You Ain't Alone in This

Critical Sense Making and the Process of Becoming

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This manuscript focuses on Youth Roots, a community-based youth program in Oakland, California. The author argues that in order to teach in his higher education classroom and develop teachers and leaders who can work in the community, he has to possess a sociohistoric understanding of the community and an analysis of oppression, while also providing tools and supports for youth to move toward liberatory healing.

Sirens, gunshots
They put me to sleep
Not exactly memories that I wanna keep
But the graph of homicides grows every year so steep
Now I'm wonderin' if we'll ever meet some peace
Shit that goes down will make you sicker than the flu shot
Does it give you comfort though
Knowing who's hot, who's not?
"It whatever" be the thought on the spot
Block's hot, shots pop, don't get caught,
keep it movin' 'til you drop

—Chorus from the song "Inured" by Juan,
eleventh grader, and Blanca, ninth grader

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We are where we live. Like Juan and Blanca,[1] I live in Oakland, an urban city in Northern California that settles atop native Ohlone land. For the Ohlone, this land was called Huichin, which was also the name of the specific group of peoples that inhabited it. While traditional knowledge of Huichin survived through the oral traditions of the descendants of those first Californians, the convergence of settler colonialism and black dislocation has created new and complex stories (Paperson).

Now working in the professorate as a scholar activist grounded in the community where I live, I feel a sense of responsibility to honor the significance of this land and the stories that have been sowed into its soil. In the higher education classroom where I have worked with graduate students working toward a teaching credential, master's degree, administrative credential, and doctorate in educational leadership, it has always been important for me to manifest this responsibility in ways where I can intersect the cultivation of critical consciousness, political urgency, and knowledge of self with the technical competencies needed to be skilled, competent, and confident educators in Oakland and similar communities. If my graduate students are/will be working with students like Juan and Blanca, I want to make sure I teach with the kind of respect, responsibility, and urgency that truly honors the lived realities of the people who are linked, even from displacement, with the land.

In the chorus from the song "Inured," Juan and Blanca rhyme about sirens and gunshots that are frequently heard at night in their community. Their establishment of the setting for their story in their opening chorus sadly reminds us that although we might not like something, if exposed to it enough, we can certainly get used to it. The sounds of sirens and gunshots would normally be considered alarming to most people—likely because they are rarely heard in many neighborhood communities. Like a bedtime story that precedes each night's sleep, the frequent sounds of sirens and gunshots that Juan and Blanca hear, however, are sounds that are routine. Even though the sounds are undesired memories to be kept, Juan and Blanca's dulled responses to them are automatic. Juan and Blanca do not even indicate that that they are shocked by the sounds (and the actions that create those sounds). If fact, the sounds are "whatever" to them.

The less we think about our oppression, the more we tolerate it (whatever "it" is) and accept it as normal. It is whatever. Such a phenomena naturalizes, rationalizes, and normalizes not only experiences and conditions but also thoughts, perceptions, and behaviors within the everyday political sphere of culture. It is one

thing for Juan and Blanca to experience sirens and gunshots within a city where homicides continue to rise as regular occurrences. It is another thing to cope by shrugging shoulders and saying "it's whatever," being distracted by trivial things such as "who's hot, who's not," and having to avoid thinking much about one's conditions in order to "keep it movin' 'til you drop."

When Blanca and Juan wrote, recorded, and performed this song (multiple times), they were participants in an out-of-school-time Youth Development leadership and critical media production program for high-school-age students called Youth Roots. As a critical practitioner participant in this research, I was both the program director and lead teacher for Youth Roots. Situated in a Victorian house that acted as a community center, Youth Roots served as an explicitly antioppressive space to build community and long-term relationships, engage in praxis (Freire) and the methodology of the oppressed (Sandoval), and act as a multimodal culture producer of counterstorytelling with the purposes of deepening knowledge of self (Akbar), radical healing (Ginwright), and fighting oppression "by any medium necessary" (Asante 203). Youth Roots comprised about thirty youth of color who traveled to the community center from six different high schools.

As a scholar activist, my research interests have never been to investigate a community as an outsider. My scholarship lies in an intimate (Laura) type of inquiry that uses love as a political apparatus (Sandoval) in solidarity with those with whom I am already engaged. As such, my work alongside the youth participants of the Youth Roots program aimed to deepen our understanding of what we do in order to do it better. Drawing from critical race methodology (Solórzano and Yosso), I examined original song lyrics, music videos, and documentary videos produced within the program to explore the following questions. What is the nature of text as cultural products and as lived culture that youth cocreate within Youth Roots? What is the nature of the participants' "Critical Sense Making" (CSM) as revealed through these texts? CSM was a concept that emerged from this work to understand how, for what purposes, and to what ends participants grappled with identity-forming experiences and decisions in their lives.

While this article was one product from the greater research, the youth cocreated a product from data collected as well. They produced their own film documentary called *What Is Youth Roots*. Data collected for their documentary included individual interviews, a focus group interview, video footage from past

performances, and video footage from previously recorded program sessions. Their documentary became one data source for this paper.

