Chapter 6

Civic Participation Reimagined: Youth Interrogation and Innovation in the Multimodal Public Sphere

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This chapter challenges dominant narratives about the civic disengagement of youth from marginalized communities by reconceptualizing what counts as civic participation in public life and how youth are positioned as civic agents. We examine ideologies that undergird traditional forms of civic education and engagement in the United States and offer an alternative vision of civic life grounded in recognition of systemic inequality and struggle for social justice. We consider the ways in which digital media has fundamentally transformed the public sphere and expanded opportunities for youth civic expression and action, as well as the ways that youth participatory action research literature offers a framework for civic education that forefronts youth experience and voice. Our analysis culminates in the development of a new conceptual model for civic learning and engagement that pushes past participation into the realms of interrogation and innovation.

This is the foundation of the [American] Dream—its adherents must not just believe in it but believe that it is just, believe that their possession of the Dream is the natural result of grit, honor, and good works. There is some passing acknowledgement of the bad old days, which, by the way, were not so bad as to have any ongoing effect on our present. The mettle that it takes to look away from the horror of our prison system, from police forces transformed into armies, from the long war against the black body, is not forged overnight. This is the practiced habit of jabbing out one's eyes and forgetting the work of one's hands. To acknowledge these horrors means turning away from the brightly rendered version of your country as it has always declared itself and turning toward something murkier and unknown. It is still too difficult for most Americans to do this.

—Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (2015, pp. 98–99)

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From the perspective of African American writer and journalist Ta-Nehisi Coates, the American Dream represents more than simply economic opportunity or material success; it also signifies a fundamental belief in the virtue of this country. According to the "Dream," the American narrative is one of triumphant progress and any behavior contrary to this ideal—including oppression, brutality, or hate—is a mere aberration from American character rather than a manifestation of it.

The Dream is powerful; indeed, much of the formal education provided to U.S. youth about what it means to be a citizen is built on its vision. Many state civic learning standards focus "almost exclusively on patriotic observances" (Torney-Purta & Vermeer, 2006, p. 16), and students are over twice as likely to study "great American heroes and the virtues of the American form of government" in their social studies and civic courses than problems facing the country (Lopez & Kirby, 2007, p. 1).

Consider the National Assessment of Educational Progress Civics Project, the most comprehensive and influential measure of civic knowledge and skills in the nation. In the framework for the 2014 exam, the governing board lays out a specific blueprint for how students should be taught to see their nation that fits strikingly well into the vision Coates (2015) critiques. They make passing reference to the bad old days when we experienced a "gap between the nation's ideals and reality" but highlight the progress Americans have made to "abolish slavery" and "remove legal support for segregation," concluding with glowing praise for "Americans [who] have joined forces to work toward the achievement of their shared ideals" (National Assessment of Educational Progress Civics Project, 2014, p. 19).

Thus, much of the civic education young people experience in school encourages them to engage in public life based on the core assumption that the infrastructure of our democracy is sound—that all citizens enjoy equitable access to opportunity and can use the tools of self-governance to remedy any threats to such opportunity. Our schools largely educate toward the Dream.

But for those, like Coates (2015), who see the agency of their communities stripped away by systemic inequities in multiple areas of public life, including criminal justice and law enforcement, citizenship is a much more fraught proposition. As the lived experiences of many Americans of color contradict the inherent logic of the Dream, these citizens must continuously negotiate the extent of their identification and engagement with a society in which they have experienced "horrors"—a painful process that W. E. B. Du Bois (1903) described over a century ago as the struggle of "double-consciousness" (p. 5). Indeed, the term *citizen* itself becomes problematic when considering the tenuous status of undocumented immigrant students in this country who find their access to public services and voice in public life in constant limbo. While we use the terms *citizen* and *civic* in this chapter, we conceptualize them not as markers of legal status but as signifiers of the rights of individuals to participate

fully in civic communities at local, national, and global levels regardless of age or legal residency. While we recognize citizenship as a concept that can complicate, challenge, or even transcend national borders, our primary focus here remains on civic engagement and disparities in the U.S. context.

The contested nature of the civic sphere for all youth, but particularly for youth from historically marginalized communities, raises questions for us about the traditional purposes and practices of civic education. We feel compelled to ask, What does it mean to educate toward civic engagement in a society in which progress occurs not inevitably or in a straight line but instead in stops, starts, and retreats? Whose perspectives and cultural values define progress today? What story lines can inspire civic action when the narrative of the Dream does not resonate?

Young people are offering answers to these questions but in forms that much civic education scholarship has a difficult time characterizing. For instance, in the wake of the unrest in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014, which was sparked when a White police officer shot and killed African American teenager Michael Brown, a young Black man posted a tweet using hashtag #IfTheyGunnedMeDown in which he asked, "Which photo does the media use if the police shot me down?" One showed him in cap and gown at a graduation ceremony, while the other showed him in informal clothing and sunglasses dancing in a house with a bottle in his hand. The hashtag went viral as hundreds of thousands of Twitter users posted photos that expressed their outrage not only at the "horror" of the shooting itself but also at the role that media outlets play in portraying people of color in stereotypical and victim-blaming fashion.

These tweets represent complex responses to a serious civic issue but do not conform to established categories of civic engagement because they are youth-generated, explicitly critical of the Dream, and representative of the new communicative possibilities opened up by digital technologies. We argue that to better capture the range of civic experiences of young people in America, the future of civic education scholarship must engage more forcefully with youth agency, critical perspectives, and digital forms of expression.

