"You Are Building on Something": Exploring Agency and Belonging Among African American Young Adults

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What Made the Difference?

Having just proposed a study focused on these young adults[1] and the influences that fostered their agency for social change, I listened as the conversation circled, quickly spiraling up to the big-picture question: "What made the difference?" In a cascade of stories and laughter, the group—the most recent cohort of participants in a church-based youth-development program—and the elders[2] who led that program shared what they thought "it" entailed. "We had opportunities to go further with everything … to brainstorm and take a leap of faith," Julie recalled. "It's also about ownership of the program and freedom," Adam asserted. Michelle pointed to the importance of relationships, saying, "You can build a program around a relationship." The elders posed questions to the young adults. Amy wondered why the youth stayed when there was no money left to pay stipends and no basketball court or other fancy facilities. "You made us think and open our eyes!" Adam began to

[1]Throughout the chapter, the term "young adults" is used in reference to the study participants, ages 23–25. During the study, the participants considered themselves to be young adults, possibly to differentiate themselves from the children and youth; several participants worked within local youth development programs. The study took place at a time of transition into young adulthood as many participants were in college; all had full or part-time jobs, and two had children of their own.

[2]The term "elder" is found throughout the chapter and was used by the participants in reference to the Youth Space staff (Ed, Aaron, and Amy) and, occasionally in reference to respected African American local political and community leaders. Highlighting the moral dimension of eldership, Adrian, one of the participants, explained that "age doesn't necessarily make you an elder" but that an elder is one who is "instilling values in a young person" (Adrian, personal communication, March 27, 2012).

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explain. Julie volleyed back with a deeply personal question for her elders at the table, "how did you know what we needed when we needed it?" (Field Notes, 2012)

I met several of the people around this table 3 years earlier in a youth-violence prevention initiative, and we had since crossed paths in the youth-development network that spanned the urban area. Over that time, I observed what I thought was a unique capacity to reflect on their actions and circumstances and to envision and enact strategies for effecting change in their neighborhood. Inspired and curious, I began shaping research questions around what I thought I saw. Now, this group was asking their own questions, revisiting powerful, shared experiences, and reflecting on the way those experiences shaped them as youth and as young adults navigating careers, college, and family life.

Having seen how structural violence and discrimination greatly affected these young men and women, but also having observed their convictions about and actions toward addressing these injustices, I situated this research in scholarship that seeks a holistic understanding of youth agency, community involvement, and activism (Bajaj, 2009; Hart & Fegley, 1995; Watts & Guessous, 2006). Hart and Fegley (1995) conducted research on youth who had been nominated by community leaders as exceptional in their commitments to helping others in their community. Their study drew a wealth of important conclusions about the youths psychological characteristics, such as self-understanding and moral judgment, and they called for research on the social context, particularly the ways community groups "provide contexts within which strong moral commitments can develop and flourish" (1995, p. 1357). From a different theoretical perspective, Watts and Guessous (2006) theorized and began to test aspects of their model of sociopolitical development—the evolving, critical understanding of the political, economic, cultural, and other systemic forces that shape society and one's status within it, and the associated process of growth in relevant knowledge, analytical skills, and emotional faculties (p. 60, citing Watts, Williams, & Jagers, 2003). Suggesting that their findings "show a link between what is good for the individual and what is good for society" and pointing out that psychological research has explored individual personal growth thoroughly, Watts and Guessous (2006) call for research on "conceptions of social (in)justice, and the social processes that lead to a collective striving for liberation" (p. 72).

This chapter's findings, drawn from a larger research study, offer a partial response to these calls for research on social processes and contexts that shape moral commitments and collective striving for social change. Taking place in city rich in diversity but marked with vast economic and educational disparities, particularly between African American and white residents, this case study explored the journeys of six young African American adults, who were recognized leaders and change-makers—especially related to youth development and advocacy—in their predominantly African American neighborhood and across the urban area. The study sought to understand the influences that the young adults articulated as contributing to their sense of agency for social change, and how they drew on those influences as they navigated young adulthood. This chapter addresses the findings related to the influences, experiences, and relationships these young adults identi-

fied as shaping their belief that they should and could effect change in, or transform, their communities. The study participants' efforts to "effect change" often focused on improving the lives of youth in the neighborhood by, for example, lending youth perspectives to neighborhood discussions and city policy related to violence, safety, health, youth programming, and community-building and by engaging in mentorship and youth development programs with younger children and youth.

The findings discussed in this chapter illuminate the relationships, narratives, and commitments that the young adults said contributed to their sense of agency for social change. They pointed primarily to ideas, experiences, and relationships that were formed in a non-formal educational setting—a church-based youth organization called the Youth Space. While they discussed the influences of family, friends, and acquaintances in school, neighborhood and professional settings, they emphasized that their relationships and experiences alongside Youth Space peers and elders helped them draw connections among individual experiences and their overall view of themselves as change-agents, as African Americans, as members of their community, and as humans. Altogether, this chapter offers illustrative examples that further develop the concept of coalitional agency put forth by Chávez and Griffin (2009), who suggested, "A coalitional agency implies that our ability to affect social change, to empower others and ourselves necessitates seeing people, history and culture as inextricably bound to one another" (p. 8).

