“Learning About Where You Are”: Pedagogies of Place and Placemaking in an Urban Community Art Studio

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To the Fei family,
and to all the young people who have taught me about community, resilience, and love
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Abstract

In recent decades, the concepts of place and placemaking have become influential for practitioners in numerous fields, including the arts, community development, and education. While pedagogies of place and placemaking are not dominant in contemporary American public schools, they are increasingly popular in community-based organizations and youth arts programs. In these settings, place-based initiatives often seek to improve the well-being of local communities through creative, collaborative responses to local issues. Such engagement with place can support the aims of youth development and liberatory education. Critical pedagogies of place and placemaking can be especially transformative for youth from historically marginalized groups. Yet few studies have examined what these pedagogies look like in practice, and little is known about the perspectives and experiences of youth and adults involved in place-based work.

Responding to these gaps in the literature, I conducted an in-depth qualitative study of an urban community art studio that offers youth programs oriented around place and placemaking. Guided by portraiture, my dissertation draws from participant observation, document analysis, and interviews (n=30) to construct a holistic view of the place-based practices at this research site. I find that place-based work was occurring in deliberate and organic forms, and in multiple arenas at once: young people practiced placemaking through shaping the structures and values of the organization, through dialogue and reflection upon their communities during their classes, and through physically exploring local neighborhoods outside of the art studio. Teaching artists used pedagogies of place to foster a culturally responsive space in which students could discuss their lived experiences, recognize difference, connect with others, and become more observant of their surroundings. My findings also reveal challenges related to power, positionality, and purpose that can arise with
place-based work in urban settings that are deeply shaped by inequality and segregation.

Ultimately, this research highlights the need for critical pedagogies of place and placemaking to be guided by values of inclusion and respect, and to be centered on equitable power-sharing and authentic relationships—both between youth and adults, and between artists and local communities.
Introduction

We urgently need a paradigm shift in our concept of the purposes and practices of education. We need to leave behind the concept of education as a passport to more money and higher status in the future and replace it with a concept of education as an ongoing process that enlists the tremendous energies and creativity of schoolchildren in rebuilding and respiriting our communities and our cities now, in the present.

- Grace Lee Boggs

For as long as I can remember, cities have captured my attention, brought issues of inequality and injustice into my view, and spurred my imagination about alternative possibilities for the world in which we live. I was born and raised in Queens, New York, and have worked with youth in urban public schools and community-based settings for over ten years. I feel most at home when I am on subways, looking out of the windows of a train car and trying to hold on to the snapshots of neighborhood life speeding past my view. I am most hopeful when I am sharing space with young people—emerging educators, artists, activists, organizers, leaders, and visionaries who are boldly speaking their truths and taking actions to “crea[t] themselves and the worlds they inhabit” (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006, p. 5). As an educator and a researcher, I aim to support our young people in cities—especially those experiencing marginalization and oppression—and to partner with them towards shared visions for a more just world.

Today’s cities are sites through which oppression operates, and they are also places where resistance and transformation can occur (Sutton & Kemp, 2011). Given current trends of urbanization, one of the most pressing challenges of the 21st century is the work of transforming cities into more equitable and sustainable places for people to inhabit. In the U.S., approximately 81% of people live in urban areas, and 11 million of these urban residents are adolescents (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2014). Young people are capable social actors, who can contribute to the transformation of urban
spaces—their neighborhoods, schools, after-school programs, parks, and more—and make positive impact on their local surroundings. For educators in cities, a number of questions arise: In a time when trends of urbanization, globalization, and development are exacerbating divides between rich and poor, threatening ecosystems, posing health risks, and perpetuating social inequity, how do we help our young people to thrive? How can adults and youth work together to learn from and invest in local communities? What might it look like to approach our cities as resources for teaching, learning, and liberation?

These questions have informed my work as an educational practitioner, particularly in my teaching experiences in urban community-based settings. When I was directing and teaching within an academic enrichment program in the Bronx, I created opportunities for students to explore stories of local places and people through film and literature, as well as through arts and cultural experiences in the contemporary city. Later on, in my work as a teaching artist in different neighborhoods in New York City, I led photography-based projects inspired by local surroundings. Over the last years in the Greater Boston area, I have continued to experiment with place-based approaches to education, often integrating the arts as a central part of this practice. From the research literature and from my own experiences in the field, I have seen how a connection to place is a common feature of many community-based educational settings, and how place-based initiatives are becoming increasingly popular—especially in programs oriented towards the arts and activism. Yet mainstream educational research tends to focus more on schools than on community-based settings for education, and relatively little attention has been paid to pedagogies of place that take shape in urban contexts. Research is needed in order to better support educators, youth, and communities in this field of work.
These personal and intellectual preoccupations led me to Urbano Project—a Boston community art studio whose mission involves working with local youth to create art for social change. Since 2009, Urbano has offered academic year and summer programs that bring young people together from different neighborhoods across the Boston area, and that foster collaboration between youth and adults on a range of creative projects that take place either inside the studio or outside in public space. In recent years, like many other institutions and community-based organizations across the U.S., Urbano’s work has been informed by creative placemaking (Markusen & Gadwa, 2010)—an approach to community development that leverages arts and culture as means to “strengthen the social, physical, and economic fabric of communities” (Axel-Lute, 2017). At Urbano, placemaking fits in naturally with the pedagogies of place that have been practiced by teaching artists at the organization for years. Existing literature has shown that placemaking can be tool for social justice, especially for historically marginalized and oppressed groups whose lands, neighborhoods, and homes have been systematically destroyed or taken from them (e.g. Hunter et al, 2016; Lipsitz, 2017; Sutton & Kemp, 2011). Critical forms of placemaking have the potential to build communities that foster solidarity, cultivate joy, nurture democracy, and empower youth as agents of change. Little has been written, however, about how pedagogies of place and placemaking play a role in the ecosystem of young people’s lives in contemporary cities, and how they can contribute to processes of transformation and liberation more broadly. Guided by the methodology of portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997)—the methodology guiding my inquiry—as it allows for more contextual detail to be incorporated into writing, helping to illuminate the phenomena that is the focus of study.

In this research, I use the real name of the research site (i.e. the organization), as well as the neighborhoods and city in which it is embedded. This decision was made through discussions with staff at the organization, as well as with faculty members at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Urbano staff members expressed that using the real name of their organization would serve as a model of transparency and an example of the teaching and learning orientation of the place. In addition, the usage of real names is consistent with the conventions of portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997)—the methodology guiding my inquiry—as it allows for more contextual detail to be incorporated into writing, helping to illuminate the phenomena that is the focus of study.
Davis, 1997), this dissertation seeks to address gaps in our understandings of these practices by attending closely to the perspectives and experiences of youth and adult participants in place-based programs at Urbano.

It has been a privilege for me to witness and participate in many creative actions facilitated by Urbano artists over the last years. I have seen young people facilitating dialogue about issues of Othering, and exhibiting photographs that directly challenge stereotypes of Black youth as criminal and dangerous. I have jumped in alongside community members as students led drumming activities, meditation exercises, and an open mic at an event in a local park. I have listened to the many ways in which these artists spoke—through their words, their images, their song, their poetry, their laughter, tears, shouts, and silences. In the pages that follow, I strive to raise up the voices of the youth and adults who were generous enough to share their stories, their cares and concerns, their questions with me over the course of this research project. My hope is that by building this platform for their voices to potentially be heard by many, we can join together in thinking critically and creatively about education for transformation in cities.

**The Map of this Exploration**

Chapter 1 presents a discussion of the theoretical and empirical literature that offers frameworks for understanding the work at Urbano. In this chapter, I highlight some of the issues confronting young people and communities in cities today, and describe existing models for supporting youth development in cities. I then review the literature on pedagogies of place and placemaking, examining both critical and non-critical approaches to integrating place into teaching and learning processes with diverse youth. Finally, I discuss existing research on community-based arts programs and their relationship to young people’s learning and development; I then introduce the research questions that frame my study of
Chapter 2 follows with a detailed discussion of my research design and methodology. I discuss how this study is rooted in the phenomenological paradigm, critical place inquiry, and scholarship on youth voice. I explain the methodology of portraiture, provide background on my research context, describe my methods of data collection and analysis, and address validity. I also reflect on issues of power, reciprocity, and partnership in this research project—which extended beyond my dissertation study and involved working with Urbano as a teaching artist starting in the fall of 2017.

Chapter 3 is called “Tracing Origins: Foundations of Placemaking at Urbano.” Here I take a deeper dive into the various dimensions of Urbano as a context for pedagogies of place and placemaking. I explore the roots of Urbano in the personal and professional histories of its founder, and the meanings that current staff and teaching artists attach to the place. I demonstrate how Urbano stands as an example of placemaking based on values held by these adults, and conceptualize it as an attempt to shift the oppressive geographies of schools and cities, especially as they are experienced by marginalized groups.

Chapter 4, called “We Need Each Other”: Youth Placemaking in an Intergenerational Space,” explores the placemaking efforts of long-time youth participants who have taken on leadership roles at Urbano. This portrait discusses the histories that have informed these individuals’ work, the meaning and value they attach to their participation in Urbano, and the reasons why they continue to come back. Through examination of their process of place-making within the organization of Urbano, I demonstrate how their ongoing work at Urbano is driven by a love for their relationships and community, and an investment in strengthening and sustaining a place that has had positive impact on their lives. I also highlight the roles that different adults at the organization have played in shaping
their experiences there, and tensions points that adults and youth encountered through their work.

Chapter 5, called “Put Me On Your Map”: Pedagogies of Place in a Culturally Responsive Educational Setting,” describes how Urbano teaching artists used tools of place-based pedagogy alongside other practices to create a culturally responsive space for racially, ethnically, socioeconomically, and geographically diverse youth in their classes. I explore how participants made sense of and experienced activities such as mapping, and how their ways-of-seeing and ways-of-being in their home neighborhoods shifted or remained the same during their time in the Urbano summer program. I show how teaching artists used place-based pedagogy to connect with their students’ identities, cultures, and lived experiences—thus providing a strong foundation for young people’s engagement in their learning and their relationships at Urbano.

Chapter 6, called “Real People, Real Stories, Real Lives: Explorations Beyond the Art Studio,” explores how Urbano participants made sense of and experienced class activities and projects that took place outside of the walls of Urbano. I examine how staff and teaching artists attached meaning to being “outside,” and I describe how the young people made sense of their experiences going outdoors and exploring different neighborhoods through their time at Urbano. I raise up the questions and concerns that long-time Urbano participants had with regard to the organization’s engagement with local communities, attending to how these individuals desired more meaningful, authentic, and purposeful forms of engagement, based on mutually beneficial relationships with local people and places.

I conclude this dissertation with a reflection upon the key insights and lessons learned from my research at Urbano. I revisit the connections between pedagogies of place
and placemaking, and culturally responsive and critical approaches to education and youth development; I further discuss the possibilities and tensions/challenges of doing this work with young people in a diverse urban context. Finally, I discuss directions for future research.
I. Youth Development, Place, and the Arts in Education: A Literature Review

During adolescence, young people are actively exploring and interpreting their surroundings, navigating questions of identity and belonging, and developing their worldviews. Adults can play an important role in shaping how adolescents make sense of their everyday experiences, and promoting their learning and well-being (e.g. Nakkula & Ravitch, 1998; Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006). In order to effectively support young people at this developmental stage, it is especially important for adults to understand young people’s relationships to the various developmental contexts in their lives (e.g. Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Ginwright & James, 2002; Nakkula & Ravitch, 1998). Research in the disciplines of psychology and geography suggests that children and youth often understand and interact with environments such as their neighborhoods in ways that are different from adults (e.g. Bass & Lambert, 2004; Holloway & Valentine, 2004). In this body of literature,
scholars often use the concept of place² to illuminate the physical, symbolic, and discursive dimensions of any context. Recent decades of theoretical and empirical research have shown that place is influential in how young people understand the workings of society and imagine their own possibilities within it (e.g. Cahill, 2000; Fei, 2015; Kato, 2011; Prince, 2014; Raffo, 2011; Rubin, Hayes, & Benson, 2009; Shedd, 2015). There are rich opportunities to support youth development through attention to the role of place in young people’s lives; however, the concept of place typically receives little to no attention within dominant models of schooling and the mainstream discourse around education.

Calls to integrate local place into school curriculum can be traced back to the writings of the educational philosopher John Dewey (1938), who argued that education should be made relevant to the everyday lives and local neighborhoods of students. A “pedagogy of placelessness” (Kitchens, 2009) is considered by some scholars to be a long-standing issue in schools—tied, in part, to an “ethos of placelessness” (Ball & Lai, 2006, p. 264) in society at large. As public schools increasingly emphasize the preparation of students for competition in the global economy, and school curriculum becomes increasingly standardized, there is reason to be concerned about a widespread disconnection of schools from local people, places, and knowledge (e.g. Cochran-Smith & Lyle, 1999; Sanchez, 2011). Moreover, as forces of globalization and neoliberalism grow more powerful—with potential impacts are “economically devastating, culturally homogenizing, and ecologically destructive to local communities” (Gruenewald & Smith, 2008, p. xiii-xiv)—it is time for educational researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to pay serious attention to these issues affecting

² Here I use a definition of place advanced by the sociologist Thomas Gieryn (2000): place is a geographic location of any scale, a material form that is can be either natural or artificial, and a site that is invested with meaning and value—“flexible in the hands of different people or cultures, malleable over time, and inevitably contested” (Gieryn, 2000, p. 465).
young people’s lives. Some proponents of place-based education (PBE)—a paradigm of education closely related to community-based education, democratic and progressive education, experiential learning, and critical pedagogy—view this work as part of a broader movement to “reclaim the local” in order to enrich students’ learning and development, enhance the well-being of local environments and communities, and build local resistance to systems of oppression in society at large (e.g. Gruenewald & Smith, 2008).

While PBE exists in the margins of public school education in the U.S. today, community-based organizations provide a natural site for adults and youth to engage closely with place. In my own experience working with youth in community-based settings, I have seen pedagogies of place and placemaking flourish in arts programs in particular. In alignment with the goals of PBE, art spaces often facilitate rich opportunities for youth to reflect upon their identities and experiences, dialogue on local issues, and create art inspired by and responsive to local communities and cultures (e.g. Beyerbach & Davis, 2011; Dewhurst, 2014; Ginwright, Noguera, & Cammarota, 2006; Graham, 2007; Heath & McLaughlin, 1993; Kuttner, 2015). Moreover, these programs tap into the capacity of the arts to develop young people’s imagination of alternative possibilities for their selves and their local worlds (Greene, 1995)—a key set of skills needed for personal and social transformation (Freire, 1970).

In the last decade, many community-based artists have become more explicitly engaged in ideas, processes, and practices related to place. In part, this has been spurred by the increasing popularity of creative placemaking—an approach to planning and design in which “partners from public, private, non-profit, and community sectors strategically shape the physical and social character of a neighborhood, town, city, or region around arts and cultural activities” (Markusen & Gadwa, 2010). With such place-based initiatives gaining
traction across country, there is an increasing need for research on the possibilities of education at the intersections of arts and community development. This knowledge can inform the practice of those who work with young people in art programs and community-based educational spaces, as well as those who work in traditional classroom settings.

Although pedagogies of place and placemaking have been practiced in rural, suburban, and urban contexts, there is a paucity of research on what these practices look like in a diverse urban setting. Much of the scholarship on PBE is grounded in traditions of environmental education, often in rural contexts (Smith & Sobel, 2010), and there is a need for more robust theoretical and empirical literature on the usage of these pedagogies with communities of color in cities. Contemporary urban contexts provide a window into the promises of our increasingly pluralistic society, as well as the severity of place-based inequities and global issues of climate change, poverty, food insecurity, and disparities between rich and poor (Russ & Krasny, 2017). Young people in cities—especially our youth of color in low-income neighborhoods—are often navigating adolescence without adequate supports to confront the racism, sexism, homophobia, police abuse, community violence, and under-resourced schools that shape their lived experience (Garbarino, 1995; Ginwright & James, 2002; Sutton & Kemp, 2011). While the needs and interests of youth in cities can vary widely, spanning the full spectrum of class- and identity-based privilege in society, all of these young people are coming of age in a time defined by an unprecedented scale of movement, rising levels of inequality, and the persistence of social oppressions. Drawing from Sutton and Kemp’s (2011) scholarship on pedagogies of place and placemaking as a means for youth development and for liberation, my research explores how adults and youth take up these tools in an urban community-based setting.
The present study responds to significant gaps in knowledge in the following areas:
a) youth meaning-making and experience in place-based programs; b) pedagogical processes and practices that are responsive to diverse urban contexts; c) the integration of pedagogies of place and placemaking with practices of community art and contemporary art—fields that share some of their orientation towards the value of culture and context. To build knowledge in these areas, my dissertation provides a detailed description of the pedagogies of place and placemaking that define one urban community arts setting, and an in-depth analysis of the perspectives and experiences of the staff, teaching artists, and students involved. Through listening closely to the voices of participants, I work to reveal the possibilities and challenges inherent in place-based work, and enable new understandings of how educators can support young people and their local communities in cities today.

In this chapter, I provide the conceptual framework for this research. First, I examine existing literature on approaches to supporting youth in urban community-based settings. Next, I review the literature on pedagogies of place and placemaking, with specific attention to their relevance to young people from marginalized groups in cities. I then turn to an examination of the fields of creative placemaking, youth arts, and socially engaged art—three intersecting practices that define the youth programs at the urban community art studio where I completed my dissertation research. Finally, I introduce the questions that guided my portraiture study at Urbano.

Supporting Youth Development in Urban Community-Based Settings

Generally, the term “youth development” refers to a model for supporting adolescents to achieve their full potential, through nurturing their competencies in physical, intellectual, social, emotional, ethical, and civic domains. Increasingly, scholars have called for research and practice that take a socio-ecological approach to supporting youth
development, particularly for youth who experience multiple forms of marginalization and oppression in the U.S. (e.g. Deutsch, 2008; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Ginwright & James, 2002; Iwasaki, 2016; National Research Council, 2002; Shinn & Yoshikawa, 2008). This approach is guided by Urie Bronfenbrenner’s (1977) ecological systems theory, which states that an individual’s development occurs through constant and reciprocal interactions with their environments. According to Bronfenbrenner (1977), the settings that young people encounter on a routine basis—their homes, schools, programs, neighborhoods—play a key role in shaping their developmental trajectories and outcomes. These environments exist as a nested arrangement, consisting of a microsystem (the immediate settings in which we spend time, such as the home, the school, or the park), mesosystem (the interactions between settings in our microsystem, such as the interaction between a peer group at school and a peer group at a recreational center), exosystem (the interactions of social structures that influence our microsystem, such as the relationship between our school and various government agencies), and the macrosystem (the broader culture and economic, social, educational, legal, and political systems that influence all the environments in which we are embedded). The socio-ecological approach to youth development (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Ginwright & James, 2002) responds to two issues in the mainstream literature from earlier decades: 1) a focus on white, middle-class youth; and 2) a tendency to emphasize individual factors and neglect the contextual factors shaping young people’s lives.

When applied to understanding the lives of youth of color in cities, a socio-ecological lens can bring to light the connection between the issues facing these youth, and the macro-level forces that produce the conditions of their lives. For example, economic changes over the last years have perpetuated disinvestment in low-income urban neighborhoods, leaving few job opportunities for people without a high school diploma. Schools and youth
programs in African American and Latinx working-class neighborhoods are closing down, and lower-income residents are being pushed out of the places they call home (e.g. Cahill, 2006; Ginwright & James, 2002; Lipsitz, 2017; Sutton & Kemp, 2011). Forces of racism, globalization, and settler colonialism have also combined to create segregated environments that limit resources available to poor people, people of color, and Indigenous peoples while establishing conditions that accumulate advantages for whites (Harvey, 2004; Lipsitz, 2011, 2017; Tuck & McKenzie, 2014; Weis & Fine, 2012). As researchers have shown, social inequalities have become spatially inscribed in today’s cities (Sampson, 2011; Small, 2004), and young people are learning volumes about the inequities and injustices facing their communities through their daily experiences navigating urban space (e.g. Cahill, 2006; Rubin, Hayes, & Benson, 2009; Shedd, 2015).

Responding to the oppressive conditions of their lives, marginalized groups have formed adaptive cultures (Garcia-Coll et al., 1996) that help sustain them through these hardships (e.g. Hunter et al., 2016; Sampson & Gifford, 2010). The contributions that family, community, and neighborhood bring to the healthy development of youth of color merit careful and continued scholarly attention (Tuck, 2009; Yosso, 2005), particularly given the histories of research that have taken a deficit-oriented approach to these young people and their settings. Contrary to popular opinion and narratives in the mainstream media, segregated and poor neighborhoods can still offer crucial forms of social support for young residents, particularly when individuals have a strong sense of belonging to the community (Barnes, 1991). Relationships cultivated within these settings can support young people in thinking critically about the social world, and developing positive racial identities—an important source of protection from racism (Tatum, 1987; Garcia-Coll et al., 2002). Garcia-Coll and colleagues (1996) thus argue that settings must be seen both on the basis of their
“external resources” (e.g. housing, schools, health care) and their “internal resources” (e.g. social support, cultural norms, histories), as all of these factors contribute to a young person’s development. By recognizing and nurturing these resources, urban public schools and community-based organizations can make significant and sustainable improvements in the conditions of young people’s lives.

Community-based organizations in particular can often occupy a unique and important position within the ecology of a young person’s life, acting as a bridge between the worlds of home, neighborhood, and school. Free from many of the structural constraints faced by teachers in schools, educators in community-based settings often invent creative curricular and pedagogical tools that are highly responsive to the young people they serve and contexts in which they work (e.g. Watson, 2012). In fact, many out-of-school time (OST) educators are critical of the “failed system” of schooling, and seek to “undo the damage that school had done to youth” (Hirsch, 2005, p. 7). Accordingly, OST programs and community-based educational settings can become a “thirdspace” (Soja, 1996)—a discursive and social space defined by dynamism and imagination, where the dominant system can be critically examined and new practices of education can emerge (Kirshner & Jefferson, 2015). As a counterpart to public schools that are severely overcrowded and under-funded—spaces that have been conceptualized as “sites of suffering” for Black and brown youth (Dumas, 2014)—OST programs can function as levers to support educational equity and access, particularly in neighborhoods with concentrated poverty (Hirsch, 2005; Kirshner & Pozzoboni, 2011). Baldridge and colleagues (2017) have written that especially for youth in marginalized communities of color, community-based educational spaces have historically “offered respite, healing, and tools that help strengthen academic performance, and cultivate strong social, cultural, and political identities” (p. 396).
Community-based organizations typically follow principles of positive youth development (e.g. Benson & Saito, 2000; Pittman, 1992; Lerner, 2002, 2004, 2005; Shinn & Yoshikawa, 2008)—building upon young people’s existing strengths, and supporting them to discover and pursue their unique “passions and sparks” (Scales, 2017). Among researchers and practitioners (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Deutsch, 2008; Jones & Deutsch, 2013; Lerner, 2004; Scales, Benson, Rochlkepartain, 2011), there is widespread consensus around the following features of positive developmental contexts for adolescents:

- caring and supportive relationships;
- opportunities to explore identity and sense of belonging;
- opportunities to take on leadership roles and increasing levels of responsibility;
- environments that provide physical and psychological safety;
- experiences that facilitate skill-building and encourage positive risk-taking.

Multiple frameworks exist to identify key outcome areas for youth, such as the “Five C’s”: competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring (Lerner et al., 2005). Scholars have also emphasized the importance of “contributions” as another outcome, given evidence of young people’s desires to contribute to communities and their need to experience a sense of “mattering” (e.g. Lerner et al., 2005; Scales, 2017).

Building upon these frameworks, social justice youth development (SJYD) seeks to “facilitate and enhance young people’s awareness of their personal potential, community responsibility, and broader humanity” (Cammarota, 2011, p. 828). Practitioners are increasingly taking up this approach in urban youth programs, especially in communities of color experiencing economic disinvestment and racial segregation (Checkoway, 2011). SJYD positions young people as partners in their own development, and agents of change in society at large; the model criticizes the lack of attention to systems of oppression in research.
and practice in positive youth development, arguing that in order to support youth of color in urban contexts, it is essential to address the impacts of political, economic, and social forces on young people’s lives (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Ginwright & James, 2002). Thus, in addition to targeting the outcomes of positive youth development, SJYD focuses on cultivating young people’s critical consciousness (Freire, 1993): their ability to critically analyze oppressive conditions, to think imaginatively about alternative possibilities for their social worlds, and to take action to address the root causes of local issues. Proponents of SJYD theorize that this approach to working with youth can facilitate processes of healing from oppression, and lead to greater empathy for others both within and beyond the local setting. Julio Cammarota (2011) writes, “Once a young person realizes his or her efficacy and ability to transform his or her own and others’ experiences for the better, he or she grows intellectually and acquires the confidence to handle a variety of challenges, including higher education, community activism, and organizational leadership” (p. 829). Key principles of SJYD (Cammarota, 2011; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Ginwright & James, 2002) are as follows:

- making identity central;
- encouraging collective action;
- analyzing power;
- engaging youth cultures;
- expanding consciousness of self, community, and the world.

Through SJYD principles of working with youth, community-based organizations seek to promote the learning, well-being, and civic engagement of young people while at the same time transforming the local contexts shaping their development (Kirshner, 2007).
Importantly, engagement is a key factor in young people’s learning and development through OST programs: without the cognitive, behavioral, and emotional investment of youth participants, such programs have little positive impact. More research is needed in order to better understand what engages older adolescents in OST settings, as this age group has received less attention in existing literature on OST programs than children and early adolescents. Existing literature suggests that one feature of community-based youth programs that is compelling for adolescents of color is their very embeddedness in the home communities of participating youth (Deschenes et al., 2010; Terzian, Giesen, Mbwana, 2009). Indeed, many OST programs are “place-based” and “tangibly local, operating within and through the neighborhoods, institutions, and social relationships that make up the everyday realities of youth” (McLaughlin & Irby, 1994, p.3). In addition, these programs tend to tap into young people’s desire to contribute positively to their local communities: in these settings, young people can be observed participating passionately in community affairs, gaining political knowledge and community organizing, and engaging civically in creative ways that are meaningful and authentic to them (e.g. Checkoway, 2011; Ginwright & Kirshner, 2011). For adolescents in cities, and for low-income youth of color in particular, these forms of engagement with local peoples and places can enhance a sense of agency, promote healing, and foster hope (Ginwright, 2015; McLaughlin & Irby, 1994). At a time when many public schools have de-emphasized their civic mission, young people may be increasingly attracted to learning in community-based settings that offer an abundance of opportunities for civic participation and local activism (Checkoway, 2011; Ginwright & Kirshner, 2011).

My research seeks to contribute to knowledge in this area through a deep exploration of young people’s participation in a community-based organization that is “place-based” and
“tangibly local.” Research in this area can reveal gaps in supports and opportunities left by schools and other institutions in young people’s lives, while also generating insight into promising forms of learning and collaboration between youth, adults, and local communities.

To inform this inquiry, I turn to the literature on pedagogies of place and placemaking, examining the theories that help illuminate what is happening in these programs, and identifying the possibilities and challenges that arise in this approach to supporting youth and communities.

**The Paradigm of Place-Based Education**

Relationships to place carry implications for young people’s self-esteem (Hay, 1998; Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996), sense of belonging (Altman & Low, 1992), and sense of agency (Proshansky et al., 1983; Raffo, 2011). In addition, research has shown that young people’s meaning-making related to place influences their civic identity development (Rubin, Hayes, & Benson, 2009), predicts their level of local community participation (Small, 2004), and informs their ideas of social difference (Fei, 2015; Kato, 2011; Leonard, 2008). Yet in the U.S., the growing emphasis on standardization, testing, and accountability can constrain the time and effort that teachers can invest into connecting with local place, especially in urban public schools. When schooling “dismisses the centrality of place in human experience, culture, and society” (Cole, 2010, p. 13), adults may be missing a critical opportunity to understand and support the students in their classrooms.

Drawing from theories of progressive education and critical pedagogy—as well as foundations in environmental education, experiential learning, service learning, and project-based learning—*place-based education* (PBE) is an approach to education that centers the local community and environment as a resource for students’ learning, development, and well-being. David A. Gruenewald and Gregory A. Smith (2008), two scholars and advocates of
PBE, have written that PBE is “not a new phenomenon”—but one that is having a rebirth given the social and ecological issues confronting contemporary society. By encouraging students to become civically engaged and invested in local concerns, PBE aims to cultivate the skills and dispositions needed to “regenerate and sustain communities” (Gruenewald & Smith, 2008, p. xvi), thus fostering a more just and ecologically sustainable society (Gruenewald & Smith, 2008; Smith & Sobel, 2010). Rather than being a prescribed curriculum or strictly defined set of pedagogical practices, PBE is best understood as an educational philosophy defined by “a mindset, a paradigm shift, a way of thinking” about the centrality of community and the value of local learning (Smith & Sobel, 2010, p. 23).

Advocates of PBE contend that by engaging local surroundings as resources for learning, schools could improve students’ academic outcomes—meeting and exceeding curriculum standards through providing opportunities for inquiry-based, self-directed, experiential learning (Demarest, 2014; Smith & Sobel, 2010). According to Sobel (2004), students who experience PBE gain skills in collaboration, problem-solving, and critical thinking, in addition to strengthening their sense of voice and their sense of connection to local people and places. In positioning students as place-makers and critical, creative citizens, PBE aligns well with models of social justice youth development that view young people as powerful social actors and agents of change in society.

Because PBE is intended to be highly responsive to local needs and interests, the activities and learning experiences that fit within this paradigm of education can vary widely. What PBE looks like in a particular context often depends on the goals of the students and educators, the culture and the norms of the learning environment, and the geographical context of the community. In an English classroom in rural Appalachia, for instance, students have reflected upon and written about their own sense of place through engaging
with the songs and poetry of local artists and authors (Azano, 2011). In a New York City
afterschool program, students have partnered with the Lower East Side Tenement Museum
to learn about the histories of labor strikes and community organizing in the local area
(Russell-Ciardi, 2006). At Urbano—the Boston community art studio that is the focus of my
dissertation—examples of place-based projects are many: youth artists have interviewed local
business owners and created multimedia installations based on their interviewees’
experiences and visions for the future of their neighborhood; they have organized public
events where they facilitate community-building activities and participatory performances;
they once painted a mural depicting a local resident as the Virgen de Guadalupe, a mother
tending lovingly to her children. These examples are testament to the wide range of activities
that can fall under the umbrella of “place-based education” (e.g. Gruenewald & Smith, 2008;
pedagogy” (e.g. Ball & Lai, 2006), or “pedagogies of place” (Jayananthanan, 2009; Ruitenbergen,
2005). In this dissertation, I use the term “pedagogies of place” to refer to the full range of
educational philosophies and methods that carry an explicit emphasis on the concept of
place. Pedagogies of place are not necessarily critical in nature, though there is a body of
literature that testifies to the importance of a critical orientation. Below, I briefly review
some key pieces within this area of scholarship.

Although much of the scholarship on PBE is based in rural settings, a small body of
literature has explored the potential of a place-based approach specifically in urban contexts
(Gruenewald, 2003a; Haymes, 1995). In his theoretical work on a “critical pedagogy of
place,” Gruenewald (2003a) emphasizes the natural alignment between PBE and critical
pedagogy, given that both approaches to education are based in the importance of students’
engagement with their own “situationality” (Freire, 1970) in the world. Gruenewald (2003a)
points out that the concept of place is actually embedded in the philosophy of critical pedagogy, as McLaren and Giroux (1990) have written: “A critical pedagogy must be a pedagogy of place, that is, it must address the specificities of the experiences, problems, languages, and histories that communities rely upon to construct a narrative of collective identity and possible transformation” (p. 263). Gruenewald (2003a) proposes that through a critical pedagogy of place, students in urban contexts can learn that the conditions in which they live are neither natural nor inevitable, that different decisions and sets of social relations can lead to alternative possibilities for their places, and that communities have the power to bring these realities about. In this way, students can more fully realize their own humanity and their rights to self-determination, and actively develop critical consciousness around the impacts of oppression on their communities as well as the ecological environments in which they live.

Gruenewald’s (2003a) conceptualization of a critical pedagogy of place is directly influenced by the work of Stephen Haymes (1995), a critical education theorist who has written about the significance of place-based pedagogy in Black urban communities. In Race, Culture, and the City: A Pedagogy for Black Urban Struggle, Stephen Haymes (1995) calls for pedagogies that: a) deconstruct white supremacist ideologies that pathologize and destroy Black spaces in the city; and b) create new meanings for marginalized identities and “spaces of self-actualization” (p. 138). To resist the racialized meanings attached to urban space in white mainstream culture, Haymes (1995) proposes “constructing alternative images and representations of place” (p. 9) that emerge from Black popular culture, and that center the voices, memories, and imagination of Black communities. According to Haymes (1995), place-based pedagogies should enact and explore bell hooks’ (1990) notion of “homeplaces”—caring and humanizing sites of belonging where “all black people could be
subjects, not objects, where we could be affirmed in our minds and hearts despite poverty, hardship, and deprivation, where we could restore to ourselves dignity denied us on the outside in the public world” (hooks, 1990, p. 42). In Black communities, historical and contemporary practices of creating homeplaces highlight the role of place and community in resistance against oppression. Acts of creating homeplaces—in Black communities and in other marginalized and oppressed groups—have thus been conceptualized by various scholars as processes of placemaking (Hunter et al., 2016), which I discuss further in the following section.

In his research on an elementary school classroom in Harlem, Sanchez (2011) draws upon the scholarship of Haymes (1995), and uses placemaking as a framework for analyzing how a teacher and her students reclaimed their learning space as one based in children’s families, community relationships, neighborhoods, and cultural histories. Supported by a school culture that valued collectivism and community, the group conducted research projects on the Harlem Renaissance and engaged in actions that included collaborating with local community members to organize the opening for a Langston Hughes museum in their neighborhood. Students also investigated histories of naming schools and museums after African-American figures, which led them to uncover legacies they were a part of that transcended time and place. Sanchez (2011) demonstrates how this classroom ultimately reveals that “[p]lacemaking is tied to identity and relationships that encompass and move beyond a particular, physical place” (p. 339). Because place is inherently tied to culture and history, pedagogies of place have the potential to connect deeply with students’ sense of identity and community, and nurture their sense of belonging to a broader “imagined community” (Gupta & Ferguson, 1992; Sanchez, 2011) that is translocal in nature. In this sense, pedagogies of place and placemaking—while they typically begin focused on one local
place—can function to illuminate the interconnectedness of different contexts and expand students’ horizons beyond their local neighborhood. They also have strong connections to culturally responsive approaches to education (e.g. Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris & Alim, 2014), as they seek to honor students’ identities, histories, and lived experiences as rich resources for learning.

Although there is strong promise in the practice of pedagogies of place and placemaking with youth, numerous issues can hinder success. For example, scholars have pointed out that place-based pedagogies that are not critical, or explicitly oriented towards decolonization, can normalize white supremacy and settler colonial ideologies (e.g. Seawright, 2014). This can ultimately justify relations of dominance with the land, and perpetuate the oppression of Native youth (Friedel, 2011; Johnson, 2012) and other youth of color (Flynn, Kemp, & Perez, 2010; Paperson, 2014; Seawright, 2014). Researchers have also called attention to the need for supports for adults and youth engaged in placemaking as an intentional effort to transform their surroundings—noting, for example, the need for adults to have adequate preparation, time, and resources for developing place-based curriculum and facilitating place-based projects (Cole, 2010). Further, adults generally need to cultivate skills in equitable power-sharing and relationship-building in order to facilitate productive and transformative collaboration with youth, and scholars have shown that this is particularly true in placemaking projects that involve marginalized youth. In their research on a community-based program that used critical pedagogies of place in New York City, Delia and Krasny (2018) found that the key mechanism for positive youth development was “authentic care” (Valenzuela, 1999)—caring relationships in which adults recognize the influence of race, class, and culture on students’ experiences and support them to confront the inequitable conditions of their lives (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Valenzuela, 1999).
Recently, scholars have begun to explore the integration of art and pedagogies of place, and demonstrated the positive impact of this integration for young people’s learning and experience. In his research on a rural elementary school that has been held up as a model of PBE, Sugg (2017) found that the arts were an instrumental tool for place-based pedagogy—establishing links across different subject areas, fostering the engagement of traditionally hard-to-reach students, and creating a means for community outreach. Indeed, as a vehicle for meaning-making and expression, the arts can facilitate young people’s deep engagement with their local experiences and the significance of their neighborhoods in their lives (Smith & Sobel, 2010). In her research with high school students in Harlem, Kinloch (2009) found that the visual arts were a form of literacy that helped students capture and express their views of their neighborhoods and issues such as gentrification. Such activities can lead students to “defamiliarize the familiar taken-for-granted conditions of life” (Goodman, 2003, p. 3), and increase their sense of empowerment (Trafi-Prats, 2012). This process is key to the critical pedagogies of place, in which a central goal is for students to question the current conditions of places as their natural state, understanding that their “present state is one of many possible outcomes” (Gruenewald, 2003b, p. 627) based on the choices that people make, and thus become aware of their own role and agency as placemakers.

Through my research and my personal experiences in the field, I have seen growing interest from educators in integrating place and local neighborhoods into their work with young people, especially in arts contexts. However, few supports exist to help these educators name and analyze their practice, and develop strategies for navigating tensions and challenges that arise. Through my dissertation research, I sought to build more robust theory around the connection between pedagogies of place and placemaking and youth
development, with a focus on using these approaches with social justice aims. I aimed to use this knowledge to provide a framework for practice that could benefit not only the staff and teaching artists at Urbano, but also other educators interested in integrating place into their work with youth in other contexts. This research makes an important contribution to existing research and practice, given that shared theoretical foundations are a critical part of the effective engagement of pedagogies of place and placemaking with youth in an urban setting (e.g. Cole, 2010).

The Multiple Meanings and Modes of Placemaking

Gruenewald (2003b) has written that a key process and aim of PBE is to heighten students’ awareness about their roles, responsibilities, and possibilities as place-makers. Yet neither Gruenewald (2003b) nor other scholars of PBE deeply explore the meaning of placemaking and its relationship to pedagogies of place. In this section, I draw from the literature in geography, anthropology, and urban design and planning in order to illuminate the multiple meanings and modes of placemaking, and describe three related but distinct modes of placemaking practice: placemaking as a social practice, critical placemaking, and creative placemaking. Throughout this discussion, I explore the connections of each placemaking practice to the needs and interests of young people—ultimately highlighting gaps in knowledge that I sought to address through my research.

In the Humanities and social sciences, placemaking has been described as a “natural social practice” (Hunter et al., 2016) and a “fundamental human activity” (Schneekloth & Shibley, 1995) that does not require “special sensibilities or cultivated skills” (Basso, 1996, p. 7). Indeed, placemaking happens organically through everyday activities that can range from cleaning a street, tending to a garden or turning a stoop into a spot for lounging with family and friends. Placemaking can also occur through one-time events, such as a block party or an
artistic intervention. Through such activities, people engage in the practice of “transforming the places in which we find ourselves into places in which we live” (Schneekloth & Shibley, 1995 p. 1)—a universal process across cultures and contexts. Individuals and groups of all ages engage in placemaking as a natural social practice: actions ranging from setting up for a party, finding and maintaining a hiding spot, or decorating rooms can all be read as examples of manipulating and transforming a physical space into a meaningful place that better suits our needs and desires. The geographer Robert Sack argues that in part, placemaking stems from a human impulse to shape our reality according to our identities and aspirations, to transform our status quo into “the reality that ought to be” (Sack, 2003, p. 4). Other scholars write that placemaking is based in our essential need to cultivate spaces in which we can grow roots and thrive in community with others (Casey, 2009; Fullilove, 2009; Sutton & Kemp, 2011); these forms of placemaking, when enacted by marginalized and oppressed groups, can be seen as acts of creating homeplaces (hooks, 1990) within the context of a society that has systematically inflicted harm on their sense of safety, security, and well-being (Hunter et al., 2016).

Existing research has indicated that for individuals, the practice of placemaking can cultivate imagination (Fettes & Judson, 2013) and creative thinking skills (Davis, Hawley, McMullan, & Spilka, 1997). In addition, placemaking can nurture a sense of caring for local surroundings and the larger ecosystems of which they are part (Sutton & Kemp, 2002), as well as enhance feelings of social inclusion; of connection to other people, communities, and environments; and of overall well-being (Denov & Akesson, 2013; Sanoff, 2000). For young people who have experienced displacement, placemaking can serve as a means for identity exploration and healing; in their study of the placemaking of immigrant youth who were separated from their families, Denov and Akesson (2013) found that youth developed their
sense of self and their sense of agency in part through connecting to new places they encountered. According to Denov and Akesson (2013), these young people’s placemaking can be interpreted as “an act of defiance” in which they “implicitly and explicitly challenged established power structures concerning who ‘belonged’ and therefore who was welcomed to a place and those who were not” (p. 66).

Scholars have also shown that placemaking can be closely intertwined with processes of research and artistic practice, sometimes concerned more with the politics of representation than an intervention in the built environment. Caitlin Cahill (2006) uses the concept of placemaking to describe her participatory action research project with young women of color in New York City, in which the group investigated experiences of gentrification in their local neighborhood. As a research collective, the group collected “war stories” and “stories of survival” within the local community, and ultimately created art projects through which they asserted their rights to remain in the local neighborhood, as well as their rights to self-representation in the “culture wars” happening around them (Cahill, 2006; Rios-Moore et al., 2004). The work of Cahill and Rios-Moore and colleagues (2004) emphasizes how young people can deliberately take on the role of place-makers, as they struggle for power and visibility in the context of urban dispossession. A robust body of literature has shown that the civic activism that young people engage in through such projects has positive impact not only on their individual outcomes, but also on the settings of which they are part: for example, research has documented examples of youth placemaking that prompted action from officials in renovating school facilities (Suess & Lewis, 2007; Torre & Fine, 2006), and strengthened the social fabric of their communities (Huber et al., 2003)—often by creating space for joy and celebration (Sutton, 1996).
In this way, there are modes of organized placemaking that have explicitly political aims, and can function as acts of resistance to the destructive forces of oppression. Indeed, this is part of the reason why across the world, countless historical and contemporary examples of placemaking can be found in marginalized communities. In the U.S., many forms of placemaking can be found in the organizing and activism of poor and working-class communities of color that have asserted their “right to the city” (Lefebvre, 1996; Harvey, 2010) in the face of threats of displacement or destruction to their homes and neighborhoods. According to the critical geographer David Harvey, the right to the city involves “the right to transform the city, to make it the city we wish to live in, and in the process transform ourselves and how we live together” (as cited in Lipman, 2011). Importantly, it is a right that belongs to all urban residents, including the most vulnerable and disenfranchised. Especially for young people of color in cities, there are high stakes attached to the transformation of toxic environments into places for their healthy development and growth (Sutton & Kemp, 2002). As many scholars and practitioners of youth and community development have argued (e.g. Checkoway, 2011; Hart, 2013; Sutton & Kemp, 2011), the routine exclusion of urban youth from decision-making processes that directly affect their lives is both a violation of their rights and a significant obstacle in the creation of cities where all people can thrive. Sutton and Kemp (2011) thus write: “For urban youth, whose lives and communities are profoundly shaped by spatial, racial, ethnic, and class exclusions, placemaking is fundamentally about social justice” (p. 138). In urban community-based organizations, there are rich opportunities for what Sutton and Kemp (2011) call a “critical placemaking practice”—“the deliberate linking of critical reflection, youth empowerment, intergenerational alliances, and collective action to claim, and reclaim, place” (p. 135).
Critical placemaking is a term popularized by Lynda H. Schneekloth and Robert G. Shibley, two scholars in the fields of architecture and planning, in their seminal book Placemaking: The Art and Practice of Building Communities. Drawing from the idea that places are social constructions that are dynamic and always in-process (Cresswell, 2014; Massey, 2004), Schneekloth and Shibley (1995) advanced a model of involving community members in making and sustaining the places they inhabit, arguing that “professional place-makers”—such as architects, planners, designers, engineers—must build relationships and share power with local stakeholders in the work that they do. This model of practice emphasizes the civic, political, moral, and ethical dimensions of placemaking; it stresses, for example, the potential of placemaking to be a “significant space for learning about and practicing democracy” (Schneekloth & Shibley, 1995, p. 142), and for fostering a “dialogic space” that validates subjugated knowledges and values difference and disagreement. In this sense, placemaking resembles education itself; as Schneekloth and Shibley (1995) write, “Placemaking, like public schooling, offers a unique public space in which to weave a web of relationships that interact to create a common world” (p. 142). Beyond that, critical placemaking deliberately seeks to unveil and transform the workings of power, ultimately supporting collective action grounded in dynamics of a “shared ‘power-to-do’ rather than ‘power-over’” (Schneekloth, 2011). For community-based organizations that seek to promote social justice youth development (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Ginwright & James, 2002), critical placemaking may help provide a roadmap to both support youth as agents of change and to transform power relations between organizations and the communities they seek to serve.

