

**Youth, Critical Literacies, and Civic Engagement: Arts, Media, and Literacy in the Lives of Adolescents**, by Theresa Rogers, Kari-Lynn Winters, Mia Perry, and Anne-Marie LaMonde, New York: Routledge, 2015, 132 pp., \$49.95 (paper).

In *Youth, Critical Literacies, and Civic Engagement: Arts, Media, and Literacy in the Lives of Adolescents*, Theresa Rogers and her coauthors report on research that took place in the years leading up to the 2010 Vancouver Olympics, a time when the city was in the global spotlight overshadowing the escalating local social and economic disparities. At the heart of this text are young people's stories that shine light on the significance of these social and spatial relations in youths' daily lives and experiences. A primary objective of this work is a call for heightened awareness of and attendance to issues of equity and social justice through innovative arts-based pedagogies, both in and outside of schools, that have been muffled within the neoliberal context.

## Overview

*Youth, Critical Literacies, and Civic Engagement* is a brief text comprising an introduction chapter, three chapters focusing on empirical examples, a conclusion chapter in which the authors summarize their analytical interpretations, and an appendix outlining examples of the pedagogical practices utilized at each site. The empirical chapters focus on three distinct research sites—a center for homeless youth, a community antiviolence organization, and a secondary school drama classroom—and youth populations that are part of a larger research project. Utilizing a case study method to integrate the three unique programs, the authors explore the ways diverse groups of young people in various settings used writing, visual arts, media and film, and theatre to make critical claims about their lived experiences—critical claims, the authors argue, that contribute to a broader social project and challenge overly simplistic negative stereotypes about young people.

A compelling part of this work is how the authors weave the intricacies of disparate youth populations, sites, researchers, and methods together with threads of critical multimodality. Rather than shy away from the nebulous aspects of meaning making, including its deeply felt, fluid, and situated nature, these authors not only attended to but also prioritized these elusive experiences. The authors illustrate the pedagogical potential of multimodal practices as generating alternative affective and embodied possibilities for young people. Each of the chapter case studies consists of data and stories with which the authors support their key claims. I now turn to the three empirical chapters to illustrate the contributions of each of the case studies.

## Empirical illustrations

Chapter 2 focuses on research that took place in a zine program housed in a center for street youths. The youths were between 16 and 26 years old and reflected a diverse range of ethnic and gender identifications and sexual orientations. The authors conceptualize the zine as a flexible do-it-yourself communicative platform that drew upon multiple modalities and genres to generate discursive resources and tools for young people to express themselves. This draws on the historical tradition of independent publishing and zines as a space of resistance where marginalized populations create community by sharing their stories and amplifying traditionally unheard voices that contribute to a counternarrative. The zine became a place where the street-involved youths crafted counternarratives that challenged the dominant pejorative narratives about street youths by portraying their complex and at times contradictory experiences of homelessness. In this way, the youths produced a new form of “subjective critical expression and civic engagement” (p. 24). The chapter illustrates the

unique insights about youths in alternative communities that can be gleaned from studying zines as a space of cultural production.

Chapter 3 focuses on a group of youth volunteers who were participating in a video production workshop within an antiviolence program. At this site, a group of about 15 young people between 15 and 20 years of age came together in the evenings to learn about video production with the goal of producing films that would “speak back to all kinds of violence, including stereotyping, oppression, bullying, and family and sexual violence” (p. 57). The adults taught the youths about video production and supported them in creating their own film projects that drew on their personal experiences through experimentation with various multimodal techniques of layering and juxtaposing text, image, and sound. The authors attend to both the process and product of the youths’ film-making experience that involved valuable identity and cultural work. In so doing, they make visible the ways in which young people utilize new film skills to play with their multiple subjectivities and positionings to speak back to and challenge dominant narratives about young people.

Chapter 4 focuses on a devised theatre project in a secondary school drama class in a middle-class neighborhood north of Vancouver. Devised theatre is defined as “the creation of original work or the re-imagining of traditional texts by one or more theatre artists, often in collaboration with visual art, creative technologies, and other forms of performance” (p. 86). The authors describe their roles in this project along a continuum from participant/observer to facilitator/director. This chapter provides an illustration of how researchers negotiate their complex positionalities when doing community-based collaborative research. Similar to the other two sites, the youths’ performances utilized sophisticated discursive tools to construct their counternarratives through performance, including parody, music, poetry, stories, movement, and critique. In this piece, the youth-produced theatre performances became sites of resistance and counternarrative through the “complex representation of space, location, and subjectivities in relation to peers, parents, teachers, and institutional contexts” (p. 97).