Framing Agency: Critical Consciousness, Critical Race Consciousness, and Transformative and Coalitional Agency

Grounded in a critical constructivist approach, this study seeks to understand the meaning the young adults made from their lived experiences, while incorporating analyses of power and reflections on the influence of social, economic, and political structures in their lives (Kincheloe, 2008). Rather than Freire's notions of power as oppressive over people, which is commonly used in critical approaches to education, this study incorporates Bartlett's (2010) reconceptualization of power as "circulating, or rather, simultaneously exercised and experienced by all" (p. 170). This recasting of power aligns with the perspectives of the young adults in this study, who recognized oppressive systems and structures but have experienced and fostered power in a collaborative, more horizontal way through collective action.

Practice theory specifically provides a theoretical framework for the study. Observing a trend in anthropological scholarship toward a broader conception of actors' agency that considered how the structure constrains action but also how the system itself is created through actions, Ortner (1984) asserted that a common approach to theorizing practice still "tends to highlight social asymmetry as the most important dimension of both action and structure" (p. 147). In contrast, Ortner outlined a new understanding of practice that (1) views actions as "not just random response to stimuli, but governed by organizational and evaluative schemes" and (2)

views the system as "an integral whole rather than trying to separate it out into levels" (p. 148). Ortner (1984) emphasized that actions are often part of broader human "projects," instead of simply individual, disconnected "moves," and that "action itself *has* (developmental) structure, as well as operating *in*, and in relation *to*, structure" (p. 150, emphasis in original). Of most significance for this study is Ortner's suggestion that rather than viewing rational individual interest as motivating actions, a new approach to practice theory attempts to understand

> where actors … are coming from …. A system is analyzed with the aim of revealing the sorts of binds it creates for actors, the sorts of burdens it places upon them …. This analysis, in turn, provides much of the context for understanding actors' motives, and the kinds of [long-term] projects they construct for dealing with their situations. (p. 152)

This study adopted Ortner's approach to practice as it sought to understand how the young adults navigate their lives, drawing on relationships, ideas, and experiences that help them navigate constraints and "binds" they encountered while creating holistic and developmental understandings of themselves and their lives. During a 2-year period of planning and implementing a youth violence prevention campaign with several of the study participants, I recognized the young men's and women's keen understanding of the systems and structures that constrained their lives and damaged their communities. They demonstrated a strong conviction that they should and could change these systems and structures. The concepts of critical race consciousness and transformative and coalitional agency help to frame the meaning-making processes behind the young adults' beliefs that they should and could effect change.

Critical Consciousness and Critical Race Consciousness

Critical consciousness is part of Freire's (1970) notion of praxis, involving cycles of action and reflection. It is the capacity to recognize and understand one's circumstances in light of the power and social structures that constrain them (Freire, 1970). Ginwright and Cammarota (2002) recast praxis by describing social action and critical consciousness as an interdependent "couplet," arguing, "people can only truly 'know' that they can exercise control over their existence by directly engaging the conditions that shape their lives" (p. 87). The importance of taking direct action is clear and helps bridge the divide between belief and behavior.

Critical race consciousness is also central to this study as it offers a framing of consciousness in which "race has a deep social significance that continues to disadvantage blacks and other Americans of color" (Aleinikoff, 1991, p. 1062). Part of the "self-awareness" that contributes to critical consciousness (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002), critical race consciousness surfaces throughout this study's findings in relation to the young adults' racial identity development and sense of agency for social change. Like critical consciousness, critical race consciousness involves analyses of power, but it importantly focuses on the role of race in the social and political structures that constrain people's lives.

Transformative and Coalitional Agency

"Agency" in this study refers to the type that is driven toward transformation or social change (Bajaj, 2009; Giroux, 1996). The study applies Monisha Bajaj's (2009) working definition of "transformative agency" which includes "belief in one's present or future ability to improve individual social mobility and transform elements of one's society" (p. 550). In her research comparing pairs of siblings with one sibling attending a public school and one a private school in Zambia that infused agency-building messages throughout its culture and curriculum, Bajaj (2009) found that although the private school students had higher senses of agency overall, their levels dropped drastically when they encountered a sparse job market and corrupt higher-education entrance processes. Bajaj (2009) concluded that transformative agency is situational, describing it as "a complex phenomenon, limited and informed by a variety of factors both temporal and ideological" (p. 552). In this chapter, the terms transformative agency or agency for social change are used interchangeably.

Coalitional agency highlights the influence of one's relationships, culture, and "belongings with others" (Carrillo Rowe, 2008; Chávez & Griffin, 2009, p. 8). Drawing on the work of Carrillo Rowe (2008) on "coalitional subjectivity," which asserts that we come to understand ourselves through our relationships with others, Chávez and Griffin (2009) proffered the term "coalitional agency." They explained, "A coalitional agency implies that our ability to affect social change, to empower others and ourselves necessitates seeing people, history and culture as inextricably bound to one another" (Chávez & Griffin, 2009, p. 8). The authors called for recognition of the way agency resides in connectedness. They assert that the "power we enact is one grounded in a profound cognizance of the interconnections and interdependences of people, privilege, and social/political/economic opportunities" (pp. 7–8). Coalitional agency is a particularly relevant concept in this chapter, and the term will be used to highlight the influence of history, culture, relationships, affiliations, and belongings with others that influenced these young adults.