While not mutually exclusive, critical placemaking differs from the policy and practice of creative placemaking that has become increasingly popular in the U.S. in recent years. The term “creative placemaking” was first used in 2010 by Ann Markusen and Ann
Gadwa, two scholars of urban economics and planning, who wrote a white paper on the subject for the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). In their article, Markusen and Gadwa (2010) describe creative placemaking as a collaboration across city agencies, artists, and community members to leverage arts and culture as a means of economic and community development. Since then, spurred by funding from the NEA as well as from numerous private foundations, hundreds of creative placemaking projects have sprung up across the country—at times shaping the activities and goals of arts programs that serve youth. As an example, in Houston, Rick Lowe and other artists collaborated with city governments, nonprofits, and community members to transform abandoned houses into spaces for art and educational programs (Project Row Houses). In other places, artists, activists, and residents have collaborated to create skate parks and mural-filled neighborhoods, and to establish and sustain community festivals, food markets, and more. Mainstream discourse around creative placemaking has tended to stay close to its roots as an idea in community planning and economic development; for example, one foundation describes creative placemaking as a process that “fosters connections among people and across cultures,” “creates opportunities for people of all income levels and backgrounds to thrive in place,” “leverages the creative potential already present in a place,” and “creates a place where business wants to be.” The broader aim of these initiatives is to engage artists in “help[ing] people think about a future and how it could be different” and “strengthen[ing] the social, physical, and economic fabric of communities” (Axel-Lute, 2017).

The economic aims of creative placemaking, however, have led numerous artists and scholars to argue that creative placemaking must go further in order to contribute to social justice in the city. Specifically, scholars have written that placemaking approaches must address politics of belonging (Bedoya, 2012), acknowledge histories of colonization and
displacement (Webb, 2014), counter settler colonial ideologies of place (Bedoya, 2012; Seawright, 2014; Webb, 2014) and economic thinking about the role of art in society (Bedoya, 2012). As Rick Lowe has said:

…[T]he challenge is trying to prioritize the people of lower-income communities rather than to use placemaking to pave the way for gentrification. A lot of investment in creativity and in the creative class is about creating a place that seems hip and cool, where people will go out in the evenings and have their lattes on the weekends. That’s about generating economic investment. That’s needed and that’s fine, but there has to be a way in which we can do that while bringing people up in the neighborhood who are already there, rather than pushing them out (Lowe as cited in Lipsitz, 2017).

Given growing concerns about displacement due to gentrification in urban neighborhoods across the U.S., it seems that this emphasis on the needs and desires of marginalized communities must be centered in order to avoid harm that could be caused by placemaking efforts.

Scholars have also noted the need for placemaking efforts to more deliberately create pathways for opportunity for young people in economically disadvantaged neighborhoods (McKoy, Vincent, & Bierbaum, 2011). Concerns have been raised, for example, that processes of creative placemaking may not always be inclusive of youth, and that the emphasis on the arts could actually alienate young people who do not readily view themselves as artistically inclined (McEvoy-Levy, 2012). Further, any placemaking projects that concern public space must also contend with broader issues of place as a site of contestation and struggle. Setha Low, a cultural anthropologist whose scholarship has focused extensively on space and place, points to the reality that many public spaces in the
city are not youth-friendly. In a 2018 interview with Katherine Peinhardt of the Project for Public Spaces, Low discusses how public spaces are often defined by “a lot of rules, policing, and surveillance; the very things young people look to avoid”; meanwhile, adults are typically quick to push young people out of both the spaces themselves as well as the processes of placemaking that create them. Low (2018) argues that adults need to recognize young people’s unique needs and perspectives, and include them in placemaking projects as “builders, constructors, thinkers.” In this process, Low (2018) contends, adults must “put [youth] at the center.” Riva Kapoor (2017), a former youth intern at the Project for Public Spaces, has pointed out similar issues around the lack of youth voice in participatory planning processes—an issue that scholars have shown to be widespread in neighborhood and community development more generally (Checkoway, 1998; Kretzman & McKnight, 1993). Yet as Kapoor’s (2017) testimony shows, youth participation in placemaking can be beneficial for individual youth, as well as for the communities and settings of which they are part:

Public engagement at a young age is key to making young people feel like they have invested in their community and develop a strong sense of ownership in their space. After all, we will be the ones using, managing, and advocating for them in the future. I have learnt the stepping stones of the placemaking process, and seen first-hand how public space can bring the community together. I am empowered and resolved to engage in placemaking in my own community in London. My fellow young people have the duty and right to do the same, and many of them have interests in doing so.

With hundreds of groups and organizations across the U.S. now engaged in placemaking projects with multigenerational groups, it is incumbent upon researchers to further develop theory and practice related to youth participation in placemaking. Although
these projects provide promising opportunities for supporting youth development, knowledge must be built around what young people need and desire from their participation in such projects, and what specific practices and processes hinder or support their learning and development as they are involved. To date, there have been no empirical studies that specifically address the experiences of young people in projects and programs informed by ideas of critical or creative placemaking; further, little has been written about youth participation in community-based organizations as a form of a natural practice of placemaking itself. In this dissertation, I investigated both layers of placemaking at Urbano—both the organic forms as well as the more planned and deliberate modes of placemaking—in order to explore the various ways in which placemaking practices carry relevance to the field of youth development and to education more broadly.

Engaging with Place in Community-Based Youth Arts Programs

The community-based youth organization that is the focus of this research is Urbano Project, a community art studio that offers academic year and summer programs for youth in the city of Boston. In this section, I provide background on the role of the arts in youth development, review the existing research on community art settings, and discuss what is known about pedagogies of place and placemaking in these contexts. I conclude with a discussion of how my research builds upon existing literature to deepen understandings of the possibilities and challenges of PBE in these settings, and the relevance of this study to the field of education more broadly.

Over the last decades, researchers have shown that the arts can promote numerous positive outcomes for young people. Arts learning is strongly correlated with critical thinking, creative thinking, problem solving, and social development (Catterall, 2009; Rabkin, Reynolds, Hedberg, & Selby, 2011). There are strong and consistent associations between
arts education and increased academic achievement: studies have shown that students with higher levels of arts education had lower dropout rates and higher grades and test scores in reading; they are also more likely to attend and graduate from college, hold a full-time job, vote, and volunteer in their community (Catterall, 1998). Importantly, these associations are strongest for low-income students (Catterall, 2009). For all young people, the arts can foster a sense of connection to the wider world (Greene, 1995), honor different styles of learning, help students who might be seen as “problems” to flourish, and create innovative environments for learning (Fiske, 1999). In addition, the arts have been shown to carry therapeutic benefits for people experiencing trauma and hardship, in part through building positive relationships and collaborations between adults and youth (Fiske, 1999).

Yet the U.S. has seen a severe decline in infrastructure for in-school arts learning over the last century, with many school districts reducing or eliminating arts offerings given pressures to emphasize preparation for standardized testing in math and English instead (Seidel et al., 2009). This decline has disproportionately impacted Black and Latino youth: since 1980, there has been a 49% and 40% decrease, respectively, in the percentage of Black and Latino students who have had arts learning experiences before the age of 18 (Rabkin et al., 2011). As Rabkin (2011) has written, “more damage has been done to school-based arts education over the last three decades than any other time since the start of the 20th century” (p. 121). While young people from wealthy families tend to have plenty of access to the arts through their schools and through museums and other arts institutions, young people living in or near poverty often have severely limited access to high quality arts learning experiences (Seidel et al, 2009).

Community-based programs have a long history of addressing this opportunity gap around arts for young people marginalized by race, class, and place. For as long as
community-based programs have existed to serve the needs of economically marginalized youth, the arts have been present. To the founders of the Hull House—the first known settlement house, founded in Chicago in 1889—the arts represented a way to connect people with their own humanity, in the face of hostile or inhospitable conditions; through art, the community strengthened their capacity to “create beauty in the midst of things, roses among the thorns, in order to sustain a sense of form and wonder and in order to keep alive that yearning...at the core of every human being, every child” (Elshstain, 2002 as cited in Rabkin, 2011, p. 122). In cities today, there are echoes of the work of the Hull House in community-based organizations that offer arts programs—for little or no cost—that support young people in examining and transforming the conditions of their lives. Often, these programs de-emphasize the focus on technical skills in art that dominates arts instruction in schools (Elliott, Silverman, & Bowman, 2016; Hill & Vasudevan, 2007; Inwood, 2008). In their study of community art centers located in economically disadvantaged neighborhoods, Davis and colleagues (1993) used the methodology of portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) to study educational effectiveness in these settings. The researchers found that all of these settings provided a “safe haven” that thrived on positive and long-lasting relationships with local communities, and that provided an oasis in a world where art and culture—especially the artistic and cultural practices of disenfranchised groups—was often devalued.

Recently, arts practitioners, policymakers, and funders have advocated for a youth development model of arts education called creative youth development (Montgomery, 2017). With roots in the settlement house movement, creative youth development (CYD) engages processes of creative inquiry and expression to not only cultivate young people’s artistic skills and accomplishments, but also nurture their personal growth, life skills, sense of
belonging, and self-esteem (Heath & Roach, 1999; Montgomery, 2017; Quinn, 1999). CYD thus creates opportunities for youth to “express their own identities, understand and change the world around them, and connect to the greater human experience” (National Summit on Creative Youth Development, 2014). Guided by many principles and practices of positive youth development, CYD programs seek to: provide a physically and emotionally safe place for youth, foster caring and supportive relationships with adults and peers, recognize young people’s strengths, and encourage youth to engage in positive risk-taking and assume leadership roles (Montgomery, Rogovin, & Persaud, 2013). Further, CYD programs emphasize the importance of welcoming spaces that affirm the value of art—a principle which manifests in the physical environment of the programs, as well as in the respect shown for the artist identities of adult and youth involved. Often, youth participants are considered “youth artists,” and are taught by instructors who are professional practicing artists (often called “teaching artists”).

While Urbano’s thematic focus tends to change every few years—a model which I will discuss further in the following chapter of this dissertation—its youth programs have been consistently centered on principles of CYD. This is evident in its employment of teaching artists as educators and mentors for youth artists, its functioning as a community art studio that values artistic excellence, and its rituals of art exhibitions as the culmination of every semester of youth programs. At the same time, Urbano carries an explicit orientation towards social justice and social change, and an emphasis on context as part of the pedagogy. Through her research on art pedagogies with social justice aims, Dewhurst (2014) argues that in order to effect social change, it is necessary to learn about the unique strengths of the local environment (both the neighborhood and the institutional setting in which a project takes place), the current power dynamics in these settings, and the levels of power
that can be shifted; she encourages scholars and practitioners to further explore the question of the relationship between place and their practice of teaching and creating art (Dewhurst, 2012). Through engaging various theories related to young people, place, and development, my research takes up Dewhurst’s (2012) question: “What is the role of place in [community arts] practice?” In order to push towards further articulating the processes and practices that define high quality community arts practice, I research the various ways in which place factors into the programming and day-to-day activities of a community arts setting.

Here it is important to note that critical considerations of place and community have been a feature of contemporary art over the last decades, and that this work has heavily informed the artistic practices at Urbano. The organization’s focus on “socially engaged art” and notions of the artist as citizen is part of what Suzanne Lacy (1995) identifies as a “radical heritage,” a tradition led by artists with marginalized identities—women, people of color—whose work centers on engagement with social issues that profoundly impact their communities and their own lived experience. In this way, the artistic practice of youth and adults at Urbano is a part of a legacy within contemporary art, one where diverse artists of color have engaged broad and diverse audiences in exploration of social issues that are directly relevant to their lives. It is a field where artists are actively cultivating values, skills and dispositions for working with communities that are not typically taught through formal schooling. As Alexis Frasz and Holly Sidford (2017) point out in their recent report, “Mapping the Landscape of Socially Engaged Artistic Practice,” growing numbers of artists, academic institutions, cultural organizations, and funders are becoming interested in this field, and placemaking is one part of the toolkit that practitioners use in this work.

As creative placemaking continues to be a policy trend on the national, state, and city levels, researchers must help build knowledge on how these practices can foster positive
transformation in young people, in communities, and in the arts more broadly. Indeed, in order to more fully understand the potential of these practices to benefit local communities, address urgent social issues, and contribute to contemporary social movements, researchers must: 1) respond to the gap in documentation around these practices; and 2) further theorize the conditions, processes, and ethics that not only support this ecosystem of practices (Frasz & Sidford, 2017), but also help our young people thrive.

**Research Questions**

In this chapter, I presented the theoretical and empirical foundations for my research on pedagogies of place and placemaking in an urban community arts setting. The literatures that I join together in this conceptual framework span the disciplines of sociology, psychology, and geography, and the fields of education research, critical youth studies, and contemporary art. My inquiry builds upon scholarship that has shown that community-based youth organizations can have a strong influence on the learning and development of adolescents in cities, who may experience multiple forms of marginalization and oppression in their schools and neighborhoods. In these contexts, adults and youth often engage closely with local cultures and concerns—typically with goals of cultivating critical consciousness and improving outcomes for individual youth as well as for the neighborhoods and communities of which they are part. Models of place-based education and youth development all inform the approaches of community-based youth arts programs, where adults and youth collaborate in practices of artmaking and placemaking that are deeply embedded in their local contexts. In these educational settings, pedagogies of place and placemaking can impact the way that young people understand the issues in their local surroundings, their own role in the community, the sense of agency they feel within the local environment, and the narratives they construct about the place.
There is a need for more rigorous empirical study, however, of how pedagogies of place and placemaking are practiced in community-based youth arts programs, and what role they play in the learning and development of adolescents in cities. What key activities, processes, factors, and conditions support the success of place-based programs for youth? How do participants make sense of their experiences in these programs? Building knowledge on young people's meaning-making around these experiences is essential for understanding how these experiences shape their developmental outcomes (Masten & Wright, 2009); this is particularly true for adolescents, who are constantly revising their understandings of self, other, and the world (Erikson, 1968; Nakkula & Ravitch, 1998; Sameroff, 2010). Young people's meaning making around place, specifically, can have strong implications for their everyday behaviors and civic actions. Coming from a place-sensitive perspective, I contend that explicit attention to young people's meaning-making related to their educational settings is necessary for holistic and nuanced understanding of their everyday experiences, as well as the developmental opportunities that community-based organizations can offer young people.

Deeper understandings of how participants—especially young people—make sense of their experiences in place-based educational programs can help improve the impact of existing programs on young people and their communities. This knowledge is useful for practitioners who are interested in learning about the concrete practices that can be utilized in a place-based approach, and/or how to incorporate or strengthen these practices in their own work. In addition, educational researchers and policymakers can benefit from these insights into what teaching artists and young people want—for themselves, for their education, and for the world at large. Moreover, by amplifying the voices of people who are often unheard in mainstream education discourse, and casting a light on places and practices
that are often unseen, this research contributes to broader dialogue about the possibilities and challenges of justice-oriented, community-based education in cities today.

The research questions that guide the present inquiry are as follows:

• How are pedagogies of place and placemaking practiced in the youth programs at a Boston community art studio?

• What sense do participants (staff, teaching artists, and students) make of their experiences in these programs?

In the following chapter of this dissertation, I describe the research design and methodology used to address these questions at Urbano, including details on the structure of programming at the organization, the populations that it serves, and the neighborhood context in which it is located. I also discuss my own history of involvement with the organization, and reflect upon ideas of power, reciprocity, and partnership that guide my ongoing relationship with the place.
II. Exploring the Methodology, Design, and Context of Research

This research on pedagogies of place and placemaking in a community art setting is grounded in the paradigm of phenomenology, through which I sought to deeply understand the meaning-making and experiences of youth and adults in a specific context. Tracing phenomenological research to the theories of German philosophers Martin Heidegger and Edmund Husserl, Mark Vagle (2016) explains that phenomenological studies aim for understanding “what it is like as we find ourselves being in relation to the world through our day-to-day living” (p. 20). In this paradigm of research, the primary focus is not the individual, but rather a particular phenomenon as it manifests and appears in individuals’ lives. Through close examination and careful description of how people experience a phenomenon, phenomenologists search for “particular patterns which transcend specific empirical contexts and point to the essential human condition” (Cresswell, 2013, p. 33).

Given its attention to human cultures and relationships, much of the existing literature on place is rooted in a phenomenological approach (Blum-Ross, 2013; Tuck & McKenzie, 2014). Geographers such as Yi-Fu Tuan (1977), Edward Relph (1976), and David Seamon (1980) draw heavily from phenomenological theories in their philosophies about the central role of place in shaping human experience. These philosophers argue that the social sciences must attend to the subjective and emotional nature of human relationships to place in order to understand ways-of-knowing and ways-of-being in the world. More recently, scholars in education (e.g. Worster & Abrams, 2005) and cultural studies (e.g. Moores & Metykova, 2009) have used a phenomenological approach to better understand processes related to place and placemaking in everyday environments. To address critiques of some phenomenological research as lacking in sufficient emphasis on historical and cultural specificity, I sought to craft a study that attends deeply to the situated-ness of the research
context in time and place, while remaining oriented towards what it reveals about human existence and experience more broadly.

This dissertation is also grounded in critical place inquiry, a framework developed by Eve Tuck and Marcia McKenzie (2014). Tuck and McKenzie (2014) contend that “place is but one of many subjects of study that are underserved by the somewhat artificial and arbitrary division between science, social science, and humanities domains” (p. 26). Their ideas about critical place inquiry are informed by Indigenous studies (e.g. Tuck, McKenzie, & McCoy, 2014), Black feminist scholarship (e.g. McKittrick & Woods, 2007), urban studies (Lipsitz, 2011), and other critical scholarship (e.g. Gilmore, 2008; Harvey, 2005)—fields that shed light on how people’s realities are shaped not only by place, but also by factors of age, gender, race, sexuality, and other identifications and experiences. According to Tuck and McKenzie (2014), these dimensions of place-based engagement and experiences must be at the forefront of any study of place—phenomenological or otherwise—in order to respond effectively to contemporary place issues of globalization and neoliberalism, settler colonialism, and environmental degradation. Critical place inquiry (Tuck & McKenzie, 2014) includes the following tenets:

- places are interactive, dynamic, and shifting over time;
- places both influence and shape social practices through the actions of individuals and collectives;
- “disparate realities determine not only how place is experienced but also how it is understood and practiced” (p. 18); and
- research should be guided by “a relational ethics of accountability to people and place” (p. 18).
Finally, this research is premised upon theories of youth voice in education research and reform (e.g. Cook-Sather, 2006). Students are routinely marginalized or excluded from decision-making processes related to their schools, neighborhoods, and cities. Yet young people have unique and important contributions to the discourse on education, as well as to dialogues on the places they inhabit and processes of community change. Scholars argue that youth perspectives and experience merit the attention of policymakers and researchers not only because they can improve the practices of institutions such as schools and community-based organizations (e.g. Mitra, 2014), but also because young people have a right to participation in the settings of their lives (United Nations, 1989). When young people have authentic opportunities to shape the practices of educational programs, there are benefits for individual youth, as well as for the organizations they seek to improve (Kirshner, Fernandez, & Strobel, 2002; Mitra, 2014). Moreover, as the sociologist Carla Shedd (2015) writes, the civic health of our society hinges on the willingness of scholars, policymakers, and other adults to truly listen to marginalized youth in cities.

The field of educational research could also benefit from further attention to the voices of teaching artists—educational practitioners who facilitate arts learning experiences in various school and community-based settings. Although teaching artists have played an important role in education since the 1980’s (Booth, 2003), their perspectives and experiences are rarely the focus of mainstream education research. My research thus includes the voices of young people and teaching artists as part of an ethical commitment to their rights of participation, as well as to the principle of reciprocity in supporting the work of the organization through this research.
Engaging the Tools of Portraiture

In *Method Meets Art: Arts-Based Research Practice*, Patricia Leavy (2015) describes arts-based research (ABR) as “a set of methodological tools used by qualitative researchers across the disciplines during all phases of social research, including data collection, analysis, interpretation, and representation” (p. 2). ABR expands—and at times, disrupts—traditional paradigms of qualitative research by opening a space in the research community “where passion and rigor boldly intersect out in the open” (p. 1), by diversifying the audiences for research, and by addressing the longings of some researchers to “merge their scholar-self with their artist-self” (p. 2). A fundamental premise of ABR is that art and science are not dichotomous (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997; Leavy, 2015): both can be seen as “crafts” that aim to advance understandings of the human condition, and that are “grounded in exploration, revelation, and representation” (Leavy, 2015, p. 2). Over the last decades, research in the fields of social science, health care, and education have demonstrated myriad ways in which the arts can enrich the project of knowledge-building—transforming inquiry into a potentially healing and empowering experience for the researcher and research participants, while also deepening exploration the meaning-making process of individuals and groups (Leavy, 2015). By illuminating creative ways to promote engaged dialogue, amplify subjugated voices, and foster empathy and connection on a profound emotional level, ABR is especially promising for inquiry that seeks to raise consciousness around issues of power and oppression.

Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot’s pioneering work on *portraiture* (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) elaborates an approach to qualitative inquiry that blends the “rigor and discipline” of scientific investigation and the “evocative resonance” of aesthetic expression (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 4). As a method of inquiry and documentation,
Portraiture draws inspiration from scholars ranging from W. E. B. DuBois—a boundary-crossing, interdisciplinary scholar who bridged different forms of knowledge through autobiography, political essays, poetry, and activism—to John Dewey, whose educational philosophies and writings on the aesthetics of teaching and learning included a call to “find ways of envisioning and recording the [educational] experience that would not distort its texture and richness” (Dewey as cited in Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 6). Although portraiture can be applied towards understanding the truths of individuals’ lived experiences and meaning-making in any of the social worlds they inhabit, the application of this method to building knowledge on educational contexts has been particularly fruitful (e.g., Catone, 2014; Keene, 2016; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2008; Watson, 2012). Indeed, in their foundational research project on community art studios in urban contexts, Hoffman-Davis and colleagues (1993) used portraiture to create holistic representations of these community-based settings, which typically exist in the shadows of schools in scholarship on education.

The tools of portraiture enabled me to honor multiple dimensions of my self and my research context, a community art studio located in Boston. First, the recognition of the powers and possibilities of art resonates with both my way-of-being in the world as an individual and my background as a photography teaching artist; in addition, it aligns with the values and practices of the organization that was the focus of research. The integration of artmaking and research was itself a feature of many Urbano classes, where teaching artists and youth at times engaged in learning about the local neighborhood through observations and interviews with local residents. At Urbano, art was a tool for building knowledge as well as a means of communication about complex ideas and experiences. The public events and art exhibitions held at the organization revealed how art could create opportunities for individuals to engage broader conversations and build community around issues of shared
interest; this, to me, felt in line with portraiture’s preoccupation with involving a wide range of people in public discourse on questions that are important for society at large. For social scientists, it is imperative to speak to audiences beyond the academy through their work, and use language that is accessible and understandable without sacrificing nuance and depth in their exploration of complicated issues. Through the usage of portraiture, I sought to create work that could foster a dialogue about place and urban education that centers on the perspectives and experiences of youth and adult artists—those who are typically excluded from academic conversations on these subjects, and those who are also directly affected by these concerns.

A key way in which portraiture differs from other approaches to qualitative research is what Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) calls the “search for goodness”: an orientation towards settings that attends carefully to what works, from the point of view of inhabitants. It recognizes the resilience inherent in all people and places, rejecting the persistent and historical tendencies in social science research to pathologize and apply damage-centered frameworks (Tuck, 2009) towards the study of Indigenous peoples, communities of color, and other historically marginalized groups. Through developing narratives that are nuanced, textured, and complex, portraiture represents a humanizing approach to research—acknowledging imperfections and vulnerabilities in any expression or enactment of goodness, and resisting romanticized visions that deny these realities of experience. In order to search for goodness, all processes of portraiture are built upon caring relationships based in empathy, dignity, and respect—investing deeply in the responsible formation and negotiation of these relationships with the recognition that “authentic findings will only emerge from authentic relationships” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997). As other scholars have written, humanizing approaches to research with youth and communities are built upon such
relationships: they “push against inequities not only through the findings of research but through the research act itself” (Paris & Winn, 2013, p. 140), and they often engage asset-based theory to focus on “what already exists, what is already happening in the context” and thus build upon these strengths (Green, 2014). Through engaging in the search for goodness, I join these scholars in the act of refusing research that “does not take as a starting point the humanity and dignity of all people” (Winn, 2014, p. 251).

Finally, portraiture’s approach to context as an essential part of inquiry parallels the emphasis on place in my research. Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) uses the term “context” to refer to “physical, geographic, temporal, historical, cultural, aesthetic” (p. 41) dimensions of a setting. In contrast to positivist research, which often treats context as a distraction from the focus of study, portraiture takes context as a resource for understanding the behaviors, thoughts, and feelings of human actors; similar to the construct of place, context is seen to be a shaping influence on human experience. In this dissertation, I examine the context of Urbano as an organization in order to develop insights into the nature and the processes of place-based education happening in these settings; this is the focus of the chapter entitled “Tracing Origins.” Throughout the empirical chapters of this dissertation, I take seriously the portraitist’s responsibility to produce “interpretive description” that is replete with vivid imagery and carefully chosen detail that help readers understand how my research participants make meaning in context. I purposefully describe contexts in the hopes of clarifying “the singularity and universality of each educational experience portrayed” (Davis, 1993, p. 7). My hope is for these descriptions to invite readers into close, critical engagement with not only the people and places who are the subjects of the writing, but also with my own meaning making and lens as a researcher.
Considering the People and Place of the Research

Scholars (e.g. Basso, 1996; Gieryn, 2000; Tuck & McKenzie, 2014) have critiqued a tendency in social science research to treat place as an empty backdrop or a simple surface upon which life occurs and data is collected. Academic articles typically include brief sections about where the research takes place, but often do not go further in engaging place in the analysis, methodology, or methods of the study completed. Given my goal of moving concerns of place to the center and forefront of the inquiry, and recognizing my own subjectivity as a person who carried specific attachments and unique relationships to places in the Boston area, I aimed to be deliberate, explicit, and thorough in my engagement with place throughout my research design and process. Using purposeful selection, I focused my study on the combination of settings, people, and activities that were most relevant to my research questions and goals.

Driven by my research questions, I sought to work with a community-based organization that was located in an urban context, and that offered place-based programs to young people in the city. Given the call in critical place inquiry for researchers to hold themselves accountable to the people and places involved in their work (Tuck & McKenzie, 2014), it was important for me to locate my study in a city where I could maintain my relationships to local communities and contexts beyond the time in which my data collection occurred. Maxwell (2012) writes that the goals of purposive sampling can include selecting groups with whom you can establish the most productive relationships, and where you have knowledge of the setting; these aims were among those that guided me to Urbano as the focal place of my research. At the point when I opened up a conversation with Urbano staff about the possibility of studying their youth programs, I had been living in the Greater Boston area for four years, and I had worked as a teaching artist—designing curriculum and
facilitating place-based learning experiences for youth—every summer during that time. I knew that I would be in the area for at least the next two years afterwards, and that my continued involvement with local community-based youth programs could offer ongoing opportunities to promote dialogue and engage in actions informed by the research. As a city with many historical and contemporary examples of grassroots projects that explicitly and deliberately integrated the practices of art and placemaking (e.g. Senechal, 2008), Boston was a place I could see this research project connecting with a community of creative practitioners with whom I had common interests.

Further, Urbano had drawn me in from my first encounter with the organization in 2014. I first learned about Urbano through a colleague at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, who was working as a staff member at the organization during her graduate studies. We began working together on a research project related to the perspectives and experiences of teaching artists in Boston, and I travelled to Urbano to lead focus groups to collect data for the study. I still remember the first time I went to Urbano—the experience of getting lost in the maze of stairwells, elevators, and parking lots on the way to the gallery, entering from the back entrance of the studio, and then encountering a gigantic three-dimensional structure built of chicken wire and hundreds of fluffy white marshmallows. It was a piece was created by Urbano youth artists for a recent exhibition. That day, I met Carmen,³ the founder and artistic director of the organization; I saw more work by the youth artists inside of a corner of the gallery, which functioned as the Urbano gift shop; I walked around the open space and marveled at how different it was from other educational settings.

³ While I use the real names of places (e.g. organizations, neighborhoods, cities, nations) in this research, I use pseudonyms for the individual research participants. Research participants were offered the opportunity to choose their own pseudonyms; some declined and asked me to choose pseudonyms for them. In these cases, wherever possible, I selected pseudonyms with similar linguistic and cultural origins as their real names.
in which I had worked. I remember noting to myself that this was a place that I wanted to return to, a place with a vision that I wanted to more deeply understand. As I returned to Urbano for exhibitions and events over the next years, I built a relationship with the place and an investment in its multigenerational community of artists, activists, educators. Given my own background as a teaching artist and my research interests in urban community-based educational spaces, I was fascinated by the possibilities I saw there.

**Understanding the Research Context**

Since its founding in 2009, Urbano has hosted art exhibitions and events, and offered art classes during the academic year and the summer for hundreds of young people ages 14 to 21, most of whom attend Boston public schools. According to the organization’s most recent annual report, more than 50% of the youth participating in Urbano programs lack access to arts programs in their schools, and can obtain the arts credits they need for graduation through participating in classes at Urbano. In recent years, two classes are typically offered at Urbano each semester, often with between ten and twenty students per class. Given the relatively small size of the studio space where classes take place, an annual budget below $400,000, and an entirely part-time staff of two or three people, it would be difficult for the organization to accommodate more programs or participants. Youth participating in programs at Urbano are compensated at an hourly rate of approximately $10/hour for their time in the classes they attend; for many of the youth at Urbano, this pay enables them to justify going to classes at Urbano rather than taking on jobs in restaurants or retail stores.
The student population of Urbano can change semester to semester, as students are only asked to commit to one class at a time. Some students choose to return to Urbano for other classes and workshops, or to attend exhibitions. Typically, these students eventually become part of a group called the “Urbano Fellows” after participating in multiple semesters of classes, and demonstrating commitment and enthusiasm about their work at the organization. In addition to meeting once a week with a teaching artist throughout the school year and the summer, the Urbano Fellows sometimes work with Urbano staff members on teaching artist proposal reviews and interviews, new student recruitment and interviews, facilitation of orientations for teaching artists and students, conference presentations, and grant proposal and reporting processes. Classes often have an Urbano Fellow as a teaching assistant to the teaching artist, and a few Urbano Fellows occupy part-time staff positions, supporting Carmen and others in the daily operations of the organization. Of the sixteen young people who participated in this research study, nine individuals were current or former Urbano Fellows, one individual was a returning student who later became an Urbano Fellow, and the rest were new students. Of the six young people who were new to Urbano that summer, three continued to take classes in the following academic year.

According to the Urbano’s annual reports, approximately 90% of students are of color, and most come from immigrant families or are immigrants themselves. The majority of students are eligible for free or reduced-priced lunch at school. The demographics of

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4 At Urbano, young people participating in the organization are called “students” when their primary form of involvement is through enrollment in a class. Young people who are a part of the Urbano Fellows are typically referred to as “Fellows.” Young people will also be called “youth artists” or “artists” by teaching artists and staff members; this language is sometimes used in written materials of the organization as well. For the purposes of this dissertation, I call young people in the classes “students,” and will mention if they are also Urbano Fellows and/or working as Urbano staff members (e.g. teaching assistants, coordinators, administrative assistants). Generally, I do not use the term “youth artists” because not all youth participants at Urbano comfortably or naturally identify as artists themselves.
Urbano students—young people who coming from nearly a dozen different neighborhoods across the Boston area—are similar to that of student population in the city’s public schools. In Boston, approximately 86% of students are of color, 45% of students have a first language that is not English, and 66% of students are economically disadvantaged (BPS at a Glance Fact Sheet, 2017). Young people in Boston face neighborhoods and schools that are racially segregated—according to a 2018 report by the Boston Globe, nearly 60% of Boston’s public schools serve a population that is over 90% students of color—and trends of re-segregation are intensifying locally and nationwide.

![Neighborhood Map from Urbano Annual Report - 2017 Fiscal Year](image)

*Figure 2: Neighborhood Map from Urbano Annual Report - 2017 Fiscal Year*

The programming at Urbano is guided by a different theme every year, which Urbano staff establish and publicize through a request for proposals (RFP) that invites teaching artists to submit project ideas related to that theme. This approach to programming
means that teaching artists typically change semester to semester, though there are also times when teaching artists will lead a year-long project or become regular teaching artists at the organization, returning over the course of years to lead projects. This structure—coupled with a high rate of staff turnover at the organization—has meant that Carmen is the most consistent adult presence at the organization. It also means that teaching artist projects—and the curriculum and pedagogy of classes—can vary widely. While Urbano generally provides orientations for teaching artists before they begin leading their classes, the organization does not train teaching artists in any given pedagogy, nor set rigid guidelines around what the processes and products that emerge from their classes should be. Within this model, teaching artists gain freedom and flexibility in how they lead their classes, and the learning experiences that students have in one class can be significantly different from what they encounter in another. Although classes are meant to be thematically cohesive—given that all teaching artists are responding to the same RFP and working with their students to produce art for an exhibition under that same theme—the content of classes is left up to the interpretations of the teaching artist and students in their group.

Although the work at Urbano has long addressed concerns of place, social issues, and public space, the organization marked an explicit focus on the local neighborhood in 2015, supported by a foundation grant for creative placemaking work. In Urbano’s 2015-2016 RFP, the theme of “The Commons: Space, Place, and the Public” was described as follows:

For the next two years, Urbano staff, project facilitators, and youth artists will work closely with community partners in our adjacent neighborhood of Egleston Square to explore themes of gentrification, environmental justice, cultural and economic equity, public space and access through creative placemaking work. We are working
with a definition of creative placemaking as a way that artists, creative practitioners, and people who live and work in neighborhoods work together to define and create aesthetically, culturally, and socially rich, sustainable common spaces.

In the following year, the organization initiated the second phase of their work on this theme—seeking to address issues of “racial, ethnic, cultural, and urban identity and representation,” and “develop social/creative laboratories to increase inter-group understanding, tolerance, and civic culture.” Through the project proposal form, Urbano staff asked teaching artists to answer questions such as: “What question does your project pose about the social construction of ‘the other’ in Egleston/Jackson Square and the surrounding area?” “How does your project gather information or otherwise investigate this question?” “How will students participate in the development of this project?” “How will you engage with people and places in the neighborhood?” A page on the Urbano website was established to provide background information on the local neighborhood, as well as inspirations for place-based projects from contemporary artists in other contexts. It was during this year that I began the research that I present in this dissertation.

The neighborhood context of Urbano itself presented unique and important opportunities to build knowledge on the complexities of place and education in an urban context. Urbano is located in Jamaica Plain, a neighborhood where the majority of the population is white (54%) and Hispanics comprise 25% of the population; the median household income in 2015 was $76,968, significantly higher than the Boston median household income of $55,777. Yet the surrounding area of Urbano also borders the neighborhood of Roxbury, a neighborhood where the majority of the population is Black and/or Latino (approximately 53% and 29% respectively), and the median household income in 2015 was $25,937. In both Jamaica Plain and Roxbury, the numbers of white
residents are increasing while the numbers of Black and Latino residents are decreasing.
Over recent years, gentrification has become a heated issue in these neighborhoods, and across the city. Particularly in Egleston Square, the predominantly Black and Latinx area of Jamaica Plain where Urbano was focusing its placemaking efforts, the themes of people’s sense of place, belonging, and identity were becoming increasingly prominent given recent battles against the displacement of working-class communities of color, and the framing of housing rights as a racial justice issue. Local youth were participating in activism for affordable housing, and there were growing tensions in the neighborhood as the demographic changes became increasingly visible—especially when a Latin American supermarket that was an important part of the cultural and social life of the local Latinx communities was replaced by a Whole Foods. Knowing that Urbano had addressed issues of gentrification in previous artist projects, I was curious about how, if at all, the pedagogies of place and placemaking at Urbano would explore current events in the local area—and also how Urbano students, who come from neighborhoods across the Boston area, might relate to these concerns.

In the fall of 2015, when I began to consider Urbano as a research site for inquiry into pedagogies of place and placemaking, the organization described itself as a community art studio that brought “together urban youth and professional artists to ignite social change through place-based participatory art and performance projects.” Some versions of its mission statement also included the term “creative placemaking” as the kind of work that the artists did. While Urbano had always been place-based as an organization, I was struck by the explicit language around space and place that Urbano had begun to use to guide its programming, and began a dialogue with the staff at the organization about my research interests. In the winter of 2016, I had an initial meeting with Carmen to discuss my
background and interests, provide materials from the place-based curriculum design that I had done over the last years, and gauge her interest in partnering me with me in a research project. We had two separate meetings to discuss details, during which Carmen and other staff members reviewed a drafted proposal for the research, and expressed enthusiasm about the project. Once I had their agreement, I proceeded to build my study design around Urbano as the place of focus.

In order to address my research questions related to the meaning-making and experiences of participants in place-based programs at Urbano, I entered into full immersion in the social world of the research site. I aimed to see it in the way that those indigenous to the world do; at the same time, I analyzed this setting from the standpoint of an outsider, comparing it to other worlds I know in order to gain further insight into their culture (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2015, personal communication). Dwelling in this place long enough to discern its defining details and recognize its relation to the world outside its walls, I drew upon the wisdom of artists such as Eudora Welty, an American writer and novelist whose body of work included many portraits of life in the Mississippi Delta, her place of home. In Welty’s words, “one place understood helps us understand all places better.” Educational theorist Eliot Eisner has argued that a feature of excellent social science and works of art is the ability to generate this kind of awareness—“creat[ing] a paradox of revealing what is universal by examining what is particular” (Eisner, 1995, p. 3). Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) similarly points out that it is “in the particular”—“the specifics, the nuance, the detailed description of a thing, a gesture, a voice, an attitude”—that we might find more universal themes and patterns of experience.

In the empirical chapters that follow, I tell stories of the particulars of the place of Urbano, and the experiences of those who inhabit the place, with a goal of achieving
moments where readers might see aspects of their own selves or social worlds reflected in these pages. At the same time, I recognize that the meaning that we make of stories is invariably shaped by the personal and historical contexts in which we encounter them (Heidegger as cited in Nakkula & Ravitch, 1998). I do not believe that there is an absolute truth and essential meaning that holds across identities, time, and place. Yet I do believe that in order to build our knowledge of the world, and to understand the similarities and differences in human experience that result from how we are situated within it, it is essential to attend to the moments in which we do feel a click of recognition—as well as when we do not. Perhaps the most important thing we can do in these moments is to ask ourselves why, and to enter into dialogue with one another as we reach towards deeper levels of self and mutual understanding. I invite my readers to engage in this kind of reflective thinking as they move through the moments that I present in this portraiture study of Urbano. In this way, I hope that we can enter into a “dialogic space” (Nakkula & Ravitch, 1998) that allows for exploration of difference, and creates new possibilities for interpreting our selves and our own local worlds.

Before we dive into this exploration, below I discuss the methods that I used to gather information about place-based programs at Urbano, and the meaning-making and experience of participants in the setting.

**Methods**

**Data Collection**

To build research relationships and become acquainted with the culture of the organization, I began preliminary observations at Urbano starting in May 2016—approximately two and a half months before the summer program was scheduled to begin. During these months, I attended exhibitions and events hosted by Urbano—both inside the
physical space of the organization and outside in the local neighborhood. I introduced myself as a researcher to the youth and adult staff who were working at Urbano during that time, and I offered myself as a volunteer as they prepared for the summer program. I also spent time becoming acquainted with the local neighborhood through attending art and music festivals held there, going to local restaurants and cafes, and walking around its streets.

When the Urbano summer classes began in July 2016, I began daily observations at the organization, and was present for approximately five hours a day each weekday—allowing me to collect data on every class session of the summer program, accompany students on class activities that took place outside of the studio, and also be present for informal interactions that took place before and after class meetings. There were several advantages to conducting this research during the summer term of Urbano classes: generally, the students had more flexibility in their schedules during this time of year, and therefore had fewer limitations in their time spent at Urbano or in activities of this research project (i.e. interviews); there was more instructional time in the classes, with two classes meeting for four hours per session twice a week, and another group of youth artists meeting for seven hours on Fridays; the warmer weather allowed for more opportunities for classes to spend time outside in the local neighborhood, if it made sense for the group. I used multiple data collection methods to build knowledge on different aspects of the place-based practices at Urbano; these methods are described below.

**Participant observation.** In qualitative research, participant observation is commonly used to “describe settings, behavior, and events” (Maxwell, 2012). The process of participant observation is dynamic, as the researcher plays an active role in negotiating the extent and the nature of their participation in the action of the setting. Green (2014) thus uses the metaphor of a game of double dutch to capture how researchers “jump” into
existing phenomenon and become a part of the action—deciding when and how to jump in, when and how to stand aside. The process is inherently complicated, messy, and unpredictable, catching us by surprise as we negotiate our shifting roles in the setting. Yet it is a crucial source of data, and a critical opportunity to form authentic relationships with research participants as we join in activities that matter to them (Paris & Winn, 2013). At Urbano, I saw participant observation as my main source of data on what pedagogies of place and placemaking looked and felt like at Urbano; it was also a key way in which I built relationships of trust, respect, and mutuality with youth and adults at the organization.

During the summer of 2016, I observed each session of the classes taking place at the organization, in addition to any special events (e.g. community exhibitions, field trips) that occurred. As mentioned earlier, I also observed sites of informal interaction outside of class sessions, which allowed me to gain further insight into what was happening in the lives of my research participants, and to consider how the unstructured spaces of the organization factor into their meaning-making and experience.

