Restorying as political action: authoring resistance through youth media arts

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the lived realities for young people growing up and learning in a climate of racial discrimination, religious intolerance, misogyny, and xenophobia, and how school-sponsored and school-supported uses of digital media can afford young people opportunities to navigate their experiences of social injustice and resist exclusionary discourses and practices. In a collaborative inquiry into the practices of two youth media producers, we explore how these counternarrative efforts are forms of restorying, in which young people write themselves into existence in ways that can reconfigure school spaces. Framed in Black feminist and critical cosmopolitan perspectives, this article considers how young people use new media tools in school to engage the narrative imagination and build the worlds they want to live in, simultaneously representing the political histories and realities of their everyday worlds and imagining alternative futures. We explore the ways schools can create opportunities for youth to engage in these new media practices that re-author themselves and the institutional spaces they encounter – and how these opportunities are situated within broader intersectional forms of systemic inequity and oppression.

1. Introduction

At the close of the second decade of the new millennium, as scholars, advocates, and citizens, we have found ourselves at a crossroads. Scholars, journalists, and civic leaders have written extensively about a contemporary global political landscape characterized by discourses of nationalism, racism, and neoliberalism, and those concerned about the future would do well to consider how our current climate of racial discrimination, religious intolerance, misogyny, and xenophobia has affected young people in their everyday schooling lives. Whether facing public harassment on transit to school, hearing racially and sexually charged remarks in school hallways and classrooms, living with school policies that disenfranchise LGBTQIA, undocumented, and disabled students, or confronting state-sanctioned discrimination against students' Islamic beliefs and practices, today's youth live and learn in highly politicized and exclusionary spaces. This article explores the lived realities for young people growing up and learning in this climate, how schools might navigate this hyper-politicized landscape, and the role digital technologies play in addressing these challenges.

We are particularly interested in understanding how school-sponsored and school-supported uses of digital media can afford young people opportunities to navigate their experiences of social injustice and resist exclusionary discourses and practices (e.g., Curwood and Gibbons 2010;

Duncan-Andrade 2007; Price-Dennis 2016). Extensive research has explored how young people produce digital media across afterschool, community, and family contexts to express their identities and take social action (e.g., Ito et al. 2010; Kynard 2010; Lankshear and Knobel 2011; Ellison and Kirkland 2014), including significant scholarship that investigates how young people are using new media to engage in participatory politics (Jenkins et al. 2016; Kahne, Hodgin, and Eidman-Aadahl 2016). We join scholars interested in bridging these digital media practices across students' academic lives (e.g., Ito et al. 2013), particularly critical scholars calling for working alongside youth from nondominant communities who have been marginalized or excluded from the research literature, whose practices have been characterized by deficit discourses, or whose stories have been romanticized, appropriated, or simplified by researchers (e.g., Alper, Katz, and Clark 2016; Dahya 2017; Garcia et al. 2015; Hauge and Bryson 2014). In this article, we argue that schools in the current era have an obligation to create opportunities for young people to use digital tools to connect their experiences and passions with their academic work and engage in social action.

In prior scholarship, we have characterized the important counter-narrative work that youth engage in online as a form of *restorying*, a process by which young people reshape narratives to reflect perspectives and experiences that have been routinely marginalized or silenced (Stornaiuolo and Thomas 2017, Thomas and Stornaiuolo 2016). We theorized restorying as a way young people use digital tools to write themselves into existence, first narrating and analyzing their lived experiences and then synthesizing and recontextualizing those stories to represent a diversity of perspectives and reshape dominant narratives. Here, we expand our understanding of digital restorying to explore youth media production in schools, interrogating the potential for youth to write themselves into existence in ways that can reconfigure school spaces – even as we remain cautious about the potential for these forms of cultural production to intervene in broader structural inequities (see Hauge and Bryson 2014).

In order to explore these possibilities and challenges, we focus on the experiences of two high school media producers – Sara, who identifies as African American and Muslim, and Gabriel, who identifies as Puerto Rican[1] – and their film, 'Property of No One.' Inspired by a humanities unit on world religions, the two created a short documentary to explore how one author's narratives of self resist broader anti-Black and anti-Muslim, xenophobic, and misogynist discourses, particularly in the context of the 2016 U.S. presidential election. As part of a long-term educational ethnography in an urban public high school, this study analyzes how the film functioned as a form of resistance that allowed the two authors to personalize the impact of dehumanizing political discourses and make visible these restoried discourses for others within and beyond the school to learn from. Framed in Black feminist (Collins 1990; Hooks 1994) and critical cosmopolitan (Mignolo 2000; Latour 2004) perspectives, this article considers how young people use new media tools in school to engage the narrative imagination and build the worlds they want to live in, simultaneously representing the political histories and realities of their everyday worlds and imagining alternative futures. We explore the ways schools can create opportunities for youth to engage in these new media practices that re-author themselves and the institutional spaces they encounter – and how these opportunities are situated within broader intersectional forms of systemic inequity and oppression.