To assist with analyzing the cultural products the youth created, I draw on praxis (Freire) to build a language and process of hope, critique, struggle, and possibility, and critical race methodology (Solórzano and Yosso) to illuminate the counterstories. Praxis identifies critical knowledge, dialogue, reflection, and experience/action as operations to move along a process of transformation. Through critical race methodology, race, gender, class, and other intersecting oppressions are foregrounded, while also countering traditional master narratives that inadequately explain the experiences of students of color. Additionally, these racialized, gendered, and classed experiences of students of color are viewed as sources of strength that inform transformative possibilities. Applying praxis as well as critical race methodology as analytical frameworks helps to provide the theoretical language to unpack how structures of supremacy were ruptured and transformational consciousness revealed within the counterstories of the students.

In this work, I simultaneously tell a counterstory while invoking the voices of the youth participants through their counterstories. In doing so, the following sections will discuss three themes: being in the water, becoming in the water, and working the water. Following those sections, I will then discuss the greater significance and implications of this research by illuminating a concept I refer to as "Critical Sense Making" (CSM). Before moving forward to highlight the student voices, I wish to pause and share a story I have told to the youth.

What's Water: From Being to Becoming

On a hot summer day, a deer walks through the forest, thirsty and looking for a cool source of water. The trees offer little comfort in slowing down the deer's growing thirst. Near exhaustion, the deer's ears perk up to the sound of running water. She moves with more purpose toward the sound, eager and excited with a spring to each step. "A river!" she gasps as she reaches the bank. She pauses for a bit looking over the conditions of the river and sees a fish swimming happily in the water. She calls down to the fish, "Hey fish!"

The fish looks up, "Yeah deer?"

The deer asks, "Hey, how's the water?"

The fish, looking perplexed, responds, "What's water?"

At first, some students laugh out loud, thinking I am telling a joke and "What's water?" is the punchline. Then a silent pause tends to fill the room. Students look perplexed, provoked. Then I continue. Not with the story, but with a discussion that first begins with unpacking the meaning behind the story and my intent in telling it.

I explain that like the fish, people can get so used to their surroundings and conditions that they do not even realize where they are. Such a phenomena makes unnoticeable and therefore natural the everyday nuances of thought, perception, and action in daily life. It's *whatever*. Through our immersion in this "water," our critical gaze, numbed from having any feelings of agency, looks more toward a distant, abstract horizon and away from our intimate internal and external environment and interactions. We say "it's whatever" and we act accordingly. The hegemonic discourse is numbing. We swim all day and never see the water. We do not feel its hold on us that embraces our skin, as if it is our skin itself. We do not hear the sound of its movement around us as if the world is still. We just swim, unaware of other possibilities or potentials.

"So what is our role," I ask. "What is our responsibility in the event when we know about the water?" In our group discussion, we collectively arrive at the conclusion that "it's whatever" is not predetermined. Society, our material conditions, and even our own selves are always in a state of being and existence at any given moment. However, that moment always passes, and therefore that state of being is temporary and impermanent. This means that while always being, we are also simultaneously engaged in a process of becoming—becoming more than what we are today.

The question is, what are we becoming? Are we moving closer to what Akbar refers to as "soul" or the "essence of our being" (25)? Or are we moving toward an "alien identity" (25), which is when the cultivation of soul becomes interrupted, derailed, or even denied?

By the same token, what does it take to arrive at a place where not only the water is made visible and apparent, but also the hope for changing the conditions becomes a concrete possibility? When change is envisioned and people are willing to swim upstream, fighting the current, then what does it take to bring others along? What does it take for people get committed to and align themselves and everything they do toward (re)imagining? As a lifelong process, how difficult is that? What do we discover about ourselves along the way? What stands in our

way along this journey, and how do we navigate those robust obstacles? These questions are central in the journey through and beyond Youth Roots.

In order to provide a glimpse into that journey, I will let the young people speak for themselves, while offering some assistance to illuminate meaning and significance. In the next three sections, I will highlight the cultural products of the participants in three themes: (1) being in the water, (2) becoming in the water, and (3) working the water. While the sequence of these themes suggests a linear progression, the truth is far more complex. The interconnected reality is messy, layered, multidirectional, and sometimes cyclical. Nonetheless, I have organized the students' stories in this seemingly linear fashion in order to mirror the praxis cycle.

Being in the Water: I Am Used to It

> Personally I don't feel nothing [about living in Oakland]. I'm used to it. I'm used to the violence, seeing police everywhere. I know it sounds a little, how you say, a little cliché, but it's true. People are used to it. No one expects you to feel sorry for them, 'cause they're used to it.
>
> —Luis, eleventh grader

> I hear about how people talk about Oakland and how there's shooting everyday doing crimes and murders but it's kinda normal to me like no big deal. I'm used to it.
>
> —Tina, ninth grader

> I'm used to it. If I hear a gunshot, I ain't trippin, but I gotta find out who got shot. . . . I'm used to the violence in Oakland. As long as I'm not involved with it or I don't have any part of it, then I'm used to it, and it don't concern me, then I don't care.
>
> —Keesha, twelfth grader

In the story with the deer and the fish, what might that fish say if probed more about the water? Would that fish say "I don't feel nothing" or "I'm used to it" like Luis, Tina, and Keesha? Instead of being asked, "How's the water?" each of these students was asked what it is like to live in their town. Each of the students

reflected something in common—being inured to the violence in their city. I am used to it. It is no big deal. I do not care. Like the fish, these students seem to *be* in water. That is, they are *being* in their condition in such a way that might seem like they are accepting of it. Perhaps they even feel hopeless.

