

Creative Writing as Decolonial Pedagogy

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Introduction

I am conducting a research project on how creative writing programs dedicated to affirming and amplifying the voices of youth of color make an impact on these youth through the implementation of identity conscious curriculum and structure. In my own experience, access to the arts and creative writing is often limited among low-income communities of color. Students of color in underfunded schools already have an educational disadvantage in their classes due to a lack of resources. This reality impacts these students' ability to master dominant forms of expression like academic writing, but it also impacts their ability to have access to other resources like creative writing programs.

My research topic is focused on how centering the voices and experiences of youth of color within a creative writing program impacts their personal and sociopolitical development. I am interested in the following research question: How does implementing decolonial pedagogies in creative writing programs impact youth of color? The social issue I am interested in investigating is the potentials and limitations within programs for creative writing that exist with a focus on inclusivity, diversity, and that acknowledge the experiences of low-income students of color. Even when programs take an honest approach and center the experiences of youth of color, they are not inherently more accessible geographically, economically, etc.

Literature Review

The voices of youth are too often silenced by social perceptions of young people as naive or less educated. Youth of color, in particular, who are at the nexus of several identities—race and ethnicity, age, socioeconomic status, gender, sexuality, and more—find themselves in a deep state of marginalization. In this literature review, the frameworks of Critical Race Theory (CRT)

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and decoloniality contextualize the experiences of othering that youth of color face in traditional literary and writing classrooms, and the belonging they experience in other spaces of language, writing, and expression, like creative writing programs. CRT and decoloniality lay a foundation for the application of Chicana scholar Gloria Anzaldúa's Borderlands Theory in the analysis of colonial and decolonial educational curriculums. An examination of the individual and collective experiences that youth of color have with creative writing as a practice and/or through a program dedicated to cultivating their skills, reveals the importance of implementing content, styles, and structures of curriculum that take into consideration the lived realities of youth of color. The significance of creative writing as an outlet for young people of color becomes apparent through this exploration of creative writing programs as spaces to support identity representation and co-create community engagement for the youth participants. This literature review explores how decolonizing the standard curriculum and viewing creative writing programs as transformative decolonial literary spaces encourages critical reflection and the development of meaningful connections among youth of color.

Theoretical Framework

Critical Race Theory (CRT) questions the systematic discrimination that people of color face and illuminates how race/ethnicity and racism impact their experiences even in areas of our society that appear to be race-neutral, like the education system. According to Ladson-Billings, "[c]ritical race theory sees the official school curriculum as a culturally specific artifact designed to maintain a White supremacist master script" as the normative standard that all people must then strive for (18). Thus, the traditional school curriculum becomes a tool for the dominant group to justify its power by rationalizing oppression and denying the "realities of the oppressed" (Ladson-Billings 14). The dominant group assumes privilege through the maintenance of a race-

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neutral or colorblind perspective of the current education system. However, CRT scholars understand that racism and our concepts of race/ethnicity remain deeply embedded within our social perceptions and societal structures, regardless of whether we are conscious of it or not. Recognizing the need for this social consciousness, Ladson-Billings identifies storytelling as the “voice” component of CRT and stresses the importance of including the stories and perspectives of people of color in the education system to uncover the inequity it sustains (14). Scholars use CRT to reveal gaps within the structures in education designed by the dominant group, which extend beyond the curriculum and into the instruction, academic assessment of students, and funding of schools as well. CRT helps identify this systemic discrimination, however, when combined with decoloniality, these frameworks provide a way to deconstruct the oppressive structures within education and our society as a whole.

