerns and make their own choices.

The physical space of the Art Factory is a seamless reflection of the organization's central message and theme....The atmosphere is instantly democratic ...

For an organization to be authentically youth led it needs to manifest several features: a strong central group of youth leaders, a distinct purpose or goal as defined by the youth, and a central focus on work created by the youth which accurately defines and represents their voice. Another necessary component of a youth led organization is that the youth function as the executive authority behind the organization's decisions and goals. "Youth-led structures prioritize young people's decision making in the organization. A youth-led organization may be fiscally sponsored or even housed in an adult organization, but it must have fiscal, strategic, and programmatic autonomy from the adult-led organization" (Making Space 7). The youth make important decisions about who the group is going to work with, the kind of projects and tasks they will be working on as well as deciding what the organization is trying to accomplish through their projects.

As can be foreseen in this brief review of previous literature, there are likely to be both positive and negative effects to having an authentically youth led organization; this chapter will explore these effects by drawing connections to this local Philadelphia youth organization, the Art Factory. These connections were drawn during a set of observations conducted by me with a group of other students, and corroborated by Althea in drafting the final version of this chapter. Ultimately, this chapter asserts that while the Art Factory is a positive example of a "youth-driven" organization in which its participants take an active role in the organization and in which they are being taught leadership skills, they are also challenged by the limits of their influence on the growing youth art scene in Philadelphia.

The Art Factory: A Snapshot of a Youth-Led Arts Organization
The Art Factory employs a very small staff with a head director and another secondary director assisting on certain days. The bulk of the work, organizational and creative, is done by the youth of the Art Factory. A smaller separate group, known as the "ART F\\ACTION" group, meets on different days and functions as the leadership or collective voice for the larger group. Members of the ART F\\ACTION group are highly motivated and independent-thinking youth who

employ their skills in order to collaborate with outside organizations and make decisions about the direction and goals of the organization.

The director of the Art Factory is an individual named Althea Baird. Youthful herself, but with ten years of community organization work under her belt, she oversees the participants with a light, supportive, and creatively stimulating attitude that encourages members to collaborate and create to the best of their ability. A positive adult presence in a youth-driven organization can be extremely beneficial to cultivating youth leadership and potential. "Listening …responding positively, and regularly implementing youths' ideas can cultivate this environment. When youth feel they are being heard and taken seriously, they engage more in programs and are more likely to benefit." (Lively) Althea's presence is not that of a lecturing professor or a parent, but rather she conveys standing on a level platform with the youth, supporting their ideas and opinions as equals and friends.

Upon our first visit to the Art Factory we observed the youth participating in an in-depth conversation on current social issues and the way those issues influence and affect the Art Factory specifically, as well as their impact on other different kinds of community organizations. We sat at a large square table in the center of the room, staring up at the large sheets of brown paper taped to the wall. Althea held her marker expectantly, perched on the arm of a sofa as she posed a question to the group, challenging them to name as many different examples of the organizations as they could. There was a no pause in the response; hands shot up instantly and answers came pouring out, all of them calling out references from past and present with confidence. There were allusions to the civil rights movement, Gandhi, and others, and connections made to current groups combatting violence against women and organizations fighting against poverty. They spoke about advocacy and direct action organizations, naming many different local and national groups with ease.

They spoke about themselves and their own identities, what those identities mean to them, what "isms" they are influenced by. They acknowledged that issues like sexism, racism, ageism, and homophobia are addressed by groups that seek to be agents against these oppressions while acknowledging that everyone participates in them, willingly and unwillingly. Each person was given a chance to speak while the others listened respectfully; each answer was expected to be backed up with an explanation that displayed impressive critical thinking skills. The level of awareness the young people showed was astounding, far surpassing my group members' expectations. We later compared this conversation to our own college courses, noting that it was at least as in depth, if not more so.

The discussion we observed on our first visit was guided by Althea but her influence was minimal. She stated what the topic of discussion would be that day, reminded and encouraged everyone to participate and from then on her main role was transcribing the main points of the discussion on the paper taped to the wall.

She made efforts to ensure that all of the voices were heard (including mine and my partners') and that each comment that was made or answer that was given was a critically thought-out response, more than just yes and no. Her guidance towards the youth was a positive example of adult monitoring "which helps youth stay on track, and encourages and provides assistance when requested" (Lively). While it was clear that she was the accountable adult, the voices of the participating youth were highlighted and encouraged. And though she initially started the discussion, it was clear that her role beyond that point was to step back and allow the youth to draw their own conclusions and provide their own real life examples about complicated questions concerning their society and the operations of oppression in it.