Critical consciousness and critical race consciousness involve young people reflecting and acting upon their experiences, particularly the "binds" and "burdens" placed upon them by the system (Freire, 1970; Ortner, 1984, p. 152). Critical reflection involves uncovering and examining "the interconnections and interdependences of people, privilege, and social/political/economic opportunities" (Chávez & Griffin, 2009, pp. 7–8). Through this repeated process of praxis, youth form, test and reshape their beliefs about their abilities to change the world around them (Bajaj, 2009; Freire, 1970). A sense of transformative agency takes shape over time, in a variety of contexts (sometimes alongside others), and with a critical understanding of one's self and the systems and structures that shape one's lived reality (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). Throughout this process, it draws in coalitions with "people, history, culture [which are] inextricably bound to one another," fostering a sense of agency that is embedded in various belongings (Chávez & Griffin, 2009, pp. 7–8). According to this conceptual model, transformative agency and coalitional agency are interwoven and overlapping.

Youth Space and the Community

This study took place in a large Midwestern city in which its population is made up of European Americans (nearly half), American Indians, African Americans, as well as those from Central America, Africa and Southeast Asia. With a robust social services sector and a long history of civic engagement and activism, the city has numerous community and nonprofit organizations that focus on the needs of youth. Compared to the rest of the United States, the state boasts several strengths, including high public high school graduation rates (Stetser & Stillwell, 2014) and high levels of home ownership (Institute for Child, Youth, & Family Policy, n.d.). However, the successes expressed through the indicators of human and financial capital are not evenly distributed across the population within the state. Although the high school graduation rate for European American (usually categorized as white) students is 84 %, the state is the second lowest in the nation for the rate of African Americans graduating from high school, currently 51 % (Stetser & Stillwell, 2014). Homeownership follows a similar trajectory, with the state ranking among the highest in the nation at 77.1 % and yet only 26.2 % of African Americans own homes (Institute for Child, Youth, & Family Policy, n.d.). These inequities raise critical questions and create an overarching frame for this study about the context that affects these African American young adults and the influences that made them think they could and should effect change in their community and struggle for social justice.

The neighborhood, where the six study participants were raised and where the Youth Space was located, has a large African American population. The young adults identified strongly with their neighborhood, communicating a sense of belonging, rootedness, and pride. They referenced their family history and support networks in the community, acknowledged the generations before them who called the area home, and described their own long-term goals of improving their neighborhood and being seen as community elders. The state housing and education disparities mentioned above were evident in the young adults' individual stories of growing up in the neighborhood. They spoke of their families' financial struggles, housing insecurity, safety concerns, the presence of gangs and drugs, and frustration with neighborhood schools. More often, however, they pointed out the positives in their lives. For example, all six participants said both of their parents[3] played a significant role in their lives, an involvement that they recognized as unique compared to many peers who grew up without one or more parents being involved in their lives. In addition, most of these young people noted trusted adults in their extended families or from the neighborhood who had taken an interest in them and communicated high expectations for their futures.

The Youth Space was located at the heart of the neighborhood, in a church off one of its busiest streets. Although the pseudonym, "Community Church" was used in the study, the church's real name reflected its rootedness in Afrocentric ideology and its commitment to social action. When the church hired Ed—the elder involved in the

[3] In the case of one young man, a stepfather played a significant role.

study—to direct a youth development program, he designed the Youth Space as an open hangout area for teens and offered summer programming for younger children in the form of summer Freedom Schools. Created in the summer of 1964 to supplement low-quality segregated schools, to mobilize voters and to build leadership capacity among African American youth, present-day Freedom Schools, led by the Children's Defense Fund, focus on "[h]igh quality academic enrichment, [p]arent and family involvement, [s]ocial action and civic engagement, [i]ntergenerational servant leadership development, [n]utrition, health and mental health" (Children's Defense Fund, 2015). As children, five of six participants attended Freedom School programs at Community Church, often at the insistence of family members.

Upon beginning high school, a variety of opportunities for youth involvement and leadership at Community Church and the Youth Space took shape. The number of staff increased when Ed hired Aaron and Amy, who led various activities at Youth Space. For example, Aaron and Amy headed up year-round efforts to engage and support teens to lead mentorship groups for younger youth. Adrian, one of the young men, described the arrangement as "intergenerational mentorship," referring to the manner in which the elders guided and supported the youth leaders (Adrian, personal communication, 2014). Ed also selected youth to participate in leadership training, called junior servant leaders, in the summer Freedom Schools, which included undertaking political advocacy, connecting with participants and community members, and assisting the main teachers in delivering the curriculum. Adam, another young man, had dropped out of Freedom Schools in the past, but a junior servant leader role, along with Aaron's mentorship, led to his meaningful and sustained engagement. According to Ed, Aaron brought an additional level of depth to these Freedom School experiences as he mentored the youth and engaged them in critical conversations about local black history and contemporary issues in the community. The Youth Space staff were intentional about integrating the Freedom School "model of affirmation … model of celebration … [and] model of encouragement and direction" year-round at the Youth Space (Ed, personal communication, 2014). Ed also engaged youth as apprentices in a small videography business that documented the community's history. He drew on his extensive personal and professional network to garner video projects and foster partnerships on a variety of youth and community-related initiatives. Over several years of their engagement with Youth Space, the youth created public service announcements (PSA's) addressing neighborhood issues; shot and edited footage for numerous organizations and events; lent their voices to the formation and growth of a city-wide youth council that weighed in on policy issues and launched services on behalf of the city's youth; became part of a local branch of a national organization advocating for peace, human rights, and social justice, which later involved organizing local conferences that welcomed two Nobel laureates to the city; and contributed to the work of the city's youth violence prevention efforts, where our paths initially crossed.[4] Whenever possible, the youth were paid stipends for their work, which enabled many to stay

[4]These examples were selected to demonstrate the scope and variety of community involvement the youth were exposed to through opportunities at the Youth Space. Ed garnered numerous long- and short-term opportunities in response to youth's interests and needs.

involved. Several activities and partnerships that began with Youth Space connections led to sustained collaborations and additional opportunities for youth involvement and, years later, social-justice and youth-focused employment.