My participant observation at Urbano involved sitting alongside staff members as they created Powerpoint slides for a teaching artist orientation, writing name tags and labelling jars in the supply closet together with youth staff, participating in icebreaker games, lending a hand when students needed an extra person for a video they were shooting or a listener for one of their ideas. I often stepped out of the action during discussions in classes or meetings, taking on the role of recorder if that was needed, or taking the time to observe from the sidelines and write my own notes. Throughout, I recognized that my presence was invariably shaping what I observed, and that the signs of my presence in the story of the organization were clear and visible to all. My face was in photos from an Urbano student-led event that then were tacked onto the walls of the studio for the spring exhibition; I was in
the group photograph used in the publicity materials for the summer exhibition of student art; I played the role of a skateboarding police officer in a video students made about what liberation could look like. Whenever I saw these signs—of my own self in the setting I was observing—I would ask myself whether I had gone too far: whether I had entered so fully into the setting that it would be difficult for me to see it through a critical and discerning lens, whether I was participating so actively that I would not be able to capture the details of the scene as comprehensively as I would need to in order to describe it in writing. I took these as important moments to practice reflexivity about my work in the setting, as well as to record my own lived experience of being a participant in place-based programs at Urbano. As portraitists do, I write myself in to the stories told in the subsequent chapters, allowing readers to see the role that I played in the settings I describe.

As a means of capturing the data from participant observation, I created audio-recordings, wrote field notes, and took photographs and video. I documented the everyday talk of the youth with regard to the concept of place, as well as the program activities, the practices of teaching artists, the body language and facial expressions of participants, and the physical features of the setting. Between May and August of 2016, I spent approximately 270 hours in participant observation at Urbano.

**Semi-structured interviews.** To address my research question related to the meaning making and experience of participants in Urbano programs, I conducted semi-structured interviews with Urbano staff, teaching artists, and students. Interviewing allowed me to fill in the gaps of what was missed through my own participant observation (Maxwell, 2012). Moreover, interviews enable researchers to develop nuanced and complex understandings of participants’ identities, perspectives, and lived experience. Because of the small size of Urbano, it was possible for me to interview all individuals involved. Ultimately,
my sample included five staff members (all adult staff members at the organization during the time of data collection), nine teaching artists (all teaching artists, including guest teaching artists, who worked at Urbano during the time of data collection), and sixteen students (all but one of the students who participated in the summer classes). Generally, I conducted one 60-minute interview with each staff and teaching artist, with the option of a follow-up interview if desired by the researcher or the research participant. I conducted three interviews with the founder and director of the organization, in order to collect data on history of the organization and the background of its focus on place.

Because a focus of this research study was on the meaning making and experience of youth participants in the Urbano programs, and given my interest in how, if at all, there were shifts in their perspectives over the course of their summer classes, I conducted two semi-structured interviews with the students. The first interview, which took place in the first weeks of the summer classes, addressed how research participants think about their identities and neighborhoods, as well as their early experiences of the summer program at Urbano. Basic background information on each research participant was collected through a paper survey after the first interview. The second interview, which took place in the weeks after the conclusion of the summer program, focused on salient moments in research participants’ experiences of Urbano, as well as the impact of their classes on their learning and development. My interview protocols were developed using strategies that have proven useful for engaging adolescent research participants (Prosser, 2011), and for research focused on themes of place (e.g. Hollingworth & Archer, 2010; Kinloch, 2009; Schaefer-McDaniel, 2007; Tuck & McKenzie, 2014). For example, I offered research participants the option of

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5 See Appendix A for interview protocols.
6 See Appendix B for background survey.
drawing their neighborhoods or a flag for their neighborhoods in order to better understand their perceptions of these places. These visual methods resonated with some of my research participants as a way to communicate their ideas, and facilitated rich and detailed discussion of questions in the interview protocol.

**Written and visual documents.** In addition to conducting interviews and participant observation, I collected written work and visual art generated by youth participants, as well as materials used by Urbano staff and teaching artists, during the summer program and the events leading to it. These data included Urbano’s organizational materials—such as annual reports and requests for proposals—as well as videos and photographs from the archives. Data also included students’ poetry and visual art; these data are important because they represent how the youth express their thoughts, feelings, and experiences through creative and artistic means—which was the preferred mode of communication for many who chose to participate in this community arts setting. These documents were used to inform interview questions, and were rich material for informal conversations at the research site as well. I integrate some of these materials into the chapters of this dissertation, to help flesh out the picture of the work happening at the organization.

**Data Analysis**

My analysis of these various sources of data was guided by the methodology of portraiture, and structured through a systematic process. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed in their entirety. Audio recordings of workshop meetings were selectively transcribed, based on the richness of the group discussions captured in the recording. I used NVivo software to code and conduct a thematic analysis of all transcribed data and
fieldnotes, as well as photographs of written and visual documents. Coding was conducted in an iterative process that began during data collection.

To manage the large quantity of data that was to be collected, I utilized a comprehensive plan for organizing and classifying the data. I began by carefully reading through all fieldnotes, interview transcripts, transcribed excerpts of workshop meetings, and written and visual documents, in order to identify the data that most directly addressed my research questions. Next, I engaged a rigorous coding process for each batch of data, generating emic codes and developing a codebook for all of the data that was to be analyzed (Charmaz, 2011). Although this coding process was largely inductive, I also included etic codes\(^7\) developed from relevant literature.

Following the analytical approach of portraiture as recommended by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997), I aimed to “listen for the story” (p.12) told by the data collected. Utilizing portraiture’s “five modes of synthesis, convergence, and contrast,” I made sense of the data through attending to: 1) phrases and terms that are repeated frequently by multiple research participants; 2) metaphors and symbols that research participants use to express meaning; 3) institutional and cultural rituals participants engage in during formal and informal gatherings of the program; 4) triangulation, or points of convergence across different data sources; and 5) “revealing patterns,” or the logic that underlies data that might appear incongruent. Because I studied two different classes taking place at the organization, I approached analysis with the understanding that there may be significant points of divergence in the stories that emerged from each of these groups. I paid close attention to these areas and made them explicit in the portrait. At the same time, I looked for patterns

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\(^7\) See Appendix C for examples of etic codes.
that held across the data from the classes and programs over time, as I listened for the overarching story of the data.

The main tools that I used to develop my analysis of the data were impressionistic records and analytic memos (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). An impressionistic record is “a ruminative, thoughtful piece that identifies emerging hypotheses, suggests interpretations, describes shifts in perspective, points to puzzles and dilemmas (methodological, conceptual, ethical) that need attention, and develops a plan of action for the next visit” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 188). I wrote brief impressionistic records at the end of each session of participant observation, and I wrote extended impressionistic records after interviews. Analytic memos were used to explore connections I found across codes, impressionistic records, and fieldnotes; they were also a key tool for me to question my assumptions and to reflect upon how my preoccupations were shaping interpretations of the data.

**Validity**

A variety of strategies for addressing threats to validity—or the “correctness or credibility” of the research (Maxwell, 2012)—were embedded in my study design. Through daily participant observation and interviews, I engaged in intensive, close involvement with research participants in the research setting. This allowed multiple opportunities for triangulation, as I collected large amounts and varying kinds of data on participants’ meaning-making and lived experience. In addition, this level of involvement enabled me to build strong researcher relationships, and support the collection of data that was “rich” in its detail and its revealing nature.

To manage my biases as a researcher, I aimed to be explicit about aspects of my identity and experience that were relevant to this study, and to examine how they impact my
interpretations. For example, I anticipated that my background as a youth educator and teaching artist would shape how I connected with the educators at the research site, as well as the way I participated in program activities. Analytic memos were my main tool for examining how my subjectivities shaped data collection and analysis, and for continually deepening my understandings of how they influenced the story I told. I shared memos with a writing group at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, deliberately engaging with colleagues whose training and background differed from my own, in an effort to bring “fresh eyes” to the data and gain perspectives on how I might be wrong.

As I developed my analyses of the data, I also engaged in respondent validation (Maxwell, 2012) through informal conversations with adults and youth at the organization. I shared my thinking and solicited feedback, at times asking directly for participants’ hypotheses to explain what we observed happening. I referred to moments in program activities, or to visual or written work that youth had created, so that our conversations were rooted in specific data points that surfaced interesting puzzles. I recorded and considered their explanations in my analytic memos, and searched the data for evidence to test the validity of different conclusions. In the portraits included in this dissertation, I directly address the intellectual and personal preoccupations (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) that shape my lens in the research, and include many pieces of data so that readers can critically engage with my interpretations and conclusions.

In addition, in accordance with the methodology of portraiture, I assessed the validity of this research in terms of its authenticity, or its ability to “captur[e] the essence and resonance of the actors’ experience and perspective through the details of action and thought revealed in context” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 12). For readers, research participants, and researchers who engage with the final portrait, I hope that there
will be a “click of recognition” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) embedded in the experience of reading these words. My ambition is to create a written work that is both “empathetic and critical, generous and discerning” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, personal communication, March 4, 2015), and that is valuable to a range of audiences as it reveals something essential about the people, places, and concepts at its heart. Particularly given the interests of my partnering organization in gaining new insight into its programs and the communities they serve, this research is designed to honor mutually beneficial research relationships, in which learning is reciprocal and shared.

**A Reflection on Power, Reciprocity, and Ongoing Partnership**

As I write about the origins of this research and the implementation of my dissertation study, I am reflecting on how much of this project was steered by me. Although I created multiple opportunities before and during the research process for stakeholders at Urbano to shape the project—for example, by offering to incorporate any feedback they offered on study design into my research proposal—the decision-making power in our research collaboration was concentrated in my own hands. Over the course of the research process—and especially during data collection—this power imbalance between me and my research participants raised numerous moments of tension and concern for me. Especially as young people’s struggle for power within the organization of Urbano surfaced as a theme in the data, I began to question whether I was personally doing enough to honor principles of youth voice, community partnership, and the “relational ethics of accountability” (Tuck & McKenzie, 2014). These principles and ethics stand at the core not only of my methodological approach in this study, but also of my own practice as a critical educator.

Thinking back to my entry into research with Urbano, I recognize that it was necessary for me to approach the staff leadership of the organization first—and that
practically, it was impossible for me to enter into early conversations with the teaching artists and students who would be present during the summer, as they had not yet been recruited at the time that I had to finalize my research proposal. Yet this also meant that I was playing into the power structure of the organization, and valuing the voices of those in positions of power over the voices of others. While each individual research participant later chose whether they wanted to opt in or out of the research, it is possible that they felt pressure to participate because the staff that hired them had already deemed it to be in the interest of the organization to collaborate with me. I appreciated that Carmen’s decision to collaborate with me in this research demonstrated the level of trust that we had built in our own research relationship, but was concerned that these dynamics might have stifled voices that might have been opposed to the idea.

Indeed, as I later learned through my data collection, there was a pattern of conflict between some Urbano students and staff at the organization, where young people had been hurt by their exclusion from the decision-making process around hiring staff at the organization. Through informal conversations, I also learned that some students were critical of Carmen’s eagerness to partner with people from local universities, perceiving this as a preference for elite spaces and institutions rather than the community-based resources available locally. Given the understandings that I was gaining about the workings of power at Urbano, I wondered whether my very presence there could be read as a symptom of a problem—one more that was perhaps more legible to the young people than to the adults at the organization. There were moments when I advocated for the interests of youth at the organization: for example, I went to Urbano staff to share some of their ideas for how Urbano could improve from the spring to the summer semester; I also mentioned to staff that some of the youth were concerned about the placement of youth artwork in the back
studio while teaching artist work was featured in front. I made these decisions to speak on behalf of the young people only with their permission, and with the understanding that it carried less risk and potentially more impact for me to share these perspectives—given the power afforded by my status as an adult, an outsider, and an educational practitioner and researcher. While I do not know whether I made the “right” decision in these situations, I believed that it was one way that I could cultivate reciprocity in my research relationships at the organization, and that in this reciprocity there was a possibility of benefit for my research participants—especially those with the least power.

Making these moves—as small as they were—felt important to me given something else I knew about the research process: that it would take many months for me to analyze the data and arrive at the point of sharing research products (a Powerpoint presentation and discussion of findings, and the written work that is this dissertation), and that this time might lessen the potential benefits of this research for those involved. Years have now passed since the summer of my data collection, and many of the students, staff, and teaching artists who participated in this research are no longer working at the organization. Given these realities, it seemed like a real possibility that the benefits of the knowledge built from this research would accrue mainly to researchers and practitioners outside of Urbano, without much of a positive contribution made to the organization itself. I began to wonder about what else was possible within the collaboration that I had established with Urbano. I sought to re-frame my understanding of our relationship from being a collaboration bounded by time, to an ongoing partnership built more firmly upon principles of reciprocity and equitable power-sharing—a more flexible relationship defined by an “ethical praxis of care” (Cahill, 2007).

When an opportunity arose during my data collection that would allow for this kind of partnership to develop, I made an intentional decision to pursue it. The staff were
concerned about finding funding to continue its programs, and approached me to see if I'd be interested in working with them on a grant to do an action research project together.

Action research differs from traditional research in that its primary goal is to address a practical problem that will help improve the practice of individuals or organizations (Lewin, 1946; McMillan, 2012; Schmuck, 1997). Typically, the problem or issue is identified by the individuals within a given setting, who then play an active role in planning the inquiry, gathering information, and taking action based on findings (Lewin, 1946). I said yes, and together with Urbano staff members, a number of Urbano Fellows, and an Urbano consultant who helped with the actual grant proposal, I helped develop a plan for an Urbano project that would involve students in investigating an issue of concern to their local community, and integrating art into the actions that would result from their research. This project followed in the model of youth participatory action research (YPAR)—an approach to building knowledge with youth that is becoming increasingly popular in schools, universities, and community-based settings (e.g. Cammarota & Fine, 2010; Rodriguez & Brown, 2009). Importantly, YPAR moves researchers beyond “listening to youth”—what I had aimed to do through my dissertation study at Urbano—towards working in partnership with youth on research of their own design. Given my own training in YPAR at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, I was familiar with the theoretical and empirical literature that demonstrated the value of this approach for challenging inequalities at the institutional level, and promoting positive developmental outcomes for youth. As an educator, I believed—and continue to believe—strongly in the contributions that YPAR can make to young people’s lives and to the settings that we share. As a researcher still cultivating reciprocity in my relationship with Urbano, I felt excited to support the staff and students in
this direction—one that emerged primarily from the organization’s needs and interests, rather than my own.

Although Urbano ultimately did not receive external funding to support the action research project, the organization expressed commitment to carrying it forward anyway. I agreed to be the teaching artist facilitating the process for students. In the fall after I concluded the data collection for my dissertation study, I began working closely with an Urbano Fellow—a young person who had been a research participant in my project, and who had expressed an interest in research—to plan the class. As a part of my effort to equitably share power and responsibility within our process, I offered to split my teaching artist paycheck evenly with my youth partner, and he accepted. Over the course of our process, I at times played the role of a teacher or a mentor, sharing my knowledge of how to design curriculum and lesson plans; at other times, he guided me through learning more about the local neighborhood of Urbano, the workings of the organization, and the content and activities that might be most engaging for our students. We solicited ideas from other Urbano students on the goals and activities of the project, recruited participants, and began our work as a class and a research collective in the spring of 2017. Over the course of two semesters, our group learned about Egleston Square, the meaning and practice of artivism (art + activism), developed research questions based on students’ interests in the role of artists in processes of gentrification, and created work to present to the public at two different Urbano exhibitions. My youth partner and I called one another “co-facilitators,” and took turns leading facilitation throughout the class. I had IRB approval for this phase of my work with Urbano, but given the difference in research focus between my dissertation and this YPAR project, I do not include the data from the YPAR project in this dissertation. I do, however, explore some key aspects of the place-based pedagogy that we enacted within
this project—highlighting the principles of partnership, youth participation, democratic processes, and caring relationships that we sought to carry into our class.

I tell this story here to make transparent the full arc of the relationship that I built with Urbano over the course of years. It is a story of my own learning about the possibilities of reciprocity, and of building authentic partnerships at the interpersonal and institutional level. The journey was a direct outgrowth of navigating the ethics of research with youth and communities, and reckoning with the power-geometries (Massey, 2004) shaping the work that we do. I do not present this story as an argument for all researchers to take an action orientation in their work, or to suggest that multiple years of commitment are always necessary in order for a research relationship to become an authentic, reciprocal partnership. I do, however, encourage researchers to imagine the possibilities of working in such partnership with communities, and to listen to research participants—especially those who carry the least power in their given setting—about what kind of reciprocity would be most meaningful and supportive to them. As many have pointed out, this often means taking off the “researcher hat” and engaging the other skills and strengths that we might have—for example, as teachers, tutors, counselors, resource connectors, artists, and more. In my case, it meant tapping into my background as a teaching artist with a critical orientation, as well as my own resources of time, to address a gap in the organization’s youth programs (i.e. around youth-adult partnership and the combination of art, activism, and research).

In some ways, my transition from researcher to teaching artist at the organization was awkward—this was particularly true as some of former research participants became my students, and other research participants technically became my supervisors. Yet there was also something organic to the progression of our relationship—a sense that I was a part of the Urbano community. On several occasions during my data collection for this dissertation
study, members of the Urbano staff members and Fellows referred to me as “family”—a word that they used to describe their own relationships, to capture the intimacy of the connections and the deep sense of belonging they felt around one another. I remember moments when someone would tease me because I asked permission to join them at a table, or for saying thank you when they didn’t believe it needed to be said. I continued to err on the side of caution and courtesy in all of my interactions, but I also took their point: on a human level, we were developing bonds that were meaningful beyond the bounds of my dissertation study. Moreover, I recognized the reality that even though I had entered into Urbano in a different position than they had, we were all inhabitants of a shared place; whether consciously or not, we were all place-makers at Urbano, too. As Schneekloth and Shibley (1995) write, “Placemaking is not just about the relationship of people to their places; it also creates relationships among people in places” (p. 1). The stories that emerge in the empirical chapters that follow—each one centered on a different process that was part of the pedagogies of place and placemaking at Urbano—are one outgrowth of these relationships, and the many possibilities they carry.
III. Tracing Origins: Foundations of Placemaking at Urbano

*Place provides the conditions for creative social practice.* - Tim Cresswell

Within the literature on place-based education (PBE), research tends to focus mainly on pedagogical practices within classrooms, and the ways in which teachers seek to connect their classrooms with local communities. Less attention has been paid to the institutional contexts in which pedagogies of place and placemaking occur. Yet context matters for the success of these educational approaches: studies have shown, for example, that pedagogies of place best thrive in schools where there are shared theoretical understandings of the approach (Cole, 2010), and where there is a common discourse around values of community, local knowledge, and relationships (Sanchez, 2011). In order to better understand the factors and conditions that shape the purposes and practices of these pedagogies in an educational setting, it is important to attend to the contexts in which they unfold.

Thus, as background for the subsequent empirical chapters that directly address my research questions about how pedagogies of place and placemaking are practiced at Urbano, I present this chapter as a study of Urbano itself as a place. I begin by describing the geographic, temporal, physical, and aesthetic dimensions of Urbano—creating a picture of what it looks and feels like to be there today. I then examine its origins in the personal and professional history of Carmen, the organization’s founder and artistic director, illuminating the vision and values that draw together Urbano’s past and present. Finally, I begin to explore how individuals who have worked at Urbano as staff or teaching artists make sense of the place—a subject which I continue to explore in the subsequent chapters of this
dissertation. I conclude with a discussion of how factors of socio-historical and socio-political context have played a role in shaping the meanings attached to Urbano: a site of placemaking that attempts to resist the oppressive forces dominant in contemporary schooling and urban life.

**The Way to Urbano**

If you’re taking public transportation, the best way to get to Urbano is to take the orange line of the “T”—Boston’s subway system. To get there from my apartment on the Harvard campus, I take the red line and transfer to the orange line at Downtown Crossing—a stop located near the financial district and the Boston Common, the site of many rallies, protests, and counter-protests over the course of city’s history. Inside the station, a cross-section of the city’s population often waits on the platform of the train to Forest Hills, which runs through the neighborhoods of Chinatown, Roxbury, and Jamaica Plain. Construction workers exchange words in Spanish, their sturdy boots and denim jeans splattered with white paint; nurses wear scrubs for their work at local hospitals, the weight of large purses or backpacks bearing down on their shoulders; elderly immigrants speak in Cantonese, sometimes carrying food in thin plastic bags or holding the hands of their grandchildren; high school students—mostly Black and brown youth—stand in small clusters, often with their earphones in, sometimes bursting into laughter about something they see on their cell phones.

The train cars of the orange line have yellowed walls and seats that bear faded colors of swirling rainbow lines. For a few stops, the subway shuttles through dark tunnels, and your reflection is all you see through the windows. Once the train breaks into the light of

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8 Drawing from observations and interviews with Urbano staff and teaching artists (n=14), this chapter centers on the voices of the adults, as a prelude for the following chapter, which focuses on the voices of youth.
day, you can look outside and catch the graffiti stretching horizontally across the concrete walls lining the train tracks—a layer of life beneath the trees, sidewalks, and streets of the city. During the summer of 2016, the walls were filled with the tags of graffiti artists, and phrases in stark black lines.

*RIP ALTON STERLING*

*END MASS INCARCERATION*

*UP WITH THE PEOPLE. DOWN WITH THE PIGS*

Decades ago, the words were different but similarly revealing of the issues of the time.

In the 1960’s, people across Boston were organizing to oppose a highway construction project that would have cut through Jamaica Plain and Roxbury, creating physical divides in the communities and displacing over seven thousand people from their homes and businesses (Vrabel, 2014). During that era of activism, in simple white letters on the mossy bricks of a railroad embankment, a message was written that stayed for twenty years.

*STOP I-95*

*PEOPLE BEFORE HIGHWAYS*

Like what was written in the summer of 2016, the words weren’t written to be aesthetically pleasing; they were there to announce the presence of people who refuse to be silenced, of ideas that don’t disappear once the lettering is erased. They are also evidence of the power of everyday people to claim their rights to their city—rights that involve the right to remain, and the right to transform it in their own vision (Lefebvre, 1996; Harvey 2008). Ultimately, the campaign to defeat the highway proposal succeeded and funds were invested in mass transit, open space, and recreational facilities in the city instead.

In Jamaica Plain, in the space where many homes and businesses had already been razed to clear way for the proposed highway, the Southwest Corridor Park was built. Now,
where the highway would have been, there are fields of grass, skate parks, jungle gyms, community gardens, basketball courts, and linden trees that turn fragrant in summer. For nearly forty years, a neighborhood festival takes place here every May, founded to celebrate the successful activism of local residents and the ideals of unity and solidarity in the community. When you exit the orange line at Stony Brook, you can walk down a concrete path in the park to get to the old Haffenreffer Brewery, a complex of buildings known today simply as “the Brewery.” Urbano has been located here since it was founded in 2009. Today, the Brewery is home to a range of organizations and small businesses that include a bustling cafe with Wi-Fi, a trendy restaurant that hosts live music and performance events at night, a non-profit fighting against displacement in the local area. There are a variety of organizations that offer programs for youth, each with their own focus and specialty: dance classes, math tutoring, soccer, biking, activism. Urbano is the only art gallery and studio in the complex, and it is easy to miss; nearly everyone gets lost on their first trip there. Whenever there are new students or visitors coming in, staff members in the office are ready to pick up calls and rattle off directions through the maze of parking lots, stairwells, and elevators that ultimately lead to Urbano.

When you arrive at Urbano, it can take a moment for your eyes to adjust to the dimness of the room, and your body to settle into the airiness of the space. Especially on humid summer days, I find it to be a much-needed relief to step inside, take a deep breath, and exhale as the door closes softly behind me. The moment offers an invitation to pause and refocus; to enter into a different way-of-being and way-of-moving around space. Here, the walls are thickened with layers upon layers of paint, renewed each time the organization holds an exhibition of artist work. Exposed metal pipes snake along the perimeters of the room, and four cylindrical pillars rise from the gray concrete floors to the brick ceilings.
above. Staff members sit with laptops at long wooden desks that line the back and side walls. Usually, there are only two or three staff members at the organization, working closely alongside Carmen or picking up calls from her when she does not come in.

There is an open doorway from the front gallery to the back studio, where Urbano’s youth programs typically take place. Like the front gallery, the back studio has four pillars and ceiling fans, exposed pipes, and nicks and paint splatters on the gray concrete floors. Instead of track lighting, single bulbs hang from black cords wrapped around the beams of the ceiling. Along the back wall, storage closets hold an impressive array of art materials, laptops, cameras, and other recording equipment. On the side, behind long black curtains, there is a kitchen area with a mini-refrigerator and microwave; cabinets of pretzels, popcorn, granola bars, and Goldfish crackers; separate sinks for washing dishes and paintbrushes; and space for drying racks and stacks of chairs that can be brought out for meetings and class sessions, though many of them are broken. Two pianos are pushed against the wall where a white board is installed, and where a projector screen can be pulled down for presentations and for workshopping student artwork. One pipe running down the wall splits into what appears to be two legs in striped tights, with little black Mary Jane shoes on. No one I asked knew the story of this fixture of the space. All that is clear is that there is a history that led to it, and this piece of Urbano—like all others—is a product of someone’s imagination.

None of the spaces in Urbano resemble what we’re accustomed to seeing in schools and youth programs: there are no colorful felt college pennants on the wall, no individual desks attached to metal chairs, no cheery posters with positive and encouraging words. At Urbano, this is intentional on the part of the adults who worked at the organization. “[Urbano] takes cues from art studios and design studios, not a traditional educational setting,” explains Mike, an artist and designer who is Carmen’s son-in-law, and who
occasionally works as a staff member at the organization. “Education for young folks has a bad reputation—it’s like an obligation. You’ve got to go to school.” He continues: “[Urbano] isn’t an obligatory thing; it’s voluntary. So I think…the environment should reflect that ethos of the place.” According to Mike, Urbano seeks to “create a different environment” for education through the making of its physical space—“not just…[through the] curriculum.” As an alternative to dominant practices of schooling, Urbano thus resists any connection to a set-up of “25 chairs and desks…three rows and weird green walls.” By following the aesthetic of many art galleries and studios—what Mike describes as a “big white box, nice lights…stainless steel, workbenches on wheels”—Urbano represents a different vision for where and how education occurs. More specifically though, it is vision that Mike recognizes immediately as belonging to Carmen, the founder and artistic director of the organization. When he first walked into the space, Mike had already known Carmen for five years, and the connection clicked: “I was like, ‘Oh yeah!’” he says. “This is Carmen’s place.”

**Space to Imagine and to Create**

Born and raised in Colombia, Carmen is a petite woman with a radiant smile and a melodic voice that can fill an entire room. When Carmen says the word “urbano”—the Spanish word for “urban”—she pronounces it in her native tongue. It begins with an ooh that tumbles into a rolled “r,” building momentum towards a dramatic climax: bAH-no! I can hear excitement and pride echoing in these notes every time I observe Carmen greet a special guest or address an audience with her trademark “welcome to Urr-bano!” The finish reminds me of the moment when you pause, step back, and take in the totality of a work of art. Yet instead of a painting on a wall, a performance in a theater, or an object in a glass case, this artwork is a place: a physical environment, a pin that you can drop on a map, and a
space that has been invested with meaning by many over the course of its years. And there is Carmen, supported by a staff of artist-educators whose passion for the work rivals her own. She invites you to step inside.

At the helm of Urbano since she founded it seven years ago, Carmen has been the public face of the organization and the steadiest presence there. With straight bangs, round thick-framed glasses, and cherry red lipstick that pops against her peach-toned skin, Carmen presents an image that is sophisticated and timeless. She keeps her short brown hair tied into a small bun, her accessories minimal yet striking, leaving nothing fussy as a barrier between herself and what she desires to do. During her work days, Carmen seldom stays in one spot for long: she walks freely around the front gallery and back studio of Urbano, with clogs or flat sandals upon her feet, working to keep command of the details of the physical space and what happens within its walls. Her loose tunics, linen pants, and light cardigans flow with the steps of her movement. In her interactions with people, she exudes a warmth that acts as a counterbalance for her strict attention to detail, and her stubbornness about her visions. Her excitement about art, the way she giggles and gushes about great work, has an energizing and endearing effect.

When Carmen talks about art, the stories can run like rivers, stretching far back into her childhood and across distances of time and place. For Carmen, art has long been fundamental to her sense of self and her engagement with the world. “I really wanted to be an artist since I was little…or felt like I was an artist,” she tells me. At the orientation for teaching artists at the beginning of the summer, and during our first interview, Carmen shared one particular memory from when she was a young girl going to school in Bogotá. One day on the bus, she witnessed a disastrous car accident from the window of her seat. Carmen remembers the gruesome scene vividly: “The two cars. Things flying. People there
with blood. The houses behind it.” Later that day, during an art activity at school, Carmen rendered the scene on sandpaper with charcoal and pastels, sparing no detail. She recalls everyone around her responding positively to what she created—“wow, this is amazing,” they exclaimed—as she sat proudly by what she had done. She took the moment as “positive reinforcement” not just of her work, but of something integral to her way-of-being and seeing. Art was Carmen’s way of processing the world—particularly in its moments of strangeness and cruelty—and communicating her observations and experiences to others. As it would for any child, it mattered to Carmen to have a supportive environment that recognized her gifts and her identity in the world.

As Carmen grew older, she became increasingly certain of her own self as an artist, and determined to pursue these interests despite discouraging experiences she faced in her schooling. The elite private school she attended was rigorous in its demands, which Carmen found burdensome and uninspiring. Rattling off a long list of required classes that did not include art—“you have to have math, algebra, trigonometry, and calculus…philosophy, psychology, civics…history, Colombian history, history of the world…American history too, and English, Spanish, French”—Carmen rolls her eyes and groans. “I couldn’t deal.” Still, Carmen excelled in school, and went on to attend a prestigious university popularly known as “the Harvard of Bogotá.” There, however, she quickly began to understand that even in the most elite settings, education could fall woefully short in delivering a positive and supportive experience for students like her. Carmen’s voice fills with a sense of indignation: “It was not about learning, and creating. It was that old traditional kind of learning, of teaching, which is all men—talking down at you. Being nasty. Crushing your maquettes with their feet. Making fun of you, being totally misogynistic and horrible.” Without affirmation for her ideas and inspirations, and without values of equality and respect in the learning
environment, Carmen felt she could not thrive as a person or as an artist. She left the school after two years, and was clear in her reasons why: “There was no space for me to imagine and to create things.” She started to search for ways to claim this space “to imagine and to create” through her own artistic practice; the art spaces that she would found later on in her career were rooted in these beliefs about importance of conditions of support, for artists to nurture their work and their learning.

During this time, Carmen was also becoming increasingly aware of social inequalities in her home country. “I was…questioning a lot, and kind of growing up. I was questioning, why am I going to this really super expensive university and…there are some people that don’t have anything…and there’s such a contrast between class and money and gender.”

Around this time, the early 1960s, the levels of inequality in Colombia were reaching a peak and stirring armed conflict in the country. Carmen became involved with a “little revolutionary group” where she began to “read, read, read” and discuss what was happening around her. There, she found herself at home in the company of others who were critical of “the system,” especially with regard to schools. “The education, it was so bad…[it] made me start questioning: How do you learn? Why do people have to be like that?” Carmen also became desperate to get out—not only of school, but of the place where she had a “safety net” of parents, family, and friends. She convinced her father to let her move to San Francisco and go to art school. By then it was the late 1960s—an “era where everybody was protesting,” she reflects—and Carmen found herself surrounded by young Americans who were “free to live by themselves, working, and protesting, and trying to change things.”

Increasingly, she began to think about how to connect her growing awareness of social issues with her identity as an artist. It was a time in which many artists were becoming politicized (Lacy, 1995), and Carmen and her artist-friends were absorbed in questions of
purpose and social responsibility. Recalling the conversations that were active in her intellectual and artistic communities, Carmen names questions that continue guiding the work she does today: “What is the purpose of making art these days? How could we get involved in the real issues that are affecting all of us, the real issues of our times? How do we work with that, instead of just being, working in a bubble?” These questions were more than idle reflections: ultimately, they guided Carmen through her career in the field of socially engaged art.

In the 1980s, Carmen moved to the Boston area with her husband Pete, a white American man whom she had fallen in love with in Colombia. Together, they settled into a quiet suburb where they could comfortably raise their children. Yet Carmen struggled to feel at home in what she described as “such a segregated city” ruled by “the old Boston people”—a bastion of power, dominated by white men, that to her seemed intractable and impenetrable. In Colombia, Carmen had grown up with a significant amount of privilege—due to her light skin color, her elite schooling, and her family’s wealth. In Boston, she began to understand the sense of marginality and exclusion that many other groups in society felt. “For the first time in my life, I started feeling like ‘the Other’—like I don’t belong here, like people make assumptions about who I am just by the way I look, or by my accent.” Carmen became increasingly attuned to “the issues of identity, the issues of race, the issues of diversity” that confronted people in the U.S. As an artist, she wanted to “address all those things.”

Carmen envisioned a space where artists could “do something about the issue that the world is going through and that we’re all going through.” Her dream was for the space to be “multidisciplinary and not just about Latin American artists or artists of color…but to be totally integrated, [with] artists of all sorts of kinds.” Their work would be outward-facing,
“look[ing] at the context, and the neighborhood, and the space around.” In the mid-1980s, she found a studio space located in what was considered “the south end of the South End,” an area with “burnt out buildings” and vacant lots. The scene was typical of the economic decline occurring in urban neighborhoods across the country during that time, as white middle-class families moved from apartments in the city to homes in the suburbs. With financial support from her parents, Carmen was able to rent the studio, and begin transforming a “long, dark room” with one window into an art gallery that she later decided to call “the Space.”

From 1986 until the early 1990s, the Space was home to many art projects aiming to shine a light on contemporary social issues, challenging artists to respond in creative and cutting-edge ways. The work garnered a significant amount of media attention and interest, and Carmen says that she became regarded by many as “brave” and as “a pioneer” for pushing the boundaries of the elite art world. She delights in the reputation for being cutting-edge that she and her collaborating artists earned: “We were like the people doing alternative things, that were rocking the art scene and everything.” In one example of the site-specific art (Kwon, 2002) that Carmen encouraged, an artist named Ritsuko Taho built a 23-foot high structure with scaffolding and chain link fence in a vacant lot across the street from the Space. Local residents were invited to help fill the sculpture with dead leaves they collected from the surrounding area, contributing to the constantly evolving public art installation in their neighborhood.

Other projects more directly involved young people in the city, offering opportunity for them to “give testimony about…the issues that they ha[d] to deal with, growing up in their neighborhoods.” One mural project took place with young men of color from Egleston Square, an economically disinvested neighborhood that was suffering from intense
community violence during the 1980s, and that happens to be in the local area of Urbano today. In a video from Carmen’s archives, we can see the young men working: they fill large canvases with an image of a police officer holding a club at a young man’s neck, restraining him while another officer passively looks on; another image depicts an American flag behind a figure that looks like the grim reaper. Then we see a small room where approximately twenty people are gathered close together, at a community dialogue at the Space. A young Latinx man in a white-button down shirt takes the mic in the front of a room, and his speech is searing:

Next time [these] motherfuckers try to tell you that you’re violent, you say I’m not violent, motherfucker. You’re violent. You’re violent because there are no books in my school. You’re violent because you brutalize me when you try to arrest me. You’re violent because this land doesn’t belong to you.

After he speaks, the audience sits in a stunned silence, then seems to exhale as one. Over murmurs, you can hear a few people lift their voices to say: yes.

For Carmen, projects like these were a form of education—about what was happening around her in Boston, and about the possibilities of working with youth. The projects positioned young people as collaborating artists and as critical sources of knowledge about issues in society. During the 1980s, models of youth development tended to frame young people as problems—engaging in behaviors that posed risks not only to themselves, but to society at large. In the 1990s, researchers, practitioners, and policymakers began to turn the discourse towards positive youth development—an approach to working with youth grounded in a view of young people as assets to their communities, and centered on nurturing the unique strengths and knowledge they bring to the settings of which they are part (e.g. Benson & Saito, 2000; Pittman, 1992; Lerner, Brentano, Dowling & Anderson,
Carmen, who viewed herself more as an artist than an educator, was beginning to see and understand young people differently than she had before. As she collaborated with young people as artists, and listened to what they had to say, she tells me that she began better “understanding all these dynamics of power, of how society tends to marginalize certain groups of people.” From these experiences, Carmen developed a theory that if social change was to happen “from the ground up,” then it had to involve the young people who were most marginalized in society. In her local context, it was the Black and brown youth who—as the young man in the video voiced—were facing displacement, limited job opportunities, police brutality, and under-resourced schools within a society founded upon oppression and genocide. These were realities that Carmen was removed from in her everyday life living in the predominantly white, wealthy suburb of Boston where she was raising her family. It was in her place of work that she gained exposure to these issues—and where she learned the power of encounters between people of different ages and backgrounds, and with different experiences of the world.

Although her time with the Space was not extensive—Carmen had to close the gallery several years after it opened, in need of a more lucrative job in order to help support her family—the experience was transformative for her. She holds it close in her memory, particularly at this phase in her professional journey: Carmen talks openly about her desire to retire, and she tells me that she considers the Space and Urbano to be the “bookends” of her career. As we sit together with hot cups of tea at a worktable at Urbano, Carmen gathers a couple of art magazines and lights up showing me the pages with photographs and write-ups about the Space. She recites the mission of the Space, that had been printed on one of the magazine pages: “The Space is a nonprofit artist-run organization,” existing to “support
artists of diverse backgrounds, working in an issue-oriented vein, and to place those artists and their work more at the center of community life.” “That was it,” Carmen confirms—casting a smile at me, and then glancing around the space where we sit in Urbano’s back studio.

The way that Carmen speaks about the Space reminds me of the way people speak of a golden age, a celebrated time of success that leaves you with a sense of yearning, that becomes an inevitable reference point for other times and places that you move through in your life. In Carmen’s description of the Space, I hear many elements of the ethos of Urbano: a commitment to diversity, a sense of social responsibility, a belief in the capacity of artists to serve as community leaders. Indeed, the mission of the Space is still alive at Urbano—an ongoing project of supporting creative work that stems from the margins rather than the mainstream, of nurturing community and connection in a city where people live worlds apart. Carmen knows that there are many ways in which Urbano is imperfect, and struggles to enact the values that it has—a theme that I explore further in the other empirical chapters of this dissertation. Yet it makes her more determined for the project to “continue beyond [her],” and persist in its striving to reach its ideals. “I would always like it to still have integrity,” she tells me. “The kinds of things that we say we want to do all the time.” With so many echoes of the Space in its own mission, it strikes me that the Space is the legacy that Urbano is rooted in, even if its path for “growing into the future” (Tuan, 1977, p. 388) is unclear.

There is one other crucial way in which the Space sheds light on the context of Urbano, and that is in the act of placemaking that it represents. For Carmen, establishing the Space was the crucial first step in her understanding of her own power and potential as a place-maker—a person who could bring individuals and groups together in one physical
location, where they could engage in dialogue about social issues and leverage their collective power to transform aspects of their reality. “[With] very little money, no experience, I managed to make it a place that was…vital,” she says to me. “It was important. People were talking about it!” Her voice quickening with excitement, Carmen continues: “I made it…yeah! A place. A destination.” In the experience of successfully making “a place,” “a destination,” Carmen stakes a sense of pride. Through her story, she alludes to a set of skills and dispositions that come with the placemaking she accomplished: resourcefulness as a response to financial constraint, courage summoned in the face of doubt.

There was also placemaking inherent in Carmen’s recognition of and action upon a need in the local landscape. In the case of the Space, this was the need for an art space that was located—ideologically and geographically—outside of the “bubble” of the elite institutions of art, and that could spark dialogue about social issues through encounters between artists with different disciplines, backgrounds, and identities. In the case of Urbano, the need was for a space where “education and learning [were] a part of the artistic practice,” and where young people could access arts opportunities that were not available in their schools and neighborhoods. The arts programs Carmen had been facilitating at another nonprofit had just been cut, and many school districts were reducing or eliminating arts offerings—a persistent trend in the era of No Child Left Behind and high-stakes testing in schools. Carmen did not come from a background as an educator, and the extent of her experience in U.S. schools came from a few years of teaching Spanish at a suburban high school, early on in her time living in the Boston area. Yet after several decades of working in the arts in the city, she could sense that there was a gap in educational opportunities for young people, that she could help address. According to Carmen, it became a part of her own artistic practice to include young people “in the conversation, and in doing the work—
and to opening the process and the question about, what is art, and who is an artist too.”

When she decided to found Urbano, Carmen had full confidence in her ability to actualize her vision. “I just felt like I can do it. I can do it! I never doubted that…you know?” Carmen’s sense of herself as a place-maker thus informed the creation of an organization where others could practice placemaking themselves.

**A Different Space, A Different Way**

On the orange line of the T, Urbano is located just three stops away from where the Space was founded three decades ago. The organization feels firmly established in its location in the Brewery—a space that is no longer the “smelly, and dirty, and dark” set of rooms with no running water that made Carmen scrunch her nose when she first saw it. Many hands have shaped it into a gallery and an art space; in it, the traces of an industrial era now seem like an aesthetic deliberately cultivated by artists. Across the glass doors of Urbano’s main entrance, there is a simple white silhouette of the Boston skyline. Sometimes, when the afternoon sun pours in through these front doors, the shadow of the skyline is cast upon the long brick wall that separates the organization’s front gallery from the back studio. Magnified and softened, the image of the city floats across the space, falling away from view over the course of the day.

Staff and teaching artists latch onto Urbano both for the intrigue of its physical environment, and for the values that it makes visible. For this reason, Sean—a youth programs manager at Urbano—always invites people to “come check out the space” if they’re interested in learning about the organization. From his perspective, Urbano is “an environment and a headspace,” “a place where you can do work…a place where you can come have time.” Elaborating further, Sean says that despite its white walls, Urbano actually feels like “a blur of warm but vibrant colors.” “It gives off this vibe or this aura of warmth
and beauty and hard work and dedication…and also a little bit of mess. Nothing is ever clean or precisely done. It’s all learning by mistakes.”

For artists who come to teach at Urbano, the physical space represented the uniqueness of the organization, and the invitation it posed to tap into their own creative energy. Yasmina, a teaching artist with previous experience in a range of community-based settings, gushes upon remembering her first impression of the space:

I was in awe. I was like, "Wow, this is really cool. This is really special." There’s something so raw about this space that feels like within its rawness it can be so generative for artists to set foot—because it’s like a blank slate in so many ways…because you walk in it’s a warehouse space and there’s like open ceilings and you can see the plumbing and the air conditioning duct and you’re just like, “Yeah! I can work with this.”

Yasmina’s imagination was sparked by what she saw at Urbano. It isn’t pristine and polished, with the infrastructure of the building hidden away. Its foundations are laid bare, and its emphasis is not on beauty, or objects held at a distance. As Yasmina explains, “it really lived and breathed—and I think that’s vital to a space where kids feel comfortable sharing and comfortable expressing. To have the space not be this monster.” In order to nurture and support engagement with the arts—especially for young people—Yasmina believed that the space needed to feel human. Alive and moving; complex and always in-process.