Challenge: Getting Heard Outside Norris Square

Even with this balanced and seamless interaction of youth and adult leadership, it became clear, even during our first visit, that there are some challenges that result from a strongly youth-led organization. Occasionally the group would stray from the topic at hand or make jokes and become side tracked from the task. In these moments Althea would step in to the conversation and recollect the group back into the discussion. However, the biggest challenge that the Art Factory faces as an authentically youth led organization is finding a way to create art and artistic products that will be taken seriously by a wide spread adult audience. Althea named this as one of their biggest concerns when asked to collaborate with us. While the Art Factory has the ability to generate art that speaks directly to the interests and concerns of its participants, i.e. the youth of the Norris Square neighborhood, they have encountered problems about their art being taken seriously and being considered for legitimate commercial or social use. The products they produce, the art that comes from their hearts, minds, and hands, is being constantly devalued due to the age, and assumed inexperience, of its creators.

> Critics have argued that 'youth' is a transitional identity - not a real community…Youth organizing, they said, risked having a narrow analysis, splitting youth from their communities and broader social justice goals. What these critics failed to see is how the youth… actually used [their] understanding of adultism as a starting point for understanding and addressing other forms of oppression" (Making Space).

The art produced by this organization, in theory, should be embraced by the community as a credible voice on community issues and interests. Many, if not all, of the topics the Art Factory addresses directly relate to the youth of the community, or other relevant social issues that affect youth city wide, not to mention that one of the Art Factory's main goals is to empower the youth of the community to develop their artistic skills while developing social knowledge and understanding.

Yet this often does not occur. A recent project the group completed was for Decarcerate PA, which is an organization that opposes funding prisons rather than rehabilitation and information and educational programs to prevent crime. The group created a series of multimedia video/ informational documentaries that

reflected the organization's message and goals, while voicing the youth's own reflections on the "prison-industrial complex" and showcasing their artistic talent and creativity. The videos consist of five short three to four minute clips that create a clear and developed picture of background information, what the organization is trying to accomplish currently, and several sections pertaining to the Art Factory youth's perspectives on the organization. All of the videos were made entirely by the Art Factory youth, from the directing to the artwork to the voiceovers. It was the final decision of the Art Factory youth to collaborate with DecarceratePA to create these videos as well as all of the creative decisions behind the production. The youth presented a successful finished product. However these videos, along with other projects produced by the organization, did not, and have not, generally received the recognition they deserve.

Though being an authentically youth-led organization has many benefits, like providing an opportunity for the youth to grow as leaders and artists, and to provide them with an outlet and an opportunity to express their opinions and concerns, the program presents some challenges as well. Because of the fact that the organization is fundamentally youth-led there is often an issue with the voices, and ultimately the work of the organization, being taken seriously. Even though the Art Factory youth are talented, educated, and culturally conscious individuals, their work is not given the attention or recognition it deserves. Herein lies the greatest problem with youth-led or youth-driven organizations: we create an environment for youth to step forward and act as strong leaders who can accurately represent and express their voices and then when they succeed, and then we smile, with comments about how much potential they show: A+. Youth-led organizations, and the work they do, could instead be considered a credible and invaluable resource in our cities and communities.

Nurturing Youth Leadership
The Art Factory meets many of the criteria for an authentically youth-led organization. The youth are the primary voice behind the organization's goals and decisions. The youth in the Art Factory decide which outside organizations they want to collaborate with, and the nature of the projects they are working on. Their unique combination of art and social education fosters youth who are capable and who deserve to be taken seriously by a society that often suggests that the voices of the youth aren't worth listening to. Through its education and empowerment of its youth and its application of adult mentoring and guidance the Art Factory exists as a model of a successful youth-led organization and creates lasting effects in its community while serving as example nationwide.

Even our presence at the Art Factory, though initially sanctioned by Althea, had to be approved and understood by the group before we were officially allowed to participate. It was important to Althea, and the organization, to have the input of the youth on any and all decisions. When she addressed the ART F\\ACTION group to ask their opinion on working with us, they stated—exhibiting remarkable leadership skill—that they would have to ask and gain the approval of the larger group as well. They wanted

to ensure that every voice was heard and respected, a theme that carries though all of their discussions, projects and work.