In this chapter, we counter the "brightly rendered" vision of our country that undergirds mainstream models of civic education and engagement in the United States and take Coates's (2015) challenge to turn toward a "murkier and unknown" understanding of America that arises from and builds on experiences of struggle and oppression. We aim to recast civic learning by examining a range of community-based civic education initiatives in both formal and informal learning spaces to demonstrate how they amplify youth voice from a redefined vision of civic participation focused on creation and criticality. We characterize these initiatives not simply as new practices within the field of civic education as it currently exists but as a provocation for this entire body of scholarship to focus on reimagining and rearticulating what citizenship and civic participation mean for young people in an era of broader social

media use, interest-driven collaboration, and research-driven activism. In fact, our analysis suggests the need to actually move *beyond* practices of civic participation and toward practices of civic interrogation and innovation.

We begin by offering a conceptualization of the "civic" that structures our discussion of civic learning and development. We continue with a brief review of current data about civic engagement and education among communities of color and then step back to determine how these scholars theorize inequity and the nature of the public sphere itself. Next, we turn to a deeper examination of our current context of civic inequity and offer examples of how research in digital social movements and participatory action research is extending notions of the "who" and "how" of civic participation. We outline the key contributions of this "participatory turn" in civic education while raising questions about the extent to which simply *participating* within existing inequitable power structures can ever truly offer redress for the injustices that marginalized communities have experienced in public life. These questions lead us to ultimately reject participation as an adequate frame for civic engagement and offer new ways forward in the field through the practices of civic interrogation and innovation.

Throughout this chapter, we focus on selected literature that is representative of and offers clear perspectives on the dominant paradigms of civic education as well as new models of participation emerging throughout the field of education research writ large. We do not seek to present a meta-analysis of the entire field of civic education in the United States; rather, our intent is to expose the normative ideas that inform policy, practice, and research in civic education as a basis for problematizing them and offering new competencies that can lead us toward a more inclusive and critical vision of civic life.

DEFINING THE CIVIC

Our understanding of the "civic" throughout this chapter hinges on the idea of democratic community—both the formal communities of local, state, and national politics and the informal communities of fellow citizens united by shared interests and concerns (Flanagan & Faison, 2001). We hearken back to John Dewey's (1916) understanding of democracy as not only a system of representative government but also "a form of associated living" (p. 16). From this perspective, civic engagement includes not only explicitly political acts such as voting but also behaviors representative of what Harry Boyte (2003) calls a "different" kind of politics—one that "builds the commonwealth" between individuals of various backgrounds, experiences, and beliefs by being "productive and generative, not simply a bitter distributive struggle over scarce resources" (p. 9). In turn, civic education involves the process by which young people gain knowledge, skills, and identities that they use to understand and participate in these forms of community life.

Of course, tensions lurk under the surface of these general definitions as scholars debate the exact sorts of knowledge, skills, and identities that spur decisions to

TABLE 1
Normative Characteristics of Citizenship

- Belonging to at least one group
- Attending religious services at least monthly
- Belonging to a union
- Reading newspapers at least once per week
- Voting
- Being contacted by a political party
- Working on a political project
- Attending club meetings
- Believing that people are trustworthy
- Volunteering

become civically engaged, what engagement looks like, and whether and how it can be fostered through specific learning experiences. We now turn to examine some of the prevailing understandings in the field.

INEQUALITIES IN CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND EDUCATION

The dominant narrative about youth civic engagement in the United States today is one of crisis. Political and social scientists generally support this narrative by comparing the actions and attitudes of today's youth (as represented through large-scale survey responses) to their counterparts from previous decades. For instance, Constance Flanagan and Peter Levine (2010) reference the results of General Social Survey and the American National Election Study to demonstrate decreases among Americans ages 18 to 29 in almost all of the major "characteristics of citizenship" since the 1970s (p. 161). Various combinations of these characteristics (see Table 1) have been cited by a wide array of scholars over time (e.g., Levine & Lopez, 2002; Macedo et al., 2005; McFarland & Thomas, 2006; Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, & Delli Carpini, 2006) to become commonly accepted as normative attributes of civic engagement.

The general narrative of youth civic crisis is accompanied by a specific story line of inequality, as analyses of most of these indicators reveal stark differences in youth participation along lines of race, class, and educational attainment (Wray-Lake & Hart, 2012). According to this story line, young people who are White, come from more privileged backgrounds, and expect to attend college demonstrate higher levels of engagement in many of the actions detailed in Table 1 than young people of color who come from communities with lower incomes and less formal educational attainment (Foster-Bey, 2008; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995).

While the overall decline in youth civic engagement is often connected to broad social trends such as "a loss of trust in government" (American National Election Study, 2010) or a diminishing sense of community life across the United States

(Putnam, 2000), race- and class-based inequalities in engagement are largely attributed to two factors: deficits within marginalized communities and/or the inequitable distribution of civic learning opportunities.