When continuously in oppressive conditions, hope is systematically rendered inert. Viewing one's conditions as "whatever" becomes a protective mechanism necessary for ongoing crisis management, which in turn makes it difficult to move past the here and now. *Being inured* might be a state, but it occurs as a process over time. *Becoming inured* might be a more appropriate way to name it. Becoming inured is something that happens and deepens through repeated exposure. It is like the callus on one's hands caused from continuous friction and pressure.

A Temporary Pause from the Water: Drawing Attention to the Omniscient Critical Point of View

Before proceeding, I wish to draw attention to two things. First, the assertions of the previous paragraph with little additional context provided would contribute to the majoritarian story (Solórzano and Yosso) and damage-centered research (Tuck) that depicts communities like Luis, Tina, and Keesha's as broken and void of hope and strength. Such narratives framed in deficit-centered ways define, explain, and reproduce the layers of assumptions of how these spaces and the people within those spaces are perceived (Solórzano and Yosso). Second, such stories and research help to rationalize and justify racist and neoliberal structures of supremacy and their underlying oppressive ideologies that dictate behaviors, practices, policies, and the (in)accessibility of resources. These structures silence the voices of people of color as well as offer solutions to uncritically identified problems (Solórzano and Yosso).

Does that mean that writers, researchers, historians, and journalists should not invoke the voices of youth of color who have experienced urban tropes such as poverty, violence, educational inequity, and trauma in general? No, but it does mean that a person who has the privilege of sharing to the public the stories and experiences of voices historically silenced must realize the power, potential, and responsibility of one's positionality as an individual who can influence thought and action. One must ask oneself, "Whose research is this? Who owns it? Whose interests does it serve? Who will benefit from it? Who has designed its questions

and framed its scope?" (Smith 10) and what hope could be gained for the individuals and communities involved? One must be responsible and respectful to the sociopolitical issues and authentic needs of the individuals/community, particularly in terms of how the individuals/community are portrayed, being careful not to fetishize tropes of the urban by centering on narratives of pain (Tuck and Yang).

Returning back to the stories of the participants from Youth Roots, I wish to make explicit that I am situating their narratives within a pedagogy of praxis, which moves along an interconnected engagement with critical knowledge, dialogue, reflection, and experience/action as well as my own critical analysis of the greater societal issues. The participants' material conditions were real, and it is important to recognize that context. Their sense making of their material conditions was also real, but sense making is a dynamic process that is communicated most effectively when narrated in a story-like fashion. As such, I invoked each of their individual voices to *begin* the process of assembling a collective story, which, once put together as a whole, will explicitly counter the majoritarian story that singularly depicts the lives of urban youth of color as lacking in agency and filled with pain. Acting as bricoleur (Denzin and Lincoln), who assembles a montage of images to form a picture, the totality of this work will form the collective counterstory. As a collective counterstory, rather than individual counterstories, a transformational coalitional consciousness (Sandoval) starts to emerge. Through such a consciousness, a collective agency that is dynamic, mobile, and acts as an oppositional strategy against dominant ideologies and master narratives is formed.

Returning to the Water: It's Hella Hard

> Living in Oakland is just, you feel me, you gotta face the facts. It's hella hard. Always struggling . . . I see a lot of shit happening on the streets to be honest with you, you feel me. I been a victim of a lotta shit. And it's a lot of things. Like you could see a lot of things from being shot, killed, stabbed. To somebody getting robbed. It's hella hard. You could be walking home and you could be a victim of the next crime, know what I'm sayin' . . . I mean, you gotta adjust, no matter who you are. You could live in the best parta Oakland but you still gotta adjust, because you see crimes, murders, you see everything. And really it hurts. Like you know, feel me. Recently I just lost my friend Evan. Rest in peace. You feel

> me, it's, you could lose anybody, you feel me, you don't know when, you don't know how, you don't know where. You don't know where you're safe. You can't even be safe at your home. Because it's that unsafe here. You really just gotta be mentally ready. Because, Oakland could break you or make you anytime.
>
> —Enrique, twelfth grader

In answering the question, "What's it like to live in Oakland?" Enrique has a less inured response to the violent conditions he describes than what we saw from Luis, Tina, and Keesha earlier. His testimony is quite the opposite. It is personal, emotionally charged, and reveals vulnerability. Enrique's description of what it is like to live in his town seems singularly depicted as toxic and traumatic, void of any hope. This is likely due to the fact that his good friend, Evan, another twelfth grader, was murdered a few months prior to this interview. I personally did not know Evan, but I did know the young man who was accused and later convicted of the murder.

Six years prior to this interview, I was that young man's teacher and advisor during two of his middle school years. I have reflected many times on what I was not able to do for that young man, especially during his high school years when he quickly rose in stature within a local gang. I share this to humanize myself beyond what critical participant implies in this story. I share this to say that whether students reveal being inured or being emotionally charged, my connection to their lives is what Crystal Laura refers to as "intimate" and from a "place of love" (215). My connection to their lives has driven and continues to drive my political clarity (Beauboeuf-Lafontant), urgency, and purpose I have in the work I do alongside them. I believe my role in helping to support their sense-making process within a larger process of praxis has critical implications.