Decoloniality emerges as a critical response to what Maldonado-Torres calls the “fact of dehumanization,” where the marginalized are confined by “the color line as a modern/colonial ontological line” (240). Coloniality refers to the beliefs, behaviors, and systems of power that uphold Western ideals and whiteness as the standard, privileging those who benefit from whiteness and creating disadvantages for everyone else who does not. As such, coloniality relies on binaries to establish and reinforce hierarchical systems of power and oppression that took root during the era of colonization. These binaries can include but are not limited to white/non-white, man/woman, heterosexual/homosexual, citizenship/undocumented status, and teacher/student. As part of the foundation of the education system, coloniality perpetuates the invalidation of the lived experiences of learners of color whose backgrounds and cultures are often excluded from the curriculum. Coloniality forces people to divide themselves into parts that best conform to societal norms—like when youth feel obligated to fulfill the standardized curriculum to

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demonstrate academic success. Decoloniality seeks to deconstruct these structures of society and “dismantle dehumanizing forms of power, being, and knowledge” (Maldonado-Torres 233).

Therefore, applying a decolonial framework to education means placing the sociopolitical experiences of students of color within the context of these larger social systems and understanding how this affects what they learn in school, how they are treated in the classroom, and their experiences at home and in their neighborhoods.

Both CRT and decoloniality establish the foundation for applying Borderlands Theory to the colonial structures that exist within the education system. Borderlands Theory is a non-binary framework through which Chicana scholar Gloria Anzaldúa conceptualizes an in-between space where individuals grapple with the internalization of identification. This process too often occurs when members of minority groups “internalize stereotypic images” of themselves that the dominant group has constructed to maintain its power, thus “inflicting mental violence” upon these marginalized communities (Ladson-Billings 14). CRT and decoloniality reveal how the “concepts of race, gender, class, and other markers of hierarchical and naturalized human difference” in the education system impact the realities of people of color (Maldonado-Torres 234), muting their voices “when they challenge dominant culture authority and power” (Ladson-Billings 18). While CRT primarily recognizes the presence of race/ethnicity in every aspect of our lived experiences, Borderlands goes beyond just race/ethnicity and encompasses all and any other identities, like one’s gender, sexuality, and age in the same vein. As a non-binary theory, Borderlands refuses to conform to a single aspect of identity or way of being and instead encompasses everything all at once. Anzaldúa describes the borderlands as both a material and metaphorical place—the land in and surrounding borders, the bodies of people of color, and the mental anguish that exists as “a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue

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of an unnatural boundary” (17). For youth of color, this borderlands takes shape through cultural barriers, mixed-race identities, gender norms, racial/ethnic stereotypes, and any other experience that impacts their educational journey. It is necessary to acknowledge the social structures and systems that impact youth of color in and outside of school because they “live and learn within a political context that increasingly works to silence and control them” (Flores 658). As such, *Borderlands* lays the groundwork for the expression and interpretation of youth’s identity through creative writing and programs dedicated to the practice.

Decolonizing the Curriculum

Navigating the borderlands often comes with the uncomfortable realizations of marginalization and unnatural boundaries forced upon the self by the structures that uphold coloniality. The unnatural division created by oppressive societal structures separates what is considered worthy enough to include in the curriculum and what knowledge is excluded. In this violent rift, a deeper anguish within the borderlands is born. The messages that youth of color are exposed to in traditional educational spaces conflict with their lived experiences as people of color, resulting in an “ambivalence from [a] clash of voices” from the constant “mental and emotional states of perplexity” (Anzaldúa 83). This embodiment of the borderlands within youth of color is left unacknowledged in traditional spaces that limit the voices included in the teaching of literature and writing. The literature will show that the importance of self-expression, whether spoken or written, is crucial for the well-being and growth of young people of color.

As the educational system in the United States looks today, with high-stakes testing and immense pressure on educators to follow a scripted style of instruction, there is little if any time to create lessons that the youth in these spaces can relate to (Ramirez & Jimenez-Silva 89). Educational policies that “silence and control the experiences and lived realities of youths from

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historically marginalized homes and communities through de facto segregation [...] and narrow views of language and literacy” maintain colonial structures and curricula within literary and writing spaces in schools, and impact the socioemotional wellbeing of youth of color (Flores 654). The maintenance of the standard curriculum means that the course content in literary and writing spaces in traditional classrooms often lacks cultural and sociopolitical relevance to learners of color. Traditional literary, language, and writing spaces are dominated by coloniality and thus differ from other classrooms and out-of-school programs where youth of color learn in a community alongside educators and peers using curriculum material that relates to their lived experiences, culture, language, and identities.

