Holding Tensions
Earlier in the year, when asked to write a poem describing her “homeland,” eleventh grader Naomi wrote:

My homeland is . . .
wild and corrupt
gangs and drug dealers running this sh***.

My homeland is . . .
full of beauty and wisdom
wild flowers and old tales from long ago.

My homeland is . . .
big and confusing
Money problems from GM to our homes.

Naomi describes how her hometown Detroit can be seen both as broken and a space of beauty; a place of community and history even as it is one of poverty and violence. The multiplicity of meanings attached to her local urban context is not unlike the increasingly multiethnic and multilingual society that she shares with her adolescent peers. Traversing ever-changing linguistic and cultural boundaries, young people today call upon a rich and dynamic set of social and cultural practices while constructing meaning using a variety of modes: linguistic and visual, audio, spatial, gestural, and multimodal (see New London Group). That said, the mosaic of literacy exchanges and events (Barton and Hamilton 9; Heath 74) that emerge, while offering utility and purpose in their everyday lives, tend to be seen as a disruption to the monolithic definitions of literacy promoted in schools, especially in an environment of high-stakes testing and increased “teacher accountability” measures.

Further, young people of color in particular rarely encounter practices and pedagogy inside classrooms that draw on and sustain the competence of their communities (Paris 93). Rather, they are asked to exchange their notions of literacy and culture for dominant ones that eradicate both what they bring with them into the classroom and the context of their “homelands,” deemed deficient if they do not perform as expected. Moreover, the large majority of their classrooms do not embody the expanding definition of literacies in our current context (Garcia 96), failing to reflect the changing nature of literacy in our technological society. As a result, students are held accountable for success in classrooms that are vastly different from what their futures will most likely demand of them, and they are well aware of this disconnect.

Me and the D
Partnered together as a teacher-artist pair in the inaugural year of Detroit Future Schools (DFS), an in-school, arts education program that weaves digital media, critical literacy (Freire; Shor), and project-based learning into the classroom curriculum, we wondered how we might attempt to address the above mentioned tensions through reimagining literacy pedagogy and, in turn, asking students to reimagine the relationships they had with their neighborhoods. After several conversations, we began developing the curriculum we outline here (see Table 1) called “Me and the D” (D for Detroit), hoping to guide our 150 eleventh-grade English students in a large Title I public high school through
a series of activities and pedagogical practices that were designed to create a more humanizing and democratic educational space. This yearlong initiative centered digital media, critical (Duncan-Andrade and Morrell; Morrell, Garcia, and Lopez) and culturally relevant (Howard; Ladson-Billings) pedagogical frameworks, and an emphasis on collaboration to push students to not only consider how they might transform themselves and their neighborhoods but also articulate and reimagine their literacy identities alongside these visions.

We knew it was important to encourage students to use words in ways that allowed them to express love for themselves and the many places they came from.

We saw these acts as inextricably linked; that is, English classrooms aiming to facilitate civic engagement and a sense of collective agency must be intentional about fostering “powerful literacies” (Gee 6) that provide opportunities for youth to construct both vision and critique of themselves and the larger structures that surround them. Among these structures are language ideologies that both shape and are shaped by the cultural, social, and economic contexts that young people navigate each day. Moreover, we knew it was important to encourage students to use words in ways that allowed them to express love for themselves and the many places they came from, embracing more pluralistic views of literacy and language education. Finally, we understood that we could no longer continue to ignore how digital media is shifting the environment of our ELA classrooms.

“Multiliteracies” and “New Media Literacies” researchers (New London Group) have accounted for substantial ways that new communications media are transforming how we use language, making a strong case for why teachers must include projects that allow students to use a variety of modes to construct meaning.

With these understandings in mind, we devised thematic units (see Table 1) that connected video, graphic design, and audio projects with eleventh-grade English coursework and participatory pedagogical practices such as student-led facilitation, transcription analysis of classroom dialogue, and sociological investigations of community. Additionally, we created three essential questions that facilitated ongoing reflection throughout the year:

- What is the relationship between language and power, and how does that manifest itself in my life?
- What role does education play in the health of a community?
- How can I use my literacy practices to rewrite my world?

