Literacy, Community, and Youth Acts of Place-Making

Valerie Kinloch

On Observing and Interpreting

Reflections from My Researcher Field Notes

Today, Phillip took us on another community video walk-through session in his Harlem neighborhood in New York City. With a wide smile, he proudly stood on the corner of 117th Street and Frederick Douglass Boulevard. Or was it Manhattan Ave? (Note to self: when looking at the video, get exact location and follow-up by asking Phil.) As he stood there, Phillip pointed out to Khaleeq and me some of the changes: new stores, high-rise condos, and more white residents. In the background were mom-and-pop corner stores, brownstones, and affordable apartment buildings with fire escapes instead of the balconies that accompanied many of the new condos. Known for its history of civic, social, and political protests, Harlem has been home to many well-known literary figures. As I stood there with Phillip and Khaleeq, who were gracefully maneuvering the video camera, I started thinking about recent conversations I had with their classmates, Kim and Samantha, at Harlem High. When we talked about the history of Harlem, it was Phillip who pushed Kim and Samantha to think about the historical value of the community. When they mentioned how they like to hang out on 125th Street and remember the good times they've had at the Apollo, Phillip encouraged them to think about the activists, artists, and cultural institutions in Harlem.

At Phillip's insistence and with his help, Kim and Sam listed Langston Hughes, Paul Robeson, Zora Neale Hurston, Malcolm X, Adam Clayton Powell Jr., and the Studio Museum of Harlem. Before he talked with them about Harlem's beauty, Phillip asked them about their knowledge of the

Schomburg Center, the Theresa Towers/Hotel, and the Adam Clayton Powell Jr. State Building.[1] Instead of waiting for a response, Phillip quickly generated a list of reasons why Harlem's history, struggle, and beauty should be remembered in public attempts to gentrify the community: "It's home to a lot of people"; "It's a historical landmark—look at the fights that went on right here for black people's civil rights"; "You can't tell me people forgot about the Harlem Renaissance. Come on now!" He ended his list by saying, "We gotta save Harlem from gentrification 'cause that's gonna displace poor and working people who live here. We gotta protect it from people who see it as a place to invest in building expensive condos that people here can't even afford. I'm just a concerned youth."

As I sit here writing my field notes from Phil's community video walk-through session, I'm thinking about his previous engagements with Kim and Sam. For one, Phil showed concern over what might happen around the gentrification and spatial re-appropriation of his community. (Note to self: ask Phil and Khaleeq what they think about space being re-appropriated. What does it mean? Do they know of instances of it happening in other areas?) This community . . . [is] where he grew up and still calls home, the only one he's ever really known. Facing the possibility of not having that community remain an integral part of his life must be difficult. Then, there are observations I've been privileged to have that involved him talking with peers and adults about the history of Harlem. Every time I think about his community walk-through sessions, I wonder how a youth with so much knowledge and passion about spatial history and culture is not engaged in school . . . [and] not encouraged to look into his teachers' eyes with as much passion as he bestows into the lens of the video camera. (Note to self: I have seen some of that passion when he's working with Ms. L [English teacher], but what about with other teachers in other classes?) These are the same critical eyes that capture images of "old" Harlem alongside "new" Harlem and that rely on these images to write powerful journal entries that are neither assigned nor graded. They are the same eyes that oftentimes have a glaze within them when he is asked to perform routine academic tasks in many of his classes. When I ask him about that glaze, he is quick to tell me, "I know this stuff already. We all do. This is nothing new or revolutionary. I'm thinking I learn more from the community, like things about history, protests, and different experiences than from school. What does that tell you?" He also said something to me like, "What does that say about disconnects between where I go to school and where I live? I do both right here in Harlem, but we're not talking about what's happening out there, like gentrification. Why not?"

On Distances and Differences

Phillip is not alone in his acknowledgment of the distances—physical, ideological, cultural, political—that exist across school and community contexts. His claim that he learns more from his community and that there are "disconnects between where I go to school and where I live" are reiterative of arguments posited by literacy researchers (Cushman, 1996; Hull & Schultz, 2002) who examine sociological distances across multiple settings (e.g., community, school, online environments, etc.). In addition to Phillip's sentiments "about disconnects" is his effort to recognize visible signs of community change—caused by, in this case, efforts in urban gentrification—that local residents encounter on a daily basis. According to Phillip, "We see this happening right here. Nobody's doing anything about it. We're not talking about gentrification in school, as if it doesn't affect us. As if we can ignore it 'til school's out." In a separate interview, Phillip talked about being one of the many youth residents in the community who are witnessing Harlem's gentrification process, and as he witnesses it, he wonders: "Who can afford the cost of gentrification? Who can say, 'I'll pay that high rent with no problems . . . ?' Not my family and not my friends' families, and we've been living here like forever. I call this process the white-ification of the hood" (Kinloch, 2007a, p. 61). His sentiments about gentrification, place, and race (i.e., blackness, "white-ification") are powerful in that they reveal the complexities involved in his acts of place-making. That is, Phillip is drawing on historical, cultural, and political statements of community change to narrate stories of Harlem as "home," or in his words, as a "historical landmark needing to be preserved, not gentrified." His narration of stories about Harlem provides him an opportunity to engage in multimodal, oral, and print forms of literacy to communicate the value of place on his identity and sense of belonging in an out-of-school community. This latter point is expressed in a comment he made during one of his video walk-through sessions. As he stood in Harlem, Phillip looked directly into the video camera and emphatically stated, "Look! I'm surrounded in a circle and I'm stuck in the middle."

