When School Is Not Enough: Understanding the Lives and Literacies of Black Youth

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This article discusses findings from two interconnected ethnographic studies on the out-of-school literacy practices of Black adolescent males: 18-year-old Khaleeq from the US Northeast, and 18-year-old Rendell from the US Midwest. The data analyzed derive from their engagements in nonschool, community-based, social justice initiatives that, we argue, represent rejections of deficit narratives about who they are (their racialized and gendered identities) and what they allegedly cannot do (their literacy capacities and capabilities). Utilizing a critical literacy approach that attends to out-of-school contexts, race, and counternarratives allows us to demonstrate how they questioned narratives of failure that unfairly place blame on Black youth and not on the structural inequalities endemic to US society. These narratives include (among others): the widening gap in achievement and high school graduation rates between Black and White male students in the United States; the school-to-prison pipeline and increasing drop-out and push-out rates that impact high school–aged Black males; and the overrepresentation of Black males in special education classes. Khaleeq and Rendell used literacies to question these racialized narratives and their consequences, and to produce counternarratives to negative assumptions about Black adolescents. As a result, we focus on how they cultivated their literacies, nurtured their spirits, and charted their own trajectories within community spaces when school was not enough. This analysis offers implications for how literacy practitioners and researchers can narrow the school-community divide by lovingly attending to the out-of-school literacies of Black adolescents.

Introduction

Many scholars (Darling-Hammond, 1998; DuBois, 1902; Gonzalez, 2001; Kozol, 1991) have long argued that American public education has the potential to remedy inequality of opportunity, improve social conditions, and reduce high rates of poverty for all people, especially those of low socioeconomic status and diverse racial, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds. In fact, Mann (1848) insisted "education, then, beyond all other divides of human origin, is a great equalizer of conditions of men—the balance wheel of the social machinery" (qtd. in Hayes,

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2006, p. 56). Relatedly, Gonzalez (2001) insisted, "Education is the great equalizer in a democratic society, and if people are not given access to a quality education, then what we are doing is creating an underclass of people who will challenge our very way of life" (p. 2). He continued, "[The] civil rights question of our nation today is that of access to a quality education" (Gonzalez, 2001, p. 2)—the type of education, we believe, that must embrace cultural equality, cultural pluralism, social justice, and community-engaged pedagogies.

We agree with Mann's and Gonzalez's beliefs about public education and the need to provide opportunities for people to actively participate in a democratic, multiracial, and multiethnic society. As DuBois (1902) reminds us, "Education must keep broad ideals before it, and never forget that it is dealing with Souls and not with Dollars" (p. 81). Indeed, the well-being of the *souls* of students—where their innermost yearnings and potential for greatness lie—is also why the landmark US Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education* of 1954, which declared racially segregated public schools unconstitutional, is so important. Chief Justice Earl Warren rightly noted that policies requiring separation of Black and White students in schools are "usually interpreted as denoting the inferiority" of Black students, and that therefore, "separate educational facilities are inherently unequal" (as qtd. in National Museum of American History, Behring Center, n.d.). Unfortunately, more than 60 years after the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, educational outcomes for many students of color in our nation's public schools are still directly connected to a system of inequality. This system is marked by unequal access to a rigorous curriculum, skilled teachers, quality educational resources, and modernized learning facilities.

Additionally, we are also aware that public education has not lived up to its full potential—as a great equalizer, a leveler of the playing field—for the very people who need it the most. Urban public schools that serve a large demographic of low-income students of color are often on the chopping block when it comes to receiving adequate funding to renovate facilities, modernize technology, replace outdated books, hire teachers early, and ensure that all students have access to a full-time staff of nurses, therapists, and counselors. When students are sitting in classes hungry, when they cannot see the words on the board or on the page, and when they experience school as a place where they are regularly bombarded with standardized tests, we have to wonder: Education as a great equalizer *for whom?* When they are forced to learn under conditions that rely on English Only and zero-tolerance policies, we have to inquire: Education as a great equalizer *for what?* And, when they are discouraged from relying on their family and community histories, intellectual traditions, and cultural practices to make sense of academic requirements, we must ask: Education as a great equalizer *where* and *how?*

As we daily contemplate these questions, we do not point our fingers at urban public schools, but at the system of inequality and inequity that allows many of our schools to function as they do. According to Lee and Burkam (2002), while we "expect schools to increase achievement for all students, regardless of race, income, class and prior achievement . . . it is unreasonable to expect schools to completely eliminate any large pre-existing inequalities soon after children first enter the education system, especially if those schools are under-funded and over-challenged" (p. 2). What happens, then, when students are preparing to exit those schools after having learned under the very same conditions that were present when they first entered them? Why is education not a great equalizer for the lives and literacies of many students of color who rely on public education to prepare them for opportunities that may have been denied to their parents or grandparents, and that are now being denied to them? More specifically and for the purposes of this article, we ask: When school is not enough, how might students learn to cultivate their literacies, nurture their spirits, and chart their own trajectories within out-of-school spaces?

To address our research question, we examine some of the out-of-school literacy practices of two Black adolescent males: 18-year-old Khaleeq from the US Northeast and 18-year-old Rendell from the US Midwest.[1] We focus on how their engagements in nonschool, community-based, social justice initiatives represent strategic attempts to resist and counter deficit narratives or ideologies (McBee Orzulak, 2015) about who they are (their racialized and gendered identities) and what they allegedly can or cannot do (their literacy capacities and capabilities) when in school. During their participation in community projects, they each interrogated narratives of failure that too readily get associated with Black males and often go unexamined in schools. Among other topics, they questioned how the widening gap in achievement and high school graduation rates between Black and White male students in the United States (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006; Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2010, 2015), the school-to-prison pipeline and increasing drop-out and push-out rates that greatly impact high school–aged Black males (Majors & Billson, 1992; Noguera, 2008), and the overrepresentation of Black males in special education classes (Kearns, Ford, & Linney, 2005) get blamed on Black youth rather than on the structural inequalities endemic to US society.

