Article

Re-Imagining Community and School through Youth and Artists' Critical Superhero Storytelling

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Abstract: In this article, we describe the methods and pedagogy that guided a superhero storytelling project, located in a midwestern middle school library, where youth were invited to work with a university-based research team and community-based artists who actively displaced historically formed practices of surveillance and silencing in the service of amplifying youth artistry and knowledge production. We recognize that school practices in many schools, by virtue of their complicity with hierarchical and evaluative mandates, undermine open and exploratory forms of youth expression. The arts-based project we describe, informed by a ten-year history of small-scale storytelling projects in the same school, offers a theoretical and related pedagogical framework for working with community-based artists to re-imagine and remake oppressive relational, epistemological, and material practices in school spaces. At the center of our report are two groups of youth and the artists and educators who supported them as they invented superheroes and activated the imaginative potential of their local community spaces for their storytelling.

Keywords: storytelling; community engagement; artists; imagination; school culture; historical bodies; historical spaces; middle school

1. Introduction

Storytelling with minoritized youth has long been a central project in out-of-school youth programs. Informed and inspired by calls for counter storytelling and speculative fiction writing (Butler 1986; Lorde 2004; Solórzano and Yosso 2002), educators and researchers have created intergenerational storytelling events (Flores 2018; Haddix 2018) and months-long research projects in afterschool programs (Hull and Stornaiuolo 2014; Low 2017; Toliver 2021; Winn 2010) that center the voices and imaginations of young people whose school curricula erase their stories, identities, and the people and places that matter in their lives. Most storytelling projects offer youth guidance in using poetry, short stories, and lyrics to describe pivotal events and reflections on their everyday experiences, with the intention of both healing painful memories and expressing joy and love for who they are among their families, friends, and community members. Some projects focus on the interpretation and production of visual arts and graphic novels, through shared reading, discussion, critique, and writing (Low 2017; Enciso and Krone 2022; Krone 2019 and Torres 2022). Minoritized youth also initiate their own storytelling in spaces outside of school, such as fanfiction platforms, that offer openings for "restorying" (Thomas and Stornaiuolo 2016) or displacing white normative characters, places, perspectives, and plot lines with self-designed images of favorite characters and reconfigured plot lines where they might see characters who look like themselves driving the action (Elliott 2010). Across this work, youth are viewed as creative and politically astute knowledge producers whose insights are vital to reimagining and reshaping their own and others' futures (Gordon da Cruz 2017; Fine and Torre 2019).

Youth need abundant opportunities to develop their expressive identities and skills, but after-school-based programs, subject to cuts and closures, make it difficult to find a place for developing artistic interests or discover expressive resources. Many middle-school-age youth also have responsibility for younger siblings after school, making it impossible for them to access after school programs in school or community centers. School spaces can, however, offer a refuge for youth who would otherwise be unable to travel after school to arts or community centers. In this study, we wondered what would happen if youth were encouraged to engage in this type of creative, community-based storytelling within the space of school. Given our determination to work in the spaces where youth would most broadly be able to participate in storytelling, we established relationships with school administrators, staff, and teachers who understood and valued the presence of a program that would enhance arts experiences for youth. We made clear that our work with youth could include curricular goals while focusing on youth engagement and ownership of their stories and art.

In this article, we describe the shared expertise and storytelling that unfolded among adults and youth during a superhero storytelling project we facilitated with 18 seventh-grade youth during the spring semester of 2019. We specifically detail how a collaboration with community artists in this project brought into focus youth and artists' critical knowledge about their lives, but also about school as a place for resistance, agency, joy, and change; for redefining the meaning of spaces within the school and community; and for discovering and supporting new relationships among peers and with adults. We argue that normative histories and practices within school spaces were transformed and transformative for everyone involved in our community-informed superhero storytelling project.

2. Theoretical Frames

Historical Bodies and Spaces

School spaces have been historically shaped and sedimented in ways that often prescribe and restrict youth's agency and imaginative activity. We see this sedimentation through the lens of what Blommaert and Huang (2009) describe as "historical bodies" and "historical spaces." Arguing against the ethnographic instinct to describe a "timeless present" (p. 3), Blommaert and Huang draw attention to how meanings calcify onto material bodies and places through time.

Although, as literacy researchers, we are often attuned to words, language, and texts, both material and social histories shape how meanings are made. These histories are, in part, located on individual bodies, which enter interactions with their past experience, which "conditions (and constrains) what they can do in social action" (p. 7). However, these histories are also embedded into patterns around how particular spaces are moved through and used. As Blommaert and Huang describe this phenomenon: "our bodies fall into shape (or out of shape) each time we enter or leave a certain space" (p. 11). As an illustration of historically formed meaning, they particularly employ the example of a teacher handing out papers in a school classroom, a practice that seems mundane but functions smoothly to describe how histories of bodies in social spaces construct how meanings are made. Although this movement seems mundane, the lens of historical bodies and spaces illuminates how this action is historically shaped through normative expectations about how student and teacher bodies act within the space of school.

Blommaert and Huang focus primarily on how bodies and spaces accrue meanings through repeated social processes, and we are similarly interested in how both youth authors and artists described the normativities that regimented their experiences of school. However, we are also curious about how this project and partnership interrupted these historically sedimented meanings. To analyze this transformation, we employ theories of critical imagination (Enciso 2017; Pelaprat and Cole 2011; Stetsenko 2017; Holland et al. 2001), which describe how social actors can reuse available cultural resources in unexpected ways to conceptualize alternative ways of being in the world. Holland et al. (2001) describe this as a process of heuristic change, which has the potential to shift how we read future

circumstances. We see #metoo, #BlackLivesMatter, and #Neveragain as examples of new imagined heuristics that ignited social movements by shifting historically sedimented readings of bodies and spaces. Although these imaginative shifts might seem temporary, in the moment of enactment, these pivots can destabilize the established expectations that structure relationships within social spheres, opening space for new roles and identities. Holland et al. explain that "ruptures of the taken-for-granted can remove [fossilized] aspects of positional identities from automatic performance and recognition to commentary and re-cognition" (p. 141). We use this perspective to shed light on how shared experiences of imaginative play enabled youth authors and artists to take on new visions of their peers and selves.