Phillip's assertions—"who can afford the cost of gentrification"; "I'm thinking I learn more from the community . . . than from school"; "I'm stuck in the middle"—serve as the foundation for this article on literacy, community, and acts of place-making. Beginning with his use of the video camera and his thoughts on a community video walk-through session with Mr. T (a teacher at Harlem High School), this article investigates Phillip's stories in relation to the meanings and purposes of gentrification in Harlem. These stories demonstrate the various complexities of confronting dynamics

of power, struggle, and identity within an out-of-school context, on the one hand, and openly addressing longstanding sociological distances and differences across community and school settings, on the other. Such complexities offer rich implications for drawing on youth community engagements inside of school in ways that stimulate practices in critical reading, writing, and performing. The article is guided by the following inquiries: In what ways can youth utilize a qualitative inquiry approach (i.e., writing, videotaping, interviewing) to engage literacy as a practice in place-making? How can a focus on literacy and gentrification in an urban community contribute to other investigations into place-making? What are the implications of this work for teaching and teacher education?

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In the remainder of this article, I situate the study in a review of literature and theoretical framing in literacy and place, and provide an overview of the project's methods. Then, I describe how Phillip engages in acts of place-making (see Schneekloth & Shibley, 1995) to understand and critique gentrification within his out-of-school community, acts that, I believe, have implications for youth literacy engagements within the contexts of schools. By critiquing Phillip's engagements around location, community change, and acts of place-making, this article contributes to existing research that explores the value of drawing on students' out-of-school activities to enhance their school-sponsored work. Additionally, it has the potential to reveal ways for educators to bridge sociological distances that exist across rapidly changing school and community contexts by being attentive to the involvements of young people in multiple settings.

Spaces, Places, and Youth: A Brief Literature Review and Theoretical Framing

It is important for literacy research to account for and seek to foster relationships between school and community contexts by attending to socially situated aspects of literacy (Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanic, 2000). Given that young people are creating and participating in rich literacy activities during out-of-school time, from voluntary writings (i.e., poetry, letters, hip-hop lyrics) to media texts (i.e., websites, MySpace pages, music videos), it seems important for educational scholarship to examine relationships between location (i.e., places of engagement; pedagogical spaces) and literacy (i.e.,

reading, writing, performing, multimodal communicative forms). A growing body of scholarship in adolescent literacy (Fisher, 2007; Kinloch, 2007a; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002; Vasudevan, 2006), in particular, investigates the nexus among youth identities, engagements in nonschool settings, and performances on a variety of traditional school-sponsored tasks such as writing assignments, presentations, group work, and standardized examinations. Such investigations point to the significance of additional research that situates youth literacy engagements in multiple spaces of learning to include schools, local communities, recreational centers, juvenile detention centers, playwriting workshops, and the physical location of the human body (see Fisher; Vasudevan; Kirkland, this issue).

What, then, are the possibilities and promises posed by the intersection of literacy and place in the lives of youth? In a study that explores expanded definitions of literacy beyond the contexts of schools, contributors to Hull and Schultz's (2002) edited collection employ multiple theoretical perspectives to rethink the meanings, purposes, and functions of literacy. To examine boundaries between school and nonschool literacy and understand "overlap or complementarity or perhaps a respectful division of labor" (p. 3), contributors problematize the situationality of learning through a range of topics: hybrid literacies, home and school activities of a Cambodian youth, acts of writing and cross-cultural misunderstandings, and, among other things, technology use across school and community settings. Such work demonstrates the transformative powers of literacy across spatial contexts in ways that challenge traditional, at times docile, views of youth engagements with learning in formalized educational settings that oftentimes perpetuate unbalanced power structures (Fisher; Vasudevan, this issue). In other words, young people are actively participating in learning in multiple settings and with multiple forms of texts (Dyson, 2005; Hill & Vasudevan, 2008; Kirkland, this issue; Wissman, 2003).

