

*“The protests made me feel so proud of us”:
Critical participatory action research by immigrant youth of color bearing witness to the
Movement for Black Lives racial uprisings*

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“There are heroes and, emphatically, heroines enough in this history. Yielding to the temptation to focus on their courage, however, may miss the point. Part of the legacy of people like Ella Baker and Septima Clark is a faith that ordinary people who learn to believe in themselves are capable of extraordinary acts, or better, of acts that seem extraordinary to us precisely because we have such an impoverished sense of the capabilities of ordinary people.”

— **Charles Payne**

We are the School in the Square (S2) intergenerational participatory research collective. From June 2019 through February 2020, we were a multi-racial, multi-generational participatory research collective of what Charles Payne might call “ordinary people” including twelve 8th graders (now 10th graders), an oral historian, a school counselor, and a professor of critical psychology collectively documenting how we, and our peers, were navigating the transition to high school, across 32 schools, in a deeply segregated city (NYC). In March 2020, our point of analysis shifted, radically and painfully. Now we are bearing witness and documenting history, in an even more unequal city, from the perspective of youth of color (aged 14 – 16), mostly from immigrant families, living in Washington Heights. In this project, we are chronicling a history of the present by exploring how young teens, largely Latinx, are surviving the pandemic, making sense of the racial uprisings and negotiating online learning in dramatically uneven contexts.

We write from “The Heights”, drawing on narratives gathered by young people who see themselves (ourselves) as researchers, activists, community members, social analysts and care-givers. Last year was the first year of our five-year longitudinal project. Twelve of us—then 9th graders—conducted 56 interviews on “transition to high school” from our 8th grade graduating class. In March 2020, due to the pandemic, followed shortly by racial justice protests, we saw an opportunity to document the experiences of young people, surviving within intersecting historic crises. To date, we have conducted more than 30 interviews during COVID19.

*with appreciation for the generosity and rich educational space created at S2, thank you Evan Meyers and Sherry King for all of your support.

In this chapter, we focus on *critical participatory action research and youth-led oral histories* as a framework for inquiry through a critical race lens. As Charles Payne suggests, we take seriously the activism of everyday people, including ourselves and our peers. We also take seriously the knowledge produced by youth of color, ages 14 – 16, concerning our lives and dreams, our schools and social movements, our families and anxieties, our communities and the rich mutual aid we see around us. We are growing up in, and documenting, life in Washington Heights when racial uprisings and pandemic, economic fears, food insecurity, health disparities and endless videos of state violence against communities of color, by police and by ICE, have disrupted previous conceptions of “normal” adolescence. We tell an intersectional story of dignity and self-determination, even as we endure systemic inequities in a city, state and nation scarred by sprawling wealth/race disparities.

The Design

School in the Square (S2) is a small, progressive charter school in Washington Heights, New York City, grades 6-8. The school serves 300 students, many of whom are immigrants, or the children of immigrants mostly from the Dominican Republic living in the Bronx, Harlem and Washington Heights. In September 2019, the first graduating class of 96 fanned out to 37 high schools across New York City. The Intergenerational S2 Research Collective has engaged a cross-institutional participatory research team dedicated to investigating research questions rooted in the experiences of S2 graduates moving through high school. We are in year two of our five-year longitudinal study of the graduating class of 2019.

Originally, we set out to conduct oral histories: twelve youth researchers interviewing peers, first and second-generation immigrant youth, to document how they were navigating New York City’s vast choice system of high schools. The research project was ground in the belief “No research on us, without us!” and situated within a culturally responsive/anti-racist middle school education. As a research collective we centered youth perspectives, with a critical race and immigrant lens; have gathered oral histories, participatory surveys, vlogs, letters to self, auto-ethnography, maps, documented writing retreats, restorative circle conversations, and we have collaboratively produced a set of videos to expose the wisdom, struggles and desires of these students. We generated the interview protocols together, developed a process for participatory analysis and most recently we created a set of ethical principles for speaking truth and yet protecting vulnerabilities of participants in times when many of our peers and families feel under surveillance. (see Anand, Fine, Perkins, Surrey, 2002)

