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Bonded in crises: youth activism in the face of COVID-19, racial injustice, and climate change

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Thesis

**BONDED IN CRISES: YOUTH ACTIVISM IN THE FACE OF COVID-19,
RACIAL INJUSTICE, AND CLIMATE CHANGE**

by

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B.A., Macalester College, 2016

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requirements for the degree of
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DEDICATION

I am fortunate enough to have many people that make my life beautiful, and thus deserve
a part of this dedication.

To my grandfather, the Late Mr. Mosaddi Mallick (1928-2012) for instilling in me the
values of being intelligent, humble, patient, and kind. You have made me into the person

I am today.

To my grandmother, Tara Devi Mallick - your unconditional love and unwavering
support are the foundation on which I build my life.

To my mother, Amita Devi Mallick - your demeanor, work ethic, and willpower make
me strong.

To my brother, Rohit Mallick - you make my life fun and full of different perspectives.

and finally,

To my father, Dr. Govind Mallick - your actions, words, and encouragement, inspire me
to never give up, to never stop learning, and to never lose confidence.

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**BONDED IN CRISES: YOUTH ACTIVISM IN THE FACE OF COVID-19,
RACIAL INJUSTICE, AND CLIMATE CHANGE**

KAMINI MALLICK

ABSTRACT

This is a year-long ethnographic study of high-school student activists in the New England area that examines youth perceptions of climate change and climate change activism. Our society often devalues the opinions and experiences of young people because of the intersecting marginalized identities they inhabit, including age, race, and gender. Thus, discussions on how climate activism affects youth tend to lack the perspective of the young people themselves. Through a combination of participant-observation and semi-structured interviews, I sought to answer the following research questions: 1) How do young activists in the New England area understand climate change? 2) How does participating in a youth-centered climate justice organization impact their overall sense of wellbeing? About half-way through the planning of this research study, the coronavirus pandemic swept the world, which added another layer to this research study: 3) How does the COVID-19 pandemic impact youth perceptions and experiences of climate change activism?

In this thesis, I argue that young people in this climate organization, through their shared experiences of cultivating social capital, expanding critical consciousness, and adaptive redefining of social relationships, develop a strong and sustained sense of community that motivates them to continue their activism. In a society that undervalues young people, these youth actively reclaim agency and use this to challenge the structures

that continue to perpetuate environmental injustice. This in turn provides these young people with a heightened sense of well-being in the face of multiple existential threats that threaten their current and future existence, namely racial injustice, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the potential destruction of their planet.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BIPOC.....	Black, Indigenous, and People of Color
CO2.....	Carbon Dioxide
CDC.....	Centers for Disease Control
COVID-19.....	Coronavirus Disease-2019
GND.....	Green New Deal
IRB.....	Internal Review Board
IPCC.....	International Panel on Climate Change
LGBTQ+.....	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer+
NEEEG.....	New England Environmental Education Group
UN.....	United Nations

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

December 6th, 2019. My parents scurried around their hotel room, packing their bags, and yelling at each other to not forget anything. I smiled as I slipped on my black winter boots, enjoying this humorous family moment before taking them to the train station so they could return home. My father had a conference earlier that week and had brought my mother along to spend time with me.

It was early in the morning. Too early. The wheels of my father's suitcase reverberated through the empty underground tunnel that connected their hotel to the train station. I carried my mom's heavy duffle bag, wishing it had wheels as well. Unsurprisingly, we arrived with plenty of time to spare — my father is a very punctual man. We huddled together at the edge of a fountain, eyes glued to the departure/arrival board. Other passengers shuffled in and out of the revolving doors at the entrance to the station, causing drafts of the chilly morning air to batter us. When their train had arrived, I walked them down to the platform and handed my mom her duffle bag. We hugged each other and, as is our custom, I bent down to touch their feet to seek their blessings. As they began to board, my father turned around and said,

“Bye *beti*. Text us when you get home to your apartment. Do you have a lot of work to do this morning?”

“No,” I smiled, “I'm going to a climate strike”.

“What?!”

I strategically timed this admission to attending a youth climate strike with the train leaving to avoid my parents' inevitable questions about the strike. My family is not one to speak out against the government or those in power. They believe in keeping the peace and staying respectful. I suspect this comes from being an immigrant and the promise of the American Dream. The opportunities this country had for them and their children outshone the ever-present inequities and injustices that enveloped them. This was the United States of America and while we never gave up our Indian culture, values, and beliefs, we were lucky to be here.

Thus, growing up, I questioned the effectiveness of strikes and protests. I feared their violent nature and I was skeptical of their power to influence or to make any lasting difference. What could possibly result from a group of people chanting, screaming, and marching about an issue for just a few hours? Though I learned about demonstrations as effective tools of change in history classes, I wrote them off as rare events that only those of the same caliber as Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi could pull off. I lived in my small bubble, oblivious to the systemic oppression, inequities, and injustices that surrounded or affected me. Thankfully, my undergraduate years at Macalester College expanded my worldview and chipped away at my ignorance. The college is known for its emphasis on internationalism, multiculturalism, and service to society. I slowly began to understand the importance of organizing to uphold what I believed in, but I was never quite motivated to join the frontline. The rigor of academic work served as my excuse to support movements only from the sidelines.

Then, in 2016, I watched in shock as Donald Trump, a man who spewed hatred and degrading rhetoric about immigrants, women, LGBTQ+, and other minority groups, who continuously made misleading claims about *facts*, became President of the United States. The Trump administration not only offered science, something I thought to be constant and structured, for debate, but questioned the legitimacy of the entire scientific process. During his term as President, he called climate change a ‘hoax’, removed the United States from the Paris Climate Agreement, and authorized the reversal of several Obama-era pro-environmental initiatives (Gibbens, 2019).

I was angry, upset, and fearful for the future of this country, just like the millions of people who turned out for Women’s Marches all around the United States in early 2017. As I watched the live stream of the march in Washington D.C. on my laptop at home, I regretted not attending in person. It was empowering to hear so many like-minded women band together and speak about their experiences of misogyny, abuse, and disrespect. This perceived camaraderie and shared experience was uplifting, even if I was not physically in the same space. These stories of oppression validated my own sentiments — I was not alone.

Later that year in April, I went to the Science March held in Washington D.C. To be in the same space together, advocating together against a government trying to silence science, was exhilarating. I felt a sense of hope and optimism for the future, knowing that there were so many other like-minded people upset over the administration’s (in)actions. While demonstrations against governments have occurred throughout history, the

tumultuous era of the Trump administration prompted an extraordinary amount of collective uprising, organizing, and civic engagement, especially by those who perhaps have the most at stake: young people.

The Fight to Survive

According to the United Nations General Assembly meeting report on March 18, 2019, climate scientists estimate world leaders had about eleven years left before the damage sustained to our planet through climate change would be irreversible (UN General Report, 2019). It is a threat to youth's futures and promise of life. Perhaps unique to this generation of young people, though, is the fact that they not only have to grapple with the threat to their future lives, but also the threat to their current health by way of the COVID-19 pandemic. For many, these crises are in addition to the constant threat to life, simply because of the color of their skin. These intersecting crises are more than enough to debilitate someone and render them hopeless. Yet, young people have persisted to organize and rally for change. How are some groups of young people doing this? What does activism and civic engagement in this time where they may face multiple crises mean for young people? What motivates them to continue?

Youth Activism Without Youth Perspective?

Many scholars have already theorized about youth activism and its meanings for young people's physical, psychological, and social development (Ballard and Ozer 2016; Taft 2011; Kirshner 2007). Some researchers argue that young people engage in climate

activism as a coping mechanism to deal with the associated worry (Ojala 2012; Ojala and Bengtson 2018), while others suggest youth climate activism is a form of ‘dutiful dissent’ (O’Brien 2018). They add much needed depth to the discussion on what activism does for young people and why they partake in it. However, most of these studies lack one key part of the conversation: the perspective of youth themselves. Few studies ask young people about their experiences in activism, how they see themselves in this work, and what it means to them (Liou and Literat 2020). Society often undervalues and underestimates youth voice, which leads them to be under-represented within academic circles and wider society. This is a critical gap. After all, “youth have the best vantage point for understanding what they need for securing a healthy, safe, and productive existence” (Ginwright and Cammarota 2006, xx).

Therefore, I conducted this ethnographic research study with the specific purpose of uplifting *youth* voice. How do young people perceive and respond to climate change? What does participation in a youth-centered environmental and social justice organization do for their well-being? Interning at POWER, a youth-centered program dedicated to supporting and amplifying the voice and concerns of young people, helped me to answer these questions.

Argument and Outline of Chapters

I argue that young people in POWER, through their shared experiences of cultivating social capital, expanding critical consciousness, an adaptive redefining of social relationships, develop a strong and sustained sense of community that motivates

them to continue in their activism. This in turn provides these young people with a heightened sense of well-being in the face of multiple existential threats to their current and future existence, namely racial injustice, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the potential destruction of their planet.

In the background chapter, I review pertinent literature on climate change, activism, youth activism and, finally, a positive youth development framework to contextualize my research study within the larger conversation of climate change activism. In the next chapter, I present my methodology, including the constraints under which this research took place. This was my first time conducting research of this magnitude—a yearlong ethnographic study where I formulated my research questions and procedure, executed that protocol upon approval, and analyzed the data.

Chapter four starts the first of three analytical chapters where I explore how different facets of youth identity impact their participation in climate justice work. I argue that taking part in this organization forges new understandings of what it means to be a young activist. In particular, I cover what it means to be a ‘young person’ from the perspective of these youth and how they cultivate capital in order to break out of the adultist assumption that they know nothing. The shared oppressions they face because of their age--and in some cases their race, class, gender, and sexual orientation--are a part of how they build a strong connection with one another.

I continue with this theme of youth identity and activism in the following chapter, but focus specifically on the impact of racial identity on their understanding of climate

change and environmental activism. The people of this organization are diverse — a majority are people of color. Joining a youth environmental group helped young people expand the concept of climate change to encompass environmental justice. They see climate change not as a complicated, incomprehensible abstraction as adults may assume of them, but as a complex problem with intricate layers and connections that they are able to tease out, rather than a tangled web with no clear path.

Finally, the sixth chapter focuses on the effects of COVID-19 on climate activism. It has been a tumultuous and trying year, and the pandemic continues into this year, as I write this. The pandemic forced young people to redefine their sense of self through Zoom, their relationships with each other, and their relationship with climate activism.

There exists some level of solidarity and among people fighting for change. I certainly experienced a form of it while watching the Women's March and attending that March for Science rally. For that moment in time, I did not feel so overburdened with my concerns about the future. But the feeling was brief, and by the next week, I wondered what genuine change came out of those marches. In the case of the youth in POWER, there exists a heightened sense of community and togetherness that lasts for far longer than the particular kind of solidarity from attending a few climate rallies together.

CHAPTER TWO: BACKGROUND

"This is all wrong. I shouldn't be up here. I should be back in school on the other side of the ocean. Yet you all come to us young people for hope. How dare you! You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words. And yet I'm one of the lucky ones. People are suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are in the beginning of a mass extinction, and all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth. How dare you!

For more than 30 years, the science has been crystal clear. How dare you continue to look away and come here saying that you're doing enough, when the politics and solutions needed are still nowhere in sight. You say you hear us and that you understand urgency. But no matter how sad and angry I am, I do not want to believe that. Because if you really understood the situation and still kept on failing to act, then you would be evil. And that I refuse to believe.

The popular idea of cutting our emissions in half in 10 years only gives us a 50% chance of staying below 1.5 degrees [Celsius], and the risk of setting off irreversible chain reactions beyond human control. Fifty percent may be acceptable to you. But those numbers do not include tipping points, most feedback loops, additional warming hidden by toxic air pollution or the aspects of equity and climate justice. They also rely on my generation sucking hundreds of billions of tons of your CO₂ out of the air with technologies that barely exist. So, a 50% risk is simply not acceptable to us -- we who have to live with the consequences. To have a 67% chance of staying below a 1.5 degrees global temperature rise -- the best odds given by the IPCC -- the world had 420 gigatons of CO₂ left to emit back on Jan. 1st. 2018. Today that figure is already down to less than 350 gigatons. How dare you pretend that this can be solved with just 'business as usual' and some technical solutions? With today's emissions levels, that remaining CO₂ budget will be entirely gone within less than 8 ½ years.

There will not be any solutions or plans presented in line with these figures here today, because these numbers are too uncomfortable. And you are still not mature enough to tell it like it is.

You are failing us. But the young people are starting to understand your betrayal. The eyes of all future generations are upon you. And if you choose to fail us, I say: We will never forgive you. We will not let you get away with this. Right here, right now is where we draw the line. The world is waking up.

And change is coming, whether you like it or not."

-Transcript of Greta Thunberg's speech during the United Nations Summit on Climate, 2018

In 2018, Greta Thunberg sailed across the Atlantic Ocean to attend the United Nations Climate Summit in New York City. Her speech was in response to the question, “What is your message to world leaders” (NPR, 2018). I included the entire transcript here because it is reflective of key concepts/themes that I expand by use of this background chapter: climate change, activism, youth involvement, and its impact on young people. Greta, like young people all over the world, worries about how climate change is going to affect her future. The onus of climate change falls to her and her generation because of adults’ failure to act. She calls adults immature, the very adults that may see young people as inferior or immature.

Understanding the Climate Crisis

To understand how climate activism affects young people, I first review the current understanding of climate change to show *why* climate activists are worried about the future of the planet. I then briefly recount the history of climate change to contextualize the anger young people feel about inaction towards the problem. Scientists have warned that the Earth’s mean global temperature is warming at a rate incompatible with human life.

Climate change is not a Recent Phenomenon

The scientific community has warned the general populace about climate change for decades. In 1820, French mathematician Joseph Fourier first theorized that there must be a balance of energy; the sun’s energy that reaches the Earth must equal the energy that

dissipates into space (Anderson, Hawkins, and Jones 2016). If there is an imbalance where the atmosphere prevents energy from leaving, this will lead to a gradual warming of the Earth's surface. Other scholars built on Fourier's theory but it was not until the 1950s when Charles Keeling predicted that doubling the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere would lead to at least a 2 to 3 degrees Celsius increase of the Earth's mean temperature (Jäger and O'Riordan 1996). By the 1980s, 'global warming' entered public discourse when published as the title in a prominent science journal (Broecker 1975). The United Nations developed the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in 1988 as a way to track the growing scientific understanding of climate change and to study the social, political, and economic effects of climate change ("History — IPCC" n.d.).

Consequences to Our Health

The World Health Organization lists climate change as one of the top ten threats to global health in 2019 ("Ten Threats to Global Health in 2019", n.d.). While weather patterns naturally vary, unchecked human activity drives the Earth's climate patterns to change at unprecedented intensities. The industrial revolution kick-started the alarming acceleration of carbon dioxide and other volatile organic compounds (VOCs) emissions into the atmosphere. Termed the 'Greenhouse Effect', these molecules trap solar radiation within the atmosphere, further warming the Earth's surface. This triggers a cascade of increased, irregular, and inexorable weather events across the globe. In the 21st century alone, we have seen some of the hottest months on record ("The 10 Hottest

Global Years on Record” n.d.). Melting polar ice caps cause sea levels to rise, destroying both animal and human habitats (Thornes 2016). Warmer ocean temperatures lead to more frequent and severe hurricanes (Woodward and Samet 2017). In September 2017, Hurricane Maria slammed Dominica, St. Croix, and Puerto Rico, wrecking homes and businesses to rubble a mere 14 days after Hurricane Irma had already gone through. The official death toll was approximately 4,645 people. Maria became the deadliest hurricane to hit the Atlantic since 2004 (Kishore et al. 2018). Some of my participants’ families are from Puerto Rico. This crisis is not just something to fear in the future, it affects people now.

Hurricanes are not the only severe weather occurrences related to a rapidly changing climate. Later in 2020, wildfires blazed through much of the West Coast of the United States, and destroyed houses, clogged the air with smog, and cast an eerie, almost dystopian, orange hue across the sky (Fuller and Flavelle 2020). Prolonged periods of drought and an unusually dry summer led to the perfect arid conditions for scorching fires (“Drought and Heat Exacerbate Wildfires” 2018). Smoke and other aerosols from the wildfires cause irreparable lung damage and exacerbate problems in those living with preexisting conditions (Reid et al. 2016). In hotter temperatures, there are higher rates of heat stress and heat stroke. There is also a direct correlation between climate change and increased respiratory asthma and allergy conditions by way of the increase in pollen season duration (D’Amato et al. 2020). Respiratory conditions further worsen cardiovascular pathologies. Exacerbated drought conditions can also lead to problems in

water, sanitation, and hygiene practices throughout the world, which further causes a cascade of health issues including dehydration and diarrheal diseases (Veenema et al. 2017).

The rise in the atmospheric carbon dioxide (CO₂) concentrations alone pose a variety of health risks. Based on the extrapolated rate of atmospheric carbon increase measured at the Mauna Loa Global Monitoring Laboratory in Hawaii, the Earth will reach toxic levels of CO₂ by 2050 (Keeling et al. 2009). Sustained exposure to high levels of CO₂ may lead to acidosis, which can then cause restlessness, hypertension, and confusion (Robertson 2006).

The effects on human health outlined above are just a few of the myriad of ways in which anthropogenic climate change will impact human physiology. However, the connection between climate change and mental health was understood to be an issue relatively recently.

Unseen Health Consequences: Mental Health & Well-Being

Climate change can directly impact mental health, especially those living in what Bourque calls “ecologically sensitive areas” which he understands to be areas that are “undergoing rapid transformation from human activities such as deforestation and resource extraction” (Bourque 2014, 417). Farmers and agricultural workers in rural Australia for example expressed high instances of hopelessness and despair at shortened or destroyed crop yields due to extreme weather events (Berry et al. 2011).

Glenn Albrecht coined the term *solastalgia* (a combination of nostalgia and solace) to conceptualize how environmental changes may lead to psychological distress (Albrecht et al. 2007). He used both qualitative interviews and quantitative surveys to understand the lived experiences of those who have gone through climate change related drought. Participants expressed the distress they felt because of a dwindling environment, and thus, home. They exemplified how climate change affects one's sense of place and identity. These interviews were done with adults who have occupied the same land for years. This concept of solastalgia intrigued Galway, who searched literature published from 2007 to 2019 to clarify the use of the term. From his review, most research that used solastalgia were done with middle class white populations (Galway 2019). The voices of marginalized populations are missing.

Albrecht's solastalgia, while not explicitly defined in the DSM-V, may be one classification of the effect on mental health. Others directly link the negative consequences of climate change like housing loss, job loss, forced migration, onslaught of disease, to the more well-known disease post-traumatic stress disorder (Berry et al. 2010; Burke et al. 2018; Butler et al. 2014). However, Eva and Robert Gifford's review posits that climate change may cause "pre-traumatic" (293) stress disorder due to constant worry over a crisis yet to happen (Gifford and Gifford 2016). It is exacerbated by the feeling of powerlessness one may feel towards future events. This may be similar to experiencing moderate/severe anxiety, but it is deliberately linked with the more familiar post-traumatic stress disorder. Most notably, they argue that "eco-anxiety"

(Pikhala 2018) and “pre-traumatic” stress disorder are similar, but both differ from “ecological worrying,” which is more proactive. These classifications all come from theorizing about adults and their reaction and anticipation to a changing climate. Can we use the same nomenclature to describe how children conceptualize and perceive climate change?