The relationship between literacy and place is also theorized in research that explores the materiality of people's interactions within textual, imaginary, and networked settings (Comber, Nixon, & Reid, 2007; Ginwright, Noguera, & Cammarota, 2006; Reynolds, 2000). For example, Reynolds (2007) employs feminist and rhetorical theories, cultural and critical geography, and composition pedagogy to argue for closer relationships between theories of writing and the physical, spatial, and visual locations people occupy. Precisely because identities are bounded by location—where people live, write, and play—Reynolds believes that teachers and researchers should consider how writing is guided by spatial practices: locations/acts of writing, community mapping, politics, differences, and identities. To do this work,

in my opinion, is to ask questions about youth participation in out-of-school settings, in online communities, and with textual productions (i.e., videos, journals, newsletters, websites) in ways that reveal how youth read and write the world as they build literate identities during out-of-school time. Such is the case in Comber, Nixon, and Reid's (2007) examination of eco-ethical approaches to place-based education to document how youth participate in the community to communicate knowledge, make meaning, and engage in interpretive literacy experiences. Their community-based research has implications for other studies on youth literacies outside (Fisher, 2007; Jocson, 2005; Kinloch, 2007a) and inside (Alvermann, Hinchman, Moore, Phelps, & Waff, 2006; Lee, 2007) of school. Taken together, these studies point to a need for additional research that, to use Hull and Schultz's (2002) phrase, bridges "out-of-school literacies with classroom practices."

The aforementioned scholarship on interconnections of literacy and place reflects an ideological view of literacy as "a social practice" (Street, 2005). In this way, knowledge and identity are central factors in understanding the multiple meanings, purposes, and locations of literacy. As Street states, "the ways in which people address reading and writing are themselves rooted in conceptions of knowledge, identity, and being" (p. 418). I believe it is important for English language arts teachers, teacher educators, and researchers to adopt an ideological view of literacy in order to seriously consider the literate lives of youth during out-of-school time. This consideration can offer valuable insight into the ways in which their community activities and engagements with literacy are oftentimes remarkably different from their school-based interactions and dispositions. Additionally, it can reveal their multiple and highly complex community engagements (i.e., place-making) while simultaneously challenging popular notions that youth, particularly urban youth of color, are disengaged from and disinterested in learning in the space of school. In other words, employing an ideological perspective to examine the interconnections of literacy and place can help educators understand why Phillip and many of his peers believe that school learning "is nothing new or revolutionary. I'm thinking I learn more from the community . . . than from school. What does that tell you?"

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Place-Making beyond Concentric Circles: On Methods

Phillip was an active participant in an ethnographic study across two local sites: the Harlem community and Harlem High School of New York City.

During the 2005–06 academic year, students at Harlem High School, ranging in grades 9–12, classified primarily as African American (54%) and Latino/Latina (45%), with nearly 47% qualifying for the free lunch program. Residing in the local Harlem community or one of the boroughs in New York City (i.e., Brooklyn, the Bronx, Staten Island), a majority of students at Harlem High have been classified as "struggling" and "underachieving," as evident from the school's placement on the "Schools in Need of Improvement" list, or SINI. However, with a new administrative unit and teachers who are committed to social justice, the arts, and high academic standards, the school was removed from the SINI list and has been actively working to increase student attendance and teacher training in an effort to implement a rigorous schoolwide curriculum (see Kinloch, 2009). The curriculum encourages student revision of unsatisfactory work, teacher collaboration, and technology use inside the classroom. As a researcher at the school, I was able to observe how this new curriculum gradually created possibilities for students to collaborate on projects; make connections across course readings, popular culture, and current events; and engage in dialogue about the purposes of writing inside and outside of school. However, as much as these possibilities presented rich opportunities for learning to occur, they did not particularly address a concern expressed by Phillip and some of his peers relating to the perceived distances and differences across school and community contexts. With this in mind, my work at the high school shifted from an examination of how Phillip and his peers think about, construct, and produce texts (e.g., written, oral, multimodal, required, voluntary) to how they create literacy responses to the visible changes, exacerbated by gentrification, occurring in their out-of-school community.

It is significant to note that Phillip's out-of-school community currently mirrors the demographics of Harlem High in terms of race and class, although the rapid gentrification of the area and Columbia University's expansion plans are changing this image.[2] Known historically as the mecca of black life and culture in the United States, Harlem is home to various African and African American cultural institutions, historic churches, political sites, architectural designs, parks, and row houses. Many of the public schools, streets, and buildings in the community are named after prominent African, African American, and Latino/Latina leaders. Walking into some of the classrooms at Harlem High School reveals this history: bulletin boards are decorated with images of famous community leaders, doors are adorned with quoted passages from well-known speeches and novels, and, on occasion, students carry or wear emblems that denote messages of pride, hope, and progress (e.g., a notebook with a Langston Hughes passage; a T-shirt, worn

underneath the required school uniform, with an image of Malcolm X). In this context, the possibilities for studying (dis)connections between literacy and place, or youth literacy involvements in school and the surrounding community, are endless.