This model of praxis (Freire 33) paired action-oriented themes—discover, create, resist, and transform—with reflective questions central to students’ experience, generating a dialogical space wherein youth both acted and reflected on what mattered most in their lives. Also, students developed confidence and agency as media and cultural producers in their communities. We encouraged students to create affirming messages about who

---

**TABLE 1. “Me and the D” Curriculum Layout**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discover</th>
<th>Create</th>
<th>Resist</th>
<th>Transform</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anchor Text</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Crucible, Arthur Miller</td>
<td>Night, Elie Wiesel</td>
<td>Things Fall Apart, Chinua Achebe</td>
<td>The Bluest Eye, Toni Morrison</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media Projects</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small Projects: My Neighborhood Tells Me, My Relationship with Education</td>
<td>Me and the D Self-Portrait</td>
<td>My Homeland—short film</td>
<td>Me and the D Final Research + Media Project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media Skills</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewing Skills, Analyzing Media Content</td>
<td>Digital Image Design using GIMP (Open Source); Photography</td>
<td>Audio and Video Recording, Storyboarding, Camera Shots</td>
<td>Audio and Video, Editing, Postproduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing Focus</td>
<td>Narrative</td>
<td>Narrative/Analysis/Test Taking</td>
<td>Literary Analysis</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---
they were using a variety of tools across multiple canvases: street corners and computer screens, keyboards, Twitter feeds, and lined paper. Through these mediums, they were able to interrogate ideas central to their humanity, leveraging the rich set of literacy practices they carried against standardized notions of literacy in school that often “politely disregarded” them (Van Orman and Lyiscott). As a result, our students were able to reclaim their presence in a space that largely treated them as nonparticipants and respond to the conditions that mapped a sense of inferiority onto their psyches. This repositioning, we learned over the course of a year, had a significant effect on students’ experience in the English classroom and their engagement with texts that they studied. And while a number of pedagogical strategies were in place to create the conditions necessary for such a transformation, we describe and analyze three events that we thought would give secondary English teachers a glimpse into the kind of impact that this curriculum had on students’ self-concept and relationships with literacy and community. These include (1) analysis of a transcript from one of several conversations inside our classroom about power and its relationship to language, (2) description of a digital self-portrait project, and (3) student reflections on projects they created for a media exchange with students in Jeonju, South Korea. Taken together, these pieces offer a compelling counter-narrative to the current deficit explanations for why marginalized populations fail to acquire academic literacies, and instead point to the possibilities that exist in classrooms that draw upon the language and literacy practices happening in students’ everyday contexts.

**Language, Power, and Thirdspace**

Sitting in a large circle during the third week of school, we begin to grapple with our understanding of language and its relationship to power. Isaac, the teaching artist, transcribes the discussion, and students are asked to document what happens: writing in their notebooks, taking pictures with their phones, and later assembling their thinking through the construction of media projects. Transformation, in the space of our classroom, must begin with the interrogation of questions related to our humanity, and in this case, our relationship with language:

**Ms. Filipiak:** In our discussion yesterday, I asked you to offer definitions of both language and power, and now I want to go deeper. How did you make sense of the connection between these terms? Is there a relationship?

**Sandra:** Yesterday I said that language is not about the way you speak, but how it’s heard. But now I say it’s to speak and to have a voice and to be heard.

**Ms Filipiak:** But why did your thoughts shift between yesterday and today? What changed?

**Felipe (Interrupts):** You have to have a voice to be heard. A message.

**Sandra:** Exactly. How you gonna be heard if you can’t speak? You gotta put the two together.

In this dialogue our students articulate an important observation around the way that power functions through language. Power is not only exercised in the way that language is interpreted, but also in how it is expressed. In most of their schooling experiences thus far students have related to language as something to be received and regurgitated. As our students think about how they are positioned within structures of power, they begin to see themselves as creators rather than solely consumers, taking on the task of reshaping their educational environment.

This process is part of a wider dialogue around how to transform classroom space to be more relevant to students’ lives beyond school walls. However, putting this transformation into practice presents a variety of challenges because, as noted in the work of Freire (72), traditional classroom spaces are structured to create unidirectional flows of information, where the instructor “banks” knowledge into the minds of their students. While asking students to imagine themselves as speakers whose literacies must be “heard” by the power structure of the educational system they exist within (itself a subversive act in educational settings where students’ primary purpose is not to speak but to listen), we also engaged our classes in the project of...
creating spaces where students could “speak and be heard” on their own terms. In thinking about how these seemingly contradictory spaces (whose terms are to be privileged, the institution’s or the student’s?) could coexist simultaneously, we turned to the Urban Studies theorist Edward W. Soja and his articulation of Thirdspace. The more generalized concept of “Third Space” (Guitérrez; Stevenson and Deasy) has drawn plenty of attention in the field of education, particularly in conceptualizing arts education as a space where students’ home and school literacies can cohabit. However, Soja’s work on Thirdspace specifically focuses on the question of power (31). We believe this to be important because for students to feel agency as producers of language, they cannot simply transport their literacy practices into the existing space of the classroom; they need to take part in creating a space of their own.