The climate change and mental health literature have not completely forgotten children. For example, Lori Peek focuses her review on children and their experiences of disaster events around the globe (Peek 2008). Child development studies often note how youth are psychologically vulnerable to the negative effects of disasters and are thus susceptible to illnesses like post-traumatic stress disorder (Bartlett 2018). This affects key life experiences like social and educational development. However, Peek warns against the portrayal of children as helpless victims (2008). Instead, we should view them as active agents in their own emotional support. They are more resilient and can adapt to a changing environment in their own ways. The author argues that researchers and organizations should collaborate with children and be able to contribute to preparedness, response, and recovery activities. This may promote resilience in children and decrease adverse mental health outcomes. Increasing the access to resources and encouraging participation in preparedness and action of disaster events may help empower children.

Unequal Effects - Environmental Injustice

I have previously used climate and environmental justice work interchangeably, but there is an important difference between the two. Climate work refers to any project

or policy related to reducing carbon emissions and shifting to environmentally sustainable jobs. Environmental justice acknowledges that marginalized populations are disproportionately affected by their environment and by the negative impacts from climate change. But what comprises the “environment”? A common definition evokes images of expansive valleys, rivers, snow-capped mountains, wilderness, and the bustle of wildlife. It is the penguins and polar bears on Arctic glaciers, the kangaroos and koalas on Australian plains, and the snakes and songbirds in the Amazonian jungles. Isn't it?

This is how I would have responded had you asked me to define ‘environment’ in high school. Why is it so natural to separate ourselves from nature? People of color advocating for the environmental justice movement pushed for the definition to not only include natural surroundings but also “the spaces in which we live, work, and play” (Novotny 2000). Many families have no other option but to live in cramped housing with no air conditioning and no green yards. Furthermore, BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) majority neighborhoods are near heavy pollutant places like train and bus stations, airports, and gas stations (Fiscella 2004). Their homes, work, and play areas do not constitute healthy environmental conditions.

Geographic location and socioeconomic conditions and even gender can further influence the degree to which people feel the impact of climate change (Cuomo 2011). Those with higher socioeconomic status have the means and resources to both mitigate and adapt to environmental change. They are able to escape, rebuild, or avoid the devastation almost entirely. Meanwhile, marginalized and low-resourced communities do

not have the necessary advantages to prosper despite major climate events. They feel the impact of climate change at much more severe levels and for much longer times. For example, increased drought seasons affect those whose livelihoods depend on growing and selling crops. Prolonged precipitation can also ruin agriculture, causing a similar cascade of problems as a prolonged drought season. Those with lower socioeconomic status living on coast lines will likely face forced migrations which could cause crowding-related health problems in more inland urban areas (McMichael Celia, Barnett Jon, and McMichael Anthony J. 2012). In urban areas, residents have increased exposure to toxic pollutants including ozone, diesel exhaust, nitrous oxides that processing plants and fertilizers emit (San José et al. 2018). An epidemiological study conducted with children from major East Coast cities (including New York, Baltimore, and Boston) showed that children who grow up in these urban areas are more likely to develop asthma and respiratory conditions (Gern 2010). Urban areas also tend to become 'heat islands' -- the combination of little greenery, abundant pavement, and a dense population makes cities retain more heat than its surrounding towns (Kim 1992).

Due to structural inequality from the pervasive racism and classism that exists in almost every society, but especially in the United States, people of color and other marginalized communities face more environment-related problems than their white counterparts (Bolin and Kurtz 2018). They are not given the necessary access to resources and thus tend to live in neighborhoods with weak, poorly planned, and often toxic infrastructure. Dr. Robert Bullard, often noted as the father of environmental

justice, defines environmental racism as, “ecological inequities in the United States [that] result from a number of factors, including the distribution of wealth, housing and real estate practices, and land use planning” (Bullard 1993, 319). Thus, the environmental justice movement combines the principles of civil rights and environmentalism. It encompasses occupational health and safety movements, indigenous land right movements, and a variety of social and economic justice campaigns (Faber and McCarthy 2003).

Effects on Young People

The focus of this thesis is on one specific marginalized group: young people. I characterize young people as a marginalized population because today’s youth have neither had input to the current state of our climate, nor do they have any say in the decision making process for climate change mitigation. Despite this, they are set to inherit the worst effects of climate change, from increased natural disasters, worsening air pollution, home displacement, and food shortages (Bartlett 2018). The current population under the age of five will feel approximately 88% of the disease burden due to climate change in their lifetime (Levy et al. 2015). Those between ages 5 and 30 will still see some of the worst changes to environment and living conditions in their lifetimes if current conditions persist. As outlined above, young people of color have a higher likelihood of exposure to future climate *and* current environmental problems.

Some people, including political and economic leaders and a large portion of the voting public in the United States, still do not accept this dangerous reality. Climate

change has become one of the most politicized topics in recent history. In the United States, politicians end up debating the validity of scientific fact, rather than proposing national policies to mitigate its undeniable effects on the population. Faced with the grim realities of their future, young people see the need for immediate solutions and policies to reverse anthropogenic climate change and environmental inequities. They have risen up to fight.

Young People Lead the Change

Youth have been at the forefront of major movements around the world for decades. They have a deep investment in bringing about positive social and political change. Young adults actively pushed for voter rights, desegregated schools in the South, and challenged racism during Freedom Rides as part of the Civil Rights Movement. Inspired by the Civil Rights movement, youth protested the Vietnam War with marches and sit-ins that expressed their frustration at the war and the drafts. In 1976 Soweto, South Africa, several thousand students peacefully marched in opposition to a mandated Afrikaans-language instruction, which reflected apartheid and racist sentiments. They were met with brutality and violence at the hands of the South African government, which pushed the issue to the international stage (Nieftagodien 2014). About a decade later in 1989, students in China expressed their dissent with the government and demanded democratic reform and economic transformation. This movement burst into the international spotlight when soldiers descended on Tiananmen Square and gunned down unarmed protesters (Kerns 2010).

In 2017, students from Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida organized one of the largest marches in United States history after a gunman killed 17 people and wounded 17 others (Burch and Mazzei 2018). Fed up with the lack of gun control and constant school shootings in the United States, these young people gave impassioned speeches and mobilized about 1.2 million people across the country. An estimated 800,000 people attended protests in Washington D.C alone (Reilly 2018). It is clear: young people are powerful agents of change in these major political movements.

Youth in the Climate and Environmental Movement

Thus, youth involvement in various environmental campaigns should be no surprise. While we knew about carbon dioxide's deleterious effect on the atmosphere, the environmental movements in the United States did not start with a focus on an increasingly warming planet. People fought against emissions that contributed to water and air pollution. In 1948, hundreds of people in a small Pennsylvania town were affected by sulfur dioxide smog emitted from a nearby steel factory. This led to a national air pollution conference in 1950 and the first time the federal government acknowledged air pollution's link to negative health effects (Dixon et al. 1959). Rachel Carson's portrayal of pesticide overuse in her book *Silent Spring* prompted President John F. Kennedy to closely investigate DDT's effect on human health. By 1972, the government banned the use of DDT (Montrie 2011). This is often lauded as the beginnings of the modern environmental movement, as people became more conscious about the links between nature, pollution, and health.

The deterioration of the environment concerned Senator Gaylord Nelson of Wisconsin (Rome 2013). Inspired by the push and enthusiasm of the anti-war movement students, the senator hired a young activist, Dennis Hayes. Hayes, along with several other college-aged students, orchestrated “teach-ins” around college campuses to educate the public on environmental issues. Earth Day gained massive media attention around the country, and thousands of college students organized marches and protests to show their disdain for the effects of industrialization on nature. Individual groups fought against oil spills, power plants, factory pollution, and other such direct impacts to the environment. The United States celebrated the first Earth Day on April 22, 1970. On Earth Day, these groups felt empowered to come together to express their concerns and voice their opinions. Young people were at the heart of it all.

Today’s environmental movement does not look much different. Activists fight against the same land degradation, water pollution, and air quality deterioration as the people did decades ago. Young people continue to be the driving force behind this movement across the globe. They started the Indigenous Youth Council to stand against the building of the Dakota Access Pipeline (“International Indigenous Youth Council - About Us” n.d.). Canadian Indigenous activist Autumn Peltier, 15, admonished leaders at the World Economic Forum for continued inaction against climate change (“Teen Activist Autumn Peltier Appears at World Economic Forum with Criticism for Federal Politicians” 2020). Twelve-year-old Mari Copeny wrote a letter detailing the Flint water crisis to then President Barack Obama when she was 8 years old. This prompted Obama

to fly out to Flint, Michigan to see how the water crisis affected the children (Itkowitz 2016). Their age has not deterred them from calling attention to environmental crises.

Greta Thunberg, the Swedish climate activist I quote at the beginning of this chapter, protested in front of the Swedish government with a sign that read “School Strike for Climate”. Global media fixed their attention on her and made her the spokesperson for climate change activism today. She started the ‘Fridays for Future’ campaign that inspired youth-led strikes in numerous cities across the world (de Moor et al. 2020). Her activism, coupled with intense media coverage, resulted in one of the largest climate strikes in world history: September 20, 2019. Young people across the globe skipped school that Friday to demand better climate policies and action against climate change. In the New England area, the youth of the New England Climate Strike group organized about 10,000 youth and allies to march on the State House (Wasser 2020). They urged the governor to declare climate change an emergency and to treat it as such.

The youth environmental movement is not just about strikes and protest, though it may seem this way because of the scenes on which the media reports. News channels and journalists favor covering major disruptions (strikes, protests, walk-outs) but seldom describe the day to day, grassroots organizing and work that young people are actively involved in throughout the country. It is not interesting enough to talk about daily life. But activism waits for no spotlight. It is in everyday acts and thoughts and behaviors. For some young people, activism encompasses their entire life.

Youth-Led Organizations in the New England

There are several climate/environment-centered student groups throughout the greater New England area. Some are as small as an after-school club within a high school while others are entire chapters of the national grassroots environmental organizations, like DayBreak. My internship and most of my fieldwork comes from working with one specific group: POWER. It is co-administered by the a public school system in the New England area and UNITY, a non-profit organization dedicated to uplifting youth voice. After the organization leaders conducted extensive outreach, there is at least one student representative from each public high school.

POWER was founded in the 1970s as part of the push for desegregating schools. Young people wanted a better relationship with the School Committee representatives so they could advocate for their rights. Every county or district was required to have an advisory council to further promote student voices. For a while, this was difficult to maintain. In 2001, the city's public school committee members asked UNITY to step in and revive the student representation. They restructured POWER using their 'Action and Support' model which ensures that a "space is built into the structure of every youth organization, so that personal support of peers is an intrinsic component of social change" (UNITY history - internal document).

The symbiotic partnership between UNITY (the non-profit) and the New England public school system continues to produce social change within the New England community. Some of POWER's major accomplishments include securing a significantly

subsidized the public transit pass for students under 19 years of age, using student feedback as part of teacher evaluation, developing a Student Rights mobile application that helps students access their rights as public school students, and mandating a functioning student government at every high school. Recent work has pushed for bathroom equity and making menstrual products freely available in all elementary, middle, and high school bathrooms, giving feedback to the current Superintendent and other school officials on COVID-19 reopening plans, and crafting position papers for public release on defunding school police and reallocating that money towards community-centered resources.

Environmental Justice Subcommittee within POWER

While everyone in the group has the option to participate in any of the work mentioned, POWER divides its work into three main subcommittees: School Climate, Student Rights, and Environmental Justice. The subcommittees push forward specific projects. The environmental justice group affectionately refer to themselves as the “Climate Team” and they take on a multitude of climate change and environmental justice campaigns. In 2018, members mobilized seven bus loads of young people and allies to travel down to Washington D.C for the People’s Climate March and organized the New England area chapter of the Youth Climate Strike. Local efforts include work with the Green Justice Coalition and other environment groups around the New England area to lobby for climate-friendly legislation. These young people are also a part of the Green New Deal Coalition and work with other interested parties like labor unions and

city planners to draft agendas and push for green policies. With the help of teachers in their communities, the team has also developed a K-12 climate change curriculum for use in science classes throughout all public schools.

Other Youth Climate Organizations

I had the opportunity to work with several other youth environmental groups through my outreach efforts as an intern. Almost all are a part of the Youth Climate Coalition, including POWER's Climate Team. New England Environmental Education Group (NEEEG) is one such example. One of my duties as an intern was to connect with other young people/organizations invested in climate activism and to continue our work on educational policy changes that adapt the climate change curriculum. NEEEG's mission aligned perfectly. A group of high school students founded NEEEG because they were "concerned that our leaders are expecting youth to fight the climate crisis when they are not providing adequate resources and standards for education on climate change from a human rights, scientific, and civic standpoint" (NEEEG Mission Statement). They wish to change the secondary education standards and curriculum of New England to incorporate information about climate change and its impact on the human population. In addition to this, NEEEG was also interested in creating lessons around environmental justice to be taught throughout classrooms. In collaborating for this effort, I was able to interview a few of the members from NEEEG for this research study.

Key Theoretical Frames

In some ways, this thesis is a study on intersectionality – whether by observing the interplay between different marginalized identities and their effect on activism or in a larger frame of how young people face the existential, intersecting crises of climate change, a pandemic, and racial injustice. Kimberle Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality in efforts to show how people are not just one identity or another but that each identity overlaps and informs the other. Social justice problems like racism, classism, and sexism cannot be reduced as individual issues (Crenshaw 1991). The *intersections* of these issues cause further, more nuanced forms of marginalization and oppression. White, male, upper socioeconomic status people built this country, so the economic and political structures in place favor those identities more than others. The farther an individual is from those identities, the more they are subject to oppressive institutions. These intersecting, inseparable identities underlie how young people interact with social institutions and how social institutions interact with young people, how they view climate change and COVID-19, and the ways they navigate all of this.

Agency

A crucial part of my argument involves how young people exercise their agency in a world that diminishes the voice and power of those that are not white, middle/upper-class cis-gendered, heterosexual males. In order to discuss this further, I outline a few of the different anthropological conceptualizations of agency, structure, and health that I

will then later use to analyze some of my data on climate youth activism. I then briefly introduce major scholars in the world of positive youth development.

The agency versus structure debate is pervasive throughout many disciplines, most especially anthropology and sociology. At its core, this debate concerns whether we make autonomous, independent *free* decisions, or if our actions are merely the product, and thus constrained by, the social structures in which we live.

Anthony Giddens, with his concept of structuration, rejects this duality between agency and structure and instead insists that structure and agency are more intertwined than others have suggested. He argues that structure acts as both “the medium and the outcome of practices which constitute social systems” (1981, 27). Within this, “structures shape people’s practices but people’s practices constitute and reproduce structure” (28). It is cyclical - individuals exercise their own agency to form the very structures that then empower (or constrain) people differently. For example, humans exercised agency in developing the social constructs of gender and race, two facets of identity that become important in analysis of the young activists in this thesis. Those very same structures influence one’s agency because of the way our society has valued certain characteristics above others. For many youth organizers, being a young, female person of color allows for little to no exercise of agency in most social settings. I explore the effects of this intersectionality on activism further in chapter five.

I acknowledge that Margaret Archer critiques Giddens’ structuration theory and instead proposes a dualism of structure and agency that does not “sink the differences between both, such that their interplay can no longer be investigated” (Vandenberghe

2005, 228). For Archer, structure and agency should not be conflated as one; they have importance as separate entities as well as their relationship with one another. She calls this *analytical dualism*. However, I use William Sewell's understanding of Giddens' structuration theory where he argues that all humans have some inherent capacity for agency but this agency is formed by a "specific range of cultural schemas and resources available in a person's social milieu" (1992, 20).

Positive Youth Development

Positive youth development (PYD) theory acknowledges the importance of seeing the capacities and possibilities of young people, rather than what they lack. In the early child psychology and development world, researchers were focused on the problems and hazards some children could or would to face growing up in their environment (Damon 2004). They scrutinized self-esteem issues, confidence, learning differences, antisocial behavior, among other traits and classified children who exhibited these characteristics as "at-risk". Identifying at-risk individuals was seen as a prevention measure - if caught early, they would not pose risk to themselves or others. This mindset of youth experience as fraught with hazards and trouble is still pervasive today. Either through subtle or overt messages, youth are taught that elders have more wisdom and to remain silent when matters of importance are discussed.

Through the lens of positive youth development, youth are fully capable beings in need of nurturing and guidance rather than treatment for negative possibilities. It acknowledges the existence of widespread problems that influence child development

and can lead to a variety of developmental challenges. However, PYD “resists conceiving of the developmental process mainly as an effort to overcome deficits and risk” (Damon 2004, 15). As practice, this theory suggests that we should make efforts to understand a child’s role in their own learning process, and to engage them in productive activities that strengthen their potential as adults. Youth contribute resources that positively impact society.

Thus, a core piece of positive youth development is seeing young people as agents in their own development. Many scholars have made contributions to the PYD field, but for the scope of this work, I highlight a few authors that I use to frame my analysis. In Richard Catalano & team’s literature review and guidance from leading scholars, he defines positive youth development programs as “approaches that seek to achieve one or more of the following goals: promotes bonding, fosters resilience, promotes social, emotional, moral, or behavioral competence; fosters self determination, spirituality, self-efficacy, prosocial norms, clear and positive identity, belief in the future,; provides recognition for positive behavior, opportunities for prosocial involvement” (2004, 101). The team goes on to evaluate various youth programs to see how they achieve any combination of these goals and found that, generally, those that achieved at least five were more effective at preventing youth problem behaviors. However, this does not get into the nuances of how different youth identities require a different positive youth development approach.

Constance Flannagan addresses a part of this issue in some of her research. Young people in “resource-stressed” communities also partake in activism, but must overcome more obstacles to do so than their well-resourced counterparts. She believes this is a justice issue that the PYD field should address. The external assets for a given community to foster youth development differ depending on the inequities that face that community. She suggests that this framework “take a political turn to emphasize the injustice of unequal opportunities for building developmental assets” (Flannagan 2007, 245).

She further makes the case for political activism as a logical next step from positive youth development by: reminding readers to see youth as agents in their development process; utilizing generational replacement theory to show that youth are more free from the social constraints in which adults operate and thus can make new approaches to solving problems; and by pointing out that positive youth development examines the real contexts in which youth grow such that their activism against such inequities is just an extension of their voice.

Shawn Ginwright focuses much of his work on the intersection of African-American youth activism and positive youth development. He acknowledges that the conventional ways of measuring youth civic engagement -- including learning about tenets of government, volunteering, and community service -- were developed by studying white middle class youth. These factors do not take into account the nuanced ways young people’s identities and social settings interplay to shape their views of civic engagement and participation in activism, as I argue in chapter four.