On Data Collection and Analysis

This article draws on data from Phillip's literacy engagements in the local Harlem community during one year. Through observations, interviews, and follow-up discussion sessions, I document Phillip's responses to gentrification and the ways in which he struggled to bring his community observations closer to his school experiences. Although I focus on Phillip in this article, it is important to note that I interviewed 27 other participants ranging from students to teachers over a 3-year period. While I used a standard interview protocol, I acknowledge that deviations occurred based on participants' responses, explanations, and examples. Also, I collected representative writing samples from students, participated in community video walk-through sessions, attended local tenants' association meetings with some of the participants, and surveyed over 160 students attending either Harlem High School or a local educational enrichment program at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

Here, I analyze findings from Phillip's video documentations, interviews, and involvements in the community in relation to urban gentrification. Through detailed processes of coding and triangulation, I was able to pay special attention to how Phillip employed a qualitative inquiry approach (QIA) to engage literacy as a practice in place-making. I conducted data member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Tanggaard, 2008) with Phillip and his peers, and I grouped data into multiple thematic categories such as writing in the community; writing in school; and writing, power, and identity. From such categorizations, I also became interested in the ways in which Phillip questioned the effects of gentrification on his identity as an African American student, on the one hand, and as an African American male residing in a gentrifying community, on the other. Some of the practices he enacted included critiquing stereotypical assumptions about academic (under)achievement of African American males, establishing connections between literacy and places of engagement, using language to articulate personal stories, and writing about the experience of digitally documenting images of "old" and "new" Harlem during his video walk-through sessions. Together, these practices contributed to how Phillip questioned "the cost of gentrification," the "disconnects between where I go to school and where

I live," and being enclosed in a concentric circle, or "stuck in the middle," through the lens of literacy.

Smart Boy and Corner Street Videos: Youth Acts of Place-Making

Reflections from My Researcher Field Notes

[Phillip] peered down the video camera lens and a profoundly loud exclamation came out of his mouth: "Gent . . . G-E-N-T. Gentrification's taking over Harlem! Nobody's doing a damn thing 'bout it." Then he looked up at me and said, "Okay, I'm ready for my video walk. I'll take the camera and be the guide on this tour. Y'all ready? Let's turn the camera on and get it going." Before we started walking, I asked Phil if he was aware that the camera wasn't on when he was talking. Little did I know, he meant for the camera to not capture his opening comments because, according to him,

"That shows you can't rely on the camera to be your guide. It's not gonna give back to you all of what I'm giving you today. Rely on the camera, but not more than you rely on what I'm saying about my community. Lesson #1: forget the camera, focus on what you see and don't see, what you hear and think you hear. Listen to my stories. Let's roll."

I'm thinking a lot of things. One is that Phil took a unique approach to start his community walk-through session, somewhat different from the one he used to begin his first walk-through a few months ago. This time, he treated the camera like it was only a vehicle, or instrument of some sort, that aided him on his journey to document signs of history, culture, and physical changes occurring in Harlem. He was more interested in telling stories about Harlem than being directed by a camera to capture certain images of the community, his friends, or himself . . . images that would take the lead in dictating the stories instead of the stories dictating the value and meanings of the videotaped images. I eagerly accepted Phil's directives to look, listen, and walk. Now, as I'm writing these notes, I'm thinking he was using a strong QIA [qualitative inquiry approach] to visually/verbally/descriptively share stories [on place-making] as he questioned gentrification. I'll have to ask him about this.

Scene A: Literacy, Community, and the Power of a Video Camera

Phillip's use of the video camera underscores an important point about the ways in which he identified with the space of Harlem. While he has lived in the area his entire life, Phillip admitted that he had never considered the value of narrating stories of change within his neighborhood, documenting historic community artifacts, and using a video camera to help him contest positions and perspectives that favored the gentrification of urban areas. Nor did he have reason to: "Why can't something like this be part of class work? We [students] can help teachers come up with projects that take us in the community. Well, is there reason to when we don't talk about out there in here?" However much Phillip recognized disconnects between his literacy involvements in school and the community, he also acknowledged various literacy goals that traverse contexts. These included being able to listen to and consider stories with critical eyes and ears, create counterarguments to popular narratives that favor gentrification, and make meaning from the stories, not the videotaped images alone. In essence, Phillip was taking us—his peers and me—on a video walk-through of his community and asking that we pay attention to the stories first and the videotaped images second in order to "learn about how . . . individuals construct their lives and histories" (Pink, 2001, p. 74).