While scholars who take a deficit approach to inequalities in civic engagement often acknowledge the intersection of various social structures that act on members of marginalized groups to suppress participation, they nonetheless locate the failure of engagement in those communities themselves. For instance, Meira Levinson (2007) conceptualizes the inequalities in engagement as a "civic achievement gap." She attributes lower levels of civic participation among minoritized communities to lack of education, failure to join voluntary organizations, and low-status employment opportunities (p. 5). She does acknowledge that race- and class-based inequalities create distinct civic experiences for members of these groups but persists in placing the onus of responsibility on *them* for not "achieving" civically (pp. 7–8). Similarly, Atkins and Hart (2003) argue that low-income youth living in urban areas fail to "acquire" civic identities because of the effects of poverty, including lower densities of adults, adults with fewer civic resources due to lack of income and education, and adults who fail to model civic behaviors like voting (p. 159).

Conversely, scholars who concentrate on the inequitable distribution of civic learning opportunities locate the root cause of civic inequalities in public institutions such as schools and community organizations that fail to educate all communities equally. This argument is grounded in the belief that civic education is a crucial catalyst for civic engagement. Research indicates that levels of civic engagement increase steadily along with levels of formal education (Nie, Junn, & Stehlik-Barry, 1996); however, beyond the positive effects of schooling generally, concerted efforts to provide targeted civic learning opportunities in both formal and informal learning environments have been found to demonstrate positive effects on young people's knowledge, skills, and commitments to participation in public life (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996).

Yet Joseph Kahne and Ellen Middaugh (2008), in their work studying the opportunities afforded to high school students across the state of California, found that students in higher tracked classes and those from high-income families consistently received more civic learning opportunities than students who did not attend well-resourced schools or experience the benefits of family wealth. They conclude,

> Schools, rather than helping to equalize the capacity and commitments needed for democratic participation, appear to be exacerbating this inequality by providing more preparation for those who are already likely to attain a disproportionate amount of civic and political voice. (p. 18)

The American Political Science Association Task Force on American Inequality (2004) details the consequences of these educational inequalities, noting that "Citizens with lower or moderate incomes speak with a whisper that is lost on the ears of inattentive government officials, while the advantaged roar with a clarity and consistency that policy-makers readily hear and routinely follow" (p. 1).

Therefore, while existing scholarship takes competing perspectives on who bears responsibility for inequalities in civic engagement (communities or institutions), it is largely united in its enduring faith in the normative constructs of civic engagement laid out in Table 1 and calls for civic learning opportunities that move students toward these behaviors. Best practices in civic education—as synthesized by a partnership of business, foundation, and research groups—include formal instruction in government and civics, discussion of controversial social issues, service learning, and participation in school governance (Gould, 2011).

Yet we find it necessary to problematize the consensus that these particular skills embody "good" civic engagement; indeed, relying on these skills as measures of engagement is an ideological choice that inevitably minimizes or ignores the value of other skills and, in turn, contributes to a narrow and exclusionary vision of who does and does not count as a good citizen. While it may appear on the surface that behaviors like working on a political project or following the news are skills unrelated to any particular ideological perspective, they cannot be separated from the narratives that educators construct about what it means to be a good citizen (Westheimer, 2015; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004)—narratives that, as we indicated earlier, are often tied to ideas of the American Dream. The skills listed in Table 1 are not neutral; rather, they conform to a particular vision of civic identity that we argue fails to take into account the systemic inequalities faced by young citizens of color. Thus, characterizing their civic engagement based on these measures fails to accurately capture their experiences of civic life.

We do not believe that this situation can be rectified by simply offering students of color more access to normative skills or adding a few new skills to the list; research in academic literacy and youth culture indicates that this approach often contradicts and impedes the pursuit of equity (Azevedo, 2011; Gutierrez, 2007). Instead, we argue for a critical vision of citizenship that can counter the dominant perspective that young American of color are civically disengaged and instead acknowledge the innovative ways in which they are participating in civic life.

In the next section, we move toward this vision by delving into how conceptualizations of civic identity based on the American Dream come up short in the face of the systemic civic inequalities faced by marginalized communities and demonstrating how researchers are beginning to develop new theoretical frameworks for civic education.

DISCONNECT BETWEEN CIVIC IDEALS AND CIVIC REALITY

As we discussed earlier, a powerful current exists in civic education scholarship that equates citizenship to a common understanding of the United States as an exceptional nation. William Damon (2001) argues that young people need to develop a shared sense of pride and patriotism in the best traditions of their country in order to realize a *civil* identity, a term that he uses to stress the traits of honesty, fairness, and common decency that he sees as crucial to good citizenship (pp. 130, 137). William

Galston (2003) attributes low levels of youth civic engagement to the failure of schools to specify a required core of civic knowledge and provide common, standardized civics assessments.

James Banks (2008) warns against this universal conception of citizenship precisely because of its propensity to minimize and suppress the experiences of minoritized groups; as he describes the consequences, "Groups with power and influence often equate their own interests with the public interest" (p. 131). A normative vision of citizenship does not comport with a society structured by systemic racial inequalities.

And these inequalities exist in almost every aspect of American public life. In 2013, the Pew Research Center calculated the wealth of White American households to be 13 times the median wealth of African American households and 10 times the median wealth of Hispanic American households (Kochhar & Fry, 2014). Meanwhile, according to the 2010 Census, African American and Hispanic families are more than twice as likely as White families to be living below the federal poverty line (Macartney, Bishaw, & Fontenot, 2013). Scholars have exhaustively documented the discriminatory treatment that minoritized populations continue to experience in public systems of criminal justice (Alexander, 2010), health (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013), housing (Desmond, 2016), and education (Lipman, 2011).