Ginwright invokes James Garbarino's conceptualization of "social toxins", i.e. violence, poverty, family disruptions, racism (among others), to describe how certain social settings become harmful to youth well-being (2010, 81). Ginwright parallels participation in activism to a kind of social detoxification, "removing or neutralizing harmful elements in a social setting" (82). Activism helps young black leaders to identify injustices within a larger system of oppressions, rather than accept the way things are, leading to an expanded sense of individual and collective agency. Then the author connects black youth activism and wellbeing through his concept of 'radical healing' which draws upon the critical consciousness that fosters young people to face racial, social, and economic inequities and mobilize their peers.

Ginwright and other positive youth development scholars/youth activism do not focus specifically on youth climate activists. Through this thesis, I expand on the connections of positive youth development, agency, and healing in the context of a diverse group of high-school climate activists in the New England area. I further add to this discussion of youth activism, agency, and healing in chapter five, where I talk about how climate organizations help to expand a critical consciousness in young people that in turn increases agency and motivation to do something about the oppression they face.

Positive youth development is a central framework in which POWER and UNITY operates. They see the capacities young people have in promoting change within their community and the world and work to nourish and support them so that youth can actively engage with the issues they care most about.

If we accept young people to be key agents in their own developmental process, it is important to acknowledge and understand *their* perspectives and experiences when it comes to climate change. Otherwise we make the mistake of speaking and theorizing on their behalf instead of working with youth to identify and mitigate the effects of climate change on their wellbeing. An ethnographic approach is useful here because it allows for a deeper, more nuanced account on how youth interact with each other, staff members, and other organizations dedicated to similar work. In the next chapter, I provide the steps and decisions made to develop, plan, and conduct this research study.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

My initial ideas for research did not involve children or climate change whatsoever. I remember sitting down at a quiet Barnes & Noble cafe, enveloped with an iced cappuccino and pizza-stuffed pretzel aroma, opening my laptop, and beginning to write about why I was interested in a degree in medical anthropology. When asked about my research interests, I named maternal mortality and postpartum depression, the culture of the anti-vaccine movement, and the bridge between culture and medicine in a hospital setting. I thought to combine my love of science with my love of anthropology and human connection, and those were the first three topics that came to mind.

The acceptance letter arrived in May and my advisor asked me to choose one of those three ideas so that we start to find potential sites for the required service learning internship. I was not convinced on one topic over the other but decided to explore cultural differences in maternal mortality and postpartum depression. I reached out to multiple women's centers and maternity clinics but did not receive responses. September came, the program started, and I still did not have an internship site. My worries continued to grow as the end of the month neared.

Friday September 20, 2019 started out abnormally. Rather than my normal morning scramble around the apartment, I woke up with ample time to take a hot shower, boil eggs, and listen to NPR (National Public Radio) before heading to the university. One story caught my attention. Young people all over the world skipped school to send a message to world leaders: they demand climate action - now. Impressed and sympathetic,

I took the time to read more articles about these climate strikes. In each news story, young people emphasized their anger towards the lack of political will and policy to mitigate climate change. A recurrent theme emerged from each of these stories: concern and fear for their futures (Brady 2019; Kaplan, Lumpkin, and Dennis 2019; Wasser 2019). Later that day when I spoke to my twelve-year-old niece, she mentioned hearing about these climate strikes on social media and lamented on not walking out of her school like the rest of the world's youth. We have not spoken about climate change before and just from her unusually quiet tone, I could sense her apprehension and worry. She immediately changed the subject because she said she felt anxious just thinking about climate change and how her world will look when she grows up.

Were children and young adults feeling like this all over the globe? How does climate change affect young people? Are they worried? Anxious? Terrified? Nonchalant? What makes them feel these ways? And how does climate change affect their daily lives? While I too was worried about the effects of climate change, I have not joined any specific environmental club or organization. What made young people motivated enough to become members of climate organizations?

The Struggle to Find a Field Site...Again

Armed with those early research questions and renewed excitement, I re-started the search for potential internship sites, this time focused on any youth-centered climate clubs or committees. My search started with groups at Boston University because I had easiest access to them. However, I wanted to work with a younger age-range because of

the NPR story and the conversation with my own niece - many of those youth were in high school or younger. How were adolescents coping with climate change?

After hearing my initial thoughts on this abrupt departure from maternal health to climate activism, one of my advisors passed along the contact information of a staff member of UNITY, a nonprofit organization whose mission was to uplift youth voice through organizing and mobilizing young people. UNITY and the city's public school system co-administered the program, POWER, where young people actively work on various campaigns related to student rights, school equity, and environmental justice. I was nervous about contacting this youth program because it sounded like the perfect fit for what I wanted to study and I did not want them to reject me. After analyzing my email for the umpteenth time, with high hopes, I hit send. Not a minute ticked by when I saw the bold heading of an unread message in my inbox: "*Forgive delayed response due to high volume*". My heart sank. The email must have been lost in a sea of people trying to contact her.

Surprisingly, the very next day, they responded: "Kevin, it is very, very nice to hear from you...". At first I thought, *Kevin? Did she send the message to the wrong person? Am I Kevin?* But I was excited - finally there was a prospective site. They wanted to have a quick conversation about the program and how I could fit and contribute to it. We scheduled the call for the end of the week. I spent the rest of that day scouring the organization's website in an attempt to familiarize myself with their work, aiming to impress them with my knowledge.

Friday morning rolled around and as I slowly got out of bed, my phone rang. I expected the call in the afternoon; instead, I answered to a conference call with the organization leaders. Clad in mermaid-pajama bottoms and a ratty loose t-shirt, I paced my apartment back and forth as I spoke about myself and about my research interests.

Thankfully, they were excited to have me as an additional member of the team. To get a better sense of the projects and campaigns they had begun to work on, they connected me to someone who would eventually become my gatekeeper. I met with this person at an outside cafe and after only ten minutes of conversation, I felt like I could talk to her for hours. She listened with attentiveness as I rambled about my initial research ideas and she explained the structure of the organization and the projects they were working on at that moment.

Becoming an Intern

From October 2019 onwards I volunteered at POWER. Every Monday and Thursday, I got on the bus to attend team meetings at 3 o'clock and stayed until the program was over at 6pm. The first time I went for a meeting, I was as nervous as if it was the first day of school.

I stood waiting for Alexandria on the 2nd floor of the Bolling Building, leaning on the railing by the elevators as I randomly scrolled through my phone, hoping to give off the sense that I am not out of place, that I belonged there. Alexandria came around the corner, looked up from her phone, greeted me with a wide smile, and escorted me to where the rest of the Climate Team was already set up. It was a smaller room than I imagined and certainly could not seat over 3 people comfortably. Yet, there were six high school students around a low circular table, some on chairs and some with their backs against the grass green wallpaper. I wanted to be as unobtrusive as possible, and I sat on

the floor by the corner, close to Alexandria. It was like grade school all over again - you find the one person who you know and attach to them. Initially, no one spoke to me. Alexandria started off the meeting and introduced me as a graduate student researcher interested in what young people are doing about climate change. I said hello and thanked everyone for letting me join their meeting. -Excerpt from field notes October 20, 2019

Research, first and foremost, should be for the participants rather than for research sake alone. I felt obligated to volunteer as much of my time as possible, beyond what my graduate program required, because I wanted to help the organization with their mission to uplift youth voices. I also felt the need to prove my worth as an intern so that I could be established as a researcher. Thus, I dove into the internship work, took on various roles, and assumed new responsibilities every day. Some of this work included facilitating small group discussions, making flyers and announcements for various campaigns, connecting with partner organizations, and attending external meetings as a representative of UNITY & POWER.

Working as an intern while simultaneously observing as a researcher was difficult. Participant observation was a key method of this research study. I tried to take every opportunity to write notes as I observed meetings. However, there were many occasions where the topic of conversation required my whole attention and I needed to respond or facilitate discussion. In these situations, I wrote reflections afterwards in my field journal.

The Potential Participants

Whenever anyone introduces themselves in external meetings, they always say “My name is ____ and I am a member of POWER/UNITY”. There are about 30 current members of POWER/UNITY and all are public school students. Most of the members identify as a person of color. From conversations within group meetings, I gathered that many of the students live in working-class households or are providing needed income for their families.

I primarily worked with the environmental justice subcommittee, a group of about 15 students who collectively called themselves the Climate Team. For this research study, I decided to recruit specifically from this Climate Team, rather than all of POWER. Although each subcommittee’s work intertwined with another I made the decision that I would speak to young people more engaged with environmental justice work on a daily basis, because I wanted to understand how climate change activism affects their perceptions and experiences of climate change.

Originally, I planned to only recruit from my internship organization. I was worried about having to go through both Boston University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) *and* the city public school’s IRB, so I scheduled a meeting with their research office. In the initial email sent to the public school research department, I clarified that I did not require access to classrooms, student data, names, or what school they came from, in the hope for a positive response when we spoke in person.

At the start of our meeting, before I even had a chance to speak, the school representative had to reject my research plan outright because recruitment from only one organization (affiliated with a public school system) was a sample of convenience. After mildly panicking at the thought of not being able to conduct research with my internship group, I asked if expanding my sample population to *any* young person in *any* youth-centered climate organization in the area would still violate their research guidelines. Thankfully, she smiled and accepted this abrupt amendment to my original research plan. On the bus ride back from that meeting, I pondered reaching out to other organizations. How was I to observe multiple other groups and balance my internship responsibilities? Would other organizations even be willing to speak with me? As much as I could try, I could never be as familiar with other groups and their dynamic as I was with my own.

Upon further reflection, reaching out to other youth-led climate organizations was a strength to my research. It would allow me perspectives from a broad variety of youth climate justice activists, as well as an understanding of how the young people in these groups interacted with one another to accomplish the same goals as those in POWER. Through working with the Climate Team for those few months, I had already made several points of contact at other youth-led climate groups. I volunteered when the group organized youth forums and town halls so I could meet leaders and members of the other environment-oriented groups and inform them of my research.

Any individual between the ages of 10 and 25 who spoke English and took part in a youth-led environmental/climate organization within the greater Boston area was

eligible for this study. I chose this age range for two reasons: 1) the World Health Organization defines “youth” as 10 to 25 years of age and 2) most high school students fall within this age group. At first, the eligibility age range was between 10 and 18 years old. However, I expanded this original criteria because some members of POWER were 18 or above and still considered a young person. I did not want to exclude their voice. I also expanded the age range to 25 to include recent alumni from these organizations. Many come back and volunteer during the summer months, which is when I conducted my field research. I did not want to leave out their perspectives.

COVID-19 Infects the Plan

Planning for this study began in the beginning of October 2019, with learning about ethnographic methods, qualitative interviewing, and other anthropological research principles. I hoped to recruit participants at the end of their meetings, talk to them about the research, and set up interviews at a time and place most convenient and comfortable for them. I intended to use the allotted research money to buy them coffee or food as a thanks for their participation. By the middle of March 2020, it was clear this could not happen.

The United States reported its first case of COVID-19 on January 20th, 2020 in the state of Washington (Holshue et al. 2020). At this time, we knew very little about the SARS-CoV-2 virus and the resulting infection. Country borders were as fluid as ever, and screening was nonexistent. COVID-19 was not in regular vocabulary. It was business as usual in the United States, despite the growing worldwide concerns of a suspected (later

confirmed) respiratory airborne virus. I fell into a state of watchful ignorance. I decided to monitor the virus on the news, but hardly thought it was something to fret over. The IRB application and my research were more important things to worry about.

On March 11th, 2020, CNN reported approximately 1,267 cases of the coronavirus in the United States, and this number was rising, fast (Rocha et al. 2020). Boston University sent out a campus wide email that informed students, staff, and faculty of an immediate suspension for in-person activities; classes, clubs, and conferences, were canceled. They encouraged students who were away for spring break not to come back to campus. Classes were to be online for the next two weeks, at least. Worried about my parents, I went home at the end of March to care for them as we continued to learn more about this respiratory virus.

I developed and refined my research plan and activities while taking COVID-19 into consideration and added a section in the IRB application detailing that I would conduct my study over phone calls and video conferencing in the event that in-person research activities were halted for the duration of the summer. Zoom was an acceptable online video conferencing platform from which to conduct online interviews. Boston University's IRB approved my research study and determined it to be in the 'exempt' category in May 2020, with a stern reminder that no in-person research activities could take place. At this point the United States was experiencing hundreds of new cases daily ("New York Times COVID-19 Tracker"). In-person research was definitely out of the question. I was about to become an expert on Zoom.

Recruitment & Setting Up Interviews

Thankfully POWER & UNITY shifted to Zoom rather quickly. We spent about a week recuperating from the shock that schools were closed and then jumped into action. There was a steep learning curve for everyone. Slowly staff members restructured program activities to be accessible virtually.

I contacted the leaders of the other youth climate organizations through a variety of communication platforms (text, email, direct message on Instagram, and Slack) to introduce myself and my research study. Unsurprisingly, most of the responses came from those with whom I was already familiar. After answering clarifying questions, I asked those adult supervisors if they could also contact parents of the youth and introduce me, my research goals, and recruitment plan. At my internship site, I asked my supervisor to inform the parents as well, so that it surprised no one when I spoke about my research with the Climate Team.

At the end of Climate Team meetings, I spent about five minutes explaining my research and gave my contact information so that anyone who was interested in speaking to me could contact me directly. I would then further explain the requirements of inclusion, that participation is voluntary and confidential, and if they are under 18, the requirement of parent or guardian consent before moving forward and scheduling an interview.

I recruited recent alumni in the same manner, by talking about my research project at the end of Climate Team meetings. Because of the pandemic, many alumni were back home early from school and could attend meetings via Zoom. I also asked the adult supervisors if they could contact other alumni about my research study on my behalf, in case there were alumni that were interested but not working with the organization this summer. If the alumni were 18 and over, they would not need a parent permission form.

With the abrupt switch to videoconferencing, the work in this organization increased. The young people were still getting used to being away from friends and peers, adjusting to a new schedule at home, and going to more meetings than before the pandemic because there was suddenly no travel time to take into consideration. Because of the hectic schedule, Climate Team meetings would end with agenda items left to discuss at the next meeting. I felt guilty taking time away from their work to talk about my research project. Therefore, despite gaining IRB approval in mid-May, I did not start recruiting participants until the first week of June. The weekend before my first recruitment effort, I reviewed my speech. Computer screen communication already took away some humanness and connection that people would have otherwise seen and felt had I been recruiting in person. It was nerve-wracking to recruit for the first time, as I note in an excerpt from my field notes from that day below:

*Climate Team started at 3pm today, as usual, but with a different Zoom link. The Zoom link we generally used expired so T**** made a new one and sent it out to Climate Team group chat. I am not on that group text because I have an Android phone and they all*

have iPhones. To add me to the group chat would mean creating an entirely new group chat. In the past, people have expressed their disdain for androids to me - one young person smiled while saying, "No offense Kamini but I don't need green texts polluting my screen!" I'm assuming this means iPhones receive non-iPhone messages as green texts. About half an hour before Climate Team started, T****, A**** and I met to talk about the agenda. I mentioned that I would need about five minutes of time to do my recruitment speech. I watched, with sweaty palms and a queasy stomach, as A**** nodded, smiled, and typed my name on the agenda: Kamini - Research Talk. A flurry of questions stormed my head - would anyone listen? Would they be interested? Have I done enough for this group that I can even ask this of them? T**** may have noticed my worried expression because he assured me that it would go wonderfully.

Three o'clock came around and students started entering the waiting room for our Climate Team meeting. Still a little nervous, I kept my video on but microphone off as I admitted them into the main room. We spent the first 20 minutes of the meeting on a check in question, as usual. Today's check in question was 'What is your favorite weird smell'. This elicited so much laughter, judgement by making furrowed expressions with their eyebrows raised, and smiles as people responded. We always say "don't yuck my yum" meaning "don't judge my opinion" but today everyone was judging T***** when he said he liked the musty clothing smell. N**** had said she liked the smell of "J****'s toes", which made everyone guffaw in laughter. I choked on the water I was in the middle of drinking. Someone changed her name to J****'s Toes which made everyone laugh again. The chat box was alive with sarcastic comments and many "LOLs and LMAOOOOs". It was the most interactive Climate Team in a while.

T**** asked for me to do my recruitment speech right after the check in which caught me off guard as I had asked to go last. People had remnants of a smile etched on their faces as I attempted to transition them from the check-in question to my research project. As I spoke, no one said a word and some people turned their cameras back off. I have to admit that while speaking, I paid very little attention to how people were reacting. I put all my energy and focus into talking about my research, emphasizing that participating is voluntary, and that my goal of doing this project is to uplift youth voices around climate change.

Only one person responded immediately (via text message) to my recruitment speech today. I found myself slightly disappointed, thinking at least the members of my sub-team would all say yes to interviewing with me. I should not take it personally - people need time to think. But I also feel like I should have done a better job. I was nervous. I wrote out an entire speech beforehand and just read from it, instead of talking to them without any prompt. I will give my recruitment spiel during next week's climate team meeting and also during my team meeting.

-Excerpt from field notes, June 2020

Over the course of the summer, I continued to remind people about my research study for five minutes at the end of each meeting. For the first few weeks, with every spiel, I had one person text me to say they were interested. My internship supervisor insisted that the best way to reach people was to text them. I was aware of this and in my role as an intern, I would often have to individually contact people for responses to questions or for prep before an important meeting. Those were my responsibilities as an intern. As a researcher, I could not individually contact people in the same manner just to talk about my research. Additionally, individually contacting people could feel like coercion. It is harder to say no to someone if it is one on one. I kept emphasizing during my small research talks that people should not feel compelled to volunteer and that they should privately message me, to remain anonymous.

When people showed interest, I gave further details on my research study. They were screened based on the outlined eligibility criteria. I provided those who were under 18 with a parent/guardian permission form which also outlined who I was and the research I was doing. They were required to obtain parent/guardian permission before setting a date and time to conduct the interview. I also asked those under 18 to provide verbal assent to becoming a research participant. Their permission was just as important to me as their parents' permission. Upon gaining appropriate consent, I scheduled interviews to be held over Zoom and reminded participants via text message one day ahead of their interview time.

Data Collection: Participant Observation & Interviews

Qualitative ethnographic research relies primarily on interviews and participant observation. Participant observation data helped to answer all three research questions. Individual thoughts and experiences are important, but the kinds of information gathered in an interview are inherently different from the data gathered through witnessing group interactions and reactions in real time. Here, participant observation was especially useful in answering the third research question: what role does activism play in shaping the effects of climate change on an individual's health and well-being? In the interview, I asked about their meanings assigned to activism, but often, participants would not remember specific moments of activism. Observations and participating in this group over the last several months provided more context and clarity to this question. By careful observation of actions, reactions, body language, and expressions, I obtained first-hand data as members engaged in climate change activism.

