Spring 2015

"Very different from most other people": Identity Exploration and Development in Queer and Ally Youths in Out of School Programs and on Social Media

Joan Huang , '15

Swarthmore College

Departments of Educational Studies and Film and Media Studies

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on Social Media

Joan Huang

Undergraduate Thesis towards a Bachelor of the Arts in a Special Major in Film and Media

Studies and Educational Studies

Advised by Professor Lisa Smulyan and Professor Patricia White

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To the Attic Youth Center, for being my home the past two summers.

To the life skills staff at the Attic for making me feel valued and for guiding me through the difficulties that come up in youth programming.

To my co-facilitator Crystal for your wisdom and experience in youth work, and for geeking out with me.

To all the youth at the Attic, both in my group and not, for making me feel comfortable and welcomed, and for all your questions and energy.

To other youth staff, who helped me navigate being both youth and staff and dynamics of near-peer facilitation.

To my thesis advisors, Professor Lisa Smulyan and Professor Patricia White, for your infinite patience and support, from initial IRB review through this finished product.

To my roommate for bringing me food so many times during this process, for helping sustain my body so that my mind could do its thing.

And finally, to all of my friends who swiped me into Sharples after I stayed on campus all night, who checked if I got enough sleep, who didn't wake me up from naps when I told them to because they knew my body needed the rest; to my friends, family, and partner for staying with me through a period of intense absence.

Abstract

This thesis explores what elements of programming at the Attic Youth Center, a LGBTQ youth drop in center in Philadelphia, encourage identity development for both LGTBQ and ally youths. Through interviews and field notes, it argues that the Attic is a unique context for identity development because it not only provides space for youths to explore all elements of their personal and social identities -- not just their gender and sexuality, but more importantly because it equips youths with the skills needed to shape their own space, at the Attic and on social media.

INTRODUCTION

I was extremely interested in science fiction and fantasy from a young age. For me, the fantastical worlds portrayed in these types of literature and media did not serve as escape from an unpleasant reality but rather as dream images of possible futures. I remember calculating how long it would be between the present and the day when Star Trek would come true. Discovering fan fiction and online fan communities created even more options in my mind of what types of realities were possible. I enjoyed the freedom of exploring the lives of other people, real and fictional, of trying their lives on when I wrote from their points of view and taking them back off when I closed my laptop. My participation in online fan communities was where I first discovered queerness, and the almost infinite variety of fan fiction narratives provided me visions of queerness that I had never seen before. Between "born this way" narratives in mainstream media and anti-bullying PSA's, I had not even considered being queer until I was in college – despite at various times having been convinced that I was Captain Kirk or Han Solo.

Recognizing and exploring my own queerness was in fact triggered by the discovery of another online community. Sometimes during freshman year of college, I discovered the queer and trans people of color parts of tumblr. Through watching how other queer and trans people of color navigated and performed their identities, I slowly became aware of not only of my queerness and gender-nonconformity, but also my racialization, immigration history and class positionality. For many of these queer and trans women and femmes of color who exist at the intersections of multiple marginalizations, tumblr served and serves as a space to explore their complex simultaneous identities. I remember that despite Swarthmore's relatively large and vibrant queer community, there did not exist the types of intersectional queer spaces I found

online. As I got busier with school, I slowly withdrew from all the online communities I had
been involved in.

I first heard about the Attic through hotpot!, a community organization for queer Asian
and Pacific Islander women, gender-nonconforming and trans people. I became interested in
working at the Attic Youth Center because I had always wanted to work with youth and saw this
an opportunity to contribute to the queer community in Philadelphia. So many queer people I
know at Swarthmore did not really start exploring what their queerness meant to them until
college, transitioning from queer survival to thriving. Seeing so many high school age queer
youth at the Attic with such confidence in their gender, sexuality, and self, I began wondering
about the ways that the Attic provided more than a safe building to hang out in. An unofficial
Attic motto that shows up on various bags and t-shirts is "OK 2 B U" (okay to be you), and I
began to wonder how the Attic lived that motto. How does the Attic transcend mere tolerance to
create a space for youths to actively explore their queer and trans identities? What sorts of
identity exploration happens in the Attic? I wondered if the Attic as a physical space served a
similar function as online communities had for me growing up.

When I contacted the Attic about working there again the following summer, they did not
yet know what their WorkReady theme was going to be. I had in mind a group focused around
documentary filmmaking and queer history, but after learning about the difficulty of teaching
production without access to adequate equipment, my co-facilitator, Crystal, and I settled instead
on speculative fiction. Thus World Building was born, a group exploring how speculative fiction
notions of building new alternative realities could provide answer to the social injustices of
present reality. When we found out that the summer theme was social media, microaggressions

and non-violent communication, social media and speculative fiction fit perfectly together as different ways of exploring and creating alternative spaces to school, home, and everyday life.

Research Questions and Methodology

Intuitively, I felt like there was some connection between what made the Attic a space for identity exploration and development and how it impacted the types of spaces youths created on social media. I focused my thesis study on two main questions.

1. How do out of school programs, like WorkReady at the Attic, influence queer and ally youths' identity development?

2. How do out of school programs impact the ways that youths use social media? WorkReady at the Attic is open to all youths, regardless of sexual orientation and gender identity, and youths participated in WorkReady with a similar level of commitment and enthusiasm whether they were queer or not, which lead me to include ally and queer youths' identity development together. I believed that that would also give me insight into the impact of the Attic rather than internal factors on identity development.

Because of the short length of the WorkReady program – only six weeks, I decided to collect field notes and conduct participant interviews in order to get a better sense of the impact that the Attic has had on youth identity development. Interviews occurred during the last week of the program and helped me understand how youths understood their experiences with both WorkReady and regular Attic programming. Because of difficulties with youth retention and getting parental consent forms signed, as well as interviews being completely voluntary, I ended up with only six youth interviews. Interviews were relatively open-ended and addressed issues of self-identification, participation in the Attic, and usage of social media. I used contextual,

performative, and possible selves approaches to identity development in order to examine the

ways participation in the Attic affected how the youths saw themselves and how they presented

themselves to others. After transcribing field notes and interviews, I coded the various ways

youths saw themselves, the Attic and social media.

Expectations, Findings and Conclusions

Because of my own strong associations between scifi, online communities, identity

development, and social justice, I expected the link between social media and speculative fiction

to be much stronger than it was. While most youths who participated in the group did enjoy

speculative fiction, they saw speculative fiction as simply a small part of the media landscape,

rather than seeing speculative fiction world building as a metaphor for creating space for

marginalized people the way I do. The "what-if" worlds that the group created at the end of the

program offered alternatives to many of the social and political problems current affecting us,

but in mundane, realistically possible ways. Speculative fiction was thus effectively irrelevant to

the research. Furthermore, all the youths initially described social media as a negative space that

the World Building group helped them navigate, rather an inherently liberatory, exploratory

space, as was expected from both the literature and my own experiences.

What emerged from my data instead was that what made the Attic a unique space for

identity development was the high level of peer interactivity and the consequent co-building of

safe space. The primary identity factors that showed up in every single interview were a sense of

being unique or different and of being creative. Sexual and gender identity for youths were

important but also only one of many important identities. Youths saw the Attic as space to

explore and develop their whole selves, not simply the queer and/or trans aspect of themselves.

The sense of safety at the Attic was created in part by staff but largely by the commitment of youths to the comfort of their peers, with staff teaching concrete skills around advocacy and conflict resolution. On the contrary, youths primarily saw social media as simply an extension of the school environment, with the same types of negativity and prejudice but to an even greater degree, rather than a radical space for identity exploration as expected. However, the activities and discussions in World Building actually made youths feel more empowered to use social media for their own purposes, using the same skills and strategies for conflict resolution and building space with peers. The key to making the Attic a successful space for identity exploration and development – and the possibility of making social media a similar space – lies with active peer interactivity and space building by the youths themselves.

Layout of Chapters

This thesis argues that what makes the Attic a unique context for identity development for youths are the everyday practices of peer interactivity and youths shaping their own space, and that similar practices could be employed to make social media a safer space. Chapter 1 gives an overview of the relevant literature on the various topics covered in this thesis – identity development in queer youths, out of school spaces, and social media. Because this thesis is an interdisciplinary work between different departments in different fields, the literature review also explores the connections between these various frameworks, especially how contextual, performative and possible selves approaches to identity development can apply to youth participation in out of school spaces and social media. Chapter 2 outlines a brief history and structure of the Attic Youth Center as an institution and also my personal involvement with the Attic. It explains the specific format of the World Building group I co-facilitated over the

summer for this thesis, and how I collected and analyzed data from that group for this thesis. Chapter 3 explores the themes that emerged from interview transcripts and field notes about how youths understand their own identities over time. Subsections discuss youth self-identification, the role of the Attic, and youth understanding of social media. Chapter 4 solidifies the findings of this thesis into conclusions about youth identity development and the usefulness of different types of spaces for development. It contextualizes the findings of this study within the existing literature, strengthening connections between disciplines and challenging certain existing narratives around queer youth identity development. Chapter 4 concludes by identifying limitations and questions that arose during the study and further possibilities for research.

1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Because the existing literature on queer youth focuses overwhelmingly on gay and lesbian, white, middle-class cis youths, I choose instead to work with the identity frameworks of social context, performativity and possible selves. A plurality of my youths were polysexual[1] and a majority were black, and while the literature on queer youths of color was extremely small, the literature on polysexual and gender-nonconforming youths was virtually non-existent. The identity frameworks I discuss below embed youths' gender and sexual identities in a broader context, giving them agency to explore rather than accept themselves, and create positive future possibilities. I then go on to examine what qualities make out of school programs contexts for development, and how programming relates to youth identity formation. Lastly, I frame social media in the context of third space in order to explore ways that social media spaces are created through their usage and how youths can create their own spaces for identity development and formation.

Queer Youth and Identity Development

Both early popular and academic literature on gay youth focused primarily on helping parents, counselors and other adults either prevent (Wyden, 1968) or manage (Hunt, 1987) homosexuality as a clinical risk. And while more recent literature is less pathologizing, it still tends to cast gay youths as victims, explaining the difficulties of growing up gay (Harris, 1997) to parents and educators so that they can prevent bullying (Besner, 1995), suicide (Remafedi, 1994) and other tragedies. Savin-Williams (2005) breaks down the two early periods of gay

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[1] I use polysexual as an umbrella term for sexual attraction to more than one gender, including identities such as bisexual and pansexual.

adolescent literature as the "separate species" approach in the 1970s and early 1980s, in which

gay adolescents were framed as categorically distinct from "normal" straight youth, and the

"suffering suicidal script" in the late 1980s and 1990s, which portrayed gay adolescence as

inevitably tragic (pp. 49-50). While newer literature has shifted from the language of "gay" or

"homosexual" to "LGBT" (Cianciotto & Cahill, 2012) and sometimes even "LGBTQ" (Mayo,

2014), it is still primarily focused on gay and lesbian youths, rarely addressing biphobia as

separate from homophobia, despite bisexuals constituting a slight majority of the LGB

population in the United States (Gates, 2011, p. 1) and a strong majority amongst LGB

adolescents (San Francisco Human Right Commission, 2011, p. 2). There is also relatively little

literature on transgender youths and basically no literature on non-binary/gender non-

conforming[2] youths. And the literature on queer youth identity development does not reflect the

robustness of the adult literature on queer people of color and other intersectional queer

experiences, tending assume the white, suburban youth experience of homosexuality with one or

two token sections on queer youth of color (Canciotto and Cahill, 2012, p. 21-25). However, for

queer youths of color and other queer youths who live at the intersection of multiple

marginalizations, queerness cannot be isolated as a singular non-normative social identity that

affects otherwise normative (straight, white, male, middle-class, etc.) identity development.