So knowing what I knew about Enrique and the loss of his friend, how did culture production come into play? Let us see how Enrique channeled a variety of thoughts and emotions into his short song, "Why Do I Feel So Grown?" Rapped over the borrowed beat of "Say What's Real," by Drake, Enrique tells a rich and complex story that seems like it might have been written from the perspective of a created character that was inspired by his own life as well as the person who shot his friend Evan.

1. Why do I feel so grown? Damn right I said it
2. Enter the world of welfare and bad credit

3. Living on the streets is no joke for the homeless
4. Parents join gangs now their kids are in comas
5. And you wonder why your kids feel so alone
6. Mama is a drinker and Daddy's never home
7. As your brain goes crazy and you start to feel insane
8. Letting out yells full of sorrow and pain
9. Throwing blood in your eye, rip your chest straight open
10. Cries for help that's a jar that's never open
11. See the pain and suffering all in your eyes
12. Heart cut in pieces brain full of lies
13. One hand on the gun that's an ego booster
14. Throw away your life no chance for a future
15. Now you feel tough, straight up with no doubt
16. Pick up a gun and you blow his brains out
17. Now you released, walking out of the vault
18. Wish I could have stopped you, told you wasn't his fault
19. Now it's said and done, that's the end of the show
20. No one reacts even though they heard the blow
21. That's how it works in this shit hole today
22. Evicted by the system makes it so hard to stay
23. Gone for ten years and nobody missed him
24. Not the work of life but the work of the system.

I share Enrique's song in its entirety at this juncture to invite the reader to experience its full lyrical and storytelling aesthetic as well as draw attention to how praxis, healing, and culture production can intersect.

As a song, "Why Do I Feel So Grown?" seems to be structured into five parts that mirror traditional plot structure: exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and revelation. Lines 1–12 act as the exposition by establishing a setting that involves a difficult social context and development of a character who is experiencing powerlessness. Lines 13–15 climactically rise as the character attempts to address his sense of powerlessness by obtaining a gun. The climax occurs in line 16, where the main character shoots and kills someone. Lines 17–20 comprise the falling action where it is implied that the character was convicted of the crime and incarcerated. The revelation that appears in the remaining lines implicates the systemic nature of criminalization and incarceration.

Could this song be reflective of the lived experiences of Enrique? Because one core belief of Youth Roots is to nurture the process of becoming through critical self-reflection and expressing truth with self and communal love, it is likely that Enrique included some of his own intimate thoughts and feelings about his life. Might part of this song also be written from the imagined perspective of the young man convicted of Evan's death? That seems likely given the story's climax. What seems to be a more provocative question, however, is why would Enrique create a character that includes his experience and that of the youth who was incarcerated for Evan's murder? Why would Enrique invoke social empathy to imagine the perspective of someone who committed a violent act toward one of his friends?

Ginwright reminds us that "healing involves reconciling the past to change the present while imagining a new future" (11), and radical healing "focuses on how hope, imagination and care transform the capacity of communities to confront community problems" (11). This assertion is an important distinction between healing and radical healing. Applying Ginwright's conception of radical healing, Youth Roots acts as a place for youth to self-reflect while building critical consciousness. Concomitantly, it is a place for youth to see beyond the water and develop the critical hope (Duncan-Andrade) and political love (Sandoval) essential to fuel authentic and active movement toward improving social conditions.

Enrique demonstrates radical healing as a process in many ways. His song helps to reconcile his past. Enrique's music aids in his healing process, especially in the way he humanizes the main character as having a difficult and tragic life while also acknowledging his wish to have been able to prevent the violence. We do not clearly see the vision for social transformation just yet, but we do catch a glimpse of the potential. Enrique confronts and problematizes some community issues—poverty, homelessness, substance abuse, mental health, and gun violence to name a few.

He also does not raise those issues in a way that remains as a community pathology. He makes clear that those issues are not the "work of life." Those issues are not predetermined, not permanent, and certainly not "whatever." Rather, they are systemic. Oppressive systems can make young people internalize trauma in a way that hinders their capacity to transform those very conditions that caused the trauma in the first place. Enrique's song, however, provides a glimpse into how an understanding of trauma as a result of systemic social problems can inspire transformative possibilities. Systems of oppression may be designed to reproduce themselves, but they are still impermanent. Oppression can be interrupted. Those

systems can be ruptured. These are key understandings to gain in cultivating the capacity to improve conditions.

Enrique reveals to us through his interview and song that his existence in the water is not static. A process of radical healing cannot be contained in a curricular unit or project. It is a layered, nonlinear process that deepens over time. His existence is not trapped in a timeless state of being. It is becoming. It is in movement. The question then becomes, toward where is his existence moving?

Becoming in the Water: Understanding Me and What I Need to Do

> I feel I have always thought about all these things. I just didn't feel the need to do anything about it. I feel that I've always known there was something holding me back. Not just physically, but structurally wise in society like in schools and in stereotypes. And I always knew it. It always hit me in the face. And I just always took it. And coming into Youth Roots, it helped me find an outlet, which is music. And I definitely found a part of me that was yet to be awakened, which was my musical and artistic side. My passion for music and for writing has definitely expanded a lot more. And now I feel like I have more of a purpose, and more of an understanding of what I need to do, and what are some of my obligations to do here. To just help better society for all of us. And to help break stereotypes. And that's been my biggest epiphany.
>
> —Juan, eleventh grader

Juan reveals that seeing one's oppression as "whatever" does not mean that one does not reflect on those conditions. It might mean that one does not think that one can do anything to improve those conditions. So one might just "always take it," as Juan confessed. Oppressive conditions can be blinding to hope and possibility, which can paralyze not just forward movement but also the desire to move.