Over time, Khaleeq and Rendell questioned these narratives and their consequences for Black adolescents. They used literacy to: (1) interrogate their racialized experiences inside and outside school, and (2) produce counternarratives to popular assumptions about Black youth from low-income urban communities. In this article, we highlight how Khaleeq and Rendell relied on literacy during their out-of-school time to talk back to narratives of failure and to interrogate the belief that education is a great equalizer. We frame our discussion in research on the ideological nature of literacies in out-of-school spaces and in counternarratives. Then, we highlight lessons teachers, teacher educators, and researchers can learn about literacies and counternarratives from the out-of-school experiences of Khaleeq and Rendell. More broadly, we hope these lessons will provide insights into the urgent need to equalize, or level, the educational playing field for Black youth in ways that take into serious consideration their rich nonschool literacy engagements.

Adolescent Literacies in Out-of-School Contexts

To examine youth literacy practices in out-of-school contexts, it is necessary for us to come to terms with how we understand literacies and, by extension, adolescent literacies. We rely on Street (1984), who distinguishes between two dominant, competing models of literacy—the autonomous and ideological. The autonomous model, which views literacy as a set of discrete skills, "disguises the cultural and ideological assumptions that underpin it so that it can then be presented as though they are neutral and universal and that literacy as such will have . . . benign effects" (Street, 2003, p. 77). On the other hand, the ideological model understands literacy not as neutral, but as "always embedded in socially constructed epistemological principles. It is about knowledge: the ways in which people address reading and writing are themselves rooted in conceptions of knowledge, identity, and being" (Street, 2003, pp. 77–78).

Relatedly, Alvermann (2009) argues that the autonomous model presents literacy as a set of skills for decoding and producing printed texts, whereas the ideological model conceptualizes literacy—or, rather, literacies—as connected to multiple modalities and forms of communication. In this way, literacy is not seen as a uniform set of skills to be taught and learned in schools, but as the various ways in which meaning is created and communicated. In addition to viewing literacy as cultural, as critical, and as a social practice, Neuman and Rao (2004) contend that "literacy also involves engaging with and creating a range of texts, building on the languages, experiences, cultures, and other assets of students, and communicating and expressing understanding in multiple ways" (p. 7). This type of communication happens individually and with other people.

The articulation of literacy as ideological has called into question not only what counts as literacy, but also what counts as texts, knowledge, and sites of knowledge production worthy of study. According to Kinloch (2011), literacy research has gradually shifted from focusing on schools as primary units and sites of study to literacy practices across multiple sociopolitical contexts, including families, homes, and other nonschool environments. The rapid development of digital communication and online social networking has also produced new literacies and new forms of expression (Banks, 2011; Kress, 2010; Lankshear & Knobel, 2008). The ways adolescents and adults, particularly those with racialized identities, engage in literacy practices across diverse contexts disrupt deficit narratives that have long positioned them as *at risk, struggling,* and *underprepared.* These literacy practices have exposed the inequities in the educational system—from standardized testing and legislative mandates, to zero-tolerance policies and the banning of ethnic studies and multicultural curricula—that adversely affect adolescent lives and literacies. Thus, it is important for literacy scholars to consider what literacy means and represents, and how and for what purposes young people engage in literacy events in relation to out-of-school time and space.

Various scholars (Campano, Ghiso, & Welch, 2016; Haddix, 2012; Kinloch, 2010; Vasudevan, 2006) who study the out-of-school literacy practices of adolescents have focused on the influence of time and space on literacy activities. While we (Valerie, Tanja, and Carlotta) agree with Hull and Schultz (2001) that it is unproductive to dichotomize in-school and out-of-school literacy practices by primarily emphasizing physical space, we believe space plays a crucial role in understanding adolescent literacies. Moje (2004) argues that many young people engage in literacy as a way to "claim, reclaim, or construct new spaces and particular identities" (p. 16; see also Leander & Sheehy, 2004). We have observed how countless adolescents, including Khaleeq and Rendell, rely on their cultural practices, diverse language use, spoken-word performances, textual productions, and spatial navigations to critically engage in literacy beyond school.

Hence, *where* adolescents engage in literacy (space and place) is intricately linked to *how* they construct specific literate identities. According to Haddix (2012), adolescents can develop literate identities if they have access to resources such as supportive writing communities. She describes a summer writing program in which Black adolescent males produced counternarratives to "dominant representations that exist in educational research about [their] social and academic experiences" (p. 112). Just as the production of counternarratives provided the adolescents in her study with time and space to counter negative stories about them, it also motivated them to reimagine how they saw the world and themselves in it as critically conscious, intellectually sophisticated, and literacy-rich human beings.

For the purposes of this article, our focus on out-of-school literacies takes into account: (1) *where*, or the spaces and places in which literacy practices are brought to the fore; (2) *how*, or the ways literacy practices influence adolescent lives, identities, and engagements; (3) *what*, which points to specific actions (e.g., writing, producing counternarratives, creating digital businesses) adolescents are pursuing during out-of-school time; (4) *when*, which signifies their nonschool time; and (5) *why*, which, for us, speaks to how adolescents rely on literacy to talk back to narratives of failure that they are bombarded with inside schools. By discussing their literacies and counternarratives, we highlight the often-ignored promise and potential of Black adolescents who, like Rendell, Khaleeq, and the youth we discuss below, understand the power of literacy to "tell our stories about who we are" (Rendell).