2. Selfmaking & worldmaking as practices of restorying

Chinua Achebe asserts the importance of 'a balance of stories where every people will be able to contribute to a definition of themselves, where we are not victims of other people's accounts' (Bacon 2000, para. 17). Countering the dangerous single story that Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie cautions us against (Adichie 2009), restorying – or reshaping narratives to better reflect a diversity of perspectives and experiences – is an act of asserting the importance of one's existence in a world that routinely silences subaltern voices (Thomas and Stornaiuolo 2016). In our research and review of the field, as well as the landscape of schooling and contemporary society, it is evident that we are in

an era of youth restorying. These new narratives do not only exist in digital spaces, however. They also are important for equity in contemporary schools, where most stories and metastories being told are from White dominant perspectives.

It can be argued that people from nondominant groups have made their humanity legible through counterstories since antiquity. Just as publications from Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* to Walker's *An Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* directly challenged privilege, supremacy, and institutional power through the use of the printing press, the mass leveraging of social media has led scholars, activists, artists, and writers of all ages to tell new, powerful stories – to quote a lyric from Miranda's Tony-award winning musical *Hamilton*, 'I put myself back into the narrative.' Perhaps the most seismic recent example of this has been the Black Lives Matter movement, launched by three Black queer women who came of age using the social Web. #BlackLivesMatter 'provided youth of color with the language to define and describe their basic rights to live, learn, and be seen as fully human' (Winn 2017). The national and global response to the narratives articulated through this newest movement for racial justice is indicative of the transformative power of restorying.

The response to restorying efforts has been a backlash of historic proportions by those who stand to benefit from the status quo. Sara, Gabriel, and their youth peers around the globe are coming of age during a time when there are those who would silence their attempts at narrative selfmaking. The forebears of Black feminist epistemologies similarly dealt with the matter of narrative silencing. Counterstorytelling has been central to the Black feminist tradition since its inception (Collins 1990). Slave narratives like those of Harriet Jacobs provide glimpses of restories that predate the Civil War. Noliwe Rooks observes the agency of Black women writers who

> have begun the task of reshaping and redefining the patriarchy's notions regarding slave women by offering an alternative view of history – a vision which has Black women at its center. While they have not as yet answered all of the stereotypes of Black women that we have come to accept, they have made a definite start … *Black women have begun to write themselves into existence*. (Rooks 1989, p. 62)

Recent work on Black girls' literate practices (Muhammad and Haddix 2016), including those of Black Muslim girls (Muhammad 2015), illumine the ways that Black feminist selves are still composed into existence, providing lexis for considering the strata of multiple oppressions (Crenshaw 1991). 'Property of No One,' which hinges upon the story of Sara, a Black Muslim teen girl living in a Northeastern US city in the late 2010s, is part of this long tradition of restorying that bridges the past with the digital age (see Sarroub 2005).

It is significant that 'Property of No One' is a film. Youth media production has long been vaunted as a potentially emancipatory site of critical media engagement (Hobbs and Moore 2014), particularly in young people's efforts to restory mainstream discourses through their counter-narrative practices (Curwood and Gibbons 2009; Duncan-Andrade 2007). In light of considerable scholarship celebrating the participatory potentials of youth media, scholars have cautioned that uncritical approaches to youth media can overemphasize the liberatory potentials of youth voice and empowerment, without taking into account deeper issues of social exclusion, access, and systemic and historical injustice (Soep 2006; Blum-Ross and Livingstone 2016; Dussel and Dahya 2017). To address such concerns, researchers have focused on the ways youth from nondominant communities are engaging in work that represent themselves and their communities in critically reflexive ways (e.g., Alper, Katz, and Clark 2016; Asthana 2017; Dahya 2017). Yet a number of researchers have cautioned that it is not sufficient to become more attuned to how youth from marginalized perspectives respond to social inequities and narrate their experiences through media. Indeed, Garcia and colleagues (Garcia et al. 2015) have argued that schools can play a central role in developing a critical digital media curriculum to address systemic social and economic inequities through civic engagement.