Soja, following the work of Henri Lefebvre, describes three kinds of space: physical, mental, and social (62). Physical space consists of the spatial practices that produce space, that is, the things we do in space that make a space (66). Mental space is made up of representations of space that structure and control a society’s spatial practices through symbols and signs (66–67). Lastly, social space—what Soja calls Thirdspace—is where spaces of representation, “linked to ‘the clandestine or underground side of social life’ and also to art,” serve as “the terrain for the generation of ‘counterspaces,' spaces of resistance to the dominant order arising precisely from their subordinate, peripheral or marginalized positioning” (67).

Thirdspace, he says, encompasses physical and mental space, while privileging neither. To return to Sandra’s quote, “you gotta put the two together.” Our classrooms are structured through the deployments of mental space—the standards, tests, and rules that govern schooling—but students’ educational space is also shaped through the diverse literacy practices (Kinloch; Moje et al. 402) that they bring with them. In designing “Me and the D” we hoped to create a “counterspace” that foregrounded students’ many literacies. Working within the existing structure of public education, we hoped to foster a classroom that also existed beyond that system’s confines. What resulted was a Thirdspace educational environment where, as educators and students, we could reflect not only on how we are being positioned within our educational system but also, given our limitations, how we might choose to position ourselves.

Self-Portrait

At the end of our first unit, we assigned a self-portrait project that required students to reflect on our class’s essential questions. Youth took pictures of each other posed in front of a green screen (see Figures 1, 2, and 3) and edited these images with GIMP, an open source graphic design program. Students then created backgrounds for their self-portraits using photographs, paintings, and words. Finally, they submitted analysis papers and gave oral presentations addressing if and how they saw themselves having power within their image.

Benchmark tests determined that, as a group of 150 eleventh graders, students were collectively operating at a fifth-grade reading level. However, their projects evidenced higher-order thinking skills such as synthesis and evaluation (Bloom) illustrating the complex and often unrecognized set of literacy practices they use to navigate their lives. Here, the mental space (Soja) of benchmark testing over looks the powerful literacies that students per...
Danielle Filipiak and Isaac Miller

form every day. Gloria demonstrates this disconnect as she shares her self-portrait (see Figure 4) with her classmates on a large projector screen: “I chose to focus on language and power for my image. My picture represents people coming together to gain power; people are protesting and youth are expressing anger and sadness. See the chain—they’re ripping it. They were enslaved and discriminated against by other people. I made this comparison between language and power and the earth. In the skies there is power that people can’t control, but as human beings we can communicate through language, and there is power in that.”

Gloria makes reference to how we might “read” the act of protesting and even references the literacy practices of the earth. She also articulates a set of relationships that reveal her budding sense of agency: “in the sky there is power that people can’t control, but as human beings we can communicate through language, and there is power in that.” This awakening (Greene 119) is tied to a movement between spaces: sky and earth, real and imagined, past and present. While the power located in the sky is beyond her control, there is also power in the experiences and expressions of Gloria’s community.

The artistic production that she shares with us here is imbued with a rich political, cultural, and historical context, significantly aided by digital media and networking with her peers. Prior to this

FIGURE 2. Digital Self-Portrait Response to Question: “What is the relationship between language and power, and how does that manifest itself in my life?”

Student quote: “My image demonstrates the sense of failure when some people try to use language and power within them. I see myself overcoming my sense of failure by keeping confidence in myself despite the feeling of failure, and setting goals to develop strategies that will motivate me to succeed in life. (And) when you are trying to use language to create power within you it inspires others to succeed.”

FIGURE 3. Digital Self-Portrait Response to Question, “What role does education play in the health of a community?”

Student quote: “My image represents my belief that people should not let adverse statements influence education in our community. In my image, I am standing in between a few of the common statements that are said about our school district. I am covering my ears with my hands to indicate my resistance against the accepted assumptions that are made about our school district.

FIGURE 4. Digital Self-Portrait Response to Question, “What is the relationship between language and power, and how does that manifest itself in my life?”
project, she did not speak much and expressed to us that she felt insecure as a writer in the more “traditional” sense. After this project, however, many of her peers looked to her for guidance and advice on papers and projects, seeing her as an “expert.” This shifted not just how she saw herself as a reader/writer but also how her peers perceived each other; “Writing,” as one student told us, began “to mean power,” and “once you have power, you know what it feel like and you ain’t wanna go back to where you were before.”

**My Homeland**

For their third unit, “Resist,” students participated in a media exchange with students in the South Korean city of Jeonju. In introducing this partnership, we explored connections between the shrinking of Detroit and the urbanization of the Global South. As South Korea has industrialized, farmland has disappeared to expand Jeonju. At the same time, large parts of Detroit have reverted to empty prairie land in the wake of white flight and the loss of industry (Solnit; Sugrue). To understand the relationship between these connected but contrasting experiences, students in both cities wrote “My Homeland” poems and shared media projects that they created based on their writing.