We are also interested in the broader role of imaginative play in unsettling the historical meanings of school spaces and the gaps youth and artists generated in these spatial roles and regularities (Enciso and Krone 2022). These gaps happen in small ways every day in classrooms, as students riff off of academic content, play around with classroom spaces, and make unexpected connections between curricula and the texts they love. We see these gaps—between what is historically anticipated within school spaces and the actions of youth authors and artists within the superhero storytelling project—as what Davis et al. (2020) describe as "moves to elsewhere" that generate alternative ways of being in school. Rather than seeing school as a stagnant entity, resistant to change, a lens of critical imagination allows us to conceptualize this space as "historically evolving, that is, continuously changing and constantly moving because of what people do in their collaborative practices and enactments of social life" (Stetsenko 2017, p. 191). Such a stance, where the future is not presumed to be a continuation of the "historical present" but rather unfolding in unexpected ways, allowed us to engage in "posing questions about how things are . . . by envisioning them being otherwise and acting on these visions" (p. 194). In this paper, we highlight how, through this partnership, youth envisioned historical bodies and historical spaces otherwise through collaborative storytelling and artistic creation.

3. Methods

3.1. Storytelling in the Mount

Mountview Middle School is located at the center of an urban corridor leading from the city's central downtown to a suburban outer belt. The school serves about 500 students in grades six to eight who identify as Somali, White and Black Appalachian, South Asian, and Latinx. Many family members are employed by a nearby casino or in the downtown service industry, where they work long hours and travel to and from work via limited public transportation. The neighborhood has been identified through census, local news, and other reports as a high-poverty area with escalating crime, drug overdose, and homicide rates, reflecting the systemic economic, medical, policing, and racial inequities that define extreme divisions of wealth and resources across the city. These divisions intensified in the early 1990s with the loss of living wage jobs, due to the dismantling of light manufacturing. More recently, the communities adjacent to the Mount have witnessed increasing gentrification as young professionals employed in new medical and insurance service centers have purchased homes at low prices and rented newly built high-priced apartments, pushing longtime residents out of the Mount and into other parts of the city.

Youth in our project would agree that life can be unpredictable and even dangerous at times. They could tell us exactly where scenes of assault, drug activity, and deprivation are visible and persistent, and they could describe their strategies for avoiding "scary people" and "bad places". These same youth, however, could also point to the familiar and intriguing people and places that appeal to them: their music teacher and the new café where she invited kids to perform; the community center where they practice basketball with their friends and learn their moves from a winning coach; the public library and its dedicated librarians, who hold a favorite comic book series installment; the Salvation Army and the homework center they run after school; large parks with fishing ponds; the many churches with services in Spanish and English; the Somali food and clothing distribution

center; the bus stop for rides across town; a corner store; the chain grocery store; and the Wendy's, McDonalds, Starbucks, and Dollar Store, which all hire eighth graders to shelve and sweep. Our project needed to be in a place where middle school youth gather, so that travel arrangements and after school responsibilities would not be a burden. The most accessible and equitable place and time for us to work with youth was at school, during school hours.

Pat Enciso began working at Mountview Middle School as a facilitator of storytelling programs in 2009, when she developed an informal storytelling club during the school lunch hour, out of a need to lower the antagonism between immigrant and non-immigrant youth (citation). These meetings took place in the school library, where it was possible to talk without the constraint of an imposed curriculum or the presumption that silence was necessary for learning. The weekly meetings with eight to ten youth over three years (sixth through eighth grade) demonstrated the value of sustained, informal, youth-led dialogue for displacing suspicions about and increasing interest in one another's lives (Enciso 2017).

Over the next ten years, the district intensified its surveillance of students' weekly learning objectives and behavioral compliance. This included the use of digital badges, which students wore on lanyards and teachers used to record behavior and test scores for a district monitoring system. Not surprisingly, youth regularly misplaced their badges. Still, the presence of badges and related micromanagement of youth behavior signaled a version of surveillance more akin to impersonal punish-oriented incarceration systems than to agentic youth inquiry and growth. At the same time, several teachers involved in a university–school arts partnership implemented innovative storytelling and drama-based pedagogy that opened opportunities for inquiry and improvisational meaning-making. We worked with these teachers during summer school sessions (2016–2018) and the 2017–2020 school years to support youth-authored superhero narratives, centered in community places. Teachers recognized that students' stories were rich with metaphor, imagery, action, and allusions related to their perceptions of relationships, challenges, and everyday events. We wondered, then, how their stories might reach an audience beyond the classroom and whether community artists might be able to work with youth to move their stories from drafts and storyboards to artistic presentations and performances.

3.2. Funding and Scheduling

In 2018, Patricia (Pat) Enciso met with directors of the university's outreach and engagement program to discuss funding parameters for a proposal that would bring five community artists to the school over ten weeks, where they would assist youth in telling their stories through different media.

Although an arts-based proposal was unusual for this university grant, funding was awarded to support the artists, materials, and a project manager, who coordinated artists' involvement in the project and guided youth toward final presentations. With funding in hand, we were able to re-engage with the school administrators to seek their cooperation in allowing artists to work with youth during school hours. After reviewing the weekly schedule with teachers, we determined that we could regularly meet with youth on Friday afternoons, when the school library was available and all students were assigned to a "core" class for general test preparation; we were also able to work in the library on Wednesday afternoons during the seventh-grade English Language Arts period. We met from January through May 2019 for 25 fifty-minute sessions. During the first ten sessions, youth worked with the university team, and then with community artists during the next fifteen sessions. One additional session included a bus trip to the university arts center, where youth walked across campus, visited the main library, and attended a young people's theatrical performance.