Educators who engage in frameworks like *Borderlands* understand that literary and writing content in the formal curriculum disregards the diverse backgrounds of learners “as legacies that affect students’ dispositions, attitudes, and approaches to learning” (Ramirez & Jimenez-Silva 88). As such, it is important to create a space that acknowledges the complex systems that youth find themselves within to transform it into one that becomes equipped with tools that these young people can use in their writing. While educators may do their best to provide youth of color with space to express themselves and critically engage with the implications of their borderland identities, the curriculum standards limit them. Abril-Gonzalez reflects on this restriction, saying, “I succumbed to teaching demands and testing requirements, moving quickly to the next literacy unit without properly attending to their experiences. I missed the opportunity for students to collectively discuss their poems” (Abril-Gonzalez 417). Even while the education system imposes limitations, multiple sources cited a strong awareness of prejudice, resilient interpretations and responses to injustice, as well as critical reflections about identity coming across in the writing that youth created in out-of-school programs (Abril-

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Gonzalez, Ballard et al., Flores, Hall, Ramirez & Jimenez-Silva, Weinstein). The refusal to conform to oppressive forces suggests the importance of giving youth of color space to disentangle the inner turmoil of the borderlands existence.

Weinstein questions the stigmatization of discussions about topics like gender and sexuality despite the hypersexualized culture in the media surrounding youth today (29). Such discrimination between what is classroom-worthy and what is not exemplifies how coloniality operates. The suppression of class, culture, and gender exists “through schooling, work, and family life, and all of these elements interact to generate a resistance to reading and writing” among youth of color in particular (Weinstein 32). Responses to such marginalization manifest in “classroom academic affairs (e.g., arguing with teachers, sleeping during lessons, cutting class) as demonstrations of resiliency within youth who are defying oppressive institutional forces” (Hall 238). According to a Borderlands approach, “[a]ll reaction, is limited by, and dependent on, what it is reacting against,” highlighting the danger in these restrictive norms in literary and writing curricula (Anzaldúa 84). Youth of color deserve writing spaces that have actively been created with a decolonial mindset to foster their emotional and sociopolitical development.

Out-of-school “youth programs can be structured to challenge ‘dominant social narratives about race, gender, and class and reimagine a more equitable future for youth’” when they acknowledge the sociopolitical realities of the participants’ lives, “transforming youth toward a focus on how to transform systems and institutions” (Ballard 180). In this way, these creative writing programs become transformative decolonial spaces for learning. Creative writing programs with inclusive and diverse curriculums for youth of color have proven to be spaces where they are “able to personalize key ideas and messages presented by representative authors

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and consequently, advance conversations on identity and community empowerment while also addressing key content standards” (Ramirez 90). Through a Borderlands lens, it becomes clearer that the colonial education system can be deconstructed and transformed into one that produces more inclusive forms of knowledge that need not come from a single perspective.

Creative Writing Programs as Decolonial Spaces for Learning

Understanding creative writing through a Borderlands lens reveals the transformative possibilities for youth of color when they are able to relate to the multicultural authors and writings being presented. According to Hall, through the implementation of “free writing and group dialogue activities” in the out-of-school program called City School Outreach, the young members “shared personal stories that disclosed the various pressures and demands that they were receiving from voices in their respective environments (i.e., parents, teachers, friends, and media)” (222). In Anzaldúa’s words, “Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language,” referring to the deep human instinct for communication with others who speak the same language (66). This shared language need not be literal, only a shared understanding of experience and companionship, which youth of color find in creative writing programs such as the one Hall describes.