Sophie, the teaching artist for a class on critical media literacy during the summer program, similarly felt an immediate connection when she first entered. “I loved the space. I was blown away by how cool the space was, and the feel to it. It was so much more than what I could have gleaned from the website, and I was already in love with the place from the website.” For her, Urbano’s environment felt completely different from the educational
settings that she had worked in previously, and thus offered a hope of healing from what she had experienced teaching in schools. Early on in her career, Sophie spent time teaching in “very rigid, traditional” schools where there was a “scripted curriculum and all of these rules.” In these settings, she says, “there was no space for expression; there was no space for real connection or relationship.” Students were disengaged, and the meaning of education became lost. To Sophie, “education has to be engaging if it’s in any way to be true to the mission of supporting fuller humans in the world, or supporting people with freer minds.” Sophie explains to me that when she thinks about the true meaning of education, she “think[s] about a space where people are being transformed, and as they are themselves experiencing some sort of transformation, the place around them and the people they touch and connect with and interact with even in simple daily ways are somehow being transformed.” In Sophie’s eyes, there was “transformative potential” in Urbano: an opportunity to create space for authentic self-expression, connection, and relationships. “That is gold,” she says, empathically. These were features of learning settings that teaching artists like Sophie valued for students, and for their own selves.

Not all of the adults working at Urbano identified primarily as educators, as some spent more of their time in roles as professional artists than in positions as teachers. For Jordan, another summer teaching artist, Urbano was a place to grow in his practice as a teacher and as an artist. It helped him gain a sense of clarity about his own underlying interests and passions. “Everything I’ve done at Urbano—like teaching and art and like, them being combined as one—is exactly what I want to be doing. But I wouldn’t have thought about that if it wasn’t for Urbano. They definitely have given me a total path.” Compared to other artistic work that Jordan had done—collaborating with hip hop artists on shows, for example, or creating films with colleagues from art school—Urbano symbolized a
new direction. There, Jordan was no longer focused on “making work for [him]self and for other artists,” shaping and measuring his work according to conventional standards of excellence in the art world. Within his first months at Urbano, he began to see new possibilities for his own artistic practice; he was learning ways to “take [him]self out of it.” “I was starting to learn that there’s somebody else that the work can be made for…every piece of work you make can’t just be about yourself…It’s like your work can do that, but it means so much more to make it for a community and make it about that community.”

Although Jordan was nervous about his first time teaching a class of high school students, he was game for this next phase of growth as an artist. With a grin, he tells me, “let me just keep learning.”

Jordan’s relationship to Urbano was also significantly informed by his identity and interests as a Black man in America. He was teaching at Urbano during a summer marked by a seemingly relentless spate of police killings of unarmed Black men and the growing momentum of the Black Lives Matter movement across the country. In this broader context, the issues that Jordan wanted to explore in his art were increasingly focused on “gender, and…race, and then place.” To him, it was becoming increasingly important to be bold—to “be even more loud”—in the art that he was creating. “I want to be like, ‘this is the problem’…and make it very easy for people to digest what I’m, like, starting to learn. And I think that’s what’s the interesting part about like, being a part of the community or the place. [It’s] like, once you get really good at that…there are some people that just [say] yeah, universally…it applies everywhere in the world.” Although we do not talk about it extensively, Jordan speaks briefly to the difficulty of finding jobs that allow him the freedom to speak and act on his beliefs: “I get fired from work all the time,” he tells me, “and it actually feels, like, good in a way. Because when I do get fired, it’s, like, because I’m trying to,
like, inject something that I believe in.” In contrast to other jobs that he had experienced, Jordan viewed Urbano as a place that could respect who he was and what he stood for.

For Jamie, a staff member who joined Urbano as a development and grants manager, the arts were “life-changing” and deeply sustaining. Jamie did not have a high school or a college degree—what society deemed “the credentials you’re supposed to have to be a successful person in the world.” Nevertheless, she tells me, she was able to become a person with a strong “sense of personal dignity and importance,” as well as a profound sense of hope and agency, because of her engagement with art. Art enabled her to understand her own capacity to challenge the status quo, especially in education. Reflecting upon her own experience, Jamie recognized how art helped her connect with her own sense of possibility, but also that of all human beings.

Everything that human beings do is the byproduct of a creative process. And if we have an experience that we want to translate into a way-of-being in the world, art is sort of a great platform with which to start doing that. It allows people the power and openness to believe that they can engage in the world that way. This is something that was the byproduct of my experience in education: I was just sold this one idea of like, “this is how you go through the world.” And you’re supposed to do things this way because this is the way that things are. And I really didn’t buy into that… I was like, this is really dumb…I don’t understand why these structures, that everyone just says is the way the world works, is the way the world works. Like, people invented these structures. Everything’s just invented by people. So let’s just invent a different way that’s going to work better for us.

For Jamie, art was key to questioning the world around her, and her role in relationship to it. It created opportunity to open up multiple ways-of-being in the world, and
encourage resistance to the hegemony of any one form of engagement. It celebrated the creative process as a way to generate new ideas and build new structures that could improve upon what existed before. It positioned people in the role of critical thinkers and inventors who can take ownership not only over their own experience, but also over the very conditions of their lives and learning. At Urbano, the staff and teaching artists believed that this was a power all young people could assume. For Jamie, there was thus a sense of recognition in the moment of encounter with Urbano: “This is the place,” she thought to herself, “This is the place whose mission is aligned most with the work that I want to do in the world.”

When staff and teaching artists talk about Urbano though, I hear both excitement and exhaustion in their voices. They were animated by a fervent belief in the importance of art, community, and dialogue about social issues—and they were, at times, daunted by the magnitude of what they were taking on. Reflecting upon what makes Urbano distinctive and daring compared to its counterparts, Sean says:

I think what is really special about what Urbano is doing—and I would not say that Urbano is perfect, by any means—but something that I think is really special about what the organization stands for and what it values is that it’s not shying away from any of the substance of what’s going on. People can say yes we’re an art studio, or a gallery, but there’s so much more [to Urbano] than that because the art is totally interdisciplinary, it’s participatory, it is engaged with the community at large. It’s not just a place where you learn how to play music, it’s not just a place where you learn how to take photographs. It’s a place where you’re learning - or engaging in - critical conversations about society that I didn't engage in until I was [in graduate school].

And this is a program for high school students in Boston!
With conviction, Sean tells me that Urbano is “a place that really believes that young people can get involved in really meaningful conversations, and really powerfully participate in society through the artistic disciplines.” More quietly, he murmurs: “it’s very brave, and very powerful.” I watch as his shoulders drop just slightly, as if humbled by the weight of the work.

Coda

As a place—a space invested with meaning in the context of power (Cresswell, 2002)—Urbano is a reflection of the visions and values of its inhabitants, shaped by the identities, experiences, and aspirations they carry (Tuan, 1977; Casey, 2009). In this way, it represents an act of placemaking of those who work there: artist-educators who are seeking to make a place for intergenerational collaboration and learning within a society in which such space is not a given. From its roots in Carmen’s personal desires as an artist, through its evolution into a space grown from the dedication of many others, Urbano has sought to be a “different” space than mainstream arts institutions and traditional public schools. As individuals continue to gravitate to Urbano in its near-decade of existence in the Boston neighborhood of Jamaica Plain, Urbano has come to illuminate persistent needs in urban environments for places where adults and youth—especially those experiencing marginalization and oppression—can come together in hopes of opportunity to learn, to imagine, to create, and to belong.

Although the staff, teaching artists, and students at Urbano come from different racial and socioeconomic backgrounds, and live in different parts of the city, their work at Urbano can be considered a collective response to conditions of segregation, racism, and oppressive schooling that affected them all. When Carmen moved to the Boston area, she felt immediately out-of-place in an urban context that she experienced as deeply segregated
and dominated by an old elite. Although she experienced a certain level of privilege given her light skin color and her class status, Carmen faced stigmatization and marginalization as a Spanish-speaking immigrant. In this context, her move to imagine and to create the Space as a place of gathering for artists from different places—and to emphasize the location of the gallery in a marginalized area of the city—was an act of resistance to the divisive atmosphere in her broader socio-political context. In addition, Carmen’s desire for the gallery to be a place where people could act towards their visions—engaging their desires to “do something”—signified an assertion of their agency to shift and disrupt the status quo. This was important in the way that it represented a shift in the relationship between Carmen and her peers—relatively privileged, professionally trained artists—and the young people from the local communities—members of economically disadvantaged, stigmatized, and segregated groups who were systematically treated as problems in society, not as artists whose work carried valuable social critique.

Urbano was the place where Carmen and others turned more explicitly towards education as a part of their artistic and creative practice. In contrast to the rigid curriculum that Carmen and other adults experienced in schools, Urbano represented the possibility of a more flexible space for artists to lead their own projects, to relate to one another as collaborators and as fellow human beings, and to orient towards change, growth, and transformation. Given a range of negative experiences that teaching artists carried from schools and other educational settings that they had worked in previously, such a place represented a possibility of a more humanizing and transformative environment for teaching and learning. The organization’s own physical space spoke to its spirit of resistance to the status quo of schooling, and to its desire to experiment with the look, the feel, and the experience of an educational setting. Through her efforts to create art spaces for youth and
adults in Boston, Carmen engaged in placemaking work that was capable of “imbu[ing] spaces emblematic of the conditions of the degraded present with foreshadowings of a fulfilled future” (Lipsitz, 2017, p. 43). Importantly, such placemaking work is not value-neutral: for Carmen and the people who joined her to work at Urbano, it was grounded in values of diversity, social responsibility, collaboration, and creativity. It was through transforming spaces into places that held the potential to honor these values, that these individuals saw possibilities for personal and social transformation too. In this way, the underlying philosophies of critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970)—centered on the powers of everyday citizens to transform the oppressive conditions of their lives—were embedded in the story of how Urbano came to be and how it continues to stand today.

Hunter and colleagues (2016) use the term Black placemaking to name the “ability of residents to shift otherwise oppressive geographies of a city to provide sites of play, pleasure, celebration, and politics” (p. 4). Black placemaking is a framework for understanding the spatial practices of any “deeply disadvantaged, stigmatized, and often segregated group” that creates sites of belonging and resistance within contexts that are hostile and harmful to their individual and collective well-being (Hunter et al., 2016). George Lipsitz (2011) argues that the spatial imaginaries of people of color regularly contest racial oppression: they turn segregation into congregation, transform divisiveness into solidarity, dehumanization into rehumanization. The places they create—even when temporary or ephemeral—“leave a record for the future of aspirations, visions, and practices that directly challenged the core beliefs and practices of a thoroughly racist and unjust society” (Lipsitz, 2017, p. 51). In this way, Urbano can be read as a product of placemaking with fundamentally political aims, and a social justice orientation that continues to inform the placemaking, artmaking, and education that it provides space for today.
Ultimately, Urbano offered space to imagine and create a “different way” to practice art and education than the dominant models that exist; it represented an effort to invent a structure to support individuals and communities who the system had failed, people whose identities, interests, and forms of self-expression could not find nurturance in schools. In *Releasing the Imagination*, the educational philosopher Maxine Greene (1995) writes:

> Imagining things being otherwise may be a first step toward acting on the belief that they can be changed. And it would appear that a kindred imaginative ability is required if the becoming different that learning involves is actually to take place. A space of freedom opens before the person moved to choose in the light of possibility; she or he feels what it signifies to be an initiator and an agent, existing among others but with the power to choose for herself or himself (p. 22).

Urbano staff and teaching artists—many of whom were struggling to find their own place within the structures that were given—were certainly drawn together by such a “kindred imaginative ability.” It provided opportunity for them to take creative risks and join with others in engaging critically with the world, enabled them to understand themselves as inventors and as place-makers, to feel hope that they could create a space that effectively addressed the longings left by schooling. Here, there was a hope of feeling welcomed and affirmed in their ways-of-being. Working in community with young people, they were “becoming different” as they sought new ways to learn, to work, and to be.
IV. “We Need Each Other”: Youth Placemaking in an Intergenerational Space

A place belongs forever to whoever claims it hardest, remembers it most obsessively, wrenches it from itself, shapes it, renders it, loves it so radically that he remakes it in his own image. - Joan Didion

Scholars have noted that we tend to live unaware of the depth of our connections to place until they become threatened—by policies of urban renewal, perhaps, or by processes of gentrification, events of natural disaster, or other forms of change (e.g. Altman, Altman, Irwin, & Low, 1992; Casey, 2009; Cresswell, 2014; Lewicka, 2010; Manzo, 2003; Schneekloth & Shibley, 1995; Sutton & Kemp, 2011). When our places are at risk of being lost to us, we sometimes rise to claim and defend them, to protect them from destruction, and preserve the connections that we have. The actions that we take to re-build and re-inhabit our places can be considered acts of placemaking—what Schneekloth & Shibley (1995) call a “fundamental human activity” that is perhaps as old as human civilization itself.

Young people are regularly engaged in placemaking—in their schools, their homes, their neighborhoods, their hang-out spots. Yet existing scholarship on placemaking has paid little attention to how young people play roles as place-makers in their own out-of-school time programs. Through my research at Urbano, I aimed to understand the multiple ways in which youth took on roles as place-makers, shaping the structures and culture of the organization as a whole. In this chapter, I focus on young people’s engagement with and experiences of placemaking in their work outside of the summer program classes. This research helps build knowledge on a process and goal that is key to the paradigm of place-based education (Gruenewald & Smith, 2008; Smith & Sobel, 2010): young people’s recognition of their own potential as place-makers who are capable of collective action to
transform spaces according to their needs and interests, and to lead them according to the shared visions and values of their community. As I show in this chapter, my research at Urbano illuminated key considerations of positive relationships, equitable power-sharing, and democratic participation that must be considered in order to support youth in this work.

**Learning to Dwell**

After Urbano’s spring programs wrap up and the school year winds down, the organization begins preparation for the summer. It was during this time that I began my data collection at Urbano, and that four young people reunited—returning to work in the place where they met as high school students four years ago. All of them were Urbano Fellows—young people who, after completing multiple semesters of classes, were accepted into a group of students with increased leadership roles within their projects and the organization as a whole. Bailey, who had just returned from her freshman year of college in the Midwest, would be the teaching assistant for the two Urbano classes taking place during the summer program. Cristina—who grew up with Bailey, a few minutes of a walk away from Urbano—was back from her sophomore year of college in New York City, and working at Urbano in addition to holding jobs at a clothing retail shop, a tea shop, and a children’s summer camp. Al was attending at a local state university, and working as many hours as he could at Urbano in between independent photography projects and an upcoming trip to Indonesia—where both he and Bailey had relatives. Scotty had never left Urbano: in addition to participating as a student and as a Fellow, he was the organization’s space coordinator, and held the keys to the doors and the security codes.

Recently Urbano had begun to take on additional meaning for Scotty, as he had decided to drop out of high school earlier that year. For Scotty, working at Urbano carried a sense of pride—a symbol of commitment to his own advancement and long-term success in
doing something that he loved. As more and more of his friends took jobs in retail, he held firm to this idea.

I’m always bragging about how like oh, I’ll never work at a department store or a restaurant, just cuz like, I’m not gonna benefit from that at all. Like there’s no skill that I can take away from that that I will need or will look good on my resume. So that’s why I’m just sticking with Urbano, just cuz like…I’m learning stuff that I would actually like to know. I would need it to pursue a career.

The son of working-class immigrants from the Dominican Republic, Scotty felt strongly that work should be more than something he just did “to get money” or just to “surviv[e].” At the beginning of the summer, Scotty told me that he spent a long time contemplating the differences between school and Urbano, wondering: “Why do I shine here, not there?” After reflecting upon this question with his girlfriend, whom he met at Urbano, Scotty felt clear: “I do work at Urbano, not at school, because school doesn’t give me anything to care about. Versus Urbano - [it] gives me something to care about. That’s plain and simple, that’s why I stayed. Because I care.”

During his work at Urbano and in his time outside, Scotty often drew an image that appeared to be a face, detached from a body, beginning to float away almost like a balloon. It was a surreal image—sometimes appearing with money signs on its eyes, hearts on the crown of its head, mouth dropped open. Often, it appeared to me as a figure shaped by a capitalist society and materialistic culture, and also driven by a higher purpose of love. One day, Scotty drew his image on a sheet of white paper and paired it with the words: “I live in a matriarchal household.” He then stuck it on one side of the Civic Sculpture, an approximately 7-foot tall, 10-foot wide box-like structure on wheels that he and the Fellows had worked on together.
Figures 3 and 4: Scotty’s drawings on the Civic Sculpture

When I saw Scotty’s drawings, I remembered a moment from the spring Urbano exhibition, which had taken place a few weeks before. Amid the buzzy energy in the front gallery, Carmen—the founder and artistic director of Urbano—touched my shoulder and guided me over to a woman she introduced as Scotty’s mother. The three of us began to chat in Spanish, and Scotty’s mother told me that if anything ever happened to her, she was glad to know that at least Scotty had Carmen. Scotty stood a few feet away, listening. Later, Scotty explained to me that Urbano was like a household, where “Carmen is the head of the house, the staff are the people we adopt, students are like neighborhood kids, Fellows are siblings…artmaking is like the chores, stipend is like the allowance.” As a household, Urbano offered Scotty a set of relationships and a setting that felt like home, as well as the opportunity to be a part of something bigger than himself. It functioned as a system where each individual had roles and responsibilities to fulfill, and everyone was an essential part of the whole. When I asked Scotty what he valued most about the Urbano household he said: “the art is last, in my opinion…it’s everything else that comes with it.”
For the Urbano Fellows, their attachment to the place of Urbano was inextricable from their attachment to the people there. Bailey described Urbano as “this place where you build your family, you build your friends,” adding that “everyone’s invited to be in those groups.” What made Urbano “fun and exciting,” she said, was not only the “opportunities that Urbano gave me, [but also] people that Urbano gave me.” “It’s ridiculous how much we care for each other,” she laughed. Beside Bailey, Cristina chimed in to say that her favorite memories of Urbano all had to do with experiencing the strength of the sense of community there. She recalled times of “someone offering to go…on the train with you, go out to eat with you” even if they didn’t know you very well just yet. “I think that’s what this is all about,” Cristina said. “It’s about community.” Al also emphasized the importance of the community, and connected it to how he understood his responsibilities at the organization. When Al and I spoke about his hopes for new students entering Urbano, he responded without hesitation:

I hope they see that it’s like a community, it’s like a family here. And that they’re accepted to this family. And it’s their decision whether or not to come back for a second semester or not, but it’s our job to make them feel welcome.

All of these young people saw it as part of their work within the household to foster a welcoming atmosphere at Urbano, and facilitate positive social connections that could grow into the kinds of relationships that they enjoyed with one another. In a conversation with teaching artists later that summer, Al said to the group: “When you enter Urbano, you don’t necessarily know what you’re going in for,” but there is a common reason why people choose to return: “it’s the connections with people that bring you back.” “It’s not just about the art,” he voiced, echoing the other Fellows. “It’s also the people and the friendships that you make.”
Although the Fellows often said that “the art [was] last” in terms of what was valuable at Urbano, art did play an instrumental role in creating the bonds between the Fellows. Yamilett, another Urbano Fellow who frequently worked alongside Carmen and the rest of the adult staff, explained that their relationships were forged through collaboration as artists, a process through which they learned how to trust one another and the adults who were mentors in their lives. Remembering one of her earlier Urbano classes—a class focused on acrobatic movement—Yamilett said: “We loved each other—because we had to depend on each other so much. To do any movement, we had to trust each other.” Any time the students felt scared, their teaching artist would coach them through the process of risk-taking, reminding them that they were not alone and they were surrounded by support:

It was challenging because we would think, “Oh, I’m gonna fall.” [Our teaching artist] said, “No, you’re not gonna fall - trust your partner, everything is going to be okay.” So we learned to trust each other, which is why we became closer to each other.

This trust in their peers and their teaching artist required faith that the people surrounding them were going to be present for them; it was a process through which they learned that they needed one another. The lessons that Yamilett took from that class shaped the expectations that she held of other students at Urbano, and the high standards that she held for their work. Reflecting upon how this learning shaped her approach as a Fellow, Yamilett described a process of holding one another accountable:

If someone doesn’t work hard, then we just tell them, you need to get yourself together and you need to work hard, because you know this project depends on all of us…the projects are about working together, as a group. Then we can accomplish something.
As I saw during the summer, this principle of working together applied not only to the projects that they developed with their teaching artists, but also to the work that they did within Urbano as an organization.

In the weeks leading up to the summer program, Scotty, Bailey, Cristina, and Al set about the work of ensuring that Urbano was ready to bring the new students and teaching artists in. Together, these Fellows planned for the teaching artist and student orientations, interviewed students interested in the summer classes, organized documentation of older projects, and reviewed teaching artist proposals for the upcoming fall semester. They also swept floors, catalogued books in the Urbano library, de-installed a recent art exhibition, and cleaned out the closets of the back studio. Bailey told me that her motivation to do this work came from knowing how powerful Urbano had been in her own life: “A lot of what brings me back here now, and why we come in here and just do inventory for six hours, is that we want this program to succeed so much because we know how much it works for us.” Al said, “a big part of being a student here [at Urbano] is about respecting the space”—a point which I took to mean both looking after the physical environment of the organization, and joining in its norms and values too.

I offered myself as volunteer help for these Fellows as they went about their work each day of the week. I listened as they made assessments, consulting one another as they went along. “Do you know what’s in those?” “It won’t fit there.” “I think we can put that there.” Nearly all of their sentences, I noticed, were framed around a collective “we.” There were times when their collective energy would flag, and one of them would draw from their well of motivation to ground them in their collective sense of purpose. Once, when Bailey felt frustrated and began to shrug off thinking about the labels on the jars in the closets—“I really don’t care anymore,” she vented—Cristina pushed her on. “Shouldn’t we get the name
right so that the young ones can learn?” Later on, Al picked up an object that no one could identify; together, they contemplated how attractive an option it was to just throw it out and thus declutter the space, and then Bailey made the final call. “It's probably meaningful to someone, let's keep it.” Every detail carried significance—if not to them, then potentially to someone else they cared about. Tending to these details was a significant part of welcoming back old generations of students, and inviting new generations to dwell in a place that had the capacity to let them in.

The depth of the Fellows’ dedication to Urbano was not lost on Carmen, who was the only staff member who had been at the organization longer than these Fellows had.

“They really care about Urbano,” Carmen acknowledged, during one of our early interviews. “They’ve been here for a very long time.” In her tone, I heard a hesitant sense of appreciation: Carmen was aware of how dedicated they were to Urbano; she was ready for retirement and looking for people to carry Urbano forward, but perhaps unsure of what it would mean to include young people in the leadership structure. Through my conversations with the Fellows during this time, I learned that Urbano was still reeling from what the young people considered an internal threat to the values and the relationships within the organization. There was lingering bitterness about Rafael, a former programs manager who, as one Fellow said, “never talked to anybody” and “whenever he opened his mouth to anyone besides Carmen, it was to give an order.” To the young people, Rafael acted like a “strict kind of teacher” who tended to shut students down rather than open himself up to their perspectives. His behavior stood in sharp contrast to what students expected from adults at Urbano: open communication and responsiveness to their needs. One Fellow described the expectation to me as a rather basic principle: “treat people like human beings, not just as…a boss.”
Witnessing and experiencing the violation of these expectations was especially difficult for Urbano students who had been close with Adriana, the staff member who Rafael had replaced. Adriana was a young Latinx artist who had grown up in the local area, and was passionate about creating spaces for artists of color and LGBTQ artists to thrive. She had taken on the role of the Fellows’ teaching artist in her last two semesters at Urbano, while she continued to work in her part-time position as the Urbano programs manager.

Scotty described Adriana as an “older sister” who encouraged students to explore their identities and experiences, to engage in critical thinking about race and racism in their lives, and to learn about artistic practices indigenous to their communities. As Scotty explained, “for like half of [the Fellows], she helped us realize we were Black. Yeah. She was all about that…she just helped us with our identity crisis…we would engage in really deep discussions.” From Adriana, Scotty learned and practiced art forms that were indigenous to local Latinx communities; he further developed his racial identity and social consciousness, while feeling cared for as a person. When Adriana left for New York City and Rafael took her place, Scotty said the transition was “like going from 100 to zero—from the best programs manager we’ve ever had to, like, the worst.”

Yet as painful as it was for students see Adriana go, they were most hurt by what happened afterwards. At Urbano, the Fellows were routinely referred to as “leaders” in the organization, and given this position, they always expected to have a clear line of communication with Carmen, and opportunities to have their voices heard. These expectations were broken in the aftermath of Adriana’s exit from the organization, when Carmen was looking to hire a new programs manager and teaching artist for the Fellows. According to Scotty, although Carmen promised the Fellows that they would “definitely be a part of the process of selecting the next person,” she ultimately went ahead in the decision-
making without them. When she invited the Fellows in, Scotty said, “she made it sound like an interview, but really it was an introduction…because they were already hired.” The event destabilized the Fellows’ sense of agency and empowerment at Urbano, which had been a hallmark of their experience there. For Scotty, this moment was a breach of trust, and an act of excluding students from a major decision that directly impacted their own lives and learning—as well as the organization that they loved.

Around this time, some of the Fellows thus began to consider “quitting, at the same time—just so we can boycott Urbano for being dumb.” Before moving forward though, Scotty turned to Mariana—one of his teaching artists that year, and someone who he did trust. According to Scotty, “Mariana was helping us [figure out] how we can regain our home turf.” After talking with Mariana, the Fellows decided against quitting, and sought to express their concerns to Carmen instead. Yamilett said: “We complained to Carmen, and Carmen talked to Rafael, and he changed for the last moments he was at Urbano.” From this, she extracted a lesson around the importance of speaking up when encountering an issue within the organization: “If we communicate, then people will change and things change and get better too.” In this situation, it became clear that the lessons that young people were taking from Urbano were not limited to what they learned from teaching artists in their classes; rather, they were learning from the whole set of interpersonal dynamics and issues that they navigated in the organization as a whole.

By choosing to assert their own voices and exercise their power to shape the organization, Scotty and the other Urbano Fellows decided to lay claim to the place, leverage their position within it, and uphold the values that would carry it forward. Instead of leaving in search of a better place, they chose to remain. For them, Urbano had become what the philosopher Edward M. Casey (2009) might call a “dwelling place”: a site that they decided
to build and reside in, affording them “the possibility of sojourns of upbringing, of education, of contemplation, of conviviality, and lingerings of many kinds and durations” (p. 112). Casey contends that dwelling is a necessary antidote to the placelessness endemic to contemporary global society; it is a process that can feel radical in a society that tends to celebrate moving or ascending from one place to another, rather than “tak[ing] the time to love, nurture, and maintain the places where we are” (Schneekloth & Shibley, 1995, p. 17).

Dwelling in a place requires a commitment to caring for it both as a physical environment, and as a spirit of home to which one can repeatedly return and find the familiar again (Casey, 2009). According to Schneekloth and Shibley (1995), it also necessitates trust and forgiveness:

What we need to enable us to live well, to dwell, is to trust in the possibility of a beloved place and our own significant part in the making of such places. This does not mean that we will not have to struggle constantly against forces that work toward the disintegration of places and communities. It does mean that we trust the world of community life that has always opposed, corrected, and forgiven, in order to dwell. (p. 8)

For a young person like Scotty, who had recently experienced such deep violations of trust at Urbano that he considered leaving despite how much he loved it, this fundamental belief in the possibilities of the community was powerful. Along with the other Fellows who continued to participate in Urbano, he acted upon a belief that the place could be better, and that he had the ability to be impactful in that process. For any community to persist through the challenges that can come of the placemaking process—particularly challenges that emerge from tensions of power and navigating relationships within the group—it is essential to develop the capacity to view a place through the lens of its promise, and to thus commit
to recovering from the errors of the past. In this way, individuals not only choose to dwell in a place, but to dwell together in the landscape of its possibilities.

**The Makings of Youhtopia**

The Fellows had a good feeling about Sean, the programs manager who was hired to replace Rafael. After what happened with Rafael’s hire, Carmen was sure to include the Fellows in the process of choosing who would take his place. Sean was a slim, bearded white man with a presence that embodied both humor and discipline, gentleness and resolve. He was a classically trained musician, who had recently completed a graduate program in arts education at Harvard. I first met Sean when I was a teaching assistant for a class on youth-adult partnerships that he took during his graduate studies. I knew that Sean was apprehensive about the many responsibilities that came with the programs manager position at Urbano, but was also excited to listen to and amplify the voices of Urbano students. During an interview, Sean told me that his ultimate vision for Urbano was that it could function as a “youthtopia”—a term that education scholars have used to describe a social space “created, constructed, and designed by young people themselves,” where young people find opportunities to “connect with peers, adults, ideas, experiences, and activities that address pressing social and community problems,” center their learning on their own lived experiences, develop critical consciousness, and “work together to produce youth-driven cultural products for social change” (Akom, Cammarota, & Ginwright, 2008, p. 11). Although Sean recognized that there was a significant distance between the present reality of Urbano and this ideal, he hoped that ultimately Urbano could become a place where “young people feel comfortable to, first of all, be; second of all, build community among peers and adults; and third, feel comfortable both experimenting in their own time and also with their peers.”
In his first weeks of his position, Sean quickly set about involving Bailey, Cristina, Al, and Scotty in planning the orientations for new teaching artists and students. To him, it was a practical thing to do, since he was in his first week in the position and needed help. Beyond that, Sean believed strongly that “the students know the organization in a different way than anyone else knows, and they deserve the space to talk about that.” In his mind, it was evident that the staff would benefit from listening to the young people, learning from their perspectives, and supporting them to take the lead. Several times over the course of a typical work day, Sean would cross over to the back studio, where Bailey, Cristina, Al, and Scotty did most of their work and where the summer classes would take place. Often with a mug of tea in hand, he would check in about scheduling interviews for students interested in the summer program, or ask them about their thinking related to a specific part of the orientations, or simply show something funny on the Internet and enjoy their company for a while. In Sean’s presence, the Fellows were relaxed and open; laughter started to come easily to the group. By creating opportunity for the Fellows to help plan and lead the events that set the groundwork for the summer programs, Sean was setting a precedent for adults to share power with youth within the structures of Urbano. In the processes of placemaking occurring within the organizations, he was bolstering young people’s rights to participate fully in a key developmental context of their lives (Checkoway, 2011). The process was only just beginning, and Sean was setting the stage for the Fellows to engage in a form of placemaking that oriented toward a youhttopia of their own.

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On the first Friday of July, the day of the orientation for students in the summer program, the energy was high at Urbano. The air felt hotter than usual; everyone was up and moving around. Name tags were created for each of the staff members, teaching artists, and
students who were expected to be there that day. Excitedly, Bailey and Cristina showed me the organizational system of colored dots they devised for the name tags, which would help everyone learn the different roles of people in the program and the classes that they were in. They had the name tags carefully arranged on a table in the middle of the front gallery, alongside of packets of paperwork that Sean had prepared for each of the incoming students, flyers for my research project, a box for anonymous questions, and two cansisters of pens pulled from the newly organized supply closet.

As the adult staff busied themselves around their desk spaces, Bailey and Cristina confidently took their perch beside one another at the table, facing the front entrance so that they could greet everyone who entered. Cristina wore a black leather jacket over skinny jeans, with a small ivory scarf knotted elegantly around her neck and her hair pulled loosely into a high ponytail; Bailey wore cuffed denim shorts and a flowing royal blue blouse, with an “Urbano City Journalists” cap backwards upon her head. With his professional digital camera, Al snapped several photographs of Bailey and Cristina holding their heads high and leaning close to one another, a mixture of sunshine and studio lighting on their beaming faces. Later that summer, several of the Urbano Fellows told me about how important the older Fellows were in helping them feel comfortable at their own first orientations to Urbano. Nicole said that at first it was “nerve-wracking, walking into a space where it seemed like everyone was friends, everyone was so cool…[and] not knowing who to talk to and walk to do”; quickly though, Bailey and Scotty became like “a sister or a brother to [her].”

I remember Bailey, being there for me. And like, making me feel like I was supposed to be there. And I remember Scotty being so annoying but like, I ended up loving him because he just made me feel at home.
Another Fellow told me that seeing Bailey be “loud and excited and having fun” helped her understand Urbano as “a fun place to be.” For new students, these Fellows embodied the spirit of the place of Urbano, and solidified their own desires to become involved.

In the back studio, chairs were placed in a double horse-shoe formation around the projector screen. Posted on the side wall were pieces of chart paper with questions related to the annual theme, revised since they were last used for a “chalk talk” activity at the teaching artist orientation. Sean had worked with Bailey, Cristina, Al, and Scotty to make the questions clearer and more accessible for high school students, seeking to stay away from any formulation of words that sounded like what they might find on a test. Cristina had enlisted me to write the agenda for the day on a standing easel that we positioned near the front of the room. After that job was done, I greeted the students who had trickled into the studio and were sitting down quietly, unsure of how or whether to engage with one another. I shook students’ hands, introduced myself, and asked them about how their trip to Urbano was that day. Mychelle, a new student who was enrolled in both of the summer classes, volunteered that she came on the bus, and that because of a robbery, the bus had to stop and be re-routed. She wore her hair in corn rows and a white T-shirt that read, in bold black lettering, “You can handle today.” After telling me that she was worried about being late, she flashed a grin and said: “But I still got here early.” I asked her about how she was feeling now that she was here, and she said that she was nervous but excited. A few seats away from her, two other students looked on and nodded in agreement, relieved to know that they were not alone.

As the space filled with approximately ten other students and the three teaching artists who were leading classes that summer, pizza boxes were opened and the atmosphere began to feel more relaxed. Bailey kicked off the orientation with an icebreaker game where
everyone had to secretly identify one “angel” and one “devil” amongst the people in the group, and then move around the space with the goal of keeping their “angel” in between themselves and their “devil” at all times. Approximately fifteen people—students, teaching artists, and students—began to move in winding paths around the back studio, scrambling to adjust to the movements of the people around them. Sneakers squeaked against the concrete floors and laughter bubbled up from the group as people became more comfortable with the room and the others around them. Afterwards, Carmen came into the studio to introduce Urbano, describing it as an opportunity for them to engage the arts to “talk about issues that really matter to you and your community.” She invited students to see their work as “relational,” explaining: “As you’re doing and creating the projects, you’re creating relationships with your peers and also with the community around you.” Next, Cristina and Bailey talked about successful projects from the past, highlighting the value of collaboration and building relationships with the community.

The group then entered into the most interactive portion of the agenda: the “chalk talk activity” that Al had volunteered to facilitate. During our interview earlier in the summer, Al had told me how much he valued the opportunity to learn in a diverse group at Urbano, and how class activities played an important role in “mak[ing] a zone where it’s comfortable to be different from each other.” It made sense to me that he would lead the activity on students’ perspectives on the theme of “the Other.” Al invited people to write or draw their thoughts in response to the questions they read on the chart paper, and the group fanned out across the space. Quickly, they began to fill the white papers with every color of washable marker at their disposal.

Although Sean and the teaching artists all participated in the chalk talk activity, it was the youth—not the adults—who facilitated the discussion that followed. The adults shared
their perspectives and experiences, participating as equal members of the discussion rather than as authorities on any of the issues that emerged. The Fellows’ role in leading the activity stood as a symbol of the student-centered learning and participation that they valued most at Urbano. Al told me that a key ingredient for the program’s success was its age diversity—the presence of people of “all ages in high school, and then college to young adult.”

I feel like that’s kind of all you really need for a successful program like this…you have that mature knowledge between those ages. And different perspectives. I feel like younger people might…know different things from like the high school level, that older people might not know. And older people know things that the younger people don’t know. So it’s good to learn from each other.

Al believed it was extremely important to facilitate an intergenerational space where people of all ages could be learning from one another—not simply younger people learning from older people. The adults were not the only teachers and in fact, the framework of teachers and students did not seem entirely resonant for the dynamics of learning and collaboration at Urbano. As Scotty put it,

At Urbano, I don’t really think of students and teachers, because that’s just not how it works. Like I don’t feel like the criteria is set up for students to catch up to [a] “master.” Like really, there is no master. We’re just trying to figure stuff out right now.

Scotty recognized that in the intertwined processes of education, placemaking, and artmaking, there was no roadmap for teaching artists and students to follow. Urbano participants were learning as they went along, and each of them had valuable skills, knowledge and perspectives to share.
Nicole was vocal throughout the discussion that Al facilitated. An Afro-Latinx high school student who attended a predominately white public school, Nicole was passionate about issues of social justice, and she viewed her experiences at Urbano through the lens of race and power. To her, it was important to acknowledge not only that Urbano was a space to learn from other young people, but from youth of color in particular. She reveled in the discussions that she had at Urbano because it offered her the chance to engage with other artists from minoritized groups, and bask in the multiplicity of their voices. During our interview, she reflected on this meaning and value of the place:

It’s sort of like our utopia. Because the real world isn’t like that. Even in the way that we talk, in Urbano. If you notice, the minorities definitely voice their opinions and are very great at voicing their opinions in Urbano. And our white allies and friends and family—definitely take up less space. And in our conversations, they know…when to speak up and when to shut up. Because they understand that in society, they have privilege. And that they have so many opportunities to voice their opinions, while we are belittled and shut down and shut up. Like, we’re told to shut up. And they understand that Urbano is the space where we can talk—and sometimes we’ll speak over one another, it can be very hard to listen to all of us, I’ll be honest about that—but it’s definitely a safe space to speak and be heard. So, people who are considered minorities in society get a fair chance to talk while our allies know when to be an ally and when to just listen.

Compared to “the real world” in which she felt denigrated, dismissed, and silenced, Urbano was a place where Nicole and other students from minoritized groups could freely exercise their voice and take up space. There, she felt surrounded by allies who were conscious of their own privileges and oppressions, and who could thus work towards centering
marginalized voices. To Nicole, this respect for the ideas of people of color, and this
unleashing of their individual voices, formed the makings of utopia within her present day
realities.

The Fellows carried a firm belief in Urbano as an opportunity for young people to
experience the freedom to express themselves. Cristina explained:

I think it’s really amazing when people realize for the first time that they do have a
voice at Urbano. Cuz I think that a lot of the time—I’ve seen it—people come into
this program and are shocked by the things that they’re allowed to say and express
through words and art.

Bailey murmured “completely” as she listened to Cristina speak, and Cristina went on to
reason that people often begin censoring themselves because “maybe they would be shut
down in their community, or their family, or their school, or wherever they’re from.” It takes
encouragement from other students for people to being opening themselves up to their own
expression: “They’re like, ‘Can I say this? Can I write this? Can I swear? Can I do this?’ And
we’re like: you can express yourself in whatever way you want.” Moreover, to the Fellows,
Urbano was supposed to be a place where when students did take emotional risks in
expressing themselves through their artwork, they would be met with encouragement and
support. “The most supportive group of people you’ll ever meet are like the Urbano
students,” Bailey said. She continued:

And it’s like always a great moment when people are crying…and we just keep
cheering them on and start like screaming their name and stuff until they either sit
down or finish their poem. And then hugs go around and everyone’s like, we love
you no matter what. It’s all these great moments of acceptance and when like people
really push themselves and realize what they’re doing.
Students like the Urbano Fellows were actively making Urbano into a place where young people could not only realize they had a voice—but be encouraged to use it at their will.

Amelia, a Fellow who began going to classes at Urbano just a few years after she immigrated to U.S. from the Dominican Republic, spoke with me about how impactful this culture of Urbano was for her. Amelia told me that, like many other new students coming to Urbano, she knew little about what she was in for when she entered the organization for the first time. The first moment she felt reassurance was when she was welcomed by the people who were there: when Carmen introduced herself directly and shared that she spoke Spanish too, and when the people around her made an effort to show kindness. With a secure sense of belonging, Amelia began to feel comfortable lifting up her own voice, opening herself up to others, and communicating her ideas. “I’m going to tell you this,” Amelia said to me, her tone turning serious as she looked straight into my eyes. “Because I started at Urbano, I’m more open to people. I have more friends. And I feel like I’m more open to opportunities. Because before I used to be shy. I didn’t like to talk to people.” Amelia chuckled, as if picturing the shyer, more closed-off version of herself from years ago. “While I was in school, I didn’t like to present and share my ideas. But once I got involved into Urbano, then I started to share my opinion. And to start to feel more strongly about things.” Amelia explained that people at Urbano always asked for her thoughts and feedback: “What do you like, what didn’t you like?” “What do you want to see while you’re at Urbano, and what do you really like to do?” To Amelia, Urbano became “an opportunity, to share your ideas and your opinions,” and it gave her confidence to speak up in other spaces of her life as well. Now, she exclaimed, “I can share my ideas—anywhere!”

For Bailey, the opportunities that Urbano gave her to step up—into the role of a teacher, a presenter, a facilitator—were what spurred her learning and transformation
through the program. More important than what her teaching artists taught in terms of artmaking skills, she told me, were the times that she had to practice “public speaking and communication and leadership…little things that Urbano has given to me without it necessarily trying to.” For this reason, she said: “Urbano does education in a super subtle way.” When she was in high school, Bailey revealed: “I barely talked in class and I had answers but I never wanted to raise my hand.” After years of being at Urbano, Bailey became what she described as “the most annoying person in classes, that refuses to shut up, who has all the answers and knows it.” Now, she has successfully made “speeches in front of hundreds of people.” At the orientation for the summer program, when Bailey facilitated activities and spoke about her perspectives with students, no one could have guessed that she had ever been quiet, scared, or shy in a group. She acknowledged this with the students, and assured them that at Urbano, “you’ll get more comfortable and push yourself as much as possible.” In the circle, the new students received her words without questions or comments. Perhaps they were quietly reflecting on the risks they had already been asked to take at Urbano, pondering what the rest of the journey would be, or patiently waiting for their time to dive in.

In the next three chapters of this dissertation, I explore the perspectives and experiences of these new students at Urbano, journeying with them through their time in the summer program classes. I also continue attending to the voices of returning students such as the Fellows, and integrate the voices of the adult staff and teaching artists in order to shed additional light on the organization’s approach to pedagogies of place and placemaking. Before moving into that part of the story, however, I use the next section of this chapter to cast attention upon tension points that arose for the staff and the Fellows towards the end of the summer program. These moments illuminate the continued efforts of the Fellows to
make Urbano a place in which youth voices could take center stage—and the power
dynamics that they had to navigate in the process. Because a focus on youth voice was at the
core of how these young people understood Urbano, the most challenging moments for
them arose when they experienced limitations in what they could express and how. Around
the time of the final exhibition of the summer, these challenges revealed the persistence of
issues of trust and communication between the youth and adults—issues that had initially
come to light in their past experience around the hiring of staff and teaching artists after
Adriana’s departure; they also highlighted the need for more power-sharing and democratic
decision-making in the organization as a whole.