While we explore the possibilities of schools working in partnership with young people to address systems of injustice in this article, we also take note of scholars who have called into serious question

how critical media literacy potentials are realized in practice, as they study how adults, youth media organizations, funders, and popular culture shape the ways youth engage with media and the stories they tell (e.g., Fleetwood 2005; Hauge 2014; Blum-Ross 2017; Pyles 2017). All practices of selfmaking are situated in broader systems, with mainstream discourses and narratives that shape the worlds we create and inhabit. Critical perspectives to understand these worldmaking practices are essential to understanding how our stories and restories fit into broader narratives and do particular work in the world; to that end, we turn to scholarship in critical cosmopolitanism (e.g., Mignolo 2000; Canagarajah 2012; Delanty 2012). Widely theorized across multiple disciplines, cosmopolitanism has proven fruitful in examining how people come to imagine and inhabit shared worlds (Kleingeld and Brown 2013). Critical cosmopolitan scholars have drawn on feminist, postcolonial, and poststructural frameworks to challenge cosmopolitanism's essentializing, imperialist, and Western roots, instead foregrounding the ways people use culture, history, and local practice in creating the worlds they live in (Bhabha 1994). We have found critical cosmopolitan theories particularly generative for restorying, especially cosmopolitical approaches to understanding how worlds are built within and through political systems (Latour 2004; Stornaiuolo and Nichols, in press; Stengers 2010).

A central premise of a cosmopolitical lens is that there is no one common world to which everyone belongs. Rather, as Latour asserts,

> A common world is not something we come to recognize, as though it had always been here (and we had not until now noticed it). A common world, if there is going to be one, is something we will have to build, tooth and nail, together. (2004, 455)

In other words, we must work diligently – and with considerable effort – to build our common worlds amid the pluriverse we inhabit. Yet there is no agreement on what should constitute a shared world, nor do we automatically possess a shared vocabulary or tools with which to build. Indeed, feminist approaches to cosmopolitics hammer home the missing, absent, and excluded viewpoints and voices as worlds are constructed, asking how we might take into account those political realities even as we work to establish new forms of connection and care for wider circles of participants (Stengers 2010). We suggest that youth media can have a significant role to play in helping to make these different worlds visible and understandable, but also making possible the conditions upon which we can build new, shared worlds.

3. Methods

This study is grounded in a longitudinal ethnographic inquiry (Saldaña 2003; Hammersley and Atkinson 2007) into how adolescents engaged with and co-constructed their high school's media lab over four years (see Stornaiuolo and Nichols 2018). The research site is referred to here as the Collaborative Design School (CDS), an open-access public school in an East coast city that opened in 2014, the first year of the study. Following a cohort of 45 over their high school years, we focus here on two seniors who became closely involved with the media lab, Sara and Gabriel. Within the broader ethnography about how students engaged with the media lab, we designed a collaborative inquiry with Sara and Gabriel as a case study (Yin 2018) to learn how students sought to use youth media as a form of political action. The central question guiding the study is: How do young people use digital media in school spaces to navigate their experiences in the current political landscape?

The larger study is framed in feminist ethnography (Abu-Lughod 1990; Visweswaran 1994; Ghosh 2016), a qualitative research methodology that critically examines how knowledge claims are intertwined with issues of power, researcher positionality, and discursive representation. As politically-focused inquiry designed to complicate and subvert ethnography's colonial past, feminist ethnography locates knowledge production in the everyday lives of participants, particularly those who occupy subaltern positions. In efforts to recognize and address power asymmetries, particularly in the relationship between researcher/researched, feminist ethnography foregrounds collaborative

authorship and questions who gets to represent people's stories and histories, in what forms, and for whom. Such concerns have shaped our current representation of data in this study.

3.1. Context & participants

As a design-oriented, technology-infused public high school, the Collaborative Design School opened in 2014 in a large urban school district with a small cohort of first year students. Seeking to imagine school differently, CDS was organized around three interdisciplinary makerspaces (Kafai, Fields, and Searle 2014), hands-on labs that focused on media, industrial arts, and community organizing. Each of the three spaces offered students opportunities to engage in hands-on inquiry projects that extended their studies in core classes and allowed them to earn cross-disciplinary competency credits. The school was open to students across the city, and district documentation shows that in the school's fourth year, students identified as Black or African American (75%), Hispanic (17%), White (3%), mixed race (3%), and Asian (2%), with 100% of students identifying as economically disadvantaged. The media makerspace was a large lab room filled with computers, flexible workspace tables, a 3D printer, and a studio configuration of lighting, green screens, and photo and film equipment. The space was often a hub for student activity during lunches and other periods during the day, but the teacher, a longtime district educator with extensive experience in media arts, also taught four periods a day of hands-on media curriculum (e.g., as a partner school in the journalistic PBS NewsHour Student Reporting Labs) as part of the school's efforts to thread making activities through the school day.