According to Ballard, participation in creative writing programs like Authoring Action (A2) offers youth of color a safe space in which to develop their critical consciousness around the systems and structures in our society that marginalize their voices. The sociopolitical contexts that inform their realities often make “the powerful experience of feeling safe [and] to be vulnerable” in a space for connection a brand new experience (Ballard 200). With this in mind, we see how the research shows that arts-based programs have proven to contribute to the prevention of negative school outcomes such as dropout while bolstering “empowerment, mental

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health, sense of belonging, and skill-building” (Ballard, 180). In addition to this, we see how youth can improve their “communication skills regarding leadership and working in groups and developing the ability to persuade others” as a result of participation in these programs (Ballard, 190). Additionally, according to Ramirez, as youth write, compose, or perform poetry “rather than print distribution,” they can develop “an understanding of community activism” if such examples are included in the program’s curriculum (Ramirez 87). Through these programs, youth have the opportunity to read and write about experiences they can relate to and that go beyond the dominant narrative of whiteness within the education system in any way they wish to pursue such action.

Through these less restrictive environments, decolonial frameworks propose that spaces can be created where “youth become more engaged in school and more likely to develop their literacy, argumentative, and critical thinking skills” in a manner through which they feel seen and represented (Ramirez & Jimenez-Silva 91-92). However, it is important to understand that the creation of these spaces should not be framed in terms of filling the space of something that youth of color lack, but should rather be framed “in terms of fulfilling the needs of youth to use their skills and voices and contribute to their communities” (Ballard 181). While we recognize how the experiences of youth of color are marginalized by the coloniality within the education system, we should not confuse this with the perception of youth of color as deficient by the fact of their marginalization. In fact, the research shows that youth of color “possess a strong sense of direction, self-esteem, and self-worth—qualities viewed as essential aspects of resilience” in traditional education spaces (Hall 238). As such, this data further supports the notion that the colonial structures within the education system silence the voices of youth of color by limiting their ability to engage in conversations related to identity, language, culture, and community.

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Through its openness to exploration and imagination, creative writing as a practice can lead to a painful awareness of marginalization for youth of color. Abril-Gonzalez witnesses this through the insights she gained from the poems that her former fourth-grade students wrote about their distressing memories from living with the constant fear of deportation for themselves and their family members (425). Similarly, Flores describes how two youth participants of the summer creative writing program Youth Writing Collective (YWC) “confront[ed] the tensions and contradictions that exist in their lives” through their writing, using their voices to critique “the oppressive structures that marginalize and silence many while privileging few” (658). According to Anzaldúa, while “[p]ain makes us acutely anxious to avoid more of it,” in the borderlands, being “caught between the worlds” also allows for transformation through the shifting understandings of our realities (47). As such, a Borderlands pedagogical approach can enable a deeper critical consciousness of how creative writing and the space in which it is facilitated can positively impact youth of color. For example, through their poetry and fiction, youth participants can “make meaning of and develop [their] identities” in different ways than they would writing in a traditional classroom (Flores 654). In addition, being within a community of peers who can provide “social and cultural information that youth of color consider legitimate and valuable sources of knowledge” fosters a sense of belonging and connection among the participants (Hall 236). In these spaces, youth engage in critical reflection and self-expression, developing their literary and writing skills to cultivate community outside the confines of coloniality.

As they progress through school, youth increasingly develop a desire for belonging among their peers and in the world (Ballard 181). As such, the socioemotional connections that youth develop within decolonial creative writing programs can also contribute to broadened

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perspectives (Ballard 195). Through the inclusion of “multicultural texts and student-centered practices” within the curriculum and structure of the programs like YWC, youth participants found identity belonging and peer support that inspired “the crafting and performing of their own original pieces” (Flores 654). Programs such as YWC encourage self-exploration among youth to foster the “discussion of social issues that are often absent in the curriculum” of traditional educational spaces in order to “critically examine and challenge their worlds” (Flores 658-9). According to a Borderlands framework, being able to recognize and name the damaging practices of coloniality can help “some of the fragmented pieces beg[i]n to fall together—who we were, what we were, how we had evolved” (Anzaldúa 70). As such, these programs provide space “for identity construction and experimentation,” as well as an outlet “to vent [...] emotional frustration, confusion, and desire” through creative writing as acts of resistance against societal norms (Weinstein, 30). In this way, youth of color can begin making sense of the contradictions and confusion of their borderland identities within these transformative decolonial spaces.