3.3. The Library

In 2016, the district hired a licensed librarian and former English teacher to refurbish the library, which resulted in a remarkable makeover, including new carpeting, paint, and

furniture suitable for adolescents to chat at high-top tables, relax in comfortable moveable chairs, and create seating arrangements with geometric-shaped modular furniture. A large-screen monitor was available for showing videos and PowerPoint presentations and a moveable double-sided whiteboard often served as a notice board. A storage room and a gifted resource room, as well as a counseling office and tutoring room, were also accessible through the library. In 2018, the librarian was replaced with a part-time aide. The space itself was often used for testing, where strict policies of minimal movement and no talking were enforced. In contrast, we selected the library as a site for this study because we viewed the space as a welcoming, multi-use space, where youth could gather in their own seating arrangements. Each session coincided with the end of the school day, so adults were able to clean up and continue to debrief and plan for the next session.

3.4. Youth Participants

We asked seventh-grade language arts teachers to identify youth who were especially vocal and enthusiastic about art forms such as dance, visual arts, film, music, and drama. Eighteen youth joined the project, by self-nomination and/or teacher nomination. Youth who participated throughout the program identified as Latinx (five girls and one boy), African American (four girls and three boys), Cambodian (one boy), Cambodian and Black (one boy), African American and White (two boys), and White (one girl).

3.5. Artists

In January 2019, Pat reached out to two community arts leaders to ask for recommendations of artists who specialized in working with youth. Additionally, Pat posted a call to artists through the city's artists-in-the-schools platform. Three artists provided resumes and brief letters of interest and were subsequently invited to work with youth during the second ten weeks. We also engaged a local comics artist and dance educator to provide one-time workshop sessions. Two artists identified as White and female, Gabrielle Solange identified as mixed race and female, and our comic artist and dancer identified as Black males. The artists brought a range of expertise including fashion and fabric design, video production, singing and music composition, visual arts, hip hop dance, and digital comics composition. All artists had experience working with youth and lived or worked in or near the Mount.

3.6. University-Based Facilitators

The university-based group was composed of one professor, who identifies as a White Latinx cis woman, and three cis women, two White and one Latinx, who were graduate students in literacy education and who had multiple years of experience with middle school age youth. In previous storytelling projects, as in this one, our primary interactions with youth involved working alongside them to support their storytelling. We scribed as they generated ideas, clarified plot and character developments, assisted with digital and computer technology, drew attention to one another's ideas, and gathered materials for their art and presentations. In our role as researchers, we documented interactions among youth with handheld digital recorders, video cameras, and smartphones, and reflected together and with artists and youth on the events and changes we observed.

3.7. Pedagogy

As described in the theoretical framing for this work, we viewed storytelling as a medium for opening up possibilities for youth to name and reimagine relationships among characters' identities and their actions in local places. At the same time, youth experienced themselves as storytellers and artists. Stories functioned as heuristics for trying out new ways to be seen and heard and to examine the world for what it is and what it might become. Our aim with youth was to create and sustain an ethos of collaborative art making, much like a writers' room, where ideas are suggested, improvised on, included, or changed as new story elements are proposed.

As university-affiliated adult facilitators, we unquestionably occupied positions of authority and power within the project and within smaller student storytelling groups. From these positions, we sought to create space for youth's "desire-based" action and narration and to lower pedagogical and research practices that reinforced the "damage discourses" (Tuck 2009) that already circulated about the neighborhood and school. Our primary role with youth was to facilitate their storytelling and artistry by encouraging them to play with ideas, take risks with new artforms, and value their own knowledge and interpretive insights about their lives and community. The library space allowed youth to form flexible groupings and workspaces where they could talk and animate their ideas among themselves and through cross-group invitations to collaborate.

During the first ten sessions with youth, we explained that they were responsible for creating superhero stories, set in the Mount, that would be told through different artforms, supported by professional artists whom they would meet in mid-March. We introduced them to the comic superhero narrative *Miles Morales: The Ultimate Spider-Man* (Bendis and Pichelli 2012) by improvising and enacting scenes as a whole group. This method, called "Whoosh" (Farmer n.d.), was facilitated by Pat as she narrated excerpts from the comic, and tapped youth, seated in a circle, to enter the central space and enact the scene. As each scene ended, Pat proclaimed, "Whoosh!", and actors left the center and returned to their seats. Miles Morales' story includes scenes of high action and interaction among onlookers and the main characters, as well as introspective scenes when the hero expresses uncertainty about the dangers of their powers and the burden of their responsibilities. We engaged with Whoosh storytelling over two sessions, discovering each time that some students wanted to move and bound across the space as Spider-Man, while others were content to minimally enact scenes and cheer on those who were more visible. Our aim was to create a collaborative, low-risk, fun storytelling experience that would also help us focus on the key components of a superhero story.

During the next session, we asked youth to consider places in the Mount where a superhero might feel protected and vulnerable. We intended this naming to amplify their everyday experiences and perspectives in relation to the fantastic stories they composed. Working on the large whiteboard, youth listed spaces where they perceived danger (parking lots, certain streets, school) and places of safety and joy (playgrounds, the library, community center, church, a neighbor or relative's home, a best friend's home, school). They also listed social concerns that superheroes and regular people might be able to change, including caring for people who are homeless, creating safe crosswalks, providing transportation, providing more food resources, creating jobs, getting rid of drugs, stopping guns, and stopping fights.

In an attempt to bridge the storytelling project with curricular goals, we also asked youth to complete narrative analysis charts that highlighted character perspectives, the role of setting, and the major shifts in the story's events. However, youth typically abandoned these efforts in favor of their own storytelling and scene enactments, led by one youth in particular who literally danced while talking through his story ideas. We also noticed that youth were beginning to form small groups, even though most did not know one another prior to the storytelling project.

By the fifth session, we shifted away from analyzing the comic narrative and focused exclusively on youth's storytelling. We gave everyone a deck of "superhero cards" with narrative features commonly associated with superhero narratives: an origin story, a defined strength, power, weakness/vulnerability, a villain who may be known or unknown, and something or someone they would protect at all costs. We also asked them to include two settings from the Mount: a place where the character is safe and protected and a place where the character is vulnerable. We asked them to use these features to construct their hero, villain, action, and setting.