I was able to conduct six interviews with current youth and two interviews with recent alumni over the course of this research. Before beginning each interview, I made sure to review the research and types of questions I was going to ask. Protecting my participants' identity was a top priority, and I explained that I would record no identifiable information, including names, school, or grade level. I asked participants what they would like their pseudonym to be, which elicited positive responses and smiles as they thought of names to use. For the purposes of anonymity, the names of the organizations, city, and participant names are all pseudonyms. Recording the interview

helped keep me present in the conversation and was something I informed the parents I would be asking in the information sheet they received. All participants gave their consent for me to record the interview. My Boston University affiliated Google Drive and encrypted computer housed all of the research data I collected. No one else had access to them. Finally, and most importantly, I reiterated that they were more than welcome to skip or stop the interview at any point and that participation was completely voluntary. According to the IRB, I was only required to gain consent from the parents of youth under the age of 18. However, asking young people for their consent was equally as important. Young people are too often overlooked or barred from participating in research that pertains heavily to them.

In my interview guide, I asked open-ended questions about their understanding of climate change, motivations for joining and participating in climate justice organizations, and how these activities and experiences made them feel in an effort to understand how climate change and climate change activism affect their health and well-being. Because I approached this research from a grounded theory lens, I was careful not to ask leading questions or make assumptions about how young people feel regarding climate change, even though this research study was inspired from hearing the worry and distress youth felt about their future during the September climate strike. Grounded theory is an approach in qualitative research that develops theory based on the data. Within my research, I did not want to assume the young people I was working with are worried

about climate change, and nor did I want to have prior assumptions about how climate activism may affect their daily lives.

After transcribing each interview, I used the qualitative analysis software *NVivo* to code the data. Some of the codes included motivation to join, or stay, emphasizing parts of one's own identity, internal feeling of empowerment, external feeling of empowerment, positive relationship with peers, facing emotions, and Zoom fatigue. Major themes that emerged included experiences of oppression/disengagement, strategic engagement, identity formation and recognition, community as motivation and strength, strength and weakness of online activism. Through the data from these coded interviews and my fieldnotes from spending almost a year with the group, I have constructed together three analytical chapters that show how environmental activism affects youth in POWER.

CHAPTER FOUR: STRATEGIC ACTIVISM

In this chapter, I argue that participation in youth-led climate and environmental justice oriented organizations forges a nuanced understanding of what it means to be a young activist. The identities they inhabit influence their experiences (both internal and external) of civic engagement, not all of which is necessarily positive. I examine the challenges young people face while participating in climate activism through lens of two facets of their identity: age and gender. First, I discuss what it means to be a young person from the perspective of the youth at POWER. There are varied definitions of youth that are rarely developed by the youth themselves. One key aspect of being a young person is facing adultism. Young people, just by virtue of being *young*, are faced with criticism and skepticism regarding their ideas and concerns. I show that young people, with the help of a youth-centered program like POWER, overcome adultist oppressions by claiming their agency and cultivating social capital and recognition that is otherwise not readily available to them. I suggest that the young people engage in strategic activism, rather than strategic suffering, where they operationalize their emotions about climate change and their future to gain sympathy and more importantly, gain action. This contributes to their shared formative experiences that in turn build a strong sense of community.

Defining “Youth”

What does it mean to be a young person? Among my paternal grandparents’ sixteen grandchildren, I am the youngest girl. Most of my family treats me as a child,

with little responsibility except to care for my younger brother. In our family, one is not accepted as an ‘adult’ until they are married and have children. Joining POWER immediately threw my identity as a young person into disarray. Was I a staffer? An adult responsible for multiple people? I was neither nearly as knowledgeable as other staff, nor did I have any authority to call myself a staff member. My second week in, I was asked to be the sole adult staff supporting a few young people as they led a workshop for a group from DayBreak, (a national, climate focused organization). Simultaneously flabbergasted and flattered that the adult supervisors trusted me enough to supervise the young people by myself, I attended that seminar attempting to balance being a guiding mentor and a laid-back observer. I wanted to make sure the event ran smoothly while not getting in the way of the students.

Conversely, I did not belong in the group that staff members referred to as the ‘young people’. In most scenarios, a person in their twenties would be considered a young person. In this organization, that was hardly the case. The young people were the high school students. What was I? I hesitated to call myself a researcher or intern because I felt that separated me more from the group. Though I was closer in age and experience to the youth, I held unearned power just because I was an ‘adult’.

When I asked about what it means to be a ‘young person’, most of my interviewees took a longer time responding. One participant thought along the same lines as I did, in experiences, rather than age.

“So I personally think it just an experience. I think the word young person is just a really complicated word because it doesn't really have a finite definition. Wow...this is so hard to think about. Yeah, I guess that's what I

would say. It's like, you know, when you're in college, you're still a young person but your experience is just talking about a college student. That's another thing that makes it complicated that we had people from POWER who aren't in college, but aren't in high school. So it's like, where do they really fit in? Because they can't talk about the college experience or what it means to be a college student.” - *Interview with Marcus, July 2020*

To Marcus and most young people in this program, age was not necessarily associated with specific experiences. He did not want to unintentionally leave out any group of people by equating ‘young person’ with an age range, perhaps because numbers are often used to define so much of a young person’s capability (voting, alcohol consumption, renting a car to name a few).

Months into the internship, I still occupied that space between staff person and young person but drifted closer and closer to staff member every day that I was given new responsibilities. My experience evolved and grew further away from the students I was meant to guide. I started to accept my role as a staff person though, and I still got nervous when leading a group of young people.

A constant battle raged in my head between my responsibilities as a staff person and my responsibilities as a participant-observer. I was wary of the, however subtle, power dynamic between adult allies and students and between researchers and participants. Thus, I was careful not to display dominance in my interactions with the young people.

POWER Dismantles Adulthood

After Climate Team finished its meeting, everyone shuffled into a larger conference room for that day’s larger POWER session. I followed the students but wondered where to go

once I got to the room. Stackable black plastic chairs circled the room's perimeter. A large monitor on a wheeled cart stood at what I assumed to be the front of the room. Not wanting to take a seat away from a student, I positioned myself atop the long white countertop that lined the back wall. I wanted to appear as unobtrusive as possible. From my own experiences with school, after-school programs, and any other adult-led activity, I thought the supervisors would sit away from the group. Instead, the two sat among the circle of students - and no one batted an eye.

-Excerpt from fieldnotes, October 2019

Rather than the signs I expected of polite discomfort at the prospect of sitting next to an adult supervisor (straight back, tight smile) some students slouched on their seats and guffawed at something Sofia had said. Others poked fun at Karen's expense for not understanding an iPhone feature correctly. The atmosphere was friendly; and, apart from an age difference, there was no obvious sign of a power imbalance. In sitting apart from the circle, I unintentionally drew *more* attention to myself.

Like the Round Table from Arthurian legend, the circular seating arrangement signified equality; no one person was at the head of the table; no one person was more important than the other. This is a clear principle at POWER and a part of how young people are able to construct their own agency. Youth might be the most heavily regulated group of people, apart from prisoners. Adults are able to dictate what they eat, when they eat, what they wear, and when they sleep. This extends to a school setting. French philosopher Michel Foucault noticed the social control exerted on students by teachers and principals at schools mirrored the control prisons had on prisoners (Foucault, 1977). A bell communicates when to get up and leave, a dress code is enforced, and privileges are taken away as a part of negative reinforcement and behavior modification. In the name of discipline, there are set times for physical activity, eating, and going to the

bathroom. Both groups lose their individual sense of autonomy and self-governance. They are not able to make major decisions for themselves. While schools make every effort to teach self-control and self-discipline, they are influenced and controlled by higher authorities.

How does being subject to a Foucauldian school dynamic impact the way the students behave outside of school? Does over-discipline in schools lead to what Foucault would call “docile bodies” (Foucault and Sheridan, 1995)? How does this affect their ability to construct their own agency? In order to answer this, we must dive further into some of the oppression young people face and rise against.

Experiences of Adulthood

“You’re too young to know any better.”

“Wait until you’re older. You won’t feel the same way.”

“The adults are talking. Don’t interrupt.”

I assume we have all heard these phrases at some point. Although I am legally an adult, I *still* hear these comments from time to time. In my family, like in many Indian households, respecting your elders consists of touching their feet, seeking blessings and wisdom, and *never* speaking out or against them — no matter what. My parents and grandparents were more lenient in this matter. I would argue with them daily about school, food, or other such trivial matters. But the subliminal messages were still present. My uncle would ask me to speak, but also to lower my voice. My mother would smile while her eyes chided me on my argumentative tone. If there was a conversation at the dinner table about politics or economics, people would rarely ask for my opinion.

Instances like these fall into the realm of adultism. Adultism is defined as “behaviors and attitudes based on the assumption that adults are better than young people, and entitled to act upon young people without their agreement” (Bell, 1995). These behaviors are influenced by societal institutions, laws, and customs. A child legally becomes an adult at the age of 18 in the United States. Before reaching this age, legal restrictions prevent them from making major decisions, including voting for a future they will live in. Of course, there are certain laws and customs designed to protect children from harm like social, emotional, and physical abuse. Children need nurturing and guidance that will help them grow and become self-sufficient. However, guidance can quickly feel like oppression when people continue to only see what young people lack, instead of their assets and strengths (Benson 2007). Adults may see their advice as harmless; young people may experience that same advice as orders. Age is equated to wisdom while youth is often viewed as synonymous with naivety. This deficit-based approach to the treatment of young people can cause them to feel dismissed, disrespected, and powerless (Park 2004). This does not foster healthy atmospheres of growth.

POWER gives students an opportunity to be free from the surveillance mode of discipline within school. They do not enforce the same kinds of regulations that young people are subject to in school. Before the pandemic and the shift to Zoom, each POWER session started with a young person calling everyone’s attention. Members spoke much more than the supervisors. They were encouraged to give their opinion, interject when they did not agree, and make decisions about the group’s work. Young people, like Marcus, found this empowering:

Some things I like about POWER...you know, it's just how we're treated as young people. We're not treated as a boss and employee; we're treated as co-partners. They look at us young people...well *you* guys look at us young people and then give us the voice to speak instead of, like, suppressing our voice or making it or like, your own voice. I mean, there's adultism everywhere - take the phone conversation we just had. But the fact that we're like, combating it, understanding it, and knowing where our priorities are. This is how things should be. It's really powerful. It's not like a normal job where you know, they say something you have to do it. Here, it's like they say something and we might have another idea and they're going to listen to our idea. I think it is good. It makes for a strong bond. I think that's one of the reasons, everyone is so in connection with each other. It's because people genuinely listen to each other and we generally work as one, you know. They're not speaking for us. They're just helping uplift our voices.

-Interview with Marcus, June 19th, 2020

Marcus clearly distinguishes this program from 'normal jobs' by the way they have given equal power and responsibility to the people, the youth they hire. He attributes his feeling of connection and togetherness to this structure. In most places, there is a strict hierarchy and young people are generally at the bottom. Giving students the opportunity to take charge, to be equals, uplifts not only their voices, but their sense of self-worth and well-being.

POWER Dynamics

Hegemonic structural ideas and institutionalized oppressions influence how individuals embody the cultural capital that is available to them, thus affecting their *habitus*. Pierre Bourdieu defines *habitus* as "a subjective but not individual system of internalized structures, schemes of perception, conception, and action common to all

members of the same group or class” (1977, 86). A person’s mannerisms, accents, taste, style, how they hold their body, are all part of their *habitus*. Society places positive and negative values on the various facets of a person’s *habitus*, solidifying a hierarchy of people and a power dynamic between those who embody ‘positive’ mannerisms versus those who possess ‘negative’ mannerisms. For example, some associate higher class with certain accents, behaviors, and ways of dressing. Others may see rural or country accents to be less appealing. Bourdieu says *habitus* is not a structure but is formed from socialization by structures and continues to contribute to power dynamics between groups of people. It situates similarly to Giddens’ structuration – society shapes these dispositions and assigns value or power to particular kinds. These internalized dispositions were apparent throughout instances of gender power dynamics and through embodied mannerisms from a school structure that I illuminate below. Does a young person’s *habitus* affect the level and forms of activism in which they partake?

Gender Equality?

After observing several meetings, I noticed that the few male students are quicker to respond to questions and quicker to give opinions (either when asked or not asked). They rarely apologize. During in-person meetings, these same people walk into a room with an air of confidence, heads held high, and smile or hug their friends in greeting. They are also, at first glance, some of the most active members of POWER and attend all climate team meetings, events, strikes, and town halls. The female students are just as active, but most raise their hands to speak, or do not speak unless specifically called on.

At events, women attend but do not as readily volunteer to host or emcee as much as the men. It is important here to consider how my own *habitus* and perceptions influence what I observed. Did I notice these distinctions in mannerisms because I was trained to or because as a woman of Indian heritage, my culture and upbringing conditioned me to consider carefully how I behave and act in public? Therefore, I am more inclined to notice those who are quieter, withdrawn, but attentive - as I would no doubt behave in similar situations. Of course, these are notes and trends. I can not use this to generalize conceptions of all men and all women of POWER. There are women within this organization that immediately sign up to attend events, to speak at panels, and to lead workshops throughout the community. Stereotypes of gender do not apply to every single person at every moment. There is a balance, and it is the welcoming and nurturing nature of the program that provides for this balance.

At the beginning of most POWER meetings, one or two students, along with adult staff, review the “group norms”. These are a set of majority agreed-upon rules of conduct that everyone, student and staff alike, is expected to follow. The core group norms include, “Don’t Yuk My Yum”, “One Mic”, and “Step Up, Step Back”. The first, “Don’t Yuk My Yum”, means that you should not judge someone based on what they like or dislike. The second, “One Mic”, refers to the rule that when one person is speaking, you must be silent and attentive. Multiple people should not speak out at once. Staff and student leaders try to enforce this especially when one of our members who is hard-of-hearing is on the call, requiring simultaneous interpretation. “Step Up, Step Back” asks

everyone to self-reflect on their participation; if you feel you are not speaking as much during a meeting, try to *step up*; if you are speaking up a lot during a meeting, *step back* and allow someone else to come forward. I have noticed that the most talkative students, male and female, will always wait for others to speak first, before speaking themselves. It is also these students who notice when someone looks like they are about to say something and are not noticed by the facilitator of that particular discussion.

One could understand the tendencies of POWER men to be more outspoken while the women are more timid as the products of societal gender norms. In the United States, from birth, we are fed messages of how to dress, how to behave, and what to like. For the girls, many stores have pinks and reds sprinkled about the aisles filled with dolls, simulated home sets, and fluffy animals. Blues, greens, and blacks color the aisles with trucks, dinosaurs, and monsters that are meant for the boys. Girls are meant to be more empathetic, caring, and “emotional”. Boys are taught to be more analytical, calculated, and distanced. It is part of the never-ending barrage of subliminal messages we hear as young children that influence some of our behaviors today.

This organization works to actively make people aware of these habits. Over the summer, POWER members came to the adult staff to ask whether or not they could hold a men’s caucus and a women’s caucus. The purpose of these caucus meetings was to provide space for those who identified as male or female and how that identity shapes or has shaped their experiences in POWER. Students planned and facilitated these caucus meetings. I attended the women’s caucus to lend support where needed and to share my

own frustrations of navigating a society that expects specific kinds of behavior from women. It was the first time POWER women came together to share their own stories in an official manner. Some women felt like they were held to higher expectations than the men; the men got away with laziness and inattentiveness and made up for it by being charismatic and outspoken. One female student said she was expected to attend every external meeting, even though she was in several other clubs and organizations at school. Once the first few women started to express their feelings, many others chimed in with their stories without the facilitators' prompt. A common theme was the number of times some men in POWER cut off the women while speaking.

Often, men of this program are the first to answer a question or volunteer for an activity and sometimes fall into the habit of taking space away from the women. However, through the reiteration of the ground rules and the recommendations made after the caucus meeting, they are also careful to *step back* and open the space for others to speak their mind. They remain just as active in participation, but I notice that they consistently catch themselves before interrupting another person and insist on letting other members, particularly women, speak before them. By actively working to right the 'wrongs', both staff and students of POWER promote a sense of community.

These rules are meant to further inclusivity and openness; yet they are still rules. As much as staff try to dismantle the "school" feeling and structure, certain procedures remain. The power differences between students and adult staff members may be miniscule, but they are ever present. The influence of a school structure on youth

behavior is clear. Many POWER members raise their hands to speak, as if they were still in a classroom. While we still met in person, they would ask me and other adult allies for permission to use the bathroom. The dynamics and regulations of school are embedded in their behaviors, even though POWER is dedicated to promoting student autonomy and agency. POWER gives the most importance to student voice and student opinions. The organization fosters an environment where students can speak out and demand a seat at the decision-making table. Still, the learned school behaviors indicate the understanding of a power dynamic within this organization -- even if the adult leaders of this organization insist the youth are in charge. Through the climate organization's foundation of positive youth development, young people learn about their own power or are reinforced and supported in equating their voice to power. This positive youth development framework helps youth to recognize their own agency, and then learn to use it.

An Exchange Between Activism and Social Capital

Pierre Bourdieu set forth theories of capital that help to analyze some of the ways in which a collective group, such as environmental justice organizations, operate. He initially delineates three kinds of capital: economic, cultural, and social (Bourdieu, 1986). Economic capital can refer to direct monetary exchange or indirect wealth accumulation like property rights. Cultural capital refers to the resources one has because of education, knowledge, and skills to which one has access. Social capital is a collection of current and potential resources that are associated with membership in a group or network of

relationships, where the accrued collective social capital or clout applies to each individual member. However, the amount of social capital a person has “depends upon the size of the network connections he can effectively mobilize and on the volume of capital (whether economic, cultural, or symbolic) that each entity connected to the person has in their possession (1986, 21). Thus, these forms of capital are inextricably linked and perpetuate social hierarchies/class distinctions within society. More economic capital, perhaps of a parent or family member, can influence one’s cultural capital through increased access to higher institutions of learning and knowledge. Through increased cultural capital, the likelihood of attaining a high-paying job increases, furthering one’s economic capital. Money, a job, and specialized knowledge are status symbols that, in most societies, confer acceptance into social networks and groups, increasing one’s potential social capital.

Most children and youth have very little economic, cultural, or social capital because of their age. Their parents/guardians provide whatever economic, cultural, or social capital they have access to. As individuals, youth have no real financial assets, have not yet entered stages of higher education that may gain them further cultural capital, and have few social networks or connections that they can effectively mobilize, as Bourdieu claims is a key part to a person’s social capital. However, for the young people with whom I worked, taking part in environmental activism may contribute to increasing youth social capital.

Throughout my time as an intern, I have seen how other organizations change their meeting times to accommodate the young people's schedules. I have also noticed those outside organizations take POWER members seriously and get excited about potential collaboration. The students are also able to ask for meetings with community members of higher social status such as the Chief Academic Officer of New England Public Schools, the Superintendent of Schools, the mayor, city council cabinet, and more. This suggests that being a member of POWER already confers these young people more social capital than perhaps non-POWER students. A group of teenagers who strategically rebel against those in power can gain power by drawing attention to themselves.

December 2019 Climate Strike

The New England Climate Strike Team planned another youth-led climate strike early in December of 2019. Several members of Climate Team said they would be there, including the adult supervisor. I did not think this was a space for adults. It was called the *Youth Climate Strike*. Surely this was not a space particularly for *me*.