Conclusion

In this comprehensive exploration, we uncover how youth use writing as a form of identity formation, self-expression, and resistance against the hegemonic system that surrounds them. The frameworks of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and decoloniality provide a lens through which these experiences are contextualized, emphasizing the significance of spaces like creative writing programs in offering belonging and representation. Borderlands Theory emphasizes the importance of decolonizing the curriculum to offer inclusive, culturally relevant spaces that address the emotional and sociopolitical needs of youth of color. As transformative decolonial spaces, these creative writing programs help youth of color navigate their borderland identities

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and open up the opportunity for them to deconstruct the oppressive structures within traditional spaces of literature, language, and writing.

Methodology

Research Method

For the purposes of this project, I conducted guided interviews in order to pinpoint the particular structures and goals that participants observe(d) and experience(d) in their creative writing programs. These interviews consisted of an open conversation where knowledge could be exchanged and recorded as data. Every participant was asked to sign a Participant Consent Form prior to the interview and received a list of the questions in preparation. Hall (2007), Ballard, et al. (2023), and Abril-Gonzalez (2020) each use similar methodologies for their investigations about the impact of creative writing programs for youth of color. Hall and Ballard et al. conducted interviews while Abril-Gonzalez engaged in *pláticas* and testimonios in a group setting. Testimonios are first-hand accounts of people's lived experiences that are shared to call for political action and change pertaining to the circumstances they face within their communities. Using these methods, the researchers involved these youth of color in the collection of their data about the programs they wanted to learn more about. While the participants in my research project did not offer testimonios about their experience in creative writing programs, I draw on Abril-Gonzalez's processes as first-hand experience from the people directly involved within these communities is necessary for the contextualization of the sociopolitical implications of creative writing programs.

The experiences that my research participants shared provided me with the information and data needed to answer my research question. For my project, at the beginning of each interview, the participants were asked whether they would prefer to use their first name or a

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pseudonym in the presentation of this research. All questions were asked in the same order during the interviews unless a participant had already answered one or part of the questions listed. Through these guided interviews each participant gave accounts of their first-hand experiences within the larger scope of their creative writing organizations.

Community Setting

Two of the three interviews conducted involved staff members of Chapter 510, a creative writing organization based in Oakland, California. Chapter 510 is a youth writing, bookmaking, and publishing center dedicated to providing a safe and supportive environment for Black, brown, and queer youth (as found on their website) between the ages of eight and nineteen. Their physical location is designed to foster community through its vibrant and colorful tables, chairs, and cushions among other decorations to create fun writing spaces. Other features like their stage enable open-mic nights where students can perform and share their writing. All their workshops and community events are held at the physical location or virtually. Youth of color from all over Oakland schools and neighborhoods are invited to join.

The third interview conducted involved a former staff member of Read and Write Kalamazoo (RAWK), another creative writing organization in Kalamazoo, Michigan. RAWK is devoted to celebrating and nurturing creative confidence in reading and writing skills for youth. With their in- and after-school programs, summer programs, and other enrichment community partnerships, RAWK encourages joy, creativity, and access through an approach that emphasizes cultural identity. Similar to Chapter 510, RAWK's physical space has a library, craft stations for exploration, and colorful art pieces that are constantly changing. RAWK, as a creative writing organization, differs in that most of their programming involves staff and volunteers doing community outreach in both the local area and low-income communities of color. Workshops,

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read-a-louds, and other events are held at their physical location, schools, neighborhoods, and virtually.