My engagement with Youth Space began with my support of a local university staff member who was organizing a youth-violence prevention campaign involving teams of adults and youth from local youth organizations. I came to know Ed and four of the young adults—Lance, Adrian, Julie, and Adam—when most of them were entering their senior year in high school. Through the course of our bi-weekly, large-group meetings in 2009–2010, I observed these four young adults in various leadership roles—facilitating meetings, planning and shooting PSAs, and organizing community events. In discussions framing the issues related to youth violence, they readily identified the systems, structures, and power dynamics that contribute to the problems in their neighborhood and city. They leveraged their familiarity with the issues and spoke with confidence and clarity about strategies to effect change. The large group became quite cohesive and bonds were formed around painful, personal discussions and the vision for our work together.

As the youth graduated and began college and/or their careers, the youth violence campaign came to a close and the Youth Space program ended. I continued to see Julie, Lance, Adam, and, sometimes, Adrian, at public gatherings as they pursued professional opportunities with youth-focused and/or social justice–oriented organizations as well as with the city-wide youth council. In 2011, I met with the group to gauge interest in this research project and they were receptive to my proposal, launching excitedly into the discussion that opened this chapter.

Researching Young Adults as Change-Agents Over Time

The case study involved six focal participants: three men and three women, ranging in age from 23 to 25 years old.[5] Ed, an elder and coordinator of the Youth Space, also lent his ideas and reflections, which situated and/or responded to the central ideas that the young adults shared in their interviews. Interviews and member checks were used to collect data from February 2012 to August 2014. In trying to understand what fostered their sense of agency, I asked the young adults to describe when they felt as if they had "made a difference" and what they "took away" from these experiences. I inquired about how they learned of various opportunities to effect change in their community, why they stayed involved, and about their motivations for pursuing this work.

I interviewed the six young adults and then, between 1 and 2 months later, three of them were also interviewed a second time. Each data-collection phase was followed by preliminary analysis and member checks that informed next steps. This study extended the use of member checks as a means to gather additional data, which, in turn, guided subsequent study design decisions. For example, after the

[5] The young adults in the study chose to either use a pseudonym or their own name.

first round of analysis, I had individual and paired member checks in which I shared with the young adults a statement that characterized a broader theme. I asked them to discuss which statements resonated with them or which did not fit their experience. In each case, they said the themes resonated with them. They went on to elaborate on several themes, sharing additional stories and examples. I incorporated this additional data into a deeper phase of analysis that yielded the central themes and began to write about these themes. In a second round of member checks, I shared my writing with the participants, asking them to speak to the adequacy of my unpacking of their stories and reflections. Sharing the analysis process through these member checks helped clarify or deepen emerging themes and probe further about the relevance of underdeveloped themes.

The approach described above is consistent with emergent design, demonstrating a commitment to being "sensitive to the data" and "guided by questions, educated hunches, and emerging findings" throughout data collection (Merriam, 2009, p. 150). In fact, this openness and flexibility enabled the shifting of the study design and research questions. I initially designed a study that prioritized the young adults' relationships and social networks as impacting their sense of agency for social change. With each round of interviews and analysis, it became evident that the young adults were directing me toward more intrinsic and relational factors.

This shift in study focus through the course of the research paralleled a shift in my relationships with several of these young adults and a shift in my understanding of myself as a scholar. For our first several years of knowing one another, my primary identity in the group was a professional one. In presenting the idea of doing a research project, I foregrounded my identity as a researcher, highlighting the value of this research for youth-work practice, expressing interest in the uniqueness of the group's experience, and framing myself as a listener and learner. After the young adults shared personal stories and reflections, some of them expressed interest in my story and motivations that shaped this inquiry. I shared that I had grown up in a middle-class, racially homogeneous region and had a ladder-like, individual-achievement focused lens well into my 20s. I explained that I was struck by group's drive to contribute to the world around them at such a young age. My reflections led to more conversations about identity, culture, race, and social justice in which the young adults shared about how their racial and cultural identities shaped their sense of agency. In analyzing, writing about, and sharing these themes with the young adults, I was humbled by the richness and importance of their cultural identities. Overwhelmed by the way in which my whiteness lent only guilt, privilege, and doubt about my role in social justice work, I began a cultural self-study alongside a mentor of mine to reexamine my cultural identity. In sharing this process in conversations with young adults, I received affirmation of my role in a collective struggle around "human rights," rather than just "civil rights" (Cyreta, personal communication, 2014) and the "importance of reclaiming our humanity" from the myth of race and "white supremacy ideology," which also strips white people of their cultural grounding (Ed, personal communication, 2014). These formative conversations created a deeper sense of mutual trust, fostered meaningful learning for all involved, and reinforced my commitments to participatory and engaged

approaches to research. In fact, several participants attended the public presentation of the study, expressing their appreciation for the intentional approach and contributing their perspectives to this discussion.