Black Adolescents and Counternarrative Production

To discuss Black adolescents and counternarratives, we first turn our attention to Jaylen D. Bledsoe, a high school–aged youth who founded Bledsoe Technologies, LLC, when he was 12 years old. Today, the Jaylen D. Bledsoe Global Group is a multimillion-dollar company with over 100 employees. In addition to running the company, Bledsoe also travels the world to deliver speeches to adolescents about having dreams, being empowered, and becoming entrepreneurs. He attributes his success to "motivation, perseverance, good old fashioned hard work, and the willingness to take risks, fall down, get back up, and do it again" ("About Jaylen D. Bledsoe," n.d.). Though his story may seem exceptional, there are other Black adolescents who are enthusiastically engaged, high achievers outside school (see www.independentyouth.org).

Bledsoe's example demonstrates that Black adolescents have their own stories to tell and dreams to pursue. Unfortunately, their stories of "motivation [and] perseverance" do not get much airtime in US media and popular discourse. The master narrative on Black adolescents would have us believe they are uncontrollable inside and outside schools, and that they willingly sit by in silence as their personhood is torn asunder. According to Allen (2015), the master narratives about Black adolescent males typically center on educational failure and "perpetuate deficit views of Black male culture, that erroneously portray Black males as lacking normative intellectual and behavioral qualities needed to be successful" (p. 210). Examples like Bledsoe contest essentializing mischaracterizations of Black adolescents as uneducable, irresponsible, and inclined to criminality. As we argue, this contestation is important because it demonstrates the valuable role of Black adolescents producing counternarratives to negative perceptions about who they are and what they allegedly can or cannot do.

Counternarratives, or counterstories, represent one tenet of critical race theory. While they take a variety of forms (e.g., personal stories, others' stories, composite stories), Solórzano and Yosso (2002) define them as a "method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told" in order to "shatter complacency, challenge the dominant discourse on race, and further the struggle for racial reform" (p. 32). By exposing how racism manifests in the lives of people of color, counterstories help to change society into a place where all people have a free and equal stake. This type of storytelling continues to be important since, as Bell (1992) observes, "the absence of visible [Jim Crow era] signs of discrimination creates an atmosphere of racial neutrality that encourages whites to believe that racism is a thing of the past" (p. 374). We agree with Matsuda (1987), who encourages scholars to seek out and listen to the perspectives of people of color for direction in the fight against racial injustice. By collecting, creating, and disseminating counterstories, we can learn from, and uncover valuable knowledge about, Black adolescents, who are often seen as "threatening, arrogant, disdainful of authority, and uncontrollable except by force or removal" (Love, 2014, p. 293; see also Penn, Kinloch, & Burkhard, 2016).

The counterstories of Black adolescent males in education emphasize their agency in negotiating structural forms of racism and inequity. For example, Allen's (2015) study of Black males who are academically successful reveals that their drive to succeed is often influenced by their parents' high expectations and their own "understanding of the purpose of school, particularly the personal, social, and work preparation benefits" (p. 217). Although the adolescents and their parents in the aforementioned study recognized that racism obviously creates barriers to success, Allen noted the adolescents' agency to overcome their difficulties in the presence of structural oppression. As one student shared, "I agree with that you have to work harder than most people, although it's not fair, it's the reality" (Allen, 2015, p. 219). This comment speaks to what Allen calls "resiliency as resistance"

(p. 219), or the idea that Black students' determination to work harder to navigate racial barriers is a form of resistance.

Similarly, the Black male college students in Harper's (2009) composite counternarrative challenge the assumption that Black males are not high academic achievers. Harper's composite counternarrative, a response to the scholarly focus on Black male academic underachievement, is based on interviews with 143 Black male college students from across the United States. It highlights that although their "experiences are often overshadowed by the master narrative that amplifies Black male underachievement, disengagement, and attrition" (Harper, 2009, p. 708), countless Black males who are academically successful also encounter racism. Harper argues for a shift in focus—from narratives about Black male underachievement to narratives about Black male achievement, leadership, and resistance—to counter the marginalization of Black males in sociopolitical, educational, economic, and media contexts.

In the remainder of this article, we take up Harper's (2009) call to shift the focus from underachievement to achievement by examining the literacy practices and counternarratives of Khaleeq and Rendell. As we address our research question—*When school is not enough, how might students learn to cultivate their literacies, nurture their spirits, and chart their own trajectories within out-of-school spaces?*—we think deeply about the embedded meanings and emerging implications of the title "When School Is Not Enough." In so doing, we pay attention to the significant effects Khaleeq's and Rendell's nonschool, community-based engagements had on their identities and literacy practices. In our conclusion, we push for more critical ways for teachers and researchers to level the educational playing field for Black adolescents by lovingly attending to their nonschool literacy engagements.

Research Methodology

Narrative Inquiry as Storying

To consider the literacies and counternarratives of Khaleeq and Rendell, we used narrative inquiry as our methodological approach (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; hooks, 1990; Kinloch, 2015a) to story their racialized experiences during out-of-school time (see Kinloch, 2015b). This required us to attend to how the stories shared by Khaleeq, Rendell, and their peers provided critical insights into the ways they resisted and countered deficit narratives about their identities and literacy capabilities. Our narrative process of listening to, documenting, and analyzing their stories allowed us to access rich layers of data about how they voiced and storied their experiences in the world. It also afforded us opportunities to pay close attention to specific patterns of human interaction (e.g., engaging with others in community spaces, interpreting social contexts, storying perspectives about the world, using language to communicate meaning). This is particularly important because, according to Bruner (1991), as human beings, we "organize our experience and our memory of human happening through narrative—stories, excuses, myths, reasons for doing and not doing, and so on" (p. 4). For Hendry (2007), narrative inquiry provides "a method for telling stories, giving voice to those traditionally marginalized and providing a less exploitative research method" (p. 490). In other words, narrative inquiry offers "a more complex and complete picture of social life" (Hendry, 2007, p. 490).