As the youth began to brainstorm story ideas, we also asked what artform they might want to learn for presenting their story. At this point, six groups formed around youth interests in comic/anime digital art, video making, visual art, fashion and costume design,

music, and dance. Small groups met during each subsequent session, at times merging storylines and contributing to one another's artistic representations. The university-based adults continued to work with each group to record or scribe their story ideas as requested and to encourage them to develop their stories by using the superhero cards and setting ideas. As their stories took shape, youth referenced everyday places and events and an impressive array of popular cultural material from all forms of social media, films, television, and music (Enciso and Krone 2022).

When community artists joined youth during the eleventh and twelfth sessions, they shared examples of their artwork with the whole group. Youth began to realize that they would, indeed, be able to work with professional artists to develop their stories and begin using artistic modes of expression to share their stories with peers and families. During the next ten sessions, three artists met with small groups to help them develop visual images, storyboards, costume designs, and music for their stories. They brought pattern templates, video equipment, digital music composition applications, and sewing supplies; and the university team purchased props (wigs, a chemistry beaker, and white lab coat), as well as watercolor supplies and professional-grade watercolor paper. As artists began to guide youth to try new artforms and take risks with painting, cutting fabric, and focusing the camera, these materials and related artistic practices co-evolved with youth storytelling and artistic explorations.

In the final few weeks of the project, all groups began to focus on completing their planned story presentations, working closely with artists who guided them through the final phases of costume fitting and music composition (Las Reinas), scene filming (KDM), storyboard and narration (Mount Heroes), digital character images for a PowerPoint story (Paradox), and dance (Bboy).

In preparation for their presentation in the library, youth invited family members, created a playbill, organized seating and a staging area, and arranged cupcakes and soft drinks for their post-presentation celebration.

4. Methodology and Methods

As project facilitators, we attempted to take a listening stance to make room for youth's emergent stories. Similarly, as researchers, we worked from an ethnographic methodological stance (Heath and Street 2008; Blommaert and Jie 2020) to answer our broader research questions about what might happen when youth participated in collaborative community-based storytelling during the school day. We believe this methodological stance best allowed us to emically capture youth's experiences of this project and its effects.

Over the course of this project, we collected an ethnographic data set (Blommaert and Jie 2020) that included audio recordings of the 25 fifty-minute sessions we spent with youth authors, photographs of youth artwork and creations, and mid-project and exit interviews with each author group. After artists joined youth author groups, we also conducted and audio-recorded informal debriefs after each session and conducted formal exit interviews with each artist, at the conclusion of the project.

For the purposes of this paper, we will focus specifically on (a) the performance or artistic product youth created for their story and (b) interviews with youth authors and artists. We are curious about how this project disrupted historically sedimented meanings and practices associated with school, allowing students to imagine and play beyond these bounds. To conduct this analysis, we rely upon participants' own descriptions of how this project changed their ways of being and interacting in school. In doing so, we hope to position youth and artists as not only subjects of this study but also co-analysts who participated in naming its ramifications and effects.

We describe two groups of youth authors in our findings section, sharing their descriptions of this work, alongside the two artists with whom they collaborated. One of the groups, who wrote a story titled "Las Reinas," was composed of four Latinx girls, Aurelia, Dulce, Eloisa, and Julia. This group worked with a white female textile artist, Judy, to design costumes for their story, and with Gabrielle Solange, a filmmaker, singer, and

producer, who composed lyrics and music for their story. The second group, who created a superhero nicknamed "KDM," was made up of three boys, two of whom identified as Black and one of whom identified as biracial. The KDM authors, True, Denzel, and Aaron, worked with Gabrielle (Gabi) to transform their story into a movie script for a short film in which they all held starring roles.

We focus on these groups because their stories and artistic products represent two unusual ways of producing knowledge in school. Their descriptions of this experience also represent the myriad ways in which school–community partnerships can meaningfully interrupt anticipated routes and routines and roles in both youth's and adults' school experiences.

In our analysis, we first logged all interviews with these two groups and their collaborating community artists. We then coded for talk turns where youth and artists described changes and transformations they experienced because of this project. However, for the sake of brevity, we will focus primarily on youth experiences. We conducted a second round of coding in which we grouped these descriptions into three categories: youth and artists' descriptions of (1) changes to their relationships with peers and adults, (2) changes in their experiences with material (equipment, art materials, shifts, and spatial surroundings), and (3) changes in how they viewed knowledge production. We move through these three categories below, keeping in mind that youth's descriptions of their references to material, relational, or knowledge shifts often intersected and became mutually informative.

4.1. Findings

In our analysis, we found that youth primarily described three types of imaginative shifts in their historically sedimented experiences of school. First, youth detailed how they reused physical spaces and materials to fit the aims of their storytelling. Second, youth explained how this project allowed them to reimagine their relationships with their peers. Third, youth articulated how this project shifted their own understanding of themselves as knowledge producers. These three shifts underline the power of collaborative community-based storytelling in school spaces. We describe them in detail below.

4.2. Material Shifts and Spatial Repurposing

We begin this section with youth perspectives on material shifts, new materials, and spatial repurposing that happened across their work with artists in the school library. In terms of "historical space," despite the library's welcoming arrangement, library decorum usually required constant self-monitoring of one's own and others' ways of sitting, walking, talking, and interacting. By opening and sustaining a gap for imagining how a story and its artistic expression might be realized, youth and artists needed to work together to literally (re)make space and materials to animate and rehearse their ideas.

For True, Denzel, and Aaron, this play began when Gabi began to show them how to transform their KDM story into a script and movie. For the previous ten sessions, the boys in this group had worked out the details of Kris Davonte Miller (KDM for short), the superhero they had created, narrating how he got his superpowers from a medical experiment gone wrong in the basement of the neighborhood corner store conducted by an evil doctor named Dr. Tiny. At the climax of this story, KDM was pulled into a lake in the Mount by a giant fish, only to discover that he had the power to turn into any animal. Although he eventually transformed back into his human form, this led to an awkward encounter with his crush at a coffee shop, where, in True's words, she "got that quick smell of fish."