While I was unable to visit the physical locations of both organizations in person, I was introduced to their environments through the descriptions that the participants offered. Through these interviews, I entered these spaces with an outsider perspective as someone who has not participated in creative writing organizations as a youth, volunteer, or staff member. However, I actively searched for and began this project due to my personal experiences with creative writing as a young person of color who did not have access to these kinds of spaces. Even when I was able to participate in creative writing classes, I did not feel represented by the predominantly white and English-only curriculum. My positionalities affect my interests, as being a young woman of color impacts what I like to write, and being a college student affects what I am able to do with it. Through this project, I share an interest in creative writing and its benefits with all three participants, whose experiences led them all to their roles in Chapter 510 and RAWK.

Participants

The three individuals who participated in the interviews were Mr. H, Marabet (MAH-rah-bet), and Kai. As previously mentioned, each participant was asked to sign a Participant Consent Form and choose whether they would like to use a pseudonym or their first name for the purposes of this project. They were also asked for permission to audio and/or video record the interviews. Two of the participants identified themselves as Black, one as Latinx, one as using he/him pronouns, and two as using she/her pronouns.

Mr. H is the Facilities Coordinator and a Staff Teaching Artist at Chapter 510. While I do not have explicit details about his role as Facilities Coordinator, in his role as a Staff Teaching Artist, Mr. H prepares and leads workshops for queer youth of color and acts as a guide for the

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young participants. Marabet is the Program and Community Manager and a Teaching Artist at Chapter 510, and in these roles, she organizes the required materials for events and workshops, trains the mentors (preferred title for volunteers) who come into the space to assist Teaching Artists, and acts as guide for the youth as well. During her time as a staff member of RAWK, Kai was the Volunteer Coordinator and then later Director of Programs. As Volunteer Coordinator Kai managed and trained the volunteers interested in working with the youth at schools or on-site, and as Director of Programs she reached out and connected with local organizations run by people of color, implemented more community outreach events, and involved the youth participants in curriculum changes and additions.

Data Analysis

For this research project, I used a thematic analysis approach to categorize the data gathered from each interview. During and after each interview I took notes on major takeaways, related concepts and topics of discussion, as well as new findings. After transcribing each interview, I listened to the audio recordings while reading the transcriptions to find common themes across all three interviews. My analysis was guided most directly by the frameworks of decoloniality and Borderlands theory as discussed in the literature review. The first theme I found was the implementation of a flexible curriculum and organizational structure within Chapter 510 and RAWK (Theme 1: Flexible Curriculum & Structure). The second theme involves the creation of spaces that support the young participants in their exploration of how to empower themselves by reclaiming their identities and telling their own stories (Youth (Self)Empowerment). The third and final theme in this project is that of building community within and beyond these creative writing organizations so that not only are the staff members and

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young participants impacted, but that so too are their wider communities (Theme 3: Building Community Connections).

Results & Discussion

Theme 1: Flexible Curriculum & Structure

Each of the research participants emphasized flexibility within the learning spaces they participate in, the freedom of exploration for youth, and/or an adjustable structure within the organizations themselves that contribute to the creation of a safe space for creative expression. This lack of rigidity within creative writing organizations like Chapter 510 and RAWK extends everywhere from their on-site workshops to their community outreach programs. The interviews revealed an intentional implementation of this flexibility into these organizations to help fulfill their goals of supporting youth. While the research participants each had a unique perspective on this process, they all described the positive impact such adaptability had on the youth.

When asked to reflect on what some of the most important aspects are in a creative writing program for youth of color, Kai answered that “[A]t RAWK [...] we were extremely flexible. Everything that we did was kind of letting the students lead how it went. [...] There was always that flexibility” to accommodate “individual student[s] wanting to work on something else and giving them space to do that.” She also went on to describe RAWK’s commitment to providing a positive community environment for Latinx youth who were English language learners. Creative writing instruction at RAWK involved English language comprehension with a focus on creating a welcoming, pressure-free environment for youth to engage with writing and literacy. Kai discusses how developing flexible program structures for creative writing allows greater freedom for the youth participants to find their voice and explore their writing. Flexibility within creative writing programs exemplifies a decolonial approach to instruction and learning

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that enables youth to engage with the curriculum material on a more meaningful level. Kai also demonstrates a Borderlands consciousness through her understanding that youth experience their language and writing in multiple contexts, and that their experiences should be validated and taken into consideration within these programs.