Collectively we form what Maria Elena Torre would call a participatory contact zone, an intergenerational research collective, rooted in commitments to participation, dignity, self-determination and culturally responsive pedagogy (Paris & Alim, 2016; Torre and Ayala, 2014; Zeller-Berkman et al, 2011). We built in a rich layer of inter-generational mentoring such that community college students (Sam’s students) from Latinx immigrant families were hired to teach 8th graders from immigrant families how to conduct and analyze oral histories. Research questions, methods, interview protocols and survey items were generated by and rooted in the

wisdom of the young people, attuned to culture, experience, dignity and concerns about privacy (of youth and families). Knowledge production is of course labor, that should be compensated and recognized (Fine, 2017). Youth researchers were paid a stipend for the training sessions, our research retreat and then additional funds for interviews conducted through a grant secured by School in the Square. They/we are co-authors on our written work and are cited throughout—with their real names when appropriate. Creative and scholarly products, including videos and written products have been developed and reviewed collaboratively by the team. As participatory researchers documenting a history of the present with many graduates of a middle school rooted in “Facing History” and culturally sustaining pedagogies, we have been able to develop racial literacies in community, so we might critically and expansively read and analyze the present moment (see Adams-Wiggins & Taylor-Garcia, 2020; Ginwright, S. and Cammarota, J. 2002; Mosley, Neville et al 2019; Othley & Blyth, 2020; Sealey-Ruiz, 2020).

Beyond commitments to democratizing knowledge production, those of us from CUNY (Michelle and Sam) and S2 (Arnaldo with founder Evan Meyers and consultant Sherry King) organized the project to support the young people in their transition to high school. And then as COVID19 overcame the city and disproportionately Washington Heights, S2 extended support to students, alumni and their families. Even before the pandemic, we anticipated that some might eventually encounter difficulties with school, housing, health care, police or immigration, mental health or family concerns. We did not want to simply “document” these struggles, but vowed as an embedded obligation of the research, to help young people and their families avoid the cumulative consequences of structural dispossession. Thus, we built into the research design a form of structured support and policy shifts at the school. From the beginning, a transition counselor, Arnaldo Rodriguez would be available to provide and/or connect these young people and their families to emotional, educational, social, economic and legal support. During COVID19, the school built a food pantry, hosted a school supply exchange space, checked in regularly with students, alumni and families, helped – to the extent possible – with housing and academic concerns. Our commitments were not only to document inequity, but intentionally and lovingly to convert research into anti-racist action.

Our interviews are extensive, lifting up experiences of the pandemic, uprisings and on-line learnings. Across zoom, we have heard concerns that are educational, ethical, political, linguistic, psychological and civic. We have learned about struggles with digital learning, the loss of family members, fear of food insecurity, depression, and the inability to bury relatives back in the DR after they died of COVID. We were impressed, and want to share in this short chapter, how the 2020 anti-racist uprisings served as Popular Education for us, provoking a desire for activism, some tensions within our respective families, amplifying ambivalence around police and animating deep appreciation for a middle school education rooted in an anti-racist “facing history” curriculum.

Bearing Witness and Becoming Activists: Racial Uprising as Popular Education

We have learned much in our 2020 interviews. The data collected is being used to strengthen the school’s racial history curriculum and mental health services. We met with Deputy NYC Mayor Phil Thompson in November to provide a critical lens from early teens on

the pandemic, protests and online learning for post COVID19 policy consideration. But here in this chapter we center the racial uprisings as a portal for seeing the aches, the desires and the solidarities of young people of color, coming of age, in New York City, 2020. We show how young people experienced these uprisings as popular education, as racial literacy pouring onto the streets, as a spark toward activism and solidarity and as exposing political and racial tensions within families.