What happens when the conditions are provided for a young person like Juan to not just reflect on his environment, but gain a set of tools and skills within a community to positively affect change within it? What happens to that young person's clarity of purpose and sense of responsibility? Juan's connection with music and writing was not an end in itself. Music and writing were mediums for sense making and influencing society. His purpose was not to produce music, but rather he used music to help fulfill his purpose—"to better society for all of us." His

journey in the water had moved from *being* to *becoming*. That is, his "awakening" was a process that equipped as well as inspired him to make critical sense of his life. Becoming in the water reflects that journey to better understand oneself as situated in the political spheres of history, society, and culture.

Blanca also reflected on how culture production in Youth Roots equipped and inspired her to make critical sense of her life. While Juan reflected on how writing and music helped to serve an outward purpose in life, Blanca focused more on discussing the lifelong inward purpose of understanding our own self—the journey to soul (Akbar). Here, Blanca reflected on how not just the production of the music itself, but also how the culture production within the program among all the participants assisted her to understand herself better.

> [When creating music] I think about my feelings, my daily life, what I see in my community, how I see myself, how racism plays out everyday, like as a system, but also in how we play into it ourselves as folks. It's my third year in Youth Roots. So I feel like it helped me grow a lot. The people. What we learn about society. The work we do. It helps me understand me. It helps me grow better as a person. And I wanna keep doing what I'm doing. Because I think what we do inspires people. Also it's getting me somewhere where I could succeed and not worry about what's going on in the streets.
>
> —Blanca, ninth grade

Blanca revealed how cultural production is both process and text (Levinson and Holland). As process, her insights on racism and its daily effects on people of color indicated that gaining a political consciousness of race and racism helped to promote her own wellness and healthy development (Ginwright). She indicated that the community produced within Youth Roots, just as much as the work she produced, assisted in helping her understand herself and grow. Blanca illuminated that critical sense making influences cultural production just as much as cultural production influences critical sense making. This reciprocal relationship between process and text is key in understanding critical sense making as well as the cultural pedagogy that created the conditions to do so. Given these insights Blanca and Juan shared about their individual processes of becoming, how might those translate into the texts they produced?

Becoming in the Water: It's Not Whatever

Let us return back to Blanca and Juan's song "Inured" that was introduced earlier. From their song, we can gain some insight about the struggle in the water as well as the struggle to recognize the "water." In Juan's own situation, recognizing the water was a key step toward moving from being to becoming in the water. Through becoming, Juan developed his clarity of purpose. Through becoming, Juan found a way to move with direction and intention.

We can also gain insight into Blanca and Juan's processes of becoming by considering what motivated them to write the song in the first place. The word "inured" was found in a preparation guide as vocabulary to know for the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), which is one of the standardized tests that students can take as a college entrance exam. Particularly for Juan, who was an eleventh grader at the time, rather than merely seeing the word as one of many that he would need to study in order to perform well on test day, he made an intimately deeper connection to the word "inured." Along with Blanca, their choice in using that word as both the title and focus of a song to write suggested their own praxis-informed process of becoming. They reclaimed an unfamiliar word that could be used to exclude students from accessing college by politicizing it. They reclaimed an unfamiliar word that spoke to their lived experiences by critically examining how it systematically functions and then mainstreaming the message they felt compelled to make public.

"Inured" narrates a violent situation in their community that one must get used to. Because the story embedded within their verse is structured and progresses in such a way that mimics a critical sense-making process of becoming, I will discuss it in parts. That is, rather than present their verse in its entirety, which would provide its overall aesthetic and essence, I will instead direct the gaze to focus more closely on these four sections as a way to illuminate a process: description of a material situation, internalized sense making, naming, and return to unfolding the material situation in combination with sense making.

The first part is as follows:

Click clack bang bang
There goes a life
Left right stab stab
Put down by a knife

This verse clearly narrates a material struggle, which is a violent physical act. Its imagery is visceral and is intended to draw the listener in to imagine and feel what it might be like to be in the struggle that Blanca and Juan depict. However, rather than continue to describe the violence of the material situation, they unravel unexpected implications of the traumatic act.

> The message real clear
> Let go of all ya fear
> End of it all betcha can't even hear
> DAAAAAAAAAAMM!!

Here, Blanca and Juan take the listener to a place in the mind by making transparent a thought process that they imply is natural, that is "whatever."

Rather than straight out naming the internalized process, their storytelling approach, which is common in hip-hop culture (Chang and D. J. Kool Herc), is done in such a way where the listener can imagine a similar experience as if happening in real time. Blanca and Juan do not spoon feed the listener by forcing a concept down his/her throat. They take the listener on a journey.

They do not, however, leave the listener in the moment of the experience, void of any critique. In this third part of their verse, Blanca and Juan build their critique by naming one unfortunate but naturalized way of thinking about an painful situation: being inured.

> But that's just what its meant to do (meant to do)
> Get used to it (that's inured)

This decision to name this psychosocial condition is done in a way that is both artful and explanatory. They explain that being inured is about being used to an unpleasant hardship. They implicate the systemic nature of what is at work when they indicate that "it" has a design. "It" is meant to do something. In this case, "it" is meant for people to be inured to violent conditions that are all too common.