Consequently, the approach that I take in my thesis, while influenced by the literature on

queer youth, draws much more strongly on other identity development literatures in order to fill

existing theoretical gaps. Even the current literature, which accords more agency and variation

within the lives of queer teenagers, has a tendency to view sexual orientation as an immutable

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[2] I use non-binary and gender non-conforming interchangeable to describe gender identities that fall
outside of male and female. Common non-binary gender identities include genderqueer, genderfluid, and
agender.

biological fact and sexual behavior and identity as the way youths navigate their born-this-way sexual desires (Savin-Williams, 2005, p. 28). Because the Attic serves predominantly black low-income youth and only relatively low-income youth qualify to participate in WorkReady, contextualizing how queerness influences Attic youths' development and sense of self within other social identities is extremely important. Social context shapes not only self-perception with networks of relationships with rules and obligations but desires and emotions themselves. Social relations and ties "not only shaped thought and behavior, but were deeply, poignantly felt" (Kondo, 1990, p. 121). Focusing on literature around identity in context, performativity, and possible selves will allow me to address parts of the queer youth experience that do not fit neatly into the pre-existing literature on identity development. These frameworks are necessary to explore intersectional identities and bisexuality and genderqueerness as full complex identities youths explore and embody in and of themselves, rather than token footnotes or worse – transitional states towards "full-blown" homosexuality or trans-ness. Understanding how identities are shaped in social contexts will also allow me to explore how ally identity development is shaped in predominantly queer spaces like the Attic, rather than isolating the ways that allies help people down the privilege gradient.

Definitions

Before going further in the identity frameworks, it would be helpful to define some terms. In the case of this thesis, *youth* refers to adolescents between the ages of 14 and 18. I use *youth* to refer to a single individual or to adolescents collectively as a group; I use *youths* to refer to a defined number of individuals. I focus on adolescence in particular because "personal identities of all sorts are negotiated during adolescence, [and] sexual identity may be especially susceptible

to transforming during this time" (Savin-Williams, 2005, p. 35). While personal and sexual identity transformations happen largely in social contexts, "[t]he most apparent parts of gay and lesbian culture - particularly bars and social clubs – are high adult-centered, and there are legal, social, financial, and political barriers that prevent any legitimate adolescent participation in them" (Unks, 1995, 4).While the Attic serves youth up through the age of 23, the high school aged period of queer youth identity development is especially interesting because youth are becoming aware of their sexual and gender identities, but are still excluded from adult queer spaces. Queer youth thus must find or create their own alternative spaces for identity development, since they are excluded from both mainstream youth culture and mainstream queer culture.

Sexual orientation describes sexual and romantic desire – conventionally, orientation "points" solely to the gender or sex of the person to whom one is attracted, rather than other physical or social traits, such as height, race, income, etc. "Sexual orientation is generally considered to be immutable, stable over time, and resistant to conscious control" (Savin-Williams, 2005, p. 28) and is considered biological or innate rather than socially constructed. Though largely unconscious, I would argue that sexual orientation is also subject to social context and change, since context shapes emotions and desire and societal standards for sexual desirability have varied greatly over time. Consequently, instead of *sexual orientation*, I choose to focus on *sexual identity*, which describes how someone sees and defines themselves personally and socially as a sexual being, rather than simply describing sexual orientation and behavior. Sexual identity is how someone sees and represents themselves as a sexual being, both personally and socially. *Gender identity* refers to how one understands and refers to their own

gender and influenced by physical sex, gender presentation (clothing, body language, haircut, etc.), and social role.

In the present literature, *LGBTQ* and *queer* are used interchangeably as umbrella terms to refer to individuals who have either a non-normative sexual or gender identity. *LGBTQ* is an acronym for *lesbian* – women who are attracted to other women, *gay* – originally men who are attracted to other men but can also refer to all individuals who are primarily same-gender attracted, *bisexual* – people who are attracted to both or all genders, *transgender* – someone whose gender does not align with the sex they were defined by the doctor as at birth, and either *questioning* – someone currently unsure of their sexual or gender identity – or *queer* – an inclusive term for all non-heterosexual, non-cisgender individuals, sometimes used to connote a political critique of existing power structures around gender and sexuality. I choose to use queer both because it covers a wider range of identities and labels than LGBTQ and for the same reason Kevin Kumashiro (2001) does:

> While queer can and often does erase gender differences and racial differences, it can also highlight the interrelationship among sex, gender, sexuality, and even race. After all, gay bashers target not only individuals who come out as lesbian/gay/bisexual, but also individuals who appear to be LGB because they transgress normative gender roles ... transgression of normative sexuality can go hand-in-hand with transgressions of normative gender. (p. 3)

It is important for me to note here that most of my youths do not use queer as a label for themselves, and I would not refer to them individually as queer. However, no acronym or other word exists to cover their wide range of overlapping and intersecting sexual and gender identities covered by *queer*.

Lastly, *ally* is usually used as more of a role and activity than an identity, indicating that while an individual does not share a marginalized identity, they are actively participating in the struggle against the marginalization of that group. Aligned with how the Attic uses the term

during WorkReady, when an unusually high number of straight and cisgender youths attend, I use ally to refer to youth who participate in Attic programming but who identify as both straight and cisgender. Ally youth come from the same communities as the queer youth and often share gender, class, or racial marginalizations with their queer counterparts.

Identity development

Identity is constructed in social contexts. Humans come to understand themselves and their roles in society through social interactions that are framed by wider systems of meaning and power. While social interactions usually occur on an interpersonal level, broader structures of power influence how meaning is made through these interactions (Lei, 2003, p. 158). Individuals are both restricted and enabled by context because pre-existing systems of power and meaning-making close off certain choices but create others – while individuals have agency as a players, social context largely determines the playing field. For marginalized people, fulfilling stereotypes can be demeaning but is often also the easiest path to some degree of conventional success (Lei, 2003, p. 158). As Goldberger (1996) explains, marginalized people are often aware of the structures of power within they are living:

> People of color, immigrants, and members of the working class can develop a way of knowing that […] is truly contextual and constructed in that they have learned firsthand how situated and power-related ways of knowing can be […], a matter of strategy and survival. (p. 356)

Marginalized people are acutely aware of the ways that their social identities shape their material circumstances, discrimination limiting their pathways to success. However, marginalized individuals do survive and thrive because their own cultural backgrounds and funds of knowledge give them skills and strategies for taking care of themselves and their communities in ways that are not possible within the dominant cultural framework.

Individuals with both marginalized and dominant social identities are affected by context. For example, in the U.S., "All students suffer from heterocentric high school culture.... straight students are also losers, for they must conform to rigid standards of behavior that admit not individual differences" (Unks, 1995, 7). While queer youth may have to learn how to be successful in the class of a homophobic teacher, straight youths must also control what they wear, who they associate with, and how they behave in order not to be seen as queer. Questioning youths are put in a particularly difficult place because once the mantle of queerness is assumed, even if the youth emerges from their questioning realizing that they actually are straight and cis, their peers will likely not believe them. While both dominant and marginalized social identities contribute to how context shapes development, "[s]tructural forces have such an important influence on the development of social identity precisely because not all social groups are valued equally and not all groups are allocated the same amount of material resources" (Hurtado, 1996, p. 374). The development of social identities is thus linked concretely to materiality – the marginalization of queerness does not only damage queer youths' self-esteem, it can affect their mental and physical health and lead to bias violence and workplace discrimination.

While queer people do face marginalization for their sexual and gender identities, it is also important to keep in mind that individuals are complex and multifaceted, moving through multiple contexts where certain social and personal identities become more or less salient. Most individuals have a combination of marginalized and dominant social identities. Their dominant social identities can help them navigate their challenges posed by their marginalized ones. However, this can be more challenging for those who are multiply marginalized. "Because of the emphasis in this country on a monocultural social and personal identity ... and philosophical and

political underpinnings of rugged individualism, the very notion of multiplicity has been conceptualized as deviant or pathological" (Hurtado, 1996, p. 375). Dominant social identities have the benefit of being viewed as normative and normal, so they are usually either invisible or understood as default. On the other hand, individuals with multiple marginalized social identities are told to choose one or that they cannot possibly exist. However, youth "sexuality is not something that can be easily described, categorized, or understood apart from being part of their life in general" (Savin-Williams, 2005, p.1), and the broader life context of queer youths must be examined in order to understand their queer identity. Race, class, immigration history, and so forth, must be understood as not only existing simultaneously as queerness but an integral part of how youths comes to their sexual and gender identities – and this fact is true for both queer and ally youths.

The relationship between context and individual is mutually constitutive, with context not only shaping individuals, but individuals creating both themselves and their context through the concept of performativity. Performativity is different from performance, in the sense that a performance is meant to be an artificial imitation of a role, while performativity is about repetition to the point that the role becomes reality, becomes naturalized. Youth become who they are through what they do. An obvious example is that ally youth "becom[e] allies […] through the being of allies, that is, practicing the behaviors that are intended and experienced as support by LGBTQ people" (Blackburn, 2012, 67-68). When allies do enough supportive acts, they become supportive people. Social identities are also performative. For example, queer youth make their queerness, their sexual and gender variance, known through who and how they date, how they hold their bodies, how they dress, how they use language, and so on. While bisexual youth may know internally that they are attracted to people of not only one gender, they help

shape the social norms around what it means to be a bisexual through their choices about their relationships, behaviors, and aesthetic. Like context, identity performativity is shaped by multiple overlapping personal and social factors. In her analysis of "loud black girls and quiet Asian boys," Lei (2003) "analyze[s] the symbolic and material effects of the production of them as racialized, gendered Other through the repeated stylization of their bodies and behavior" (p. 158). When youths perform their sexuality, it is influenced by how they perform their gender, their race, and their socioeconomic class. Their individuality is also shaped and viewed through the lenses of their social identities. These stylizations are important because of their symbolic and material effects, how others see them and how they see themselves fitting into broader systems of meaning-making and social, academic, and economic positions.

People can both create and change context through performativity. When youths come up with a new term or aesthetic, they can reify that new identity category into a defined, though not rigid, way of looking, acting, and being. For example, in order to create the Attic as a safe place for trans and gender non-conforming youths, the practice of asking for preferred gender pronouns at the beginning of every meeting, asking rather than assuming gender pronouns and thus gender becomes a social norm in the Attic as a space. Through the repeated stating of their gender pronoun, youths reinforce that they are that gender, creating a space that encourages gender self-determination and agency. That youths may state their gender pronouns and sexual orientation along with their name during introductions gives them the power to define themselves with terms that work for them and also contribute to the broader social conception of what it means to be or look like someone who has that social identity.

Related to but irreducible to context and performativity, youth identity development is also affected by the creation and activation of possible selves. Markus & Nurius (1986) define

possible selves as "individuals' ideas of what they might become, what they would like to become, and what they are afraid of becoming" (p. 954). Possible selves can be positive selves towards which to aspire but also negative selves to avoid. Future selves are not all possible selves; a youth may feel that certain future selves are out of their reach and thus closed off as an impossibility. Possible selves are usually selves that have not yet come into being, but "[p]ast selves, to the extent that they may define an individual again in the future, can also be possible selves" (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 955). Thus giving youths a way to understand a negative past or current experience can be vital in the creation of positive future possible selves. Performativity is a mechanism through which youths can make future possible selves present attained selves – through behaving like the desired possible selves, youths can become that aspirational self. Because individuals exist in broader social and political contexts, "possible selves are individualize or personalized, but they are also distinctly social" (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 954). Possible selves are linked to possible worlds. If an individual cannot be a desired self in their present context, they may move to a different context where that self is possible or try and change the existing context. Possible selves can encourage youths not only to try and improve themselves, it can also serve as incentive to work for social change, so that more positive possible selves can be available to more people.

Viewing identity development through the lenses of social context, performativity, and possible selves, shifts the focus from how queer and ally youths come to terms with their unchangeable underlying innate sexual orientation to how they actively explore and create their own gender and sexual identities. Viewing queerness contextually helps us understand the ways that gender and sexual identity are shaped by various social forces and the youth's other personal and social identities. Understanding gender and sexual identity as simply one facet of a web of

interrelated social identities also helps explain how participation in a queer space like the Attic

contributes to ally youth identity development and not just helping to hone their skills as an ally.