Hendry's (2007) claim that narrative inquiry is a way of "giving voice" to people through nonexploitative methods connects with hooks's (1990) critique of the relations between being oppressed and being silenced, or of being told, "I want to know your story," only to have your story told "back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own" (p. 343), and no longer yours. She continues: "Re-writing you, I write myself anew. I am still author, authority. I am still the colonizer, the speaking subject, and you are now at the center of my talk" (hooks, 1990, p. 343). hooks reminds us of the histories of colonization, violence, and oppression that have dehumanized the lives and devalued the stories of historically marginalized peoples, and that have allowed researchers to oppressively claim those stories as their own. In fact, she recognizes the important role researchers play in encouraging others to tell their own stories in ways that humanize and affirm themselves and others, and not in ways that further colonize and oppress them (see hooks, 1994; Patel, 2015; Smith, 2012).

A narrative inquiry approach has allowed us to carefully listen to, respond to, analyze, and connect with the stories shared by Khaleeq and Rendell—stories about how they see themselves in the world at the backdrop of how others see them, and stories about their attempts to resist deficit narratives about how they cultivate their literacies, nurture their spirits, and chart their trajectories within out-of-school spaces. From the collection of their written artifacts, interviews, and observations, to the exchange of videotaped narratives and presentations at community meetings, their stories have revealed, according to Rendell, "who we are from our eyes . . . how we makin' sense of what we do in the community 'cause as young Black boys, our stories matter."

Research Sites, Participants, and Data Collection

The first research vignette features 18-year-old Khaleeq, who attended Harlem High School, an open-admissions school in the US Northeast with 37 certified teachers, one principal, two assistant principals, and 550 students across grades 9–12. During the time of this study, 54% of the students identified as Black, 45% as Latinx, 2% as White, and 1% as Asian, and a majority of the students qualified for the free or reduced lunch program. Harlem High was located in a historically Black community with a history of sociopolitical activism, civil rights activism, and literary renaissances. It was in close proximity to a community college, a major research center, historic brownstones, and new high-rise condominiums. It was at Harlem High where Valerie met Khaleeq and worked alongside him, his peers, and his English teacher on a research study on adolescent literacies and urban gentrification. In 2014, years after Valerie completed the initial data collection and analysis processes (which spanned from 2003 to 2007 and from 2009 to 2010), Carlotta and Tanja began collaborating with her to revisit the data. Specifically, Tanja and Carlotta have encouraged Valerie to think more deeply about the study's larger theoretical and methodological significance in relation to Black adolescents' out-of-school literacies.

During the research study, Valerie observed students at least two to three times a week in their English classes, throughout the school building, in the community, and during their voluntary visits to teacher education courses at a local university. Together with research participants, Valerie attended tenants' association meetings, engaged in community demonstrations, and participated in community video walk-through sessions to gain a better understanding of local residents' fights against urban gentrification.[2] Across these activities, she noted how Khaleeq and his peers were actively engaging in the community by questioning and writing journal entries about visible signs of gentrification. Additionally, Khaleeq, one of his peers (Phillip), and Valerie interviewed a total of 27 students and teachers for 30 to 90 minutes each on gentrification, place, and literacy practices. At the suggestion of Khaleeq and Phillip, Valerie distributed surveys on gentrification to approximately 168 students in grades 9–12. The surveys asked students to share their feelings regarding gentrification in the local area and to indicate the nonschool, community institutions they frequented (e.g., the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, the Studio Museum in Harlem, the Museum of Modern Art, the Apollo Theater, the Harlem Theater, recreational facilities, and nonschool educational programs). From the collection of written artifacts to interviews, surveys, and observations of participants in a variety of contexts, it became obvious that Khaleeq and many of his peers' attempts to assert their identities in positive ways occurred during nonschool time.

The second research vignette features 18-year-old Rendell, who attended Truth High School, a Title 1, urban public school founded in the mid-1970s in the US Midwest. During the time of this study, the school had 47 certified teachers, one school principal, three assistant principals, and upwards of 800 students across grades 9–12. The majority of the students (81.5%) identified as Black, 11.5% as White, 5% as Hispanic, and 1% as Asian, and of all students, 20% were classified as physically disabled. Located in a longstanding, primarily White, working-class residential community on the city's north side, Truth High School was surrounded by single-family homes, apartment complexes, a park, churches, and a busy thoroughfare. It was at the school and in the context of a critical service-learning, community-engaged initiative, which lasted from 2012 to 2016, that Valerie met Rendell and collaborated with him, his peers, and one of his English teachers.[3] At the conclusion of the study's initial data collection process, Tanja and Carlotta met Rendell during an informal research visit. At that time, Carlotta and Tanja began collaborating with Valerie to discuss the project's theoretical and methodological rigor and the ways Black adolescents assumed active roles when it came to their nonschool literacy engagements.