Students worked in groups to record footage in the neighborhood around the school and created video poems that responded to our classes’ three essential questions. In one video, students shared that while Detroit is marked as a site of conflict, it is also “a place of opportunity and hope that inspires me to strive for a better life.” LaShonda describes how creating a video shifted her group’s perception of Detroit: “We learned to represent our homeland in different ways. We thought about who represents Detroit and how we represent ourselves as Detroit. We talked about where we came from, how we grew up, and how we can better ourselves.” Digital storytelling (Hull and Katz), in this case, permitted students to create spaces of representation (Soja 67) where youth dictated the manner in which others viewed them.

For this project we felt it was important to stress collaborative process. Too often the school system reflects the way our larger society individualizes success: separate desks, separate assignments, and the goal of going to college in a far-off community and finding a job elsewhere. As one student expressed in his poem, “My homeland is a place that when I get older I ma come back and visit.” To change this, we wanted students to practice working together and affirming themselves as a community. Josephina reflects, “In past years, in English we were more focused on book work and didn’t pay attention to our community. Through media projects we have become more involved and aware of the problems that happen in our society. This class mixes English with the actual world, not a fantasy story.” This follows the vision of Detroit Future Schools, which seeks to shift students from seeing their city as a place from which they hope to escape to a thriving home they are committed to rebuilding.

**Conclusions**

Vicente told us at the end of the year, “This program brought me to school some days. There was days I wasn’t gonna come and I thought, ‘I gotta do my group media project.’ And I didn’t do it for a grade; I did it because I categorized it as important.” What motivated him most was not a system of punishment and reward, but a learning community that he felt invested in and affirmed by. Working together as a teacher-artist team, we were able to build a classroom with students that prioritized human relationships, believing this to be crucial in transforming the classroom space. We find this to be especially true when working with urban youth of color who have been cut off from their relationships with one another by a system that has treated them as criminal, disposable, and deficient. Any space that dehumanizes young people in this way becomes disempowering regardless of what tools, teachers, or tests students are given; therefore, changes that do not take this into account are superficial, at best.

Grace Lee Boggs, a 98-year-old Detroit philosopher-activist, writes that “our schools have been in continuing crisis because so few educators are able or willing to take the risk of leaving behind the old factory model and creating a new one that meets the human and social needs of young people to be creators of knowledge and of social change” (142). In part influenced by Boggs’s work, Detroit Future Schools created a theory of change...
that states: “Creating our own media is a process of speaking and listening that allows us to investigate the problems that shape our realities, imagine other realities and then organize our communities to make them real. When we train students to use media in this way, we transform them from consumers of information to producers [Kellner & Share, 2005], from objects within narratives of exploitation and violence to active subjects in the transformation of the world” (Saidi & Lee). This brings us to ask what teachers, researchers, teacher educators, school leaders, policymakers, and others committed to urban education reform are doing to address the political and pedagogical barriers to more relational, participatory, and engaging models of literacy. Some questions we took into account during our partnership, which we believe are valuable to consider in the immediate future of English education, include the following:

- How can English classrooms be sites where students are welcomed and supported to draw on multiple Englishes while generating and negotiating content?
- How do we shape more humanizing spaces that “love students up” without making them choose between dominant and marginalized notions of literacy and identity?
- What innovations must we introduce into our English classrooms in an age of new digital media technology?
- What kinds of pedagogies do we need in place to engage and support students in these New Media contexts?

The question of what our cities will become is in the hands and minds of our youth; therefore, we urgently need paradigms that position students to shape the future condition of our democracy and humanity. James Baldwin tells us that “People evolve a language in order to describe and thus control their circumstances, or in order not to be submerged by a reality that they cannot articulate” (5). As technology and an increasingly pluralistic society are changing the nature of literacy, it is of the utmost importance that we reimagine what our classrooms must look like to support young people in articulating and shaping their ever-changing circumstances and realities. We cannot wait any longer.

**Works Cited**


Danielle Filipiak and Isaac Miller
Danielle Filipiak is a doctoral student in English education at Teachers College, Columbia University, where she serves as an adjunct faculty member and Zankel fellow with the Student Press Initiative. She taught English for ten years in Detroit, Michigan, and is interested in digital literacies and youth civic engagement. You may reach her at drf2127@tc.columbia.edu.

Isaac Miller is a teaching artist with Detroit Future Schools and a writer-in-residence with InsideOut Literary Arts Project. He has also taught with Youth Speaks and the James and Grace Lee Boggs School. You may reach him at isaacnoah@gmail.com.