While this initial storytelling was largely conducted seated around a table, with Pat scribing the group's ideas, the group set their story in motion after Gabi arrived. Denzel described this process of moving from the story to a live-action film: "We wanted to do a comic book or a slide show. And then True was like, 'Can we do a short film?' Then [Gabi] had a camera that could record and that was really helpful and she got her microphone and we started getting the props that we needed for storytelling and we were trying to figure

out where we were going to do it, because all the scenes we did out here were loud." As Gabi worked scene by scene through the group's story, they shifted into different roles in the story using props she brought, in addition to props adapted from the supply room to recreate scenes of evil doctors and animal transformations. Quickly, the library became their stage, and other groups grew accustomed to the group's requests for temporary moments of silence for filming. For one specific scene, which needed absolute silence for filming, the groups moved into the supply room, creating the set they needed apart from the distraction of their peers. When Pat asked Denzel how filming helped his story get told, he replied, "It helped us move around, because we like to bounce and stuff. So we could focus." Denzel mentioned that he and True often make YouTube videos about the videogame *Fortnite*, so they did have filmmaking experience. However, he also noted, "we talk but we don't move around, and I like moving around."

In the final presentation, the group screened their video to their peers, who expressed surprise and delight as their classmates transformed into Dr. Tiny and KDM, and familiar settings, like the school hallways and the supply room, became locations of superheroic conflict and action. For this group of youth authors, this project, and specifically, working with Gabi as filmmakers, transformed the historical space of school (and corresponding expectations about how bodies should conform to this space) into a place where they could "bounce," "move," and repurpose settings and resources to meet new ends. Although Denzel reported that his family was trying to move out of the Mount the summer after the project, he explained this difference between historically sedimented meanings of school spaces and the meanings that unfolded within the project. "I want to come back for this [superhero storytelling project]" he declared, but qualified this with, "I don't want to be here for class.".

With the second group of youth authors we feature in this paper, these material transformations happened on slightly different scales. In this group, Aurelia, Dulce, Eloisa, and Julia worked together to tell the story of a character they named "Lightning Queen." Although this story changed as the youth authors combined and modified their ideas, this story featured a superhero teen girl (an eighth grader at Mountview). Lightning Queen's superpowers are activated when her boyfriend breaks up with her and begins talking to other girls. As she falls into a deep depression, she learns she has the power to control the weather, bringing storms and rain. She also develops a connection with her grandmother, who has passed away but returns to give her advice in the form of a pet dog.

Students were interested in creating costumes for this character (whose original name was "Fashion Queen"), and Judy Rush, a local textile artist, supported their costume-designing and -making process in preparation for their evolving plan to share their story as a runway/performance of "Las Reinas", the Lightning Queens. For their final performance, they each read lines of a short script, included below:

> *Abuelita te quiero ver*
> *I want to see you (spoken all together)*
> *What's happening to me? What are these clothes? Why are people talking about me all*
> *   of the sudden? Why am I so sad when it rains or storms?*
> *Why do I feel like I'm more powerful when I'm with them?*
>
> *Beep Beep*
> *I'm getting a text: "Why are you so different?" You are not different*
> *You're just being yourself*
> *No matter what people say you're still the same to us*
>
> *Why did you send that text? Why did you say I'm different? What does different mean?*
> *   Maybe talk to her before talking about her*
> *Don't judge her if you don't know her*

The first material transformation we want to highlight in the work of Las Reinas is the transformation of the historical bodies of "students" into imagined superheroes through

costuming. In an exit interview, Beth Krone asked how the girls' different costumes related to the story, and Julia explained, "We're basically all one version of Lightning Queen. At first we didn't really know, but then we were making the costumes and we thought that. They're different colors with the same design." Their costumes shared similar features but also remained distinct for each girl's style and personality. Judy embraced the challenge of gathering supplies for their artwork. As the project began, she reported, "I'm going to start looking for some fabrics at Goodwill [a charity-based recycled clothing store.] They can use the legs. They can use the sleeves. They can change a waistband. They can color something. They can iron on something and change it. It doesn't have to be sewing on a machine." Judy's knowledge and flexibility with available materials became a source of delight and learning for the girls. When Judy arrived at school with two bags full of secondhand satin and taffeta prom dresses, the girls began to imagine their costumes, but they were reluctant to cut up the dresses. Judy encouraged them by handing over the scissors and assuring them that mistakes are impossible. Julia articulated the way this transformed the telling of the groups' story and their own roles within this space. She explained, "If we weren't able to create costumes the story might be boring. This is more fun and will give a little taste. Like you can see it in real life." In contrasting the two-dimensional story with the group's three-dimensional costumes, Julia described a sensory and material shift, marking the costuming experience as "a little taste" and something "you can see in real life." Like their superheroes who reshaped material experiences of the weather, the girls' Lightning Queen costumes reshaped how their story was materially experienced by themselves and their peers.

In addition to learning fashion design and transforming material for costuming, the girls also encountered new narratives for representing female superhero bodies, which notoriously reproduce a damaging beauty standard. While developing designs for her costume, Eloisa referenced a workshop conducted by a local comic artist, whose images of female characters celebrated their large torsos, arms, and legs. As she explained in an interview, Eloisa initially imagined her character as Wonder Woman: "I was like, at first I wanted to dress in the boots because I wanted to try to see if . . . because I wanted to look like Wonder Woman. . . . she had like a little tight dress with high boots." She also referenced images of the beloved Tejana singer Selena, and tried to draw her bustier as a feature of her own design. After Judy provided design templates representing different body types, Eloisa began exploring possibilities more in line with her own body shape. Following the workshop with Mr. W, she recalled, "He showed us that we can be different kinds of shapes, not only skinny because all the superheroes are skinny. And he was like, just go look at yourself. See what you can see in your brain. We don't only have to have a skinny person in superheroes. It can be a chubby person, could be a skinny person. It could be thick, you know. And [Gabi] helped me make it kinda thick and chubby. I even wear the skirt!"