To engage in this learning, I rely on Pink's (2001) insistence that ethnographers "develop a self-conscious approach not only to their relationships with the video subjects but also to how both relate to the camera" (p. 78). This reliance required that I interrogate Phillip's use of the camera as well as his request to "rely on the camera, but not more than you rely on what I'm saying about my community." Undoubtedly, my nuanced understanding of the camera was highly informed by Phillip's relationship with it, particularly as he exerted ownership over and responsibility for the camera, and as he eagerly accepted multiple roles.[3] These interchanging roles included cameraman, subject, object, and video director. In the following excerpt, I asked Phillip to explain how he saw himself and his role in relation to the camera:

> **VALERIE:** Can you talk about how you relate to the camera when you're doing the recording or being recorded? I'm a little curious.
>
> **PHILLIP:** I had a feeling you'd ask that one day! Okay, yeah, the camera's there. I just try forgetting I'm walking with it and taping what I'm talking about. I'm just talking, describing the changes, you know, and thinking about things I did in Harlem . . . memories and things. I'm letting everybody see what I see through my eyes. I'm aware I got the camera in my hands, but what's important is my story. I know my story is like, is like one star out of a million stars, if a story's a star. But it's my story. It needs to be heard. I want to know: Where are the people gonna go, the ones who might be displaced cause they can't afford the high rent? What's gonna happen to Harlem and places like the Apollo? Why aren't more people talking about the changes, taking a stand? Those things I want to know, so I'm telling my stories and using a video or digital camera to help me do that.

In additional interviews—official and unofficial—Phillip talked about how the video camera allowed him to capture visual aspects of Harlem that he may have inadvertently left out of his larger print-based narrative on community change. Gradually, he came to see himself as a mini-documenter of urban gentrification who questioned the significance of lived experiences and human stories of struggle as he willingly traveled through a familiar space with new eyes. During his traveling, he sought answers to what I consider to be researchable questions: "Where are the people gonna go, the ones who might be displaced . . . ?" "What's gonna happen to Harlem and places like the Apollo?" "Why aren't more people talking about the changes, taking a stand?" Such questions were framed within his qualitative inquiry

stance, one that asked observers to look, listen, and walk as stories about *his* Harlem were revealed.

This qualitative inquiry stance was also evident during one of his visits to my teacher education course in the summer of 2006. The class was comprised of graduate students in English education who were full-time, experienced middle school and high school teachers from districts in Michigan, Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, and Washington, DC (see Kinloch, 2009). Students in the course were in the final stages of completing their MA theses on a range of topics: race and writing instruction, the role of model texts in literature classes, and, among others, students as active readers and writers. For one of our discussions on community and youth writing, I invited Phillip to talk with the students about gentrification in Harlem. Excitedly, he explained that the project involved "going around Harlem 'cause there's a lot of new buildings being built up in Harlem that, buildings weren't there or torn down, and they build new buildings at a high price for certain people that can't afford it." He continued with the following:

> My building that I used to live in, I moved across the street to the building I live in now, and that building looks better than the building I'm living in now. Then there's a new building on the right, on the left, and up the block. So I'm in the middle. So it's just about time before they get to my building. So with this project, I'm trying to educate young people that this is going on in our community and it might hit your community next. So I'm trying to teach people what it is, you know, like try to stop it. Not even try to stop it, but like make the rent affordable.

In addition to the physical appearance of buildings and the increasing cost of rent, Phillip also described his growing facility with the video camera and how he was "going around taking pictures, showing people new buildings and old buildings." He then said, "Every day I think of ideas, I'm putting music onto DVDs, interviewing people about themselves and what's going on in their community." He talked about keeping a journal, taking digital pictures, and attentively listening to the stories that youth and adult members of the community shared with him (see Kinloch, 2007b). These things contributed to his qualitative inquiry approach to documenting, questioning, and critiquing gentrification in Harlem. They also contributed to the ways he reimagined the complex, multilayered purposes of literacy: posing critical questions, collecting evidence, writing journals, and authoring stories. I believe that this approach (QIA) can prove beneficial for students to learn as they navigate their way inside of school space and engage in multiple academic tasks: critical reading, textual analyses, collaborative work, and performances with and around standardized testing.