During the course of the research study, Valerie observed students at least twice a week inside school, at community events, at local and national conferences, during research meetings at the school and in the community, and in the school's urban fruit and vegetable garden. The garden, located on the property of a Methodist church that was adjacent to the high school, was a community-based initiative that students codesigned with their English teacher and members of the church. Valerie also observed students on the garden's Design Team, which was a racially diverse, 12-member, student-led group responsible for creating, maintaining, and nurturing the garden throughout the year. Across these activities, Valerie paid particular attention to Rendell's active engagement in the garden project and his increasing interest in community events. His interest was indicated by his voluntary visits to local food banks and assisted living facilities, and by his mentoring of younger students who expressed an interest in the Design Team and the garden. Additionally, Rendell, one of his peers (Hailee), and Valerie interviewed 6 of the 12 student members of the Design Team for 30 to 65 minutes each on topics such as identity, literacy practices, and community involvements. At the suggestion of Rendell, Valerie and four members of the Design Team reviewed data from surveys on service-learning and community engagement that were distributed to teachers, their students, and community members who had participated in the larger project. The surveys asked them to share their feelings about the effects of community-engaged initiatives on their literacy practices, and about the community sites they frequently visited (e.g., pride centers, assisted living facilities, food pantries). The collection of surveys, interviews, written artifacts, and observations of participants in the school and community revealed Rendell's and his peers' attempts to assert their identities and practice literacy in creative ways.

Data Triangulation and Phases of Data Analysis

As previously stated, the research vignettes featuring Khaleeq and Rendell derive from a variety of qualitative data that captured their involvement within their respective communities. Although Khaleeq and Rendell participated in separate research studies on literacy and community engagement with their high school peers, teachers, and community partners in different geographical locations, we believed it was important to triangulate data across each study. Our decision to do so was highly informed by the multiplicity of shared themes, the similarity of findings, and the heartfelt personal and political feelings of resistance participants expressed about their active engagements with literacies beyond the physical space and pressures of school. Because the process of data triangulation played a significant role in our methodological approach, we first explain its purpose and then describe the data analysis procedures of our study.

According to Taylor, Bogdan, and DeVault (2016), "Triangulation is often thought of as a way of checking out insights gleaned from different informants or different sources of data. By drawing on other types and sources of data, observers also gain a deeper and clearer understanding of the setting and people being studied" (pp. 93–94). Triangulation involves a combination of data sources that provide an expansive understanding of contexts (e.g., location/environment and economic, educational, political, and/or social conditions) and participant identities (e.g., who they are and what they believe, think, and do within the spaces they occupy). For Denzin and Lincoln (2005), triangulation "is not a tool or a strategy of validation but an alternative to validation"; it is "a strategy that adds rigor, breadth, complexity, richness, and depth to any inquiry" (p. 5; see also Creswell & Miller, 2000). In this way, triangulation is an important strategy that seeks to minimize methodological biases and personal prejudices while strengthening the generalizability of any study.

In agreement with Denzin's (2010) argument that "we need a moral and methodological community that honors and celebrates paradigm and methodological diversity" (p. 425), our decision to triangulate data was purposeful. We wanted to learn more about how Black adolescents used literacy during nonschool time. Thus, we sought to better understand the possible differences between their forms of participation in their community and school contexts, and the ways they countered deficit narratives about their identities and literacy capabilities. To do this, we relied on multiple data sources. These included primary data from participant interviews, observations, written artifacts, and field notes, as well as secondary data from newspaper stories, articles, photographs, and promotional materials from community events. Such a wealth of sources provided us with an opportunity to focus on how Black adolescents across spatiotemporal conditions engaged in community-based initiatives that supported their desire to cultivate their literacies, nurture their spirits, and chart their trajectories within out-of-school spaces.

Data triangulation within and across the studies also allowed us to "map out the richness of human behavior, interaction, and responses to persistent issues" (Kinloch, Burkhard, & Penn, 2016) related to Khaleeq's and Rendell's racialized literacy experiences beyond schooling environments. To do this, we coded journal entries, field notes, and video- and audio-taped data for recurring themes of engagement, resistance, and identity within the stories of participants (data analysis Phase 1). Then, we turned attention to how Khaleeq and Rendell, within their immediate contexts, engaged with peers and shared literacy stories about their engagements, as demonstrated by their attitudes, dispositions, and descriptions of how they worked collaboratively with others to accomplish goals (data analysis Phase 2). Throughout our data analysis phases, we focused on Khaleeq's and Rendell's decisions to use literacy to participate in nonschool spaces and their processes of "mak[ing] sense of who I am and what I can use literacy for" (Khaleeq). This latter point was a major theme that emerged from the data and from Valerie's ongoing observations of Khaleeq, Rendell, and their peers.

In addition to the phases of data analysis, it is important to note that participants across the two studies engaged in extensive member-checking sessions of collected data for accuracy (Guba & Lincoln, 2001). They offered their interpretations of data for relative meaning and as a way to re-story aspects of their experiences in community contexts. Both Khaleeq and his peers in the US Northeast and Rendell and his peers in the US Midwest participated in multiple data discussion sessions and remain in contact with Valerie about their ongoing community engagements. In the remainder of this article, we share the results of our work across the two studies by offering stories related to Khaleeq's and Rendell's community-based literacy interactions and counternarratives. Doing so allows us not only to identify, but also to generalize larger pedagogical implications for literacy teachers, teacher educators, and researchers regarding the out-of-school literacy engagements and counternarratives of Black adolescents.