Performativity pushes back against a natural, innate conception of gender and sexual identity. It

does not deny that there are biological, unconscious, uncontrollable elements to gender and

sexuality, but rather chooses to focus instead on what youths do to express their gender and

sexual identities and how their practices create and reify identity categories. Lastly, the

framework of possible selves demonstrates that youths' identity development is not only shaped

by their social contexts and the actions of their peers and themselves, but also by a sense of

futurity and possibility.

Out of School Programs as Contexts for Development

Supportive out of school programs serve as contexts of development, encouraging

performative experimentation, and nurturing positive possible selves. WorkReady at the Attic

serves as a job (often youth's first experience working) and also an organized activity in an out

of school program. The Attic is more than a building where youths access services. WorkReady

fits neatly into Mahoney et al's (2005) definition of an organized activity as "generally

voluntary, [with] regular and schedules meetings, ... several participants, [and] supervision and

guidance from adults, and ... organized around developing particular skills and achieving goals"

(p. 4). While some youths are required to come to the Attic as part of mandatory court-ordered

probation, WorkReady itself is a voluntary paid opportunity for youth who want a summer job

and experience working in a community organization. This summer, about 35 youths came to the

Attic for WorkReady Monday through Thursday from 11:00 A.M. to 4:00 P.M for six weeks

with the goal of learning about social media, microaggressions and non-violent communication,

as well as gaining the skills needed to get and keep a job, with a special eye the towards how to navigate the job market and workplace in light of marginalization around sexuality, gender, race, and socioeconomic background. Under adult guidance, youths learn the skills associated with job readiness and moreover explore how to push for social justice in their schools, home communities, and interpersonal relationships.

The adult guidance and skills-based focuses of out of school organized activities are designed to encourage positive development in youths. Attic programs more generally and WorkReady in particular organize activities that Eccles and Gootman (2002) argue encourage positive development by creating a space with "physical and psychological safety, appropriate structure, supportive relationships, opportunities for belonging, positive social norms, support for efficacy and mattering, opportunity for skill building, integration of family, school, and community efforts" (p. 11). The Attic serves as an important alternative space for identity exploration and development in youths who may feel like certain parts of them are not welcome or are actively silenced and erased in school. The Attic also seeks to create a safe space for youths to be themselves, giving youths the support and autonomy to build exploratory, experimental spaces for collaborations with peers and personal identity development.

Out of school programs are important because they provide space for youths to develop in way that are either discouraged or ignored in conventional school settings (Mahoney et al, 2005, p. 3). Because public schools, and especially those labeled "underperforming," are held to strict standardized testing standards, school curriculum often focuses on teaching to the test at the expense of critical thinking, skills needed for higher education and the workplace, and personal development. The Attic cultivates what Eccle's and Gootman (2002) call "efficacy and mattering" (p. 11) -- an understanding of one's own power to create change and of one's own

actions as meaningful and valuable. The Attic does this by giving guidance to youths in a way that tries to "support autonomy, value individual expression and opinions, [and] concentrate on growth and improvement rather than absolute performance" (Eccles and Gootman, 2002, 11). Focusing on youth autonomy, expression, opinions and growth is especially important because students with marginalized social identities frequently often do not have the space to explore and develop those sides of their selves in mainstream classroom settings. For example, the history of people of color, indigenous people, queer people, working class people, and women are often not included in the formal curriculum, and asking about those topics is seen as a detour from the material class is trying to cover for standardized testing. Implicitly, those students are told that those parts of themselves are not important and that people with those identities have not done important things. However, without restrictive standardized tests and limited curriculum, out of school programs provide an opportunity for youths to express and explore their marginalized identities. Out of school programs are especially important for youths at the Attic who are marginalized on the bases of gender and sexuality, and frequently multiply marginalized also on the bases of race and socioeconomic status. Over 70% of the 3.2 million queer youths in the U.S. feel unsafe at school because of their gender expression or sexual orientation, and LGBT youths are much more likely than heterosexual youths to drop out of school (Mallory et al., 2014, p. 1). Both queer youth and black youth are punished much more harshly than their straight and white peers (Blackburn, 2012, p. 9), and face higher rates of homelessness and incarceration. The Attic provides a positive out of school space not only for queer youths but also for ally youths who face similar marginalizations on the basis of race and class, but also frequently face homophobia and transphobia by virtue of standing up for their queer friends (Blackburn, 2012, p. 9) and

misogyny for supporting queer friends and demanding respect as a women (the majority of Attic

ally youth who came to programming outside of WorkReady regularly were female).

The Attic as an out of school space provides support to queer youths by creating a safe

physical space, material support, and more elusively by working towards a sense of safety. The

Attic provides a literal building for queer youths who may not have a home to go to after school

or who want a space to spend time in without the threat of physical violence public spaces can

hold. The Attic also provides hot meals, HIV and STI testing, counseling and transportation

tokens, all for free. All of this contributes to the Attic creating an atmosphere of physical and

psychological safety. The Attic works to "provide… secure and health-promoting facilities and

practices, allow… for safe and appropriate peer interactions, and discourage… unsafe health

practices and negative or confrontational social interchanges" (Eccles and Gootman, 2002, 11).

While the Attic has certain physical safety guidelines, such as the banning of weapons and drugs

on the Attic's property (youths who carry weapons for self-defense may check them with the

receptionist at the front door when they enter the building), creating a psychologically safe space

requires much more ongoing work. Safety in this sense does not mean that nothing hurtful every

occurs at the Attic, but rather, in conjunction with efficacy and mattering, youths feel

empowered to bring up when they feel uncomfortable and address unhealthy relationship

dynamics between peers. The Attic code of conduct encourages both youth and staff to work

actively to create and maintain a sense of safety for other community members. The physical

building, the social norms, and participants contribute to a safe "space as a dialogic between

place and people" (Blackburn 10).

Aside from encouraging youth development through the creation of a safe space, the

Attic and WorkReady in particular creates a new social context that encourages experimental

perfomativity and opens up new positive possible selves through the creation of positive social norms, supportive norms, opportunity for belonging and skill-building. Social contexts are influenced by broader structures of power but manifest in the everyday standards for social interactions. Positive social norms "maintain[…] expectation and requirement for socially appropriate behavior and encourage[…] desirable and accepted values and morals" (Eccles and Gootman, 2002, 11). The youth code of conduct at the Attic exists not to control and restrict the behavior of certain youths, but rather to create the type of social space where all youths can speak and be heard, without fear of judgment. Youths then bring these social norms into other space they occupy, such as a friend groups, GSAs and the classroom. The Attic also "offers stable opportunities to form relationships with peers and adults wherein social interchanges are characterized by warmth, closeness, caring, and mutual respect, and where guidance and support from adults is available, appropriate, and predictable" (Eccles and Gootman, 2002, 11). This is important because social contexts are shaped heavily by the people in those spaces, and queer youths often face hostility from peers, teachers, administrators and even family. Positive social relationships help youths understand themselves as valid human beings with positive possible selves. Attic staff and older youths serve chosen family for many, support groups teach histories and survival skills they would never learn in school, and the Attic provides a sense of being part of a community. Meeting older peers and adults who share their social identities is vital, especially for queer youths of color and trans girls, when the most common narratives are either invisibilizing or tragically violent.

The Attic provides a space for the experimental performance of different identities and the creation and attainment of positive possible selves by creating an opportunity for belonging in which youth are safe to try out new selves. It also teaches the skills youths need to make their

selves known and thrive in the broader world. The Attic "emphasizes the inclusion of all members and maintains a social environment that recognizes, appreciates, and encourages individual differences in cultural values, gender, race/ethnicity, and sexual orientation" (Eccles and Gootman, 2002, 11) in order to create opportunity for belonging. While the Attic is a center specifically for queer and ally youths, youths have a huge range of sexual and gender identities within that umbrella. Furthermore, while a majority of the youths are low-income and black, they come from a huge variety of religious, immigration, and personal backgrounds within that. The Attic encourages youth individuality, while simultaneously working not to isolate youths for their difference. Youth also learn how to respond to unsupportive peers and adults in other settings. Skill-building helps youths "learn and build physical, intellectual, psychological, emotional, and social skills that facilitate well-being in the present and prepare individuals for health and competent functioning in the future" (Eccles and Gootman, 2002, 11). Skill-building is vital because the vast majority of skills youths need to do well in the workplace and in their personal lives is not taught in schools. WorkReady helps to build the skills youths need to first find and then keep a job, and the Life Skills staff continue with this type of work outside of WorkReady. The non-violent communication framework taught in this summer's WorkReady also equipped youths with various tools for dealing with hurtful comments and disagreements both within and outside the Attic. And lastly, given the space to practice within the safety of the Attic, youths learn how to represent their complex selves performatively known in wider social contexts and to envision attaining positive possible selves.

Social Media and Third Space

Digital productions tell stories of sorts (often nonlinear and multivoiced) and leave a digital trail, fingerprint, or photograph of 'where I was then,' 'where we are now,' 'who I would like to be,'

and so on. In other words, young people's interactive uses of new technologies can serve as a model for identity processes. We propose labeling such cultural production activities *identities-in-action* as a reminder that, like cultural production, identity processes are multifaceted and in flux, incorporating old and new images. (Weber & Mitchell, 2008, p. 27).

Unlike most other types of media, social media relies almost entirely on user content creation to exist. In most social media platforms, users create profiles by posting material that interests them and portrays them in a way that will earn them validation from peers and other followers in the form of likes, positive comments, and an increase in followers. Social media falls into two broad types, those who digitally connect users to their real life acquaintances, such as facebook, and those who connect users with similar interests, such as tumblr. According to Weber and Mitchell (2008), social media is characterized by constructedness, collectivity and social construction (39), convergence (40), reflexivity and negotiation (41) and learning (42). For the purpose of this thesis, I take a third space approach to social media, in which users do not only use social media but construct social media spaces. This approach is closely related to contextual, performative and possible selves understandings of identity development.

Because youth social media usage blurs the lines between physical and digital realities, between public and private networks, between media production and consumption, it can be understood through Rowe and Leander's (2005) conception of third space. Third space challenges a cohesive, singular, knowable understanding of reality as reducible to the physical through a trialectic understanding of space "as it is *perceived* by the sense [first space], cognitively *conceived* [second space], and *lived* by participants [third space]" (Rowe & Leander, p. 320). In other words, first space is physical reality, second space is an ideal or imaginary reality, and third space is where people live and navigate between real and ideal, exploring and shaping space for their own wants and needs. In the context of social media, youths can use the

tools provided in the social media interface in order to portray their everyday lived realities in way that aligns with their ideal imagination of themselves. For example, a youth might post filtered selfies to gain followers and likes from those who appreciate their beauty and fashion or articles about politics in order to get followers who create and sign petitions and mobilize others to call governmental representatives. Not only are youths able to consciously choose how to create their online presence, they create counter spaces.

The lived reality of third space with a focus on action rather than static states maps well onto a performative understanding of identity, in which youths use third space to create their own identities through repeated performance of who they wish to be -- and who they wish to be seen as. Though social media staff often create posts around major events in the form of messages to users, social media content is produced almost entirely by users. A facebook profile is not blank before users fill in their information -- it is non-existent. boyd's (2008) description of a myspace profile, eight years later, works just as well for the variety of social media sites such as facebook, tumblr, and instagram, that have become popular in the meantime. "A Myspace profile can be seen as form of digital body where individuals must write themselves into being" (boyd, 2008, p. 129). Youths create their digital bodies and identities through repeated postings to create an emergent picture of who they are. A single post is just a post, but repeated posts create a certain type of user. Because self-representation is much easier to control online, the third space of social media also allows users to easily create new possible selves and move between current and possible selves. "By allowing youth to customize their avatars and create personal spaces filled with meaningful objects that reflect themselves, virtual worlds can support adolescents as they try on different aspects of their identity in their quest to answer this question of who they are" (Beals, 2010, p. 47). By viewing other profiles, youths are able to expand their range of possible

selves, and by posting different types of content on their profiles, youths can try out possible selves to gauge the social reactions of their peers and experiment before definitively choosing to change direction.