Our roles were constantly under negotiation, and relationships between and among the four of us evolved over time. Amy (Author 1) began the ethnographic study before the school began, in collaboration with the founding principal. She and her team worked closely alongside the staff, especially as the school expanded each year, by participating in the professional development and hanging out in school spaces regularly. The research flowed in relation to the needs of the community, involving partnerships with the humanities teachers, some of whom were also working in collaboration with Ebony (Author 2) and her research team, as well as youth participatory action research studies with students (who worked to build a writing and tutoring space in the school). Issues of race, gender, and privilege were salient in the researchers' relationships; Amy identifies as a White, middle class, cis-gendered university researcher and Ebony as a Black cis-gendered university scholar and critic. Both 18 year-old seniors who grew up in different neighborhoods in the city, Sara identifies as a African American Muslim young woman and Gabriel as an Afro-Latino young man of Puerto Rican descent. Conversations about race and privilege were prevalent in conversations among the four of us as well as within the wider school community, especially in light national and local focus on the Black Lives Matter movement and the reality of police brutality the young people in the study faced in their daily lives.

3.2. Data collection & analysis

The primary data for the collaborative inquiry described in this article centered around the production of the short (6:25 minute) documentary film produced by Sara and Gabriel, 'Property of No One.' Data included the film itself, various artifacts related to the film (e.g., clips, storyboard, video from conference presentation, etc.), and six semi-structured, transcribed interviews about the film. The interviews included two with Sara and Gabriel together, discussing the process of making the film and an artefactual analysis of the film itself (each lasting about an hour); individual interviews with each author, two with Sara and one with Gabriel (each 30–45 minutes); and one interview with the media arts teacher about the making of the film and its reception and circulation (~45 minutes). In addition to these focused data, we included more general ethnographic data, including weekly field notes about the media lab over two academic years, other student films and projects produced during that time, and interviews with students in the media lab as well as other teachers and staff.

We analyzed all data iteratively, engaging in collaborative theory building via grounded analysis (Strauss and Corbin 2015). To analyze the film itself, we experimented with different data representations and visual research methods (Pink 2007; Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña 2014). Using the online tool Airtable, we create a multimodal transcript (see Appendix A) using Halverson's (2006) method of representing filmic texts by grouping together semiotically cohesive shot sequences. We then engaged in two rounds of coding, first descriptive coding followed by a more general pattern coding (Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña 2014). In the first round of descriptive coding of the film and interview transcripts, we collaboratively generated codes related to the process of making the film (finding inspiration, editing news clips, filming interviews), its connection to different institutional contexts and events (the presidential election, humanities assignments), audiences for the film (family members, teachers, other students), and the political and personal commitments represented in the film (student voice, discrimination about Muslim religion, women's choice to cover). We then engaged in a second cycle of coding, taking into account the broader ethnographic data to understand how the film fit into the broader ecology of the school and media lab. Here we centered on five pattern codes that cut across earlier descriptive code categories: authorship; identity; worldbuilding; counternarrative; and impact/connection. Each of those pattern codes helped us to shape our findings collaboratively and decide how to represent the data.

4. Findings

The two findings sections below unpack the process of making the documentary film and the attendant cultural contexts, examine issues around collaborative authorship and identity the film raised, and center the process of restorying within these efforts. We focus on the selfmaking and worldmaking capacities represented by the media production process and consider how these capacities position young people as agents of their own stories and forms of resistance.

4.1. Storying as selfmaking: authorship, identity, and 'sister stories'

Sara and Gabriel agreed that the central story of the film is Sara's. Beginning with the written attribution in the opening screen, which appeared as white text on a black background, the film located Sara's story in her desire to raise awareness about her religion: 'THIS FILM IS INSPIRED BY [SARA], AN AMERICAN MUSLIM WHO SEEKS TO RAISE AWARENESS OF HER BEAUTIFUL RELIGION.' Sara appeared in six scenes in the movie, four talking head interviews and two video sequences, the first one in which only her voice appears and the last one in which she was featured from every angle. In this way, Sara's experience, voice, and face were central to her effort to convey the beauty of Islam in light of so much misinformation about the religion. Gabriel described how Sara 'had a story to tell, her Muslim identity in America' and how 'she felt as though being a Black woman who is Muslim cannot fully be authentically herself walking in the streets of [the city].' Sara acknowledged that people would have a new understanding of her experience as a young Black, Muslim woman as a result of watching the film: 'Most people might get like, you all go through this? You go this and it's like, I really go through this. And I went through it with my family, too.'