Bearing witness to the Black Lives Matters (BLM) movement out of their windows, through social media or in the streets, these young people were joyous that “finally someone is standing up.” Their attraction to the uprisings enabled activism—on the streets, online, and within their local communities, and sometimes created tensions with family. Many were constrained at home by family rules surrounding COVID19, precarious immigration status, or parental fears of police violence against protestors. Still we/they appreciated that private pains and wounds were spilling into the public. They showed their solidarity mostly online, some a little annoyed that “my mother won’t let me go out to protest.”

When asked, “why do you think these protests grew so rapidly now?” the alumni responses were thoughtful and informed. Sympathetic to neighbors, family members, people on social media who are “tired of this happening” and “just wanted justice.” A former S2 10th grader from Washington Heights Alyssa Victoria explained that: “It started with police brutality, police killing innocent black lives...provoked it.... People of color and black people, they were tired of it. They were tired of this happening and they wanted justice.” She recognized and appreciated the calls for police accountability: “They were just trying to bring attention to the cops... ‘look what you’ve caused.’...Now, a lot of people said, OK, it was not necessary to have a riot.... Other people...think the riot brought a lot of attention.” Her close friend Mya LaPorte from S2, now a tenth grader from a Dominican family living in Harlem explained the evolution of the protests as being dictated by the refusal of the NYPD to recognize their shared humanity: “So obviously, people of color are...getting mad. It’s been happening for a long time, and yet we haven’t seen any change. So, you know, that’s when they started the protests and then that turned into a riot because I feel like the police during that situation mishandled that completely. You did not need to do what you did.... Like, well, you guys didn’t care for us when we were trying to be peaceful, so why should we be peaceful anymore?” These youths articulated a complex understanding not just of the issues that sparked the protest and informed its character, but also of how power and the status quo can be challenged.

Bearing witness to the protests provoked a deep sense of empathy and solidarity in these young people. Watching, listening and engaging in the unfurling of rage and demands for racial justice “opened my eyes.” “We now have a voice” and “we know that people in our community” share these thoughts. *Jesslin Hiraldo* explains the power of “sharing stories.” “How George Floyd was killed, well murdered was brutal. And people decided not to stay shut. [They began to] fight back and speak out on what they thought was right. So when me or my community are sharing stories, I feel like it’s more effective now because we now have a voice and know that people in our community have the same thoughts.” *Aiden Lam* considered the protests an “awakening”: “when you hear people speak about their past experiences, it’s very awakening.... I feel like this is and this whole movement, generally, has really shown how prevalent racism is in our country....” Others reflected on how the façade of calm collapsed in the wake of George Floyd’s murder as non-white communities throughout the city increasingly

shared experiences within their communities of negative encounters with police that emboldened the movement demanding change.

The uprisings functioned as a form of popular education: strategic political theatre, on the streets, “out my window” and on the internet. Siarra Saviñon offers that the uprisings opened her eyes and pierced the silences that surround systemic racism: “I know racism was a thing and it's always been a thing, but with all these protests happening, like, it really opened up my eyes and really realized what's going on in the world and how certain situations aren't being talked about and they should be.” Learning from each other, these young people were sharpening their own lines of analysis, piercing the silences of “certain situations that weren't being talked about and should be.” The young people described a new collective consciousness of the trauma racist policing had inflicted on their neighbors, friends and loved ones. Perceptions of racial injustice, for these 9th and 10th graders, were sharpened.

As an echo of W.E.B. DuBois' pageantry genre, designed for the Black community to learn history and collective experiences, Noel Columna elaborates on the pedagogical gift of the uprisings: “I feel like [for] some people who don't really know that much about black history....[the protests] really taught them, the history of these protests.” Many commented on social media as an information highway that allowed students to educate themselves in a way inaccessible to previous generations. Alyssa Victoria explains, “I feel like social media really brings the awareness and lets you know what's up. And I think that was my biggest source of...inspiration and that's what really inspired me to continue supporting Black Lives Matter. [Friends on Social Media] educate...and...reassure me.”