Third space offers not only interesting ways of portraying the self, but also the opportunity for creativity and exploration in the production of new types of spaces. *"Third space uses imagination to appropriate first space places, objects, and bodies along with second space representation of them in order to create a 'counterspace' of resistance to the dominant order"* (Rowe & Leander, 2005, p. 321). With the rise of smartphones and the prevalence of free social media platforms, social media is an accessible space for youths who may not have access to the types of community spaces that adults do. Queer youths often have access to facebook groups and other online communities, while they may not have sufficient resources or be too young to make it to queer community events in their area. While young people are often excluded from meaningful participation in real world events either due to age restrictions or lack of resources, through social media youths can create and access online spaces in which to socialize and explore. Internet memes are an excellent example of youth appropriation of mainstream media material to give it meaning against the dominant order. Internet memes take viral images or videos and recontextualize them with text or sound in order to give those materials new meaning. Likewise, fanfiction, fan videos, and fan communities create a third space, in which fans can connect and share readings of the material that resonates more strongly with them, even if those readings are not "canon" -- even if they are contrary to the diegesis of the source material.

The way that counterspace is created through appropriation and recontextualization of existing material fits well with a contextual understanding of identity. Though users can create their profiles however they want, in order to make them intelligible to others, they must draw on

pre-existing cultural frameworks. Memes often draw on popular television or film images, and certain angles and types of captions make selfies more like-able. Youths can create their own communities online, but the materials they build those communities with already exist. However, just as youth social media use is constrained by context, performative use of social media can create new contexts by shifting community norms. By exploring different ways of being and relating through social media, users create social media communities with new social norms and guidelines. The interactive communities that arise online around different possible selves also offer users glimpses into the various possible worlds that are associated with those possible selves.

2. METHODOLOGY

The Attic Youth Center creates opportunities for LGBTQ youth to develop into healthy, independent, civic-minded adults within a safe and supportive community, and promotes the acceptance of LGBTQ youth in society.

Attic Youth Center's Mission

The Attic Youth Center is currently an after school drop-in center for LGBTQ youth aged fourteen to twenty-three in the Philadelphia area. The Attic provides a range of services, from a space for queer youths to hang out in and meet each other to support groups, from to work readiness support to counseling and social services. Though the Attic is physically located in Center City, near Philadelphia's ritzier business districts, it serves primarily black, low-income youths, and works to make the center accessible to youths throughout the city by providing snacks, dinner, and tokens, for travel.

The Attic first began in 1993, as a project of two social work graduate students, one from Bryn Mawr and the other from Drexel, to provide weekly support groups for queer youths in the attic of the Voyage House, a shelter for homeless teens. At the time, no queer-specific youth services existed in Philadelphia, and they had been told, "There are no gay youth." One of the two graduate students, Carrie Jacobs continued expanding the scope of the Attic and is now the Executive Director. For the first year and a half, the Attic provided support to dozens of youth, working closely with the youths themselves in the form of the Youth Planning Committee and the Speaker Bureau[3]. Funding sources were initially difficult to find because at the time, almost all grants to queer organizations were for programming around AIDS prevention and treatment

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[3] The Speaker Bureau was originally a group of youths who provided workshops and trainings to community organizations and schools in order to advocate for queer youths. The Speaker Bureau is now the Bryson Institute, which has its own staff and youths speakers and is house in the fourth floor of the Attic.

and there was a fear that LGBTQ adults were "turning" youths queer and queer youth

programming would accelerate this process.

Over the next twenty years, the Attic slowly grew from a once weekly after school

support group in a literal attic to its present size and scope. The Attic is now housed in a four-

story building purchased in 2000 after a gift from an anonymous donor. Staff has expanded from

two volunteer graduate students to almost two dozen paid staff in a variety of roles. The first two

floors house youth spaces and life skills staff offices, which constitute a vast majority of youth

programming, the third floor houses administrators and the fourth floor houses the Bryson

Institute, therapy and social services. The Attic is open weekdays for five to six hours, beginning

with unstructured drop-in space for youths to just meet each other and eat food before going to

support groups, interview and job-readiness practice, community meetings, or arts spaces. While

the Attic is open to all queer and ally youths ages 14 to 23, a large majority of Attic youths are

low-income queer black male, gender non-conforming and transfeminine youths (Blackburn,

2012, p. 27), and there is more programming targeting younger youths. Most of the ally youths

come from similar backgrounds, though a majority of ally youths are female.

WorkReady is a program of the Philadelphia Youth Network (PYN) that pairs low-

income youths between the ages of 14 and 18 who are either in or just graduated from high

school with community organizations, and pays them so that they can experience jobs that have

directly community impact. Each year, the Attic serves as a WorkReady site, providing

education around jobs and community projects for youth to work on for five hours Mondays

through Thursdays for six weeks. In the mornings, youths learn skills necessary to find and keep

a job, such as resume-writing, interview practice, and conflict resolution, along with social

justice issues that affect the workplace, such as institutional discriminations, bias incidents and

how to navigate structures of power as low-income, largely of color queer youths. After lunch

(provided by the Attic, though youths can also go out and buy lunch themselves if they wish),

youths attend work groups, which are you united either thematically or around a single

comprehensive summer-end product. For example, the summer of 2012, youths worked to create

a guide about bullying and LGBTQ students for educators, with each work group in charge of a

different sub-topic, while this summer (2014), youths explored the theme of social media and

non-violent communication and each group produced its own final project to illustrate what they

did and learned at a summer's end showcase. While the Attic is generally open to both LGBTQ

and ally youths, because WorkReady is funded through PYN, WorkReady tends to have a more

ally and first time youths than might join the Attic during regular programming because they find

out about the Attic as a summer job opportunity rather than through friends as a social space.

However, many WorkReady newcomers, including allies, become school year regulars.

I first found out about the Attic sophomore year in the fall of 2012 through involvement

in Philadelphia's queer community, and interned there the summer of 2013 with funding through

the Lang Center's Summer Social Action Award (S2A2). As an intern, I helped design the

curriculum for and facilitated one of three sections of youths in the morning group. I also did

coverage during lunch and spent time talking to youths, especially those who were new to the

Attic. In the afternoons, I did general administrative tasks, keeping attendance and hours,

checking and inputting timesheets, liaising with PYN and helping work group facilitators when

they needed it. While I chose to work at the Attic because I also see myself as a queer youth and

wanted to learn about the experiences of my peers, my positionality as a middle class gender

non-conforming Chinese American person from California also meant that I also learned new

ways of navigating race, gender and sexuality in the context of the Attic. Having grown up in

Davis, California, a college town in the Central Valley of Northern California, I was not

accustomed to being the only Asian person in the building and had no experience answering

questions about my race and ethnicity from people who had never had an in-depth conversation

with an Asian person before. Furthermore, I had a lot of difficulty holding conversations around

anti-Asian racism because of the amount of anti-Black racial profiling from Asian shop owners --

the most extensive interactions Attic youths tended to have with Asian people. Reflecting back

on how my involvement in the Attic affected my own identity formation not only with regards to

sexuality and gender, but also race, gender presentation, immigration and socioeconomic class,

inspired me to return to the Attic this past summer for my thesis research to try and fill some of

the gaps in intersectionality in the current literature on queer youths.

From the start, I was interested in how the Attic serves as a space for identity formation

in queer and trans youths. Inspired by a project done there called TWENTY, I was interested in

how youths chose to express themselves and their identities to the world through media.

TWENTY led me to ask specifically how media education spaces at the Attic allow for

exploration of the self through media production. TWENTY was a project that celebrated the

twentieth anniversary of the Attic by producing a series of videos where youths could tell their

own stories by writing, starring in and shooting their own personal journeys at the Attic. Pieces

ranged from a music video to an illustrated story to a genderqueer Baroque dinner party.

However, after speaking to the facilitators of TWENTY about difficulties teaching filmmaking

technical expertise in such a limited amount of time without easy access to equipment for youths,

my co-facilitator, Life Skills Program Specialist Crystal, and I decided to do more media

exploration than production. In conjunction with the Attic's broader theme this summer – social

media, non-violent communication, and microaggressions – and our joint interest in speculative

fiction and social justice, we decided to focus our group on the examination of social media as a form of speculative fiction-style world building. The group, called World Building, would focus on exploring what kinds of worlds we built with our social media use and culminate in youths creating a media work that showed what kind of world they want to build and live in for the future.

World Building met from 1:00 to 4:00 every Tuesday and Thursday for six weeks, as one of six WorkReady work groups. Crystal and I were interested in the ways that speculative fiction, which covers science fiction, fantasy and superhero literature, as well as other genres that do not map onto what constitutes rational reality in the West, such as magical realist, supernatural, surrealist, and horror works, can be used to express marginalized ways of understanding and navigating the world. We drew especially on speculative fiction traditions, such as afrofuturism and cyberfeminism, which incorporate not only literature and film, but also music, technology, and fashion as ways of expressing alternate realities. World building is the process through which speculative fiction creates an alternate reality. We decided to explore social media as a form of speculative fiction style world building in order to think about how digital spaces are similar and different from physical spaces, and especially how digital spaces can be used to create better realities. The ubiquity of youth social media use, especially with the advent of smartphones, meant that social media was a good way of introducing the framework of microaggressions and also non-violent communication and other ways of responding constructively to prejudice online and in daily life. In order to explore youth social media youth and the alternate realities possible in digital spaces, we read articles, discussed and role-played microaggressive scenarios, analyzed our social media news feeds, looked at social justice social media spaces, brought in speakers such as the founder of the Afrofuturist Affair to explore

radical speculative fiction possibilities, and created videos that explored our visions for better

futures. While there was a curriculum, we wanted non-violent communication and creative usage

of social media to be incorporated into the everyday routines of youths, and so much of the group

was spent building and practicing the associated skills. Youths used the non-violent

communication conflict resolution model both in hypothetical role-plays and when actual

problems arose in the group.

I designed my study around the question of how out of school programs, especially those

that draw on the unique capacities of social media and speculative fiction, impact queer and ally

youths' identity development. I chose two methods of collecting data: participant observation and

interviews. In addition to facilitating, I was also a participant observer in the group, recording

field notes on what happened during group to gather data for this thesis. I wrote notes down

directly after rather than during group, in order to minimize disruption. Participant observation

allowed me to examine outward manifestations of identity development and participant

interviews allowed for greater insight into youths' internal thought processes and identity

development. Youth were recruited from World Building for interviews during the second to last

week of the program in order to allow minor youth enough time to get consent forms signed by

parents. However, most of the interviews occurred the last week or even before the showcase on

the last day of the program because most of the minor youths who volunteered to be interviewed

forgot to get their paperwork signed in advance. All data (both field notes and interviews) was

fully anonymized, with names and identifying details changed, in order to minimize the risk of

being outed as a study participant and thus as queer, which is especially an issue for minors who

are not fully out to their families. Furthermore, written assent or consent forms were not

collected from youths, since they would be the only direct, named link between participants and

the study, though they were given written copies to look at and I went over them verbally during

recruitment and again before the interview. The entire data collection process was approved in

advance by Swarthmore's Institutional Review Board.

While field notes were taken for each group session, participants differed over the course

of the summer. Getting consistent youth attendance and engagement was one of the difficulties

of both running facilitating the work group and recording consistent data. Of the eleven youth

from the first day, only seven were at the final showcase the last day. Of the four who did not

come, one voluntarily transferred to a different work group, one was terminated the third week of

the program for poor performance in their Monday/Wednesday work group, one got on SSI and

quit without letting anyone know, and one simply did not come to the last day of work. One

youth was transferred into our group from another for being distracted when around his friends

and another was placed in our group after they joined the program at the beginning of the third

week. In a relatively small group, spotty attendance in the fourth and fifth weeks made final

group project difficult – the group ended up producing only two rather than three "what-if

worlds."