In the face of these experiences in public life, appeals to patriotism and calls to participate in a responsive and inherently virtuous democratic system can ring hollow. While civic education is one influence on civic engagement, so are interactions with government representatives and agencies, and research shows that negative contact with public officials can have a dampening effect on willingness to participate in public life (Soss, 2005; Weaver & Lerman, 2010). Cathy Cohen (2010) argues that many young people respond to the danger they sense from public officials such as police officers by engaging in a "politics of invisibility" that involves staying under the radar and disengaging from public life as a civic adaptation geared at ensuring their literal survival (pp. 195–196). Over 20 years before Ta-Nehisi Coates published his memoir, philosopher Cornel West (1993) argued that those who study American democracy must "face up to the monumental eclipse of hope [and] unprecedented collapse of meaning" (p. 12) experienced by the Black community, and fellow philosopher Eddie Glaude (2007) asserts that democracy in the United States "must begin by engaging the historical legacies of racism that threaten democracy's realization" (p. 40).

Community psychologists Roderick Watts and Constance Flanagan (2007) lay bare the civic education dilemma created by a context of systemic civic, political, and economic inequality—they contend that traditional notions of political socialization "implicitly encourage investment in or identification with the prevailing social order and replication of it" and ask, "Are young members of marginalized groups as likely as more socially integrated youth to replicate or buy into a system where they feel excluded?" (p. 781).

Anger and disengagement from traditional channels of political participation emerge as reasonable responses to Watts and Flanagan's (2007) question about the

civic atmosphere in the United States for people of color. Educators face the daunting task of instead developing an alternative vision of civic engagement with their students that can inspire hope and action. Deep exploration of the root causes of racial inequality in this country requires that educators refuse to force youth to conform to dominant systems of civic participation and instead create space for interrogation and innovation.

Many of the efforts to find a way forward involve reconceptualizing citizenship, moving away from viewing it as a possession or status to be achieved and toward a practice to be constantly negotiated based on the contexts that young people are experiencing (Lawy & Biesta, 2007). Drawing on sociocultural learning theory, Nasir and Kirshner (2003) argue that civic identity development must be analyzed through three overlapping lenses—the social interactions that occur between individuals, the cultural practices that structure these interactions, and the institutions in which these interactions occur (p. 141).

Scholars operating from this practice-oriented, sociocultural view of citizenship have been advancing youth civic education and participation on two fronts: pushing on the modalities of civic participation by focusing on new possibilities offered by digital media tools and expanding views on the agency of young people as participants in public life. We turn now to these literatures in order to demonstrate how they move us toward a new critical framework for understanding and educating for civic life.

THE PARTICIPATORY TURN: NEW AFFORDANCES OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES

When it comes to understanding civic participation, research too often becomes bogged down by privileging adult perspectives on what youth should be doing as civic agents rather than asking young people what actually engages them or what kinds of civic learning opportunities they may already be experiencing.

Before exploring examples of how civic participation and civic learning could be broadened in contemporary contexts, we find it necessary for education researchers to take a step back and assess what our field means when we discuss participation. As noted earlier, a litany of traditionally defined markers of civic participation exist and currently dominate the field; however, these skills do not take a full account of the practices in which youth are presently engaged. In considering the skills that are presently valued within the public sphere and the gaps that exist, we in the civic research community must ask ourselves several key questions:

- What does it mean to participate?
- Who participates in civic acts?
- What outcomes are sought and gained by participation?
- What stances must researchers take when studying the civic participation of youth and communities?

Looking beyond traditional measurements of civic action, youth are participating in civic activities that dive deeper into issues of equity and localized politics and that represent broader contexts for civic action. By moving from traditional forms of civics that focus on voting and individual responsibility to more justice-oriented understandings of civics that capitalize upon advances in multimodality and connected forms of learning, we see possibilities for deeper and more resonant approaches to civic learning. If we are to continue to trust in institutions of public education to foster commitments to civic participation, we argue that they must be willing to explore the varied experiences of citizenship that students bring to school. Furthermore, while much of the language around digital civic engagement focuses on increasing youth participation in public life, we argue that students' use of social media tools can start to change the conversation from one about merely participating toward one about interrogating normative civic practices and structures and innovating new forms of civic action.

In looking at youth socialization, engagement, and forms of shared governance in interest-driven spaces like online gaming and fandom communities, Mimi Ito et al. (2015) describes the value of understanding the "little p" politics that youth engage in regularly (p. 162). Considering that youth and adults alike are now participating, socializing, and demonstrating civic agency in both the physical world and in online spaces (Bennett, 2007), the contexts in which participation happens and civic engagement occurs are much more flexible than ever before.

Participatory Culture as a Disruption of Traditional Civic Engagement

Broadening definitions of participation to consider how youth organize, socialize, and produce complex media in, for example, online gaming communities demonstrate how civic engagement is fundamentally different in today's "participatory culture." As Jenkins, Clinton, Purushotma, Robison, and Weigel (2009) explain, "Participatory culture is emerging as the culture absorbs and responds to the explosion of new media technologies that make it possible for average consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content in powerful new ways" (p. 8). Though remix culture and fan fiction are seen as some of the main aspects of how participatory culture shapes youth experiences (Jenkins, 2008), this includes an important civic shift for youth as well; if youth today possess the tools for producing, distributing, and coordinating civic messages via digital technologies, the opportunities for learning about civic engagement are no longer tethered to traditional spaces like classrooms.