For Sara, her story is an intensely personal one, yet only a fraction of her experiences made it to the screen. At the time of making the film, she was grappling with her family's reaction to her conversion; while her father, brother, and cousins were Muslim, her Christian mother had serious concerns that Sara was working to address. One of Sara's motivations in making the film originally was for her mother to accept her choices; she described thinking, 'If I make this video, when I show her how devoted I am to be a Muslim, then it will make her change her mind.' Sara broke down crying a number of times during filming, and Gabriel was very aware of his responsibilities in helping Sara tell her story:

> I literally just stopped talking and let Sara talk, everything she shared from her story. … This is not my story. I helped develop it, bring it to life, but this is Sara's story. I shared her vision. I shared what was in her heart.

Both authors acknowledged that while Sara's experiences inspired the story, ultimately the story was larger than any one person. Sara described its broader narrative as a 'sister story': 'It's not really so much my personal story. It's really every Muslim's story. So I would just say it's a sister story.' As a sister story, the film represents the stories that other young Muslim women could tell. It also positions 'Property of No One' within the work of restorying, and the broader emancipatory project of Black, Black feminist, and Black Muslim counterstorytelling.

Both authors acknowledged these broader set of narratives as influencing their decision to bring in other perspectives in the film itself, including that of their teacher and a local Muslim activist. Layering those voices with Sara's was a way to acknowledge the deep effects of anti-Muslim bias directed particularly at young women of color. Indeed, the Black, Muslim female teacher featured in the film echoed many of Sara's own sentiments and provided a broader context for those experiences. In scene 15, for example, Sara said that if someone asked what her religion meant to her, she would respond, 'It's my life.' In scene 16, her teacher responded to the same question: 'My religion means my life, it's my livelihood, it's my grounding.' By editing these statements to appear back-to-back, the film positions Sara's experiences as connected to these 'sister stories,' as part of a broader historical narrative shared by women of color following Islam in today's world. Gabriel acknowledged that these sisters represented one of Sara's primary audiences for the film, in her desire 'to provide inspiration to young Muslim girls to not be afraid of wearing their hijab and embrace the beauty within the religion.'

At its heart, the film was personal to the two authors, made more so by virtue of its immediacy of mode. Sara explained that the film was like a gift to its audience, 'a piece of us' that she and Gabriel were sharing with others through its visual elements:

> It's just it's just us giving you a piece of us that, you know, a book can't give you. A paper can't give you. We're giving it to you live through the lens. We're letting you see how we feel. We're letting you see our lives and we're telling you our lives, our truth. I feel like when somebody watch my video and I speak about it, you can kind of get that imagery in your head. It's like with Gabriel you get the words and you get the visual.

Rather than a book or essay, which Sara saw as static forms, the film lived and moved, a visual representation of their experiences. The film is the proper modality for this gift, according to Sara, because it was a marriage of both words and images, a way to really see their lives, their truths, and their stories – and how these were connected with others' stories over time.

Despite its personal nature, the film was also a response to an assignment within a school context. While assigned to write an essay for the unit, Sara approached her humanities teacher and asked if she could make a film instead, using the resources of the media lab and bringing in well-regarded filmmaker Gabriel as collaborator. The school served as a sponsor for these media activities, with the media lab at the school making such media work available and accessible. Brandt has described literacy sponsors as 'any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy – and gain advantage by it in some way' (1998, 166). As a sponsor of the film, the school acted as an agent in simultaneously supporting and regulating this literacy practice.

While individual teachers certainly served as sponsors of Sara and Gabriel's project, school itself sponsored this media production work as well. Not only did the school provide a set of tools and resources for media production in the form of the lab space and a dedicated media teacher, but the very structure of the school provided flexibility in how students performed their requirements. As a competency-based school, CDS allowed students to demonstrate mastery of a topic via multiple means. For this assignment, students had to show they were proficient in building an argument with claims, evidence, counter-claims, and sources. While the school supported media production to address some competencies, CDS also served to regulate those practices through elaborate requirements and constraints. Sara described the process of making sure the film fulfilled the demands of the competency system:

We had to go back and made sure it met the competency. So it was like every question we did or every answer that we responded to always had to go back and match up with the competency because if it didn't match up with the competency it wasn't working. And it wasn't like we could go our own way with the video, which we wanted to do. It was so many parts to the video that it was like really good in the video, but we had to cut out just to meet some competency. Like, it was kind of like the worst part, but the best part is that we were able to all tie it into a grade. And reach out to people that you can reach out to, like our panel.

Working within the constraints of the school provided opportunity to connect with panel members from the community while also earning a grade. Yet, it was more work to consider every word, every video cut, in light of how to forward their central argument. As a sponsor, the school played an important role in both making possible some things while suppressing others, an exercise of the institution's power.