Additionally, Phillip's various acts and activities disrupted how he came to understand the community as a site of literacy, activism, and change instead of simply "a place to sleep." Such a disruption encouraged him to resee the familiar landscape of Harlem as a space to engage in critical conversations that involve community changes (e.g., increased rent, renovated apartments, displacement) as well as practices in literacy (e.g., keeping a journal, listening to stories, interviewing people). For example, various graduate students in my teacher education course challenged Phillip to do the following:

- Define literacy in relation to community, change, and self (I see this as a practice in understanding terms in order to critique them)
- Provide examples of "acts of place-making" (this is practice in defining, describing, and explaining specific place-based acts, activities, and represented artifacts)
- Name/describe the old buildings being torn down and the new buildings being built (I see these things as lessons in being descriptive, analytical, and accounting for local history)
- Consider the consequences of gentrification on the old and new artifacts in Harlem and on the lives of longtime and new residents of the community (these are practices in understanding the reasons and motivating factors behind change and spatial re/designs)
- Think about his identity and levels of activism as connected to community, culture, and change (I see this as establishing significant text-to-self-to-world connections)
- Find connections between local community events and those within his high school (I see this as establishing connections and relationships across contexts)
- Account for other perspectives, locally and globally, that may or may not support his stance/argument (this serves as a practice in gathering evidence and considering multiple voices, positions, and counterarguments)

Such suggestions disrupted Phillip's thinking about gentrification as "bad" and "negative" in that they motivated him to further develop and critique perspectives on community change. As well, these things encouraged Phillip to more descriptively narrate a story on the intersections of place and literacy within his local community (Harlem) and eventually within academic contexts (e.g., a graduate teacher education course, his high school English

class). During a follow-up interview, he commented, "I'm learning what was here [in Harlem]. I'm reading and writing about history, telling my story. I'm thinking about other people's stories before I talk against gentrification. And I'm still using the camera." Phillip's access to videotaping *his* Harlem helped him to produce a visual text about the community, which in turn shaped the ways he chose to identify with that text for multiple audiences (e.g., peers, teachers, teacher educators, community members).

In other words, the video camera served as a tool in Phillip's journey to question gentrification and narrate a story of change that invited participants and listeners to pay attention to "what you see and don't see, what you hear and think you hear." This invitation extended beyond Phillip's use of the camera to include his belief, as articulated to my graduate students, that the role of the camera is to help make the story come alive, not to "actually tell the story. That's my job." On this latter point, Phillip, acknowledging the aforementioned list of suggestions from my students, asked them to consider the directives they give to students in relation to writing assignments. To do this, he used the video camera as a metaphor: "Teachers ask students to draw on ideas from published writers to support our argument. The camera is like the published writers. . . . I use it to support my story on gentrification, not to tell it. You gotta let us use our voice to make our argument, which hardly even makes it in the paper." He continued, "It gets lost in the evidence and quotes we have to use when all of that is supposed to support our arguments, not be our arguments. Let us rely on what others say, but give us freedom to tell our story, have our argument." From the students' suggestions for Phillip to think critically about gentrification to Phillip's ideas about student writing, voice, and the video camera, learning in this academic context became potentially both democratic and reciprocal (i.e., democratic engagement; Kinloch, 2005).

Scene B: Telling Stories, Making Arguments

Over time, Phillip's perspectives on gentrification became highly influenced by his interactions with others: peers (i.e., Khaleeq, Daman, Kim, Samantha), teachers (i.e., Ms. L, Ms. Cunningham, Mr. Tavern, teacher education graduate students), and local community members (i.e., black tenants at association meetings, white residents new to the area). He contemplated the significance of historic sites in Harlem and questioned specific acts of place-making such as renovating, rebuilding, maintaining, representing, and making affordable habitable places for people of color. In doing so, Phillip expressed a growing interest in learning more about the lives of local

longtime residents of color, the literate lives of youth living in this rapidly gentrifying community, and in the possibility of forming a collaboration with community members, local schools, government bodies, and urban planners/designers. In particular, Phillip became increasingly reflexive of his understandings, positions, and dilemmas around gentrification in *his* community—a reflexivity that, in part, connected to suggestions offered to him by my graduate students. The following exchange serves as an example:

> **PHILLIP:** Your students got me thinking about something . . . defining the terms community and gentrification and even literacy. That's true, that's a good point.
>
> **VALERIE:** Why's that true?
>
> **PHILLIP:** We're doing literacy work. Reading and writing about gentrification, using digitals [cameras] to support stories. We're talking with people. Those are . . . literacy. I agree with them about defining terms, naming things, gathering evidence . . . .
>
> **VALERIE:** What about situating yourself? The part about how you identify with the project and think about how others see [gentrification].
>
> **PHILLIP:** Yeah, *seeing* gentrification. I did like what Mr. T said on his walk. He's onto something that'll help me do the defining, the naming, and the, um, I guess identifying.

Phillip and I conducted a video walk-through session with Mr. T, or Tavern, an ESL teacher at Harlem High. Self-identifying as a middle-aged Senegalese male residing in an apartment building in close proximity to where Phillip lived, Mr. T expressed concern over the gentrification of the community: "It's changing quickly. Too quickly, if you ask me." Having lived in Harlem for nearly 10 years, he talked about moving into a community with "an already established black population" that has been experiencing a lot of spatial, racial, and economic shifts. As Phillip recorded the walk-through and I stood next to Mr. T, we both became interested in descriptions of "Harlem being lost," "tremendous changes," and people being "pushed out."