Furthermore, expanding on the value of understanding participatory culture, a group of recent researchers have described the ecosystem of extracurricular participation that youth engage in as "connected learning" (Ito et al., 2013). Connected learning is realized when a young person pursues a personal interest or passion with the support of friends and caring adults and is in turn able to link this learning and interest to academic achievement, career possibilities, or civic engagement (p. 6).

By looking at how individuals might collaborate when socializing in virtual worlds like *World of Warcraft* or *Second Life* (Boellstorff, 2008, Chen 2011; Nardi, 2010) or online knitting communities (Pfister, 2014) or video game design (Rafalow and Tekinbas, 2014) or fan fiction production (Hellekson & Busse, 2014), connected learning points to powerful forms of participation, engagement, and production that—while academically robust—often happen far away from the gaze of schooling and traditional measures of civic participation.

At the same time, as connected learning points to forms of extracurricular participation that are "socially embedded, interest-driven, and oriented toward educational, economic, or political opportunity" (Ito et al., 2013, p. 6), engagement in online gaming, fan fiction production, and distribution of remixes of popular songs can potentially highlight how youth understand their role in broader civic, public spheres. Youths' lives are spent socializing in digital spaces just as much as they are in their physical environments, and as such, the connected ecosystem must consider how civic learning opportunities occur across these spaces.

Though youth may learn forms of participation in digital spaces that can be taken up for civic and political purposes, the online context is not inherently political. For example, though some studies have noted that games can foster spatial awareness and civic learning (Kahne, Middaugh, & Evans 2008; Ondrejka, 2008; Squire, 2008, 2010), most digital games that youth consume do not explicitly engage with civic agency. However, the Internet can become a means of civic learning if we look beyond traditional measurements found in civic education literature. For example, as portals for socialization, group coordination, and production of fan fiction, games can foster youth participation in "affinity spaces" (Gee, 2004) for civic learning opportunities. As Salen (2008) notes, "Beyond their value as entertainment media, games and game modification are currently key entry points for many young people into productive literacies, social communities, and digitally rich identities" (pp. 14–15). As we look toward new avenues of youth civic engagement, youth interests and online social forums have the potential to become the seeds of 21st-century collaboration and organization around political interests.

Connected Politics and Civics That #Matter

Connected learning is also tied to more familiar contexts of political engagement. Most usefully, Cohen, Kahne, Bowyer, Middaugh, and Rogowski (2012) describe "participatory politics" as "interactive, peer-based acts through which individuals and groups seek to exert both voice and influence on issues of public concern" (p. vi). Considering how information can circulate, inform, and lead to action, participatory politics can mobilize networks—both online and off—sustain dialogue for agenda setting, and "enable participant to exert greater agency through the circulation" and production of political content (Cohen et al., 2012, p. vi).

One aspect of civic engagement in today's participatory culture that youth have shaped is the role of activism and organizing vis-à-vis online hashtags. In terms of

sustaining circulated, politicized content, hashtags have played a significant role in how youth engage in participatory politics. As such, the hashtag has quietly become a feature of recent social networking software that elevates it to a tool for powerful civic participation. As a nod to the ability of media to shift based on the needs of consumers and producers in a participatory age, the rise of the hashtag as a tool for organizing was initially a "hack" of existing search functions within Twitter (Parker, 2011). In 2007, Chris Messina tweeted, "How do you feel about using # (pound) for groups. As in #barcamp [msg]?" Messina's tweet points to the ability of search engines to neatly organize all tweets that include the same appended text (e.g., #BlackLivesMatter; #Occupy, etc.). Using hashtags for youth civic engagement can "help amplify individual voice through aggregation and dialogue. These two contemporary examples build off of global uses of hashtags on Twitter for civic action across the globe from Greece to the Arab Spring" (Garcia, in press). While important critiques exist regarding the ways that social media can create new opportunities for surveillance and harassment and perpetuate capitalistic corporate interests, we find it important to highlight its potential to instigate sociopolitical innovation. Though some pundits have dismissed the uses of online media for civic change as "clicktivism" or "slacktivism" (Gladwell, 2010; Morozov, 2011), its ability to sustain civic solidarity is perhaps most visible as a result of recent and ongoing movements such as #BlackLivesMatter.

Originally seen on Twitter in response to the unceasing murder of unarmed young men and women of color at the hands of police officers, #BlackLivesMatter is an ongoing movement to end violence—both literal and symbolic—that people of color continue to experience. As such, we are intentional in noting that #BlackLivesMatter is not simply a "trending" phrase or a "dialogue." As a movement, #BlackLivesMatter has persevered in public consciousness over the past 3 years largely due to its ability to sustain participation in both online spaces and in physical demonstrations like "die ins" (Levenson, 2014) held during holiday shopping seasons.

Young people, and particularly young people from historically marginalized communities, have been spearheading one of the most prominent civil rights movements taking place online and in the streets of the United States today (Abber, 2014). Unlike conventional models of civic education, the #BlackLivesMatter movement critiques the root causes of policies affecting young people's daily lives; rather than working within the system, the movement is calling out the system itself. In considering how these efforts reflect youth expertise around forms of connected learning and a fluency in the mechanisms that drive participatory politics, #BlackLivesMatter can be seen as a form of "connected civics." Ito et al. (2015) define connected civics as "a form of learning fostered via participatory politics that emerges when young people achieve civic agency linked to their deeply felt interests, identities, and affinities" (p. 17).

