Introduction
In the era of high-stakes testing, arts and arts education in U.S. public education have fared poorly (President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities, 2011). If schools want to have arts programs, increasingly they have to recruit private revenue to support their efforts (Fang, 2013). The Common Core has no reference to arts education (College Board, 2012), and arts education has fallen further and further out of any conversations about the future of public education, despite a growing body of evidence pointing to the benefits of the arts to at-risk youth and the most vulnerable populations in schools (Art Works, 2012). The same might be said for civics, once one of the cornerstones behind the purpose of providing public education for all its citizens. (Labaree, 1997). While most U.S. schools have a civics requirement and most high school students take a civics class, fewer than 25% achieve a proficient score on the NAEP Civics Assessment, and that number shrinks dramatically when looking at low-income and minority students (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2011). Given the huge shadow standardized testing casts over the curriculum, it is fair to say that a commitment to educating young people to be active participants in our democracy is not high on the list of priorities and standards of today’s educational leaders.

In Youth, Critical Literacies, and Civic Engagement: Arts, Media and Literacy in the Lives of Adolescents (2014), Rogers and her colleagues at University of British Columbia attempted to bring the conversation about the arts and civic engagement back into focus. The authors stated that their work explores “the ways adolescents and young adults from diverse urban settings in Vancouver, Canada, use writing, visual arts, and theater to make critical claims about their everyday lived experiences” (Rogers, Winters, Perry, & LaMonde, 2014, p. 1). Their research occurred around the time that the city of Vancouver was preparing to host the Winter Olympics, with the changes to the urban landscape that accompany such an event. They go on to add that their descriptions

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The level of transparency the authors brought to presenting their approach to data collection and analysis was admirable. They described not only their methodology but also the process of data collection, including how they engaged the participants. This approach to data collection was found to be very useful. However, the team was limited in their ability to do this because they were not there when the data were collected. Therefore, they had to rely on the data collected by other researchers. This is a limitation of the book's conclusions. The engagement part of civic engagement involves more than consciousness raising but also involves the ability to influence public policy. The book described how civic engagement can have some limited autonomy in terms of control over their own lives and bodies, but the national control and the presumption that its citizens should not have any relationships with the outside world is limited. The book also acknowledged that their dynamic presence as participatory observers in the classroom directly impacted the realities of their students. In their appendix, the authors further detailed the methodologies and methods used, and the participants of the study. The participants of the study were primarily street youth who were involved in the creative arts program. The program provided additional and substantial insights into the creative arts and how they are employed different types of arts: writing and publishing, filmmaking, and theater production. The book concludes with a discussion of how and where the youth critical literacy work is employed, and how it is facilitated in the classroom. The book provides additional and substantial insights into the creative arts and how they are employed different types of arts: writing and publishing, filmmaking, and theater production.
and using parody or irony, the youth were talking back to or disrupting “repetitive citations” about street youth that disempowered them, and thereby repositioning themselves in relation to their audience. (Rogers et al., 2014, p.38)

Such an analysis is fine as it stands, but it calls into question what kind of effort was made to do a member check with the youth, and further, whether any of the youth read this manuscript and had thoughts on how their lives and work were ultimately portrayed. For this particular population, who openly expressed their distrust and guardedness with the presence of researchers and research practices in the first place, I wonder how a more transparent practice of sharing iterative analyses might have colored and informed the shape of the text. This was one of my struggles with this book overall, that the theoretical analyses seemed to ascribe more than perhaps the empirical data supported.

Leaving Out Violence: Talking Back to the Community through Film

Here the authors reported on a group of youth who are part of a community center that offered a national antiviolence program, LOVE (Leave Out Violence). Many of the youth were victims and/or had people close to them victimized. The program also helped to develop young leaders. The researchers seemed to connect well with these youth, and the youth were open to learning various techniques of filmmaking, all leading to their creating or imagining several individual short films as well as producing a group film. The fluency with which these youth related to film and music suggests strongly that as media film and music have become what makes up the youth literary canon more than the printed word. There is no real discussion of the leadership component to the program, so another example of where the agency associated with their practice of critical literacy is hard to discern.

The flow between the analytic vignette and its interpretations and implications is stronger and clearer than that of the previous chapter. It might have something to do with there being considerably more empirical data presented. However, there is still the gnawing problem of theoretical overreach when describing one of these teen films as presenting “a range of discursive and cultural resources to engage in or talk back to dominant cultural narratives about her life and world” (Rogers et al., 2014, p. 71). That young filmmaker may very well be talking and stating such claims, but there is no evidence of who is actually listening. In this chapter, the authors characterize as “complex” these youth’s civic engagement, calling it “more than local but less than global” (Rogers et al., 2014, p. 79). Once again, the empirical data does not seem to support it.