When asked about his goals coming into his role at Chapter 510, Mr. H answered, “[C]reating a safe space for them where they can just laugh and talk about their day, and, you know, at a certain point, [...] we had such familiarity with each other. [...] The point for me is for the students to have some fun [...] and get some writing done too.” Mr. H’s response describes the ways in which letting go of strict curriculum goals contributes to the creation of a fun and stress-free environment where youth can enjoy their time learning in a comfortable community space. In this way, Mr. H rejects the colonial interpretation of what a literary and writing space should look like. He understands that building connections within these spaces can be transformative and affirming for the young participants.

When asked to share her thoughts on what important aspects there are to include within a creative writing program, Marabet answered that “representation does matter. [I]t goes a long way in supporting [...] a healthy environment” to encourage youth “to become the best version of themselves through writing.” Marabet expresses the importance of freedom within these organizations in supporting youth in their journey to self-discovery through writing “their truth.” From a Borderlands perspective, this approach to teaching creative writing acknowledges and affirms youth as more than just learners, but as people who are experts of their own lives.

Theme 2: Youth (Self)Empowerment

As all the participants who were interviewed were staff members of these organizations and not youth themselves, the empowerment that the research participants describe in these interviews

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comes from observation rather than first-hand experience from youth of color. Instead, the interviewees reflect on their goals of creating spaces to uplift and amplify youth voices through creative writing. This theme is related to the previous as curriculum flexibility helps the research participants support youth in their discovery of (self)empowerment. This theme also recognizes the need for cooperation between staff members and youth participants as partners to achieve (self)empowerment.

When asked to share how he decided to design his workshop curriculum, Mr. H answered: “[T]he first time around that I did [the workshop], um, I wanted to praise their queer identity,” as he recognized that queer representation for youth of color was not accessible. He sees the inclusion of queer people of color’s successes across various fields and platforms as an important part of his curriculum. Mr. H’s personal experiences inform his desire to affirm the realities of queer youth of color by providing them with knowledge that they can then take and make their own. His intentions demonstrate a Borderlands consciousness about the complex realities that youth enter these creative writing spaces with. Recognizing that language, literary, and writing spaces too often disregard the sociopolitical context that these youth of color find themselves in, Mr. H actively creates a transformative decolonial space where the young participants can feel validated and represented.

When asked to talk about her goals and experience as she entered her role at Chapter 510, Marabet answered that as an educator and mentor, she aims to be a resource for students as “writing is not easy, and it is vulnerable, and it takes a lot from us. Yet, if [youth] have the support, then, you know, beautiful stuff comes out of it. [B]rilliant stuff, actually.” Marabet expresses her view on the roles that staff have in empowering youth while also acknowledging the agency of these youth as they develop and demonstrate their own voices and power. She

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deconstructs the notion that mentors/educators are the ones who set standards for students to meet and engages in a decolonial approach to learning through which the young participants can navigate their own creative paths and ask for guidance along the way.

When asked to reflect on what was working well in the organization and what goals she had when she entered her role as Director of Programs, Kai answered: “I was able to reach the community to just hear from people, learn from people. We started doing a lot more, um, getting youth voices involved and, [...] figuring out how to build a youth council so that we weren't just making decisions for them, but including them in the decisions.” Kai describes the creation of a youth advisory council at RAWK multiple times in her interview, emphasizing the importance of an organization-wide approach to supporting youth (self)empowerment. She demonstrates how transformative decolonial spaces can be created for and with youth by including them in the process of transformation.

Theme 3: Building Community Connections

Community is an essential aspect of these creative writing organizations as it creates comfortable environments for learning and for building meaningful connections with others of similar and different backgrounds. This third and final theme intertwines the previous themes as each encapsulates ways that youth are supported and empowered when all aspects of their lives are acknowledged. Every research participant talked about the ways that uplifting youth of color also impacts the communities they belong to outside of these organizations. Whether it be through outreach events in low-income neighborhoods, open-mic nights where youth share their writing with their family and friends, or through the publication of their work, youth of color participate in and influence their communities.