Working with three artists who reinforced the joy of embodying one's full self, Eloisa encountered a new narrative of superhero identity that materially shifted her understanding of who is represented in these stories and what she could do to create images and an actual costume made to fit and celebrate her imagined and real self. Rarely is such a confluence of material and narrative engagement made available to young people in school settings for their consideration and transformation.

Youth stories also disrupted prevailing deficit narratives about the larger space of their neighborhood and community. They deliberately foregrounded joy, humor, and flair over "the bad parts." Indeed, both stories included multiple spaces where youth found safety, community, and positivity: a grandmother's house, playing Fortnite in the front room, a fishing pond in a nearby park, a neighborhood corner store, and the community center. Similarly, the Las Reinas storytellers recognized that most people viewed the Mount as "where the bad parts are." But Aurelia argued that, "It's good that it's in the Mount because you [others] don't know what the Mount is going through. Like crimes are always happening but—it's hard to explain," as Dulce continued, "Yeah. and it's not

that bad as people think it is." In defense of their community, the storytellers developed storylines of agency and proud representations of their everyday lives and community spaces (intervening in a fight and stopping a villain/bully, speaking back to negative social media attacks). While stories do not materially change a place, the practice of restorying (Thomas and Stornaiuolo 2016) defies sedimented views, upsets the "historical present" (Stetsenko 2017, and opens a heuristic for examining who has the right to frame the meaning of our social lives. We argue that telling these stories in school is significant for youth, who learn to create a place for voice and vision, especially under constrained conditions.

4.3. Relational Shifts

Youths in this project not only described the shifts that emerged as they reimagined uses for materials, selves, and stories in the "historical space" of school, but they also noted the ways this partnership changed their relationships to both artists and the peers who joined them as authors and artists. Although students' relationships to each other in school are often framed by social and academic hierarchies, youth in both the KDM and Las Reinas groups both described how, within the space of this partnership, they learned to know each other in new, strengths-based ways. We use their reflections on their experience to consider how collaborative creating alongside adult artists allowed them to unsettle historically sedimented relationships to each other and imagine new possibilities for being together in school.

Telling stories in the school meant that youth were familiar with one another, either by friendship or reputation. In the KDM group, True and Denzel were longtime friends; however, Aaron was new to the school and not someone they had worked with or noticed, beyond the fact that he rarely spoke. During one interview, Aaron was absent and True and Denzel began talking about how excited and surprised they were by Aaron's participation in their shared storytelling. True shared that, "It's been cool. Because we get to know him better." Denzel added, "We can communicate with him better. Like newbies who weren't here last year, everyone's like, 'Who is that?'" "Like people who come from another school, it's hard because you just get bullied," True explained. "[Aaron] doesn't get bullied though," Denzel commented, and True declared, "I don't let nobody bully him."

Although Aaron was a quiet presence within the group's authoring, and later, film-making, which was largely led by True and Denzel, they also recognized Aaron's work within this group as key to their shift in relationship. In another interview, when Aaron was present, Denzel compared Aaron to Nick Fury, the Marvel superhero who founded the Avengers: "Aaron had the biggest part. Just like Nick Fury, even though he's a side character, he had one of the largest roles. So you have to give credit to the side characters that are not the main characters." True affirmed this reframing of social power and importance through the lens of side characters, "He was like the best actor." Aaron, listening, responded, "I felt really shy," and Denzel explained, "When we first started doing it [filming the KDM story] he felt kind of shy, and as we got further in, he let loose." When the group screened the final short KDM film during the final presentation day, Aaron's performance as the doctor who poisoned KDM drew similar praise from his peers.

Through the action of co-creating with the group, Aaron—who had been read in certain ways within the historical space of school—played out new relationships and roles.

Gabrielle Solange, the filmmaker and editor behind this group's short film, shared True and Denzel's sentiments about how this project changed relationships, allowing the group to reimagine identities beyond sedimented expectations. In an interview, she also pinpointed relational shifts: "[The film] was definitely a radical transformation of every kid involved . . . that's gonna definitely impact the rest of their lives just to see that they can push past their fear, that they can step out of what limits have been put on them and do anything." Denzel noted, when asked about Gabi's role, "I think what she did for Aaron is help boost his voice so that he could be heard." However, Gabi also noted how the project changed not only students' narratives of themselves and each other but also artists' own relationships to their purpose and their work.

When asked about the effects of working with youth in this project, Gabi responded, "opportunities like this sustain artists like me. And they assign value to us for being an example to the kids and to the community—that we can make a difference in the city."

For the KDM group, this transformation of relationships extended beyond school walls. When Pat wondered if the group would share this with others, True replied that he could not wait for his mom to see the movie they were going to make. This was in part because of True's close relationship to their fictional character, KDM, who he described as close to himself: "I relate [KDM] to me. Because he's like kind of funny, entertaining, confused, scared, doesn't know what to do with his life." Although in school spaces, youth are often slotted into "student" roles with relationships built upon competition, conformity, and compliance, here the creative play encouraged in the filmmaking of the KDM allowed youth (and the artist they worked with) to rearrange relationships so that a deeper understanding of self and others could become visible.

The girls in the Las Reinas storytelling group also identified shifts in their relationships. Unlike True, Denzel, and Aaron, however, the Las Reinas storytellers were close friends before this project, including Eloisa and Julia, who were cousins and lived in the same household. All of the girls realized that, despite their daily proximity, they were surprised by one another's revelations as they began telling the Lightning Queens story together. In one interview, Julia reported that in their storytelling sessions, "Eloisa always says her past and then I'm like 'I didn't know that!'" When Beth asked how participants' pasts came up in storytelling, Julia explained, "We combine our histories with our stories sometimes." In a separate interview, Aurelia and Dulce described a similar shift in their relationship to Eloisa, who had been their friend for the past two years of middle school but took center stage in the Las Reinas story and costume creation. "In here, she was really smart," Aurelia explained. Dulce added, "She doesn't feel like she's smart but she really is, she's really creative." Eloisa herself reflected on this change as well, describing her own resonances with the Lighting Queen character the group created. Like True, who named his ability to "relate" to KDM, Eloisa explained that, similarly to Lighting Queen, she was trying to move beyond tumultuous emotions to achieve peace. "Now I am like this up and down," Eloisa told Pat, "but when I grow up, I want to be balanced . . . being balanced in life will get you out of trouble. A fact. Being balanced in life will help you be kind." Similarly to Aaron, Eloisa took on new roles and relationships to both herself and her peers within the Las Reinas group. Although her role in school was often that of "troublemaker", this collaboration allowed Eloisa to step into a creative composer role that reshaped her relationship both with herself and with others.