Phillip's reference to "what Mr. T said when we did his walk" acknowledged Mr. T's stream of consciousness with defining gentrification in Harlem. During his walk-through session, Mr. T articulated the following belief:

> This thing that people call gentrification, in my opinion, is not gentrification because my understanding of gentrification is several different ethnic groups getting together in a community. . . . What I see here is

> white-ification. Let's face it! Or what sociologists call ethnic succession, when one ethnic group gets pushed out by another ethnic group. And if what I see going on here does not stop, then the trend is...within ten years, we're all going to say, "I used to live here." That's exactly what is going on.

Mr. T alluded to "this thing people call gentrification" by referring to the presence of "ethnic groups," "community," and "white-ification." His view of gentrification—"several different ethnic groups getting together"—reiterated those of LeGates and Hartman (1986) who argue that the optimistic side of gentrification can create neighborhoods with a variety of people from various class and race backgrounds. Arguing that what appears to be gentrification in Harlem is really "ethnic succession," Mr. T's comments challenged Phillip to examine this trend as a way to determine "exactly what is going on." While his challenge (as well as the suggestions from my teacher education graduate students) motivated Phillip to practice "defining, naming, and identifying," it afforded me an opportunity to listen, as Schultz (2003) explains, "to the social, cultural, and community contexts of students' lives" (p. 76). To do this, I supported Phillip's out-of-school investigation into gentrification and his narration of community change; he openly shared honest, unedited stories, even if at times they contradicted with my own.

In many ways, Mr. T's comments regarding white-ification and black people being pushed out of Harlem paralleled—and oftentimes directly borrowed from—sentiments expressed by Phillip, who first articulated the term "white-ification" during one of his earlier interviews. Mr. T's remark, "What I see here is white-ification. Let's face it," echoed Phillip's argument, "Who can afford the cost of gentrification . . . . Not my family and not my friends' families, and we've been living here like forever. I call this process the white-ification of the hood." Both Phillip and Mr. Tavern understood white-ification as the increasing presence of whiteness and white people in areas (such as Harlem) that are predominately occupied by residents of color. Mr. T's borrowing of the term represented a reversal of learning whereby he was not only acknowledging Phillip's linguistic creativity but also drawing on it to describe Harlem's changing landscape. In this case, learning became reciprocal. Whereas Phillip characterized Mr. T's video walk-through as a text that helped him to further define and identify artifacts affected by gentrification, Mr. T used Phillip's popular term, "white-ification," to explain racial shifts occurring in Harlem.

In this case, learning became reciprocal.

Together, Phillip and Mr. T challenged each other to consider the consequences of gentrification through expanded definitions of identity and community. In this case, identity consisted of, among other things, race and

class and related to how one identified with (or positioned oneself in) the community. For Phillip, "If you're gonna be part of a community, figure out how to fit in. That way, you're at least trying to be part of it and the people here." For Mr. T, community included groups of people who contributed to the livelihood of the area they share by teaching, donating or volunteering their time in a community-based organization, getting to know neighbors, and/or attending community meetings. The act of defining terms through an exchange of perspectives was heightened when Mr. T stared into the video camera and powerfully stated: "Please, please don't push me out . . . . I don't like that. I used to live here when it was a dump." Phillip, holding on tightly to Mr. T's words, added: "We all used to live here when it was a dump. Now you [new residents] figure because it's nice . . . 'I can move in. You know, it's safe.' They fail to realize . . . ."

Based on other observations of and discussions with Phillip, I have concluded that his dangling phrase, "They fail to realize," referred to historic movements and ongoing struggles over affordable housing, political and civil rights, and quality educational opportunities for people of color in this localized context. Similar to Mr. T, Phillip believed that "new people to the area" do not take into serious consideration the significance of these struggles and movements on the identities of African, African American, and Latino/Latina residents, particularly as identities are so intricately connected to place. In Phillip's words, "Nobody can tell us about struggle. I see it every day. It's a struggle living in a place you know's changing, a place that's your home where you'll soon be priced out." In terms of identity, he remarked that his "identity as a youth, student, black male, a resident of Harlem . . . these things are tied to this place and that's how I connect with this project." His confession located race ("black"), gender ("male"), and class ("soon be priced out") in debates over urban gentrification and helped him to understand how identity is connected to place. Phillip insisted that it was important for people "to realize" these things (e.g., identity-to-place relations, community change, struggle) to truly understand, in the words of Mr. T, "exactly what is going on."