Research Findings

Research Vignette 1: Khaleeq and "Our Struggle to Live"

During a community session on youth literacy practices and urban gentrification, Khaleeq, his peers, and Valerie walked up and down the streets surrounding the apartment complex where he lived with his family. Khaleeq talked openly about the presence of new buildings in the area (e.g., high-rise condominiums, office towers, corner stores, and supermarkets) and his belief that he and his family would be pushed out because of increasing housing costs. When Phillip, another youth participant, asked Khaleeq to talk about the threat of being pushed out of the community, Khaleeq said, "This my home but that don't matter. Our struggle to live never matters to other people. Can we *really* do anything about it?" Valerie asked, "You don't think you can do anything? Why you participating in this project?" To this latter question, Khaleeq explained, "It's about our community. I know that." He continued:

> But it's also about me. In school, like I don't be feelin' free. You know, like sometimes I be suffocatin' and think I'm ah stop breathin'. Then, we be out here doin' the work . . . I'm breathin', feelin' like I'm smart. That's how I always wanna feel. I be in school and get tired being labeled the Black boy who don't know somethin', who ain't smart enough. Out here, I don't worry 'bout that.

Khaleeq's statement, "Our struggle to live never matters to other people," is poignant for a number of reasons. First, it points to his belief that Black lives and, by extension, Black history, struggle, and liberation, do not matter to others, or to say it more explicitly, to many White people. Although he has said on a number of occasions that these things matter to him, he still questions, "Can we *really* do anything about it?" Secondly, his statement speaks to his own desire to move toward freedom, the type that allows him to not "be suffocatin'" and feeling as if he is going to "stop breathin'." Khaleeq was well aware that in school, he was racially positioned as "the Black boy" who wasn't "smart enough." However, in the community, he was viewed as smart and knowledgeable. In fact, he could express his opinions without criticism and use the language of his ancestors without disdain. His participation in the project was just as much about rejecting pervasive narratives of failure that too quickly get associated with Black bodies as it was about interrogating community change that results from urban gentrification.

To reject such narratives—about himself ("I ain't helpless"), other Black people ("they be sayin' we dumb"), and the community ("they want us thinkin' where we live is bad")—Khaleeq relied on practices in literacy and counternarratives (e.g., critical reading, writing, and questioning; producing positive and affirming personal stories). Examples of this rejection include his collaboration with team members to interview community residents about gentrification; create, disseminate, and analyze responses to surveys about community needs, trends, and demographics; and present literacy artifacts in university courses and at tenants' association meetings about community preservation. Khaleeq confessed that his participation in our community-based, social justice project gave him a heightened sense of confidence and purpose: "I'm reading community history and writing what I see. We do all this reading 'cause we examining gentrification. I'm involved, like responsible."

His increased levels of confidence and purpose were not limited to an examination of gentrification. They also materialized in how he began to talk about narratives of failure that get associated with Black adolescents who live and attend schools in urban environments. For instance, one afternoon, as Khaleeq, Phillip, and Damien (his peers), Rebekkah (a research assistant/participant), and Valerie created poster-sized maps of the local area for presentation at a tenants' association meeting, Khaleeq remarked: "We take what they give us and be believin' that." Phillip laughed before asking him to explain his comment, and Khaleeq elaborated: "You know, like, what you [Phillip] be talkin' 'bout. They think we don't do any good, like we not smart. Like, we dangerous 'cause we Black or we criminals 'cause we Black. Then put being male on top ah that. We get labeled 'cause ah who we are." Without hesitation, Phillip responded: "Because of who they *think* we are. It's easy for them to think we ah threat. . . . That way they don't have to admit we built the world. They know the truth." The following conversation ensued:

Khaleeq: What truth?

Phillip: We smart. Point blank. But if you don't believe it, they got you every time.

Khaleeq: Who's truth that is?

Phillip: Our truth, man. Every Black person's truth. It's like . . . we Black males, right, and they give us a bad rap. They be sayin' "y'all a threat, y'all can't learn, y'all be actin' up" [Khaleeq interrupted and said, "actin' out"]. They be sayin' that in school, on the news, like, everywhere.

Valerie: They want us buying that narrative.

Khaleeq: But what we suppose to do?

Phillip: Push back, man. Like, you gonna just take it? Look at us now. We out here in the community doing this gentrification thing. Makin' these maps. Goin' to residents' meetings. That's what we gotta do. Don't believe what they say about us.

Valerie: Reject it. Don't make that your reality.

Phillip: 'Cause it ain't. Like, we writing about what's going on. We doin' all this reading about the community—what was here before, what's here now, what's coming next, and like, what it means for Black people already here.

Khaleeq: Kinda like resistance?

Phillip: That's what I'm sayin'! Tellin' our stories about who we are, our community.

Our conversation, which was a counternarrative to negative stories about Black males that circulate throughout society, paved the way for Khaleeq and Phillip's presentation of their community maps at the tenants' association meeting.

At the meeting, they listened as residents exchanged stories about destabilized rent, the fear of displacement, and the economic threat gentrification would impose on their lives. A few days later, Valerie asked Khaleeq to share his reflections about the meeting. He said, "Well, people got stories. Everybody wanna tell stories." When Phillip asked him to talk about presenting the maps, Khaleeq replied, "Our maps are stories. Signs of writing, literacy. That's literacy. How we making sense of our world by writing . . . mapping the community, getting in a room with strangers, listening, presenting stories." To this, Phillip added, "You a Black male doing that, too." Khaleeq's powerful response was heartfelt:

> I'm ah say this . . . . I don't be feelin' confident in school. I wonder if I'm stupid or if school be makin' me think I'm stupid. I'm not the only Black male who been told to take special classes, be real 'bout what I'll do *if* I graduate school. I wanna go to college, but people at school be like, "consider your options." I know what that means. I do this project [in the community], reading books, writing these journals, drawing maps, presenting at meetings. I'm speaking in front of people I don't know. Learning about the community. I don't feel on edge like I'm ah stop breathin'. That's how I should feel in school. Most times I don't. When you [gesturing to Phillip] said Black males get a bad rap, I started thinkin'. You right. That happens in school, but the key is to not accept that.