With some youths opting out and others forgetting to get parental consent forms signed, I

ended up recording interviews with only six youths. These interviews ranged from twenty five to

fifty five minutes in length. The youths interviewed cover a wide range of identities, reflecting

the diversity of gender and sexual identities served at the Attic within the queer and trans

umbrella. Of the six interviewees, two were straight, one was gay, and three were polysexual.

Four youths identified as female, one as male, and one as genderqueer. Five of the six youths,

four black youths and one white youth, explicitly identified their race as important to them. This

group of youths was fairly representative of what identities present in World Building, although I

wish I had been able to interview more male youths from the group, especially a male ally youth. The interviews followed a loose script and covered three categories: self-identification and youths' own understanding of how their identities have changed over time; how they and their social identities are treated at school, in the mainstream media, and on social media; and why youths go to the Attic and how they felt about World Building. Because these various topics were interrelated for many of the youths, the interview did not necessarily follow the linear flow of the original planned structure, though every interview addressed all these areas. Also, after the first interview, I realized that the language of the interview protocol mapped much better onto an academic framework or my personal understanding of myself rather than youths' experiences. Consequently, I found myself often re-wording questions, asking about "parts of yourself" rather than "identities." Similarly, I often re-framed my questions using the language youths described themselves in order to allow the youths to express themselves how they saw fit, rather than trying to force them to use the framing I had originally imagined.

Despite the limitations of the study, interviews and field notes yielded an interesting and varied data set. Because of how my own adolescence was and is influenced by speculative fiction and how Crystal and I originally designed the group around speculative fiction-style world building, I noticed that I was trying to find evidence in the data that supported the importance of speculative fiction. While many of the youths were already interested in speculative fiction, which is why they chose World Building in the first place, they understood the speculative fiction materials and speakers who came to group as illustrations of empowering media usage, rather than frameworks around which to understand other parts of their lives. Realizing that my own experiences with the topics youths discuss, I decided to do a rough coding, by topic -- self-description, the Attic, and media, before extracting themes and doing a finer coding within those

topics. Because I only worked with these particular youths for a short period of time, in order to get a better sense of youth identity development, I coded their interviews first and focused on the themes they themselves described and then looked for similar data within my field notes, rather than vice versa. However, the short length of the study and the voluntary limited sample of interviews I was able to conduct meant that my data mostly only represented youths who had participated in the Attic already outside of WorkReady and were invested in the Attic as a space.

3. FINDINGS

"It's a nice place, and it all depends on what you make it." (Jas, personal interview, August 6, 2014)

Because of the open-ended nature of the interview questions, youths articulated a wide range of gender and sexual identities. Given the opportunity to name and explain any important elements of their identity, gender and sexual identity were framed as only a facet of their whole self. In fact, the prevailing self-descriptors were unique-ness and creativity. Youths recognized the ways that their identities had changed over time and were changing still. With the except of one, all youths had experienced negativity from peers either on the basis of social identities or other personality traits, but had used those experiences to strengthen their determination to succeed and their sense of self. Of the six youths interviewed, three of the four queer youths described the Attic as an important space for them to explore, develop and affirm their sexualities and gender identities, and all the youths describe the Attic more generally and World Building in particular as a space for learning more about issues of social justice and social identities. The Attic serves as a non-judgemental space that allows youths to explore their whole identities – not just their gender and sexual identities – and equips them with the skills to resolve conflicts between each other and to speak up outside the Attic. While all youths were very aware of the negative potential of social media for bullying and harassment, through the discussions and activities in World Building, they also came to see the ways that they could be agentic in building the types of communities they want online.

"I'm very different from most other people": Creativity, Fluidity and Resistance in Self-Identification

Because of the open-ended nature of the identity questions, youths were able to define themselves how they felt comfortable with language of their own choosing. In describing their gender and sexual identities with their own words, the youths were able to articulate what those terms meant to them and were able to invent new language where they felt existing frameworks were not relevant. The huge diversity of social and personal identities of the youths forms this overarching narrative of "unique-ness," in which youths use their creativity both to define and form themselves. This leads to a strong sense of self, which allows youths see their identities as cohesive, while still recognizing changes over time and fluidity within seemingly stable identities. Lastly, youths described negativity and discrimination, both explicitly with regards to social identities and more generally, which they had all witnessed and all but one had experienced, and how they became determined to succeed individually and speak up for themselves and others outside the Attic.

An important act of self-identification for youths was being able to choose their own social identity descriptors. Youths used language creatively for their own needs, including choosing multiple words for a single identity facet, inventing labels when pre-existing ones felt less relevant, and resisting the usage of social identity labels more generally. In using three terms rather than one to describe his sexuality, Jared showed how similar language for a singular identity are not synonymous but rather carry different meanings whose relevance depends on setting. Jared describes himself as "gay, queer, and same-gender loving" (personal interview, August 7, 2014). For him, gay means that he is a male who loves and dates other males, while queer shows belonging in the broader more inclusive community of people who are gender and

sexual minorities. Same-gender loving is used almost exclusively in the black community and focuses more on behavior and desire, an available identifier to all individuals who choose to love those of the same gender and act on that desire. It is an active pushback against the cultural assumptions embedded in the term gay, especially the implicit whiteness that many people of color read into the term, and shifts sexual orientation from a stable identity integral to the self to a set of desires and behaviors that could be either a central or peripheral part of one's life. Robin has invented labels for themself[4], having the preferred gender pronouns of anything or "cat pronouns." As they explain, "Cat pronouns are my preferred gender pronouns because cats can be male or female or transgender or intersex, and cats, no one cares is cats lick men or lick women, or lick transgenders" (personal interview, August 7, 2014). Cat pronouns include a variety of meows and also the word "cat" itself. For them, cat pronouns allow them to express a fluidity within and rejection of conventional gender and sexuality terms that no existing gender or sexuality term encompasses. Furthermore, it expresses a sense of freedom from social conventions and expectations -- no one cares what a cat does, so it can do what it wants. A third youth resists the notion of social identity labels more broadly. Megan explains, "I don't like to be put in a label. Like what a girl is, what a boy is. But if I have to choose, I'd rather be referred to a she" (personal interview, August 7, 2014) For her, social identity labels are restrictive because they carry with them certain specific expectations for personality and behavior, and she adopts one only reluctantly.

From the rich diversity of social identities, youths seem aware of how different they are from each other despite all falling under the umbrella of queer and ally youth, all identifying as

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[4] I use they pronouns for Robin as a reminder to the reader that they are genderqueer, since they have no preferred standard gender pronouns, accepting he, she, they, and it, and cat pronouns are difficult to use in writing due to their wide variance (the whole range of meows Kat demonstrated) and lack of standard declensions.

unique in some way. Four of the six youths were explicit about being unique or different, while the remaining two expressed that they had certain personal traits or behaviors that set them apart from others. When pushed to explain what exactly being unique or different means, the responses of youths who explicitly described themselves that way fell into two broad categories, different from everybody and different from others who share their social identities. With the exception of one youth who seemed ambivalent about certain personality traits, all the youths described their unique traits as positive, sometimes in contrast with low expectations or negative stereotypes for other who share their social identities. For example, Karen explains,

> *Karen*: I'm an energetic, bubbly person. Who's like really weird, and I don't seem like who I am.
> *Joan*: Weird in what ways?
> *Karen*: Weird as in I don't conform in everything—the way I dress, the way I talk, the way I act isn't how a normal, young black person acts….I'm not ratchet neither…. When people see me they think I'm mean and difficult and I'm gonna be a baby momma at my age. (personal interview, August 8, 2014)

Youths are aware of the negativity they face for their often multiple marginalizations and actively define themselves in opposition to these low expectations, though often framing that opposition in a way that does not challenge stereotypes themselves aside from their individual abilities to transcend them.

In asserting themselves in a difficult world, the next most common self-description is creativity. Creativity is expressed by five of the six youths, and art is seen as an effective alternative form of self-expression. For one youth, the availability of poetry groups at the Attic was one of the things that originally brought them to the space, and a few were involved in the poetry group that happened on the days of the week World Building was not. Mariah explains art as a way to express difficult thoughts: "Because sometimes when I say stuff, it'll come out right, but sometimes if I draw it, it comes out perfect" (personal interview, August 7, 2014). Poetry

served a similar function for other youths, helping them articulate personal experiences in a way that made sense to other audiences. Art serves as more than a form of personal expression but as a way of "letting my voice be heard" (Karen, personal interview, August 8, 2014) and advocating for themselves and issues that affect youths and their communities. Furthermore, creativity is more than a passive personality trait or something used only for the arts, but rather an integral part of youths' approach to the world. As Jas explains, "I make everything a process" (personal interview, August 7, 2014). Art is not a discrete object that is conjured up but rather an active process of making and doing, which youths use to channel their creativity and personality into something satisfying to themselves and expressive to others. While art is an obvious expression of creativity, creativity moreover allows youths to constantly interact with and affect their surroundings more generally.

This sense of creativity allowed youths to recognize fluidity in their processes of creating themselves. Youths articulate growth and self-acceptance, while still retaining a strong continuous sense of self, essential elements to developing confidence and becoming more willing to share themselves honestly with others. Understanding and feeling confident in their own transformations also opened the youths up to different ways of inhabiting an identity, as well as the possibilities of future growth. Jas articulates the prevailing sense across the youths that they have not necessarily become different people altogether but that self-acceptance and confidence have contributed to growth; "I don't feel like I've changed, I just feel like I've grown into like a bigger, a bigger person who started out" (personal interview, August 6, 2014). For many youths, an integral part of growth is finding a community of people with which to explore and accept marginalized social identities. For many youths the Attic was a space that allowed for the first time to talk to people who shared social identities they had suppressed or were questioning, and

those conversations "[h]elps you be one with yourself, stop telling lies to yourself" (Jas, personal interview, August 6, 2014). All the queer youths expressed the importance of self-acceptance in building confidence and presenting oneself honestly to the outside world. As Robin explains that in contrast to insecurity about her weight as a child, "I just started to feel confident in my body when I turned about 13 years old. It's my body and I have to live with it so fuck who cares" (personal interview, August 7, 2014). Youths recognized that though they were capable of changing themselves, that ultimately they had to live with their choices and lives and that being honest allowed them to meet and connect with people who would accept them for themselves. Safe spaces allow youths to affirm and solidify identities before bringing them into the broader world, which gives youths the opportunity to connect with other authentically. Self-confidence helps youths be willing and able to speak up and advocate for themselves and each other.

The exposure to different aspects of the queer community also gives youths models for possible futures and a sense of continued growth in their identities. For example, Jared explains that aside from learning about gender and sexual identities he had previously not known about, such as a pansexual and genderqueer, "And also within the gay community, there are different types of gay, and I identify with bear community. I guess I'm not there yet, I'm still a young adult" (personal interview, August 7, 2014). Having finally found a subset of the gay community that shares his body type, which isn't shown often in mainstream gay media with its focus on thin, muscular men, he can see a future for himself in his sexual identity in which he can exist and be desirably without needing to fundamentally alter his body.