To texture the meaning of this portion of the verse, there are two voices at play. Outside of the parentheses, Blanca's voice is singularly rapping the lyrics. Inside the parentheses, only Juan's voice is heard, as if an echo. Consistent with hip-hop music, this echo-like utterance simultaneously serves as an emphasis of meaning and an emphasis of rhythm. This is the first instance that this echo, or

ad lib, appears in the song, which also contributes to the storytelling effect of building toward something climatic. As such, it makes perfect sense that Blanca and Juan would transition next to a falling action that reflects an internal response to an external stimuli.

> And you gotta grasp real fast
> The soundin of your homie's closing casket

The message here is that there is no time to dwell on the trauma, perhaps because there is likely to be another one literally and metaphorically around the corner. One must "keep it moving" as Juan and Blanca highlighted earlier.

As Juan and Blanca continue their song, they move beyond describing the conditions of the situation. Rather than remaining in an often occurring place when describing urban communities—pathologizing a situation as if a state of being—they do something different. They problematize the situation.

> Now you walk through the town
> And you hear a gunshot
> You find that it's normal
> I guarantee that its not
> The spot's real hot
> 5-0 on the block
> You got a chain on ya mind
> Ya need to take a look inside

First, Blanca and Juan return to narrating an unpleasant scenario—hearing a gunshot. Then they reidentify the typical response—thinking that the shooting of guns is normal. From there, they begin to problematize the situation.

They assert that there is nothing normal about having to hear gunshots, living in an area that is "hot," where police (that is, 5-0) frequently occupy as if in a militarized zone. Juan and Blanca then challenge the listeners to examine why they think what they think, which perhaps, might be confined (that is, by a chain). This is a direct challenge to the master narratives that describe communities of color in deficit oriented, pathological ways.

In many ways, Juan and Blanca's lyrics as a whole reflect their own process of becoming. They put at tension being inured to one's socially toxic conditions

and having to navigate those conditions with needing to develop a critical analysis of oppression and how it has a grasp on them. Being and becoming in "the water" is complex, discordant, and dissonant. To match the dissonance designed into this story of becoming, there is also a musical dissonance created through the beats and background chord progressions and melodies. "The message real clear"—becoming in the water is not easy. Making critical sense of one's life and social conditions can be painful—necessary for radical healing and transformation, but painful.

Becoming is not a phase that one moves through in order to reach another phase. We are always in a process of becoming and expanding our definition of ourselves. Earlier, I mentioned that Juan was emerging in his clarity of purpose. He was discovering how love as a political apparatus grounded his purpose. Music and writing acted as mediums to assist in his critical sense-making process. As a complement, Blanca indicated that her critical sense-making process as both an individual and communal experience assisted in her music production. Together, Blanca and Juan demonstrated the transformative potential of their processes of becoming in the "water." With the tools of culture production, the skills of praxis, and political love as the grounding to fuel one's purpose, how does a Youth Root participant make sense of his/her capacity to effect social change? How does a Youth Root participant not only become in the water, but also affect the water?

Working the Water: Taking It Back

You gotta stay strong its called perseverance
First step take yo mind then clear it
Set a purpose and focus
And grind mothafucka, I know you know this
And though at times yo struggle might seem hopeless
Keep ya head up you ain't alone in this
Maaannnnnn
Why you think I wrote this?
I found the mold and I broke it
Now I'm recruiting you
Let's take back Oakland
And all the stolen, dreams, lives, and moments

We stand in the face
Of reproaching hatred
And if I don't do nothing
I'm goin ta take it back
—Verse from the song, "Take It Back" by Tony, eleventh grader

"Take It Back" is an original song that includes four different lyricists, two of whom were students in the program and two who were adult educator-artists. Tony was one of the students and I was one of the adults. This collaboration and partnership between youth and adult is symbolic of the way that Youth Roots enacted a cultural pedagogy that shifted the traditional power dynamic between student and teacher.

"Take It Back" is a call to action for nondominant communities who have been historically disenfranchised to reclaim the journey toward soul. The song calls for critical and humanizing work toward self-actualization and self-determination as a counter to dominant structures of supremacy. Tony's verse is alive with an inspirational and motivational commitment to work in solidarity with the people of his town, which as a whole has been historically associated with being broken, damaged, and full of despair.

His challenge is not filled with judgment, condescension, or accusations of what is wrong with the town or its people. It is filled with the critical hope (Duncan-Andrade) needed to build and develop agency towards a committed and active struggle for justice. Tony clearly recognizes that the work to "take it back" is difficult and isolating. If it were easy, then everyone would be doing it. At the same time, there are others doing it, including him. So Tony stresses that "we" need to be taking things back together.

This is a powerful point to highlight. Working the "water" is not the same as working *in* the water. Working *in* the water certainly is part of the work to create movement in order to effect change. However being, becoming, and working *in* the water is still *in* the water. Transformation requires *changing* the water. That change requires work. Tony calls for people to put in work and to do that work *with* him. The chorus to the song reaffirms his call.