Eloisa attributed this shift both to her storytelling peers and to the group's artist/mentor, Judy, who collaborated on their fashion designs. When asked how working with an artist changed her storytelling experience, Eloisa replied that she valued Judy "taking her time to come and work with us. She could be doing something else, but she came to work with us." As Judy transformed materials into costumes, inviting the girls in as co-artists and co-authors, the group became not only friends but also creators. Dulce also described this shift, reflecting that the project was "fun" because "I get to spend more time with my friends and when we're not here we can talk about it at recess or when I'm with them . . . Like we talk about the costumes and what do they think about it." Although, in the KDM group new relationships were built amongst youth as they came together as filmmakers, in the Las Reinas group, existing friendships were reconfigured and expanded as youth collaborated as artists and creators. Furthermore, in partnership with community artists, youth began to understand each other as smart, capable, engaged, and important within and beyond the time and space of school and the storytelling project.

4.4. Knowledge Shifts

As Blommaert and Huang (2009) argue, knowledge is embodied and "enskilled" through the accrual of interactions in historically formed spaces, among others who reproduce normalized relations and actions. During their storytelling with community artists

and university-based researchers, youth recognized that their knowledge could become visible in ways that were typically disallowed in the "historical present" of the library and school. Through the invitation to imagine worlds and create artistic representations of characters and storylines, youth worked within a gap that "ruptured the taken-for-granted" about themselves, their community, and their presence in school (Holland et al. 2001, p. 141). In interviews, youth identified knowledge about themselves, their community, and one another that became valuable new "pivots" for being and becoming spokespersons for their lives.

In the KDM group, students described this epistemological shift in terms of their excitement to share their own ideas and craft their own stories, implying a contrast with how knowledge was typically valued and produced in the space of school. When Pat asked Denzel to describe the project, Denzel responded, "It's cool to work with artists, different types of artists and have our own story to tell." True responded that the project was "special and fun at the same time." Pat followed up, asking how exactly it was fun, and Denzel expanded upon this: "We get to make our own ideas and make our own stories." True tacked on, "Make funny scenes." True also pointed out that he appreciated, "how we get to make our own design of the character and the color, how he should be and how he wants to look." For both of these youth authors, making their *own* stories using their *own ideas* was central to the joy and pleasure they found in creating this superhero in collaboration with both artists and each other.

True and Denzel expanded on the shift from historically established knowledge about their neighborhood to their own perceptions. True noted that, in the storytelling process facilitated through this project, "you're telling a story about your life." Denzel continued, explaining how this required a specific balance, "It's about our own life but we can put more positive things. Like most of our life has been positive and there's been some negative so we can't have all our negative in some story that supposed to be funny or fun and we're supposed to have fun doing it and we don't want to bring up bad times that might make us feel sad and not want to do it anymore. So that's why we can make it about our positive life but not just all our negative. Maybe there can be some negative things . . . but no one wants to read just a negative book or story." Like Julia, who suggested that Lighting Queen represented a different story about the Mount, Denzel described how this storytelling experience allowed the KDM group multiple pathways to regulate how their lives were known. "It's kind of life changing," True followed up, "because you're letting your feelings out and . . . letting people know what happened in your life." The "letting people know" that True described disrupted practices of silencing and opened imaginative spaces for youth creators to produce knowledge about themselves on their own terms. This knowledge production also allowed students to move into new roles as skilled and competent producers of texts and art. Students talked about this project as a first step in filmmaking and production careers, and True noted that this experience, "boosted my confidence to be an actor one day.".

In the Las Reinas group, youth described similar experiences of knowledge (re)production. When asked about the name of their group and why they shifted from Lightning Queens to Las Reinas, they announced together, "Because we are queens! And [Spanish] sounds better and we're mostly Latinas. We're all Latinas." In recognition of their Latina pride, Gabi composed a song using a merengue beat and Spanish-dominant lyrics improvised and selected by the girls. During the final performance, Gabi's Spanish-dominant vocals and musical composition were shared as a surprise for the girls and the whole group. Gabi demonstrated the power of the girls' knowledge and talent by elevating their ideas, language, and musical preferences through a professionally produced soundtrack. When Pat asked Eloisa what she expected of the project overall, she responded, "I thought it was boring. I thought we were just going to write a story and that was it." However, she described her actual experience of the project as "fun and cool" while "being with people we love and creating." Dulce added, "And you get to make something that's just yours, completely created by you all." The girls' knowledge production was accom-

plished as an embodied, joyful collective displacement of White-dominant monolingual, monocultural education that disrupted the often "boring" experiences of school-based literacy assignments.

Multiple youth in this group noted the same interplay between "being with people we love and creating" that Eloisa points out here. When Eloisa outlined the group's thinking process, she noted that she "had the big mouth." "Ms. Judy would say, 'great idea', but we need Julia." Julia, alongside Eloisa in the interview, countered, "Eloisa got the ball rolling." Julia explained the specific balance the youth struck with Judy in producing costumes for this character: "It's all equal. Judy gives us ideas and sees if we like them and then we give ideas and see if she likes them." In contrast to the historically individualistic, hierarchical process of knowledge production in school spaces, Eloisa and Julia described a shared problem-solving process in which youth stood on equal footing with professional artists as they collectively brought their stories to life.