Performing Adolescence: Staging Bodies in Motion

Their final research site was a school setting, and beyond identification as located in a middle-class neighborhood, no details are offered about the school. The fact that it offers a sophisticated theater class for ninth graders leads one to think that it might have been a private school. Like the youth filmmakers, these students seemed quite open to receiving instruction in specific techniques and skills, in this case writing and producing performance pieces of “devised theater” (i.e., self-created). I appreciate the authors’ admission that their facilitation and overall presence had a real effect over the social, political, cultural, and interpersonal contexts of the site. This chapter blends the qualitative and theoretical in an overall representation of what these youth did, experienced, and the larger social implications. However, here too the authors engaged in the occasional theoretical embellishment. For example, their description of a devised dialogue in a clinic where one girl played the role of a tattoo artist and the other an artist with a few tattoos of her own reads as:

Lexa: Oh, cool, I have a couple of tats myself. What are you in for?
Lexa: Actually, I sculpt. You?
Lexa: I’m a tattoo artist.
Lexa: I saw your sketches. What do you do?
Lexa: What do you do?
Lexa: You?
Lexa: Oh, cool, I have a couple of tats myself. What are you in for?

(Rogers et al., 2014, p. TK)

The immediate analysis of the scene makes one wonder the degree to which these girls might see themselves in this critique: “The tattooed body here was set against the body as a subject of testing, offering a counterpoint or counter discourse to the medicalizing and surveillance discourse of the female body in the majority of the scene” (Rogers et al., 2014, p. 92). Perhaps it is a minor point, however, I think especially when conducting research with youth and other vulnerable populations, researchers should go the extra distance to ensure that their analyses resonate with those who provided them with the data and to discuss how their analyses are situated into their lived lives. The authors claimed that “in addressing publics, these productions teach specific ideas about young people to their audiences that can be understood as a form of citizenship” (Rogers et al., 2014, p.108). As in the previous two chapters, to cast the youth’s art as somehow representative of civic engagement is a bit of stretch.

Youth Claims in a Global Context: Texts, Discourses, and Spaces of Youth Literacies

The authors summed up their research by stating that the youth they worked with “demonstrated that they are sophisticated critical and cultural theorists and important and vocal participants in local and global conversations about contemporary social issues, collective democratic life and social justice” (Rogers et al., 2014, p. 99). A poster about the careless disposal of needles, a film about teenage stereotypes and an imagined film about a city undergoing radical gentrification, a devised theater performance set in women’s clinic and for a school audience—it is clear that these youth had important things to say and that there might be some larger potential for impact from their artistic expressions. However, I don’t think that their work rose to that level of consequence. This is not to negate the messages created and communicated or the sincerity behind them.

The authors chose to link these youth’s work with theoretical positions of counter resistance and their implications toward the larger society rather than with actual efforts in either North America or worldwide by youth succeeding in making social change via their
art and civic behaviors. The efforts to reform the prison industrial complex via the work and art from Chuco's Justice Center in Los Angeles (Owen Driggs, 2014); the Mikva Challenge and its mission to develop the next generation of civic leaders (www.mikva challenge.org); Louder Than A Bomb, the largest annual poetry slam; and any number of arts activism projects published by the website WhatKidsCanDo.com are just a few examples of youth using their critical literacies and public art skills to realize success in changing policies around how adults in power view youth and their contribution to society. Perhaps it is my own bias toward participatory action research with youth, however, that says linking their work in solidarity with youth artists/activists around the world might have been a stronger way to elevate their work.

Alternately, throughout this book, the appropriating of the language of critical theory, of “radical pedagogical possibilities” (Anyon, 2014), and the positioning of “public bodies against corporate power, [to] connect classrooms to the challenges faced by social movements in the streets and provide spaces within classrooms for personal injury and private terrors to be translated into public considerations and struggles” (Giroux, 2005, p. 10) served as injections of rhetorical steroids onto a data set and an empirical body that didn’t really support the additional heft and scope. I find this somewhat endemic in certain educational research. I say this as someone who appreciates that kind of theorizing and wants to believe in the revolutionary implications researchers advance. Still, such references move further away from the data and closer to pushing an agenda that is not as well substantiated by the facts on the ground. This point is also reflected at the end of this chapter, when the authors introduced a section on implications from these sorts of youth critical literacies on the curricula in school—they also did not acknowledge that there were pedagogies and practices already in place doing the work they posited (Morell, Dueñas, Garcia, & López, 2013). Again, I very much agree with their sentiment, but there was so little actual reference from the perspective of these youth as to make the section feel more than a little added on.

The authors made some effort to modulate their critique away from these larger theoretical claims. They stated that "whether or not youth view their work as civic engagement or resistance work, we need to understand the gray areas between their actions, intentions and the social implications of their work" (Rogers et al., 2014, p. 112). Later they added that the possibility exists that these youth

will find meaning as their public pedagogies and civic engagement, often momentary and partial and at times more sustained and committed, unfold in time and in the context of institutional histories, urban contexts, and particular nation-states, and also in retrospect; that youth resistance and engagements can be viewed as continually contingent rather than fixed. (Rogers et al., 2014, p. 112)

I wish there had been more of that kind of measured critique.

Youth, Critical Literacies, and Civic Engagement is an interesting read. However, I do not feel it breaks new ground either theoretically or in its examples of youth art as political and social critique. Nevertheless, it is highly thoughtful, and the authors believe strongly about the role that youth can and do play to bring to light critical issues and observations about society, making their voices and concerns heard. Perhaps in doing so, they will become more active participants in civil society, and in the process, teach adults a thing or two.

References