Take It Back
Back before police brutality
Take it back

Back before euro history
Take it back
Before colonized communities
Take it back take it back
So come with me
Let's take it back

As a counterstory, "Take It Back" is rooted in an analysis of racism and how it has manifested in our communities. The song is unapologetic in naming certain racialized conditions that have oppressed communities as a way to call on the masses to organize and "take it back." "Police brutality," "euro history," and "colonized communities" were all topics that were explored during learning experiences about racism on the "block," in the schools, and in interactions with outsiders moving into Oakland prior to the song ever being written. Many of the songs produced each year, like "Take It Back," resulted from the various learning experiences gained.

Another song that represents "working the water" is "Oakland State of Mind" (OSM). It was the second song on the Youth Roots album titled *Edit the Real*. The name of the album was a word play on the idea of editing movie reels. As learning explorations that year, Youth Roots examined the politics of representation and identity. Questions explored included: How much of me is really me? What do "they" say about "us"? If we really know who we are, how will we be? How will we become?

Like "Take It Back," OSM was a collaborative body of work. Perhaps it was the largest collaboration among the Youth Roots participants to that point. It included nine different emcees (lyricists), two singers, and two music producers (one student and one adult) to create the song. Beyond the song, there were three filmmakers (two students and one adult), and the entire Youth Roots group to participate in the music video and subsequent live performances.

OSM was inspired by the original song "New York State of Mind," by Jay-Z and Alicia Keys. Rather than taking the original beat from the New York version, OSM was completely produced from the ground up. The Oakland tempo is faster. The music has multiple hints of an Oakland sound and feel. The lyrics, while following a similar cadence to the original, are completely different in both theme and word choice.

In true Youth Roots fashion, the chorus best exemplifies the thematic focus:

Oakland
So much oppression can blind you
We want to remind you
City of Oakland
Love, strength, and spirit that shines through
The youth will inspire you
Let's hear it for Oakland, Oakland, Oakland

In a city that has notoriously and consistently been labeled as one of the most dangerous cities in the United States (CQ Press), OSM was explicitly written to act as a counterstory about mainstream perceptions of the city of Oakland and its residents. Competing against local news and Discovery Channel expositions that feature the world of various notorious gangs, OSM critically recognized Oakland's challenges, but more importantly it highlighted the numerous assets found in "the Town" rarely highlighted by mainstream discourses.

In order to mainstream their message more prominently, the Youth Roots students chose OSM as their feature film production for that year. They knew that to reach the masses, they would have to create a music video. In one of the film documentaries that was produced by Youth Roots, Juan discussed this idea of mainstreaming the message:

> It's important for us to get our message out. Like kinda thinking really critically about what's going on. They talk about how there's homicides going on. It's a dangerous city. But we're here man, we're intellectuals. Bud, we tryinta come out.

As a body of work, the recorded track of Oakland State of Mind, its music video, its live performances, and the culminating "All Oakland Youth Talent Showcase," which was curated, organized, and hosted by Youth Roots, were all part of "coming out," as Juan put it. "Coming out" was also meant to be done in a particular way: as "intellectuals." In essence, this is what it means to "work the water." Working the water means using mainstream mediums alongside community to put critical, intellectual messages out into the public sphere to act as counterstories to dominant ideologies. It means being a part of catalyzing change.

As demonstrated by Enrique's verse from OSM, this is how Youth Roots takes it back:

We in Oakland, streets flowin in fear
People always fuck up
Niggas going nowhere
Every other night it's pop, pop, pop
Little kids dreams down, shot shot shot
Yeah we in the Town
Tryna make a change tho
Always let my rhymes loose
Go and let my brain flow
Never ever silent
Always outspoken
Guess where I'm from
Yeah that's right, Oakland!

Working the water in Youth Roots fashion means to use the power of performance to counter the performance of power (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o). Performance acts as a site for struggle. Enactments of power take place in the arena of public performance. Will that power be used to establish dominance and supremacy over the masses or will that power be used to mobilize the masses to confront and counter dominance and supremacy? This is the struggle.

For Youth Roots, their role in the struggle is a combination of the organic intellectual (Gramsci) and the celebrity Gramscian (Neal). Gramsci introduced the concept of the organic intellectual, who emerges from what he called the un-unified, working "subaltern" classes. The organic intellectual, from this perspective, serves as an organizing intellectual force for the working classes. The celebrity Gramscian, more specifically, intersects his or her fame and political agenda to bring the message to the mainstream. Youth Roots, as media culture producers, bring that message to the mainstream public as "artivists" (Asante 202) by "any medium necessary" (Asante 203).

Leaving Your Mark: Critical Sense Making and Cultural Production as Coalitional Process

Youth Roots doesn't make you change how you are. What it does is give you the tools and the agency to change yourself as you see fit. And it teaches you

> how to look at yourself in a way that it will help you change yourself for the best.
>
> —Tony, eleventh grader

As critical culture producers, Youth Roots participants focus on leaving a mark. This happens through their power of performance using music, videos, event productions, graphic designs, and presentations/workshops for educators. These marks no doubt contribute to the counterstories of what youth of color from a city like Oakland are like and can do. The other marks left in this counterstory are the young people themselves. The youth are the walking, breathing marks, the living counterstories. Tony asserted that when he discussed changing oneself. In his self-reflection, he illuminated that Youth Roots is merely a mediator that helps young people expand their own definitions of themselves. It provides the conditions, not the mold. As Tony chanted in his "Take It Back" verse, "I found the mold and I broke it."