Looking across the possibilities of participatory politics and youth civic development vis-à-vis connected learning, it is important to emphasize that these disruptions to traditional understandings of civic opportunities are not simply built on the premise that technology "solves" issues of equity. In fact, though many examples of

disruptive participatory politics or youth engagement in connected learning point to positive aspects of digital technologies, the affordances of tech are not the root of these disruptive practices; youth interests, concerns, and passions are what drive civic learning—be these interests in online or off-line contexts. Likewise, not all games (digital or nondigital) are useful for civic learning. Though U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor made headlines in 2016 for launching an "iCivics" videogame (Singer, 2016), such digital tools largely reify traditional understanding of civic learning. The kinds of civic learning that youth are already doing in online games like Minecraft or in virtual communities like Twitter are leading to new disruptions of old civics. As Jenkins, Ito, and boyd (2015) note,

> Connected civics begins with an appreciation of how young people are developing political and civic capacity when they run their own World of Warcraft guilds, Minecraft servers, or fan conventions, a kind of "little p" politics that contrasts with the more adult-centered 'big P' Politics. This kind of organizing may not be about the government, but it is about governance, and it involves trial by fire in experiencing what happens when you have power and authority. (p. 162)

The "trial by fire" of youth civic participation in online and off-line contexts is largely ignored in how adults are considering the possibilities of youth as leaders today. And while some digital games, resources, and curriculum are developed to support youth civic learning, these tools often funnel individuals into traditional metrics of civic participation and are frequently advertised in ways that reinforce dominant, capitalist markets that do not sustain the cultural wealth of youth of color. These issues contribute to our desire to further the conversation about youth civic action in ways that push past mere participation and toward critical practices of interrogation and innovation.

Thus far we have considered the affordances of the participatory turn as related to youth socialization, play, and connected civics in digital spaces. In what follows we consider specific models of youth-led research and codesigned activism and consider the contributions of critical theory to transforming how young people are viewed as civic actors.

THE PARTICIPATORY TURN EXTENDED: SITUATING YOUTH AS CIVIC LEADERS

Alongside our field's need to challenge what counts as participation, we must consider what kinds of epistemological stances and methodological approaches ground how we work alongside and within youth-driven civic communities. While much civic education research treats young people as citizens in training and attempts to measure future commitments to participation in public life rather than honoring their current forms of public engagement, the expanded view of participation that we have presented insists on highlighting youth civic agency in its own right and on its own terms.

A variety of educational practices in formal and informal educational spaces, running the gamut from ethnic studies courses (Sleeter, 2011) to spoken word poetry

slams (Fisher, 2005) to youth organizing collaboratives (Rogers, Mediratta, & Shah, 2012), are seeking to reorient civic learning from the perspective of young people and build opportunities for action out of the contexts and experiences of their daily lives.

We propose that these practices can be usefully grouped together and understood as forms of civic education under the umbrella of what has come to be known as youth participatory action research (YPAR)—a form of inquiry that situates young people as the primary drivers of the research process and situates the issues about which they care most as the primary subjects of that research (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). While the word "research" implies that YPAR is primarily a methodology, its openness in terms of the practices that can be included in this term show that its overriding contribution is primarily an epistemological one—challenging traditional notions of who can produce knowledge and who can drive social action and change (Mirra, Garcia, & Morrell, 2015).

YPAR happens in a variety of learning contexts, from classrooms and after-school programs to community organizations and universities, and amplifies the voices of young people from elementary school to college and beyond through a range of activities. Our purpose in this chapter is not to parse exactly which activities should be considered YPAR according to any strict definition but instead to use YPAR as a broad framework that expands the nature and purpose of civic participation. YPAR addresses key concerns about what "counts" as research, who gets a voice within the research arena, and what role research plays in the daily lives of youth.

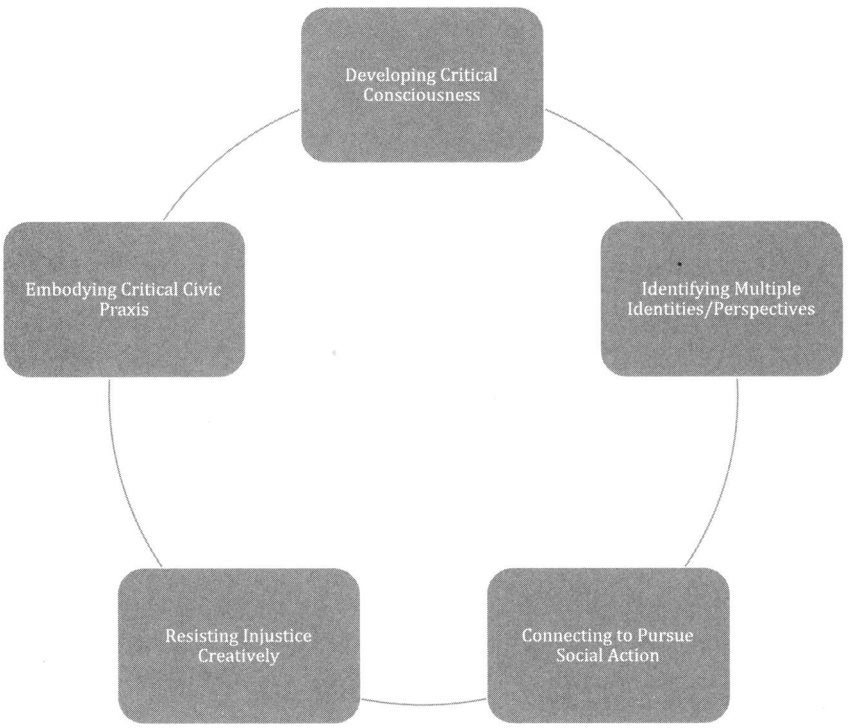
Figure 1 highlights a set of competencies distilled from our review of YPAR scholarship that comprise a cycle of critical civic learning and development. While these competencies are inextricably linked in practice, we tease them apart here in order to foreground their unique contributions to challenging traditional models of civic learning and supporting youth agency.