As I rode the escalator up from the train station platform, the cacophony of people reached my ears. The plaza was bustling with hundreds of people, young and old clad in their winter jackets, hats, scarves, and gloves, holding up a variety of signs. Completely overwhelmed, I stepped off the escalator and hoped I could find a few recognizable faces from POWER.

Instead, the first person I recognized was U.S. Senator Ed Markey and only because his is a household name among many of the climate organizations in the New England area for writing the Green New Deal, a progressive climate legislation to promote green jobs. Youth and adults alike were clamoring over each other to get a picture with him.

I continued to walk around and take note of the kinds of people that were there. The crowd was mostly young people, which I expected. However, I saw many adults either supporting their own kids or on their own, all carrying cardboard signs. One adult pushed her child's stroller through the crowd, closer to where Ed Markey stood as he posed for pictures. A little girl, perhaps no more than 4 or 5 years old, held a cardboard cut out too. I felt a punch in my gut as I read her sign:

"Don't let me go extinct."

This parent must have known the emotion her child holding this sign would elicit.

Young people strategically deploy their emotions and experiences about climate change into political action, which suggests that they have both the agency and capital to do so. Otherwise why would media give so much attention to these climate activists? They gain social status by working with other youth populations to turn out in numbers and get the world to listen to a group rendered invisible by their age, class, race, gender

or an intersection of all these identities. Though we live in a society that favors biomedicine and quantitative thought, scientific facts and evidence are not enough to convince people in power of the current and impending impacts of climate change. Young people turn to stories, personal narratives, and emotions, all qualitative information used to elicit specific emotional responses in order to enact change.

At the beginning of her 2020 documentary *I Am Greta*, we see flashes of scenes depicting climate disasters and its human impacts. When Greta goes to sit in front of Swedish parliament as her way of protesting government climate inaction, melancholy music plays in the background. These are choices clearly made to grab the viewer's attention and elicit responses of fear, sadness, and guilt - all to sympathize with the protagonist (Greta) and the problem (climate change).

The narratives and messages intended to shame politicians about inaction on climate change use personal anecdotes and stories. I saw other signs that said, "*Charlie Baker your inaction is killing us*", and "*Protect Our Future*". Young people were mobilizing their cultural capital of being 'vulnerable youth', reminding adults of their stated values and rights to full citizenship by asserting that youth are deserving of care. This strategic exchange suggests strategic use of agency.



Figure 1: "There is No Planet B" – December 2019 by Kamini Mallick

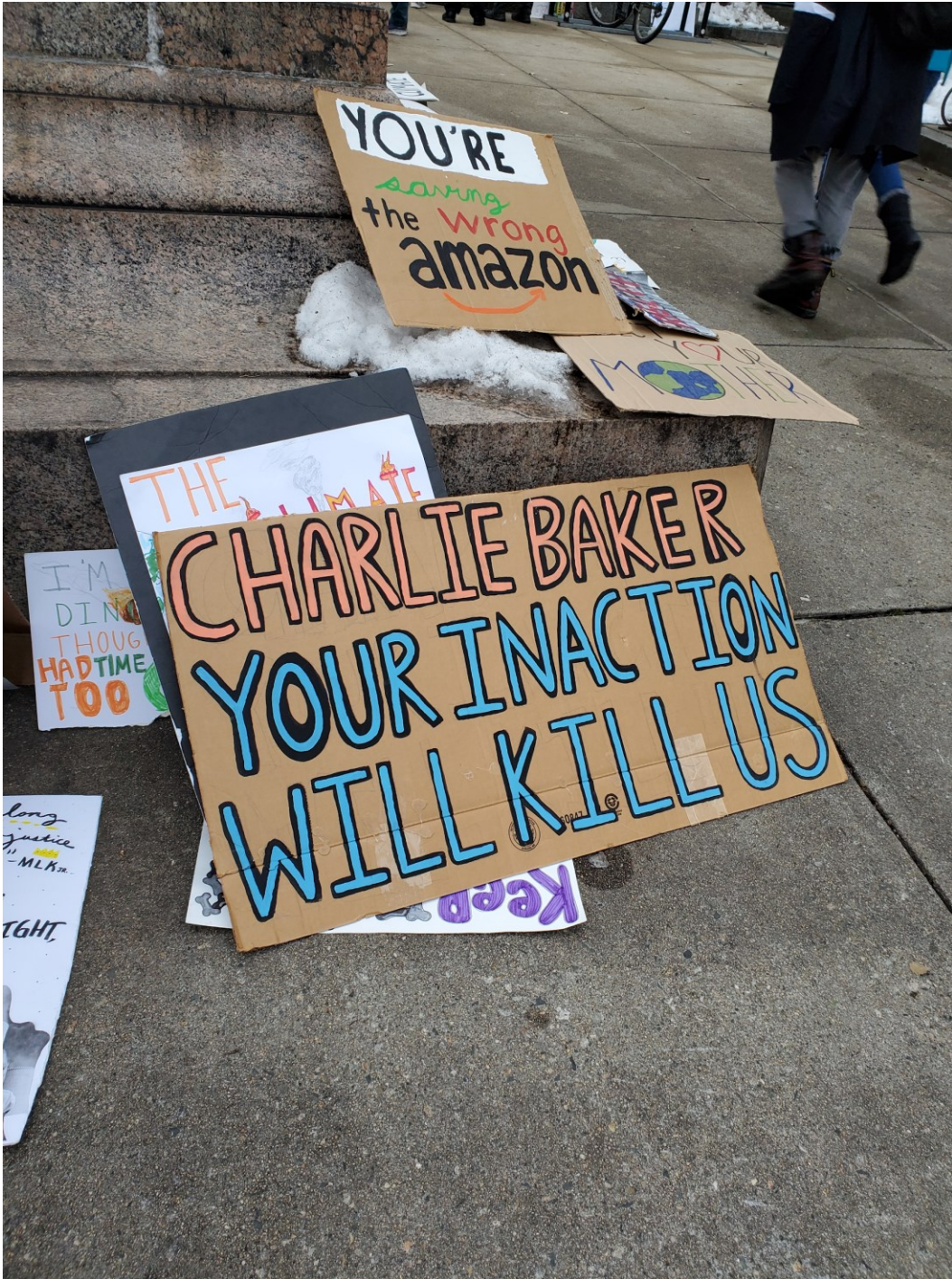


Figure 2: "Discarded signs from Youth Climate Strike" – December 2019 by Kamini Mallick

When others, whether it be institutions like the IRB wanting to protect ‘vulnerable’ populations or humanitarian aid efforts during war, decide and identify who needs help, it can create an immediate power imbalance; the giver is considered a savior and the receiver, a victim (Fassin 2007). The victimized group then is at the mercy of the savior with no real autonomy of their own. With strikes and climate activism, members of environmental justice groups seem to consciously label themselves as victims of these ‘future wrongs’. They exercise their agency by commodifying their worries of climate change to elicit the appropriate emotional responses and motivate change, creating what Erica James calls a “political economy of trauma” (James 2004). At the December 2019 Climate Strike, many of the signs that young people held up had pictures of a weeping Earth, alluded to extinction, and fears of the very near future.

In her essay on political violence and humanitarian interventions in Haiti during the 1991-1994 coup, James defines traumatic citizenship as “individuals and groups seek recognition, agency, political, and economic power, and security through attempts to seek justice and restitution for past wrongs or experiences of victimization” (James 2004). Young climate activists are collectively invoking a kind of traumatic citizenship where they seek justice for *future* (as opposed to past) wrongs if we do not abate the negative effects of climate change in a timely manner. By claiming this traumatic citizenship

through activism, young people are holding governing bodies and key stakeholders in climate change accountable and responsible for their current and future quality of life. The responsibility of combatting climate change falls *back* to the adults in power.

Reed and Foran's "political cultures of oppression" theory may further augment this conceptualization (2002). Sociologists Jean-Pierre Reed and John Foran studied the Nicaraguan revolution of the 1970s and theorized how to use culture and agency in analyzing revolutions. They notice how the people suppressed under authoritarian regimes operationalize their emotions and experiences into activism and action. Reed and Foran note that this is a group initiative that becomes a movement, not just individual suffering.

I would argue that young people, through strategically deploying their emotions to enact change invoke a kind of traumatic citizenship, and thus participate in what I would call 'strategic activism'. Perhaps strategic activism then increases young people's social capital, because they intentionally use their suffering to draw attention to the problem. More social capital gives rise to more power which they can then use to influence change, another way in which young people exercise their agency to push the boundaries of societal structures.

But does the collective social capital transfer to the individual level? Other programs and organizations often ask POWER members to come and speak or give testimony, as a young person. Sometimes they act as a representative of the program, using the POWER's collective social capital. In other cases, such as speaking about specific political candidates or local school power structures, staff members remind the young people to be careful in what they post. As a program administered by a nonprofit organization and a public school district, in order to continue their work in implementing social change, the program must strategically navigate institutional relationships. The students get frustrated by this – I have heard, on multiple occasions, students say, “the politics are annoying”. Still, if the individual members want to say something that could be potentially at tension with certain political actors/relations, they speak their mind but say, “I am not speaking on behalf of POWER or UNITY”. They can not use the collective social capital POWER members gained, but feel empowered enough from their participation in this program to break off and say their piece anyway. Though POWER's agency may be constrained by the structural forces that keep them functioning as a group, POWER still fosters students' agency by helping them to strategically navigate those constraints.

Civic Engagement as Disempowering?

Though these highlighted instances of activism and civic engagement showcase the ways in which young people feel empowered, I must acknowledge that civic engagement and activism does not *always* have such a positive connotation. The environmental and social justice work they are fighting for can be draining at times. In this activism work, young people must often acknowledge historical, familial, personal, and future traumas, which can be either encouraging or despairing. Upholding political relationships and dynamics within the city and between fiscal partners sometimes caused tensions between students and staff members. For example, the organization was not allowed to endorse any specific political candidate during the national presidential election or local city council elections. They were only allowed to express their support for climate and environment-friendly legislation. This contrasted with NEEEG, the other climate organization I had a chance to speak with and momentarily observe. NEEEG was not barred from advocating for a specific candidate by outside forces, but still hesitated to do so. Young people from both POWER and NEEEG understand that certain relationships need to be maintained for the greater purpose of pushing environmentally friendly agendas. However, I do not suggest youth always comply with these external pressures. They know how and when to strategically employ their opinions and

experiences but are further helped by staff and mentors from their respective organizations.

Activism brings about moments of empowerment and disempowerment – in some cases, organizations like POWER work to uplift youth voice. In other cases, that very same organization can stifle youth voice, albeit unintentionally. This goes back to the concept of agency – in order to push for the change they want, sometimes, young people must actively decide *how* to voice their concerns. I would argue that this still falls under the realm of exercising agency. Though they may be stifled by structural or behavioral systems, young people *know* of this system and are intentionally operating within it to achieve long-term, pro-environmental goals. This promotes feelings of hope and overall wellbeing among youth and may counteract some of the feelings of despair associated with intangible, abstract crises like climate change.

In the next chapter, I further delineate how POWER and the people within POWER foster youth agency through expanding their critical consciousness. Importantly, I do not suggest that the organization imparts or educates young people to *form* a critical consciousness, as this moves back into the mindset of seeing youth deficit rather than assets. Instead, I suggest participation in the organization helps to further *develop an expanded critical awareness*.

CHAPTER FIVE: TOWARDS A CRITICAL AWARENESS

“At first I thought I was fighting to save a tree. Then I thought I was fighting to save a rainforest. Now I realize I’m fighting for HUMANITY”

- Vanessa Nakate, Ugandan youth climate activist (April 20th, 2020-Twitter)

In my field notes and in conversation, I have used ‘climate change’ and ‘environmental justice’ rather interchangeably. This is because to the young of POWER, climate change work is necessarily a *part of* environmental justice. Without placing the needs of black, indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) communities first, we can neither achieve environmental justice, nor can we slow down climate change. Climate Team members stood hand in hand with another proenvironmental group in New England and blocked off a major road to call attention to gas leaks in lower-income neighborhoods. These students also worked for months on creating a curriculum that brings to light several ways in which people in Boston face environmental injustice. Together with youth representatives from various other climate organizations, POWER members held general youth forums and spoke about the higher rates of asthma in their communities. They advocate for the environment by advocating for people. But this conflation of the two words is not simply inherent -- POWER builds this connection by further developing an expanded critical consciousness or awareness in the young people.

As discussed in the previous chapter, society underestimates young people in terms of their ability to comprehend complicated problems or ideas. I teased out the ways in which the identities of age, student, gender, and socioeconomic status shape young people’s understanding and experience of activism and the way in which they use their

social capital to their advantage. In this chapter, I will continue this conversation by adding race and ethnicity to the layers of identity the youth in my study inhabit. These intersections of identity influence young people to see climate change as a web of intricate and complex problems. They understand much more than adults give them credit. Joining a youth climate group with a diverse group of individuals has helped these young people expand the concept of climate change to encompass environmental justice.

Climate Change is Complex, not Complicated

From the start, I wanted to approach this research where I would make no prior assumptions about young people's understanding of climate change. This was hard. I assumed young people were riddled with anxiety at the thought of climate change. Excess stress and anxiety leads to increased cortisol levels in the bloodstream, which has negative health effects downstream. Perhaps we were producing a generation doomed to deal with a deteriorating climate as well as a physiologically deteriorating body. My assumptions may qualify as adultist -- did I assume young people experienced anxiety about climate change because a small part of me thought they inherently could not handle such an existential crisis? This may be true or not true, but is not in the framework nor in the scope of this study. The young people themselves should explain how they viewed climate change.

When I first asked Sarah, a member of another climate group, what climate change meant to her and what motivated her to join NEEEG [New England Environmental Education Group]; she responded in the following manner:

I come from an environmentally conscious family. Since I was a child, I've always been environmentally conscious. I feel environmentally conscious and so I've always just been wanting to contribute more to benefiting the environment and whatnot. When I was younger, I really loved animals and so it was definitely important to me. Climate change in terms of its effects on animals... which I feel like is... That's how I learned about climate change as a child - through its impact on animals like the polar bears and like the rain forest and stuff. I was like, "this is terrible!" and then I wasn't exactly sure how I could help. So, um, then I decided that when I got to school, I was like, "I want to join a club that's having impact." And it's this interest that I've always had so I just... I just joined them.

Sarah's first thoughts were of polar bears and the rain forest - ubiquitous messaging we have all received at some point or another. When, or rather if, we learn about climate change, general lessons about climate make the case of degrading animal habitats. Perhaps we are taught to care more about animals than humans because adults feel children cannot handle it? It becomes a problem, though, when this is the *only* thing people associate with climate change. They do not know or understand the extent of the human impact, especially on disenfranchised communities.

Sarah goes on to say:

So in Youth CAN, we do a lot of educating the school community and the [city] community. We tried to not just focus on Climate change as a singular narrative. We try to also apply like a social justice lens and like a racial lens as well, um, and like a health lens, of course too, just to have a more complete view. And like we're in an environmental club too so it's not just climate change.

Participating in a climate justice organization helped her to see the significance of the situation, as something *more* than just affecting Earth's animals. It is as if climate change

denotes something different than environmental justice. Perhaps, for some, the phrase ‘climate change’ makes them think just about Earth’s physical changes due to a warming planet. It does not encompass the complex levels of problems that people face. These youth climate groups help expand their concept of climate change into something actionable, something that they can fight for: environmental justice.

It is evident that young people worry about their future in the context of climate change. During the interviews, I tried to ask general, non-leading questions about their understanding of climate change: What did they think about climate change? How did they characterize it? And how often did they think about climate change? Alexandria, hesitated at first:

“Uhm, climate change is a lot of things to me, uhh climate change is...hmmm...how should I start...”

She wasn’t alone. Almost every participant paused before answering this question: what did climate change mean to them? For Alexandria, pausing before answering the question was unnatural for her. In Climate Team, POWER meetings, even this interview, when she has something to say, she says it without hesitation. It took her several seconds to gather her thoughts on this question, and then she tried again:

“OK, I’ll start in the scientific way. Climate change is an actual...like, an effect that it’s having on the earth in negative ways due to human contributions through pollution and all the other things that humans do that affect the environment.

As she spoke, she forced out a laugh, as if she knew her answer was perfunctory and too simple. Climate change was more complicated than this. She continued to answer, moving away from the scientific definition and into the complexities of climate change as she understood it:

But I also think climate change is also the lack of knowledge and --- the lack of knowledge and affectability and how people actually handle the issue. Um, it's preventable. It's something that if we all work together regardless, regardless of how we feel politically... I don't think it's a political issue. I think it's just...It's not even a human rights issue. I just think it's just something that needs to be solved. Um, it includes human rights situations in it, especially on a broad surface. It's just scientific...but how it affects certain communities is going to vary due to white privilege and white people having higher profit...profit levels of like white people being able to afford, you know, solar panels on their houses or um, buying clean energy from like organizations...you know what I mean? There's just...there's so many other underlying things. It's a racial issue because more communities of color have more train stations and bus stations that pollute the air even more which contributes to asthma.

So I think climate change in itself is just like what's happening to the Earth and how it negatively is affecting the Earth. But I think the underlying effects of it. It's just all social justice issues as an economic issue, it's, it's everything...an education issue. It's a lot.

-Interview with Alexandria, June 19th, 2020

I could sense some indignation when she asserted that climate change is *not* a political issue. Her body posture became more rigid, her facial expressions more angry, and her voice tone more harsh. It was a visible but brief change, one that I suspect she did not realize herself. The fact that politicians continue to debate climate science and the mere existence of climate change as a phenomenon was appalling to Alexandria. This is the

case for many other members in Climate Team as well. At many of our weekly meetings, students have made offhanded comments on the lack of movement with regards to climate change. They often note that they would be much better suited for political office because current lawmakers and political leaders do not understand the severity of the situation. This lack of action is the one of the main drivers behind protesting and lobbying state officials.

Wisdom is culturally associated with age and experience. Because of adultism, young people are often underestimated with regards to their ability to understand the depth and nuance of a particular problem. Perhaps this is why young people are not as often included in key discussions about policies and programs, even when these directly affect them and their futures. Alexandria's response about what climate change means challenges this prevailing notion that young people are not capable of handling this complex thought.

Race and Climate Change

Youth activists at POWER understand climate change as complex, multi-faceted issue. The identities they inhabit and the relationships they create help shape this complexity. Many members of Climate Team identify with marginalized racial, social, and economic groups, which molds their thoughts, actions, and experiences. Each influences the kinds of relationships they have within communities and within structures of power. Intertwining several of these aspects of one's sense of self brings about a further nuanced understanding of their place in the world and the impact climate change

will have on them. Alexandria, who saw climate change as intricate woven layers, identifies as an Afro-Latino woman and during meetings, is quick to point out how an issue makes black men and women even more structurally vulnerable because of intersecting minority identities, whether the problem is school culture, police brutality, health care, or climate change. In her answer to defining climate change above, Alexandria alludes to the race tensions she sees within environmental justice, "...how it [climate change] is going to affect certain communities varies due to white privilege." (Interview, June 19, 2020). She calls out the economic disparities between white and black communities and how the consequences of climate change will affect black folks disproportionately to white.