On a more personal level, these youth researchers voiced a deep appreciation for their friend and fellow researcher Alondra Contreras. Alyssa explained, “Alondra, a person in our group, she says, really inspiring words and she educates me... And I'm like, thank you. Thank you for letting me in on that.” Aidan Lam mirrored these sentiments: “I have a friend, Alondra, and...before this whole pandemic in eighth grade, she was very outspoken about these things...She really taught me a lot. And I went to like a predominantly white elementary school. And a lot of the stuff, it was pretty much general biased history. And I was talking to her about it and she told me, like basically we were talking about history...and if you change, like the perspective of the narrative, how clear it becomes.”

The protests also kindled memories of racialized incidents in their pasts. A student researcher (Alyssa) recalled that when she lived in Connecticut “it was like second grade and people used to call me Mexican. And I don't know what that's supposed to mean. I didn't say anything.... but they said like, oh, you're Mexican, you should go get that Mexican guy.... It bothers me...” Another commented: “There would be times when some people like to talk bad about us because we're talking Spanish” By stitching their own racialized wounds into a larger fabric of U.S. history and struggles for racial justice, these young people could see themselves as woven into the fabric of a movement growing down the block and around the nation. Aidan suggested that the uprisings have forced a national racial reckoning, “I feel like a lot of people were kind of I mean, they probably knew about [structural racism], but just didn't really face it. They didn't see, it was kind of probably in the back of their minds. But this like these protests have really drawn it out...” Allies from unlikely sources could be forged in these conditions as Alyssa noted, “You know, there's...a lot of white people, like they're genuine about this and

they're like using their privilege to help support the Black Lives Matter movement. I think that's great."

From Witnessing to Engaging: Activism Online, Protests in the Streets and Intergenerational Tensions at Home

In times of COVID19, the journey from shifting consciousness to activism is of course treacherous, particularly for young people, of color, in immigrant families of multiple generations, where COVID19 flared with devastating furor.

We asked how the young people responded to the protests. Many replied as frustrated on-the-street activists, while other were keyboard warriors kept home by family members concerned about police escalations and contracting COVID. One student Alyssa Victoria recalls, "My mom wouldn't let me protest. She's a party pooper." Another, Samantha Bruno explained, "I couldn't go out in the streets, my mom wouldn't let me." A third conceded, "I did want to join the protest, but my mom told me no, because she was so scared in case something happened to me, in case the police came." Yet another Mya Laporte explained, "I wasn't allowed to protest.... I wanted to...but I couldn't protest." Denied the ability to attend physical protests, these students used new tools to engage in anti-racist activism.

Many of these students found their voice on social media. They expressed their solidarity with the anti-racist movement taking hold of the streets below through tools inaccessible to earlier generations. One 10th grader explained that after she was forbidden from protesting by her anxious family members, she moved to social media: "I like on social media that's a really, really good platform to spread awareness. I feel...think the biggest platform is tik tok, which that's kind of silly, but it actually is. And a lot of people do bring awareness to these certain things and they have protest there and they have a lot of things that you can get educated, be educated...." Another Jesslin Hiraldo explained, "I feel like most of my friends and some of my family went on Instagram and they posted a lot of information on Black Lives Matter. On their bios they would put the George Floyd go fund me.... They would post like the black screen with the caption Black Lives Matter with the different artist." Another Sheylany Paulino Valdez explained she engaged by "sign[ing] petitions...and I've shared stuff on social media."