"You Had the Feeling You Were Part of Something Else. You Are Building on Something": Agency and Belonging

In response to my questions about the ideas, experiences, and relationships that made these young adults believe they should and could effect change in their communities, they described a sense of agency rooted in a layered sense of belonging. This section is framed by Julie's words about how the Youth Space elders highlighted her social embeddedness, drawing attention to the way her choices and actions influenced others. She explained, "In [the Youth Space], they asked me to think about my role with peers who weren't in the room, with family, in the community. You had the feeling you were part of something else. You are building on something" (Julie, personal communication, 2013). Throughout the iterative data collection and analysis process, when I tried to understand how they enacted transformative agency, these young adults told me about their coalitions, their belongings—with one another and with their elders at the Youth Space, within an African American counter-narrative of courage and struggle, and to a set of shared moral commitments or values. The subsections below illuminate these layers of belonging.

Relationships in the Youth Space Community

As they shared examples, stories, and memories about how they got involved at the Youth Space, why they stuck around, and what deepened their engagement, the young adults pointed to the relationships with their elders and the group norms at the Youth Space. They experienced a level of acceptance and support from their elders related to personal, school, and family issues. The elders encouraged the youth's involvement at the Youth Space and in other organizations, often giving them rides to facilitate their involvement. For Cyreta, the trust and support of her elders gave her the confidence to take on a leadership role at the Youth Space. She recalled, "that's something I always got from Sister Amy and Brother Aaron, and, Mr. Ed, is that even though they were looked at as elders or as big brothers and big sisters to us, they were always there to serve" (Cyreta, personal communication, 2012).

The young adults also said that their elders' expectations challenged them. The questions elders asked and the way they facilitated conversations at the Youth Space reinforced the idea that the youth had a responsibility to themselves and others to critically engage and participate through their actions and their ideas. These expec-

tations challenged them intellectually, made them see themselves and their community differently, and fostered their engagement at the Youth Space and in their neighborhood. The elders also communicated long-term expectations of the young adults to eventually "give back" by taking on mentorship roles with other youth (Adam, personal communication, 2012). The dedication their elders showed in guiding them over years and across circumstances instilled a sense of responsibility to make good decisions because "there's a lot of people betting on me" (Adam, personal communication, 2012).

All of these levels of relationships within Youth Space community illustrate the balance of challenging expectations and holistic support that participants experienced during their engagement. As described previously, the youth were exposed to numerous opportunities to contribute to projects and initiatives within and beyond the Youth Space. Many young adults said they had "stumbled into" these opportunities as Ed casually invited them to contribute before established roles, goals, or direction were in place. They were willing to try out new experiences and take risks knowing that they could go back to their peers and elders at the Youth Space to reflect upon them. Through these reflections they learned the importance of stepping out alongside peers, and were surprised with what they were able to accomplish while overcoming challenges and fears together. In essence, these young adults saw the Youth Space as the fertile soil into which the roots of their transformative and coalitional agency grew, drawing in nutrients that would feed and nourish them as they enacted their sense of agency in their neighborhood.

Learning "So Much More" Through a Counter-narrative of African American History

The part of the years-long experience that the young adults identified as fostering their commitment that they should effect change was their sense of belonging to an African American counter-narrative of courage and struggle. Learning about the courage, strength, and struggles of their ancestors—particularly through summer Freedom Schools experiences as teens, but also in discussions and activities in their subsequent, year-round Youth Space involvement—sparked a desire to contribute. Cyreta, Michelle, and Julie compared this learning to their school-based learning of African American history and stated emphatically that they learned "so much more" in the Youth Space.

Julie's in-depth reflection, summarized below, illustrates several dimensions of learning "so much more." She began by talking about "being introduced to [her] ancestors" through the narrative of slavery, which "portrayed [her] community as passive and as docile and cowardly almost" (Julie, personal communication, 2013). She pointed out that learning the slave narrative of African Americans in school alongside students of other ethnicities felt as though her ancestors' identity was "prescribed," to her, and that she felt like a powerless recipient of this characteriza-

tion (Julie, personal communication, 2013). She also pointed out that, while figures like Harriet Tubman were named, school curricula didn't "talk about the courage in that" (Julie, personal communication, 2013). Instead, she drew on the counter-narrative she had embraced at the Youth Space as she elaborated on Tubman's courage, pointing out the economic blow Tubman and so many others dealt to the slave trade by escaping and resisting. Julie recalled that learning the counter-narrative "opened some, [opened] a different door. Like, it doesn't have to be that way [as the dominant narrative depicts the story]. It doesn't have to be my identity. It doesn't have to be the end of this story" (Julie, personal communication, 2013). Building momentum as she drew connections between her sense of belonging in the counter-narrative, her belonging at the Youth Space, and her sense of self, Julie went on:

> Because once you go to [the Youth Space], like, you learn so much more. Like, you learn so much more about your ancestors and your history and your community and the people around you, that, like, you can't stop there …. I've got to learn more, and I have to be able to understand more and you know, be able to contribute to this history and do things differently. So … it's always been one thing after another or, you know, coming into [the Youth Space], learning and being around other youth who kind of had similar experiences. (Julie, personal communication, 2013)

What Julie found and was attracted to in the counter-narrative was her ancestors' power, meaning their strength and courage along with the impact they had through individual and collective resistance. This story of a powerful people quickly replaced a characterization that Julie had learned in school. Seamlessly, Julie drew connections from her ancestors to her community and "the people around [her]" as examples of hope and courage, sites of power, and sources of learning that would guide her actions as a co-author of the counter-narrative. At the Youth Space, she encountered the counter-narrative alongside elders and peers where she felt safe, understood, free from judgment, and able to grapple with its complexity. The content and process of their learning honored her and other youths' struggles and strengths, helped them recognize and embrace their own power to effect change, and framed their community and their interactions with others as sites of power.