As we unpack each of these competencies, we reiterate they comprise a process that can be used to interrogate the civic world youth and adults inhabit—there is no beginning or end or linear progression of steps to be followed. A comparison of these competencies to the normative skills presented earlier in Table 1 offers a clear illustration of the contributions YPAR makes to establishing an innovative, critical vision of civic engagement that honors the experiences of youth from marginalized communities.

Developing Critical Consciousness

One of the key processes involved in YPAR is the deconstruction of traditional narratives of meritocracy and equality that undergird the American Dream and foster deficit ideology about minoritized communities. Unlike most civic education research, YPAR is built on a critical theoretical tradition—specifically Paulo Freire's (1970) theory of conscientization, in which oppressed communities engage in critical social analysis to expose and dismantle unjust power hierarchies and ideologies and imagine alternative possibilities. Instead of taking at face value the idea that cultural

FIGURE 1
Cycle of Critical Civic Learning and Development



capital is concentrated within dominant communities (Bourdieu, 1985), YPAR draws on theories that highlight the funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992) and cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) of working-class communities of color.

In their description of their work with Latina/Latino youth in Tucson, Arizona, Julio Cammarota and Augustine Romero (2011) explain that the development of critical consciousness helps youth move past feelings of powerlessness in the face of civic inequities by helping them "name the practices that counter and address the oppressive social and economic forces impeding the development of a healthy identity, neighborhood, and world" (p. 494). Coming to understand society from a critical perspective is the foundation on which political efficacy and civic praxis can be built (Watts, Diemer, & Voight, 2011).

Identifying Multiple Identities/Perspectives

Part of the process of developing critical consciousness involves making explicit the pluralism of American society—the variety of cultures, experiences, and beliefs

that are contained within the label of "American citizen." Sonia Nieto and Patty Bode (2008) define multicultural education as the explicit application of critical consciousness to formal and informal learning contexts, transforming not only curriculum and instruction to include diverse perspectives but also "the interactions among students, teachers, and families and the very way that schools conceptualize the nature of teaching and learning" (p. 44). Critical multicultural education, with its explicit antiracist orientation and commitment to honoring students' lived experiences, sets the stage for characterizing young people as active civic agents with the power to challenge historical power hierarchies and create knowledge on their own terms.

Jason Irizarry (2009) characterizes YPAR as a vehicle for connecting multicultural education to social action in order to counter civic inequities. He highlights youth research as a model that can help young people develop "the skills necessary to positively shape their life trajectories, while simultaneously challenging the multiple forms of oppression that delimit them and reproduce social inequality" (p. 198). This model of civic learning resists conceptualizing Americans as an undifferentiated group and instead celebrates differentiated experience as a catalyst for recognizing oppression and pursuing justice.

Connecting to Pursue Social Action

The concept of critical consciousness holds that the key element that bridges critical social analysis with social action is a sense of collective efficacy (Watts & Hipolito-Delgado, 2015). YPAR promotes a sense of solidarity and trust between young people and stresses the key role that relationships play in struggles for social justice. YPAR, whether it takes place in schools or community organizations, gives young people opportunities to connect with each other as well as to adults, resources, and experiences that enable them to realize their civic potential and take action on issues that matter to them (Ginwright, Noguera, & Cammarota, 2006). The collective nature of YPAR offers a source of community social capital based in mutual trust and shared interest (Sampson, Morenoff, & Earls, 1999).

Resisting Injustice Creatively

In the face of oppression, young people can choose to respond in a variety of ways. Daniel Solorzano and Dolores Delgado-Bernal (2001) offer a typology for responses—progressing from reactionary behavior through conformity toward resistance—that is organized by the extent to which young people possess a critique of social oppression and an orientation toward social justice. Without an understanding of oppression created by the ongoing development of critical consciousness, students may veer toward taking action within the constraints of existing civic structures, a choice that the authors claim has little chance of fostering social justice. Transformational resistance is achieved only when young people channel their awareness of oppression and passion for justice into pursuing action that is "political, collective, conscious, and motivated by a sense that individual and social change is possible" (p. 320).

YPAR represents a model of civic engagement that has the potential to foster transformational resistance. Cerecer, Cahill, and Bradley (2011) highlight the space that YPAR creates for young people to express themselves creatively through a variety of modalities in pursuit of justice.

Embodying Critical Civic Praxis

Shawn Ginwright and Julio Cammarota (2007) bring together all of the elements of this alternative vision of civic learning in their model of critical civic praxis, which they define as "the organizational processes that promote civic engagement among youth and elevate their critical consciousness and capacities for social justice activism" (p. 699). This commitment to continuous collective action and reflection through YPAR offers a pathway forward in our understanding of how to structure civic learning experiences that resonate with the experiences of young people of color.