**Tension Points**

Every semester at Urbano culminates in an exhibition where friends, families,
funders, Board members, and community members are invited to engage with the artwork
produced by students in the classes. The event can bring over one hundred people to
Urbano, and the weeks leading up to it are an intense time for everyone in the organization.
The last week of the summer classes tend to become open periods of time for students to
focus on producing work for exhibition, and many of the Fellows choose to stay at Urbano
beyond their regular hours in order to complete work to their satisfaction. Carmen would
come into the back studio to check on the progress of the projects, and the stress levels of
students and teaching artists often rose as she surveyed the room, expressed critical
feedback, and asked questions about plans. With the organization in a seemingly perpetual
state of searching for funding and support, there was tremendous pressure upon the
students to present “high-quality” work, and for everything to “look good.” There was a
sense that everyone—but perhaps especially Carmen and the other adults—needed the event
to be a positive reflection upon themselves and the organization as a whole.
The Fellows had high expectations of themselves and the exhibition; semester after semester, they had experienced it as an important opportunity for the young people to be legitimized as artists in the world beyond the studio. In the days before the summer exhibition that occurred during my data collection, several of the Fellows stayed to continue painting and decorating the art piece they had transformed from the “Civic Sculpture” to a “Casa Móvil”—a structure that was meant to carry items from each of their homes, and represent mixture of their many different cultural identities. Carmen, Sean, and Ricardo—the Fellows’ teaching artist, who had been hired with Rafael—stayed for at least a part of the time too. Chinese take-out or pizza would be ordered, on Carmen’s credit card, and the group would take breaks to eat together at the meeting table in the front gallery. These times when everyone ate together were some of the Fellows’ favorite moments from their time at Urbano; sometimes, they called these their “family meals.” Conversation could turn from what people were seeing on their social media, to what their relationships with their siblings were like, to what they thought of how their artwork was coming along and what they wanted to do when it was time to go back to work. There were many moments of levity and fun, which helped carry them through the exhaustion that could take over. It was important for the young people to have a balance of work and play, and a reminder of the relationships that held them together. One Urbano Fellow remembered these late nights as some of her favorite memories from the summer at Urbano—times when they “were just sitting there, laughing, painting”—and pointed to how these experiences set Urbano apart from the other arts programs she was in. “Other places have potential, but also you need to have a sense of community, a sense of family to have that joy, to have that wholehearted joy.”

However, even as the Fellows were finding enjoyment in the process of preparing for the exhibition together, they expressed to me some concerns about what they had begun
to see as a pattern with Urbano exhibitions. When adult artists showed their work at Urbano, it was always in the front gallery—the room that Carmen had always envisioned and shaped into the main presentation space. The white walls there glowed under professional track lighting, and visitors could walk right in from the main entrance and look at the work. In comparison, the back studio felt dim and unfinished, with a significant amount of the square footage taken up by Urbano’s kitchen and storage areas. As the summer exhibition approached, the front gallery still held work by Jordan, an Urbano teaching artist who had been leading the summer class on cinematography. At a previous exhibition when teaching artist’s work was displayed in the front gallery and students’ work was in the back studio, Scotty noticed confusion amongst youth in the room, who saw the imbalance of attention and wondered, “I thought this was supposed to be about us.” Cristina saw this as an issue, and voiced her concern to me:

I think that it comes off in such a negative way. Like, if you walk into Urbano not knowing what Urbano is…I think the first thing you are gonna see is Jordan's show. And as much as anyone explains to you that this is a place where teen artists and college artists come together and blah, blah, blah—as much as someone will tell you that, all you’re gonna see is this art, like, the teacher's work in the front. I think it’d be hard to actually convince yourself that students do play a big role, you know? Like, that’s really what Urbano is about…I think that [the students] should be showcased and represented a little nicely, you know?

To Cristina, space was symbolic. The front gallery signified the work—and the artists—most centered and celebrated at Urbano. The reality that the teaching artists’ work was situated there while the students operated mainly in the back studio disrupted any notion that the students—the youth artists—were the priority at Urbano. For Cristina, this
situation called Urbano’s identity into question, dissolving their lofty and admirable mission into empty words—little more than a “blah blah blah.” Listening to Cristina, Bailey, and Scotty all express these concerns in our informal conversations, I mentioned the potential issue to Sean, who quietly took the information in and thanked me for sharing. I wasn’t sure if it was the right thing to do, but it did seem to be the most ethical action that I could take at the moment. That summer, though it is unclear whether I or the Fellows had any influence on the decision, the teaching artist’s work in the front gallery was ultimately de-installed, and the Fellows’ artwork was placed in the middle of the room for the summer exhibition.

On the day of the final exhibition, staff, teaching artists, and students began arriving earlier than usual in order to complete installation, clean, and prepare the space for the event. In the back studio, the teaching artists and a few of students were putting finishing touches on their works. Hanging from the pipes along the ceiling was an installation of “light clouds”—water cooler bottles and other plastic bottles that were covered in cotton balls and illuminated from within with different colors of string lights. Cristina helped to touch up the paint on the wall where the students had created a legend for the symbolism of the different colors in the clouds. Bailey was helping a group of students from Sophie’s class, who were trying to install sets of photographs where you saw one image—a Black boy running down the street, for example—and lifted that to reveal a zoomed out frame that completed the picture in a way that contested mainstream narratives: the boy wasn’t running from the police, it turns out, but rather enjoying a race with a friend to see who could run the fastest. Another Fellow had created and installed a piece where twelve photos of people—some of the faces white, some Black—were displayed beneath the words, “Who are you most afraid of?” Intended to break stereotypes of Black people as criminals, the piece invited audience
members to read information cards about each of the individuals in the photographs, which ultimately revealed that the white people had committed violent crimes, and the Black people were victims of deadly violence, often committed by police. In another work in the back corner of the room, students from Jordan's class had installed a hologram where a video of their own faces and voices could be seen and heard, completing the statement, “I am Other because…”

Once exhibition time hit, family and community members began to flow through Urbano. Staff, teaching artists, and students changed from the scrappy clothes they wore to paint and sweep, into dresses and dress shoes. Some students painted their nails and put on lipstick and make-up. Bags and other miscellaneous items were stuffed into the kitchen corner, hidden from view. With instructions from the staff for each class to have just a few of their students talk about the work they created, some students and teaching artists stood on the side to prepare their remarks. Nicole took me aside and giddily whispered that she would be sharing an original poem when it came time for the Fellows to speak. From our interview earlier that summer, I knew that Nicole saw her poetry as deeply tied to her own identity and culture: with a lot of her writing, she said, she believed that “some people who are not Latino may not necessarily understand what exactly it is that I’m talking [about].” Yet she had positive experiences reading her poetry at Urbano, and was moved by how people try to understand.” As she explained,

It makes me feel like my culture, land, everything that I stand for, is never ever ever treated by other people or what they do, at Urbano. It’s appreciated…and people like me who can relate, put their best effort to be there for me.

Nicole vividly remembered times when her Urbano peers cheered for her, cried with her, listened and hugged her through emotional moments that came with sharing her artwork.
She had come to believe that “art is a way of trusting,” and even though she was wary of
times when she felt pressure to “explain [her]self” to people outside of her own
communities, she saw “Urbano [as] one of those places where we can take that risk.” “Even
if things go sour,” she said, “there are enough people to support you.”

I was looking forward to hearing Nicole speak. Her mother and younger sister were
at Urbano that day—along with teaching artists who she had worked with over the last years,
and who had mentored her in her poetry. After Carmen welcomed the crowd to Urbano and
thanked them for being there, she turned the microphone to the Fellows, who stood side-by-
side together with Ricardo in front of the Casa Móvil, some of them standing on the ramp.
Bailey and Scotty began the presentation, introducing the artwork and what it represented.
Nicole began to introduce the Fellows as the “leaders” of the organization, mentioning that
they had a decision-making role in the grants and projects of the organization, when there
was some commotion on the side where Carmen and Sean were standing. In a loud whisper,
Carmen was telling Sean that they needed to move on to the next group immediately. There
was urgency in her tone, and Sean responded by making a motion to Bailey that she had to
wrap it up and direct the crowd to the back studio. Visibly confused, but deferring to her
supervisors in the matter, Bailey interrupted Nicole to address the audience and announce
that it was time for the group to head to the back studio, where the work from the other
classes was displayed. As people shifted away, Nicole and some of the Fellows remained by
the Casa Móvil, thrown by what had just occurred.
Later on during the event, I saw Nicole crying in the parking lot, outside of the main entrance to Urbano. I stood and comforted her, along with her mother and one of her former teaching artists. Over the course of the rest of the exhibition, I saw other Fellows stalking around Urbano, muttering, “I’m done.” At one point in the night, Bailey, Nicole, Yamilett, and Amelia gathered at Carmen's desk, and joked about starting their own organization—a place they would call “Urban-yes.” Later on, Bailey explained to me:

The joking reason that I started Urban-yes was just that I was so frustrated with everything and I felt like we hadn’t been listened to and it was honestly right after the Fellows had that like, shitstorm…we didn’t know what was happening and it looked bad…and so I was talking to Yamilett and Amelia, and I was like: what if we just start our own program? And we’re like, yeah, it would actually be good because we’d actually listen to each other—that was sort of the thing.
Bailey continued to express how the Fellows were an overlooked resource at the organization, and they were fed up.

…the Fellows have the majority of the answers [about how to improve Urbano] but we don’t get asked the questions and when we do…sometimes [we’re] just not listened to. And so Urban-yes just came out of wanting a space that is this program, cuz we love this program, but we can actually do what we want with it, if that makes sense. And that was sort of like the joking thing of Urban-yes, but also semi-serious of like, we are over this. It’s the same thing every time.

In this talk about Urban-yes, Bailey revealed how important it was to the Fellows to be “listened to”—to have their knowledge and perspectives valued, and to have a greater share of power at the organization. They felt disrespected and under-valued as members of Urbano, and what happened in their presentation of the Casa Móvil was just one example of a pattern in which they felt like they were told they had a platform and a mic, and then had their voices denied by the adults who purported to support them. That experience, they seemed to say, was not what they had signed up for. Though they were given opportunities to take the lead—such as in their planning and facilitation of orientations for students and teaching artists—it was unclear whether they would ever gain full respect as equals within the organization, no matter how much time and effort they put in.

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Semesters at Urbano typically end with a debrief and feedback session, where students, teaching artists, and staff gather in the back studio to name the successes and the challenges of the classes and the exhibition. The exhibition is a culminating event, but not their last day together. Pizza is ordered, paychecks are received. That summer, Sean organized a highly structured feedback session that allowed participants to have in-depth
discussion about one particular aspect of their summer, and later come together to share
their thoughts and perspectives. He set up stations with post-its, and marked each one as a
different area of feedback: “the exhibition,” “time and space,” “learning experience,”
“support from teaching artists, teaching assistant, and staff,” “community engagement.”

Chairs were arranged in a large horse-shoe formation, and after giving time for everyone to
talk in small groups about one of those areas of feedback, Sean gathered the whole group in
the center of the room. He introduced what followed as a “listening” session, where the staff
would aim not to respond to what students said, but to simply take in their words. He also
mentioned that there would be an audio-recording of the session, and that he would share a
transcript and notes with the staff and teaching artists working at Urbano in the upcoming
fall.

What followed was less of a dialogue, and more of a presentation of the feedback
generated from each of the different topic areas. Sean tried to maintain a high level of
control over the process. At one point, he interjected when a Fellow suggested that they first
talk about “negatives, then positives” about each topic, so that they could feel better at the
end of each presentation; Sean, seemingly tense, abruptly responded by asking for only one
presenter to speak from each group, and to do “positives, negatives, then recommendations”
in order for there to be consistency across the groups. The room was quieted by his tone,
and later shocked at a moment when he cut Carmen off as she tried to respond to something
a student had said. To Carmen, Sean said: “I want to go back to listening for now. But I
appreciate your comment.” It was not the way that reflection discussions typically went at
Urbano, nor was it the norm of interaction with Carmen who, after all, was the head of the
organization.
When the subject of the Fellows’ presentation at the exhibition came up, Bailey said it was a “big miscommunication” that led to their embarrassment in front of the public. It was uncomfortable because we didn’t understand what was being asked of us, and it happened in the moment in front of everybody…it made us look unprofessional, and like we weren’t taking it seriously, but the fact of the matter was that we just didn’t know what was going on.

Sean exercised his own power to respond, saying: “I will actually respond to that because I take ownership of that…I thought that I had communicated that [there was little time] as I was thinking about the night, but I guess I must have just communicated with myself. So, I appreciate the feedback.” A back-and-forth ensued, with Carmen suggesting the usage of a script and rehearsals so that students could be ready for the presentations, assuming that the young people would improvise them otherwise; Fellows and students raised concerns about a script and other rules making it “really hard to talk about your art, because it doesn’t feel like an honest representation of your art,” and saying that no matter what, one or two minutes was “not enough time to accurately represent the work”—especially after the “working so many weeks” on their learning and their artistic products. The group seemed to agree that better communication was necessary, but the thornier issues—around trust, respect, and power—seemed to linger and go unresolved.

Later that summer, Nicole and I got together at a neighborhood ice cream spot, and reflected upon her takeaways from her experience around the exhibition. She told me about how she was approaching it as a lesson about the nature of change in an organization, and in society at large:

You have to give people chances. As far as administration goes. It’s very important to - have whatever feelings you have about authority, but to allow authority to listen
to you, and make promises to you, to give them that chance to do so. So that if they do not live up to those promises, now you have weight; you have validity in your argument now. Like, all you need is for the stuff to be in writing, or verbally said. So that you can hold whatever people are in authority accountable for what it is that they promised you. So I think it's important to be patient with social change. Because you want to gain more validity... in what it is that you're pushing for. And more cause... like more of a support... for whatever it is that you're trying to get pushed.

For Nicole, Urbano had become a place of learning about how to work across power imbalances and effectively “push” for what she believes in. Her narrative reveals her recognition that as much as the Fellows were framed as leaders within the organization, it was still the adult staff—who she called the “administration” or “authority”—who held control. Nicole’s words about the need to clearly communicate demands, to be patient and yet firm about ideals, and to hold people in power accountable for what they promise, align well with strategies of community organizing and activism in general. Urbano was not utopia—it was not immune to the power dynamics in society at large—and the students were learning how to push for authentic power and platforms that allowed their voices to be heard.

Importantly, these weren’t struggles to overthrow the adult staff members who held positions of power within the organization. The youth that I spoke with valued their relationships with adults, and the learning that they gained through these relationships and their classes. At Urbano, the Fellows wanted the staff to not only respect them and their work, but also to understand the fundamental interdependence of adults and youth. Indeed, the research literature (e.g. Ozer et al., 2013; Zeldin et al., 2012) has shown that shared decision-making power between adults and youth can provide the most optimal conditions
for youth development. To set a foundation for equitable power-sharing between adults and youth though, adults need to consistently communicate to youth that they are seen, valued, and respected as partners in larger efforts for change. On this subject, Nicole mused on a line from one of her favorite rappers, Common: “For any movement it takes the wisdom of the elders and young people’s energy.” She explained:

It brings, light to the fact that…elders know best. They always know best. But young people have the energy and the means to hold a movement and keep it alive. So, uniting—having less adultism, and understanding that we need to listen to our elders and our elders need us too. You know what I mean? We need each other.

Weeks after the conclusion of the summer program, Scotty and I sat down for ice cream at the same place where I had met Nicole, and reflected on all that had happened during the previous months. Scotty often talked with me about his dreams of an “Urbano school”—“I feel very passionate about that,” he told me—where Urbano could have a building all to themselves, and would have young people coming in every day to learn. “There’d be a lot of classes going on and you could just pick the ones you like,” Scotty said. Other than an expanded space and more class offerings at once, Scotty didn’t want much else to change: in his opinion, the education would be “what it is right now—like, exactly [the same].” For him, despite Urbano’s shortcomings, there was still something about the place that represented a vision of what he believed education should be. I asked Scotty about what advice he would give to other educators who were interested in doing the kind of work that Urbano does: what would he want them to take away from the experience of Urbano? His response was immediate:

You said advice? Um…easy. This goes to schools too. Damn, I…I want to say, it's not about what you want. Cuz like…staff and Carmen and stuff might be the face of
Urbano and who founded it or whatever, but like, if there were no students, there's no Urbano. If there's no students, there's no school. So like, just listen to your students. And when students are suggesting something, listen to it. Even if it might not even work, cuz like, if you keep the students happy, like they will be glad to come to class, you know? If you're giving them what they want.

Scotty’s narrative here reveals what the Urbano Fellows desired from this place that they loved: it was about recognition of their value, of the essential role they played in the functioning of the organization; it was about inclusion and respect. In the context of a society where young people are routinely marginalized within or excluded from decision-making processes that directly affect their lives, these young people were calling for attention both to the instrumental nature of their presence and participation, and to the importance of their ideas. It involved adults not just hearing them, but acting upon what the young people were saying, as a demonstration that their ideas were being taken seriously. To them, this was the meaning of educators “listening to [their] students”: it required adults stepping back, and allowing those who did not have positions of power to exercise their agency in shaping their shared place.

Coda

David Gruenewald (2003b) has written that a key aim of place-based education (PBE) is to open pathways towards “re-inhabitation”—a process in which we “identify, recover, and create material spaces and places that teach us how to live well in our total environments” (p. 9). Inhabiting a place goes beyond “residing” in it (Orr, 1992); it is more than simply being there, complacent with the structures and norms that shape it. Rather, it involves caring for a place, making it into a dwelling, continually working through its issues in order to arrive at its possibilities. To re-inhabit is to tap back into our natural capacity for
placemaking—that is, to make places for community and for connection (Schneekloth & Shibley, 1995), to practice the ability to see what is, what has been, and what else could be, and thus to experiment in building more sustainable and just worlds than exist in our present realities.

Both re-inhabitation and placemaking involve ways-of-thinking and ways-of-being that are learned through practice, and through active participation over time. As scholars across the fields of PBE, urban education, and Indigenous methodologies have pointed out (e.g. Lipman, 2013; Seawright, 2014; Tuck & McKenzie, 2014), these ways-of-thinking and ways-of-being in our environments are not generally taught in mainstream educational institutions. Yet urban community-based youth organizations can offer “third spaces” (Soja, 1996) in which adults and youth create alternatives to the status quo (e.g. Akom, Cammarota, & Ginwright, 2008; Hirsch, 2005). It was this kind of space that Urbano Fellows began to cultivate their values, skills, and dispositions as place-makers. In the Fellows’ work, I saw what Schneekloth described as an innate human ability to “make our places locations for dwelling”—an ability that receives little attention within a society that “denigrates the simple, mundane, daily acts of maintaining the world” as “technical, rational acts rather than essential, poetic ones” (Schneekloth & Shibley, 1995, p. 17).

The stories of the Urbano Fellows demonstrate how their process of re-inhabiting and placemaking at Urbano was grounded in the decision to lean into their relationships and their sense of ownership over the place, and to trust in the future rather than dwell in the past. In general, existing literature on pedagogies of place and placemaking have paid little attention to the instrumental role of positive interpersonal relationships in supporting the learning, development, and well-being of youth. Yet the narratives of the Fellows demonstrate the overwhelming significance of caring relationships with peers and with adults as a reason for their participation in Urbano. As this chapter shows, these
relationships helped the Fellows find a sense of meaning and purpose in their work at the organization, and fostered a sense of belonging to a larger community that respected their ideas, identities, and interests. Nicole’s previous experiences sharing her poetry at Urbano illustrate how these relationships created a supportive environment for her to confront deeply personal subjects in her artwork, and develop the sense of safety and confidence she needed in order to speak her truths within the Urbano community. At Urbano, these relationships are marked by “authentic care” (Valenzuela, 1999)—a care marked by warmth, kindness, and concern for individuals while recognizing the social position factors and macro-level forces shaping their lived experience. Recent research on critical pedagogies of place has shown that mentorship relationships defined by authentic care are a key mechanism for positive youth outcomes (Delia & Krasny, 2018)—echoing a wealth of theoretical and empirical literature in the field of youth development about the importance of positive and supportive relationships for adolescents. Recognition of the value of relationships was central to the placemaking that Urbano Fellows engaged in at the organization: from the way that they worked together on organizing closets to the ways in which they handled the bruising experience of the summer exhibition, these young people pushed Urbano to become a place where caring relationships, collectivist thinking, and collaboration were centered. Youth placemaking at Urbano, then, meant practicing the communication skills, the open-minded and open-hearted dispositions, and the habits of forgiveness and understanding that strong relationships require.

For the Fellows, this also meant that they were highly sensitive to any practices—intentional or not—that they saw as a threat to the principles and values they understood as the defining features of Urbano. Towards the end of the summer program, a number of tension points emerged that led the young people to question what the organization stood
for, when they experienced their own marginalization within the place. One key insight that emerged from this research is that for young people, the process of placemaking involved confronting power dynamics that were reflective of issues in society at large. Perhaps this is to be expected in a society in which adultism pervades nearly all settings. Educators typically do not receive training in equitable power-sharing with their students, and youth are often assigned to roles as passive recipients rather than as partners in their own learning and development (Jennings et al., 2006). Staff members at Urbano, such as Sean, carried strong intentions to share power with the Urbano Fellows and to build platforms for their voice: through the initiative of adult staff, the Fellows had opportunities to help conduct interviews and evaluate applications for teaching artist and youth artist positions; they were also able to take leadership roles in planning and facilitating orientations. Yet there were also many decisions from which they had been excluded—such as the hiring of their own teaching artist, and the length and style of the presentations at the final exhibition. These were decisions that mattered deeply to the Fellows, and the experience of the adult staff “not listening” to them left them concerned about whether the organization truly cared about the same values as they did.

As the Fellows’ experience with Carmen and other staff shows, the failure to create and uphold structures that support youth participation—particularly in decisions that directly affect their learning and their experience—can be extremely painful and potentially disempowering for youth. Community-based youth programs can have a positive or negative impact on youth development, depending on whether the opportunities they provide are suited to the needs of young people at different developmental stages (Benson, Scales, Hamilton, & Sesma, 2006; Eccles et al., 1993). When young people are not included in decision-making processes that concern their own learning and development, it can
negatively impact the effectiveness of the organization and the outcomes of individual youth—particularly if it means that youth become less engaged or leave the programs altogether, taking their knowledge, creativity, and energy with them (Kretzman & McKnight, 1993).

The example of Urbano points to a developmental need for youth and young adults to have both power and respect as capable leaders within the settings of which they are part; this is perhaps especially important for an organization that explicitly engages in placemaking work, which is fundamentally about the rights of all individuals to shape and transform the places they inhabit. Here, my research echoes that of Owens and colleagues (2011), who found that marginalized youth and disenfranchised communities can benefit from place-based learning initiatives that counter adultism and center youth voice. As Sutton (2011) invites us to consider: “If places are texts that instruct children about a way of life, what types of landscapes might enable them to take leave of their assigned ranks and roles in the hierarchies of the dominant culture?” Urbano had the potential to be this kind of landscape for students, but it necessitated the involvement of adults at the organization to invite students into roles of increasing leadership. Given that intergenerational learning is an important feature of PBE (Bowers, 2008; Gruenewald, 2008; Mannion & Adey, 2011), increased attention must be paid to how adults can support young people’s full participation in their educational settings, and practice equitable power-sharing with youth.

Ultimately, this research suggests that in order to foster and maintain strong relationships between adults and youth, adults need to demonstrate willingness and resolve to truly listen to young people—demonstrating respect through norms of communication, accountability for their mistakes, and dialogue and action in response to young people’s demands. Indeed, in the literature on youth civic participation, researchers have shown that
young people's interest in and commitment to their work in an organization is enhanced when they feel like they have a voice, real responsibility, and are taken seriously in their opinions (e.g. Morgan & Streb, 2001). The role that young people have in a program or project significantly shapes the impact that the work has on their lives (Flanagan, 2004). In authentic relationships between adults and youth, adults need to re-position themselves, resisting traditional power relations between adults and youth in educational settings and in society at large. As Camino and Zeldin (2002) write, “Rather than ‘leading,’ adults need to be in the background, monitoring, mentoring, facilitating, but not being in charge” (p. 782).

Finally, the findings of my research with Urbano pick up on an idea in the literature on placemaking which emphasizes that relationships—especially between people who are positioned differently in hierarchies of power—are a goal of the process, and the process of building these relationships must be built upon robust dialogue between different stakeholders in a setting (Schneekloth & Shibley, 1995). According to Schneekloth and Shibley (1995), relationships and dialogue are the underpinnings of critical placemaking as a “significant space for learning about and exercising democracy” (p. 140). Although there is no prescribed formula of placemaking that should be applied across contexts (Schneekloth & Shibley, 1995), the principles of cultivating democratic processes and addressing power imbalances have the potential to enhance the success of any collaborative effort between adults and youth, no matter what kind of place they share.
V. “Put Me On Your Map”: Pedagogies of Place in a Culturally Responsive Educational Setting

Place is latitudinal and longitudinal within the map of a person’s life. It is temporal and spatial, personal and political. A layered location replete with human histories and memories, place has width as well as depth. It is about connections, what surrounds it, what formed it, what happened there, what will happen there.
- Lucy Lippard

When we define ourselves, when I define myself, the place in which I am like you and the place in which I am not like you, I’m not excluding you from the joining - I’m broadening the joining. - Audre Lorde

Out-of-school time (OST) programs and activities are widely seen as important contexts for young people’s learning and development. Recently, scholars have identified the need for increased attention to issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion (Malone & Donohue, 2018), and called for increased research on how to create culturally responsive OST spaces for diverse youth (Dawes, 2018; Cruzado-Guerrero & Martinez-Alba, 2018; Ngo, 2018; Sanders, Lewis-Watkins, & Cochrane, 2018). Culturally responsive pedagogies honor the knowledge, skills, and experiences of students as rich resources for their learning and empowerment, and for their success in an increasingly pluralistic society (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Paris & Alim, 2014, 2017). Although much of the literature on culturally responsive pedagogy has focused in schools, the approach is applicable across different teaching and learning contexts, including community-based educational spaces (e.g. Baldridge, 2017; Ngo, 2016). Some studies have shown that in arts programs, culturally responsive pedagogies can support students’ abilities to critically examine and respond to issues in their local environment—heightening their sense of agency in creating their own life stories and promoting goals of social change (e.g. Garcia, 2012; Hanley, Noblit, Sheppard, & Barone, 2013). Community-based arts programs are typically “embedded in the living culture, people, and place of a specific context” (Dewhurst, 2012), and thus well-positioned to support critical, culturally responsive spaces for youth.
In recent years, a number of scholars have pointed out natural connections between pedagogies of place and culturally responsive education (Comber, 2016; Gruenewald, 2008; Galle, 2017). Indeed, the *principles* guiding these pedagogical approaches are well-aligned. For example, pedagogies of place tend to uplift local cultures and contexts as an integral part of nurturing the well-being of youth and communities; critical models of these pedagogies also aim to support young people in recognizing and addressing oppression (Gruenewald, 2003a, 2003b; Gruenewald & Smith, 2008). Although place is certainly not the only entry point into culture, it can surface dimensions of students’ identities and lives that might otherwise go under-examined, such as their connections to their local neighborhoods and their ways-of-thinking and ways-of-being in these contexts.

In this chapter, I study Urbano as an example of an OST space that utilizes art and pedagogies of place as key elements of its practice. Responding to a gap in the literature around the *practices* that lie at the intersection of pedagogies of place and culturally responsive arts education, I documented Urbano class activities and interviewed staff, teaching artists, and students involved (n=30). In this chapter, I present examples of these practices from the two different Urbano classes taking place during the summer program in which I collected data, and analyze the perspectives and experiences of both youth and adult participants. I explore how teaching artists talked about place as a pedagogical tool, and I examine how these pedagogies enabled learning about students’ identities, interests, and everyday lives. Throughout, I integrate students’ narratives of how their experiences in class shaped their relationships to their home neighborhoods, as well as to Urbano as a social space that valued connection and dialogue across difference.

**Drawing Connections**

“Dorchester…Roxbury…West Roxbury…Rozzy…”
Just loudly enough so that the people around could hear him, Scotty recited the names of Boston neighborhoods as he drew them into his map. I watched as he composed the lines of the city with the same dexterity with which he drew characters and designs in his sketchbooks. Around him, six other Urbano students stood at their own sheets of chart paper, Crayola markers in hand—all drawing in response to a prompt from Jordan, the teaching artist for their cinematography class. *Map where your house is, and where the people you consider your neighbors are.* The atmosphere was lively and relaxed in the back studio of Urbano—a marked difference from previous class activities when students watched video clips on a projector screen in a darkened room, while sitting in office chairs around a long rectangular table. During the mapping activity, everyone in the group was up and active. The studio was as bright as the lights could go, and the sounds of chatter and laughter began to fill the air.

In slim-cut jeans and a graphic t-shirt, his hair freshly cut and his goatee neatly trimmed at a local barbershop, Scotty was in good spirits that day. I felt a sense of relief: it was the second week of the summer program, and I wasn’t sure that he was going to return. During the previous session, Jordan led an hours-long lecture on animation because of technical difficulties getting the software on the Urbano laptops, and Scotty—for the first time in his four years of Urbano—walked out of class. “That was bad…that was horrible,” Scotty told me. “We were all just watching [Jordan] do stuff. I don’t know if to him, that was like…teaching? But I’m 100% sure nobody learned anything during that whole time.” The class struck a nerve for Scotty, who generally saw Urbano as the place where he enjoyed learning; he was also sensitive about any art class centered on “technical skills,” which he often found to be overly narrow in focus, and minimally irrelevant to his life. Compared to school, Urbano classes provided Scotty with a broad perspective on “what art can be and
what can be done with art”; they also gave him opportunities to create what he considered “art about relevant things—about like, where I live.” I didn’t know whether Jordan had a sense that integrating place-based activities into the next class after the animation lecture would specifically re-engage Scotty, but during the neighborhood mapping exercise, it became clear that a focus on local surroundings opened up numerous possibilities for students’ connection and learning.

“Mattapan…Hyde Park…JP…” Scotty continued saying neighborhood names out loud as he filled out his map of the city.

Upon hearing Scotty say “JP”—the affectionate name for Jamaica Plain, the neighborhood in which Urbano is located—Cicada whipped around to face him from where she stood at the back of the room. In gym clothes and sneakers, her blonde hair streaked with green and tied into a messy ponytail, Cicada bounded over. “I live in JP,” she exclaimed. “Put me on your map!” Cicada had recently joined Scotty as one of the Urbano Fellows, a group of program alumni that met on Fridays and often took on leadership roles in the organization. The Fellows frequently described one another as “family,” and Cicada told me that these “family relationships” were a major reason why she kept coming back to Urbano. Scotty responded to Cicada with cool affection, like a brother tending to a younger sister: “Where in JP?” “By the Stop and Shop,” she answered. “OK,” Scotty said with confidence. “Say no more.” In black pen, Scotty carefully marked a dot and wrote Cicada’s name into his map, close to where he had already written the names of two other Urbano Fellows who lived in the same area. They clustered near a dot labeled “Urbano”—which Scotty had included as an example of his favorite place.

Although Jordan didn’t say this directly to the class, the neighborhood mapping activity was closely related to the central theme of an art show he was preparing for Urbano
that summer. The show would be called “Who is your neighbor?” and focused on Egleston Square, the immediate neighborhood of Urbano. Through photography, video, and interviews with local residents about their favorite spots in the area, Jordan sought to create a “representation of this neighborhood” that “put [the people] up on this pedestal”—lifting up the stories and voices of community members who might otherwise be overlooked or undervalued. The project was anchored in Jordan’s belief that the art at Urbano should emerge from the local: according to him, “it’s just that much more powerful for people from a community to understand that an idea, a new idea, can come from whatever they see all the time.” As a teaching artist, Jordan wanted to encourage students towards new understandings of their local surroundings; he also believed that the communities in which they were embedded could be helpful resources for them as they grew up. Indeed, existing literature provides evidence for the benefits of these ties: research has shown that strong community ties and neighborhood identification can promote local participation (e.g. Bonaiuto et al., 2000; Devine-Wright & Howes, 2010; Lewicka, 2005). As someone who himself benefited from relationships with neighbors—Jordan told me that his neighbors in his hometown in the Midwest taught him how to use computers and lent him equipment to begin DJ-ing—it made sense that Jordan wanted to “expos[e] students to these ideas of like, how can you engage in the community and the community can help you as much as you help them.” It was the goal of centering students on questions of their relationship to their community that Jordan wanted to bring into his class.

After all of the students completed their neighborhood maps, Jordan called the group over to the rectangular table in front of a large white board—the place where they usually gathered to watch videos projected onto a pull-down screen, or experiment with audio and visual recording equipment spread across the table. This time, Jordan said the area
would be their “stage”—the place where each person could stand and present their map to the group. Scotty jumped up to sketch out a large-scale map of Boston with dry-erase markers on the white board; this would become the backdrop for all of the presentations that followed. Jordan then modeled the exercise by doing a presentation of his own map—a sketch of where he lived in Cambridge. On the white board, Jordan pointed out where Cambridge was in relation to Boston, and then held up his piece of chart paper to point out important elements of his neighborhood to the group: he showed the bridge that he biked on to get to Urbano—the symbol of his “connection to Boston”; he talked about how he didn’t know most of his neighbors, and how that has likely caused mix-ups with their mail and perhaps other issues too. Over the next hour, students took turns presenting their maps, talking about what they included and answering questions from their teaching artist and peers. The presentations varied in tone, content, and length—some were just a few sentences and one-word responses to questions, others were twenty-minute long stories that spurred lively conversation within the group. Imani—a rising high school freshman who was new to Urbano—stepped into the front of the room first, and pointed out the elements of her map in simple, straightforward terms.

I live in Dorchester, and my house is right there, and that’s my backyard, porch.

Here’s my neighbor…[his] daughter used to go to [my school]…and they’re nice. My other neighbors, I don’t know much about them…this one guy down there, he has two dogs so whenever I go past his house the dogs bark at me.

Jordan probed further, asking “Do you wish your relationship with your neighbors was better? Or do you like to keep it the way it is?” Shrugging, Imani said: “It doesn’t really matter to me.” Jordan nodded, and the group gave her a generous round of applause—as
they proceeded to do for every other student who presented too. Imani blushed as she sat back down.

Van was another new student at Urbano who lived in Dorchester, having immigrated there with her family from Vietnam when she was a child. Like Imani, Van talked about where the barking dogs were, where the “really nice” neighbors were and where the ones that she’s “not close to” lived; she also pointed out her friends’ houses, the park she goes to with her brother, the library, and the transit stations that she goes to every day. Jordan followed up with questions about moments of disagreement with neighbors as well as about the qualities of “space, light, or sound” in Van’s friend’s house, which led Van to provide more detail about the differences in their living spaces: “It’s dark over there [in my friend’s house]…I prefer dark, cuz I feel like in my house the lights are really on, and they’re really bright lights too, the rooms are small, and everyone’s close in together.” Jordan took the opportunity to say more about himself to the students:

Everyone’s close when you’re at your place? That’s cool…I feel like I grew up in a house where no one was home, so I went to other people’s houses and when everyone was like jammed in the same room, I was like, “oh yay!”…it really attracts me to hang out with other people that have that sort of relationship with their families.

In these moments, Jordan shifted attention from neighbors and neighborhoods, towards more intimate spaces and themes—such as the closeness we might desire with other people, the roots of these desires in our own experience, the times when we feel comfort and joy. Place, after all, is more than a physical environment that exists externally to ourselves; Jordan’s activity demonstrated how place is a “reservoir of meaning” (Thrift, 1997) that people can draw upon to tell stories of who they are.
By opening up the opportunity for such stories to be told, Jordan not only demonstrated his own curiosity and interest in his students’ lives, he also created a space where students could find connections with one another. Daniel, a new Urbano student who was a rising high school freshman, seemed ambivalent about the activity at first. “I didn’t know what the heck we were supposed to be doing,” he said to the group, before he proceeded to talk about his map. He described it a “super zoomed-in” image of his house, highlighting the room where he plays video games as his favorite place. Even though he didn’t demonstrate strong interest in his own map, he leaned in and listened closely as other students presented, resisting his usual habit of playing with his phone during class. Daniel perked up when he realized during Scotty’s presentation that they both lived in Roslindale, in different parts of the neighborhood. Excited, Daniel interrupted Scotty: “Wait—do you live near a Burger King?” Scotty gave a sly smile and pointed to the location of Burger King on his map. “We must live really close to each other!” Daniel exclaimed. “Wait!” He listened closely as Scotty continued to talk about the landmarks around his house—“the projects” that used to be by his house, the “hill” where his house is located—and towards the end, Daniel proclaimed with satisfied grin, “I know exactly where you live.” He added, teasingly: “OK, so you live near my friend…I’ll find my way, don’t worry. One day you’re going to see me.” Scotty chuckled, seemingly amused. The two boys were four years apart in age, one having just left high school and the other about to start. Before that moment, the extent of their connection came from brief conversations about Pokémon Go. If not for their paths intersecting at Urbano, and the neighborhood mapping activity, they likely would have continued living completely separate lives. In those moments of making a connection, of experiencing a click of recognition, the group felt like it was coming together.
After the class finished sharing their neighborhood maps, they split into smaller groups to walk around the local area and take photographs of spaces that felt positive or negative to them. I joined Imani, Daniel, and Scotty on a walk around Egleston Square, during which Scotty informally took on the role of our guide and led us to locations to which he had a connection—either through Urbano or his personal life. Together we saw the place where Scotty, as a small child, he hit his head on the phone booth while running down the street; the quirky video store where Urbano held a poetry event that packed the tiny
space full of people; the wall with the name carvings of young men who were a part of the “X-Men,” a popular gang in Egleston Square during the 1980s, which Scotty said likely included a number of his own relatives. Imani and Daniel took turns taking photographs on the professional digital camera that the group had borrowed from Urbano.

For long-time Urbano students such as Scotty, activities such as neighborhood mapping and neighborhood walks were familiar aspects of Urbano; they had come to know their home neighborhoods and the area surrounding Urbano well, and though they continued to enjoy these activities, they were not particularly impactful elements of their continued participation in classes. For new students, however, these place-based activities became salient parts of their experience. During our interview at the end of the summer program, Imani remembered the neighborhood walk that we did with Scotty and Daniel, and talked about how it shifted the way she saw her own surroundings. She found the activity “fun” because she liked the opportunity to “walk around and look at different things and think about how they made us feel.” She remembered the flowers that made her feel positive, and a “little wooden cardboard thing [that] said RIP to someone” that made her feel negative. Her response revealed how place is tied to feeling, and Jordan’s activity was thus an opportunity to tune into her own emotional experience; it provided material for her to reflect upon the connections between what she observed and how she felt, her external and internal worlds. Patricia Owen-Smith (2017) writes that pedagogies of place are based on a conceptualization of the learner “as an experiencing, thinking, and feeling human being, one with an exterior and interior self” (p. 25). By basing his class activities both on what students thought about their neighborhoods and their neighbors, and how they felt as they moved around their local worlds, Jordan helped heighten students’ awareness of their embodied,
emotional experiences of place. He introduced them to a “contemplative practice” (Owen-Smith, 2017) that they could take into other areas of their lives.

Imani also told me that before she came to Urbano, she "was just not paying attention to anything, and not thinking about it deeply." She continued: “Ever since we took that trip around the neighborhood, I started to look at stuff and like, I guess, analyze it more… I started looking more into nature, and taking pictures of things… just basically looking for interesting stuff." Imani already had a camera at home for a while, and was excited to have inspiration for her photography. It was thus that she began to make new observations about what was happening in her neighborhood—noting, for example, that a chocolate factory that used to be down the street from her house had closed down. Earlier in the summer, Imani had told me that she did not feel attached to the neighborhood where she lived: she had moved around many times in her childhood, and had dreams of living in California or Canada—places that she learned about through YouTube videos and conversations with teachers. In addition, her mother didn't like her to spend time outside of the house alone, and so Imani did not have many opportunities to explore the city independently. Yet Imani was allowed to be on her own street, according to her mother’s rules, and Jordan's class had sparked a way of seeing and interacting with a place she had not taken interest in before.

Similarly, Van told me that her interest in experiencing different areas of Boston was increasing as a result of her participation in Jordan's class at Urbano. Over the course of the six-week summer program, she began taking walks independently around Jamaica Plain when she was early for class; she also became more attuned to the sounds and sights of her neighborhood in Dorchester, which she hadn't paid attention to before. Van told me that she was emerging from the summer with a deepened sense of connection to her neighborhood. “Before, I'll be like, in my house - or [I'll] go away from my house and be somewhere far
away from the neighborhood…now that I think about it, I think I’m more like a part of the neighborhood.” Van’s increasing awareness of and sense of connection to her surroundings “made [her] interactions more enjoyable”: with a smile, she said: “it feels good…I think it’s something good.” Van also told me that she had begun to think about what could be improved about the neighborhood, for the local community.

I know the people around me who live in Dorchester don’t really like it. And there’s really nothing for them to do, instead of hanging out with friends. So having more activities, or a place for people to just hang out in the area, would be nice, I guess. [It] would make it better.

Through Jordan’s class, Van was learning to observe and analyze her surroundings and to understand the needs of her local community; in her time outside of the class, she was continuing with these habits of thinking, feeling, and exploration. Although Van was not planning any specific actions to create this kind of space in her local neighborhood, she was starting to imagine how her local environment could be different—a desired outcome of critical pedagogies of place (e.g. Gruenewald 2003a, 2003b), critical and culturally responsive arts education (Garcia, 2012; Graham, 2007; Hanley et al., 2013), and social justice youth development (Cammarota, 2011; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Ginwright & James, 2002).

In addition, Van highlighted a social dimension of these activities that for her, stood out as a defining feature of Urbano. At the beginning of the summer, Van told me that her primary interest in coming to Urbano was the opportunity to do “art stuff” and “filmmaking”—she was focused on technical skills in art and the artistic products she could create. However, she ultimately found that what she valued most about the program was the opportunity to learn about people's lives in areas of the city that were different from where she was from. Van explained:
The thing I like about Urbano is that people come from different places. Some people live really far away from here, some people don’t. And I kinda like that. Because when we’re together, you see different things, you experience different things. So coming together, you can hear different thoughts about other people who are different from us. That’s something that we don’t do in school, so I like that.

As an example of a moment when students were “coming together” at Urbano, Van brought up the mapping activity and talked about how it “made [her] know more about everybody else”: “It made them feel more familiar, so it’s more comfortable being around.” For her, the activity played an important role in creating a social space that was different from school—a place where she said that although students are "coming from different places, we just never have a chance to like, talk…we’re just in school, taking notes and taking tests. So we’re not really connecting to each other that much." With few opportunities for social connection with other students in her classes at school, Van was happy to be broadening the horizons of her own world through learning from her peers at Urbano.

Long-time Urbano participants such as the Urbano Fellows felt strongly that the opportunity to find connection across various axes of difference was an essential part of Urbano’s youth programs, and what typically had the most powerful impact on their learning. This was especially true given not only the neighborhood diversity of students in the program, but their racial and ethnic diversity as well. Bailey, the Urbano Fellow who was the teaching assistant for the summer classes, and who grew up in a multiracial family in a predominantly white, middle-class area of Jamaica Plain, said that “conversation” was the arena in which these forms diversity of Urbano transformed the learning experience. According to her, the diversity led to “a lot of enjoyable moments” as well as “serious conversations…moments that have gotten really tough just talking about race and
community”; Bailey said that this environment allowed for “the most interesting, I think intellectual, conversation about race” that she could remember in recent years. Reflecting upon a conversation from several years ago, Bailey said, “We wouldn’t have been able to have that conversation if everybody there were white or everybody there were Asian; it was a huge mixed group.”