Julie also described how getting involved at the Youth Space affected the way she felt about herself. She recalled feeling "really low" and "smaller than other people" as a teenager, due, in part, to her "family and [their] situation and [their] finances" (Julie, personal communication, 2013). She identified Ed and being part of the Youth Space as helping change those feelings. She explained, "I didn't feel as important, you know, around, until you could actually have someone say to you, like, what you bring and your contribution to this is an asset and it's needed" (Julie, personal communication, 2013). Julie's in-depth reflection on learning and embracing the counter-narrative in a safe setting alongside her peers reveals her identity and tangible actions that were affirmed and framed as contributions to a broader struggle, and illustrates various layers of coalitions that informed her transformative agency.

Adam shared a similar story of finding engagement and belonging at the Youth Space. While attending middle school in a nearby suburb, Adam's teachers recommended he switch from mainstream classes to International Baccalaureate classes.

Adam struggled with the change, recalling, "in mainstream, I was with my homies and in IB, I was with all white kids … I failed miserably. I guess I felt alienated and lost interest" (Adam, personal communication, 2014). Joining the Youth Space after middle school, Adam was exposed to readings and discussions that resonated with his experience and "put [him] on notice" about racial disparities in schools and their consequences (Adam, personal communication, 2014). He continued to explore his racial identity under Aaron's mentorship, which fostered his critical race consciousness and cultural identity—areas of personal growth that he enjoyed sharing with the youth he mentored as a young adult.

Commitments in Action: A Worldview of Connection and Embeddedness

The previous sections have illustrated that through their coalitions—their relationships at the Youth Space and in their roles as co-authors in an African American counter-narrative—the young adults came to see themselves as "part of something bigger" (Julie, personal communication, 2013). This section illuminates a third layer of belonging, one consisting of shared values, that shaped their coalitional agency. In describing the ideas that guided their decisions and in articulating the values that connected them to the counter-narrative and to one another, the young adults referenced two broad commitments they held as a group—to honor the humanity of others and to serve others and struggle for justice. I used the phrase "commitments in action" to reflect the way the commitments both guided how the young adults enacted agency in their lives through their actions and choices but also framed these actions and choices as contributions to the counter-narrative, both big (i.e., through career choices) and small (i.e., in conversations that helped others see themselves as part of a worthwhile struggle).

Honoring humanity. While this commitment was evident in many of the participants' stories, Adrian, a philosophical and spiritual young man, shared powerful examples acknowledging the inherent worth of every human being. He explained,

> I'm not going to take somebody's life just because you call me the n-word. I respect your life … and the crazy part is it's not two-way … It's me trying to be the person I want to be. It's not about you; it's about me. (Adrian, personal communication, 2013)

Even in the face of injustice, Adrian envisioned himself choosing to honor humanity, enabling him to "be the person [he] want[ed] to be." Highlighting that "it's not two-way," Adrian affirmed how his sense of self and his commitments remained strong, regardless of how others viewed and treated him.

Adrian offered another example about learning to examine "root issues" at the Youth Space, demonstrating one way to recognize and appreciate others' humanity. Continuing with the issue of violence, Adrian pondered, "People shoot each other, but why? Are they just crazy?" (Adrian, personal communication, 2012). He continued, "… you start looking at family structures … at their financials … looking at

vendettas, start looking at other reasons why people would go to that extreme. And you start realizing that you stop demonizing so much, start looking at them like human beings" (Adrian, personal communication, 2012). Adrian demonstrated the practice of breaking through an issue's label (e.g., violence) and delving into the complex factors that make up the issue. He recognized the tendency to "demonize" others and highlighted the importance of trying to understand people and their situations. Adrian said this way of thinking "opened [his] eyes" and changed the way he saw his community and his role in it (Adrian, personal communication, 2012). By using empathy, he was able to better understand the multiple factors that contribute to violence and honor the humanity of the people involved in it. Furthermore, honoring humanity recognized and affirmed the uncertainty of these young men's and women's journeys and their closeness with the friends, siblings, and cousins who had gotten caught up in gangs, alcohol, or drugs. For example, Lance said he had always admired his two older brothers, but when one was killed in gang violence when Lance was in high school and one was incarcerated, Lance recalled thinking, "Well, I don't want to make either one of [his brothers'] choices. So let me see what happens if I do this [get involved at the Youth Space]." (Lance, personal communication, 2012). In our conversations, Lance highlighted all he had in common with his brothers. He framed his choice to join the Youth Space as an uncertain one. For him, focusing on his own "good" decision-making and "positive" choices would not honor his brothers' humanity and the complexity of their circumstances.

Sense of responsibility to serve others and to struggle for justice. The commitment to serve others and struggle for justice is deeply tied to the counter-narrative and to the commitment to honor humanity. As Julie's story illustrated, part of finding oneself in the counter-narrative was embracing one's responsibility to contribute to the generational struggle for justice. Furthermore, human connectedness was at the core of Adrian's description of what it meant to honor others' humanity. Also, the Youth Space elders were deliberate about holding the youth responsible for their contributions and their actions in ways that "give back" and serve their community. An important part of assuming the responsibility to serve others and struggle for justice was to accept their embeddedness in and responsibility to serve in numerous relationships and spheres of their lives.