Khaleeq's reflections point to his ongoing efforts to "not accept that"—"that" being the narrative of failure presented in many schools about the lives and literacies of Black adolescents. At times, this narrative is super-visible—marked by the positioning of Black males in classrooms, by suspension and expulsion rates, and within professional conversations about their presumed academic (in)abilities. At other times, it is disguised within the hidden curriculum and codes of power in educational systems (see Apple, 1990; Delpit, 2006) that seek to prevent Black students from achieving academically. Rather than capitulating to failure, Khaleeq demonstrated academic, social, and creative competence in the community. His participation in our project and awareness of the need for Black people to tell their stories point to how he used literacy within nonschool contexts to interrogate his racialized experiences and produce counternarratives to pervasive labels of intellectual inferiority. As Solórzano and Yosso (2002) remind us, historically disenfranchised people must tell their stories to "shatter complacency [and] challenge the dominant discourse on race" (p. 32). Khaleeq is powerfully engaging in this work.

Research Vignette 2: Rendell and "Step[ping] Away from School"

Similar to Khaleeq, Rendell believed it was important for Black adolescents to "tell our stories about who we are" to counter images that falsely portray their intellectual abilities, academic acuity, cultural competencies, and sociohistorical realities. One way he told his stories was by participating in a critical service-learning initiative that afforded him an opportunity to collaborate with peers and community partners to address issues of hunger, access, and ability. In this context, he not only investigated pressing community concerns, but examined perceptions others might have of him as "a Black male who went to city schools" and who "grew up with a working single parent." According to Rendell, "nothing's wrong with that, but people think Black, and urban, and single parent . . . they automatically see statistic." His participation in the project, along with his growing commitment to community-based work, encouraged him to question other people's perceptions about who he was and what he was capable of accomplishing.

During an interview, Rendell recalled how some teachers talked negatively about his familial circumstances and academic potential. He shared:

> I did school OK, but you start thinkin' on what they said. Like, "You know where you from, don't hope for too much," or "It's alright you don't know that," or "Don't worry about doing well," or, like, "College? No, just get ah trade." They never even ask *how* they can help you succeed. Even askin' what you wanna do in life. Those words never came outta their mouth. Now, there were a couple [who cared], but the majority were like "That poor Black kid, he ain't got no chance" or "He just a statistic" or "Anybody love him?" They don't think about how that make you feel.

Rendell's reflections take us to Giovanni's (2007) poem, "Nikki-Rosa," in which she writes that she was never concerned about being economically poor because, as others fail to realize, "Black love is Black wealth and they'll / probably talk about my hard childhood / and never understand that / all the while I was quite happy" (p. 53). Similar to "Nikki-Rosa," Rendell was aware of the narrative of failure that got imposed onto him. However, he neither internalized nor accepted it as his own. He did not allow such narratives, circulated within schools and throughout society, to define his capacity to do good in the world.

Once Rendell became involved in the critical service-learning project, he found himself (e.g., voice, confidence, agency) and became interested in increasing his participation in the community. He shared: "It's a way to give back, and think about what the community needs. We read, like, texts. Creatin' pamphlets. Helpin' write grants. Out here I'm workin' with people I never talked to in school. We growing a garden. But not just a garden." For Rendell, the project, the first wheelchair-accessible fruit and vegetable garden in the area (see Kinloch, Nemeth, & Patterson, 2015), was a symbol of critical literacy learning and social justice. The garden represented the collaborative efforts of adolescents and community partners to enhance the spatial design of an empty lot, to provide access to fresh fruits and vegetables to residents in the area, and to create a positive space for racially, ethnically, linguistically, and ably diverse people across the life span to work toward a shared purpose. In these ways, participants, and Rendell in particular, began to interrogate issues of power: Who has and does not have access to fresh fruits and vegetables, and why? What kind of system allows people to go hungry? Why do some people have more than they need while others don't have enough? Participants also began to consider ways to address social injustices in the community by asking: Why are certain advantages, or opportunities, afforded to a few people and not to others? What can happen if we publicly discuss the negative consequences that result from discrimination, homophobia, racism, and ableism? Can we ever get rid of poverty and end racial disparities?

These experiences, paired with comments that had been directed at Rendell—"You know where you from, don't hope for too much," and "College? No, just get ah trade"—encouraged him to take an intimate look at himself and his narrative of perseverance. In a self-assigned journal entry he wrote, titled "Words of a Young Black Male," Rendell described feelings of resentment toward his schooling experiences. He opened with:

> I never really knew the greatness of black individuals. . . . I now know why, due to there being a certain system, not built to teach black individuals about their history and greatness. . . . Still I ask myself why was I not taught this in my early educational career. I thought I was suppose to learn all this in school, but who knew that I'd have to step away from school to learn this information.

When Valerie asked how he felt about having to "step away from school to learn," Rendell turned her attention to the closing paragraph in his journal, which stated, "from one, picking up a book, and two, talking to mentors . . . I'm getting in touch with my emotions and struggles, growing up in a Eurocentric society." Rendell and Valerie had the following conversation:

Rendell: You be focusing on . . . the word you use to describe readin' and writin'?

Valerie: You mean literacy?

Rendell: Literacy. That's it. When I say step away, that's what I did. I wasn't learning. It shouldn't be, "pick up a book, write a paper," but make sense of what you read and feel. Do you see yourself in it? How it make you feel? I didn't know I should see myself in it. Nobody told me.