Over the years, Bailey and Nicole—another Urbano Fellow, an Afro-Dominican teenager who grew up in a part of Jamaica Plain with a concentration of Latinx immigrant families—had had a number of such intense conversations, including one during the orientation for the Urbano summer program. The students were discussing issues of race and gentrification, when Bailey challenged Nicole to think about how ethnicities and borders were “constructed” rather than fixed and objective social groups. Nicole remembered hearing Bailey make her point “in this beautiful way,” and later told me about how she was left with the feeling that she “knew nothing, and there’s just so much more that I want to learn.” Although she was daunted and overwhelmed by the feeling, she could see the power in the moment.

I’ve read so many books and I’ve had so many dialogues, I had so much to explore about all these different social issues…and it makes me feel like I know a lot, for my age, but not enough. There’s never…there’s no one out there that knows it all. And sometimes that can be disempowering…but sometimes it can also be empowering, because there’s always room to further educate yourself.

In this way, Urbano became a place where students could experience the personally transformative process of dialogue, the potential for sophisticated discourse about social issues within a diverse group, and the ongoing learning and relationships that can emerge from a space where—as Nicole described the summer program orientation, “everyone
brought their own perspectives and experience, and there was no ‘right’ way-to-be.”

Particularly in a city that many students described as highly segregated, it was important to the young people to have this “meeting place” (Comber, 2014) where they could make connections and reflect upon both the similarities and differences in their experiences. Virgo, an Urbano Fellow from Roxbury who had participated in Urbano classes on-and-off for approximately three years, explained:

I think the name “Urbano” really does fit the program. Because…we all share some of the same experiences. Or we know what it feels like to at least BE where we're from. And that's what I love about Urbano. Because it's like, you could be from anywhere and you'll still fit in. Cuz everyone is from somewhere else, and everyone has their own experiences. And it's just like: just to connect them. So that I could say, “I’m from Roxbury, and I’m from Dudley to Save-a-Lot (a local store). That's where I grew up.” And someone could be like, “Oh really? Because I'm from Save-a-Lot to Grove Hall.” And it just still kinda connects us because we're all from BOSTON.

We're all…this is a city. This is where people wanna come. But then you see all these other experiences and what it is to be from an urban place.

Virgo understood Urbano students to be keenly aware of “where [they're] from” and what that meant in terms of their lived experience; their connections to place were not buried at a subconscious level, but were a part of their self-knowledge. In their social space, they were able grow their awareness of the diversity of their everyday lives and experiences, and explore what it might mean to share a place identity as Boston youth. It was a process that highlighted the diversity of personal experience found in any urban environment—an important reality given tendencies in education research and practice to assume similarity in
the experiences of urban youth of color. In addition, it demonstrated how this attention to place enabled some Urbano youth to find a sense of belonging within the diverse group.

* * *

Over the next weeks of the summer program, Jordan's class broke into small groups to focus on separate projects for the final exhibition. Aside from one demonstration on how to make holograms, Jordan didn't do any other direct teaching within the group; he supported them in the pursuits that they had taken on. Jordan would later recall the neighborhood mapping session as his most successful of the summer, telling me that he was happy that “people dove into it,” and that “[they] all got to work on something, [and] be very expressive.” Jordan knew that the animation class that Scotty had walked out on was a low point for the class, and he told me he was determined to “bounce back” with activities that were more “inclusive,” interactive, and hands-on—“a way for everyone to feel like they’re doing something.” In this respect, the activity appeared successful: the whole class seemed engaged in the act of creating their neighborhood maps, and each student seemed to have something unique to put down on paper and to discuss with the rest of the group. “Honestly, I think it could have even been the class,” he said to me. “Because they were so involved in it…and so many people’s drawings were so descriptive, and there’s so many questions that you could still ask.” Tapping into place was not only engaging for students; it was an opening into many different pedagogical possibilities, given the knowledge and the personal connections that it surfaced.

From the beginning of the summer program, Jordan had demonstrated a serious commitment to basing his curriculum on the interests that students expressed: on the first day of class, he came in having studied and cued up scenes from each of their favorite movies, and proceeded to play each of the video clips for the group to watch and discuss.
Yet by the end of his class, he had started to appreciate the value of broader questions about how students thought about, experienced, and explored their local surroundings, as a springboard for understanding what was truly meaningful to them. For this reason, Jordan’s main regret from the summer was that he hadn’t made these questions of place and community the foundation of his class. “You almost need to start with like, ‘Who is your neighbor? Where do you like to go? Where are your favorite places?’ Like you need to just gouge [the students] for all the information about that, you know?” “I think if I would have opened it up more,” he said, “I would have learned more about the students, and they would have learned more about what I wanted to teach them in relationship to space, light, and sound.” Thinking specifically of one student who he later learned was interested in skateboarding—not so much for skateboarding videos but more “an explorative way of getting around the city by herself”—Jordan thought that he might have been better able to connect by asking questions like, “What’s your favorite mode of transportation, or how [do] you see the city?” “I think [that] would have given me more information about them, and then maybe helped me have more keywords to go and find more works to show them,” he explained.

Although Jordan did not ultimately integrate such questions into his teaching that summer, his ideas cast light on an affordance of place-based pedagogy that has not been discussed in depth in the literature: place as an entry point into students’ “creative practices”—the habits of mind and body that are integral to their identities and their understandings of the world around them (Gustavson, 2007). According to Gustavson (2007), skateboarding, gaming, photography, and more can all be considered part of students’ creative practices—and are oftentimes practices that are social in nature, thus connecting them with communities that share aspects of their identities and interests.
Integrating students’ creative practices can improve the design of any learning environment, but this may be especially important in arts contexts. As Jordan suggests, young people’s creative practices might be tied to their experiences of place, and deserve attention in educational settings that aim to connect meaningfully to students’ creativity, the contemporary community practices that are a part of their culture (Paris & Alim, 2014), and thus the ways they make sense of who they are in the world.

In the next section of this chapter, I turn focus to an example of place-based pedagogy in the other class taking place at Urbano that summer—a critical media literacy class taught by a teaching artist named Sophie. In this class, pedagogies of place similarly contributed to a culturally responsive space for students, but focused more on raising awareness about the workings of power in society, bringing attention to students’ community concerns and issues of race and racism more broadly.

Pathways of Hope

To Sophie, the teaching artist leading the critical media literacy class at Urbano on Mondays and Wednesdays that summer, there was something "healing" about place and personal stories. I knew that Sophie had spent time exploring these questions prior to her work at Urbano that summer: she and I had worked together previously, through a Harvard research project on an online learning community focused on themes of place, identity, and local-global connections. In addition to teaching at Urbano, Sophie was continuing as a research assistant on the project at Harvard, and facilitating a neighborhood oral history project with a group of young people in Cambridge. At Urbano, Sophie hoped to take her belief in "the power of stories as an anti-oppression tool" and establish a classroom space where "a variety of voices and ways-of-being can rise." To Sophie, "being able to start from personal experience and connection to where you are in the world is a really simple and
essential way to start.” Through sharing stories of lived experience from a “multitude of places,” and respecting these stories as important sources of knowledge, Sophie hoped to illuminate one way for individuals to “heal and liberate and to grow together as humans.”

Whereas Jordan entered his class focused on teaching fundamental skills and concepts in film and video, Sophie designed her class around goals of “critical pedagogy and decolonizing the mind.” Their classes differed significantly in their content and aims, yet without coordinating their plans, both led a mapping activity with their students in the same week. Like Jordan’s activity, Sophie’s activity exemplified the power of place as a hook for student engagement and as a vehicle for building connections between people. The major difference was that Sophie oriented her mapping activity to the idea of “community” instead of home neighborhood, and she opened with a brainstorm of various ways that communities could be formed. As Sophie took notes on a sheet of chart paper, students named “language,” “culture,” “hopes and plans,” “race,” “gender,” “ideology,” “economic standing,” “generation,” “area, and more. Sophie then encouraged students to map what felt “the most pressing in terms of [their] daily community,” to consider both the struggles and the strengths of their community, and to make multiple maps to represent different communities if they had the time and the interest. She explicitly recognized that students could be a part of many different communities at once, and also that their sense of belonging to these different groups could change over time.

Sophie modeled the activity for students before giving them time to work independently on their own community maps. As Jordan did by mapping and describing his own neighborhood to his students, Sophie took the opportunity to reveal a part of her own background, values, and interests with her group. It was not an easy task for her—she later told me, “I felt so vulnerable in that moment, that I thought must look like a fool…this
white person talking about this weird rural place far from here”—but she felt it was important to openly confront issues of “place and positionality” in her class. In Sophie's view, "some level of place-based awareness in the work you do is imperative at an ethical level"; in her class, it was an element of creating a "pluralistic landscape" for stories of all people and places to belong. Being white and from a rural place was a part of her identity that she knew differentiated her from the young people at Urbano, and she was curious about what could emerge from her move to "bring that in and share that," rather than pretend that that difference did not exist. Standing by the dry-erase board where she had sketched a number of concentric circles that represented “the rural…very homogenous community” that she was from in Montana, Sophie described the struggles and strengths of the place that she came from: “There's a lot of rich culture, there's a lot of connection to the land, where I grew up. I grew up on a farm, my family was on the farm since they immigrated here from Germany.” She identified the “connection to land” and the “work ethic,” “the ability to work with [their] hands,” as some of the strengths of the community that she wanted to carry forward; she talked about issues of drug and alcohol abuse and limited access to arts and cultural programs as some of the struggles that they faced.

Figure 8: Sophie’s community map
Cristina, an Urbano Fellow and part-time youth staff member, had decided to take a seat in the circle of students in Sophie’s class that day. Although she didn’t usually participate in the classes while she was working at Urbano, she was drawn to Sophie’s class—what she described as a place where "everyone talks about where they're coming from in their community, and issues that are important to them." After listening to Sophie talk about her place in Montana, Cristina raised her hand. “Do you think that these communities that you grew up in affect the communities you’re a part of now? Like, do you think that because you grew up in such a rural area, maybe that gave you a desire to move to the city?” Sophie affirmed Cristina’s questions and comments with enthusiastic nods and words: “Absolutely, absolutely…I love what you’re bringing in, which is the way that this map would overlay my community map of Cambridge.” As students set about creating their own neighborhood maps, Cristina’s point about the ways in which the communities we come from inform the communities we choose lingered in the room. It heightened the group’s awareness that the maps were an opportunity to think not only about their communities, but about how these communities played a role in their life stories.

Students spread out across the back studio—some sprawled out on mats on the floor, some working at tables—to create their community maps. When Sophie brought the students back together and invited them to talk about their maps, they responded with the same openness and vulnerability that she had modeled for them when she described her own. They sat in their usual circle of chairs, and Cristina jumped in first. Holding up a square of brown butcher paper with concentric circles drawn in marker, she told the group:

My community is JP. Six words I associate: safe/safety, learning, convenient, culture, openness, community. Four words that could be a negative impact because of those: off
of community, I wrote exclusive; off of safe, I put sheltered; off of convenient, I put easy; and then off of culture, I put white middle-class.

She went on to express her desires for the community: “First is including other cultures—teaching and learning about others’ backgrounds, and using resources to help other communities.” Cristina’s map spoke to numerous privileges she knew she had, living in a predominantly white and middle-class area that she experienced as safe. She could see the complexity in each facet of the community too, noting how nearly every aspect of JP could have positive and negative implications—that, for example, her sense of safety and community came at the expense of excluding other groups. At the same time, based on how she drew positive and negative associations, she made clear what some of her own values were: inclusivity, openness, diversity.

Immediately after Cristina spoke, Brandon raised his hand and asked if he could go next. Tall and slim, with a shy, reluctant smile, Brandon was a basketball player who typically came to Urbano in gym shorts and athletic socks pulled high up onto his calves. In their race, gender, class, and neighborhood identities, Brandon and Cristina were completely different. Brandon was a young Black man who lived in Mission Hill, a high-poverty area of a predominantly Black neighborhood, and attended a private school on a scholarship; Cristina was adopted from India to white middle-class parents, and she had attended a public high school focused on the arts. Cristina was entering her junior year at a prestigious college in New York City, surrounded by peers who were pursuing careers in the arts, and living in a New York City apartment partially subsidized by her parents; Brandon had hoped that a basketball scholarship could be his “getaway” from the “gun violence and drug activity” in his neighborhood, so that he could attend a “reputable college” and pursue his dreams of becoming a physical therapist. Things hadn’t worked out as planned for him, however, and
he was delaying enrollment at a university in order to support his family at home. Brandon had a strong desire to “be educated” and “be independent,” and he was glad that at Urbano he could not only be paid, but also enrich his learning and experience. Sophie’s class was his first semester at Urbano, and Brandon told me he was just “soaking everything in, every experience has been fun.” “There hasn’t been a class…where my perspective hasn’t been expanded,” he told me. “There’s always something that I hear and I’m like, ‘I wasn’t thinking that.’ So things like that…they’re nice.”

When Brandon presented his neighborhood map, he began by explaining that although he chose “student-athlete” as his community, he realized he couldn’t extricate that part of his identity from the place where he was growing up. “I should’ve put Mission Hill too,” he said to the group. “When you’re a student-athlete, you face a lot of distractions and adversity—this is where I was like, Mission Hill. Because there’s potential bad influences.”

Brandon was careful with his words, seeming to emphasize the power of individual agency: “all the things that are potential bad influences, they don’t have to be—you can control them.” At the same time, it was important to him to name the specific factors that created challenges for him. He pointed to phrases that he included in his community map as he explained them to the rest of the group.

I also put dangerous environment, because there’s a lot of gun violence and drug activity and all that. And then I put lack of resources—that’s also the Mission Hill part, because you know—some kids, because of the [socio-economic] class that they are, they’re fairly poor or whatever. Some people have to work to get what other kids receive from their parents, you know?…So I put lack of resources, which makes it harder to advance in society.
Brandon was acutely aware of how poverty and community violence constrained opportunities for young people, and limited upward mobility in his community. He also noted how a lack of encouragement and support created additional challenges for someone in his position:

“You face a lot of judgment when you’re trying to actually better yourself, I guess. [I put] lack of motivation and stuff, because just your environment, there’s not much productivity. You’re not inspired by much; you don’t see anything good.

With little sense of hope for conditions changing in his neighborhood, Brandon approached the question of the “strengths” of the community in terms of how it gave him “fuel” and motivation to get out. “For strength, I just put struggle struggle struggle struggle, everywhere. Because all of that negative stuff, that’s also what fuels you at the same time. So I just put struggle. You want to get away from that dangerous environment, you know? You want to make your life better.” He had scrawled the word “struggle” nearly a dozen times over on his square of butcher paper, like a cloud surrounding his experience.

Sophie responded to Brandon’s presentation by recognizing how he “flipped struggle into strength.” She went on to talk about the importance of shedding “the deficiency lens”—which she described as an “imperialist or oppressive approach to looking at communities,” and a lens that was often applied to urban schools and marginalized groups. Although she didn’t make a direct connection to Brandon’s talk about his neighborhood, the implication was that the media often perpetuated a “single story” of places like Mission Hill, and that these stories tended to come from people “on the outside…[who] don’t have personal experience to actually connect to what life is like for that community.” By inviting her students to think both about struggles and strengths in their communities, Sophie was reinforcing the importance of learning to see their surroundings through a lens that was
both critical and compassionate, and thus able to surface a “more complex story” than is typically told. She emphasized the need for them to define their own spheres of belonging, speak their own truths about their communities, and hold up the complexities and differences of their stories without pushing towards neat conclusions.

Bailey concluded the student presentations by showing the group a page she had made in her sketchbook. "How I did mine—it’s different," she said. "I put them all of [the communities] in circles and separated them into four things: mixed-race, bisexual, woman, and [the college I go to]. Those are the four, that if someone asked me to identify myself really quickly, they’d come to mind the fastest.” Bailey's community map acknowledged her belonging to multiple communities, and illuminated the salience of race, sexual orientation, gender, and school identities in her life. Significantly, even though I knew that Bailey also identified strongly with Jamaica Plain, she did not choose to include place in that version of communities to which she belonged. Another student chose to map a place that was not his home neighborhood, but a spot in Boston that he hung out with his skateboarding community—a place that he described as "legendary," and a symbol of a creative practice (Gustavson, 2007) that he found meaningful. In this way, Sophie's activity created opportunity for students to choose the parts of their identities that felt most salient to them in that particular moment in their lives, which in some cases led them to talk about communities and places that they chose, rather than the places they were given. Her activity also teased apart the notions of “place” and “community”—resisting a common assumption that all individuals hold an affinity for a place-based community.

To conclude, Sophie acknowledged the difficulty of answering questions about identity and belonging, recognizing the constantly shifting nature of these aspects of our selves:
Part of the reason this is difficult work is because we all have different sides of our identities, and different selves within us that come forward step back at different times in our lives, and different places. So it's not easy work, but it's really beautiful.

As she repeated the word “different,” Sophie nodded subtly and looked in the eyes of each of the six students around her, as if to recognize their presence in the room and acknowledge that their work had only just begun.

* * *

Over the course of her critical media literacy class, Sophie led students in continued exploration of the issues relevant to their lives, honoring the multiplicity of identities and communities that shaped how they saw themselves in the world. To address goals of developing students' critical consciousness—their ability to perceive injustice and "recognize [their] own potential to initiate the transformation of reality" (Cammarota, 2016, p. 235)—Sophie collaborated with two other teaching artists with fields of expertise that were different from her own. Yasmina—who Sophie and I had both worked with through the Harvard online learning community research project—came in to teach students about photography as a means of storytelling. Like Sophie and the other educators at Urbano, Yasmina was passionate about building platforms for youth voices to be heard, and about uplifting local insider knowledge to help tell more complex and complete stories about their places. As Yasmina told me:

There's always a gap in the story and most of the time the folks best suited to fill that gap are the young people, because most of the stories that we hear about everywhere and everything are reported on by adults…That was important to me—just noticing that there was space for the story to be told from a youth's perspective, and…the space should always be made to do that…especially in these more
marginalized areas where the only story being told is from outsiders. Not only just adults, but folks outside of the community who don’t actually experience everyday life in that locale.

Yasmina believed that photography was one means through which young people could address gaps and distortions in the existing discourse around issues of local relevance, and she positioned Urbano students as the experts on their own lives and stories. Yasmina facilitated activities that gave students “a chance to go out and experience the ground that they walk on very often, but with an intention to both observation and creating—and in this case—art, or photos.” In this way, Yasmina showed students a creative practice that they could use to share knowledge about their local places beyond the sphere of their Urbano class.

Shirley, a local non-profit leader, scholar, and social justice activist, led a number of workshops and lectures throughout the weeks of Sophie’s class. Shirley actively drew upon her decades of work in youth media, as well as her personal experience growing up in a working-class community in the local area, in her class sessions with Urbano students. During our interview, Shirley told me that “Boston is very much a city of neighborhoods,” and that young people naturally “bring their neighborhoods with them” when they tell stories about their lives. “It is very much like people are connected to those physical spaces,” she explained. As a media maker, Shirley also recognized that grounding stories in the details of a particular place “helps you find yourself in the story,” providing “context to actually understand people’s situation, in a way that you can find your own empathy and your connection to it.” Thus, one of the activities she did with students focused on a youth-made video about the possibility of a Walmart store opening in Roxbury. Virgo and Brandon—both of whom lived in and identified strongly with Roxbury—responded immediately:
Brandon pointed out that the donations that Walmart was offering to business owners “seemed like bribery”; Virgo reflected on how her own views on the issue had changed—“At first I thought, ‘Oooh, Walmart’! Now I hear that Walmart would kill Roxbury.” Shirley pointed out how the rhetoric in support of bringing Walmart into Roxbury suggested that what the neighborhood needed was “new, better people”—rather than policies to better serve the poor, Black, and Latinx communities who were already there. In a role-play activity, students then dove into what they imagined to be the perspectives of different local stakeholders on the issue; in small groups, they made videos based on hypothetical interviews with a local politician, a local business owner, and the CEO of Walmart. Ultimately, all students—no matter what neighborhood they lived in—experimented with placing themselves in the story and imagining the situation from different points of view.

Over the course of the summer, Shirley, Yasmina, and Sophie brought in photography and videos from a wide range of places: students analyzed video about a community center in India, commercials made in China, “The Danger of a Single Story” TED Talk by the Nigerian author Chimamanda Adichie. What stayed consistent across these curricular materials was not a focal place, but rather a set of concerns around racism and power imbalances in social institutions. Throughout, the teaching artists emphasized the power of young people to create social change, and interrogated negative messages that society conveyed about youth. On the first day that Shirley came into the class, she voiced appreciation for what the students brought to the room by virtue of being young people—a factor of identity that they all had in common, and one which sometimes led to their marginalization. “Young people are always scapegoats for what’s wrong in society,” she told the group. “It’s been said about millennials, and every other generation. But you’re not more violent, you’re not less thoughtful than the adults in this society.” Shirley spoke with authority
and conviction, and students were listening. “There are more guns in communities, and more tests in school because of adults.” She proceeded to show the students “The Apollos,” a short video about a group of students at a public high school in Oakland who “fought to make MLK a nationally recognized holiday.” “They were your age,” she emphasized. As Shirley proceeded to give examples of different youth-led protests and how movements have been condemned by the mainstream media, the students seemed to hang onto her every word, eager for more. Later on that summer, drawing connections to the youth organized walkouts from Boston public schools in the previous year, Sophie further affirmed the importance of youth activism, and recognized it as a part of the contemporary community practices (Paris & Alim, 2014) of many local youth.

During one of Shirley’s workshops, Sophie asked students about what they had learned about the history of activism in their schools, and she was met with a chorus of statements condemning the school curriculum. “I got in a fight with a teacher about that,” said Virgo. “I wanted to learn more about Black history, other than that we were being enslaved. The teacher said, ‘It’s not in the curriculum, I can’t teach you that.’” Bailey added that in her school—a prestigious private school outside of Boston—the general mantra of the teachers was: “If it’s not on a test, it won’t be taught.” Mychelle echoed these sentiments and told me that in her Catholic school, which she described as predominantly Black, the extent of their learning about Black history was what was covered during Black History month. She hadn’t learned much about slavery or Black leaders aside from Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Rosa Parks, and Ruby Bridges. She thought it was confusing that her school could be considered a “good school” with these glaring omissions in its curriculum: “Everybody’s saying, you know, wow you go to a good school, and it was like - I didn’t learn simple stuff about myself.” Mychelle told me that she had learned about the history of
Honduras—where her mother and grandmother were from—at home, but it was important to her to also know about her African ancestry as well.

It’s good to know where you’re coming from. And that’s just important to me, like I would want my kid to know how I grew up, just like I knew how my dad grew up and how my grandmother grew up, you know?

To Mychelle, a curriculum that allowed her to better understand her own roots—to understand the experiences of those who came before—would help her better understand her “self.” By connecting her with contemporary struggles led by people who were young and Black, Urbano sessions like the ones led by Shirley offered her knowledge that she felt she was owed.

Scotty was not in Sophie’s class, but he had voiced a similar complaint to me about the failure of schools to teach content relevant to his everyday life. As an example, Scotty talked about how gentrification was a constant topic of discussion in Urbano classes, yet everyone at school seemed “so clueless” about what was happening in their neighborhoods. Scotty vented: “Teachers have the information and knowledge about…gentrification and how it works, but like, we don’t talk about that in schools at all…That’s something the whole class would want to know, you know what I mean?” For Scotty, the disconnect between students’ concerns and the content of their curriculum was a source of frustration and confusion; he wanted to learn about gentrification beyond what he was able to observe on his own, and better understand the workings of a phenomena that was impacting students’ lives. I was reminded of Valerie Kinloch’s (2009) research with a young Black man in Harlem, in which she explored the stark contrast between her research participant’s passion for studying his neighborhood and “spatial history and culture,” and his lack of engagement in school. The young man in Kinloch’s (2009) research voiced:
I'm thinking I learn more from the community, like things about history, protests, and different experiences than from school. What does that tell you?…What does that say about disconnects between where I go to school and where I live? I do both right here in Harlem, but we’re not talking about what’s happening out there, like gentrification. Why not? (p. 317)

In these voices—tinged with outrage—we can hear these young people’s desire for spaces to “talk” about what they were seeing in their local surroundings, and for their learning to be based in what was happening in their communities. Clearly, what was happening “out there” in their neighborhoods was not something they left behind when they entered their school buildings and classrooms, and the failure of institutions of education to address these realities felt incomprehensible to them.

The opportunity to learn about personally relevant issues was eye-opening for many students at Urbano. The students who were in Sophie’s class during the Urbano summer program often described their experiences with words that suggested a sense of awakening. Over the course of the program, Brandon created a design on the inside cover of his sketchbook with the word “Urbano” written in block letters, the “O” drawn in the shape of a lightbulb with a star-shaped aura around it. He planned to continue adding to the design as he gained more experiences through the program. “It just gets you thinking,” he responded, when I asked him what he liked about Urbano. “All the lessons are good…they just open your eyes, I guess.” For him, the “open” nature of thinking, learning, and interacting at Urbano contrasted significantly with his experience of his local neighborhood, where he said “it’s just like a weird atmosphere, the environment is just weird.”

Cuz, like, nobody there thinks they’re gonna go anywhere. So they only think like, this neighborhood—they think it’s the world…their minds are in closed boxes. So
they don’t see much, they don’t care about much…nobody aspires to be better or anything, or to get out. So nobody’s being social; everybody’s just weird.

Brandon was troubled by what he perceived in his home neighborhood as a widespread lack of aspiration, motivation, and care; he desired to expand his world beyond this environment, and saw Urbano as one way that he could do this—breaking his own routines of being a “homebody” who only “leave[s] the house to play ball.” It was important to Brandon to appreciate the choices that he did have, perhaps because he felt the environment in which he lived was outside of his control. “Some people—they’re forced to live in these communities because they can’t afford anything else…it’s not like people chose to live there, they just bad to live there…[and then] they just grow into it, you know?” Brandon didn’t have a choice as to where he lived at that stage in his life, but he did have the chance to define himself as someone who pushed against a “closed box” of thinking and action. Reflecting on how he was impacted by his time at Urbano, Brandon said: “I always kinda thought different from other people—like, outside the box. But now it’s just evolving to another level.”

![Brandon’s Urbano design](image-url)

*Figure 9: Brandon’s Urbano design*
Brandon felt particularly inspired by the video that Shirley had shown about the students who fought for MLK Day to be a holiday. When I asked him about what he gained from the class, one of the things he spoke about was hope:

I guess it's staying optimistic and hopeful. Like with the MLK thing, the Oakland kids. Cuz they really were just like kids, it was like I think ten of them and the teacher, and they really made an impact. And now it's a national holiday. So yeah it's just like you gotta keep fighting.

Brandon called the students “tenacious,” and saw that as the reason why “their goal was completed; it was achieved.” He felt like he already had tools for “the fight” through growing up in his neighborhood, which he said gave him “the hustler mentality” he believed he needed in order to succeed.

There’ll really be people that work like nine to five, there’ll be people that have two jobs and the parents really won’t see their kids like at all, like they’ll only see them, but that's when they walk in, they take like a two-hour nap, go back to work. There's people like that but they really do that every day and I'm like, that takes mad dedication, yo. So yeah just the fight. Everybody knows the struggle so everybody's trying to get out of the struggle, that's when the fight—when that hustler's mentality comes in.

Brandon’s personal struggle at that moment was in persisting through a setback in terms of his college plans, and ensuring that he could still find a way to become a physical therapist. Here, even though the context and the goals were different, the stories of youth activism that he learned in Sophie’s class mattered. “It just means the route [to my career] is now different,” he said, “[but] I don’t care what route I gotta take to get there. I guess that kinda in a way ties back to that whole Oakland-type kids, and the whole hope thing.” Although he
didn't feel that he had any significant shifts in his perspective on his neighborhood through his time at Urbano—“Nah, I know how my neighborhood works,” he responded, when I asked him about whether he saw it differently—Brandon emerged from the class with a habit of “being more observant,” and a strengthened resolve and faith in his ability to achieve his goals.

Through Sophie’s class, Virgo said she was “unlearning” some of her prior beliefs and “what she’d been conditioned to be.” This was particularly true with regard to racism that she felt she had internalized, as a young Black woman in the U.S. Virgo told me, for example, about how she recently stopped believing that “nappy hair [was] bad…[or] anything to be ashamed of.” She said she had been “conditioned to believe these things” by what she saw online and on social media. She valued Sophie’s class for the opportunity to “develop the skills that I need to decolonize my mind and decolonize other people’s minds, get rid of these stereotypes and biases and prejudices and actually see things for what it actually truly is.” For her, it was an opportunity to reflect critically upon dominant ways-of-thinking and ways-of-seeing in society, which was leading her to think deeply about her own beliefs and values. She explained:

You really have to look really deep into like, OK, you told me the apple is green. I need a source. And I need to open the apple. And I need to figure out, how could it ever have been green? I need every detail I can possibly get now. because after that, it's like I couldn't be sure that anything told to me is true anymore. So it, it really makes me more like a critical thinker. And analyzing things a lot more.

Virgo began to take on a questioning stance towards anything presented to her as true, and she said that she wanted her community in Roxbury to do the same: “I just would like for
the rest of my community to open their eyes, and just learn to know the facts first...the reason a lot of people don't get justice is because people don't know the [whole] story.”

One way that Virgo began to shift her habits of thinking was in relation to the racial tensions in her neighborhood. Towards the beginning of the summer, Virgo spoke with me about intense feelings of distrust and anger that she had towards the white families she saw moving into Roxbury. She described her neighborhood as embroiled in a “race war”—a “dangerous war” that she felt ready to fight, even if she wasn’t sure how. Virgo feared physical and cultural displacement from her home due to the gentrification she observed, and she was upset by recent incidents that felt like attacks on the Black communities in the neighborhood. She told me about how she turned hostile towards the white family that lived on her street after an incident in which someone printed an image of a confederate flag and put it on a beloved nearby mural that held an image of Nelson Mandela and the words “Roxbury Love.” Virgo’s view of the world as increasingly divided along racial lines was heightened by what was happening in the national context during that time: it was the election year, and she saw white supremacist beliefs surfacing around her.

It was always Black versus white...you see what side people choose...even [in] how they say things, like if someone says, for instance, “I’m voting for Trump,” it draws a line and it separates them completely from the rest of us.

I found it understandable that Virgo would feel increasingly unsafe, physically and psychologically, given what was happening around her. Virgo wasn’t retreating, however: that summer, she and Brandon attended at least one protest of police violence together, and she was energized by her experience in Sophie’s class. In her words, I felt her sense of faith in the capabilities of Black youth and other historically oppressed groups. “They’re not winning this time,” she said, referring to the gentrifiers in her neighborhood but also more broadly, to
white supremacists. “They can't enslave us again, it's not gonna happen. We're a totally different generation.”

By the end of the summer program, Virgo still held on this sense of pride and belonging based on her place and race identities. Yet she had also become more self-reflective about her assumptions about and her relationships to the white people moving into her neighborhood. She told me that she realized her assumptions were based on “the stereotypes of white people that I would see on social media,” and she thus wanted to “change that point of view in her head” because she wouldn't want others to make assumptions about her based on her race.

I had a thing like, who am I to tell someone that they can't move into my neighborhood because I don't feel like they fit the description to live here? So I just had to like get that conditioning out of my mind that just white people don't belong in Roxbury. And I've been battling with myself a lot because I'm like, not to say that they do belong in Roxbury, cuz there's a very big part of me that's like, whoever is here, is meant to be here, they gotta stay here and no one else can come in. But then I'm also like, okay, if I as a Black person wanted to move to a white community, I'll probably get the same treatment that I'm giving out to the white people in my community. So it's just like, just changing perspective—it brings up a lot of questions about myself, and I'm trying to figure out what really is wrong, what really is right, what really is racism and prejudice, things like that. It's a very difficult process but I'm working on it.

Virgo mentioned that her friends in the neighborhood weren't as “open-minded” as she was, and suggested that at times, they had initiated aggressions against white people in the neighborhood. She said that although she didn't join them in behavior that she disagreed
with, she couldn’t fault them for the way they felt. It is impossible to know if she would have joined them in these actions if she had not been in Sophie’s class, but what was clear was that she was developing a more empathetic stance towards a group that she had previously cast as a permanent enemy. A key outcome of youth development is a sense of empathy for other groups, perspective-taking skills, and moral and ethical thinking—all of which Virgo was practicing through her participation in Sophie’s class.

While all students in Sophie’s class told me that the experience helped them to become more critical of their sources and more oriented towards understanding the full story on any given issue, there were some students who did not latch onto the connections to place in the curriculum. Daniel, a new student who was in both Sophie’s class and Jordan's class, struggled to identify with a community, and did not have strong feelings about his neighborhood. This had become apparent during Jordan’s mapping activity earlier that week—when Daniel drew a map of Roslindale that consisted mostly of his own house, since he spent most of his time indoors, playing games on his computer. During our first interview, Daniel explained that he found his neighborhood “boring,” and that “nothing ever happens, ever”—leaving him with little to say about the people or the place. Most of his neighbors were elderly and white; his was the only Black family on the street, and his main interaction with neighbors was during the winter, when they would pay him generously to help shovel the snow. When I asked what he might design as a flag for his neighborhood, he took the blank index card I offered him and handed it back to me: an empty white space. When Daniel and I met for our second interview at the end of the summer program, I asked him if he would change anything about that image, and he replied with his simple and emphatic “no.” “It’s not that I don’t like it,” he clarified, “it’s nice and quiet.” “Everyone’s nice…[and] if anyone is racist…they don’t say it or act any different to me or my family than
anyone else.” In response to a question about whether he observed any changes in his neighborhood during the summer, he said definitively: “No. I mean I've lived in the same neighborhood all my life, and everyone else around me has lived in the same neighborhood for as long as I've been living there, so there's nothing new to observe.” Daniel maintained a neutral relationship to his neighborhood, and did not see it playing a significant role in his life. While he was comfortable talking about it if asked—he did draw and present his neighborhood map in Jordan's class—he didn't see it as a salient part of his identity or experience.

Daniel also told me that he had a baseline of knowledge about the content taught in Sophie's class, because of a history teacher that he had in the eighth grade. He described his history class as “engaging,” and elaborated by explaining how it connected with his racial identity and experience:

The teacher made it about Black people I guess. Or minorities. And less about spouting unnecessary facts. She related it back to actual problems that we could have…the teacher definitely knew that that’s what most kids were thinking about…like realizing that if we wanted to get anywhere in life, we had to know that stuff was actually happening in the real world, and it's not only about what you're going to do after school or whatever.

Prior to that class, Daniel said, his world was limited to his games: “I was only concerned about what video game I was going to play when I got home…and then in 8th grade, that's when we had started learning actually important problems.” Daniel told me that Sophie's class built upon the foundation that his history class had set—“It just made me more aware of everything that was happening around me,” he said—and helped him understand that people's opinions and beliefs are the consequence of the stories they've been told, which is
often only “one side of the story.” He continued to be interested in learning about other people’s stories—“I always like to hear or see other people’s perspectives,” he said—and was excited for learning that felt relevant in the world at large rather than in his personal life. For Daniel, Urbano was far more about exploring a plurality of perspectives, and about thinking analytically and being creative, than it was about any one particular group or place. One year after he participated in Sophie’s summer class, Daniel continued to take classes at Urbano—including the class on art, activism, and research that I helped lead—and he told me that it was those features of Urbano youth programs that brought him back. He also told me that although he still had the same neutral feelings about his home neighborhood, he was increasingly finding ways to spend time walking through his local surroundings. Similar to Imani—who was beginning to take photographs on her street in Dorchester, inspired by Jordan’s class—Daniel was in a process of experimenting with his relationships to different places in his local world.

Daniel’s story raises an important point about pedagogies of place that has been discussed in the existing literature (e.g. Ball & Lai, 2006; Graham, 2007): educators would be mistaken to assume that students are intrinsically interested in their local places as a topic of study, simply because they see them on a regular basis. Indeed, as Graham (2007) writes, “students can be reluctant to become involved with local content, local ecology, or activism…contemporary culture that surrounds students is persuasive, pervasive, and not particularly sympathetic to environmental or local concerns” (p. 396). Scholars thus recommend that educators interpret the invitation to attend to place as a call for listening closely to the students in their classrooms—understanding that their identities, interests, experiences, and practices are the most relevant construction of “the local” that is possible (Ball & Lai, 2006).
Based on my research with Urbano, I would add that in a diverse urban context, it is important for educators to create space for a wide range of stories of place to be told. As the narratives of Sophie’s students make clear, every individual embodies a multitude of places and communities based on the shifting and complex nature of identity. Furthermore, making room for all of their stories is an important part of honoring the cultural pluralism and curiosity about others that young people naturally bring. Ultimately, what was most important to the teaching artists and the students was not just the explicit engagement with the various neighborhoods that they were from, but the creation of a space where all of these places—like all other aspects of their backgrounds, experiences, and identities—were honored as a potentially significant part of their lives, their knowledge, and their strength.

**Coda**

Grounded in critical theory (Giroux & McLaren, 1989) and sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978), culturally responsive pedagogy is founded on the idea that “instruction is more effective when students’ and teachers’ prior experiences, community settings, cultural backgrounds, and ethnic identities are considered and integrated in curriculum and instruction” (Gay, 2010 as cited in Taylor & Sobel, 2011). According to Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995; 2009), culturally responsive teaching is a means to empower students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically. Pedagogies of place can be a powerful tool for supporting young people in these explorations, and the critical examination of their local worlds. As a window into their individual identities, communities, lived experiences, and creative practices, place provides a powerful entry point into the richness of students’ lives. At Urbano, I found that pedagogies of place were well-aligned with culturally responsive pedagogies, critical pedagogies, and other models of progressive education that seek to heal the disconnect between students’ experiences in the different spaces of their lives.
My research revealed multiple ways in which place-based pedagogy played a role in shaping a culturally responsive art space for Urbano youth. First, in both classes that I observed during the Urbano summer program, mapping offered an engaging method for students to talk about their home neighborhoods and their communities. In Jordan's class, mapping the home neighborhood provided a way for all students to contribute to the collective knowledge of the group, and to connect their different places and experiences in their process of better understanding the city of Boston as a whole. The questions that Jordan asked students around what they liked and disliked about their relationships with neighbors, and what they identified as positive and negative spaces in their surroundings, also inspired students to become more observant and exploratory as they moved through their everyday lives in the city. Through his teaching experience, Jordan came to recognize place as the starting point for more deeply understanding his students’ interests and the fullness of their lives, and believed that it held the potential to make his whole class more engaging and effective. Yet even without systematically and consistently integrating place into his teaching, the meaning and value that his students attached to the activities he did facilitate signal the highly impactful nature of this educational approach.

In Sophie’s class, pedagogies of place allowed for students to dive more into their analysis and perspectives on the particular social worlds of which they were a part—surfacing knowledge not only about their personal connections to other places and peoples, but also about the challenges they faced and the unique resources found in their communities. Guest teaching artists in her class utilized place to foster a culturally responsive space by valuing students’ stories and knowledge as insiders of their communities, and acknowledging place as one factor of identity—along with age, race, and class—that could be relevant to their lives.
Further, the pedagogical approaches in Sophie’s class encouraged critical reflection on and analysis of the cultures and communities of which students were part—holding promise as a form of culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris & Alim, 2014). As both Brandon and Virgo showed, there were ways-of-thinking and ways-of-being associated with their neighborhoods that deeply informed their everyday experience and relationships, and that they were beginning to question through their time at Urbano. According to Paris and Alim (2014, 2017), culturally sustaining pedagogy enables students to not only honor and extend dimensions or aspects of their culture, but also to problematize them. In what they call a “loving critique” of culturally responsive pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995), Paris and Alim (2014) discuss the need for asset pedagogies to address both the heritage practices and the contemporary community practices of students of color, and also to engage critically with “problematic elements expressed in some youth cultures” (p. 86), such as those that reproduce hegemonic ideas informed by sexism or homophobia, for example. By creating opportunities for young people to explore and share elements of their identities, experiences, and backgrounds connected to their home neighborhoods, Urbano classes provided students with a culturally responsive space that bridged into the territory of culturally sustaining pedagogy. It raised questions about what aspects of their places they wanted to sustain; it also allowed them to interrogate what aspects of their places might be in need of change. In this process of critical examination, it becomes possible to imagine how realities might be transformed—cultivating the ability “to look at things as if they could be otherwise” (Greene, 2007).

Finally, in both Jordan and Sophie’s classes, pedagogies of place helped foster a classroom space in which group dialogue, personal storytelling and deep listening were valued as essential to the processes of learning and creating together. A number of scholars
have written that particularly for educators interested in facilitating democratic communities for learning, attention needs to be paid to the spaces that emerge from the activities that we do, and how these spaces matter in the experience of young people (Hill & Vasudevan, 2007). Drawing from Vygotsky’s (1978) social development theory, Nakkula and Toshalis (2006) argue that the intellectual growth of adolescents emerges from the interpersonal connections that they form, positioning each student as vital to the development and education of others. By providing an entry point into talking freely about their lived experience, the mapping activities helped foster connections between individuals—based on both a recognition of difference as well as discovery of similarity. They positioned students as experts on their own experience, and validated that each of them had a unique perspective to contribute to the group’s collective knowledge and work. Moreover, they provided students and teaching artists with a foundation upon which they could build relationships of mutual understanding—an essential resource for their learning, development, and transformation (Brown & Gilligan, 1993; Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006). Through these activities, both Jordan and Sophie took opportunities to model vulnerability and openness about their own lives in their practice of participating in the activities along with the students; they allowed students to see into their lives, and thus built a reciprocal dynamic in which all members of the class community were learning from one another’s different experiences.

In this way, these Urbano classes demonstrate how place can be used to not only create a culturally responsive and culturally sustaining space for youth. In accordance with the theory and philosophy of critical pedagogy, pedagogies of place can transform relations in the classroom and thus “produce new knowledge through active engagement and dialogue, where knowledge is grounded in the experiences of students and lecturers, and
where learning and education are culturally relevant, socially empowering, and participant driven” (Giroux, 2009).
VI. Real People, Real Stories, Real Lives: Explorations Beyond the Art Studio

Figure 10: Students' map of the local neighborhood, created on an Urbano wall

Urban community-based youth organizations, especially those with civic and democratic aims, have been known to integrate a focus on local place and experiential education as key parts of their practice (Checkoway, 2011). This is particularly true in community-based arts contexts, where experiential learning and pedagogies of place often serve as a tool for deepening young people’s understandings of and attachments to their local surroundings (Ball & Lai, 2006; Graham, 2007; Grimwood, Gordon, & Stevens, 2017; Trafi-Prats, 2012). In urban environments, learning about local surroundings through experiencing them firsthand has the potential to increase students’ awareness of inequities related to race, class, and other social position factors (e.g. Elwood, 2004; Kinloch, 2009; Ritsema, Knecht, & Kruckemeyer, 2011). However, much of the empirical literature on
place-based education (PBE) neglects this dimension of young people’s place-based experiences, focusing instead on their ecological understandings and the affective dimensions of their connection to place (for exceptions, see Jocson, 2016; Kinloch, 2009; Senechal, 2008). As an urban community art studio that regularly engages young people in outdoor experiences through its pedagogics of place and placemaking, Urbano is a useful context for studying: a) how this practice creates opportunity for heightened awareness of inequality and inequity in local contexts; b) the possibilities and challenges of place-based work for artists in urban contexts.