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Afterword

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I n her introduction to this collection of essays, Hannah Ashley refers to these profiles as "more … journalism than qualitative research," and this rings true (2). Like the best kind of journalism, they are a form of reportage that bear witness to realities worthy of our attention and action. This kind of observing and writing about literacy is more important now than ever. American society broadly, and Philadelphia most certainly, struggles under the weight of many enduring social legacies that are especially brutal on poor communities – for example, our nation's history with slavery and institutionalized racism, the prison-industrial complex, and what Mike Reid and other community-minded leaders have called the "poverty-industrial complex" (5), which generally points to a set of fiscal practices that systematically mismanage federal funds intended for our most impoverished citizens. Any sustained attempt to nurture and grow community literacy, the writers in this collection make clear to us, must continually confront and grapple with these tenacious, historically rooted legacies. Words Are Your Roots grapples mightily, pointing us to ways of being and thinking that can expose our society's worst tendencies to the sunlight of rational critique and community action.

Though each profile in this collection can be seen as simply describing a particular community space in Philadelphia, there is also an overarching argument being made, and identifying the implications of this argument is crucial for all students, citizens, volunteers, and professionals invested in the vitality of our local communities. First of all, though they are primarily descriptive – as opposed to being prescriptive and advocating for specific actions – these essays also help to clarify the dynamic, changing preconditions for transformative action. For example, when Angira Pickens describes the resistance to gentrification in the Badlands, she helps us see that community organizing must deal with fairly new social processes – in this case, wealthy developers marginalizing the lives and landscapes of the citizens who currently reside there – as well as all of the older, familiar processes that accompany a low-income urban neighborhood. We might see here a two-part argument: 1) there are forces at work that threaten the already diminished autonomy of the Badlands, and 2) in order to effectively assess and critique these forces, we need to know more about how this community functions, how its members respond, how its landscape responds to the encroaching threat. Each of the five profiles in this collection articulates a similar movement: by shedding light on these location-specific situations, and by viewing them in terms of "third space" theory, we arrive at a starting point for advocating for these spaces in informed, powerful ways.

More to the point, what are the practical, political results of this literacy research and reporting? How do they encourage action? How do they mobilize us – and which of us do they mobilize? Who is this us – what are the boundaries of this us-ness (we probably should not call it a community, just yet), and how might we stretch it out to include further constituencies, to invite new stakeholders, to find new readers and witnesses?

Third space theory again provides one possible answer to these questions. As many of the writers in this collection point out, the third space is a physical location that serves as a hybrid space between home (first space) and school (second space), or between home and work, where individuals are allowed to engage in ways of being that are distinct from either the first or second space. The term also suggests a hybrid form of thinking, imagining, and writing. These profiles describe not only physical spaces, in other words, but social and imaginative spaces wherein individuals can become part of something that exceeds any particular place. They provide opportunities to imagine and create a writing self that is untethered to the many of the stereotypes that, as Emily Mazur and other contributors note, have burdened the self-perceptions of young urban writers. By teaching us how to argue on behalf of these literacy spaces, this collection serves as a call to protect them. I like to imagine our policy-makers and legislators, if they were to read these profiles, would agree.

Words Are Your Roots also reminds us that third space theory pertains to all of us, not simply to our community organizations or to our youngest and most vulnerable writers. In fact, this collection of essays serves as a challenge to the university – too often seen as a uniform, homogenous entity, separate from the public – to integrate itself more fully, practically and imaginatively into the public sphere. This means scholars must continue to imagine themselves as both specialists and public intellectuals – or that we need a third space of professional identity, where our specialized writing can still speak to audiences beyond academia. It is also a reminder that curriculum in all disciplines can engage more fully in the local landscapes that surround the campus, and that the idea of a "campus" is quickly evolving. The function of a college education is changing, overall; what it means to be educated is being transformed by programs, such as the Youth Empowerment and Urban Studies Program at WCU, that require its students to see their local surroundings as avenues for learning, and not merely as objects for study. The college students who wrote these essays, the teachers and community organizers who facilitated this reportage, and the many citizens whose stories are shared, are now actively designing this third space. Let's be optimistic that this space continues to grow.

This is a collection you will savor if you care about the promise of children in Philadelphia. I love the way the authors love the neighborhoods they have encountered, the people that they meet there. Inequity isn't just a word or a convenient bludgeon for one party to attack another; inequity is a lived experience that confounds our American dream of democracy. Love expressed in creative action addresses the violence of inequality directly and effectively, as each chapter of this collection demonstrates.
--Eli Goldblatt