Not Failing to Realize, Not Ignoring It in School: On Teaching and Teacher Education

What implications do Phillip's examinations into urban gentrification, experiences with a video camera, and interactions with Mr. T pose for teaching and teacher education? In what ways can a focus on literacy and gentrification stimulate other investigations into place-making in local community

and school contexts? In this article, I have attempted to demonstrate how Phillip's community involvements drew on, however implicitly or explicitly, his growing desires to read, write, and question the world around him. His stories about gentrification were not just about a young man using a video camera to talk about community change. They were, in fact, a part of a larger repertoire of spatial, cultural, and linguistic practices employed by a youth during out-of-school time. It is important that these practices become a part of the English language arts curriculum in ways that challenge students to think critically about texts and places of engagement. Students should be encouraged to write powerfully about their (dis)connections to multiple arguments, positions, perspectives, and locations of learning. Drawing on the out-of-school practices of youth can prove beneficial for how teachers motivate students to actively participate in school-sponsored experiences even if at times such experiences appear messy and out of control.

Students should be encouraged to write powerfully about their (dis)connections to multiple arguments, positions, perspectives, and locations of learning.

Instead of waiting for an opportunity to explore topics of gentrification, community change, and identity in school, Phillip turned to his community. He became invested in documenting change, questioning race and the presence of white-ification, interviewing people, and analyzing his beliefs alongside suggestions offered to him by others. Such an investment led to his growing desire to examine relations of power, struggle, and identity within his familial community. His use of the video camera helped him to document spatial-temporal conditions (i.e., demographic changes, gentrification) in Harlem that mere pen and paper could not adequately capture. Specifically, the camera served as a tool that supported (as opposed to dictated) his narration of community stories. In this way, Phillip's act of telling stories about community change helped him to re-imagine his community from simply "a place to sleep" to a site of literacy that fulfilled something absent from his school experiences. As he explained, "When I'm in school completing assignments, I know what to do. The thing is, I don't feel connected to it because the work isn't presented in a way that makes me think I'm part of it. I'm supposed to sit there, listen, act like a machine. That's not right." His comments serve as critiques of the performance of schoolwork—"act like a machine"—in that they draw attention to a desire to "feel connected" and be "part of it." They also speak to Phillip's awareness of the growing distances and assumed differences across school and community contexts. In school, he performed "like a machine," whereas in the community he had "a freedom to just be me." Like so many other youth I have collaborated

with, Phillip was authoring literate experiences in a non-school site as a way to disrupt traditional notions of school, schoolwork, education, identity, and community.

Regarding teaching, generally, and English education, specifically, Phillip's interactions in the community demonstrate alternative ways that youth engage in practices of naming, defining, identifying, analyzing, and interpreting complex concepts (e.g., gentrification, community) through multiple mediums and forms of texts (e.g., interviews, video camera, journaling, presenting to graduate students). His various experiences—using the camera, talking with graduate students, considering ways to define gentrification, and learning with and from Mr. T—allowed him to assert his voice. Eventually, he took such lessons back into his English class, which materialized into sophisticated school-sponsored writing assignments: persuasive essays, journal entries about gentrification in Harlem, and, according to his English teacher, interesting written analyses of selected passages on love and time from Shakespeare's *Much Ado about Nothing*. Such experiences hold the promise of pushing English education in new directions that account for the lives, literacies, and critical capacities of youth and that interrogate pervasive assumptions that they are disinterested in and disengaged from learning. Phillip is an example of a youth who is invested in experiential forms of education. Educators should encourage students to experience learning in multiple ways, around multiple topics, and in multiple contexts. To do otherwise would be a disservice.

Author's Note

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Notes

1. The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture is a research facility dedicated to preserving the history, cultures, and contributions of Africans and African Americans throughout the diaspora. The Theresa Hotel opened in 1913; after its desegregation in the 1940s, many African Americans stayed at the hotel, including Lena Horne and Louis Armstrong. Other visitors included Malcolm X, Fidel Castro, and Joe Louis. The hotel is now an office space and an official New York City landmark site. The Adam Clayton Powell Building is where the state office plaza is located. The building was named after New York City's first black councilman and longtime congressman.

2. In December 2007, the New York City Council initially approved Columbia University's comprehensive rezoning plan, which would allow the university to expand into and develop new facilities on a 17-acre site in the Harlem area known as Manhattanville. For more information, see http://neighbors.columbia.edu/pages/manplanning/.

5. Before this project, I saw the video camera as "a tool" that captured actions that I could view and recall at a later time instead of as "an instrument" that supported a larger narration of stories that one creates, authors, and shares with others. Initially, I avoided being recorded during video walk-through sessions, fearing that my appearance on the tape would dictate the stories that Phillip and his peers would later remember and tell. To welcome Phillip's multiple roles with the camera, I was required to be seen, visually and orally, in various aspects of the project; hence, my nuanced understanding of the camera.

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Valerie Kinloch is an associate professor in the School of Teaching and Learning at The Ohio State University.

Literacy, Community, and Youth Acts of Place-Making

Valerie Kinloch
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