Youth Roots does not judge or pathologize what one is not yet. This is key to co-creating the conditions for youth to *take it back* throughout their processes of becoming. The tools and agency that Tony refered to are those that help to problematize and critically make sense of "the way things are" in order to reveal "it's NOT whatever." These revelations are key in the constant removal of obstacles that appear throughout one's life. Youth Roots, as a program that intersects with young people at some point in their lives, deems the cultivation and honing of critical sense-making skills are crucial in the ways that participants navigate their lives moving forward. The process of becoming is continual, which means there is always something to problematize and critically make sense of within ourselves and in relation to others, history, and society.

To guide that journey, Youth Roots must be fluid like water, but clear and intentional as well. Programmatically, Youth Roots does that by being rooted in a clear set of values-centered beliefs that ground the conditions for one to critically recognize the water, become in the water, and work the water alongside a community of youth and adults who aim to build with the masses using popular mediums that help mainstream the message. This entire process can be transformative for both the culture consumers (that is, audiences) and the culture producers (that is, Youth Roots). However, engaging in a transformative process of becoming and expanding one's definition of oneself, while working toward community change, is by no means easy. To assist with theorizing in this process as a framework, I

have named it Critical Sense Making (CSM). I will now briefly discuss CSM as a bridge toward this counterstory's close.

Who am I? Who are we? Where have we been? Where are we now? Where are we going? Each of these questions has no more than four words, but all are complex and can have different answers at different points in time. The self, whether individual or collective, is complex and dynamic. Individual/collective identity formation is a dynamic process within a context and involves multiple influences and intersectionalities. Aspects of our identity act as markers of our relational positions within a context during a specific point or duration in time. Because people walk through multiple contexts in daily life across time, people also have multiple positionalities.

CSM departs from critical thinking, which is often reduced to a set of individual "intellectual" skills (Paul and Elder) that do not necessitate an analysis of oppression. CSM might employ the skills of critical thinking, but its purpose is not the same. In contrast to critical thinking, CSM situates an analysis of the sociohistoric conditions that have influenced one's multiple positionalities with one's navigation of situations, decisions, and evolving clarity of purpose in the everyday political sphere of culture. As a praxis-oriented process, it centers on problematizing, challenging, and navigating ideas, situations, and texts while helping to understand oneself.

The students of Youth Roots helped to illuminate the concept of Critical Sense Making (CSM). Their music and interviews showed how CSM functioned and toward what service—an individual as well as a communal process of becoming. The role of a critically informed cultural production was in the programmatic conditions that the Youth Roots students were immersed in as well as in the variety of work they co-created. Together, Critical Sense Making and cultural production operated with reciprocity. CSM was revealed in the counterstories within their cultural products. The processes that students experienced informed the creation of the products. Concomitantly, the creation of cultural products helped in students' process of Critical Sense Making. The creative process itself placed students in a position to make critical sense of their experiences, their new learning, the purposes for their products, and how to best reach the audiences they were intending to address.

While Youth Roots was a critical media production and leadership program, it was clear that something liberating happened in those spaces that journeyed toward soul. At the same time, the moments within Youth Roots were still only

moments of seed planting. The fruits of this work did not necessarily manifest themselves immediately. When fruits did appear, old thorns might have still existed and new ones appeared. The journey toward soul was and is a continual process of becoming.

Yet, the Youth Roots project was not about soul *finding*. It was more about the interconnected and multidisciplinary processes of cultivating agency, confidence, critical consciousness, and radical healing for a community of caring and committed artivists to learn how to intentionally live their authentic journey toward soul, particularly amid the larger structures of supremacy that might try to deny that. Throughout those processes, the critical hope for all students within Youth Roots was that each person would find clarity of purpose that aimed toward the liberatory transformation of self and community. Through finding that discovered purpose and common goal, the group found one another.

You Ain't Alone in This: The Work in Higher Education and Beyond

As I conclude, I do so knowing that I will be meeting Juan for lunch directly afterward. Juan, like many of the Youth Roots alumni, is a working professional in the field of education. His journey into his current role as an after school program director has not been smooth or linear. The challenge to stay the course along a course not designed to be traveled for the long haul has proved a significant adversary. Juan has admitted to wavering multiple times in his clarity to remain on this journey toward community transformation. Yet, like many of his peers, he has remained.

We are where we live. Juan's commitment to Oakland and its youth is inextricably linked in profound ways. In the higher education classroom where I spend much of my time with adults working to deepen their own links with their communities, I remain hopeful that our struggles collectively are paving a course that is personally and socially transformative. The journey has never been easy, but at least the amount of committed travelers who walk hand in hand in solidarity has been increasing. When I walk into the classroom, when I work with schools, when I am being and becoming where I live, I am reassured that I "ain't alone in this. Maaannnnnn."

G. T. Reyes, PhD, is grounded in a commitment to work toward the capacity building and empowerment of young folks, teachers, school leaders, and cultural workers to radically imagine ways that can transform their own realities in critical, principled, values-centered, and purpose-driven ways. He currently works as a community engaged assistant professor in the Educational Leadership for Social Justice doctoral program and the Center for Research, Equity, and Collaborative Engagement (CRECE) at the California State University at East Bay. He is a former K–12 teacher, high school principal, and youth development educator and leader.

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NOTE

1. All participants as well as the location of the site have been given pseudonyms. All participants quoted in this article were between fourteen and eighteen years of age at the time of the interview and student-produced work.