In this final empirical chapter of my dissertation, I begin by examining how Urbano staff, teaching artists, and students attached meaning and value to their experiences outside of the physical space of Urbano, analyzing both adult and youth perspectives on engagement with their local surroundings. I then raise up the issues and concerns that long-time Urbano students expressed with regard to the organization’s interactions with local communities. Ultimately, I show how these young people desired more meaningful, authentic, and reciprocal forms of community engagement, based on mutually beneficial relationships with local peoples and places. In the coda of this chapter, I draw connections to the practice of creative placemaking in youth programs, and for the field of socially engaged art more broadly; I also explore how these findings are relevant for all educators seeking to engage in place-based work in contexts of social inequality and difference.

**Opening Doors**

*Outside.*

At Urbano, the word “outside” had the power to fire up energy and stir the imagination of the artists in the room. For Carmen, the action of going outside resonated with her sensibilities as an artist interested in doing work in public space. It spoke to her
desire for Urbano to diversify and broaden the communities engaged in their conversations, and to do projects that thus had “more freedom…more meaning…more strength.” “I’ve always been…about artistic interventions or interactions that you can do out in a public site,” Carmen told me. From her perch as the founder and artistic director of Urbano, Carmen felt that she had witnessed “how satisfying and how important and how great the projects were - for me and for the kids - when you had to place them in public space, when you had to interact with the public.” In addition to improving the quality of the artwork, she believed that being outside opened a pathway for people to view and relate to their surroundings in new ways. “When we start looking at [our surroundings] with closer eyes,” Carmen explained, her voice becoming animated. “With curiosity…with compassion! with creativity! With possibilities,” she continued, “different things happen. It’s a different way of seeing, and reacting to the world, right? Yeah. Yeah!” Eyes shining, she concluded: “that’s basically why I really like this work.”

As sunlight streamed in from the glass doors of the main entrance, I remembered a moment from a conversation we had earlier in the summer, when Carmen told me about her first time seeing this space and considering it as an option for Urbano. The doors had been the saving grace of the otherwise dismal space, cluttered as it was with boxes and piles of old clothes and trash. “I came here and, ooh! And then I finally saw the light! The door!” For her, that one feature of the space was the glimmer of possibility in the darkness—it was the one thing that made the space viable for the community art studio she wanted to start. Nearly ten years later, as we sat at opposite sides of her desk in what became the Urbano gallery, Carmen gazed at these doors and gestured toward them as we talked about Urbano’s recent focus on placemaking in the local neighborhood of Egleston Square. She expressed that she had been frustrated to see that teaching artists were “[falling] back to just doing the projects
in here”—inside the physical space of Urbano—when there was such exciting opportunity for student learning and community engagement to be found outside, in the public sphere. Now with a foundation grant to support creative placemaking work in the Urbano youth programs, Carmen had an opportunity to further encourage artist projects that could “relate to the community,” not only “the space inside here.” The full potential of Urbano’s work, she believed, rested in what they could do beyond the confines of the studio.

Carla, Urbano’s development and grants manager that summer, shared Carmen’s enthusiasm for going outside, and believed that Urbano had a key role to play in fostering young people’s relationships to Boston. “Youth…are part of the city,” she said. “They're part of a place. And how can you not talk about that? If not…in a place like Urbano.” In her view, Urbano presented a natural opportunity for young people to discuss the existing connections that they had to their larger environment, and to also “go out, as artists, as explorers” so that they could “feel the place…and try to work with that.” Like a number of the teaching artists at Urbano, she stressed the importance of learning the local environment through “feeling”—through becoming aware of the emotional and sensory experiences that they had while being there. In her previous work with young people in Colombia, Carla felt like she had witnessed the “magical change” that this process can inspire. Smiling, she said: “It opens a door—and they can see life with another lens, with another perspective.”

In addition, Carla wanted to see Urbano develop a closer relationship with its local neighborhood of Jamaica Plain, and felt like the creative placemaking grant that the organization had received was a productive step in this direction. She acknowledged that Urbano had previously seemed closed off to the local area—bounded, “like a parenthesis,” she explained. She believed that opening up would be “very beneficial for our kids, for our artists, but also for us.” “I feel that we are trying to - trying to get deeper! Deepening this
relationship with Jamaica Plain. Because that is what we are. That is the place that we are.”

For Carla, deepening a relationship with the local neighborhood was both the logical responsibility of a community-based organization such as Urbano, as well as a personal desire that she had. She was intrinsically interested in exploring her local surroundings. On her own, she was seeking to build a relationship with the place through taking time “to walk, to know the little shops, and the parks” and to also take classes at local institutions; it was thus that, on a personal level, she felt like she was “discover[ing] JP.” Carla saw Urbano, as an institution, as being in the “early stages” of getting to know Jamaica Plain; she felt they needed more time—as well as a “decisive position”—to become a “part of the community.”

To Carla, the organization’s previous engagement with Egleston Square seemed more incidental than “intentional”: when Urbano students went outdoors, she said, “it [was] not like, ‘OK, let’s go outside to this specific neighborhood.’”

From the start of the summer program at Urbano, it was unclear how “intentional” and “decisive” the organization was about building a relationship with the local neighborhood through their place-based work. At the orientation for teaching artists that occurred the week before the classes began, Carmen mentioned that “place-based education” and “creative placemaking” were elements of the work at Urbano, but did not elaborate further on what that meant to the staff, or what expectations they held for the teaching artists and students in doing this work. Scotty, one of the Urbano Fellows, presented a set of slides about the organization’s history of work in Egleston Square, the part of Jamaica Plain closest to Urbano. “Our immediate commons is Egleston Square,” he said, and proceeded to talk about the activities he had been a part of: a neighborhood tour from the director of a local non-profit, who Scotty described as “like the mayor of Egleston”; a workshop on community organizing and leadership from a local urban planner; interviews
with local business owners. He highlighted the resources that were developed from these previous projects in Egleston Square: relationships with local business owners who later donated food to Urbano events, a “database” of information about the local neighborhood that drew from the interviews they conducted. Around the table, Sophie and Jordan—the summer teaching artists—nodded, seemingly impressed. When the presentation moved on to a discussion of what makes for “quality” work looks like in an Urbano class, however, there was no further mention of engagement with the local neighborhood and community. Sophie would be teaching a critical media literacy class, Jordan teaching a cinematography class; neither of them had proposed to focus on Egleston Square or Jamaica Plain, and none of the staff members had raised this as a concern.

While the teaching artists had not planned their classes with a primary goal of connecting their students and their work with the local neighborhood, they did express a strong appreciation for the value of going outside in general. On a “simple level,” Sophie saw going outside as a hook for student engagement: “I think that a change of context is important. I think that exploring and observing the world around you is really important in keeping students engaged in a four-hour class. There’s a simple reason. It’s summer!” Jordan similarly believed that time outside was a necessity during the warmer weather—both for students and for people in general. Jordan took his class outdoors to record audio and take photographs and video several times over the course of his class, and believed that these experiences were importance for their work:

I think it was really good because [for] one, it's summertime, they need to get outside. And I think that's how a lot of work is created—[it] is like through those ideas of just being able to experience life and then react to them. And then I think also just like seeing the community more often, I think, was like a really big deal.
On a human level, Jordan saw the importance of people having time to enjoy fresh air and sunshine, and to not be cooped up inside. In addition, for youth artists, being outside could open up an avenue to individual creativity, and also to learning about the people who surrounded them; these were inherent benefits of encounters with people and places outside of the back studio of Urbano.

Sophie told me that this practice was a part of her core beliefs as a teaching artist who wanted to support students in speaking back to dominant narratives in society. “Pedagogically,” she said, “I think that I’m really interested in starting from the material that’s around us, hidden in plain sight… I don’t know how we begin to tell different stories if we don’t look in a multitude of places.” In all the teaching that she did, she wanted her students to appreciate their local surroundings as a source of inspiration, and to see raw materials for creating art all around them. During our interview, Sophie mused:

Maybe I’m speaking as a poet more than [as a] place-based teaching artist, but I think the first thing is to look for the beauty in the quotidian. Not even the beauty, but look for the complexity in the quotidian. It doesn’t have to be a field trip across the city, or some big narrated walking tour. It really might be letting students be alone in a different space with pen and paper, or camera, or just their own eyes. I think that being willing to start with the small, the obvious, the quotidian, is a really simple principle that might sound boring, but can be really essential to this kind of work.

For Sophie, the goal of going outside was to cultivate habits of “looking for beauty”—noticing the details in places that might otherwise get neglected, and tuning into their own sense of what is interesting and worthy of attention. To gain deeper understandings of our surroundings—no matter how humble they may be—it required transforming an
environment into an object for close study, taking time absorbing the details of a setting, and choosing to experience it differently than usual.

Outside of his time teaching the cinematography class at Urbano, Jordan was trying to deepen his own understandings of and relationship to the local neighborhood of Egleston Square. To him, this process was important preparation for his work at Urbano, as well as the centerpiece of an artistic project he was developing for an Urbano exhibition. Often, Jordan came in to teach his class at Urbano after spending time walking or biking around the local neighborhood; sometimes he continued this work after dismissing his class, too. He told me that he had immersed himself in this process as soon as he got the offer to teach at Urbano that summer. At the end of the summer program, Jordan and I sat in a cafe in Cambridge blocks away from where he lived, and he gazed out of the window at the cars and passersby while speaking at length about the nature of place-based work. He told me believed that getting to know a place meant resisting our tendencies to lean on learning that is “‘fact-based,’ or like proven by some statistician or someone that has a college degree,” and instead learning from asking questions of the people right around where you stood. Further, in the narrative below, he explained the factors of time and vulnerability that he believed were the most crucial—and the most challenging—aspects of the process.

…the amount of time that I wanted to be in the community...it was a lot longer than I'd thought. And I'd really have to figure out ways to, you know, just to be eating at the local bodega and like talking to people and making friends. Like, I have a lot more friends now—tons of them more than I did before—but that initial, “I need to sit on this corner for an hour and like meditate and take in what's happening and like, walk the walk of everyone in the neighborhood”...[it] needs to happen like almost immediately, like the second you sign the contract, you have to be almost
transplanted to that place, and be taking in their local news, and just like discovering what they’re doing.

And I feel like that's really difficult...Because I mean, it's just like restructuring your day. You have to be like, “Alright, how am I going to involve this place that isn't my community...I have to go to that community—I don't live there—I have to go there and figure [it] out.”...You have to make yourself vulnerable to that community, and make yourself vulnerable to that community at, like, almost all times of day. Like I think that's the other big thing: to be like "I need to be there in the morning, I need to be there in the afternoon, I need to experience [it at] night." Like I need to experience what these kids are talking about. You have to have dialogue and start having a rapport with those people. And the only way it can happen is by being there.

Jordan identified several aspects of the work that he found necessary and difficult at the same time, particularly coming from his position as an outsider to the place and the community. One concerned the physical nature of the work of getting to know a place: echoing Carla, he believed that it required “being there” and experiencing it directly—something that required going there, moving around to different locations within the place, and exploring it at different times of day. Jordan highlighted the dedication of mind, body, and time that place-based art and education can require—it transcended the bounds of a class session with students, and even preceded the start date of a class. As his narrative suggests, it was a shifting of the geographies of his everyday life that expanded his social world, and his own sense of belonging to community; it required a full-bodied vulnerability, openness, and humility. Jordan’s approach worked for his purposes, as he told me that as time went on:
I would be out there walking around with my camera; I would shoot stuff. And some people would be like, what are you shooting? Most people would just say hello. And then it’s like by the time they see you the second time or the third time or the fourth time, it’s like you’re almost starting to become part of that community.

He would stop in to the local bodega and speak little bits of Spanish with the woman who worked there, and they would both begin to look forward to their interactions. Over time, with these “very small things”—what scholars of place-based pedagogy might call “thousands of intimate moments” (Somerville, 2011, p. 75)—he built what he called “a relationship with the space.” This is one of the theorized outcomes of place-based education, though it has rarely been considered from the vantage point of the educator rather than the student. Yet given the need for educators to invest deeply in students and their places in order to do transformative work (e.g. Duncan-Andrade, 2007; Watson, 2012), Jordan’s method of knowledge-building about place can be considered instructive for educational practitioners across contexts.

When Sophie and I got together at the end of the summer, she reflected on her personal hesitations about engaging in place-based work as an outsider to the local community, and raised questions about the relationship between knowledge of place and knowledge of macro-level forces in society. Because of her outsider status based on race and place—she called herself a “white woman coming in from Cambridge into a community where I don’t live”—Sophie “wasn’t always sure that [she] belonged there doing that work, in the first place.” Further, on a more philosophical level, Sophie was wrestling with how the construct of place—when defined as the local neighborhood—fit into the critical pedagogy that she sought to practice. Sophie had designed her class as an opportunity for students to use media to critique and resist systems of oppression affecting their lives, and she was
interested in “larger discourses…that are operating at a higher, or more national, or cross-
place sort of level.” To her, if there was to be a focus on a local neighborhood, it was
important to make the connection between the micro and the macro:

I think if you can make that transition…if you can start from something that’s
rooted in place and explore that without having to lose the possibility of opening up
into discourses that capture a part of identity, or part of the work that might not be
based on the physicality. So maybe that’s the greatest limitation: it’s if it’s understood
as the physical, concrete place.

Based on the other teaching that Sophie was doing at a youth program in Cambridge near
where she lived, where students not only did “field observations and talking to people on the
streets,” but also “dug into who used to live there…the histories of their homes and the
history of zoning and a little bit of the urban planning,” Sophie was beginning to turn
towards “the power of place-based work with a little bit of history.” “I think that that makes
the difference,” she said.

Learning who used to walk those streets, who used to live there, who composes
different parts of my community, parts of my community that aren’t visible to
me…that really transformed the way I connect with own community and
neighborhood, and that was really powerful for me.

In his scholarship on critical pedagogies of place, Gruenewald (2003a, 2003b, 2008)
discusses the importance of learning history as a part of understanding that the broader
social, political, and economic forces shaping places, and providing evidence for students
that the present reality of any given place is the product of human decisions; in this way, it
can support students to further understand their own situationality (Freire, 1970), their own
potential as place-makers, and the connections between different places across time and
space. Several Urbano Fellows—Bailey and Scotty, for example—mentioned to me that they had begun to dig into the history of different neighborhoods in Boston through online searches in their free time; their curiosity had been sparked by the exposure they gained to these places through their classes at Urbano. Scotty told me that he had burning questions about Egleston after his first semester of focusing on placemaking in the local neighborhood, when his journalism class was “doing a lot of research about Egleston Square.” He learned that Egleston used to be a “hub in Boston”: “there was a theater—and there’s no theater in Egleston now—and everyone around Boston used to come around Egleston for entertainment; it was like downtown.” When I asked if that research made him “see Egleston differently,” he responded with an emphatic “Yeeewwwwah.” “I look at Egleston] as a place that definitely downgraded, and I wonder why. That’s my number one question.” Over the course of the following year, Scotty and I conducted research together, and he eagerly read—and later taught—about the policies of red-lining, practices of transit-oriented development, and contemporary processes of gentrification that have contributed to the conditions of the neighborhood today. Based on what I heard and observed from Scotty’s experience of doing research and learning history, Sophie’s proposal that “a little bit of history” could make pedagogies of place more transformative for students seemed to carry weight.

Although Jordan and Sophie did not ultimately integrate an explicit focus on Egleston Square into their curriculum and pedagogy during the summer program, they did facilitate numerous outdoor experiences for students, especially through activities involving photography in their local surroundings. In the following section of this chapter, I explore the range of ways in which students made sense of their experiences going outside with Urbano—attending both to the experiences of students in Jordan and Sophie’s classes, as
well as to the narratives of the Fellows—long-time Urbano participants who had had years of experience encountering different neighborhoods through the activities and relationships facilitated by Urbano youth programs. Altogether, the meaning making and experiences of Urbano youth participants illuminate both the possibilities and the challenges of engaging with local places and people through the practice of art.

**Searching for Meaning, Authenticity, and Purpose**

Nearly all of the young people I spoke with at Urbano told me that a memorable part of their experience in the programs was their time outdoors. Soft smiles typically accompanied their talk about activities occurring outside of the Urbano studio—often as if these memories conjured up a dream of summer, a time of joy and freedom. Several students drew a comparison between being outside and being “in school” or “in class.” For Swifty—a rising high school junior in Jordan’s cinematography class, who started taking classes at Urbano soon after he immigrated from Vietnam at the age of thirteen—going outside enriched his learning experience. Swifty told me that he thought Urbano students would learn more if they spent more time outdoors:

I feel like sitting inside with people feels like trying to learn something. I mean, I know we’re trying to learn something [at Urbano]—but it makes me feel like that’s a class structure. A classroom structure. I feel like that changing it up, taking the class outside, enjoying the nature, and also learning at the same time…I feel like our minds will be like, more easy. More open.

Like many other young people I interviewed, Swifty saw Urbano as a place of learning that was intended to be different from school, and because he appreciated how Urbano could “chang[e] it up” and operate outside of the structures of schooling, he wanted to see the classes go outside more often than they did. He connected being outside to the experience
of contentment and well-being—an “easy” mind, as he put it—that he believed facilitated students’ ability to learn. Indeed, scholars have written that for youth in cities—where the tendency is to spend the majority of time indoors—outdoor experiences can cultivate positive and meaningful human-nature relationships, resulting in greater happiness, health, and overall well-being (e.g. Grimwood, Gordon, & Stevens, 2017; Russell, 2013).

Daniel, a rising high school freshman who lived in Roslindale, found joy in several aspects of going outside with Urbano. “I liked going outside and taking pictures a lot,” he said brightly. “That was fun…when we went out and…took a certain amount of pictures in the park, or like in that area near the train station.” When I asked Daniel what was fun about the experience, he began in his usual direct manner and became more contemplative as he spoke.

I think it’s because (a) I like to take pictures; (b) I like to have an excuse to go outside. I guess…see…because it was the first time I got to really talk to anyone in the program freely. Hm. I guess that’s it.

For Daniel, these experiences represented a release from the social norms and power dynamics within a traditional classroom setting, where students are expected to be “serious” and focus on their teacher’s instruction:

I feel like if we were inside, we were getting instructed on what to do. So goofing off or whatever wasn’t a good idea. When we were outside and everyone’s all spread apart, if you were with one specific group of people, then it’s like more OK to be less serious.

These opportunities to talk with peers were especially meaningful to Daniel because of the restrictive environment of his school, where he said students were “not even allowed to talk to each other without getting in trouble.” In general, he experienced Urbano as a place
where students were “given a lot more freedom” in their physical movement, their social interactions, and their learning experiences.

Figure 11: Two students in Jordan’s class, photographed by an Urbano Fellow

For some of the young people I spoke with, the act of doing photography in different neighborhoods around Boston became an artistic practice that they maintained, and that led them to build relationships to different places in the city. Al was a rising college sophomore and an Urbano Fellow who had spent three years in the organization’s youth programs, and was planning to continue working there as part-time staff. When Al was a teenager, he participated in the Boston METCO program—a voluntary school desegregation program founded in the 1960s. In the years that he was commuting from his home neighborhood to a nearby suburban high school, Urbano was his main connection to Boston. Al believed that without Urbano’s programs, he “wouldn’t have learned about these neighborhoods and the places [he] actually live[d] in.” “Over the course of the time I was in
Urbano,” he told me, “JP became more familiar. Because we would always be, for each project, going out into the local areas...something I probably never would have done [otherwise], now that I think about it.” When I asked Al about what he thought of as his home, his response revealed the depth of the connection he had cultivated to Boston.

I just feel like everywhere in this area—like all the way to downtown Boston—this is like my home. With street photography I’d always be walking around the streets...different alley ways and such, and I just became so much more familiar with the city I live in. This whole area—it’s like my home. Not really a specific place in the area, just in general.

Part of what was helping Al connect with his local surroundings was not just spending time being there; it was moving through them with a camera on hand, as an emerging street photographer. For Al, Urbano opened a pathway for him to engage with strangers and unfamiliar spaces, and over time he came to feel like the entire city was his own.

For some other long-time Urbano students, the opportunity to learn about neighborhoods other than their home neighborhood served as a wake-up call about the issues of inequality in the city. Bailey, the Urbano Fellow who was the teaching assistant for both of the summer classes, talked extensively about the impact of these experiences on her life. Bailey lived just blocks away from Urbano, in what she called “one of the safer neighborhoods...one of the more white neighborhoods in Boston.” Reflecting upon how her understandings of Boston had changed over time, Bailey told me: “I think if I only lived and worked and did everything in JP, then [I] would think that Boston is this incredibly idyllic place.” She continued:

I didn’t really know much about the differences in the neighborhoods for a really long time, and Urbano sort of opened it up to me. And I talk about it now all the
time, but like Boston…is one of the most segregated cities and that’s something I
didn’t realize until working at Urbano. I knew sort of about the segregation of
Boston, I knew about busing, I knew about all of that. But I didn’t realize how much
it still stands.

Bailey had learned about early Boston history in school, but was awakened
to the persistence
of segregation and neighborhood inequality in her city through her time with Urbano.

“Busing isn’t taught in schools, more current history isn’t taught; I feel like those are really
important things.” Bailey described herself as a “history nerd” who actively sought out
opportunities to learn more history, and to talk about contemporary issues: “the majority of
Boston history I know, I learned from researching on my own…it’s stuff that really impacts
the way that I can have conversations in Boston.” For Bailey, knowing about places outside
of her own neighborhood was key to become an informed citizen of the place.

For Bailey, it was particularly impactful to have structured opportunities to spend
time in neighborhoods that were stigmatized in the mainstream media, and to make friends
who shared her interests in exploring different places of the city. Through learning about
different places and making friends with Urbano students who were willing to explore the
city with her, Bailey was able to expand the geography of her everyday life and social world.

[Before Urbano] I spent most of my time either in [downtown] Boston or Newton,
because that’s where my friends were. That’s where the people I knew more were. So
once I started doing Urbano, I started exploring the city a lot more than I used to.
Cuz like my friends in Newton aren't interested in doing anything out in Dorchester,
even though there are fun things to do there. They're more interested in hanging out
on Newbury Street, or whatever. So I would go downtown and hang out with them.
With Urbano though, I made friends with people who were interested in going to
Dorchester. And we did, as part of the program. And we would go to those places. And like I said, until you go to place, you can't really know it. You make assumptions about it. And a lot of those assumptions just came from like, a child growing up and you hear these things, like on the news. You hear that like, a lot of killings happen in Dorchester that aren’t happening in JP. It's like not necessarily that Dorchester is ever a bad place, it's just that I understood it because it's what I heard.

Through these experiences, Bailey developed habits of seeking to “know” different places through being there, and questioning the stigma that exists around particular neighborhoods. By venturing out from the places where she usually spent time, Bailey began to develop a philosophy about the need to experience different places in order to become truly knowledgeable about the world. “You can’t be well-informed if all you know is where you’re from,” Bailey said. To gain “deep understanding of the world,” she explained, “you have to go to another place and experience it.” It was both the willingness to go out to other places, and the belief in the importance of this process, that she gained through her time at Urbano.

A year after the summer of my data collection, I remained involved with Urbano as a co-facilitator of a class, and I was able to continue learning about the lives and interests of a number of the youth participants whose experiences I discuss here. Swifty, Daniel, Mychelle, Cicada, Al, and Bailey were all continuing with practices and pursuits related to exploring places outside of home. Swifty had applied to and won a scholarship to participate in a nature-based travel program that connected him with Native American communities in the Southwest. Daniel was scheduling time to take walks outside so that he didn’t spend all of his time inside playing video games. Al was regularly hired for jobs as a photographer who used the city as his backdrop. Bailey had gone to study abroad in Europe. All of these young people described Urbano as a positive impact in their lives, and although the activities they
did outside were only one part of their Urbano experience, it was a practice that tended to stick for each of them, in ways that were meaningful given their unique interests and goals.

Yet while it was clear that many students gained as individuals through spending time in different neighborhoods with Urbano, some of the young people raised questions and concerns about the organization’s place-based work. Especially in my interviews with Urbano Fellows, these questions came up specifically with regard to Urbano’s recent focus on the local neighborhood of Egleston Square. Because Urbano’s students were geographically diverse, and many were outsiders to the predominantly working-class Latinx communities in Egleston Square, their encounters in this local place left them grappling with difficult questions around power, positionality, and difference. Because long-term Urbano students had more experiences around place-based art and placemaking in Egleston Square, they grappled with these issues more than the new students in the summer program did; I thus focus on their reflections in the section that follows.

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When the Urbano staff decided to do creative placemaking in Egleston Square as a part of its youth programs, the Fellows felt unsure about what this new direction would entail. Their reactions were heavily shaped by their own relationships to the local neighborhood, which ranged from negative to neutral. Bailey and Cristina had grown up seeing Egleston as a “rough neighborhood,” “on the other side of the tracks,” that was “a little less safe...a little more sketchy” than the area where they lived. Another student who grew up in the same area told me that he understood Egleston as “shady”—an assemblage of places and peoples not to be trusted. Virgo, an Urbano Fellow who lived in a predominantly Black neighborhood in nearby Roxbury, said that she “never considered Urbano to be in Egleston”; she associated Egleston with people who she knew and didn’t
trust—“not the best of people,” she told me. In her personal life, she had made an effort to avoid this area in order to distance herself from what she perceived as these negative influences in her life. Yamilett, an Urbano Fellow who had lived in Egleston since she moved from the Dominican Republic at the age of twelve, felt neutral: she enjoyed her neighborhood and the Spanish-speaking communities that surrounded her, but the place that mattered most to her was the Dominican Republic—the subject of much of her poetry, a conversation topic that seemed to make her swoon. When I asked Yamilett about what she thought of Urbano focusing on Egleston Square, she responded: “I mean, when we are making art at Urbano, anywhere we do it, I think there’s a connection to everything.” In this sense, the “place” of the art was not of strong consequence; it could be Egleston, or anywhere else.

Scotty was in Urbano classes from the first semester of the organization’s focus on creative placemaking in Egleston Square, and his attitude toward the shift to the local held a mixture of skepticism, ambivalence, and cautious curiosity. Like Yamilett, Scotty believed that Urbano’s focus could be anywhere, as long as it was grounded in a concern for place. Indeed, it was a connection to place that brought Scotty a sense of purpose in the art and learning that he did at Urbano.

Scotty: I never did place-based art at [my school]. And I dropped out…because I didn’t care about it. Versus Urbano, you know? I’ve been at Urbano the same amount of time I’ve been at school at this point, and I still haven’t dropped out of it. Because it’s place-based. That can tell you something.

Jessica: Mm. So what about ‘place-based’ stuff keeps you?

Scotty: It just…it has a reason? It’s not just like…it’s not just about technique-mastering or the skill-building. But like, learning about where you are. Yeah.
Given his understandings of Urbano, Scotty entered into the Egleston Square projects with the hope that he could learn more about where he was—both in terms of the local surroundings of Urbano, and the community that his own family was attached to. “A lot of these people [in Egleston] grew up with my parents,” he told the teaching artists at the orientation at the beginning of the summer. “I have roots in Egleston even though I haven’t lived there,” Scotty said, which made the work “more personal” to him. Yet even without his personal connection, he believed that a focus on Egleston Square “made sense” for Urbano. According to Scotty, “Urbano always did a lot of work around Boston and outside of its own neighborhood, but didn’t spend enough time focusing on what’s…more local to us. Like, hyper-local. We were thinking too outside the box and forgot about where we’re in.”

Scotty could see flaws and contradictions in this local focus, though, when he thought about the reality that Urbano students, teaching artists, and staff had stronger connections to other areas of Boston than to Egleston Square. During our interviews, Scotty pointed out that Carmen was “not even from Egleston,” and he felt “pretty sure that she didn’t open [Urbano]…with the intention of serving this community.” Even though Carmen had what Scotty called “artistic roots in Egleston”—her former art studio had facilitated a mural project with young men in the neighborhood during the 1980s—she did not demonstrate a genuine interest in the local community, in his eyes. “Why does she live in Cambridge?” he asked me, charged up during one of our interviews. “I feel like the least you can do is live here too. But it seems like even she is avoiding living here. Like, why. Why is that? It doesn’t make sense.” Especially when compared to Scotty, a Dominican-American who grew up spending time in Egleston Square, Carmen seemed disconnected from the local community in multiple ways. As a light-skinned Colombian immigrant with both race and class privilege, Carmen’s own identities, social networks, and experiences had little in
common with those of the predominantly Black and Latinx working-class immigrant communities in Egleston Square. According to Scotty, Carmen “didn’t even know much about Egleston Square until [Urbano] started researching it.” These realities made Scotty question just how relevant to students—and authentic to staff—this focus on Egleston Square would be.

Scotty’s reservations deepened during the first semester of Urbano’s focus on Egleston Square, when he was part of a journalism class that conducted interviews with local business owners to document their narratives of the neighborhood. Despite his pre-existing connections and his usual comfort level in the neighborhood, Scotty felt disoriented and uncomfortable being there as a part of an Urbano class. This was an unsettling experience that shook his sense of confidence and belonging in the place.

I kind of felt like an alien when I went into Egleston last summer, just like—with our little [Urbano] hats, going and just interviewing a bunch of people. I feel like from their perspective, we came out of nowhere, you know? When we’ve been over there [in the Brewery] since 2009, but we never reached out to them. So like, why now?

Because we’re running out of themes?

Scotty was sensitive to the reactions of the local residents to the presence of the Urbano artists, and understood why they might be doubtful or distrustful of the group; to them, Scotty thought, Urbano could seem like an “invasive” presence in their neighborhood. He also knew that whereas students who were not a part of the local community might be able to walk away from the discomfort the experience, he would not be able to have that luxury.

“I just felt a little weird because this is people that I’ll keep seeing,” he told me. Still, Scotty was willing to tolerate feelings of awkwardness that came with going to Egleston with
Urbano; what nagged him more were the questions of authenticity and purpose that came with Urbano’s presence there.

Cristina was the teaching assistant for the Urbano journalism class that Scotty was referring to, and she similarly spoke of feelings of discomfort with the experience of being in Egleston Square. Cristina came from a different background than Scotty: she and her siblings were adopted from India to middle-class white parents, and they grew up together in Jamaica Plain. As Cristina spoke with me about Egleston, she hesitated—“I don’t wanna, like, label it, because it’s like someone else’s community.” With reluctance and frustration in her voice, she confronted the realities of her experience as I sat with her, and listened.

I went to Egleston Square the most I ever have in my whole life with Urbano last summer…documenting stuff, and I was the T.A. [teaching assistant]. I had to watch these students, plus like, [help] get us around and this and that. And I was like, “Okay, this is—I don’t wanna be in charge of a group of people in this weird neighborhood. Like, I don’t want to.” And like, we ran into a couple situations of just really weird people. There was this drunk woman who came up and tried to talk to the whole group, and I was just like, “This is so(3,5),(996,992)
to her concern about the relationship between Urbano teaching artists and students, and the local residents of Egleston Square:

These are real people with real stories and real lives. I’m like, maybe we should return something—I don’t know…we were walking around these neighborhoods with these five hundred dollar cameras, and I just felt like: “So, what are we doing?”…Like, we had this teacher last year—who was awful, by the way—she was from the suburbs of Massachusetts…this little white lady, and she like, clearly, did not understand her surroundings. We were walking around with like, all these cameras, and she had a Starbucks coffee in her hand.

I was just like, this could come off as a little disrespectful, knowing that we’re going to this community that’s very underprivileged. Like, they don’t have that much money, and you’re going in there with all this expensive stuff to interview them and then just leave. Like, I don’t know, there’s something weird about that. Like, you’re not making them feel like you’re on their level at all. Like, you’re kind of like—I don’t know. I don’t like that. It’s a little too weird for me.

Cristina was bothered by the treatment of Egleston Square community members as objects of study, rather than as “real people with real stories and real lives.” This dynamic was even more troubling because the local residents already experienced marginalization in society, given that they were predominantly working-class, Spanish-speaking, Black and brown people of color. Cristina’s desire for a sense of reciprocity in the relationship with the local community—her sense that Urbano “should return something”—spoke to the ethical questions that arose for her in the course of these experiences in place. To her, a sense of equality in the relationship was important; she was upset at the thought that the art Urbano
was doing was exploitative of the local neighborhood, and functioned mostly to benefit the artists at Urbano:

I don't think that the people in Egleston Square are gaining that much out of it. Like, I don’t ever see any of them coming to any of the exhibitions. I don’t see any of them ever. I feel like sometimes we’re going in there as privileged students, just going to collect data for ourselves.

Furthermore, Cristina was unsure of how much students could take away from the experience—“because how many times can you walk into Egleston Square and interview the same group of people? Like, how many times can you do that before it gets so boring?” Like many other students, Cristina valued Urbano for the new experiences that young people were able to access, and for the opportunities they had to explore what was interesting to them. In order for them to find meaning and purpose in their work with Egleston, it was necessary for them to be genuinely interested in learning about the neighborhood. In her words, the relationship between students and the place had to be “more authentic” and reciprocal than what had become the norm.

As Cristina and Scotty reflected on uncomfortable experiences in their time at Urbano, they were drawing out learning about the kind of community engagement that felt meaningful, authentic, and purposeful to them, and pondering the ethical responsibilities of artists more generally. On occasion, their teaching artists prompted them to engage in this thinking. Scotty told me about a time when Mariana raised a question about an interactive chalkboard wall on the Civic Sculpture, an art piece that he and the Urbano Fellows were developing together with their teaching artist Ricardo. On the wall, they wrote questions that invited people to give their thoughts on issues in their communities, and ideas for how to address these challenges. One Saturday, when the Fellows brought the Civic Sculpture out to
a neighborhood festival in Jamaica Plain, Mariana approached and asked Scotty a simple question: “What are we going to do with those responses?” To me, Scotty expressed that the question made sense: “You would assume that since we’re asking that question of people and they’re giving responses, that we would then look at the responses and try solving the problem, right?” He paused for a beat, and then said: “We just throw it in the trash.” Bitterly, Scotty said that he was “already pissed off” just by talking about it; he made air quotes with his hands and saying “interactive art…it’s not doing shit.” For him, community engagement had to entail more than placing artwork in neighborhoods outside of the doors of Urbano:

Just being out there isn’t doing anything. I don’t feel like it has a purpose…we’re just doing it to look like we’re engaging with community, to have a picture of it on someone’s lawn. But like, it’s not doing anything.

Scotty signaled an issue where some of the art made through Urbano classes could be construed as serving to maintain an image of community engagement, without real substance or meaningful action to back it up. He believed that Urbano could be doing more than it currently was for local communities, and that they needed to be more thoughtful and responsible with how they planned, conceived of, and carried out their collective artistic practice.

Although the pathway to practicing this kind of artistic citizenship was unclear, there were moments in the Fellows’ engagement with Egleston Square that stood out to them as positive examples of what was possible. Cristina mentioned a time in the Peace Garden when “we talked to people…I liked that more, because we were as much a part of it as the community, and we were just kinda like—it was a space to be together and talk and listen to music and that kind of stuff.” At that event, Egleston Square community members were invited in and treated as equal participants in a series of arts-based activities in which
Urbano students were facilitators and participants; there was an active effort to bridge the distance between the Urbano classes and the community members there, using the arts as a means to foster connection. Scholars have written that placemaking can be done through one-time ephemeral events (e.g. Schneekloth & Shibley, 1995); especially when these events reflect values of equality and inclusion, where everyone is “as much a part of it” as the next person, these acts of placemaking can strengthen local ties and foster meaningful forms of social interaction.

Although Cristina was not referring to “Public Art Takeback” with her example of a successful project, her description recalled that event for me. Scotty was a part of an Urbano class that organized and facilitated Public Art Takeback in Egleston Square at the end of the first year of Urbano’s focus on creative placemaking in the local neighborhood. It was a Saturday daytime event in a small park off of the main strip in the neighborhood. Designed with the goal of bringing playfulness and joy to adults in the local community, the event involved sharing food, playing icebreaker games, doing group meditation, participating in interactive drumming exercises, and holding an open mic. The students gauged its success based on how much people smiled at the event; they were touched by feedback from community members who enjoyed the event and stayed for the whole time. One community member—a man who was homeless and often stayed on the benches of the park—told them that for the first time in a while, he felt treated as a human being. I knew that Scotty considered Public Art Takeback to be a model of the place-based art and the community engagement that Urbano was capable of; he described it as art that was both “at a place” and “for a place”—centered on the people who lived there.

Nicole, an Afro-Dominican Urbano Fellow who was born and raised in Jamaica Plain, similarly believed that the work Urbano did in Egleston should be more centered on
meaningful gatherings with the local community. She reminisced about a placemaking project that Urbano did in partnership with a local community group, with the students unveiling a mural that they had painted of a local mother and her children, and then celebrating the winter holidays with the community by “eating pastelitos, drinking Goya cola, and dancing salsa.” The event was culturally resonant for Nicole, and stood as a symbol of the joy that could come of authentic connections with the community. In her view, it was important for Urbano’s next step to be a stronger focus on building these connections, and on boldly confronting social issues as a community. When I asked Nicole about what role she thought Urbano should have in Jamaica Plain, she thus responded:

I think Urbano should be less concerned with aesthetic, and more concerned with their mission. Which is to have artists create art that is for the goal of social change. As opposed to, how pretty something is. You know what I mean? Because I could draw a beautiful flower that holds absolutely no social or moral significance. Or I can hold a community workshop on race, and privilege, and incorporate art into that workshop. You know what I mean? And at the end of the day, that's more significant. Than a flower.

Nicole believed that the job of Urbano artists was to create art that held “social and moral significance,” and in her mind, this necessitated a more direct confrontation of social issues than what she had seen in previous Urbano projects. Like other Fellows, Nicole felt strongly about the need for education and dialogue on the issues of race, power, and privilege that were shaping their personal experiences and the encounters they had with the local community. The Fellows’ experiences venturing out into local communities thus led them journeying in to questions about their own core values as artists and community members—uncovering the interests stirring at the intersections of their lives.
Coda

In this chapter, I reveal how the pedagogies of place and placemaking at Urbano involved a process of exploring unfamiliar terrain in the city, expanding the boundaries of one’s everyday life and social world, and gaining exposure to individuals and groups whose identities and experiences might be different from one’s own. Both the adults and youth at Urbano valued opportunities to be “outside,” which they associated with an intervention in the traditional norms of learning environments in schools, and with new social interactions and relationships with place. Staff and teaching artists identified a number of potential benefits to going outside as a part of their practice as artist-educators, including opportunities to: a) develop high quality artistic projects that could engage broad, diverse communities; b) transform their ways-of-seeing and ways-of-being in their local surroundings; and c) spark and sustain students’ engagement in a class experience. Overall, they expressed strong beliefs in the importance of “exploring the city as an artist”—an act that for them entailed the ability to view the world through a critical and compassionate lens, to discover the complexity in the details around them, and to derive creative inspiration from these new experiences.

Grounded in these beliefs, Urbano staff and teaching artists encouraged students to exit the confines of the back studio of Urbano, and spend class time outdoors. The adults who had personal interests in building a relationship with the local neighborhood of Urbano also sought to practice the principle of investing time in being in the local neighborhood outside of their work hours at Urbano. To them, deepening a relationship with the local place involved walking its streets, engaging with its institutions, talking with its people, and gradually becoming a part of the local community. This method of getting to know place resonates with ideas in the literature about place as epistemology (Cresswell, 2002)—a
particular way of knowing about the world that, in the case of Urbano, centered on a mental, emotional, social, and sensory engagement with local surroundings. The orientation towards going outside in Urbano classes illuminated both how place was viewed a resource for knowledge-building, and how the process of knowledge-building required the engagement of all parts of the self. This was a rigorous process that necessitated curiosity, vulnerability, dedication, and time.

In the context of a class at Urbano, going outside brought students new opportunities to engage with an artistic practice, and to engage with one another. For a number of new students, the experience of exploring the local environment carried opportunities for joy and for discovery. As a result of these experiences, some students became passionate about photography as an art form and a vehicle for observing, documenting, and exploring their local surroundings. For young people who had been involved with Urbano over the course of years, these experiences sometimes functioned as a springboard into heightened awareness of inequality and segregation in their city. As the narrative of Bailey showed, going outside with Urbano—either with Urbano classes, or with friends from the program—allowed for learning about issues confronting different communities in the city, and opportunity to interrogate the often racist and classist narratives that existed around particular places in Boston. For her, the work was about more than being there, developing a relationship with local place; it was about intellectual engagement with historical and contemporary social issues in the city.

As Urbano students grew increasingly socially aware through their classes at Urbano, however, they became frustrated with the kinds of community engagement that came with the artistic projects they were doing. This was particularly true of their projects in Egleston Square, which occurred during Urbano’s focus on creative placemaking in the local area. As
is evident from their narratives, Urbano participants held high standards and expectations for the work that they did in local communities, and it was important to them to feel like they could stand by both the process and the products of their projects. Yet they did not have positive feelings about most of the projects that they had done in Egleston Square over the last years, often using words like “weird” and “awkward” to describe their experiences of going out into the local community through their Urbano classes. Thus, over the course of Urbano’s focus on creative placemaking in Egleston Square, they began to ask difficult questions about their consequences and implications of their presence in the local neighborhood—questions that were left largely unresolved though their classes. What was clear from their interviews was that they needed an authenticity of connection, a mutually beneficial arrangement, and a clear sense of purpose in their engagement with local communities.

While the Fellows did mention a number of recent placemaking projects that carried a sense of meaning, authenticity, and purpose for them, they expressed a desire to continue pushing towards forms of community engagement that were more participatory and critical than what was their norm. Adriana Gallego, a notable policymaker and practitioner of creative placemaking in Latinx communities, has voiced that the “beauty” of creative placemaking is the opportunity for different groups to learn together, and to practice reciprocity—for it is these processes that “alter the ecology of any given situation” (National Endowment for the Arts, 2013). Given the values around positive relationships and dialogue across difference that Urbano students held, it seemed to me like such a direction would not only make sense to many of the young people at Urbano, but also allow them to find their

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9 For further discussion of these values, see earlier chapters, “‘We Need Each Other’: Youth Placemaking in an Intergenerational Space” and “‘Put Me On Your Map’: Pedagogies of Place in a Culturally Responsive Educational Setting.”
sense of meaning, authenticity, and purpose in placemaking projects—both in Egleston Square and other places in their city.

One reason why the narratives of the Fellows matter is that, as Frasz and Sidford (2017) note in their report on the field of socially engaged art, artists do not have a formalized code of conduct that provides ethical guidelines for working with communities. Training programs for professional artists tend to be more focused on artistic technique than on the skills, dispositions, and knowledge required to do community-based art in collaborative and ethical ways. Yet as socially engaged art grows as a field, it is important for questions of ethics to be given robust attention—particularly since many artists are working across differences in power and privilege, and interacting with communities outside of their own. Frasz and Sidford (2017) name a number of ethical principles based on their research with socially engaged artists, including: humility, honest inquiry and deep listening, reciprocity, generosity, equity, and safety. In addition, they advance a set of guidelines that are particularly important for artists working outside of their own communities:

• secure an invitation to be there;
• be aware of your own bias and privilege;
• recognize and value local expertise, knowledge and cultural practices;
• leave the community better than you found it, and have an exit strategy;
• work with community-based entities (people or organizations) that can provide a through line for the work.