Lance related an "ah-ha moment" when Freedom School teachings of "lov[ing] your brother and protect[ing] your sister," along with the guidance of his Youth Space elders, changed the way he viewed himself and his role in his neighborhood. Whereas he would previously watch out for his own family, but ignore a fight or wrongdoing and "just keep on moving … 'cause it had nothing to do with me," Lance said, after participating in Freedom Schools and at the Youth Space, he would intervene. He explained why:

> … I look at it, like, there was somebody who told me the same thing … They stopped and said something [to me]. It was like, "OK, you actually got me to think about what I'm doing right now, like, you makin' me realize that what I'm doing may not be, like, perceived as the right thing." … It's become key, like, as far as, like, with working with like the kids and all of that, like, 'cause of Freedom School. I love the way that I work with kids 'cause of Freedom School. (Lance, personal communication, 2012)

Lance's shift from a position of minding his own business to stepping up and speaking up seemed to stem from both the Freedom School teachings and the way people in his life made him think about how others perceived his actions and the example he set. Throughout our conversations, Lance indicated that being a role model and appreciating the power and importance of that role enriched his work with youth. Lance articulated two interconnected strands of coalitional agency that influenced the way he saw himself and his actions. One was the ongoing African American counter-narrative of brothers and sisters struggling together; the second strand included his elders' impact on his thinking and he indicated the hope and pride he felt about similarly impacting the youth he encountered. In later conversations, Lance drew direct connections between his experiences as a youth and the strategies he used to connect with the youth in his after-school program. For example, when a young man told Lance he had been acting out in a class he struggled with because he disliked the teacher, Lance responded, "Man, I didn't like none of my teachers that I worked with … [but] at the end of the day, who was this class benefittin'?" (Lance, personal communication, 2012). Lance smiled remembering how the youth came to the realization that acting out was only hurting him. This example resonates with Lance's "ah-hah moment," above, and illustrates how Lance leveraged his own past struggles to connect with youth. From his experience as a young man who looked up to his brothers, and, later, his elders, Lance understood and embraced the importance of offering a positive model for youth.

The sense of responsibility to serve others and to struggle for justice was reinforced through engagement in activities developed in partnership with other youth- and social justice-oriented organizations, whose representatives also valued serving others and framed work in the community as a responsibility. Surrounded by people, including her own elders and other community leaders who were articulating this view in one particular meeting, Julie recalled how the message that she was responsible to others sunk in. Whereas she once felt like a "superhero 'cause [she was] helping" in her neighborhood, the group discussion helped her realize that "I'm no more of a hero than anyone else that's suffering from this or that's, dealing with these problems, just because I'm willing to help" (Julie, personal communication, 2012). For Julie, adopting the group's viewpoint shifted the celebration of their work and the superhero status to seeing her work as a responsibility, a given, and an expectation. Julie also felt an urgency to spread this new perspective, saying "… there needs to be more people that feel responsible, not feel … I don't even know what other word to describe that, but there should be more people that feel obligated to [help in their community and be a neighbor]" (Julie, personal communication, 2012). Julie's reflection illustrates her sense of connectedness to a broad network of community members and the mutual sense of coalitional agency defined by human connectedness, responsibility, and commitment to social justice.

Julie later talked about her first job out of high school doing youth development with a large community center. When she realized the center's goals and structures did not allow for the relationship-based, community-focused approach that she had experienced and valued, Julie left to work as a consultant, largely within the rich network described above. She explained that, while the center job offered stability,

she felt she was not "following along with what [her] purpose is" and that, at the center, "[she] really didn't feel like [she] had any real responsibilities or [she] didn't really feel like [she] had any real power" (Julie, personal communication, 2012). Her enthusiasm building, Julie described "reconnecting with everybody [listing elders and organizations]" and feeling "that's where I belong, you know what I mean? That's what my purpose is to be doing things in my community constantly … [as a consultant] I'm not technically tied down and not allowed to do it the way I think it should be done" (Julie, personal communication, 2012). Throughout our conversations as Julie shared examples of her vision for "how it should be done," she drew directly on her experience as a youth at the Youth Center to articulate a relationship-based and community-focused approach.

Discussion

The findings presented in this chapter extend and deepen our understanding of agency by shedding light on the coalitions, affiliations, and belongings that informed the young adults' sense of agency for social change (Chávez & Griffin, 2009). The young adults in this study repeatedly emphasized their belongings and embeddedness—with one another and with their elders, within their neighborhood, within a courageous African American counter-narrative, and within a shared set of commitments or values—as shaping their beliefs that they should and could effect change. These layered belongings were also interconnected and reinforcing. The community that formed at the Youth Space created a safe, shared space of learning and processing where the participants made meaning of their lived experiences. The Youth Space community affirmed the participants' inherent value and their contributions, linking both to a courageous African American counter-narrative that played out daily in their neighborhood. Embracing the counter-narrative while participating in activities at the Youth Space not only reinforced the interdependent "couplet" of social action and critical consciousness (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002, p. 87), it also provided opportunities to experience and practice the commitments in action. Through their ongoing involvement, the young adults embraced the counter-narrative and their roles as contributors to a generational struggle. The commitments in action helped the young adults see their actions as "part of something bigger" and as having the potential to effect change in big and small ways.

These interwoven findings resonate with O'Connor's (1997) study of six African American youth she called the "resilient six" youth who expressed optimism for the future *and* demonstrated high academic achievement, as distinct from other optimistic, but not highly academic achieving youth in the study. Similar to my observations of the young adults in this chapter, the resilient six articulated "a particularly acute recognition of how race and class (and, in two cases, gender) operated to constrain the life chances of people like themselves" (O'Connor, 1997, p. 605).