Other participants also commented on the issue of climate change affecting non-white, non-rich communities the hardest. Chandler, a white middle-class student, also described how race plays a role in his thinking about climate change:

I think that when I think about solving the climate crisis, the most important part for me is environmental justice. The crisis obviously hits people of color and communities of color harder and faster and first. So we have to make sure that environmental justice is part of every single action we take as, you know, as the people confronting the climate crisis. We have to make sure environmental justice is always in the conversation and environmental justice communities are always in the conversation and they're always leading the charge and that they have voice in writing legislation, they have a voice and planning the actions.

- Interview, Chandler, July 7, 2020

Other than being a young person, Chandler does not hold a historically marginalized identity. However, through participation in this program and forging friendships with those that do inhabit marginal identities, he believes in the importance of empowering disenfranchised communities. It is not just an extension of caring towards another individual, but a heightened sense of his own community and who comprises that community.

To be Critically Conscious

Later in the interview, Alexandria said something I did not expect. I asked her to describe any memorable event or experience while she's been with Climate Team. After looking off to the side of her computer, she started to talk about the Green New Deal Kickoff rally that occurred last year (2019). Massachusetts Senator Ed Markey and popular New York congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez co-wrote the Green New Deal, a set of green guidelines and programs aimed at reducing carbon emissions and increasing job opportunities in more renewable energy resources (Friedman 2019). Progressive Democrats rally behind this and claim that a Green New Deal is not only beneficial for our planet, but for our economy as well.

Alexandria recounted seeing many prominent politicians at this massive event, including city councilors, senators, and congressmen/women. There were several climate and environmental justice groups in attendance, including DayBreak, Youth Climate Coalition, and of course, POWER/Climate Team. She reflected on how her attendance at this event made her see the problem of climate change differently,

I felt like it was one of the first times that I understood why the climate crisis was truly important. I mean, of course, throughout my life, my parents emphasize, like, you know, you should treat the earth like it's your mother. We recycle a lot, we compost a lot, but I never really understood the context of how the climate crisis connects to other social justice issues. Um, and I think that this event...really, I guess sort of educated me on... okay this connects to racism and so many other social justice issues because there's still like other communities that don't have access to the resources to help their communities more... And it's also a health crisis...everything sort of fell into place to me and it made more sense because of this event.

Her parents, like many others, taught her to take on individual responsibilities in order to fulfill a duty to the planet -- reduce, reuse, and recycle. It was not until she joined Climate Team and attended the Green New Deal kickoff rally that she understood the broader implications of climate change, and its connection to social justice issues.

Environmental organizations provide spaces for young people to become more critically conscious and a chance to expand their own sense of self in relation to other larger units.

Paulo Freire developed the concept of critical consciousness while working with laborers in Brazil. He realized that part of the reason why marginalized groups are stuck in a cycle of structural violence and inequities is because they are not made aware of said inequities. Johan Galtung defines structural violence not as violence enacted by a specific individual, but violence done by an indirect subject or actor (1969). Racial, gender, and economic disparities that exist within social structures may harm an individual or community. Critical consciousness describes how oppressed or marginalized people learn to critically analyze their social conditions and act to change them (Watts, Deimer, and

Voigt 2007). Watts further delineates three crucial components of critical consciousness:

1) there exists a level of critical social analysis or critical reflection; 2) there must be some political efficacy or perceived ability to effect sociopolitical change; 3) these elements then naturally lead to participation in civic or political action (2007, 46).

POWER encourages young people to engage in critical social analysis by asking members to think more deeply about the underlying factors that contribute to the issues they want to take on. Recognizing ‘Root Causes’ and ‘power-mapping’ are two specific tools organizers use to get at the heart of a specific problem and identify key allies that may help them achieve their goal. This is exemplified by the fieldnotes I have included:

For Thursday’s Climate Team meeting, we are in a smaller room than before, the eight of us. Three boys are animatedly chatting about something that happened at school. Alexandria tries her best to get everyone’s attention by clearing her throat so that we may begin the meeting. This fails; the three boys are still talking. The two girls in this room, along with Alexandria and me, are silent. The other boy has not looked up from his white notepad. He is sitting next to me, and I can see a drawing of a house. He keeps erasing and drawing specific lines.

Alexandria, without speaking, gets up from her chair and writes, ‘What is the Green New Deal’ on a whiteboard that encompasses an entire wall. This captures the attention of the young people as they turn their chairs to look at what she is writing. She comments about finally getting their attention and asks everyone to answer the question she wrote on the board. The three boys who were speaking earlier are the first to answer; they give their response in “popcorn style” - meaning they do not wait to be called on to speak but rather say their piece and call on the next person to speak. Some answers include environmental justice, renewable jobs and industries, and a renewable economy. I notice that Chandler, one of the white male students who is involved in a lot of other organizations, is answering

the most. But then stops to look around at those who aren't answering. Tim is also talking a lot compared to the rest of the students. The two girls are still silent. David, the only male person of color in the room, interrupts Chandler and Tim from time to time with his own opinions or a funny comment.

Alexandria then writes 'Root Causes' on the board and asks the group to discuss why they think the Green New Deal has not been implemented yet. Again, the three boys are the first to answer, but this time there was a pause where there was not before in the first question Alexandria raised.

The minute Alexandria wrote capitalism on the whiteboard, Chandler, David, and Tim started talking at once, at a louder tone about what it means for them and what is the better alternative to capitalism, if any. Tim kept suggesting that the only answer to this is to build communism. David immediately said, "Hey hey hey man I didn't say that" in a lower volume. The girls in the room were still silent but nodding their heads or smiling at some things that were said.

Excerpt from fieldnotes, January 30th 2020

When asked about the Green New Deal, one of the students mentioned 'environmental justice' and a 'renewable economy'. I expected this because as part of Climate Team, they had also attended the Green New Deal rally with Alexandria. At the event, they learned more about key points concerning environmental injustice in context with the labor and energy industries. However, there was a large pause when Alexandria asked about why the Green New Deal was not yet been implemented. Perhaps the Climate Team members had not individually given this problem much thought. When Alexandria wrote 'Capitalism?', it made the other members immediately jump into conversation, suggesting that capitalism is a more familiar concept for young people. I have heard

Climate Team members often talk about capitalism as a source of environmental degradation. At the end of this particular discussion on the Green New Deal, I noted down what the final *root causes* map on the whiteboard looked like:

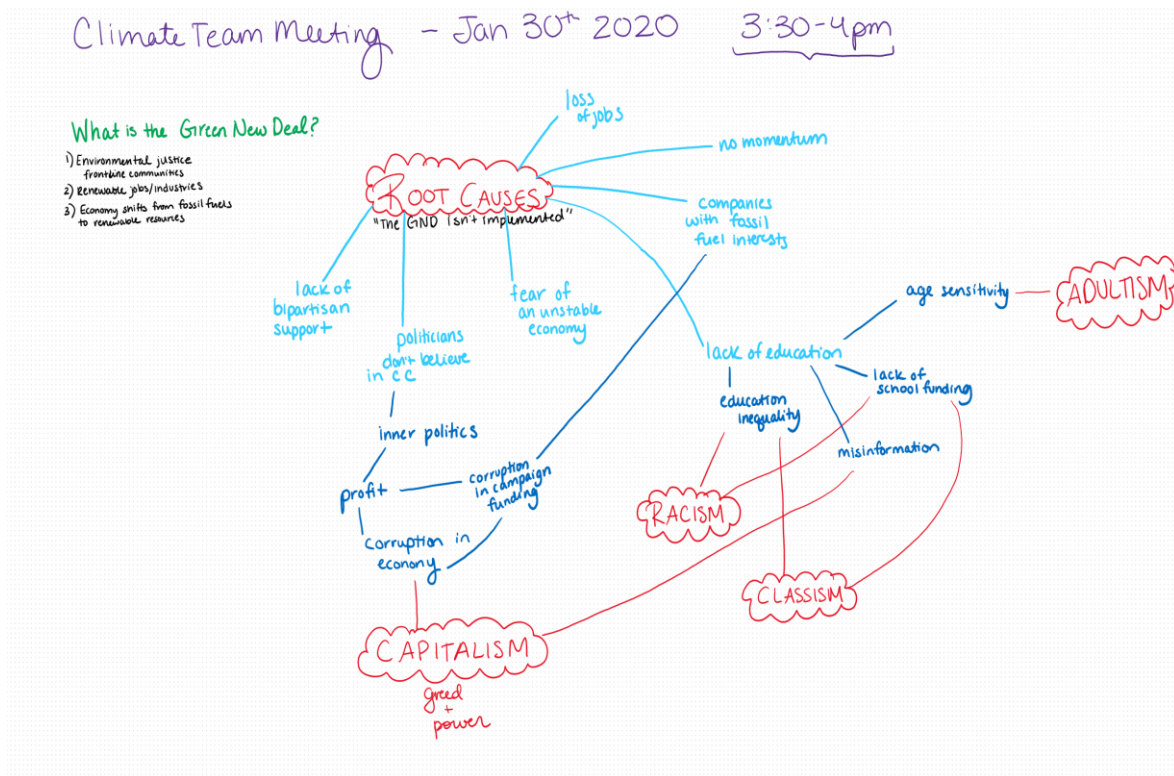


Figure 3: *Diagram of Root Causes* – Taken from Jan.30.2020 fieldnotes

The light blue colors were the initial responses the young people gave to why the Green New Deal was not implemented yet. Answers included lack of bipartisan support, disbelief in climate change, fear of an unstable economy, companies with fossil fuel interests, lack of education, no momentum, and loss of jobs. But the darker blue reflects the responses after Alexandria and David both considered some of the deeper causes behind lack of education and knowledge dissemination. POWER as a larger program has

dealt with a variety of problems within the public school sector so the young people were quick to identify education inequality, age sensitivity, misinformation, and lack of school funding (in darker blue) to explain lack of education on the GND (written in lighter blue). Tim and Chandler both suggested that a few of the causes written connect with each other -- the diagram is more complicated than the way we had drawn it. For example, companies with fossil fuel interests directly influence corruption in campaign funding, politicians in power, and profit. The web was more complex, but not complicated. Finally, they identified the *root causes* (drawn in red) that tie up or summarize the ideas written in light blue and darker blue: capitalism, racism, classism, and adultism, social forces that perpetuate structural violence among marginalized communities. The young people know that these larger issues underpin our society (perhaps this is why they chose to represent it as red), but they teased out specific ways in which these -isms contribute to the overall problem of unacceptance of the Green New Deal. This entire exercise further undermines the adultist notion that youth may not understand complicated issues. Not only are they fully capable of discussing the nuanced ways in which our society works, they help each other come to that understanding. POWER promotes their members to have a heightened sense of critical consciousness through both discussions started by adults to facilitate conversations *and* through young people teaching and learning from each other.

The second component Watts describes for a critical consciousness is a perceived ability to enact sociopolitical change. Identification of root causes, as done with the discourse around the GND, helps to pinpoint specific goals and areas that young people

may be able to change. Climate change can feel like an abstract problem that has no tangible solution and thus contributes to a sense of despair and hopelessness that results in inaction or indifference (McKinnon 2014). The specific goals make working towards a larger problem like climate change and environmental justice more concrete. In addition to this, staff members at POWER readily remind the young people about their various ‘wins’ or successes in organizing that the group collectively should feel. For example, every Monday during larger POWER meetings, the staff set aside a few minutes to talk about successes from the week or progress made on a certain campaign. This idea was suggested by the young people themselves, who during the pandemic especially, felt like they were losing sight of the change that they could make. When someone shares a success story or a progress story, the whole group (staff and students alike) celebrate by clapping or typing some positive response in the chat. In this way, the group continues to motivate students and show how effective their advocacy work can be.

These two components, critical social analysis and perceived sociopolitical effectiveness then leads to enacting action. In the case of the Green New Deal example, the young people identified tangible, root causes on which to act, and through the support and encouragement of the group at large, believed in their ability to take specific actions. The team decided to focus on the adultism and the inadequate education piece of the GND problem. A few Climate Team members now attend every state GND coalition meeting and push for youth representation and consultation. Others developed workshops for students, parents, and teachers across the school district to learn about climate change, environmental justice, and adultism within these movements. Thus, a more nuanced

critical consciousness developed as a part of a community may serve to counteract feelings of hopelessness and despair in the face of existential crises. I do not want to give the impression that young people do not have any kind of critical thinking before joining a climate organization. I am suggesting that this critical consciousness is developed even further. They have the capacity, but they need the community to foster that engagement. A critical awareness of the structures that oppress leads young people to be more intentional in pushing back on those oppressions. Thus, they use their agency within the constraints of social structures, but question the constraints in the first place and reshape the very structures that suppress them. A critical awareness increases youth agency.

To Be Critical of Your Own Movement

It is one thing to become aware of the inequalities that underpin the fabric of society and give rise to climate change in the first place; it is another to be able to critique those within your own movement. The young people in POWER's Climate Team, on a surface level, support other climate activist organizations but also critique the climate movement for being too homogenous.

The "Whiteness" of the Climate Movement

Media outlets popularized the 16-year old Swedish climate activist, Greta Thunberg, for leading the youth's fight against climate change. She started school walkouts and she protested every week outside the Swedish parliament. Eventually, she became an international youth icon, the subject of talk shows, magazine covers, and just

recently starred in a documentary about her journey. When Climate Team members mention her, they do so with ambivalence. They recognize the influence she has as a young leader, and that in turn gives them more capital and clout, because they too share her identity of being a youth climate activist. POWER youth are happy with her messaging because it at least puts climate change on the world stage. However, she is a young *white* girl that now seems to represent *all* young activists in the climate movement. The people in this movement are diverse and inhabit a variety of different racial identities. As many participants mentioned, the effects of climate change disproportionately impact marginalized populations.

My understanding of the youth's perceptions of climate change, climate change activism and race was clarified even further when I attended a DayBreak hub meeting in late February 2020. In order to efficiently work towards our common goal of advocating against climate change, Charlotte, the adult advisor/supervisor of Climate Team, suggested we develop strong relationships with other environmentally conscious youth groups in the area. DayBreak, a nationally recognized organization, was at the top of her list of allies to befriend. She believed that working with them gave rise to many politically influential opportunities for organizing.

According to Alexandria, Climate Team had previously tried to form a relationship with DayBreak, and the members have never been very pleased with how this group conducts themselves, especially in the recruitment process and inclusion of marginalized communities. During my very first Climate Team meeting, the group

lamented the pictures of an event DayBreak hosted that they posted to social media in the hopes of attracting more members. Not a single person in any of those photos was a person of color. Still, when Charlotte asked who all could attend the upcoming Saturday morning DayBreak hub meeting in February, quite a few members showed interest. Perhaps they thought not to waste this opportunity to help enact change as well as support common causes. I volunteered to accompany the young people to this DayBreak meeting so that I could learn more about other organizations and support Climate Team members as needed.

The DayBreak hub meeting was to be held at the Old South Church. I stood across the street on the steps to the city's Public Library. The lion statues served as my leaning post as I typed a text message to Alexandria: "Are you here yet?" Right before I hit send, I glimpsed her walking through the ornate church door.

I quickly crossed the street and caught the surprisingly heavy door from closing. A woman in front of me had a maroon, button-bedecked backpack on. She turned to look at me and asked if I was also going to the DayBreak meeting. I said yes, but that I did not know where it was inside the church itself. Relief flooded her face as she remarked that this was her first time as well. We stepped into a dimly lit area with high ceilings and a faint, musty smell. The area to our left was blocked off with yellow tape, and the entrance to our right was where I assumed church go-ers gathered for their religious service. For a minute, I questioned whether this environmental organization had any religious affiliations or connotations, and if so, would they really hold meetings in the prayer room? I continued to look around the hall for a sign of the DayBreak meeting - sounds of mingling, of rustling chairs, or any signs denoting information. My companion, a white female, simply walked up to what I assumed was the security desk and asked the guard behind the counter where

the meeting was. She pointed us to another hall to our left that I had completely missed upon my initial perusal of the space. Finally, we found everyone.

It had large stained glass windows at the front and back and a small stage-like area. The room was smaller than I expected, and I wondered how it was to fit the 50+ members of DayBreak. I found Alexandria standing in line by the baby grand piano, waiting to sign in. To get her attention, I poked her elbow. She turned around, her eyebrows shot up, and she grinned widely as she hugged me. I was glad she was here, in this unfamiliar place. We sat down and saved seats for our young people with our coats and backpacks. Some DayBreak organizers started moving the wooden chairs in a crescent-like shape with a projector and screen as its center. On the screen was black and yellow lettering (the colors of the DayBreak movement).

The constant hum of chatter became louder as more people entered the meeting room. The young people from Climate Team arrived together. Each took their turns hugging me and Alexandria before taking their seats. Suddenly, a few DayBreak organizers started to sing a song with the following lyrics: “Solid as a rock, rooted like a tree. We are here. Standing tall. In our rightful place.” Immediately the chatter ceased and almost everyone joined in, chanting these words again and again. The young people looked taken aback and were not singing.

Singing was meant to be a unifying moment, a way for everyone in the DayBreak meeting to both capture attention and act as a grounding practice. But what if one does not know the lyrics? Then the practice meant to close distances instead alienates people even further.

Once the song was over, the facilitator (I learned later that the facilitators change every time) thanked everyone for singing and then led us through some breathing exercises meant to further ground everyone and make us feel “present in the moment”. They asked us to think of a thought or memory that fills us with happiness and let it “occupy our space”. I could not tell if the young people next to me were doing these exercises or not.

After this, as an ice breaker, they asked us to hold up via our fingers how involved we have been with DayBreak before this. One finger denoted little to no experience while ten fingers meant you have attended almost every meeting. We were to walk around and find someone so that our numbers added to eleven. For example, I held up two fingers because I was still relatively new to the city's youth climate activist space. I was supposed to find someone who was holding up a nine or higher. The POWER boys sitting with us got up and fully participated in this icebreaker. The women, Alexandria, Kylie, and I, did not. We turned to each other in our seats, smiled, and talked about how our day had been. The point was to socialize with someone you do not know, but in a sea of unfamiliar faces, we were much more comfortable together.

Then, the facilitators requested the audience members to read aloud paragraphs about DayBreak's mission and principles, most likely to welcome and introduce the organization to the new members that just joined that day. After a moment of awkward silence, Marcus volunteered to read the first paragraph and soon more people began volunteering to read aloud. There was also a list of 11 "principles" that DayBreak followed and again, asked people from the audience to read off each one. The third principle struck me as rather non inclusive; "We are Americans..." but not everyone identified as American and that can feel like they are purposefully left out of the conversation when climate change affects every one of us. There were at least 60 to 70 people there. Demographically, it was incredibly white and probably white middle-class; the facilitators were all white people. There was only one African American in the room, and that was Alexandria, who said she definitely did not identify as American. Yet again, an activity meant to unify the group became a point of contention and further distance. I was starting to understand the reasons Climate Team did not praise DayBreak very much. Space, created by white folk, really only worked for white folk.