Valerie: You think you didn't see yourself because you weren't represented? What I'm asking . . . if you don't see yourself in the pages of what you're studying, do you know you should be represented in them?

Rendell: Good question. You gotta ask, why would someone like me not see myself or be represented? All we've done in this world and we not taught about it?

Valerie: How'd you learn that that was the case? Not being represented or . . .

Rendell: The service-learning project. I started seeing myself as a strong Black male, and smart. My mind started thinkin' I'm someone makin' a difference. I was readin' and writin' all the time 'cause ah our project. I began questionin' what I was readin' . . . then I went to the Atlanta conference and heard that man talk 'bout statistics for Black males not graduating high school. I was like, I'm out here doin' this work, I'm not a statistic, and I'm from an urban community. At that point, I stepped away from school, not quit, but step back. The project helped me do that . . . question what I wasn't gettin'.

Stepping away from school allowed Rendell to see that he was, in fact, an intelligent Black male who was not a statistic and who did not fit into the minimizing narratives about the identities and capabilities of Black adolescents. His story is important to note because it counters narratives that would have some believe Black adolescents are not resilient, are not academic achievers, and are not community-conscious. Additionally, his narrative points to his awareness that what he was doing in the project was grounded in critical literacy. That is, Rendell was conceptualizing literacy in very expansive ways that moved beyond the routine of "pick[ing] up a book, writ[ing] a paper," and into the practice of sense-making in which he questioned who he was, how he felt, and how he was not represented in schools. This practice, to borrow Freire's (1998) words, invited Rendell to "read the word and the world" as he interrogated power, injustice, and inequality in multiple contexts. In our opinion, Rendell's literacy engagements support Harper's (2009) insistence that we shift the focus away from Black male underachievement to Black male achievement (see also Thomas, 2015). In the next section, we consider lessons about literacies and counternarratives for teachers, teacher educators, and researchers.

When School Is Not Enough: Implications for Teaching and Learning

When school is not enough, some Black adolescents may painfully internalize deficit narratives about who they are and what they cannot do: "They think we . . . dangerous 'cause we Black" (Khaleeq), and "Don't hope for too much" (Rendell). This internalization can deter them from believing in their purpose, promise, and potential to achieve academically and contribute positively to their community. It can also deter them from "tak[ing] risks, fall[ing] down, get[ting] back up, and do[ing] it again" (see the example of Bledsoe). We are aware that schools cannot do it alone—that is, schools cannot by themselves eliminate all forms of educational inequities and social inequalities, given that these are large-scale systemic issues rooted in structural oppression. However, schools do have a major role to play in leveling the educational playing field for all students, especially for Black adolescents.

When schools partner with students, families, community organizations, and social service agencies, the importance of young people's schooling experiences and the mutuality and bidirectionality between schools and communities are made more visible. On the one hand, students will receive encouragement from various people to engage critically in their literacy practices inside and outside schools as they better understand their agency, resolve, and resilience. On the other hand, students will be encouraged to generate counternarratives regarding the reproduction of power asymmetries and deficit stereotypes applied to many Black youth. This latter point is important to attend to, given the reality that some community programs, like schools, are steeped in monolithic norms, inequities, and racism. It becomes important, then, for students as well as teachers and researchers to think deeply about *how, what, when,* and *why* Black youth participate in literacy as they are encouraged to produce counternarratives to discourses of failure and incompetence that often get imposed on them.

Additionally, we believe that schools should be places where students experience "education as a practice of freedom" (hooks, 1994), and not places they feel compelled to "step away" from because some teachers do not believe they can achieve. Schools should provide students with opportunities to learn, succeed, experiment, imagine, and consider who they seek to become in the world. Therefore, our call to action is twofold. First, we believe all educators must reimagine schooling practices in ways that both affirm students' knowledges, perspectives, community realities, and life goals, and critique systems of racism and inequity. This should happen in schools through liberatory, creative pedagogical practices that provide opportunities for students to gain knowledge of self and others (see Manning, 2016) and that demonstrate the many ways Black adolescents have agency. Because Black adolescents demonstrate excellence in schools, educators must affirm Black life by encouraging students to produce counternarratives that reject deficit discourses about Blackness. And, yet, we are also aware that to encourage students to produce counternarratives is to also design learning spaces and cultivate educational opportunities that are critical, engaging, sustaining, and loving.

Secondly, in the design of learning spaces and opportunities, educators must recognize the power and potential of student achievement in their communities. Consider, for example, Khaleeq's participation in tenants' association meetings and Rendell's involvement in a critical service-learning project. These community engagements encouraged Khaleeq and Rendell to fully engage their literacies and gain deeper understandings of themselves and their communities. Therefore, our call to action and related examples help us to understand the important role educators have in recognizing those glaring moments *when school is not enough.* Because recognition is not enough, we must also determine tangible ways to transform schools and communities into humanizing, loving places and spaces that nurture and support, encourage and honor the lives and literacies of Black youth. Doing so can get us closer to equalizing, or leveling, the educational playing field for Black adolescents.

NOTES

1. We have official consent from all participants to use their real names in this article.

2. During community video walk-through sessions, participants invite project members into their community for a walking discussion. The lead participant narrates a story about the area while another team member videotapes. During the session, the researcher takes a "back seat" and learns about the community from the facilitator (see Kinloch, 2010).

3. Rendell's English teacher, Ms. Washington, was an active participant in a community-engaged initiative/professional development opportunity designed and facilitated by Valerie. The initiative involved 80 public school teachers, more than 4,000 preK–12 students, and 20,000 service beneficiaries from the community. Through this initiative, Valerie became acquainted with a number of students, including Rendell.

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