The school also played an important role in creating an environment that encouraged students to share parts of themselves often silenced or put aside in school. Sara recognized that people at CDS was respectful of others' beliefs, and that the curriculum was responsive to students' needs:

In this school, nobody shuts anybody out for being who they are. They allow us to be who you are in this school. That's true to understand in this school – they do not shut you down for your ethnicity, your race, your religion, nothing. You're accepted in this school. Nobody is judgmental.

Gabriel concurred that 'that teaching establishment right there is what more schools need … . This school creates platforms for student voice. I think that is very important in general.' Gabriel linked supportive spaces and student voice, implying that teaching and learning in any school should be oriented to creating platforms in which students' voices are centered. Gabriel's championing of other people's voices was an important element for Sara, who remembered him telling her, 'You need to stand up and have a voice on this subject.' But for Sara, her voice was connected to those sister stories, to reaching other communities beyond the walls of the school. Having such a platform supported by school 'allows us to reach sources that we can't reach [otherwise],' such as inviting a student-run panel of activists and religious experts to present at the school.

The teachers and staff represented an important set of sponsors. These sponsors were responsible for creating and enforcing the competency system within which students worked, but they were also involved in nurturing a supportive school environment. Sara and Gabriel described their close relationships with the Humanities teacher, the media lab teacher, and the special education teacher appearing in the video. Each of these individuals took an interest in the project and in Sara and Gabriel personally, and Gabriel praised the close relationships between teachers and students as 'what creates change and possibility.' Gabriel called for other schools and teachers to learn from this example, because 'once you change your teaching method, the pedagogy that flows from teachers, and start really understanding urban youth, [you will] understand the dreamchaser's philosophy.' Gabriel's invocation of Meek Mill's dreamchaser philosophy linked teachers' sponsorship to young people's dreams – teachers are on the frontlines of supporting students and making their dreams and ambitions seem possible. For Gabriel, it was the obligation of schools, particularly urban schools, to support teachers' work to support students and create platforms for student voices that have historically been silenced. Neither Sara nor Gabriel thought that schools alone could do this work, however, and in the next section we explore how they worked to address systemic forms of oppression and discrimination that they saw being reinforced in schools, particularly for youth of color in urban schools.

4.2. Restorying as worldmaking: naming and reframing the worlds we live in

One of the central dimensions of our argument is that youth media offers significant opportunities for restorying work by students in schools, positioning them as agents of resistance using a repertoire of tools for naming oppression and narrating new visions for the future. In this section, we delve into the ways Sara and Gabriel's film functioned as a prime example of restorying at work. We begin by

talking about their efforts to make visible the forms of discrimination young Muslim women like Sara face, bringing in perspectives from others to argue that such forms of discrimination are not new. We then move to consider the ways that new narratives are proposed. From Sara's ending words in the film about a whole different world, she is joining in her life as a Muslim to the hopeful ending sequence set to Andra Day's song 'Rise Up'; the film is decidedly directed toward building a vision of a different set of possibilities for living in a common world in which voices like Sara's are central.

Naming the world in which one lives is essential to restorying. Digital media makes it easier to see those worlds in action by virtue of the visual and aural elements that allow viewers to empathize and imagine those worlds in sufficient detail. The two video sequences that bookend the film, one from 1:01–1:24 and the other from 5:22–5:41, function to illustrate Sara's world. In the first montage, five clips of scenes from nature are set to haunting music with lyrics in Arabic, with Sara's voice declaring, 'I am a Muslim. I am an American. I'm no terrorist. But I am hope. This is my religion. This is what makes me unique.' In the final montage, a video sequence shows Sara from different angles, including a closeup of her face, set to the swelling music of Andra Day's 'Rise Up,' with a voiceover reiterating the importance of her religion to her life. These different tools – music, voiceover, video, text, image – arranged in a particular sequence and juxtaposed with other filmic elements were used to name their world. For Sara and Gabriel, these tools were important to naming oppressions that they faced, specifically around racism. Gabriel explained that the film helped to set those broader issues in context, arguing that 'as you grow older you will start to see white supremacy is the number one problem in America.' Indeed, images of America – from news clips of Trump as the American president to an image of a flag in the opening video sequence – permeate the film, functioning as an eternal tension in how to reconcile racism and sexism with America's promise of freedom for all.

A critical aspect of that naming process for Sara and Gabriel involved situating forms of oppression in a historical context. For example, the title of the film, 'Property of No One,' emerged from a discussion based on a shirt with that phrase that Sara wore to the filming. Gabriel explained their thinking about the title as echoing tensions around freedom and slavery:

> Property of No One stands for when she talks about when you think of African-American people and their history, you think about slavery and how they was property back then. Now she created a conversation where I'm nobody's property. Donald Trump can say all these things about Islam. He could be the leader of this nation, but I am not his. I think that really stuck, and it was just a great title to go with.