The narratives of the Fellows illustrate the need for youth artists to have access to this broader discourse on ethics in the field of socially engaged art, and to have strong mentorship from their teaching artists as they navigate their experiences in their local communities and surroundings. In general, it seemed that the staff and teaching artists were
not having these reflective conversations with students about their experiences outside, thus leaving a missed opportunity for the adults and youth to advance their artistic practice and improve their impact in their local surroundings.

This chapter also illuminates an important point about how differences in power and privilege between groups who inhabit the same neighborhood can make place-based work complex; this is an aspect of pedagogies of place and placemaking that is especially relevant to diverse urban settings. The literature on PBE tends to neglect these issues that often arise, assuming that place is a natural conduit for community, and that connections between different inhabitants of a place are fairly automatic. Simply because students attend programs or classes in a particular neighborhood, does not mean that they feel an affinity towards the local place or people. In the literature on social engaged art, the difficulty of using place as an organizing construct for community has been discussed by various scholars (e.g. Frasz & Sidford, 2017; Kwon, 2002). Drawing from critical spatial theories (Massey, 2004; Harvey, 2010) that conceptualize place as contested, shifting, and dynamic sites of meaning that are produced through social, economic, and political processes, Kwon (2002) reminds us that place-based communities do not exist naturally, and that artists must take care to avoid essentializing approaches to working with people in a local environment. This body of work adds needed complexity and nuance to the discourse in PBE and youth development around community, which sometimes takes for granted the unity of people in a given place; it invites practitioners to interrupt romantic or nostalgic notions of place as a stable and unproblematic source of identity and belonging. Indeed, residents can be deeply divided across lines of race, class, religion, and other axes of difference within a place—both in urban and rural environments (Boggs, 2011; Fisher & Smith, 2012). Part of the work in pedagogies of place, placemaking, and community-based arts projects is to recognize such
differences and enter into dialogue about the challenges and contradictions of place-based work—while also promoting trust, hope, and solidarity within a group (Mullinax in Fisher & Smith, 2012).

As frameworks for youth development increasingly emphasize the importance of young people contributing to their communities (e.g. Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Gambone & Connell, 2004; Lerner et al., 2013; Scales, 2017)—which are often local and place-based—it is crucial that teaching artists and other educators gain skills and knowledge in how to work ethically with the people and places that surround them, recognizing and interrogating both the similarities and differences between different groups. Once engaged in some form of contact with local neighborhoods and their communities, young people need space for dialogue to process their experiences—both in terms of what they are learning about these places, and what they are learning about themselves and about society as a whole as a result. One implication of this research, then, is the importance of integrating praxis into the practice of pedagogies of place and placemaking. Praxis, according to Freire (1970), is an ongoing cycle of reflection, theory, and action that people can use to create change in the realities of their lives. Praxis occurs through dialogue, and must be cultivated as a habit of learning and inquiry so that learners can continue deepening and improving their effectiveness in responding to the conditions of their lived experience. Scholars have written that praxis is central to experiential learning theory (Kolb, 2015) and socially responsible artistic practice (Elliot, Silverman, & Bowman, 2016). It is also key to an ethical and robust practice of PBE and placemaking (e.g. Gruenewald, 2003a, 2003b; Gruenewald & Smith, 2008). Urbano utilized some structures for feedback—such as the debriefing sessions after exhibitions—that enabled staff, teaching artists, and students to reflect upon and theorize about their experiences, so that their learning could inform the future actions they take.
Building in more of such opportunities within projects during a class, and building youth-adult relationships that allow for the dialogue to be productive and supportive, could enhance the quality of their projects in the local neighborhoods and enrich the sense of meaning, authenticity, and purpose that the young people find in the work.
Conclusion

When I embarked on this research project with Urbano Project, I set out to address two questions: 1) *How are pedagogies of place and placemaking practiced in the youth programs of a Boston community art studio?* 2) *What sense do participants make of their experiences in the programs?*

Using the tools of portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997), I aimed to address gaps in existing research regarding: a) the practice of pedagogies of place and placemaking with youth in diverse urban contexts; b) the meaning making and experiences of young people in programs and projects informed by ideas of creative placemaking; and c) the connections between pedagogies of place and placemaking and models of youth development more broadly. Based on data collected through participant observation, interviews, and visual and written document analysis, this dissertation presents in-depth interpretive descriptions of the activities occurring during a summer at Urbano when the organization focused explicitly on themes of space, place, and the local neighborhood in its programming. By interweaving the voices of the youth (*n*=16) and adults (*n*=14) who took part in this research, I sought to construct a holistic portrait of the work and the learning taking place at Urbano.

In this final chapter, I begin with a brief review of the literature that informed this research study, and then summarize the key takeaways from my research with Urbano. I discuss how the findings of my research contribute to scholarship on pedagogies of place, and draw connections to the related literatures on critical pedagogy, culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogies, and youth development. I conclude with implications for future research related to place-based work with youth. Although the focus of my research was an urban community-based arts setting, I demonstrate how these findings are relevant for practitioners across various contexts and fields that share a concern for supporting youth, strengthening communities, and nurturing the places they call home.
A Look Back on the Literature

Place-based education (PBE) is an approach to education driven by: concern for the social connectedness and active local citizenship of young people; an emphasis on the local neighborhood as a resource for individual and collective learning and transformation; and a broader goal of creating a society that is socially just and ecologically sustainable. As numerous scholars (e.g. Coulter, 2014; Gruenewald & Smith, 2008) have pointed out, while the terminology around PBE is fairly recent, it is not a new phenomenon. Coulter (2014) writes: “Children throughout time have been raised in and learned about their local culture and surroundings. It’s only with the rise of the modern school that we have chosen to cut our young off from their surroundings by locking them indoors for an increasing fraction of their childhood” (p. 7). For young people in public high schools today, the learning taking place in their classrooms is often highly removed from the contexts of their lived experiences in their out-of-school hours. Given current educational policy around standardization, and the dominant discourse around education for global citizenship, the focal place of study in classrooms tends to be the national or global context—rather than the places right outside the school building, or other local settings where students spend time.

Despite these trends, however, educators across the country have sought ways to practice pedagogies of place and center their work on the concerns of local communities. There many potential benefits to the integration of place into curriculum and pedagogy in schools: existing literature on PBE has shown that outcomes for students can include higher levels of engagement, improvements in academic and social-emotional skills, increased sense of agency and sense of connection, heightened social awareness and ethical thinking, and the capacity to engage in collective action to confront issues of oppression (e.g. Demarest, 2014; Gruenewald, 2003a; Gruenewald & Smith, 2008; Smith & Sobel, 2010). Moreover, PBE
nurtures relationships and systems that contribute to the well-being of the community—what Paul Theobald (1997) calls “the commons”—which in turn supports healthy youth development. Resisting the individualist tendencies of schools and society in the U.S., this approach aims to support youth and their communities—understanding the interdependence of all parts of the social-ecological system, and recognizing the need for a collectivist stance to promote a more socially just and ecologically sustainable world.

Based on my own experiences working as an educator in the Greater Boston area and New York City, I have seen how pedagogies of place often emerge organically in urban community-based settings. In particular, urban community-based arts programs can provide supportive conditions for young people to reflect upon their identities and experiences, dialogue on local issues, and create art that inspired by and responsive to local communities and cultures (e.g. Beyerbach & Davis, 2011; Dewhurst, 2014; Ginwright, Noguera, & Cammarota, 2006; Graham, 2007; Heath & McLaughlin, 1993; Kuttner, 2015). Scholars of culturally relevant arts education have written that “the capacities of imagination, creativity, and agency are ways of knowing and doing that belie the powerlessness of the oppressed” (Hanley et al., 2013), and that access to arts education can thus be considered a social justice act of redistributing resources and recognizing the culture and identity of subjugated groups. In alignment with goals of PBE and pedagogies of hope and liberation (Ginwright, 2015), community-based arts programs can tap into the capacity of the arts to develop young people’s imagination of alternative possibilities for their selves and their local worlds.

Place is becoming an increasingly explicit part of the work of many contemporary artists, activists, and educators who work with communities experiencing marginalization in the U.S. As place-based initiatives gain traction across sectors, it is important for researchers to build knowledge on how young people are impacted by this growing field of practice.
Over the last years, a significant number of youth arts programs have been shaped by policy trends around creative placemaking—an approach to community development that centers arts and culture as a means for spurring local economics and improving community life (Markusen & Gadwa, 2010). Policymakers and funders often promote creative placemaking as a powerful tool for dialogue, collaboration, relationship-building, and education (e.g. Markusen & Gadwa, 2010; NEA, 2013); however, little is known about how young people engage in and experience this process of working with communities to address local cares and concerns. Scholars have shown that placemaking efforts can sometimes marginalize or exclude young people (McEvoy-Levy, 2012), and do not sufficiently address issues of place that are of direct concern to working-class communities of color (e.g. Bedoya, 2012; Webb, 2014). Given these concerns, research in this field must take a critical look at the ways in which pedagogies of place and placemaking are practiced with young people in diverse urban contexts, and generate insights that can guide researchers, policymakers, and practitioners doing work in this field.

Urbano Project is a community art studio that offers youth programs that involve a focus on creative placemaking, place-based art and performance, and engagement with local communities and neighborhoods. Serving young people from across the Boston area, it is a setting that encompasses differences in the race, class, and neighborhood identities of students. The nature of Urbano’s engagement with local settings in its youth programs varies across different classes and semesters, as the organization intentionally does not use a prescribed curriculum, nor does it communicate specific expectations for teaching artists with regard to working with local people and places. Through participant observation and interviews with Urbano students, teaching artists, and staff, I collected data both on the
range of ways in which Urbano participants practiced pedagogies of place and placemaking, and their meaning making about their experiences in the programs.

**Summary and Discussion of Findings**

Broadly, I found that my study participants were engaging deeply with concerns of place in multiple arenas through their involvement with Urbano: the arena of the organization, which I discuss in “Tracing Origins: Foundations of Placemaking at Urbano” and “We Need Each Other: Youth Placemaking in an Intergenerational Space”; the arena of their class meetings in the Urbano studio, which I discuss in “Put Me On Your Map: Pedagogies of Place in a Culturally Responsive Educational Setting”; and the arena of their experiences in local neighborhoods, which I discuss in “Real People, Real Stories, Real Lives: Explorations Beyond the Art Studio.” Each of these arenas carried meaningful experiences and significant learning opportunities for young people, especially with regard to issues of power, participation, identity, and purpose. Some of these learning opportunities were facilitated thoughtfully and deliberately by adults at Urbano—such as when teaching artists led neighborhood and community mapping exercises with their students. Other moments of learning came from the messier realities of struggles for respect, negotiations of trust, and working towards authenticity within relationships at the organization.

As the chapter “Tracing Origins” shows, Carmen’s original intent in founding Urbano was to establish an inclusive space where artists from different places could feel welcome and supported, where collaboration and transformation could be encouraged, and where young people could be positioned as skilled and knowledgeable artist-citizens in their communities and in society at large. Throughout the empirical chapters of this dissertation, my study participants voiced the significance of an inclusive and diverse space within a city with high levels of inequality and segregation, and with public schools where the regimes of
standardization and testing have left little room for imagination, creativity, and local responsiveness in classroom learning. Given these conditions shaping their educational experiences and their everyday social worlds, Urbano staff, teaching artists, and students sought to make Urbano a place that could resist the oppressive geographies of the city (Hunter et al., 2016), and address the opportunity gaps in arts learning for Black and Latinx public school students (Rabkin et al., 2011). In this way, Urbano itself embodied an act of placemaking that was rooted in the realities of their experiences in Boston, and that is reflective of conditions shaping the lives and learning of individuals across many urban contexts in the U.S. My research thus illuminated how artists at Urbano—adults and youth included—valued the organization as a place where people could share experiences, build relationships, and collaborate across various axes of difference.

My research also highlighted the importance of relationships as a part of what sustained the long-term involvement of young people as place-makers at the organization. In the empirical chapter “‘Put Me On Your Map,’” I analyze the work of the Urbano Fellows, young people who attended several semesters of Urbano classes and then took on more leadership responsibilities within the organization, in order to explore several key aspects of the placemaking occurring at Urbano. With regard to relationships, the Urbano Fellows emphasized the sense of family, community, friendship, and household at Urbano as a major reason why they continued to come back. Some students talked about these relationships as an essential support as they reflected upon difficult personal experiences through their artwork, or during the classes. Nicole, for example, expressed how much it meant to her that people were there to listen and to “try to understand”—often offering her empathetic silence and warm hugs after she shared poetry about her experiences as a gender-fluid, Afro-Latinx teenager; Cicada talked about how the close-knit relationships that she had at Urbano...
were a source of joy that distinguished it from other arts programs she had been a part of. Research has shown that a sense of fun and joy, as well as emotional support to persist through stressful experiences, are key contributors to healthy adolescent development (Brion-Meisels & Jones, 2012; Bronfenbrenner, 1977; 1998; Delgado & Staples, 2008; Sameroff & Chandler, 1975; Sameroff, 2009; Sameroff, 2010). In the case of Urbano, they enhanced young people’s sense of belonging, and nurture their sense of care for the place that brought their relationships together. In their scholarship on placemaking, Schneekloth and Shibley (1995) note that relationships are a key goal of the placemaking process; scholars of PBE, however, have paid scant attention to the role of interpersonal relationships in building and sustaining students’ relationship to place. My research contributes to this literature by demonstrating the importance of positive and caring peer relationships for young people, and suggests the need for practitioners of pedagogies of place and placemaking to prioritize relationship-building as a foundation for their work.

Urbano Fellows also expressed that it was important to them to have positive relationships with the adults at the organization. For the Fellows—young people who were considered leaders within Urbano—these relationships with staff members had to be grounded in respect, listening, and communication in order for them to be experienced as positive and caring. There were moments when the Fellows formed deeply supportive relationships with adults, such as when they were working with Adriana, the former programs manager and teaching artist who mentored them in exploring their racial identities and examine issues of oppression. Then there were moments when these relationships broke down or were tested, such as in moments of broken trust and communication between students and staff. Through these experiences, some of the youth participants gained deeper understandings of the workings of society and strategies for pushing for change in the
context of power imbalances—such as skills in communication, collaboration, and relationship- and community-building.

The work that the Fellows continued to do to communicate their feelings and concerns with the adult staff at the organization, and to continue working to make Urbano a place where young people could feel welcome and free to express their voices, revealed how deeply they cared about Urbano as their “dwelling place” (Casey, 2009). In addition, it shows how Urbano—like all places—can be understood as a site of contestation, where different groups may struggle for power in the process of trying to make the place their own. While this is a natural aspect of place, it is incumbent upon adults in an educational setting to foster relationships with youth that are supportive rather than combative, and to engage in equitable power-sharing as a part of encouraging youth voice and participation. My research thus echoes scholars on student voice, who emphasize the need for adults to establish a culture of listening in order to encourage youth voice (e.g. Cook-Sather, 2006). These findings highlight the need for democratic processes and dialogue to equalize participation, and to ensure opportunities for young people to participate in decision-making that directly affects their lives. Indeed, when placemaking is based in positive and authentic relationships between individuals, institutions, and communities, it becomes a “fertile site for the practice of democracy” (Schneekloth & Shibley, 1995, p. 203).

Within classes of the summer program, teaching artists used pedagogies of place in ways that revealed place as a powerful tool to support students’ engagement in their learning at Urbano. As I show in “‘Put Me On Your Map,’” this became visible in the enthusiasm with which students mapped their home neighborhoods to share during class activities—tapping into power of place to function as a “reservoir of meaning” (Thrift, 1997) that people draw upon to construct their life stories. Because the process of authoring one’s life
story is central to adolescent development (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006), these kinds of place-based class activities helped create a context for youth development that suited the developmental needs of young people (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). In addition, by creating opportunities for students to talk about their everyday lives and listen to one another’s stories, pedagogies of place set the groundwork for students to incorporate their lived experiences and identities into their collective knowledge, to recognize their places as worthy of reflection and dialogue, and to build mutual understanding and connection amongst members of the group. Further, place-based pedagogy created a social space that was centered on recognizing difference and listening deeply to understand others. This kind of relational practice applied as much to students’ learning through their peer relationships as to their learning from their teaching artists, who also brought their own connections to place into the discussions in the classroom. Discussing, experiencing, and reflecting upon place enabled students to become more observant of the details of their surroundings, and more attentive to the connection between their external worlds and their internal universes of thought and feeling; in this way, they became more critical about their own relationships to their communities and neighborhoods. Across classes, place served as one tool among others that teaching artists used to foster a sense of belonging and connection in the context of difference, and to develop a culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris & Alim, 2014, 2017) that affirmed pluralism and allowed space for students to discuss the concerns most relevant to their everyday lives.

In “Real People, Real Stories, Real Lives,” I demonstrate how local place—defined as the areas immediately outside of Urbano’s doors—also provided a catalyst for students’ engagement, learning, and social awareness. Staff, teaching artists, and students were sparked at the notion of going outside and “exploring the city as artist”—which the adults saw as a
process of attending to the beauty and wonder of their surroundings, slowing down to look at details, and allowing their emerging interests to guide them towards unfamiliar places. Staff members viewed going outside as an essential part of creating high quality art that engaged communities, and of building relationships between people (i.e. Urbano artists) and local place. Guided by these beliefs, some of the staff and teaching artists were actively exploring the local neighborhood and becoming acquainted with local community members as a way of knowing the place on their own free time. Many students expressed that some of their favorite moments at Urbano involved going outside—an activity that represented a break from the routines of learning in the classroom, and that provided opportunities to move around and interact freely with others.

Yet Urbano students who had more years of experience with creative placemaking projects—projects where they went into the local neighborhood of Egleston Square, a predominantly working-class Black and Latinx area of Jamaica Plain—raised important critical questions about the meaning and implications of their presence as artists there. Several Urbano Fellows had become uncomfortable with Urbano activities and projects that felt potentially voyeuristic and exploitative of a community that lacked power and privilege in society; these students were facing the recognition that their work was benefitting Urbano artists more than it was the members of the local community. As these young people wrestled with questions about the ethics of their projects in the local neighborhood, they raised the importance of reciprocity, inclusion, and participation in their relationship with Egleston Square community members. In this way, they called for an approach to being outside that transformed relations of power between groups, rather than perpetuating existing power imbalances in their local context and in society at large. Their narratives also
highlighted their needs to find a sense of meaning, authenticity, and purpose in their place-based work with Urbano.

A number of scholars have highlighted the need for pedagogies of place and placemaking to pay closer attention to the power structures and macro-level forces shaping students’ everyday lives in local places, and to more directly confront issues of inequality and oppression (e.g. Graham, 2007; McInerney, Smyth & Down, 2010). Gruenewald (2003a) points out natural alignment between PBE and critical pedagogy: both are philosophies of education that emphasize students’ critical examination of their “situationality” (Freire, 1970) in the world, and are based in a fundamental view of students as capable social actors who can challenge injustice and transform the conditions of their lives. According to Gruenewald (2003a), the concept of place has long been implicitly embedded—and at times, explicitly stated (e.g. McLaren & Giroux, 1990)—within theories of critical pedagogy: place grounds people in the particulars of their local environment as a way to observe and critique macro-level forces affecting many places at once. Although few empirical studies have named and examined the practice of critical pedagogies of place in urban settings, those that do exist demonstrate the promise of such an approach for heightening students’ sense of belonging and strengthening community ties (Sanchez, 2011), and for cultivating positive collaborations and mentorship relationships between adults and youth in an educational setting (Delia & Krasny, 2018).

The pedagogies of place and placemaking that I observed at Urbano were critical in a number of ways. First, they created opportunities for students to become aware of inequalities and injustices in society—both through their physical explorations of places outside of their home neighborhoods, and through some of the curriculum they encountered in their classes. Many students described these learning experiences in terms of an
awakening, and held onto these moments as transformative ones that prompted them to revise their previous ways-of-thinking, ways-of-seeing, and ways-of-being in the world.

Second, pedagogies of place and placemaking were used to center the knowledge of all individuals in the classroom—valuing their expertise on their local neighborhoods and lived experience, and debunking notions of the teacher as a sole authority in the classroom. Third, the process of placemaking is fundamentally centered on goals of transformation, with social justice aims and through democratic processes. As a process that is meant to be based in collaboration, dialogue, and praxis, placemaking provides an engaging means for students to regularly practice acting upon the world in order to change it—as can be seen in the Fellows’ efforts to maintain and transform Urbano into a place for new generations of students.

Fourth, the pedagogies of place and placemaking at Urbano provided students with ample material for deep self-reflection, enabling them to tend to their own feelings and emotions in response to their local surroundings, and inviting them to interrogate the status quo of their everyday realities and imagine how they could be different. These activities encouraged students to dive into their interior self as much as they were exploring their external environment, and thus deepened the ways in which they thought about ethics and social responsibility in the work that they did. Given that critical pedagogy is a philosophy of education that can be enacted in many different ways, my research at Urbano offers insight into several possibilities for using place as a multi-pronged tool in education for transformation. It is one vision of how critical pedagogies of place can unfold in a diverse urban setting, and reveals how engaging this kind of education can be for young people.

At the same time, my research points to the potential need for educators to take a more robust approach to critical pedagogies of place and placemaking, if they hope to cultivate students’ critical consciousness through this practice. According to Ginwright and
James (2002), the development of critical consciousness (Freire, 1993) is a central goal of social justice youth development: it empowers young people to transform institutional practices through focusing on root causes of systemic issues, and leads to enduring abilities to analyze power and take collective action towards change. At Urbano, students gained exposure to inequalities in their local environment—but exposure does not automatically lead to understandings of the root causes of issues they observed. As Sutton and Kemp (2011) discuss, our habits of taking the conditions of our places as a given can make it difficult to think about them in the context of power. According to Sutton and Kemp (2011), because the “naturalness of place masks its use in power relations…critical work [is] difficult but not impossible” (p. 1); “The empowerment of urban youth therefore requires not only active engagement in their everyday worlds, but critical analysis of the underlying socio-structural processes producing the inequalities they observe and experience in their own lives” (p. 139). In order for place-based learning experiences to become empowering and liberating, young people must be supported to uncover the workings of power in their places. Without understandings of these broader processes shaping these inequalities in place, people can be left feeling “both blamed and powerless” (Sutton & Kemp, 2011).

In the narratives of the Urbano Fellows, there was at times a sense of self-blame and powerlessness evident in the dissatisfaction they expressed with the projects they had done in Egleston Square thus far. Although they were not blaming the issues facing local communities on individuals, they also did not name what they believed were the root causes of these inequalities between them and the Egleston residents, and how their artistic practices might be changed so that they could address these root causes. Nicole did mention a workshop on race and privilege as one way to better engage local communities, suggesting an understanding of racism as an underlying cause of community struggle in the local
context. Still, in general, these students may have benefited significantly from mentors who could help them make connections between different places, notice and analyze patterns in what they observed, and enter into inquiry about issues they observed. During the Urbano summer program, Sophie and her guest teaching artists were explicitly focused on teaching students about issues of power and oppression, especially with regard to racism in the U.S.; their students tended to respond positively to their curriculum and pedagogy, expressing that it was learning they wish they had been able to do in schools. Yet given the structure of programming at Urbano—with teaching artists and students changing every semester, and with few clear expectations around what teaching artists should be teaching the students—there was a lack of systematic and consistent attention to building critical consciousness over the course of time. Moreover, teaching artists with professional backgrounds as artists rather than as educators may have difficulty guiding and supporting students through this process. For schools and organizations seeking to use critical pedagogies of place and placemaking with young people, then, proper preparation, training, and support must be considered in order for teachers and learners to be equipped to cultivate their critical consciousness together. Given that there are no existing institutions for the preparation of teachers, teaching artists, or any other adults to gain skills in critical pedagogies of place and placemaking, the onus is on organizations and individual educators to learn to do this work.

Before moving into a brief discussion of other tensions and challenges that could arise in the practice of pedagogies of place and placemaking, I want to turn focus to the role of art in shaping the place-based work at Urbano. While several of my youth research participants voiced the idea that “art comes last” in terms of what was meaningful and important to them about the organization, it seemed to me that art played a significant role in facilitating and supporting what they did value: their relationships with one another, their
desire for a means of engagement with other people, the freedom to take positive risks and express their ideas in ways that were authentic to them. Thus, while the products of their art making were not of great consequence to their experience at Urbano, the processes that they went through as they worked towards their products did matter. At Urbano, the practice of art fostered students’ shared identity as artists—providing them with a sense of belonging at Urbano, and a way to understand who they were and what they could be in the world. It was an identity that students, teaching artists, and staff tended to associate with imagination, resourcefulness, creativity, rigor, and hard work. Moreover, at Urbano, being an artist carried a sense of social responsibility and a desire to have impact in the world at large. Indeed, throughout the summer of my data collection, there was a quote by Jeremy Deller written in neat block letters, on a chalkboard wall in Urbano: “I went from being an artist who makes things to an artist who makes things happen.” By communicating values around artists as action-oriented community members who can apply their gifts towards the greater good, Urbano thus leveraged the notion of artist to empower students in roles as community members and place-makers. Ensuring that there was some creative component to nearly all of the class activities they did also helped keep the pedagogies engaging and relevant for students: all of the students had entered into Urbano with an interest in art and with creative practices that they did in their free time, and supporting these aspects of students’ identities and interests was essential for creating a culturally responsive arts space for them to learn and grow.

While not all placemaking efforts necessarily include art, my research suggests that the arts can play an instrumental role in strengthening the placemaking capacities of individuals and communities. Indeed, we might see art and placemaking as processes that are fundamentally interrelated. Research on arts educators’ beliefs about quality arts education
reveals multiple areas of resonance with the goals of PBE and placemaking, including “provid[ing] ways of pursuing understanding of the world,” “help[ing] students engage with community, civic, and social issues,” and “foster[ing] broad dispositions and skills, especially the capacity to think creatively and the capacity to make connections” (Seidel et al., 2009, p. 17). The works of philosophers, activists, artists, and writers such as James Baldwin, Grace Lee Boggs, Maxine Greene, and Audre Lorde have highlighted the importance of creativity and imagination in our ability to question the oppressive conditions of life, and to invent new ways of being, living, learning, and knowing that support the fullness of our humanity. At Urbano, arts learning experiences supported young people in cultivating their sense of flexibility, resourcefulness, willingness to experiment, and perseverance—all of which are skills and dispositions needed in processes of creating change. Coupled with critical consciousness, these skills and dispositions could be leveraged to address inequities and injustice in the current world, and actively create better alternatives to a deeply flawed status quo of social life.

Ultimately, my research demonstrated that there was no one element of Urbano that was transformative for all students; there were strong differences in the classes that they participated in, as well as the roles that they took on within the organization. The heterogeneity of Urbano students’ interests and goals was recognized and affirmed by the staff and teaching artists at Urbano, who wanted each individual student to exercise their agency in guiding the experience and taking away from it what was most helpful and relevant to them. At the same time, students consistently pointed out the importance of opportunities to:

- engage with perspectives and experiences that were different from their own;
• understand themselves as people whose identities, cultures, and contributions mattered;
• create and collaborate with other individuals who shared their interests in art and social issues;
• be supported by peers and adults as they pursued ideas that were meaningful to them.

These features of their experience were connected to the culture and the social space of Urbano—cultivated not only through Urbano classes, but also through the other rituals of the organization, such as the culminating exhibitions, the debrief sessions about their work, the “family meals” that they shared. Although pedagogies of place and placemaking helped support these aspects of their experience, they were not solely responsible for them. Rather, what mattered was the existence of Urbano as a place where these opportunities could exist, because they were consistent with the values of the organization and its approach to education and art. These are principles consistent with positive youth development and creative youth development—models that support young people’s growth through building upon their interest and strengths—and that could be further integrated into pedagogies of place and placemaking in order to increase their benefits for youth.

In the last section of this conclusion, I explore several avenues for future research to continue building knowledge in this field. Before I do so, however, I conclude this discussion of findings by naming three possible tension points that arose from my research related to the practice of pedagogies of place and placemaking with youth, and articulate questions for practitioners to consider when moving forward in this work:

1. Fraught relationships with local places. Over the course of my time at Urbano, it became increasingly clear how complicated and varied students’ relationships to place were. Existing
literature on PBE rarely accounts for traumatic experiences that individuals may have had in different places, or experiences of mobility and involuntary displacement that can raise difficult issues and emotions. For young people in urban neighborhoods, and especially for Black and brown youth who are heavily surveilled and policed in public spaces, these experiences can be some of the most salient memories of place that they carry (e.g. Ginwright, 2015; Harding, 2010; Kinloch, 2010; Shedd, 2015). I began to hear this in informal conversations with students, as they told me about “racist neighbors,” about being stopped by police on their skateboards when they are downtown, about projects being torn down and having to move several times because of rising rents in their neighborhoods. The prominence of issues of racism was particularly clear in Virgo’s narrative, who described the dynamics in her area of Roxbury as a “race war” between long-time residents in the local Black communities and the wealthier white residents who had recently moved in. In general, the mainstream literature on the practice of PBE pays little attention to the salience of racism in the learning and development of youth of color, though this is an essential feature of place—perhaps especially in urban settings. Scholars have pointed out, however, the necessity of addressing Eurocentrism and white supremacy, settler colonialism, and global capitalism when practicing pedagogies of place with Native youth, Black youth, and other youth of color whose communities have experienced forcible removal from their ancestral lands (e.g. Flynn, Kemp, & Perez, 2010; Paperson, 2014; Seawright, 2014). In order to move the theory and practice of PBE forward, educational researchers and practitioners must continue to build knowledge on pedagogies of place that are sensitive to these histories that many youth and communities carry. As educators, how do we provide appropriate supports for students of color around the difficult issues, emotions, and experiences that engagement with place brings up? What might it look like to enact pedagogies of place that support
radical hope and healing (e.g. Ginwright, 2015), given the trauma faced by marginalized and oppressed youth in the places where they live?

2. **Differing levels of interest in local surroundings.** Ball and Lai (2006) have written about how “owing to particular sociohistorical circumstances, students in some places are already sufficiently interested in their place to find the inclusion of local content meaningful...elsewhere, the primary challenge is finding any local content that students will find provocative” (p. 272). They continue: “the very socioecological conditions that marginalize place(s), making place-based pedagogy an attractive option for educators, also foster many students’ indifference to their local context” (p. 272). Indeed, many of the youth participants in Urbano classes told me that they desired new experiences—explorations that took them into unfamiliar territory, rather than into the places they spent time in every day. Nearly all of the students who I spoke with told me that they wanted to travel in the future—that they wanted to see and experience places outside of their current city and country. In this way, a basic premise of PBE—the goal of nurturing students’ connections to their local place—becomes complicated to work out in practice, and potentially in tension with goals of responding to students’ multiplicity of place attachments and the differences in their interests and goals. Given the geographical diversity of students in many youth programs, as well as the countless places to which they carry attachments, it is often impossible for an educator to ever identify one place in which all students have a natural interest. How do educators manage the demands of differing place interests amongst a group of students? What strategies can be used to engage with multiple places at once, and draw connections to macro-level forces that shape all the places around us? How do we balance a sense of accountability to local community with a responsibility to develop learning experiences that are relevant and meaningful to all of our students?
3. **Authentic and reciprocal relationships with people who are local to a place.** As the narratives of the Urbano Fellows in “Real People, Real Stories, Real Lives” demonstrate, it is important to build a sense of genuine connection and authentic engagement with people—not just with places—in pedagogies of place and placemaking. For the Fellows, it was frustrating to walk around in neighborhoods and feel like they were intruding upon other people’s space, and engaging as voyeurs rather than as collaborating artists or another relationship where power was balanced. There was an inherent power imbalance in the act of Urbano artists taking the initiative to go into the neighborhood and decide to base some of their artistic projects there. Increasingly, artists who are working with communities outside of their own are confronting these questions of power and privilege, and developing guidelines for how to practice socially engaged art in ethical, responsible, justice-oriented ways (Frasz & Sidford, 2017). For adults supporting young people to engage in this kind of artistic practice, especially in contexts heavily shaped by inequality and social difference, a number of critical questions arise. How do educators negotiate potential mismatches between the needs and desires of a local community, and the needs and desires of their students and/or their supervisors? What steps can be taken for the processes of PBE to be just and equitable for local community members, particularly those from groups with less privilege than the students or educators involved? What actions can be taken to help build awareness of power and privilege at all stages in the process of collaboration with others? How can young people be engaged in deciding the appropriate ethical guidelines for working with communities?

For all of the tension points raised above, the responses and approaches to these questions will vary depending on factors of context and the different stakeholders involved. There are no clear right answers to any of these questions. My hope is that by naming these potential issues and articulating questions, productive reflection and dialogue can point the
way forward for youth and adults in a variety of educational settings concerned with themes of place, power, and community.

**Directions for Future Research**

Several avenues for future research emerge from the findings of this study. Below, I highlight four areas for future research that are especially relevant to those interested in supporting youth development.

First, it would be fruitful to study the long-term trajectories of youth and adults who have been involved in placemaking work, as well as their impacts on the settings that they sought to transform. Little is known, for example, about whether participation in pedagogies of place and placemaking informs young people’s decision-making about their personal, academic, and professional lives. Do they tend to prioritize staying in place rather than leaving to pursue opportunities elsewhere? How do their evolving relationships to local people and places play a role in how they author their life stories (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006)? Further, how does engagement in pedagogies of place and placemaking shape educators’ relationships to local communities, their meaning making about their work, and their own investment in local places? It is possible that through cultivating deeper connections between people and place, place-based education can lead to more sustained commitment to local communities than what might emerge from contexts defined by a “pedagogy of placelessness” (Kitchens, 2009). Sustained commitment may also have significant impacts on the vitality of neighborhoods, but research is needed to understand the nature of these impacts and their connection to broader processes of neighborhood change.

Second, we need better understandings of how factors of population and context shape the practices, purposes, and outcomes of place-based work with young people. This
dissertation study focused on an educational setting that brought individuals together from different parts of a city, and encompassed racial and socioeconomic diversity in its student population. Pedagogies of place and placemaking may take shape in a significantly different form when they are more local in focus—such as an organization that serves young people in one building or a set of blocks—or that are defined as affinity spaces for specific groups of youth—defined, for example, by racial/ethnic identity, gender, or religion. Similarly, these educational approaches could be enacted in different ways when the adults share a number of these identities or background experiences with the young people in the setting. It is possible that when there are more identities and experiences held in common between participants in placemaking projects, groups can more easily mobilize for collective action on a range of different issues that concern them—not all of which are place-based. Building knowledge on these various factors and conditions for PBE can help sharpen our understandings of the range of ways in which these pedagogies can be practiced, and how these pedagogies can serve the broader political aims of different groups.

Third, there needs to be more research on how, if at all, pedagogies of place and placemaking can support youth and communities in combating displacement in their local neighborhoods. Several of my research participants expressed strong fears about being displaced—physically and culturally—from the places they had long called home. For most of these young people, gentrification was deepening racial divides and increasing tension, while at times leaving a sense of hopelessness around holding on to their place and the sense of community they had attached there. This is an issue that affects millions of youth of color in working-class communities across the U.S., and yet little work has been done in the field of educational research to better understand how to productively bring these concerns into the classroom. What happens to young people’s sense of identity and well-being when they
are displaced from places to which they are strongly attached? What kinds of pedagogies of place and placemaking have a healing impact in their lives, and what are the mechanisms for this outcome? Particularly in gentrifying cities, there is an increasingly urgent need to attend to the processes of migration, mobility, and displacement that are shaping students’ lives, and that educators must account for in their teaching.

Finally, our communities need to build knowledge on how to support the adults who are engaged in this work. Existing research has shown that a lack of time and preparation are key challenges for teachers in schools seeking to implement place-based pedagogy in their classrooms (Cole, 2010). My research also signaled the need for time and preparation for robust and authentic place-based learning, and raised concerns around the demands placed upon educators like teaching artists for whom these resources are severely limited by structural constraints of their positions. Administrators in schools and non-profits play a key role in creating structures that can enable pedagogies of place to flourish—through facilitating opportunities for educators to plan curriculum and collaborate with one another, for example, and also through building and maintaining partnerships with community members, local institutions, and city agencies that educators and students could tap into. Further research is necessary in order to develop best practices for stakeholders in a variety of roles, and to begin dialogue about the ethics, methods, and standards of quality that may hold across contexts in this field of practice. Indeed, as place-based initiatives continue to bring educators, artists, and activists together in supporting youth and communities, researchers can help cast light on how these intergenerational collaborations and learning experiences can transform the world into “a more human dwelling place” (Baldwin, 1962).
Appendices

Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview Protocols

Interview 1

Notes for Introductory Script:
- Share a few sentences about myself and this research study.
- Explain participant involvement and permission; review assent form together.
- Provide overview of the structure and the topics discussed in this interview; note the brief background survey that participants will be asked to complete after the interview.
- Emphasize that if a question is uncomfortable, the participant does not have to answer; encourage participants to ask their own questions as well.
- Ask if the participant has any questions before we begin.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main Topic</th>
<th>Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Background</td>
<td>1. Tell me a bit about yourself. Where did you grow up?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. What are you studying in school? Are you involved in any clubs, teams, or student organizations there?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>3. How did you get involved with [this community-based arts organization]?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>4. How did you first become interested in the arts?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Identities (Circles Activity)</td>
<td>5. What would you like to share with me about what you created?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Can you point to a part of this diagram that feels particularly meaningful to you, and share why?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6. Did anything surprise you as you drew this diagram?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7. I notice [ ____ ] in your diagram. Can you tell me more about this?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8. Before we move on to talking about your neighborhood, is there anything else you’d like me to know about you?</td>
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</table>
### Perceptions and Interpretations of their Neighborhood

**Instructions:** Imagine that a friend from out of town was visiting you, and that you could take your friend on a tour of your neighborhood (however you’d like to define it). Please sketch a map of your neighborhood, including any “landmarks” that have been important in your own life.

9. Tell me about one of the landmarks that you chose to include. Did you have a memorable experience in this place?

10. I notice [ ____ ] in your map. Can you tell me more about this?

11. Tell me about any lines or boundaries that you used to define your neighborhood. Would you like to share anything about what is not included in this map?

12. If you could design a flag or a symbol for your neighborhood, what would it look like?

Or If you could choose any three words to represent your neighborhood, what words would you choose and why?

13. Are there any aspects of your neighborhood that you’d like to change?

14. Is there anything else you’d like to share with me about your map?

### Experiences in the Place-Based Program

15. Tell me about how you got involved in this program. 
   - What do you remember about your first day here?

16. Did you have any expectations of the program when you started?

17. So far, what aspect of the program stands out to you the most? *This could be something that came up during a discussion or an activity, or it could be something about the program in general.*

18. Can you tell me about a memorable moment that you’ve had in this program so far?

19. What hopes do you have for the rest of your time in this program?

### Closing

20. Is there anything else you’d like to add? Maybe something that I didn’t ask about? Maybe something you’d like to add to a previous answer you gave?

*Thank you for sharing your thoughts and experiences with me in this interview. I am learning a lot from you and I look forward to the next time we’ll speak. Before you go, I’d appreciate it if you could complete*
| this brief survey so that I can have your basic background information. Thank you again! |
### Notes for Introductory Script:
- *Share a few sentences to remind participants of the focus and goals of this research study.*
- Review assent form from the previous interview.
- Provide overview of the structure and the topics discussed in this interview.
- Emphasize that if a question is uncomfortable, the participant does not have to answer; encourage participants to ask their own questions as well.
- *Ask if the participant has any questions before we begin.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main Topic</th>
<th>Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experiences in the Place-Based Program</td>
<td>1. The last time we spoke, you were working on [_____] in the program. Can you describe what you’ve been working on since then?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2. What aspect of the program have you been enjoying the most?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Can you share an example of how you experienced this?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>3. Has anything challenged you in the program? How have you dealt with this challenge?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>4. What would you like to change about the program?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>5. What has kept you here?</td>
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<td>6. If a friend expressed interest in participating in this program, what would you want them to know?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program Impact on Learning and Personal Development</td>
<td>7. Before this program, was thinking about “place” something that you did a lot?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• How would you explain this concept of “place” to someone who has never heard it before?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Has anything surprised you about this concept of “place”?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Do you consider “place” to be important or relevant to your own life? Why/why not?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>8. How does this program compare to the kinds of learning or activities that you do in school?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>9. Do you feel like this program has affected you or your life at all?</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
- Since you started the program, have any of your perspectives on your neighborhood changed? If so, how?
- Would you say that you’ve learned anything new about yourself? Can you tell me more about that?
- Would you say that you’ve learned anything new about your community? Say more about that.

10. At our last interview, you expressed that some of your hopes and expectations for this program included [__________]. Have any of these hopes or expectations been met since the last time we spoke?

11. Do you have any new hopes or expectations for the remainder of your time in the program?

| Broader Program Impact | 12. What do other people in your life know about what you’re doing this summer at [this community-based arts organization]? Have you invited people you know to the final showcase?
| | 13. What do you hope people will take away from the event?
| | 14. Do you think that the work that you’ve been doing in this program has impacted the people who live in this local area?
| | - Can you share an example of how you observed this impact?

| Closing | 15. Before we conclude, is there anything else you’d like to talk about? Maybe something you’d like to add to a previous answer you gave?
| | 16. Do you have any questions for me?

Thank you very much for sharing more of your thoughts and experiences with me in this second interview. I really appreciated the chance to talk in-depth with you, and I continue to learn a lot from your perspectives. I’m grateful to have you as a participant in this research study.
Appendix B: Background Survey for Youth Study Participants

Note: Study participants will be asked to complete this brief survey after their first interview. It should take no more than a few minutes of their time.

1. What school do you attend?

2. What grade will you be entering in the Fall of 2016?

3. What is your age?

4. What is your gender and your preferred gender pronoun?

5. What is your race/ethnicity?

6. What is your preferred pseudonym for this research study? (OPTIONAL)

7. Is there anything else about your background that you’d like to share with me?
Appendix C: Examples of Etic Codes

Codes developed from literature on youth development (e.g. Cammarota, 2011; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Ginwright & James, 2002)
- Peer Relationships
- Youth-Adult Relationships
- Care
- Role Models
- Life Skills
- Personal Development
- Race and Racism
- Cultural Identity

Codes developed from literature on place and adolescence (e.g. Prince, 2014; Proshansky et al., 1983; Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996):
- Sense of place
- Place identity
- Place attachment
- Influence on well-being
- Constructing “urban”

Codes developed from literature on place-based education (e.g. Demarest, 2015; Gruenewald, 2003; Smith & Sobel, 2010):
- Encountering difference
- Learning about others
- Stereotypes
- Sense of community
- Privilege
- Sense of pride
- Sense of belonging
- Sense of agency
- Perspective-taking

Codes developed from literature on arts education and community arts settings (e.g. Beyerbach & Davis, 2011; Dewhurst, 2014; Graham, 2007; Greene, 1995):
- Meaning/value of art
- Access to art opportunities
- Process/Product
- Imagination
- Technical skills
- Collaboration
- Insider-Outsider Dynamics
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