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When asked about her thoughts on important things to be conscious of when designing a creative writing program, Marabet answered that is important to “mak[e] sure that while you're thinking of the student, you're also thinking about the family” because “we have to remember that these students bring their experiences, their family, their community – and how do we hold them together?” Marabet engages in a Borderlands framework by recognizing that the youth in these creative writing organizations leave these spaces with the ability to impact others. She deconstructs colonial interpretations of young learners as a homogeneous group by affirming that each individual has a different story and experience.

When asked to describe how she decided to structure the programs and curriculum within the organization, Kai answered that it was crucial to consider the positionalities of the youth. She described how weekend or evening programs were mostly attended by white youth despite the youth of color also expressing interest in these programs. Youth of color could only attend programs at their school, thus, Kai explained that when “we see a problem, we have to figure out how to fix it.” Their solution was to start virtual programming and hosting block parties that involved going into the communities so that people without transportation would still be able to attend. Kai explained that the programming at RAWK “came up by seeing a need, seeing a gap in what we were doing, and then trying to fill it up with something” to serve these communities. Kai identifies the importance of taking into consideration the larger sociopolitical context in which youth find themselves. She further demonstrates a Borderlands consciousness by acknowledging that transformation is always possible when the need for change arises. Taking action to fill the gaps within the organization’s structure exemplifies how transformative decolonial spaces can be reshaped to actively work toward deconstructing colonial structures around us.

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When asked to elaborate on the significance of the physical space in which creative writing takes place, Mr. H answered that the environment impacts “children and their creativity,” describing the Chapter 510 building as full of art done by local painters, with “a stage inside the main space” for “teen open mics if we do it, or, [...] book celebrations when we do, um, finally publish a student’s work.” Mr. H engages in a decolonial perspective by acknowledging the power in altering the physical space where learning and writing take place. Creating a fun and colorful physical space breaks away from the colonial interpretations of what a learning environment looks like, encouraging the youth to think creatively and beyond the bounds of traditional educational spaces.

The implications of this project include the importance of decolonial frameworks within traditional educational spaces that can transform them into environments where all youth are seen and heard. The data emphasizes a strong need for the creation of comfortable and welcoming spaces for youth to engage in critical reflection and creative expression. The research demonstrates the incredible potential for future change in the creation of more culturally conscious creative writing programs for youth. Such change also holds the possibility of transforming other curricula in similar learning spaces. While this project has yielded many considerable findings, there still remain many areas left to explore.

I believe future research can dive deeper into the impact of socioeconomic status on youth of color and their ability to access places like Chapter 510 and RAWK. This area of study would also greatly benefit from more investigation regarding the impact on the academic performance of youth who participate in these organizations. Lastly, the research has also revealed structural limitations within these creative writing organizations. For example, non-profit organizations often have to prioritize the projects and programming they are able to offer

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as funding and resources are finite. As such, future research should focus on this gap in the applications and operations of decolonial frameworks within creative writing organizations in the hopes of finding solutions or work around for this gap.

Conclusion

The main key takeaways I had from this research project was the incredible value of creative writing as a decolonial pedagogy and form of creative self-expression. While creative writing has been my passion since I was in middle school, I still learned a lot about the ways it can be applied to encourage learning and give youth of color a way to express their complex emotions and thoughts that are too often disregarded in our society.

I pursued this research project in the first place because I envisioned it turning into a small but complete creative writing program for Latinx youth. While I could not include every detail about the interviews I conducted, I learned so much about the aspects that make up great creative writing programs. With the knowledge I gained, I feel much more prepared to take on the task of creating my own program for youth. I hope to start my own creative writing program for low-income Latinx youth at a middle/high school around the Santa Clara area. My goal is to identify a school that could really benefit from such a program, apply for funding, offer it at an accessible location and time, and provide books for the participants.

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