Here Gabriel tied the idea of slavery, of Black people being considered property, to the anti-Muslim, xenophobic discourses Trump spouted in the opening clips. Gabriel linked historical forms of oppression, the denial of people's humanity based on the color of their skin, to the current forms of discrimination against people's religious beliefs and the subsequent dehumanization of those discourses.

Gabriel and Sara spent much time drawing those historical links in the film and in their editing choices. To some degree, they saw their task as informing audiences, especially white audiences who may not be aware of the oppression and discrimination young women who look like Sara face. Gabriel described that 'a lot of kids are not even knowledged on a lot of things in America, so they don't even know that it's bad.' So for the film's authors, portraying the way things are for them as young people involved correcting historical stories that 'glorify white America. They glorify George Washington. They glorify Abraham Lincoln.' What schools and media should do, however, is historicize those stories from diverse perspectives, because 'it's also about Martin Luther King. It's also about Malcolm X, James Baldwin, and Maya Angelou. So we get this whole spectrum of everything embodied in African-American history.' By rooting these African American histories in their personal experiences, Gabriel explained that he and Sara can help people see the world from their particular lived vantage point: 'We can identify certain things because that's where we come from and that's where we lived and I think that's what makes our work unique.'

In restorying work, historicizing is centrally important. Young people are not creating media in a vacuum – they are responding to lived conditions historicized over time. Gabriel and Sara were careful to situate such historicizing work in terms of broader systems of oppression. Gabriel described how one 'could see the system working' through juvenile detention centers, addicts on the street, and metal detectors in (urban) schools. Gabriel was very clear that he has been 'more coming at why the system is set up the way it is' in his media work. This systemic approach is meant to draw parallels between slavery and continued silencing and violence against Muslims, women of color, and immigrants. For Sara and Gabriel, these connections helped to explain the reality of the world they live in through film; Gabriel explained:

> it's more meaningful when you see more stories like that [in the film]. And I think that way the world is set up is like we've been through slavery and all of that, and we have been oppressed, marginalized our whole lives so our stories will never be those rich, white kids' stories.

The stories he and Sara tell will always be one located in a particular worldview, one derived from being historically oppressed and silenced – and that those stories are at heart 'sister stories' that connect them to others through history.

An aspect of this naming process involves issues of representation. How should Sara and Gabriel represent themselves in order not to reify or otherwise reinforce stereotypes, but still convey the difficulty of racism, Islamophobia, and other intersecting forms of oppression they face daily? How can they speak for themselves and for others? Sara explained that

> you don't want to make people feel bad about how they portray Muslims. But, in the meantime, you want to get your word across. So, it was like, we had to be considerate of how we were going to answer the questions, how we were going to base it.

While Sara worried about how to portray Muslims and speak on their behalf as a representative, Gabriel worried about how to convey Sara's story, ultimately choosing to edit out parts that were too personal. In all these ways, naming their worlds meant representing their stories in the broader contexts in which they lived. For Gabriel, he had been grappling with issues of representation since he decided to attend an elite, predominantly white institution for college; he explained:

> I want to be there for my ancestors. I want to be there for my people and my community, and really put my city on the map because I think if I'm in a space with a lot of white people of course they're gonna not respect me. And they're gonna, racial slurs and all of that, obviously. But my grind and my motivation will never stop because of that.

For Gabriel, the grind and motivation to succeed was rooted in his desire to continue the legacy of his ancestors – to work against and in spite of the racial slurs and stereotypes young men of color face.

An important dimension of restorying is the construction of counternarratives, stories that reframe mainstream discourses by telling stories from alternate perspectives. In 'Property of No One,' the opening five clips portray Donald Trump shouting about the dangers of 'radical Islam,' often in front of the American flag. This opening sequence of shots provided the mainstream U.S. narrative about Muslims that the entire film pushes back against. Sara explained that the Muslim ban was the political impetus for the film, spurring her desire to counternarrate the claims made by Trump about Muslims as dangerous terrorists: 'There are 50 different kinds of Muslims. And I'm a Salafi Muslim. I pray five times a day. That's what I am. So, you can't say that all Muslims is terrorists, because they're not.' Gabriel argued that media has specific potentials for restorying, providing 'a forum where we express our perspective and then you would get that intersectional lens.' Such a forum for self-expression, Gabriel continued, was tied to the potential for articulating 'the right representation, changing the narrative, fighting for this, that, and a third and sharing stories that shine a light on dark areas in life.' Youth media, in other words, offers a key opportunity for changing the narrative by representing these alternate stories that shine light on areas of darkness.