The next game they made us play is get up and arrange ourselves by birthday (month and day) without speaking. I noticed people were holding up the month number with their fingers. I found some people who were holding up the number 9 and joined them.

One girl put down 9 fingers and held up 2, to indicate that she was born on September 2nd. I stood in front of her and held up a number 1. Another girl, white with curly hair, held up a 1 also and when I nodded we shook hands and stood side by side. At one end of the room stood the Jan 1st and the other end of the room was December 31st. They made us say our birthday out loud to see how well we did. Apart from a few mismatches here and there, we seemed to have gotten it right. The mistakes earned laughs from the crowd. After this, the facilitators asked us to turn to the person next to us and discuss which one of the eleven principles we resonated with the most. One of my partners said he was a senior in high school and lived in Arlington but drove down to be a part of this DayBreak meeting. The other partner was a junior at Northeastern and had lived in Arizona before. We spoke about what excited us and what resonated with us among those eleven principles. I remember pointing out my issue with the wording of the third principle on the list. By their raised eyebrows, I could tell they did not have the same grievance with the third principle but nodded their heads anyway, perhaps to politely agree with what I said. I introduced my research project and both nodded again but did not offer many conversations in return. The rest of the meeting continued with updates about the kinds of work they were planning to do ahead of the presidential primary elections.

Towards the end, Alexandria raised her hand and mentioned that some of the times were not in consideration with high school students who are still in school until 3 pm. After the event, the facilitators came over and spoke with Alexandria, Kylie, and Marcus about this issue and they exchanged numbers. I did not hear most of their conversation but saw they had tight smiles and a solemn expression as they nodded their heads -- perhaps to be polite?

I told one of the other facilitators about my perceived problem with the third principle, highlighting its potential to be exclusionary towards those that did not identify as American. He said it was part of a 'national principles thing' but that he would try to bring it up in the next meeting. It was never resolved and the wording continues to be as such even now.

We quietly left the church hall and headed outside. The silence was a little unsettling. I was used to Climate Team members joking or hugging or laughing with each other at the end of meetings. It seemed like everyone wanted to wait until they got out of earshot of other DayBreak members before speaking. Alexandria mentioned that we could go to debrief the DayBreak meeting in the public library across the street. She and I tried to find a study room where we could all sit and have a conversation. After ten minutes of searching, the young people grew impatient and found an open, common area of the library and asked if we could talk there. The young people sat at the edge of a circular fountain and the adults, including myself, sat on the floor. Immediately, they began relaying their frustrations of the meeting. They spoke about how DayBreak doesn't have any diversity or any things for young people under 18 to do despite having asked multiple times for a DayBreak-Youth group or at least high school-aged breakout sessions from the hub meeting. They believed DayBreak was only concerned with using their membership for diversity purposes. DayBreak does not adequately address black and brown communities and the climate change those communities are currently facing. They were all incredibly annoyed at the lack of anything being done despite constantly providing feedback. One young person lamented, "They just take our numbers, and then when we follow up, nothing gets done."

Fieldnotes, Feb 2020

There is something different here about young people in different environmental organizations. Not all groups are set up in the same manner as POWER to promote critical consciousness. Those that inhabit marginalized identities further develop a critical consciousness because of their interactions. This field note from attending my first DayBreak hub meeting highlights the way in which young people critique groups that claim to have the same focus (climate justice) as their own. The young people did not feel welcomed or included despite DayBreak's use of icebreaker and grounding practices that

were *meant* to bring everything together. The inclusion practices (singing, the birthday game, etc), though unknowingly, created *more* distance from DayBreak members and the youth from POWER's Climate Team. When I or the other POWER members tried to explain why certain practices and phrases excluded the young people, we were met with people who pushed the responsibility to the larger DayBreak organization. Though DayBreak could be considered another youth-oriented climate organization in the New England area, it does not create the same space of community and development that Climate Team members experience with POWER. We should not assume every youth climate/environmental justice group impacts all youth in the same manner. Participation in an activist group may suggest a level of critical awareness and thinking, but Climate Team and POWER creates a space that is inclusive, healing and where people have the ability to grow.

The experience of racial/ethnic exclusion in the DayBreak meeting is a key example of how this critical consciousness operates; the ability to debrief and process the anger/sadness they felt, and to then get to the "root causes" points to the level of sophistication I claim young people have. The processing of emotions this group of young people exhibited also showed that they were comfortable with expressing themselves to each other. Expressions of anger and sadness can make a person feel vulnerable, but talking through those emotions with peers that live through the *same* experiences can be therapeutic.

CHAPTER SIX: REDEFINING RELATIONSHIPS

In the last chapter, I examined how race and racial justice affected the way young people perceive climate change and environmental justice and navigate their way through these movements to construct their sense of self within activism. The focus of this chapter is the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on their understanding of self, relationships with one another, and activism in general. Young people had to redefine their sense of self, belonging, and activism due to being online. Through interviews and observations, the young people had seemingly contradictory feelings about the pandemic. In more obvious ways, the public health restrictions were disruptive to their normal livelihoods and their civic engagement work. In other, more unexpected ways, the pandemic became a cause of increased productivity and, for a brief moment, a mental health break.

Disruption

One of CNN's first reports that mentioned coronavirus was on January 7th, 2020 and was titled: "A mysterious virus is making China (and the rest of Asia) nervous. It's not SARS, so what is it?" (Gan 2020). The article was not front page news and news anchors fleetingly mentioned it before switching to another topic. As I expected, no one at Climate Team meetings mentioned anything about the novel virus in China when these news reports came out. Our work continued as normal; we prepared for the various projects and campaigns lined up for the year, including work with the Green New Deal,

promoting climate change curriculum throughout all high schools, and preparing for the planned worldwide climate strike in April.

Suddenly, we began hearing more and more about the novel coronavirus in the mainstream media as it spread from country to country. By March 2020, cases of the virus exponentially rose within the United States due to the combination of inconsistent communication from the federal government and a widespread lack of adherence to public health safety measures. Almost every non-essential business switched to operating online or not at all.

POWER took about a week off of regular programming to shift to an online platform. Like most businesses and organizations, we did not have any experience conducting an afterschool youth leadership program virtually. Staff had to individually connect with all program members to ensure they had stable homes, enough food to eat, working computers, and reliable WiFi, among other things. The staff themselves had to quickly adapt to Zoom, one of the many online video conferencing platforms that emerged as a result of the pandemic.

I could see that this shift was difficult for the program. I had to adjust and adapt to the new restraints as well. Due to the inherently social nature of community organizing, building connections with other climate organizations, collaborating on specific environmental campaigns, voicing concern about education policy and adultism was best done in-person, face to face. Staff and students alike faced challenges with remaining connected to one another, maintaining new relationships with partner organizations, and

staying motivated in this activist work. They had to rethink and redefine what it meant to be an activist and how this affected their lives.

Did We Really Have Any Time Off?

Out of all my participants, Marcus had the most to say about how the pandemic affected his life and his outlook on activism. At first, he explained how he felt during the early stages of pandemic-related school and activity suspensions.

“I kind of just think that we kind of needed this. For me personally, [it was] kind of a slow down... like a mental health type thing. Sometimes, you know...for me personally, life happens. And like you said, I’m a busy person so days go by and weeks go by, and I’m doing so much that sometimes I can forget about literally valuing what I’m doing, you know?”

And it’s like...when the pandemic happened, it took away everything for everyone because...(pause). Well, not everything, but your way of life just changed so much and you have to appreciate so much stuff because you can’t do it now.”

Marcus initially saw COVID-19 as a time of reflection, appreciation, and a little relaxation. In getting to know climate team members, I knew Marcus to be incredibly dedicated to everything he did. He actively participated in organization meetings and readily volunteered to represent the organization at external events, even on top of his involvement in a plethora of school, sports, and community activities. It was only when the pandemic forcefully shut down his extracurricular activities that he realized how exhausting it was and how much he needed a break. In today’s world, to be a competitive student and increase chances for a “good” future is dependent not only on excellent

grades, but the excellence one achieves in multiple extracurricular programs. Marcus and many within this organization maintain high expectations and stretch themselves thin.

Another participant, Julia, would often tell me about her stresses in managing academically rigorous school work, debate team, POWER work, and other clubs at school. For a moment, having to stop as everyone transitioned to online classes/meetings was a breath of fresh air.

Redefining the Climate Crisis

The COVID-19 pandemic allowed the planet to breathe fresh air as well, quite literally. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, transportation (including cars, trains, busses, ships, and planes) emissions are one of the major sources of greenhouse gasses in the Earth's atmosphere. Due to lockdowns and travel restrictions across the world, greenhouse gas emissions drastically plummeted. Day to day air pollution readings dropped. The dusty orange haze that dominated most of the background of pictures was replaced by clear skies and views of the Himalayas in the distance - a sight many had not seen for years (Bourzac 2020). The young people at POWER were the first to tell me this. At a meeting early on during the pandemic period, a few students commented on these positive snippets of an otherwise bleak news cycle. "At least the Earth is healing", one student sighed (Fieldnotes, April 15th, 2020). It was a comfort to focus on at least some positive aspects during this time.

'Physical' rather than 'social' distancing

Due to the fact that the SARS-COV-2 virus spread easily via respiratory droplets, the United States Center for Disease Control (CDC) and other prominent health agencies recommended all people not living together practice 'social distancing'. Everyone needed to stay at least 6 feet apart, wash their hands frequently, and wear face coverings over their mouth and nose. Necessarily, this meant avoiding social gatherings. Unfortunately, the CDC's recommendations were counterintuitive to what many of us know and how many of us operate. Humans are inherently social. To distance ourselves from others for long periods of time can be detrimental to our health. A recent study by Morraquin and Morgan analyzed the mental health ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic. After polling over 400 adults, they found that stay-at-home orders were associated with depression, generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), insomnia, and acute stress (Morraquin and Morgan, 2020).

While young people (especially those below the age of 18) were considered low in the risk of suffering from severe complications due to COVID-19, they were not immune to the effect closure of schools and disruption of daily routines had on their mental health. At first Marcus was thankful that the pandemic caused his life to pause and slow down, but he quickly went on to describe the negative effects the transition to online had on his mental health.

“So that type of stuff has been really hard and I, I think, although I kind of needed that break and I kind of needed that slow down from my own mental health, it's also really been hard being alone a lot of the time. You're by yourself, and you're in your head a lot because you got nothing

else to do. And I think a lot of people can relate to that statement because we went from, like a high speed life to nothing.”

The break, the relief from having to slow down was only a relief for a short period of time. The disruption to his daily routines, his social patterns, and his overall lifestyle became more of a hindrance on his mental health than a blessing. He further commented:

“And it's like, all right, here's a break and then like April and May and June started coming around wait a second, we're *still* on the break and looks like we're not coming out of it anytime soon. And then it's kind of like, oh crap, now I'm just sitting in my house, doing the same thing every day...don't know what to do.

Marcus also missed the kind of connection, laughter, and interaction that characterized involvement in this organization so well.

“And in POWER that has really taken a toll on us because it's like, for me personally, I value those POWER meetings a lot but not being able to even take the bus home with friends after POWER meetings or stand around [bus] station talking about stupid stuff, it's just gone. It's hard. But it's just like we're missing that type of bond and that type of relationship that you get with people”

He acknowledged the importance of the activism work that Climate Team and POWER continued to do during the pandemic. But to him, and to most of the members of POWER and Climate Team, to be a part of this organization was not just about taking part in activism. Friendship and the family-like atmosphere were equally important.

“Like the stuff I was saying earlier, when we're at POWER we're not just like students here to talk about climate change. We have fun. We have jokes. We do stuff. And that is just as important because it keeps us on

track to get the work done. It's kind of like it's a constant thing that we talk about in POWER. We're not just activists, we also have to be people too. So what's been hard about this is that it's been hard to be people over Zoom. You know, it's like, you can't just have an informal formal conversation over Zoom it's like you're either in the middle of meetings and it's really hard to know when someone's about to talk and you're probably gonna interrupt someone else or you're gonna have an awkward silence for like five minutes because no one knows when to talk.”

From this part of Marcus’ interview, one line stood out to me more than the rest: “*It’s hard to be people over Zoom*”. This suggests there is something particularly not human about conducting all social interaction through an online video platform. As Marcus mentioned, this feeling of disconnect has been one of the hardest things young people have had to deal with because of the pandemic. The young people at POWER were spending almost 10 hours straight looking at a screen due to school and afterschool activities. Before, the major incentive of POWER was seeing and talking to friends. After the switch to Zoom, POWER and Climate Team became yet another screen.

Teenagers, in particular, rely on social relationships with their friends and peers as part of their development and identity formation. The virus required us to be spatially distant, but it was up to the individuals to reform relationships and connections virtually, in a manner that was slightly different from the way young people utilized social media. Posts on popular social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, serve as a way for young people to express a particular part of themselves, their identity, or their emotion. They can control almost every aspect of their post, their appearance, and even who sees the post. On Zoom, they can still control their appearance (by turning off

their camera) but there is an unfamiliar, insecure element to it. Rather than maintaining a certain image or facet of identity and self-expression that social media allows, the use of Zoom was more about maintaining relationships with others. But many of my participants reflected on the tiring, exhaustive nature of Zoom calls.

Redefining Personal Space

Despite the feelings of Zoom exhaustion, there were still spaces for connection and conversation. We adapted icebreakers and games to a virtual setting. We made sure to spend a few minutes before each meeting to ask how people are doing and gauge their energy level. However, it was much easier to disengage from the conversation when everyone was online. During many meetings, most people have their cameras off and are muted. Whenever I facilitated an icebreaker or conversation and saw that most people had black tiles with just their name or a picture, it felt like I was not being heard, though I know that people were off camera for a variety of reasons. It did not reflect disrespect, rather there may have been things happening in the background that they did not wish others to see. In fact, many of the young people very recently advocated against a “camera-on” policy at school. Teachers were calling parents, lowering grades, and taking other punitive actions against those who had their cameras off. Students advocated their position to the Superintendent and heads of high schools that this action must stop. Just like me, teachers may have felt that those blank squares meant inattentive students. In reality, there could be many different reasons why they chose to turn off their camera. Having your camera on meant people were not only looking at you, but getting a glimpse

into your life at home. Some of my team members have told me that they have to simultaneously help with younger siblings' Zoom classes while trying to pay attention to their own. Others do not have a private space from which to attend Zoom meetings and do not want others to see their background. It was an adjustment on both sides. Young people had to figure out new ways to present themselves and teachers/facilitators had to find new ways to make sure young people were staying engaged. Sociologist Erving Goffman's *dramaturgy*, where he likens social interactions to a theater production, may be useful in analysis here. Goffman suggested that, when faced with social interactions, particularly *face-to-face* social interactions, we attempt to control our presentation, act, and mannerism to give off a certain impression (Goffman 1959). To go along with the metaphor, the front stage is where we tend to give a specific kind of delivery -- what we *want* the world to see. The backstage is where we are in preparation for our next venture to the stage, but there is no internal pull to put on a 'performance'. But how does this translate to an online setting, where we *technically*, if the person so chooses, are face-to-face via Zoom, but not in-person. Liam Bullingham and Ana Vasconcelos argue that Goffman's presentation of self is well-suited for online interactions (2013). After analyzing content and interviewing several bloggers, they found that people present specific versions of themselves on social media that may elicit specific responses. For many of the respondents, their 'online' self did not reflect their 'offline' self, but their 'whole' self, suggesting that people actively pick and choose what aspects of themselves to portray to the world. The presentation of self is still controlled -- the blogger or social media influencer can carefully curate pictures, videos, or thoughts that then take time in

‘posting’ or presenting to the world. However, participation on Zoom and other video conferencing platforms occurs in real-time. Young people choose what aspect of themselves they would like to show the world, but there is still an element of unpredictability -- their background environment. Perhaps their home life or even their room was their backstage, where young people were free to be their ‘whole’ selves and it may not be something they want to share.

Re-learning Social Cues

In person, we were all in the same room, often sat in a circular configuration, and could see visual clues on how engaged people were in the conversation or activity. One could observe the subtle nods, the attentive stares, the shrugs of shoulders, the quizzical expressions, and the shifting of bodies. It was easy to read body language and to get a feel for the room environment.

Zoom reduced each person to inhabit a small rectangular tile. The more people on a call, the smaller your tile became. POWER meetings had 40+ people while Climate Team meetings had at least 15 or more. I could see no more than a person’s shoulders up to their head, if they had their camera turned on at all. Though everyone’s faces/tiles were now arranged on your computer screen, it was hard to focus on any one particular person. Thus, I could only rely on what someone said and their tone of voice rather than the additional gestures one uses to consciously or subconsciously communicate. Your ‘Zoom box’ or ‘Zoom tile’ becomes your personal space. That is your presence and you are able to control what parts of you people see and do not see, and when. If you do not want

someone to watch you eat, you can turn off your camera and be even more distanced from the other people on screen. You can change your background so that people do not see your home or whatever space you are often in.

But I experienced an unexpected feeling during one particular Monday POWER session. There were about 45 people on the call, so all our Zoom tiles were reduced to take up no more than a square inch of space on the screen. For one activity, we separated into groups of about five or six young people and one staff member in order to facilitate more meaningful conversation by allowing more time for people to talk. In my small group, two of the students' videos kept lagging. They would attempt to speak, only for their audio or video to freeze in between each word. It sounded incoherently robotic. I offered to FaceTime (a video chat feature on Apple devices) and hold up the phone so that they could speak to the group through *my* computer speaker. Suddenly, it felt like they were in my room, rather than separated by Zoom tiles. They held side conversations with each other and with me, while people continued to talk in the larger POWER meeting, just as we would have had we been in-person. Technically, these two students were still separated from me and from each other by a screen, but something about this interaction was different. Because they were speaking through *my* Zoom tile, it felt like they were in *my* room, with me. We were not as separated as the rest of the students on this call were. The students even commented on how the FaceTime call and Zoom call felt distinct but they too could not quite understand why. Perhaps it was a more personal, less official communication platform--one is used for school and POWER meetings; the other, for quickly conversing with friends and family. Most people have adopted Zoom

as their official video conferencing platform to host meetings. It has become symbolically associated with work, rather than leisure. If we had continued to discuss the small group talking points rather than carry on the side conversations as we did, would the FaceTime experience have felt similar to that of Zoom? Perhaps, because of the new way we must forge and maintain relationships online, we redefine how we present ourselves. The space we inhabit in a Zoom tile becomes a part of this new identity and presentation. Talking through a computer took away the human connection that everyone craved.

We all had to learn how to deal with our emotions and our exhaustion. One particular moment during the summer brought to light the effects of the disconnected feeling people had over Zoom.