Like True and Denzel, the girls also described the value of presenting their own ideas about their superheroes, themselves, and their communities. When Author 1 asked Aurelia and Dulce about what adults stood to learn from youth's work in this project, Aurelia replied, "They can learn about you—what you're scared [of], what makes you nervous, and they will think it's fun." "So you're saying adults will learn about who you are?" Pat asked, and Aurelia and Dulce agreed.

Despite the fantastic and (science-) fictional dimensions of youth's stories and art in this project, both groups described ties between the knowledge produced in their stories and their experienced lives. Although this was in part because of resonances between youth and their fictional characters, all youth participants described shared processes of co-creating with artists as additionally recasting their relationship to field-based knowledge. Like True and Denzel, who talked about this project as enhancing their future careers as filmmakers, Aurelia commented that, in this project, "I'm learning how to do fashion. It's actually kind of hard!" By opening gaps in historically sedimented practices of knowledge production, this project allowed students to both incorporate their lived knowledge of themselves and their communities into their stories and extend their learning beyond the walls of school and into larger artistic communities and fields.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

Community-engaged research brings together people whose histories of power and knowledge are central to projects of imagining and enacting new futures (Fine and Torre 2019). In this study, university-based researchers worked with youth, and artists, in school spaces to imagine stories about superhero characters whose lives were bound up with youth identities and their community. By recognizing the school as a historical space, where youth are necessarily present but not granted the agency or authority to define their own interests and futures, we were able to temporarily displace hierarchies of youth's access to material resources, relationships, and valuations of personal and community-based knowledge. As Gordon da Cruz (2017) suggests, we sought to "interrogate where expertise lies, conduct race-conscious analyses, and ground research questions, processes, and analyses in asset-based understandings of communities." We facilitated this work by interacting in ways that repurposed the school library as a workshop-like space, where youth were invited to embody and produce knowledge grounded in their popular cultural and neighborhood knowledge. Their stories were further developed through artists' encouragement and recognition of youth's capacity to develop new skills and identities as valued artists and critical storytellers.

We argue that youth's embodied storytelling and artists' professional knowledge disrupted historical spaces and historical bodies, defined by Blommaert and Huang (2009) as the sedimented ways we organize ourselves and interact in predictable ways, referencing histories of relationships; the meaning and use of materials; and the ways voices, movement, and knowledge are recognized. Further, we argue that imaginative play with characters, actions, and superhero themes opened a gap or pause in the past and present conditions of

schooling so that new reflections on and possibilities for the future might become material for shaping youth identities in and out of school.

Across 25 sessions, the historical space of the library was transformed through youth's embodied storytelling; artists' and youth's appropriation of materials for videos, costumes, drawings, and dances; and youth narratives that displaced deficit assumptions about their childhoods. Their relationships with one another and with adults also shifted from individualistic to collective, from uncertain identities to equal partners with adult artists, and from unknown peers to known, protective friends. We know from recent research on youth development that positive peer-to-peer and child-to-adult relationships provide a significant buffer against stress and trauma in young people's lives (Harris 2018). The storytelling project certainly opened a space for such relationships to grow and thrive. As knowledge producers, youth recognized the complexities of balancing a compelling story with a truthful portrayal of their community and lives, as they also reflected on the ways their own identities merged with and diverged from their characters' traits. They also valued their arts experiences as prelude to potential future roles as community artists. Finally, as Gabi noted, the project valued the artists' knowledge of the arts and the community, whose skills and talents "could make a difference in the community."

Although we separate shifts in historical bodies and places into three categories—material, relational, and epistemological—these categories intersect and are interdependent. For example, in the KDM group, Denzel and True's knowledge of themselves as filmmakers and producers was dependent on their movement as artists and actors through the library space. Their shifting relationships to Aaron and one another were based on this reframing of the group as valid producers of knowledge and competence within this space. Similarly, in the Las Reinas group, Judy's affirmation of Eloisa, Aurelia, Dulce, and Julia as legitimate knowers and creators of fashion encouraged them to take the first scissor cut and materially transform secondhand fabrics into superhero costumes. As they designed these costumes, their stories deepened and expanded, leading them to share parts of their own lives that changed their relationships to themselves and each other. We therefore see material, relational, and epistemological transformations as co-occurring consequences of the university–community partnership that invited youth to collaborate around imaginative work in school.

Especially as youth's lives become increasingly regulated, standardized, and surveilled, the lens of historical bodies and historical spaces has important weight for community partnerships and research. This theoretical frame opens questions about who defines community spaces and how meaning gets sedimented in ways that restrict and limit individual agency and movement. Like Hice-Fromille and London (2022), who studied the non-academic, liminal spaces in schools where youth navigate identities and social realities, we believe that libraries, hallways, cafeterias, and other school spaces hold great potential for supporting youth into their emerging sense of purpose, artistry, and identity. We see this project as an invitation to further consider how community partnerships may disrupt such sedimentation to form what Fine and Torre (2019) call "participatory contact zones." They describe these zones as configurations that "ignite the catalytic insights produced when very differently positioned people join together to critically examine what is and to creatively imagine what could be" (p. 436). Although we provide the example of one project conducted in one site over the course of four months, findings more broadly suggest that productive community partnerships generate gaps for participants to coalitionally imagine historical spaces otherwise. Our findings also suggest that school provides a particularly fruitful location for such work.

We do not mean to romanticize the work youth and artists conducted in this project. Like most school-based activities, this project was contingent on Mountview schedules, rules, and expectations, and depended on maintaining relationships with school administration, faculty, and support staff. Many of these normative expectations around space, relationships, and knowledge-production were disrupted through youth's creative story building. However, as we sought to advocate for youth outside the bounds of our weekly

time together, we also found that this change was sometimes frustratingly transient and temporary. In this paper, we purposefully highlight the transformative aspects of this project to describe how community–university partnerships that take place in school settings may create—on a small scale—the "participatory contact zones" Fine and Torre describe. In doing so, we hope to open space for more research that positions both youth and artists as collaborators who may together reimagine what it means to be a student in school.

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