While youths expressed affirmative aspects of themselves and their personal journeys, youths also discussed negativity they faced and continue to face. Five of the sixth youths had experienced negativity directed towards them, and all the youths had witnessed negativity

directed towards friends and peers. Negativity was explained primarily in two ways: reactions against people just being themselves and explicitly against certain social identities, including intersections of multiple social identities. An example of the first variety, Mariah explains that she has "been bullied for being open minded and being myself" (personal interview, August 7, 2014). These two traits meant that she was friendly to those who were targets of bullying and also honest about who she was, opening herself up for similar bullying from peers. All youths gave examples of people being discriminated against for social identities and how stereotypes shape expectations for who others believe they can be. All youths had witnessed homophobia in school, online and in their neighborhoods. Furthermore, Jas and Karen experienced biphobia[5], prejudice related to the fact that they were attracted to multiple genders, from both the straight and gay communities. As Jas explains, "people call me a whore because I like both genders and I know what I want" (personal interview, August 6, 2014). For Jas, the insults she receives are not only related to the fact that she likes multiple genders but also a reaction against the fact that she feels comfortable and confident about that fact about herself. The four women in the group recalled experiences of misogyny, especially around being talked over in group settings. For Karen, being a woman can be difficult because "people basically talk over you because you're a female. And because they feel like females are always wrong" (personal interview, August 7, 2014). Because the opinions of women are not valued in many of the spaces the youths are in, asserting themselves can also trigger negative reactions, including from other women. All four

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[5] I choose to use biphobia as the general term for prejudice against people who are sexually and/or romantically attracted to multiple genders because it is the established term and because the distinction between various polysexual identities rarely factors into biphobia, which stems primarily from prejudice against the fact an individual is attracted to more than one gender. Bisexuals are not the only people who face biphobia (for example, Lia is pansexual). Common forms of biphobia include expecting bisexuals to cheat on their partners (with a different gender), believing that bisexuality is a phase, that bisexuals are confused or in denial, or that bisexuals are "just doing it for attention," or assuming that bisexuals are inherently more sexual or available to fulfill sexual fantasies. For more information on biphobia, see San Francisco Human Rights Commission (2011), *Bisexual Invisibility: Impacts and Recommendations.*

black youths and one of the two white youths also identified race as something around which they faced or had seen someone else negativity. However, racial discrimination for youths tended to be more subtle or environmental. In contrast to the slurs and outright bullying many had experienced for their sexualities and gender, youths expressed frustration about how people often had low expectations for them because they were black and how black people were not portrayed as having agency in mainstream media and narratives. Mariah's frustration that "black people don't always get credited, or like people in black movies get lesser roles or die fast" (personal interview, August 7, 2014) echoes how Jared, Karen, and Jas all shared stories about others not believing that they would be able to succeed in school and achieve the educational and career goals they wanted.

Youths also showed an awareness of the ways that social identities interacted, in stereotypes that intertwined race, gender and sexuality. While acknowledging the media's depictions of women as damsels in distress, the three black women in the group presented stereotypes that black women in particular face. Mariah is aware of this distinction, explaining, "I do pay attention to other people's stereotypes, but the one I really pay the attention to is black women" (personal interview, August 7, 2014). In contrasts to stereotypes of passivity and victimhood that characterize depictions of white and to some degree Asian women, Karen explains that "When people see me they think I'm mean and difficult and I'm gonna be a baby momma at my age" (personal interview, August 8, 2014). Because of the negative stereotypes about black women being unfriendly and aggressive, self-advocacy on the part of the black female youths is often interpreted as them being intentionally "obnoxious and stubborn" (Mariah, personal interview, August 7, 2014). For Jared, his race, body type and gender presentation contrast to the way desirability is conventionally coded in the gay male community,

creating difficulties in his relationship. He feels that that prevailing depiction of queer men, even in media created for the queer community, gives the impression, "Basically if you're fat, feminine or a person of color, you don't matter" (personal interview, August 7, 2014). Because of this, he has experienced other men flirting with his boyfriend in front of him and people in restaurants giving him dirty looks when they see them eating together.

Despite and because of the difficulty of facing so much negativity, resistance and speaking up for others is integral in all but one of their narratives. Negativity makes many of the youths want to succeed more, and prove that their social identities are not impediments but assets to be celebrated. Furthermore, learning about power and activism gives youths a constructive way to channel frustrations and contributes to their commitment to advocating for themselves and others. In sharing their stories of discrimination and frustration with each other, youths are able to contextualize what originally are isolated negative experiences into a broader understanding of social structures of power. Jas expresses the sentiment behind a lot of youths stories: "Because when people say that I can't do shit, it makes me want to prove that I can....It just really made me wanna be more than what I am...and show people that I'm not a statistic of what I should be" (personal interview, August 6, 2014). Negativity actually contributes to her desire to prove that she can be successful both as an individual and to overcome limiting stereotypes about how those who share her social identities should be. Three of the four black youths also explicitly expressed pride in being black, connecting their current struggles with those of past generations. As Mariah puts it, "our ancestors went through so much for us to have like, access to things and knowledge ... we didn't have a hundred years ago" (personal interview, August 7, 2014). This is not just a struggle for material benefits like good grades or good jobs, but also access to history and knowledge. The articles and media explored in the group

contributed to this exploration by helping youths contextualize themselves as active participants in the production of history and knowledge. Youths see their present and potential future successes in this light, as creating opportunities for other marginalized people. Karen wants to be a horse veterinarian, but she wants more than just the job. "I wanna stand up and let my voice be heard, and let it be known that there's another black female in this occupation" (personal interview, August 8, 2014).

Identity Exploration and Building Safer Space Together

World Building group consisted of youths who had a range of experiences with the Attic, from youths who had been involved in the Attic and WorkReady for years already and those for whom this summer was their first time there. For all but one youth interviewed, the Attic provides a space with peers and adults that is an alternative from the negative environments they faced in past or current schools. Youths see the Attic as a place where they can be accepted and supported in all the complexity of their social and individual identities, and where exploration is possible. And while youths are appreciative of all the services provided by adult staff, they also see the Attic as a place where they are active participants in creating and shaping the space how they want. As a part of this active collaborative building process, youths see themselves as able to shape the space of the Attic to fit their needs and advocacy both in and outside the space as the role of all youths, queer and straight alike. Lastly, youths saw World Building as expanding their abilities to create supportive spaces in the Attic and at school, by covering a broader spectrum of identities and topics, through the exploration of mainstream and social media.

With the exception of one, all the youths had experienced discrimination and marginalization at school, from both peers and adults, making the initial draw of the Attic its

contrast from these spaces. Outside of discrimination youths faced for queer, youths also experienced bullying for being women, for being black, for speaking up, for being gender-non-conforming, for body type, and for mental illness. And while negativity from peers was the most common, youths also expressed that teachers and other adults at the school had for the most part either not stood up for them or actively added to discrimination. For example, in group on day, while discussing microaggressions, Jas had told a story about a geometry teacher who upon finding out she was bisexual refused to directly hand her anything, forcing other students to pass her handouts, tests and other materials. Eventually she transferred into a different class because of the teacher's hostile behavior. And some of the difficulty youth have interacting with teachers stems from the fact that they are youths. As Megan believes, "School is the same as the media really.... I think teachers especially! Because they have all these stereotypes for teens and youth, and how they're ignorant and cause trouble" (personal interview, August 7, 2014)/ Thus on top of figuring out their social and individual identities, youths have to defend themselves as youths.

The Attic thus serves as a safer alternative space, a second home where personal exploration is accepted and encouraged. Jas's friend who introduced her to the Attic described to her as a place where "they're all gay, and they love each other, and they're really supportive" (personal interview, August 6, 2014). While the Attic, like any space, does have conflicts between youths and between staff and youths, the fact that multiple youths described it as a "home" (Mariah, personal interview, August 7, 2014; Karen, personal interview, August 8, 2014) or "second family" (Jared, personal interview, August 7, 2014) indicate that despite those conflicts, youths feel overall that the space is one where they are valued for their whole selves. Though explicitly a drop-in center for LGBT youths and their allies, youths expressed that they felt like parts of their identities outside of their gender and sexual orientation were also valued.

For Jared, this has manifested in the opportunity to connect with those who not only share his gender and sexual identities, but also those who share his class and race backgrounds.

> I came to the Attic because it's a place I went to be myself and be around other people like me....a lot of people who come to the Attic are predominantly people of color from inner city backgrounds..., people I've really wanted to reach out with. (personal interview, August 7, 2014)

For Jared and other youths, coming to a queer space where racial and class backgrounds are accepted as integral to their selves and their queerness is vital. Because of the supportive environment, youths are comfortable expressing themselves fully and exploring parts of themselves they feel unsure about. Both Jared and Megan feel like the Attic is a space where they can express their politics and activism freely, which involves exploring a whole variety of subjects beyond gender and sexuality. For Jared, politics are not simply a topic of conversation or an activity, but rather a party of how he sees himself. He explains, "I'm a very political person, and I like that here, I can express my views. This is part of my identity, this is part of me" (personal interview, August 7, 2014).

The non-judgmental space of the Attic, where youths are able to express their full selves, also allows for a high degree of experimentation. The high degree of diversity within the queer community of the Attic gives youths new models of self-expression, and youths do not need be certain about their identities for them to be respected, which allows youths to try on identities and experience their social and interactive components before deciding if it resonates with them. For example Karen was questioning her gender when she first came to the Attic and upon the encouragement of a trans friend who was telling her "how transgender is, and what the downfalls of it is, and if you're not really into this life, then try it out" (personal communication, August 8, 2014) she tried it out. She had given her preferred gender pronoun as *he* in a series of groups and

after hearing people describe her in that way, she decided that she was not trans and went back to using she pronouns.

While adults provide services and facilitate groups and disputes, the Attic is also a peer space, where youths feel responsible to keeping the space safe and learn how to resolve peer conflicts. While in groups, there is curriculum planned by adult facilitators, youths appreciate the learning that happens in conversations between peers. As Jas explains, "At another place I would just [be] doing something that really wasn't productive. I feel like I can have intellectual conversations with my peers and stuff" (personal communication, August 6, 2014). Youths value what other youths bring into the space of the Attic, wanting to learn and grow together. Youths see it their responsibility to keeping the space safe for each other -- in fact, one of the only regrets Karen had about World Building this summer, was that we did not spend more time talking about Jared and I did not like certain common slurs because she felt like understanding that better would make her a better ally and advocate for other youths in the space (personal interview, August 8, 2014). The non-violent communication we covered directly equipped youths with skills for conflict resolution. All but one of the youths I interviewed highlighted it as one of their favorite parts of the summer. The fact that we practiced using the model in a group setting, when a conflict erupted around whether or not crying was an appropriate response to bullying, helped youths see which parts of the model worked and which did not. We culminated that discussion by writing up community requests addressing the feelings and needs of each group participant and collectively signed the new guidelines. While feelings were hurt and frustrations abounded during the original argument, non-violent communication provided a way solution where "nobody felt like they was getting pushed down" (Mariah, personal interview, August 7, 2014).

The feeling of peer responsibility extended to sense of solidarity rather than charitable

allyship for the youths at the Attic. Ally youths are not mere helpers in the space, but rather full

participants. Likewise, speaking up and speaking out against injustice is not the sole

responsibility of ally youths, but queer youths as well. While straight youths first came to the

Attic to find out how to support queer youths, they became full participants in the space and

along with queer youths, commit to work to dismantle oppressive power structures more

generally. Karen recounts an argument that happened in morning group when three straight male

youths abstained from participating in an activity because they felt that it did not apply to them,

as straight youths (personal interview, August 8, 2014). Karen and other queer youths grew upset

because for them, mere tolerance was insufficient -- being an ally the Attic meant full

participation in co-creating the space. Just as full participation was expected for ally youths, the

actions of allyship, such as interrupting bullying, speaking up, and educating peers, were also

expected for queer youths. All youths, with the exception of one, told me during their interviews

that they want to make their voices heard. The youths have various concrete strategies for

making their voices heard, from performing poetry to starting a GSA to simply talking to friends.

The Attic serves as a safe space for youths to learn about allyship and get constructive feedback

about their actions. As Jas puts it, "Church people come here too, so I gotta give them the floor

to ask questions" (personal interview, August 6, 2014). Questions are encouraged and youths see

them as a genuine attempt to expand learning and combat ignorance. And youths recount their

own past hurtful actions in forgiveness when allies are unwittingly oppressive.

Participants saw World Building as serving as a similar type of space as the Attic in

general, appreciating the diversity within the group and learning about broader social issues than

the Attic normally covers. In World Building, youths learned about broader political structures

and how queerness fits within them and worked on their advocacy through practicing skills and

self-examination. While youths regularly discuss queer and trans political issues at the Attic, as

Jas explains, "we usually talk about LGBTQIA problems, but not problems in general....we got

perspectives of people who weren't just LGBTQIA, from heterosexual people, from white

people, and people who were perceived as white but were actually a different nationality"

(personal interview, August 6, 2014). By discussing other social identities and hearing stories

about identities youths were not as familiar with, they learned to examine the ways that different

social identities are related to each other. Learning about how their various identities were

related encouraged youths' self-reflexivity and made them more aware of their own positionality

in their advocacy. Because of the broader topics covered in World Building, youths built an

understanding of allyship, where good allyship meant not just addressing homophobia and

transphobia, but also misogyny, racism, and other oppressions. As Megan explains, talking about

race made her aware of her own white privilege and encouraged her to commit to combating

racism.