O'Connor (1997) supposed that this awareness could lead to discouragement but, instead, found that the youth's "familiarity with struggle"—individual or collective resistance to oppression—set them apart. The resilient six were "privy to social behavior and discursive practices which not only expressed the need for struggle but also expressed its potential to produce desirable change" (p. 605). Black adults in the youth's lives modeled these behaviors and practices. O'Connor suggested that these youth's familiarity with struggle could illustrate their "embeddedness in a cultural context which might more readily translate their penetrations into political strategies" (p. 602). She stated:

> I contend that these messages, especially those which emphasized the potential for collective action, conveyed the agency that resides (even when dormant) with marginalized communities. In short, resilient youths, unlike other optimistic respondents, appeared to have not only insight into human agency at the personal and individual level but also a basis for interpreting Black individuals and collectives as agents of change. (p. 621)

The models of agency to which youth in O'Connor's and this study were exposed framed youth's actions in political and collective terms. The young adults in this chapter learned about the courageous and impactful struggles of their African American ancestors. They were exposed to community leaders and elders who viewed themselves as responsible for contributing to an ongoing struggle for justice. In repeated cycles of action and reflection over the span of years, they drew connections between the struggles in their lives and structures of oppression in society, and they engaged in activities to address those issues. The young adults expressed a sense of "building on something," that is, a sense of connectedness, a "sense of common struggle" (Ginwright, 2007, p. 412), and coalitional agency, both across generations (as illustrated in Lance's story about speaking up because somebody stopped him and made him think) and around ideas, moral commitments, and visions for justice.

While transformative agency and coalitional agency are introduced in this chapter as two separate concepts, the young adults in this study enmesh the two. When Adrian, Julie, Adam, Michelle, Lance, and Cyreta were asked questions focused on individual beliefs that made them think they could and should make a difference in their neighborhood and city, they overwhelmingly discussed the relationships, belongings, and connectedness through a lens that views "people, history and culture as inextricably bound to one another" (Chávez & Griffin, 2009). Similarly, their own "familiarity with struggle" constituted a coalition, a sense of belonging and embeddedness within a narrative of individual and collective struggle (O'Connor, 1997).

Based on her research with students exiting school and entering the job market in Zambia, Bajaj (2009) concluded that transformative agency is situational and contingent. Perhaps, as this chapter suggests, transformative agency could be bolstered or reinforced by coalitions. This study raises other conceptual questions about the relationship of coalitions and transformative agency. Is transformative agency interwoven with various coalitions, relationships, and narratives more resilient in the face of challenges or disappointments? Does transformative agency,

when supported by a sense of belonging and embeddedness, sustain agency across contexts and/or over time?

The current Black Lives Matter movement in the United States embodies many of these interwoven concepts and may offer insights to the questions posed. A social movement that began with protests when the Florida man who shot an unarmed young black man was acquitted of criminal charges, the Black Lives Matter movement has grown as several black men in cities across the country were killed in altercations with police officers who were, in many cases, also acquitted. Weaving these tragic instances together with broader trends, statistics, and stories, the movement has shone light upon systemic injustices in law enforcement and criminal justice systems across the United States. The name and the movement "Black Lives Matter" assert a counter-narrative of humanity, a story that counters the narrative of injustice and dehumanization that the movement has helped document with poignancy and through collective action. Both narratives resonate with people who have come together in Black Lives Matters chapters, gatherings, and protests across the country to call for change. As these disenfranchised individuals and their allies come together to collectively address the "binds" and "burdens" (Ortner, 1984, p. 152) placed upon them by the system, they embody a sense of transformative and coalitional agency.

Conclusion

Framed by the concepts of critical consciousness, critical race consciousness, and transformative agency and coalitional agency, this chapter illuminates the importance of the sense of belonging that shaped these young adults' identities as change-agents. The sections in the chapter discuss three coalitions or strands of belonging that the young adults said influenced their beliefs that they should and could effect change in their neighborhood and city. First, a sense of belonging with one another and with their elders at the Youth Space, a youth organization, provided a safe space in which the youth could discuss and learn from their experiences, such as their struggles in school or at home or their involvement in the neighborhood. Through these relationships, the young adults experienced full acceptance and affirmation and came to embrace their roles as contributors at the Youth Space, in the neighborhood and city, and to a broader human struggle. Second, the young adults described a sense of belonging within an African American counter-narrative of courage and struggle that affirmed their own and their ancestors' humanity and power. Third, the participants embraced two commitments in action that they learned, experienced, and practiced at the Youth Space—to honor the humanity of others and to serve others and struggle for justice. These commitments constituted a worldview of connectedness that grounded the young adults' change-agent identities and helped frame their individual actions and choices as part of a larger, collective struggle. Altogether, the young adults articulated an interwoven sense of transformative and

coalitional agency—one that took shape over a long period of time and that they drew upon as they navigated young adulthood. This study further developed the notion of a coalitional agency that sees "people, history and culture as inextricably bound to one another" (Chávez & Griffin, 2009, p. 8). In social movements, activists and organizers mobilize, shape, and cultivate these coalitions as they seek democratic change through collective action. Youth workers, educators, community leaders, and policymakers who understand these interwoven forces of social transformation have valuable insights into human agency and rich opportunities to promote lasting social change.

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