At the heart of restorying is imaginative practice – the capacity to dream up alternate futures. For Gabriel and Sara, that process of restorying meant imagining a new world, one with more equitable

and just futures for young Black, Muslim women. Gabriel explained that this process of creating a new world via film allows youth perspectives to dictate the rules of that world:

> We could create and dream on media, and we can put a Black female into office as a President. … What that would do when a little girl sees that is like, 'I could do that.' … That's the definition of what film could do. It erases all the noise in America. You create your own establishment. You create your own world, and you get to set different rules and different laws.

As Gabriel described, these forms of counternarrative allow authors to imagine more equitable futures, to position a Black woman as president and thus open up young girls' imaginative vistas. Such an effort to create the world anew is tied up with counternarrative; these artistic, creative practices are often rooted in histories of injustice that need to be overturned via imagination:

> Because at the end of the day, we want equality. We want to be in this common world but it's such like we can only dream of it and only create it in our art or the poems that we write or the films that we create. … We're able to give something to the world that has never been seen before. We are able to give a different perspective to it.

This hopeful gesture toward the future, to retain hope for alternate realities, is at once rooted in the present – in showing how the world really is – and in the future, to imagining how it might be.

5. Conclusions – restorying selves and worlds anew

'Property of No One' was initially born in Sara's desire to tell her story as a relatively new Muslim, grappling with religious identity expression in a political culture that denigrated her gender, religion, and race. Beyond the context of the school assignment, the story that Sara and Gabriel told is one deeply rooted in a much longer history, one in which discrimination was baked into the very foundation of America (see Kendi 2016). Students were acutely aware of the inherent contradiction of enslavement amid the Founders' espousal of freedom, especially at a time when the afterlife of slavery (Hartman 2008) was made evident through #BlackLivesMatter, and the settler colonial nature of the United States was being laid bare through the #WaterIsLife protests at Standing Rock Reservation (Dunbar-Ortiz 2014). As Gabriel said in an interview, 'It's Sara's story, but it's a bigger story than just a singular person.' Indeed, it is this historicizing work that is so central to restorying – Sara and Gabriel deliberately ground their counternarratives in the perspectives of people who have traditionally been silenced and ignored.

As the authors worked together, new audiences and purposes for the film emerged from their collaboration. Gabriel described his moment of realization during the editing process: I think as I was filming it and editing it, I realized it's not just towards little girls. It speaks for all types of races. What it does it provides knowledge and context so white people could look and understand the difficulty of putting on a hijab and walk in America where their presence is deadly. Such an effort to appeal to different audiences, to make white viewers understand the threat women wearing a hijab face on the streets, was an important context for the film, one that emerged during the editing process as they decided how to layer different voices together. This awareness of audiences beyond those proximate to CDS also signals the desire to negotiate the cosmopolitics of shared worlds.

There has been considerable critique of research about youth media as overly optimistic, and worries about how well youth films are positioned to interrogate root causes of marginalization or intervene in systemic forms of oppression. We are aware of these critiques and have thought carefully about how Sara and Gabriel's work in this school-sponsored filmmaking project operates as a form of social action and represents a hopeful path forward for schools. Our collaborative inquiry revealed that 'Property of No One' involved young people working within the constraints of the systems they occupy and with the tools they have at their disposal to do socially just work. As Gabriel asserted, 'You can't live in a society, and expect it to be what it is. We have to help.' This process of restorying – of presenting the realities of their everyday worlds, situating those experiences in relation to historical practice and current discourses, and of telling stories from less visible

perspectives to imagine alternate futures – is fundamentally equity work. But this kind of equity work requires sustained support by a network of sponsors and a repertoire of tools. In the words of Gabriel: 'I honestly think once you give a young person the tools to be great, they gonna run with it. They just gonna shoot for it.'

Some may wonder about the significance of our focus on youth media production during a time when the seams of the world appear to be unraveling, and the fabric of the United States is being torn apart. Yet we contend that 'Property of No One' is agentive selfmaking *and* worldmaking in a nation that is based on property rights rather than human rights (Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995). Restorying selves shattered by persistent structural inequality is difficult enough during our fractured times. 'Making the world anew,' as Langston Hughes envisions, requires a roadmap. Sara, Gabriel, along with young people all over the world are mapping the way forward.

Note

1. All names are pseudonyms (including the school name). Sara and Gabriel were instrumental in the writing of this article but chose to remain anonymous at this time.

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Disclosure statement

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