> Even though people don't think that they have privilege, I realized that I do because I'm
> white, so when I go out, I don't have to worry about getting harassed or racism from
> cops. I used to think that racism was something from back in the day, but now I get that
> it's something that still happens, to people I know. (personal interview, August 7, 2014)

The topics covered in World Building not only encouraged youths to speak up, it helped them

become aware of the ways that they were upholding oppression. After the group, Karen

explained to me that she became more aware of how "calling people sluts or hos because of the

wrong reasons" was hurtful and upholding misogyny (personal interview, August 8, 2014).

Similarly, Jared realized that he had been holding prejudices about other working class black

youths. "I'm as bad a white person whos' judging them....These people really care. They're allies

that really care" (personal interview, August 7, 2014). In this case, building community with

straight allies around queer issues lead to an increased sense of racial solidarity and commitment to racial justice.

Conflicts and Agency on Social Media

Every single youth recounted stories of negativity faced on social media. In contrast with the usual discussion of social media as a powerful space for youths to create their own reality, five youths saw negativity on social media as an extension of negative stereotypes in mainstream media and bullying in school. The remaining youth actually saw the mainstream media positively, with social media being a site where people faced significantly more negativity. Robin describes the negativity they witness, "Like homophobia, and body shaming and gender shaming, that's what I see on social media, like not accepting people for who they are" (personal interview, August 7, 2014). Marginalized social identities offer opportunities for increased victimization, though social media seems generally to be a very negative place. Aside from negative messages around marginalized identities, social media also perpetuates hierarchies within social identities and what types of marginalization are acceptable. As Jared explains, both mainstream and social media give the impression that "if you're fat, feminine or a person of color, you don't matter.... apparently gay men are just effeminate and gym happy white men" (personal interview, August 7, 2014). And prejudiced behavior on social media comes not only from the privileged -- half the youths explicitly described examples of queer kids being negative towards each other. Karen has "seen gay people bash each other" (personal interview, August 8, 2014).

While youths describe negativity on social media in the same terms as bullying in school, they also recognize how medium specificity enables those behaviors in different ways online.

Traits that in other situations can allow exploratory and communal online participation, allow more negativity that individuals may be willing to exercise in person. These are anonymity, the ability to try on different identities, and group consensus. Because many social media platforms have users sign up with usernames and users can sign up for multiple accounts, users are practically anonymous. Mariah explains why she believes that digital anonymity increases negative behaviors. "I think that because some people don't got the balls to say the kinds of stuff they tryin' to say, so they do it online because they think nobody's gonna find out" (personal interview, August 7, 2014). While marginalized individuals might take advantage of anonymity to explore identities in a setting with a lower chance of repercussions, there are also fewer repercussions for those who choose to harass or bully online. Likewise, the fact that many social media users "switch their personality depending on who they around" (Jas, personal interview, August 6, 2014) could allow users to try on identities to explore their interactive, social elements. However, in these cases, coupled with anonymity, youths are able to create specific profiles with which to engage in negative behavior, while still being able to maintain social ties with friends and families on a separate account. Lastly, the types of mass interaction that enable the crowd sourcing of funds and knowledge also means that youths gain support for negative behavior online that at school, someone may reprimand them for. The mass anonymity and ability to slip between identities lead to a situation that to Jas is "worse on social media, because you get a lot of people who agree" (personal interview, August 6, 2014).

However, despite their stated misgivings about social media, youths also identified ways that particular traits of social media allow for unique ways of responding to negativity and creating a desirable social media environment. All the youths spoke about how helpful the "Virtual Village" activity and subsequent discussions were. For the activity, youths sorted their

top 100 friends or followers into various roles, such as warrior, wizard, drum circle, and so on, in order to re-conceptualize their social media platform as a virtual village and examine who populated their village. We then discussed whether or not these were the people youths wanted to be interacting with, and what they could do about it, if they were not. In this discussion, youths identified some ways that they could respond to negativity online -- leaving the space, deleting negative comments, and blocking negative users. While leaving a room when someone says something to displease you may seem rude, simply navigating away to a different page is easy. It is also easy to delete negative content, especially if it shows up on your profile. And the most effective method is to control who is allowed to post on your profile by blocking negative people. As Jas recounts her thought process during the Virtual Village activity: "I was like 'why am I following all these things and people I don't wanna see?'... And I blocked a lot of people too" (personal interview, August 6, 2014). Aside from eliminating the voices and content that users did not want to see, youths also discussed the ways social media allowed engagement with other users who share similar interests, who they might not have ever met or kept in touch with offline. Karen chooses to surround herself with "the people from high school that I want, or from the people who follow my music, my sports, stuff like that" (personal interview, August 8, 2014). For Karen, social media allows her to stay in contact with peers who share her interests, while eliminating negative influences from middles school from her newsfeed. Jared is an avid doll collector and while he chooses to populate his feed with other doll collectors, who he would not have had the opportunity to meet in person, he also has needs to balance doll collecting with politics, choosing from the strategies discussed to deal with when other doll collectors post prejudiced political opinions.

In addition to shaping social media space through the regulation of how other users engage with one's own page, youths also described the power of creating and sharing unique one's own content. Youths who attended group during the creation of the What If World projects really appreciated that process. One day, the journal prompt was *If you are not willing to ask "what if," you will accept "what is."* Youths imagined what the world would looks like if certain social issues, such as educational inequality, racial profiling, and transphobic violence, did not exist. Based off of these imagined futures, youths worked in groups to designed videos to illustrate their what if worlds. The youths who participated in that part of the group found the ability to illustrate that imagined reality in a way that was accessible to others to be extremely powerful. Likewise, one session, Rasheedah Phillips, the founder of the Afrofuturist Affair, gave a presentation on race and science fiction, and all the youths who were present that day found her possible futures to be extremely compelling. As Jas explains, "I liked the fact that it was people doing their own view of the future, and some of them was plausible, like you could see it happening. And it was eye opening to see the world in a different viewpoint" (personal interview, August 6, 2014). Alongside publishing fiction, screening films and holding other community events, the Afrofuturist Affair uses social media to create an online communal space that serves as a portal into an what imaginative future designed by black people might look like. Youths also spoke about the strength of two hashtags used in morning group, *let's talk about the shade* and *WWGJD* (*What would gay Jesus do?*). The first reframed microaggressions as an example of "shade," which allowed youths to discuss how microaggressions could still be hurtful despite their seemingly neutral surface content. The second built off the common Christian adage "What would Jesus do?" and challenges youths to imagine a Christianity that was inclusive of

queer people and explore how existing religious, moral, and political frameworks can be

rearticulated in order to express seemingly excluded perspectives.

4. CONCLUSION

This thesis argues that the Attic is a unique context for identity exploration and development for queer and ally youths because of the everyday practices of peer interactivity and youths shaping their own space, and that the transference of skills from the Attic to social media can make social media a safer, more libratory space. The identity narratives youths tell strongly challenge the existing literature on queer and ally youth identity development, especially notions of biological essentialism in gender and sexual identity development and a charity model of allyship. They also cover a wider range of social identities and explore under-represented identities within the queer youths community -- those of polysexuals, gender non-conforming individuals, and youth of color. An understanding of the Attic as a supportive context for development builds on contextual and performative notions of self and space; and youth identity experimentation and fluidity demonstrates how possible selves are attained. While adult facilitators play an important role in teaching skills and offering support to youths, what makes the Attic an effective space for youth development are the intensity of youth peer interaction and working with peers to shape the Attic into the type of space youths want. The creation and perpetuation of norms of peer respect, valuation, and responsibility allow youths to work to transform spaces outside of the Attic, including social media. While youths initially understood social media as a negative extension of discrimination faced in school, discussions and activities allowed them to explore how skills learned in World Building could be used to create positive online spaces. While the lack of interviews with youths who were not invested in the Attic means that there are limitations to understanding why the Attic is a powerful space for some youths and not others, this thesis also opens up many interesting areas of research in queer and ally youth identity development.

Identity in Action: Moving Beyond the Development Narrative

The findings of this thesis confirm that large gaps exist in the existing queer youth

development literature by challenging its biological determinism and by exploring identities that

are under- or unrepresented in the current literature. Contrary to Savin-Williams's (2005)

assertion that the proliferation of queer identity terms indicates that sexual orientation is no

longer a relevant social identity because youths no longer experience marginalization for being

queer (p. 1), youths described both experiences of marginalization and commitment to their

various self-identifiers. The differences between bisexual and pansexual; gay, same-gender

loving, and queer; and genderqueer and transgender indicate more than different terms for the

same experiences, but rather how youths navigate and invent themselves in dialogue with

existing identity language. These self-identifications, as well as descriptions of personal

experiences, argue against biologically essentialist notions of gender and sexuality. For example,

countering the "boy trapped in a girl's body" notion of transmale experience, Robin explains that

even after transition,

> I'll be a feminine male because I love being a girl, but I always felt like I was a boy.
> That's why I'm a genderqueer because I don't care if you call me male of female or it or
> they...I would get genital reconstruction surgery, but I don't think I would ever get chest
> removal. They became my best friends. (personal interview, August 7, 2014)

While Robin's story shows that they felt like the "wrong" gender from a young age, they also

appreciate their body in its current state, love certain "opposite" gender parts of themselves, and

feel comfortable but fluid in their current identity. Both Robin and another youth who was in the

group but declined to be interviewed expressed non-binary gender identities, an area in which the

current literature is sorely lacking. The percentage of youths in World Building and at the Attic

who have polysexual sexual identities also indicates that the existing literature's focus on

homosexuality and homosexual behavior in youths ignores a large section, if not a majority, of queer youth.

The findings of this thesis, however, do build heavily off the existing literature on identity in context. The Attic is a specific context built by youths and adult staff with unique norms within that space. Youth learned skills that allowed them to sustain the Attic as the context that it is and to change outside contexts into better spaces for development. Youths described the Attic as a vital part of their self-acceptance, exploratory identities, and commitment to speaking up. The non-judgmental atmosphere of the Attic and social norms that make youths aware that they are valuable contributors to the space create the type of context where creativity, fluidity, and holistic identity development are valued. The Attic is a distinctly different setting for development than school, or home, where youths often feel uncomfortable expressing their whole selves or like they were bound by rules over which they had no input. While distinct, however, the Attic is not a completely separate context, in the sense that youth bring their norms from other spaces into the Attic. On one hand, the fact that the Attic allows youths to explore their other identities makes the Attic an intersectional space for the exploration of race, class, and other identities as integral parts of the self and a recognition of the ways they interacted with gender and sexual identities. Jared is particularly grateful for a space to connect not only with other queer youths, but young black, lower-income, queer men. Likewise, Karen, Mariah, and Jas all expressed an awareness of the marginalizations they face on the basis of racialized gender assumptions, and Megan increased awareness of her privilege as a white woman. However, youth also bring negative outside social norms into the space. For example, Karen recounted a story about feeling frustrated that certain ally youths were not participating

because they did not feel that a discussion on queerness applied to them, since they were straight, despite the Attic's attempts to create a context in which all youths built a space together.

A performative approach to identity development is closely related to how the Attic becomes a positive context for development, as well as to the types of identity exploration that occur at the Attic. The Attic becomes a safe space for identity exploration through the repetition of certain practices, until they performatively become norms. Non-violent communication cannot just be taught in a lecture once, it must be practiced so that it shifts how youths interact with each other and resolve interpersonal conflicts. Giving youths the space to explore their gender identities requires the establishment of preferred gender pronouns as a norm in the space and a shared understanding that gender cannot be assumed by simply looking at an individual. Preferred gender pronouns becomes a question everyone in the Attic learns to ask because they are asked collectively at the beginning of every single group session and also because youth are able to articulate to their peers the reasoning and importance of asking for preferred gender pronouns. Likewise, allyship requires active solidarity rather than passive acceptance, and becoming an ally occurs through consistently speaking up and supporting peers, rather than through self-proclamation. Allies are thus performatively a part of creating the Attic as a space, as much as queer youths are. The performative practice of creating safe space is also what allows youths to try and create similar contexts as the Attic in their friend groups, in GSA's and at school, through the establishment of similar norms in those spaces.