Still, a number were able to engage in-person anti-racist protests, in support of a movement that has become transformative for youths of color in New York, often in concert with on-line media. Alondra explained, "I have gone to protests and I also have been trying to educate people on what has been going on in America.... I've been using social media to talk to people from around the globe." For some, the activism became intergenerational moments of unity. A 10th grader Aidan Lam recalled, "My mother took me to a protest in New York. Very peaceful. It wasn't like violence, like rioting.... I heard a lot of people speak and a lot of people were sharing their own experiences....when you hear people speak about their past experiences, it's very awakening.... I feel like this is and this whole movement in general, has really shown how prevalent racism is in our country..." This is a generation that is redefining what it means to be an engaged activist. Today, taking to the streets and posting on social media together further the goals of raising awareness, building solidarity and holding power structures accountable.

Evolving Lens on the Work of Anti-Racism and the Role of the Police

This new found activism unfolded complex tensions, for some, at home. Queens-based Filipina anti-racist activist and author Micaela Millan explains, “When the Black Lives Matter struggle became reinvigorated after the horrific death of George Floyd, my first step in participating in this movement started at the dinner table.” Millan’s experience mirrored those of the non-black youth researchers of color. In their intellectual, political, ethical, affective and virtual connections, most of the young people we interviewed embraced a bold and broad sense of solidarity, as people of color. They appreciated the commonalities and struggles of Black lives and immigrant lives, and yet in many cases their families disagreed. For some, these newly formed solidarities and critical consciousness provoked tensions within families and between community members.

Some of our researchers worried about what they came to see as anti-Black racism within their families and communities. Alyssa Victoria offered a story that was repeated by many: “My family...they don't consider themselves people of color, like being Dominican. They're like 'I'm Spanish...'” Mya Laporte was exasperated in discussions about the protests with her family: “I sit down thinking, like, grandma, you're black.” A 10th grader reflected on the racism that manifests in the immigrant community to which she belonged: “I see that as Dominicans...they're only black when it's needed. Like they're only black when they want to say the N-word.... [I'm] like, 'look at these protests...support something.'”

Difficult racial conversations were, however, not only with elders but also internal—particularly when these young teens had to think through their relations with the police. A number spoke of the growing ambivalence they harbored toward law enforcement. Samantha Bruno was clear: “There's overpolicing in Brown communities and Black communities and I do see that... I don't have that much trust in police just because of experiences from other people...” The use of force against Black and Brown communities, as well as against protestors over the summer, deepened their growing sense that police violence was systemic racism. 10th Grader Joel Almonte emphasized the unchecked power of the police within communities of color: “The police...they have so much power and they see colored people as an excuse to use that power, and...they're overusing their power. They think they're so much more powerful than everybody. They think they could do whatever they want. And the worst part about it is that if they think you're doing something wrong, it doesn't matter. They could stop because they have the power to do it.... People are demanding justice....” Alyssa came to a similar conclusion when offering her analysis of the ways structural racism operates within the law enforcement community: “I think that when you're a cop, you can only choose the uniform you're in, or your people. It's not both. You have to listen to what the people that are on top of you say, you know, and if that consists of suspecting somebody and then arresting them for looking suspicious, that's what you're going to do.”

The heightened perception that developed from negative experiences with police within these students’ communities was amplified by the digital solidarities against police brutality. Many youth researchers expressed a deep ambivalence about the current criminal justice system. Joel explained, “When I see police, I feel scared. I feel scared because you never know what could happen, what they could do. But I also realize that there's also good police, I cannot

not say all police is bad.” School did not provide much refuge for many of these teens from escaping the anxiety of police encounters. Alondra Contreras explained that she would urge the Mayor to end “the overpolicing in schools and [remove] the school safety agents and metal detectors and stuff like that, [which] has a negative impact on life.”

While most expressed support for the Black Lives Matters movement, some were just confused about how to build community safety without police. Nathan Boissier reflected “I feel like if you start to rebuild the police, I feel like this crime is going to go all the way up because if you want to rebuild the police, there's going to be nothing there to stop criminals, basically. So I'm a little confused...” And still others have relatives who work for NYPD, and they recognize the vulnerabilities. Another layer of anxiety for young people who witness parents off to work in precarious circumstances.