An Explosion of Emotion

POWER provided a summer program where young people could come in to work Monday through Thursday from 10am to 4pm. It was a combination of activism work, educational trainings, and fun activities. Climate Team's main campaign over this period was called "Vote Climate". The initiative was to contact eligible voters across the country and discuss voter registration, candidate platforms, and pro-environmental bills/candidates. As a nonprofit organization, we could not endorse any particular candidate, but we could support climate friendly policies and legislation. During the POWER summer program, we organized our strategy for the Vote Climate campaign by researching and discussing environmental policies, candidates, and key states that may help turn the November presidential election in our favor.

During the week in July that POWER was to talk about the Vote Climate campaign and begin calling voters, I was on vacation with my family in a West Virginia state park. The staff member that organized a majority of the Vote Climate campaign work suggested I come to a Tuesday afternoon session where he planned to ask the young people about their climate story and what climate change meant to them. He knew of my research and thought this was a good opportunity to “be a researcher”. The purpose of this activity was to have young people pause and reflect on *why* they did this work; what was the overall goal? They could then use their ‘climate story’ as a way to further motivate people to vote for pro-climate policies.

The staff member told me to get on the Zoom call at 1:30pm, as that was when he would start the climate story workshop. Thus, I woke up late, sat outside the cabin we had rented, and sipped hot chai while talking with my family members. This was one instance where my family and I were disconnected from the internet so none of us were on our phones. The only place we could get service was inside the cabin. Instead, we enjoyed each other's company and the view around us. The lake, surrounded by tall forest-green trees, sparkled as it reflected the sun’s rays. It was peaceful.

1:29pm. The minute my phone connected to the cabin WiFi, I was barraged with texts in our staff group chat - something had happened during the morning training and the young people were not happy. I entered this session caught completely unaware. About two minutes in, I was put into a breakout room with about six other young people. I was very familiar with three of the young people as they were also on the Climate Team. Usually, adult allies take on the role of facilitating and taking notes when we split

into breakout rooms (which happens very often in order to hear more young people's thoughts). I thought I had to lead the breakout room knowing nothing - and I clearly stated this. The three young people who knew me the best started to explain a little about what had happened earlier in the morning. Thankfully, another adult ally came into the breakout room and was able to facilitate conversation. For about 30 minutes, the youth in this breakout room spoke passionately and without prompt or hesitation. Their cameras were turned on, they were speaking fast, and the biting tone of their voice told me they were angry and upset. From what I understood, one youth member made a disparaging remark about police brutality and Black Lives Matter which sparked a debate using the chat function on Zoom. The adult allies facilitating that session then disabled the chat function, thinking that the conversation had veered too far away from what the session was trying to accomplish and the chat discussion became less than productive (so said the two staff members during our debrief at the end of the day). During the afternoon session, the young people made it very clear that they disagreed with disabling the chat and it was equivalent to silencing their voice. This, coupled with the comments against Black Lives Matter and police brutality by the one youth, led to a three hour *non-stop* heated discussion in which most of the POWER members spoke directly to the dissenting young person making those comments. There were raised voices (to the point of yelling) and almost every single person out of a 35 member group had their camera on. Since the end of March, when POWER meetings first started to occur over Zoom, we have struggled to get everyone to turn their camera on. Most meetings, about half the attendees have their

camera on and *stay* on the entire meeting. The situation on Tuesday was the first of its kind. It showed me how much this affected the young people.

At several points during this three hour long call, I heard “This isn’t the POWER I started out in.” My initial research questions sought to address how the organization as a whole affected youth’s perception of climate change activism and that participation in the organization may mitigate the more negative emotions related to climate change. This entire incident, coupled with reviewing the four interviews I had conducted so far, made me think that the mitigation or coping factor has more to do with the relationships young people have cultivated within a climate justice organization. Positive relationships with peers, having fun, interacting with youth from other organizations sounds like a major motivation for doing climate work. When a friend or peer is hurt (as was the case this past week), other members join together and speak up, even if it is against the actions of another member or leadership of the organization they work for.

From the beginning of this internship, I believe the young people saw me as staff, despite my introducing myself as a graduate student researcher. They would ask me for a key card to use the bathroom in the building, assuming that as staff I should have an access card too. Sometimes young people would ask if they could have a bag of chips on the POWER cart or if they could sign up to attend an event. After switching to Zoom, I had to take on more responsibility and lead a small group of youth in promoting climate change curriculum within BPS classrooms. About three weeks ago, one of my team members made a comment along the lines of, “Kamini you should get a raise for this” (I do not remember what the comment was in response to now) and I had to remind them

that I am an unpaid intern. My team members were shocked and admitted to forgetting that I was not *technically* staff. This past Tuesday was one of the first times that I subconsciously took on the feeling of a staff member. People were expressing feelings of hurt and discomfort and a part of it was directed towards the staff members. I have been tip-toeing this line between researcher and staff member for some time now and at that moment, when someone said they were disappointed at staff for not handling the situation in a better manner, I felt like a staff member and I felt shameful.

If we were in person, I had to wonder if this entire incident with George would have culminated in the same kind of heated response. From what I observed when we were in person, staff members are quick and subtle about pulling aside people they needed to talk to in private. Perhaps the young people would not have held back their feelings for so long. In person, we are generally able to understand the feeling of the room by noticing each other's voice tone, facial expression, and body language. While on Zoom, we could only rely on the words being said. The voice tone and facial expressions were hard to read when the internet lagged for some and because everyone occupied one tiny section of the computer.

One of the staff members reflected on this phenomenon of being 'less human' on Zoom by comparing it to how they thought about road rage. Most people are quick to become frustrated when they get cut off or if traffic is too slow. They might curse or yell at the person in front of them from the confines of their car. But if there was no car, and people just stood in front of each other, most would treat each other with more respect.

Face-to-face contact and communication tends to promote mutual cooperation (Drolet and Morris 2000).

Productivity during a Pandemic?

The switch to online was not *only* disruptive for this organization. In this era of Zoom, many people started to understand how productive a work-from-home lifestyle can be. I would not be surprised if the post-pandemic era finds itself with more work-from-home jobs. Many of the participants felt like the work increased and felt busier than ever, partly because transportation time effectively disappeared, allowing people to attend more virtual meetings. Now, instead of maybe making it to one or two meetings a day, with a simple click of a link, we could attend one meeting after another -- all from the comfort of home. Because of the pandemic, young people could make time for other social justice activities. New England Environmental Education Group (NEEEG), the other climate group I was able to observe and recruit participants from, formed *due to* the pandemic. Anthony, the founding member, reflected on the added time the pandemic gave him.

“So it's definitely affected the work in like a negative and positive way. Um, people have, like, people are going through some really hard times. And I think that's definitely something to acknowledge. Positively... um it opened up a lot of time for us to be able to like sit down and actually work on what we want to get done. So for example, we launched [NEEEG] in April, which is in the middle of [the pandemic]. And that's because we had so much time. We have the whole day that we didn't have to go to school, we had the whole day to pretty much just work on it.”

He and a few other high school students thought to capitalize on this chance to focus on a key crisis that has always been a problem in their eyes, but before this year, they did not have as much time to devote to it. Since the start of the pandemic, NEEEG has grown to include over 100 students from across the state. Like Anthony, these young people decided to use their time in support of environmentalism.

Expanded Geographical Boundaries and Connections

The use of Zoom and other video conferencing platforms seemingly erased the geographical distance between youth activist organizations. It presented the opportunity for people to connect, wherever they were, and work on the same environmental issues together. Sarah, another member of NEEEG, reflected on this as a positive aspect of the pandemic. Though she felt the negative impact of being in isolation, unable to connect with members in person, she took comfort in being able to virtually meet with other youth activists from across the New England area.

“Well, I joined [NEEEG] during isolation. So I've always been in isolation with both of those organizations. But I will say what's nice about meeting online with them is that you're meeting online with people from across the New England area because like I never would have met people from like the Western New England area probably because I live in [name of city]. But I can through zoom, which is great. Um, and so that's been it's been really beneficial and it's just been really nice to see how empowered, people are from across [name of state] and to Just really have a sense of community across [name of state].”

They associate forming relationships within the activist community with the pandemic. While in one way, they may have felt more alone, in another, there was a renewed sense of awe at the camaraderie of young activists from different places, all fighting for the same issues. Before the pandemic, these meetings were few and far between, and it was hard to get a group of young activists from the same city together, let alone from across the state and country.

Opportunities and connections with other groups increased for POWER as well. No transportation time meant people could schedule every minute of their day if necessary. Over the summer, the organization met with the Superintendent of schools on a biweekly basis to discuss ongoing projects and her positions or responses to certain issues. We were able to get meetings with the head of security for the public school system when we were discussing school policing. As discussed in a previous chapter, a large part of this was because of the collective social capital POWER, as an organization, held. People *wanted* to meet with these students. The pandemic made it easier to schedule these meetings earlier rather than later.

The Value of Connection

This lack of physical presence and social cues, the reduction of self to a two-inch tile, and the separation of bodies by a computer allowed for increased space of tension, despair, and disillusionment of the importance of activism. As Marcus said, it became hard to be a person over Zoom – perhaps he meant it became difficult to exercise the kind

of empathy people have with one another when they are together in the same room. The young people had to work even harder to maintain or create meaningful, lasting relationships with one another. After in-person meetings, I would see people hang around the hallways or walk towards the bus stop together, chatting and laughing about something that happened at school. After online meetings, everyone would log off right at the end, even though staff would encourage anyone that wanted to talk to stay on the Zoom meeting. It probably felt less personal and less rewarding to talk online, since the whole social experience was now online. However, the few times when people stayed after regularly scheduled program hours, were days in which youth felt the need to stay connected in order to deal with intense emotions. A key example of this was the night of the United States presidential election. The organization itself could not endorse any particular political candidate by name due to constraints placed upon them as a nonprofit group, but the young people, for the 2020 election, had one clear choice in mind. The state of the pandemic, racial injustice, and climate change were all at stake which made it a nerve-wracking night for everyone in the organization. A few staff members, including myself, elected to keep a Zoom room active throughout the entirety of the night so that any young person who wanted could come online and have people with whom to talk. This night lasted well beyond midnight because election results kept changing. Though not everyone from Climate Team was on this call, a majority were and stayed online. We talked about random topics, from the election, to school, to embarrassing moments in our lives. I felt more connected to the young people through this informal, longer than

average meeting, on Zoom. Several weeks after this event, some members still reflected that that night was one of the most memorable for them.

These experiences of being on Zoom suggest that although in-person gatherings are more conducive to forming relationships, young people find a way to build connections when they feel they truly need it.

CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION

As usual, the climate team meeting started with a check-in question. Describe your day or mood in terms of the weather and if you were famous, what would you be famous for? The 'day-as-weather' part of the question was one I had heard before, but the second part was new. People started to answer the question with some humor, citing they would be famous for creating a funny Tik-Tok or music. Then one person replied with a more serious comment: they would be famous for becoming an activist. Soon most people started chiming in with activism and civic engagement in mind.

"I'll be an activist for the black and female community."

"I'll be famous for completely reforming current American politics"

"I'll be famous for some kind of reform."

"I like activism so maybe I'll be famous for activism. Just some where I'm voicing my opinion. Or burning something down."

-Excerpt from Fieldnotes, June 18th, 2020

I continued working with the young people well after the summer. My role grew. I supervised a small subsection of Climate Team on promoting environment and environmental justice education. We also became the 'training' team and led workshops for students, parents, teachers, and school administrators on what activism meant, what it looked like in practice, and how it affected young people. The goal was to show others the importance of understanding youth perspectives and how to best support them as they engaged in activism.

During the first of these workshops, I was a little frantic. I handled the background work -- hosting the Zoom session, admitting people into the meeting, last-minute prep with the team, and sharing my computer screen for the few slides the team put together. The students welcomed those that joined as I played Pharrel's *Happy* in the

background. For this first training, we only had three parents show up. My team immediately messaged me in our group chat: “*Well this is awkward*”. A few minutes later, one member reflected, “*I’ll try my best to make this not awkward*”. It was clear; three people was not quite the turnout they had hoped for.

An hour later, the entire team said this was the best workshop they had ever given. The low turnout helped bring about deeper, more intimate conversation about activism and what it means to be supported in the work. I facilitated a panel discussion where I asked the team pre-planned questions that they could answer as a way of helping parents to understand their perspective on activism. The questions were about balancing activist work and school work, motivations behind activism, and what it meant for them. All my tension and nervousness about this workshop disappeared when the students began to speak. They were passionate and eloquent and commanded everyone’s attention. All cameras were on, and all participants were looking directly at the screen. Even the organization’s main supervisor, who attended but said she was going to do something else simultaneously, stopped her work just to listen. The young people spoke about their personal experiences regarding activism, the strength and power it made them feel, and gave some suggestions to the parents about making them better supporters. In this workshop, we also included a WordCloud generated by input from all the members of this organization (across all three subcommittees).



Figure 4: POWER’s WordCloud on Activism

The figure above is a screenshot I took of the first WordCloud, where the prompt was “*In a few words, what does activism or civic engagement mean to you?*”. As more people input their words, the WordCloud continues to take shape. The size of each word corresponds to the number of people that entered that word. Thus, the larger the word, the more people that used it. In this figure, we can clearly see that, to many of the organization's youth, activism equates with change, power, and equality.

Through this thesis, I have laid out the ways in which participation in a youth-centered social and environmental justice organization has both affected and been affected by intersectional facets of a young person’s identity; most notably gender, age, and race. Alexandria came to realize just how important her identity as a young black woman is to her understanding of climate change as a larger social justice problem. As an

alumni member, she never stops uplifting the voices of the youth, but especially those black female members, because she knows it is not only black people that are silenced, but society constantly silences young black women. Chandler, a young white caucasian man, expressed the importance of addressing environmental inequities that people of color face at larger magnitudes than their white counterparts. While he may have had these thoughts before, his interactions and relationships with the other young people augmented his sense of social justice.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, when relationships were tested and one's sense of activism, and relationships had to be redefined, POWER members prioritized valuing each other and creating the same atmosphere of togetherness they enjoyed while in-person. They welcomed, uplifted, and appreciated all the new students who joined in the middle of the pandemic, despite never having interacted with them in-person. They spent extra hours on Zoom to help each other work through heightened emotions, even though all acknowledge that Zoom is draining. It is this very aspect of community that creates a safe and healthy environment that fosters positive youth development.

chat box, using the heart-emoji reaction on Zoom, or typing “Periodt” -- that signified that they were in full agreement and it was not up for debate.

These young people have faced and continue to face a myriad of challenges, especially in this last year alone. The Trump administration ignited deep divisions within the people of this country to the point where insurrectionists stormed the Capitol building, threatening the safety of Congress members and American democracy itself. Racial injustice is an ongoing, ever-present, and systemic public health issue in this country, but the murders of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and countless other black and brown people deepened the hurt and pushed the Black Lives Matter movement to resurface. Many of the youth I worked with attended these protests. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the major inequities that make people of color much more susceptible to the virus than their white counterparts. These intersectional crises augment one another to loom as one large crisis. It can be debilitating to think about even one at any given time. In a group text chain, one of the members of Climate Team posted a meme created by artist Adam Ellis. It has a cartoon drawing of a man that gets handed sphere after sphere representing ‘regular anxiety’, ‘COVID anxiety’, ‘election anxiety’, ‘worried about global warming’, and ‘seasonal depression’. Across each of the four panels in which this cartoon man is handed these spheres, his eyes widen, perhaps indicative of how overwhelmed he feels juggling these existential crises. While generally used as comedic relief, memes can be a way of expressing a variety of emotions and feelings someone may experience. Within the hour, almost half of the 30 people in the group either “liked” or “loved” this meme using Apple’s react-to-a-message feature

on the iPhone. This suggested that more than half of the young people connected with the message of this image. They may have felt sympathy towards this meme because they too felt as if they had to juggle these various crises in addition to normal everyday worries of teenage adolescence. It framed the constant juggling act young people were stuck performing. Youth balanced themselves on the tightrope that wove together insecurities, responsibilities, families, friends, school work, crushes, and heartbreaks.

On top of this, young people caught and juggled climate change, then racial injustice, then COVID-19, one crisis compounding the other. The pandemic only cast into relief the stark health disparities black and brown communities face; these same disparities will cause those communities to experience further negative health consequences as climate change continues to intensify. These are not worries that can be so easily teased apart. For young people, the threat to life, whether to themselves or their friends, is three-fold because of these crises. One of the recent alumni members of POWER expressed his frustration at the number of issues the young people faced. At the end of our interview, I asked if there was anything more he would like to say or if there was anything else I should have asked about.

Ben: There's also something really special about the amount of dedication that a lot of the young people in POWER have. And I think a lot of it is because the support they get. The young people have a lot of really good support that allows them to care about these issues.

And I don't... I don't mean this to sound wrong, but sometimes I wish some of the kids in POWER --hah more like I'm using the word kids again I catch myself doing this-- *I wish some of the young people in POWER had more time to be young people too.* It sucks that a lot of them have to worry about racism every single day and police violence every single day

and cops in their schools and they have to be concerned about climate change, and sexism and how to grow up as a young man or young woman or whatever else, someone might identify as.

I'm so glad that the people in POWER care about those issues. And I've had that support to fight for the issues they care about, but it's just also like...It's exhausting to even watch some of them put that much effort forward into some of those issues because sometimes I wish they could just get through high school or something.

And it's also one of the things that will always frustrate me.

Ben laments that young people should not have to worry about these varying crises and that this worry takes away from the experience of just “being a young person”. Worrying about these existential crises has become a constant struggle of young people’s everyday lives. Working towards goals, especially with peers/friends, that confront some of these crises may be healing because it allows for otherwise abstract, seemingly hopeless goals to become tangible, manageable points of progress.

Through a positive youth development framework placing importance on youth voice and thus fostering a sense of agency, these young people develop a strong and sustained motivation for activism. Not all forms of climate activism are the same -- this ranges from planning and attending protests (which grabs media attention) to lobbying at state and local levels for climate friendly-policies to educating the public on climate change issues. Each kind and level of engagement is appropriate for a specific purpose at a specific time. This is part of what it means to be strategically active; knowing what type of activism to utilize and when. POWER helps to foster this strategic activism within the young people by expanding critical awareness of structural oppressions (like the

adultism, capitalism, racism young people identified in the ‘root causes’ diagram) that communities face. It is because young people are aware (or are made aware) of these social structures that they are able to act and push against these constraints in the first place. Participation in youth-centered organization reminds young people of the power their voice holds, both through the support of adult staff members as well as the support and encouragement of each other. Treating young people as equal stakeholders, equal partners with assets and capabilities enhances their sense of agency and promotes them to further utilize that agency. While I agree that a PYD approach can be beneficial for young people, I hesitate to focus on how it can prevent certain ‘problem’ behaviors. The motivation for involving young people, for working with young people in these different kinds of activism and civic engagement programs, should come from seeing young people as partners rather than as subjects to be shepherded.

Unless drastic measures to reduce carbon emissions are taken now, there is a high probability that intersecting crises young people face today will take shape in even more complicated ways in the future. Racial and gender disparities that exist now are on track to increase as more people fight for the same resources. This work, while not intended to be generalized to all youth communities or after-school programs, provides some suggestions into the ways other groups may want to structure their programs so as to best support the wellbeing of their students in the face of further existential crises.

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