YPAR engages productively with the ideas of connected learning and participatory politics considering its commitment to building on shared youth interests and using digital media tools in the service of amplifying youth voice about issues of civic concern. YPAR scholarship often highlights the use of multimedia as a favored strategy among young people for conducting data collection and sharing their research findings (Garcia, Mirra, Morrell, Martinez, & Scorza, 2015; Yang, 2009). More important, YPAR also reinforces the idea that the stance we take toward youth civic participation is just as, if not more important than, as the modalities we use; positioning youth as knowledge-makers necessitates a more creative and production-centered relationship with digital technologies.

We argue that these advances in the modalities and stances of civic learning also necessitate new language to describe civic action. We now turn to consider whether the terms *participation* and *engagement* are strong enough to capture the intents and purposes of critical civic praxis and offer new terminology to guide future research in this field.

MOVING FROM PARTICIPATION AND ENGAGEMENT TO INTERROGATION AND INNOVATION

We find it problematic to characterize the critical youth production embodied by participatory culture and YPAR as examples of mere civic participation or engagement, largely because those terms signify action that is circumscribed by and beholden to a larger system that, in the case of our civic context, is too often attached to patriotic and outdated ideologies and behaviors. While we could be content to claim that these forms of civic learning serve to expand what counts as participation, we feel that the power and potential of these practices call for stronger terminology.

Young people who recognize that their lived experiences do not comport to the narrative of the American Dream and who take social action based on critical social analysis are engaged in the crucial work of interrogating the public sphere. They are disrupting dominant ideas and exposing the bedrock inequities behind the

assumptions of fairness and equality in American life. They, like Ta-Nehisi Coates, are taking up the difficult task of moving past the brightly rendered version of their country but finding hope and change in the process of agitation.

And they do not stop there. They are not content to ask their questions to those in traditional positions of authority; instead, they turn to the communicative possibilities of new media and raise their voices as researchers to engage in civic innovation. They are remixing tools like Twitter through hashtag activism and are beginning to develop their own apps and programs. They are asking adults to take up positions as audience members as they take the mic to profess their expertise. And as quickly as new modes of expression are developed, young people are finding ways to manipulate them to broadcast their civic ideas and beliefs.

These youth practices offer huge promise for challenging systemic inequalities in civic life and for challenging deficit narratives of youth of color in the public sphere. They situate struggle as just as powerful a catalyst for civic action as patriotism and expand our conceptualizations of civic agency. Future research is needed that offers more responsive methodological frameworks for capturing these forms of agency and more innovative analytical frameworks for synthesizing the impacts, but we are encouraged by the possibilities.

CONCLUSION: REIMAGINING CIVIC PATHWAYS ALONGSIDE YOUTH

If we are to look for ways to better engage youth of color in meaningful civic learning opportunities, it is not enough to simply hew to the pathways of participation that have largely disenfranchised these students for decades. As Kirshner (2015) writes, "Too many interventions that target students of color–despite decades of critiques of deficit-based approaches–continue to be designed without their input and to be based on carefully elaborated accounts of what they lack" (p. 172). Clearly, the traditional measures of civic participation that have been foundational for education research are not dramatically transforming the civic life experiences of youth of color today. With no end in sight, it is time to rethink the civic educational approaches currently implemented and researched and, perhaps, look at how youth anger, sense of disenfranchisement, and disappointment in the current socioeconomic landscape can open up the space to reimagine civic possibilities today.

As there are widespread precedents of how national electoral forms of civic participation have intentionally placed communities of color at distinct disadvantage through voter suppression and gerrymandering; as there are numerous examples of how communities of color in the U.S. experience systemic social inequities; as civic education research is often done in the silos of tenure track academia such that little benefit or insight is gleaned by those communities most disenfranchised by the sociopolitical and educational system, ours is a field that is overdue to more critically question how and why civic participation reinforces existing power structures.

Current popular media—from fictional worlds of Harry Potter and the Hunger Games to real-world examples like #BlackLivesMatter—illustrate youth leading in

powerful and world-realigning ways. It is time to stop dictating pathways of civic participation and following the powerful examples young people are providing of what embodied civic leadership looks like both online and off-line. Fundamentally, a movement moves. Embracing the flux and responsiveness of civic participation in new contexts—whether contained in online, off-line, or hybrid spaces—youth movements are led by processes of innovation today. Largely, civic education does not sustain the participatory politics of youth involved in *World of Warcraft* guilds or organizing #BlackLivesMatter because these are foreign to the familiar "Characteristics of Citizenship" that have been replicated in schools for generations.

As a field that must advance forms of youth civic engagement that value youth interests and expertise, we argue that we must rely on two dimensions of disruption. First, we must answer Cohen's (2010) call to interrogate what counts as civic participation and engagement today. Rather than dictate the pathways for civic participation for youth—and particularly disenfranchised youth of color—the paradigms of what citizenship looks like and how it is enacted must be thoroughly reevaluated. Second, we must innovate participatory pathways forward alongside the youth that have been primarily kept at a clinical distance for scrutiny.

The book-length dialogue between Paulo Freire and Myles Horton (1990) lifts its title from the work of Spanish poet Antonio Machado: *We Make the Road by Walking.* As we tread through the "murkier and unknown" context of the United States today, our civic pathways require innovating new methods of participation and reexamining our assumptions about the civic roads we have trusted in the past.

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