## Contributions and limitations

In *Youth, Critical Literacies, and Civic Engagement*, Rogers and her coauthors have effectively constructed an alternative or counternarrative to dominant neoliberal education narratives (i.e., high-stakes testing, rote memorization). Their counternarrative tells a story of learning and education that prioritize transformational learning through embodied practices and social relationships. They catalyze this paradigm shift through a lens of multimodality that focuses on the ways that youths use the arts, media, and discursive resources as tools for personal meaning making and broader cultural criticism. Perhaps most important, they address the tendency, evidenced across all three sites, for youths to reify the negative discourses and stereotypes they were trying to challenge. Rogers and her team offered a pedagogical imperative for themselves and others engaging with youths in critical, arts and multimodal work: “be open to and to remember the importance of recurring cycles of creation, analysis, and critical re-evaluation in the pedagogical process” (p. 60). This text encourages researchers working in this vein to constantly ask themselves: what are the broader implications of the stories that we co-construct through our work?

Another contribution of this text is an innovative view of cultural production as civic engagement, whereby the authors argue that young people actively contribute to broader society through, somewhat tenuous, creative public projects. The authors focus on two implications of this view of cultural production within a counternarrative framework: Cultural production is grounded in personal meaning making and is the site of public resistance and critique. Here, they argue that art and media production are a democratized communicative platform where youth, especially marginalized youth, can actively appropriate and transform the prevailing negative narratives about young people by taking on the public role of cultural critic.

The authors avoid a common pitfall in youth scholarship, the tendency to over- or under-scrutinize the role of adults in youths' cultural productions by explicitly addressing their roles as artists and educators and the pedagogical nature of their work. Their roles were to support and teach the young people skills and techniques involved in designing a zine, creating art, media, and performances for particular audiences and aims. The authors worked alongside young people as artists, creators, scholars, and mentors to explore personal experiences of social inequity and marginalization to better understand the various social and cultural factors that mediate youths' lived experiences. These explorations, in turn, were grounded in the understanding that youths are active cultural producers who engage in powerful social critique with the potential to galvanize personal and social transformation. From this vantage point, art, creative expression, and multi-modality provide a platform for young people to reflect upon their lives and experiences by experimenting with various discursive resources and tools that generate alternative opportunities and subject positions to those that currently exist or are readily available to them.

*Youth, Critical Literacies, and Civic Engagement* is an important contribution to conversations about the social construction of youth, arts and literacy, and civic engagement, yet it may pose a challenge for some readers in several ways. First, novice readers may have a difficult time situating themselves in relation to the text because they may not have an understanding of the vast range of theories and concepts the authors draw upon. This challenge is partly due to the brevity of the text in relation to the breadth of sampled theoretical concepts that are not always thoroughly situated or defined. For example, citizenship and civic engagement are key concepts used in a variety of ways throughout the text. Each of the case studies utilizes particular renditions of civic engagement that rely upon the pivot of personal-private; more clarification of how each author utilized citizenship and civic engagement in their research would ensure the reader follows the discussion. Second, this text makes a significant contribution to scholarship on creative and arts-based methodologies yet requires a reader with some prior knowledge. This also highlights a possibility for the authors to elaborate upon their case study methodology and innovative research design in future works.

## Conclusion

Despite the aforementioned limitations, Rogers and her coauthors write in a widely accessible style, making this book appropriate for undergraduate and graduate students, teachers, and professors of education and social sciences. The book or any of the core chapters would provide a good introduction to arts-based research to undergraduate or graduate students. Chapter 2 would be ideal for a graduate social work or education course where students are grappling with how to critically engage and build relationships with marginalized youth. For experienced scholars and researchers, this text is an excellent resource for designing and implementing critical, creative research with young people or other marginalized populations. Rogers et al. convincingly argue how and why scholars and pedagogues should have access to tools and resources necessary to design and implement alternative pedagogies that are actively organized toward a more socially just world. Within this is a plea for curricula that capitalizes on young people's strengths and resources within a broader critical agenda that is grounded in democratic participation. I close with the participant quote that opens the text and reflects what I believe is the authors' aim: "We know what's going on and we're trying to change it" (p. 1).

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