The identity development and exploration occurs through the creation of possible selves and the performative attainment of those selves. Because identity is performative, meaning that it is taken on in its repeated practice, youths are able to try on new identities by performing the role of that identity -- such as Karen trying out being a boy -- and if that role feels comfortable, then a

youth may continue with the practice of that role until it becomes part of their self. However, if they do not feel like a certain identity resonates with them, a youth can simply stop performing that role. Possible selves remain open and are taken on through their enactment. Futurity is not fixed for youth at the Attic -- youth do not see themselves as transitioning into a static adult identity, but rather see the potential for growth and fluidity. Jared and Robin both express that there are identities that they may fall into when they get older -- bear and male, respectively -- that they are not yet and may not ever be. These future selves are possible or probable, rather than definite. Likewise, youth's academic and career goals in the face of discrimination, hardship, and invisibilization, show that youth see certain career paths as open possible selves and that they believe their attainment of those goals will open up those pathways as possible selves for others who share their social identities.

Identity Development and the Creation of Space

The effectiveness of the Attic as a context for development goes beyond supplementing the skills youths need to succeed at school or work, but relies rather on teaching youths the skills needed to build and shape the Attic into the type of space they feel comfortable exploring in, and to expanding those skillsets beyond the Attic. More than a building with rules, the active ongoing practices of the youths, facilitated by adults through discussion, programming and teaching skills, creates the safe space of the Attic. Because it is the practices within the space of the Attic that make it safe, a lack of facilitated space online explains why so many youth experience social media as confrontational and negative. Skills for creating interactive and accepting spaces are more easily learned and honed at the Attic, where adult facilitation and longer-term investment work to shape norms and practices. These skills can later be translated to social media spaces,

turning them into similarly exploratory contexts. The Attic is and social media has the potential to be a unique space for identity development in queer and ally youth because the centrality of peer interactivity and the development of skills to build together the kind of space where the exploration of possible selves and worlds is possible.

The Attic goes beyond allowing the youths to express parts of themselves that are ignored or suppressed at school; it encourages youths to build their own unique context for exploration and peer co-building. Support for "efficacy and mattering" (Eccles and Gootman, 2002, 11) – giving youth a sense that they can make decisions and that their decisions matter – occurs through the transmission and practice of certain types of skills and community norms, such as asking preferred gender pronouns, youth rather than adult explanations of community guidelines, and non-violent communication. Bringing together their outside identities and future possible selves, youth, along with adult facilitators, are able to create a third space in which to explore and create new potential selves. While youth at the Attic, and especially at WorkReady, do learn certain work-specific skills, such as resume building, the Attic is a different type of space from school because it focuses on allowing youths to develop their identities rather than the attainment of specific curricular standards. The skills youths learn and practice at the Attic allow them then to work to create similar safe spaces outside of that context.

While the support of staff if important, the value of the Attic for most youths is the high level of peer interactivity and the ability to actively build rather than passively be in space with those peers. While adults do facilitate the space of the Attic, youth expressed that they highly value the peer-to-peer interactions that occur at the Attic. For Jas, learning came from intellectual conversations with peers, and Karen explained that youths regularly ask each other questions because they are interested learning more about each other's identities. For all the youths who

described the Attic as a second home type of space, peer love and respect was vital to that atmosphere. Youth, queer and ally, also actively participated in the creation of the Attic as a space. More experienced youths explain why community guidelines exist to newer youths, and ally youths are full participants in programming and discussions. Four of the six youths interviewed appreciated that we learned about and practiced non-violent communication in World Building because it equipped them with additional tools to resolving conflict within the space. The fact that youths all variously recounted the story of the conflict around whether crying was allowed in the face of hardship indicates that the Attic is not a conflict-free space, but rather that the ability to resolve those conflicts in a way that respects the different parties is what makes it safe. Furthermore, conflict resolution and space building were concrete skills youths understood were applicable to spaces outside of the Attic, in transforming school and home contexts into safer spaces. While discussions about a broad spectrum of social identities and oppressions helped youths develop their critical thinking skills around social injustices, positive conflict resolution and space building allowed youths to work past problems to imagine better alternatives and to feel like they were equipped to work towards making those imagined worlds a reality.

The positive findings about the Attic as a context for identity exploration and development does however have limitations because of the research methods used. Voluntary interviews meant that only youths who were interested in talking about the Attic signed up. Because peer interaction and co-building require a high level of commitment, youths who were committed to the Attic were more likely both to view the Attic positively and to want to speak about it. Though it was difficult to learn why some youths were not as invested in the Attic because they did not want to be interviewed and often also interacted less with the other youths,

a significant number of youths were obviously not as invested in the Attic, if at all. Of the youths who were in World Building, one was terminated for repeated refusal to participate in another group they were a part of, another was transferred into the group for causing trouble with two other friends in a different group, and a third left the program without telling anyone after getting on SSI and no longer needing the income from WorkReady. There seemed especially to be trouble with straight male youths and participation in the Attic. This study was unable to explore whether certain groups of people were more invested in the Attic, and why that might be. Furthermore, WorkReady is relatively structured, with the same group of youths every day, who are similar ages. Youths participating more in the Attic's drop-in programming cover a much wider range of ages and backgrounds and could challenge the peer-element of interactivity and co-building. Do older youths feel the same commitment to their peers and to the space?

The findings on social media, while not alarmist in the way that "stranger danger" framings of youth online are, demonstrated that social media did not inherently serve as a positive context for exploration and development. Qualities that are often given credit for making social media welcoming and exploratory -- anonymity, the ability to change identities, and group behavior -- in this case were described as allowing discriminatory behavior from peers. What makes the Attic a successful space for identity development is the normalization of certain behaviors and practices that create a sense of safety and mattering for participants, and youths actually saw social media more positively after exploring the ways those types of skills can be used to change the context of social media. The Attic actually served as a space for youths to study their own usage of social media and come up with alternative visions for how they wanted it to function. Thus the Attic was a space for social media exploration, rather than social being a space for identity exploration. Youths were able to bring up challenges they had faced online in

World Building and work with facilitators to strategize ways of minimizing negativity and finally building the types of spaces they wanted to inhabit.

The Attic offered possible creative, alternative uses of social media that youths were able to practice during WorkReady and maybe over time will have created new digital norms. By examining and consciously choosing what types of people they interact with online, youths are able to create new contexts for peer participation and space building. The hashtags created in morning group and used by the youths throughout the program -- *let's talk about the shade* and *WWGJD* -- gave youths examples of how existing social media phenomena could be appropriated to talk about issues that were relevant to them. Non-violent communication gives youths new ways of resolving conflicts online, rather than simply blocking or reporting negative posts and individuals. Just at the Attic brings together youths outside identities and internal space norms, the activities and discussions in World Building contributed to how youths understood social media as a context and gave youths new ways of engaging with others and shaping that space. Lastly, social media allows the opportunity to extend the space created by the Attic beyond the physical building, which allows youths to continuing interacting and building with each other when they are unable to make it to the the Attic due to time or travel constraints. And perhaps in the future, Attic youths will be using social media to create all sorts of new worlds online and making them a reality.

Future Possibilities for Research

The limitations and findings of this thesis highlighted certain gaps in the existing literature, opening possible directions for future research. Many of the limitations of this study had to do with the fact that it was only six weeks in length, which meant that youth changes over

time were mostly self-reported rather than observed and that there was little time to actually engage with the practices of social media. Many of the youths had attended the Attic for months or years and I could access information of that long-term development through youth testimony. While youth self-description is extremely important, because interviews are voluntary, a longer-term study would be useful to better understand why some youths become invested in the Attic as a space and others do not. A longer integrated social media program could also give insight into how transferable the peer interactivity and space-building skills from the Attic are to social media, and what unique types of spaces can be created online with those skills.

The current literature on queer youths focuses on a relatively narrow subset of that community, and youth interview responses revealed new directions for increased research. These include research on intracommunity conflict, sexual identity formation in polysexual youths, gender identity formation in gender non-conforming youths, and self-naming. Two of the three polysexual youths described instances of facing biphobia from both gay and straight people, including partners. The diversity of gender and sexual identities within the queer umbrella allows hierarchies and prejudices to arise even within that marginalized identity, and exploring the intricacies of intracommunity dynamics would give increased insight as to how different parts of the queer community experience that community. Parts of the queer community that are especially under-researched and invisibilized both within the academy and often within queer communities themselves, are polysexual and gender non-conforming identities. Of non-heterosexual adults, polysexuals are a plurality, and in adolescents, they are a majority. The types of negative comments polysexual youths faced from both straight and gay peers indicate that biphobia is different from homophobia, and that polysexual experiences of queerness are distinct from gay experiences. And even within the polysexual identity, the strong insistence of one

youth on "bisexual" and the other on "pansexual" shows that there is diversity within that community. While Savin-Williams (2005) explains the proliferation of gender and sexual identity terms as an indication that those identities are no longer politicized, meaning that youths no longer face marginalization on those bases, the necessity of spaces like the Attic and the stories of youths contradict that analysis. While some discourse analysis has been done on queer identity language, more research into the lived experiences of those who choose different terms will give insight as to whether there are macro-level trends about who chooses what terms. Do factors like race, class, and gender identity factor into how people understand their sexual identity? Are terms different used in different communities actually synonymous? More research into questioning as an identity, rather than a transitional stage into a queer identity, would also give insight into when youths try on identities and they do not end up working.

Another broad area for further research would be youth peer allyship and identity development in ally youths. The current literature on youth and allyship focuses on adults being allies to youths or on allyship "down the privilege gradient" -- allyship as a charitable act for helping those who have more marginalized social identities. However, from the experiences described by the youths I interviewed, many straight ally youths experiences marginalization in school settings on the bases of race, gender, association with queerness, and other factors, meaning that their allyship was not simply leveraging their greater privilege. More research would be useful to broaden an understanding of how allyship functions in the lived experiences of youths and how it affects their development. How does being an ally effect the identity development of straight youths? Given the fact that ally youths regularly attend programming at the Attic, how does allyship function in a predominantly queer setting, rather than a predominantly straight one, like school? How does allyship function when certain parts of a

community face distinct discrimination such as biphobia and transphobia, often from other members of their community? Do shared experiences of marginalization make youths more like to engage in ally behavior in other areas? What are ways that marginalized youths stand up for themselves and for each other?

APPENDIX

Interview Protocol for WorkGroup Participants

I.   Identity

    A. How do you identify currently?

        1. Do you have preferred gender pronouns? If so, what are they?

        2. How do you describe your gender?

        3. Your sexuality?

        4. Are there any other identities that are important to you?

    B. Have these identities changed over time?

        1. In what ways?

        2. What has contributed to these changes?

II.   Media

    A. What kinds of messages do you in mainstream media (tv, movies, books, etc.) about people who share your identities?

    B. What kinds of messages do you see/hear in school about people who share your identities? Is it the same as the media? Different? How?

    C. What about in social media/online? Is it the same as the media or school? Different? How?

III. The Attic and WorkReady

    A. Why do you come to the Attic?

        1. For how long have you been coming to the Attic?

        2. How has participation in the Attic affected the way you see yourself/identify?

B. Why did you start doing WorkReady?

1. What stands out for you about the speculative media group you were a part of for WorkReady this summer?

2. Did you learn anything that surprised/stood out to you?

3. Has participation in this summer speculative media project contributed to the ways in which you identify? How?

4. How have topics explored during the program affected how you see yourself or how you fit into the world?

5. What about the program worked well and why? What did not work?

6. Is there anything else you'd like to add about WorkReady?

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