Developing Racial Literacies: Learning to Read the World Racially

Throughout this process, but particularly during the Summer of 2020, we (Michelle, Sam, Arnaldo) were quite impressed by the sophisticated “racial literacies” expressed by these young people. Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz (accessed 2020) helps us frame the wisdom narrated by the youth researchers: “Racial literacy in schools includes the ability to read, write about, discuss and interrupt situations and events that are motivated and upheld by racial inequity and bias... an action-oriented process requiring love, humility, reflection, an understanding of history, and a commitment to working against racial injustice.” Director of Oral Histories for the project CUNY Professor Samuel Finesurrey asked, “Did anything about your S2 education help you make sense of the protests and the uprisings?” To a person, there was a resounding YES. Their expansive racial literacies, by their own accounts, were nurtured in S2 social studies classes where students were asked to pierce the “white gaze” that saturates most history classrooms; to re-write their textbooks, and to conduct original research on racial injustice/oral histories. When the murder of George Floyd catalyzed an international movement for Black Lives, these youth researchers explained that the culturally responsive curriculum at S2 (not so much in high school) helped equip them with the historical insights to grow the movement within their own social networks.

Their sixth and eighth grade social studies teacher Maeve Pfeiffer drew particular accolades for preparing students to critically engage at such a young age in anti-racist activism that has swept the nation. Noel explains, “Not only did [Ms. Pfeiffer] teach me about history and like important things that happened...she also taught me...how to talk about them, how to think about them.” Jesslin elaborated further, “As a graduate from S2 in my social studies class and we talked about the Little Rock Nine, all those different cases that were involved, the racism. And I feel like my teacher from social studies, Miss Pfeiffer, prepared me to speak about racism and encourage people to talk about it too.” Joel added, “That class was amazing, they taught us so many things. It was really one of the main classes that taught us about the real world..... And we just learned a lot about racism, discrimination...police brutality. We just learned a lot about that in S2.” It was a critical reflection on American history, Aidan explains, “It wasn't like the typical American history where everyone's the good guy.”

Not all schools in the NYC embrace the actively anti-racist pedagogies employed by educators at S2. Asked about the role high schools did—or should—play during the racial

uprisings in providing the space to air frustrations and grievances, the responses were uneven. Aidan expected more from high schools: “I know some [high] schools remained silent [after George Floyd’s murder]... I think that's very wrong, especially...in high school in New York.... It's better to be open with your students.” The silence can be painful, especially for those who have experienced a more racially responsive educational institution.

The impact of a strong “facing history” education is evident. At S2 educators are committed to culturally responsive pedagogy and to scaffolding youth understandings of U.S. racial history. The students from diverse backgrounds were invited and expected to inquire, study, learn more about their own and others’ background. These alumni, both interviewers and the peers they interviewed, were well informed, engaged and overwhelmingly supportive of the BLM protests. Those who attended S2 in particular credit their middle school teachers for giving them a “lens” for seeing and understanding the uprisings. There is much evidence in these interviews that a culturally responsive education is pedagogically essential as young people are navigating racism, uprisings, state violence and engaging in movements for racial justice.

Envisioning the Future

These times of despair have not led to a dimming of future hopes for many of these students. They are still willing and able to dream big. When asked, “Who will you be at age 25?” Mya explains “I hope I'm happy is the most important thing. I'm living like somewhere that I want to live and maybe New York or maybe like California around there. Somewhere like where I would be happy.” Jesslin has high aims for herself in the medical profession explaining at: “twenty-five as a medical student because you can't be a doctor just yet. So I see myself as a medical student. A successful job.”

Perhaps because they live in times of youth empowerment, or perhaps because of their culturally responsive education at S2, these students’ future goals were soaked in the desire to live in, and create, a more just society. Naomi Pabon, an S2 graduate who recently moved to Florida explained, “If I play basketball, I do not want to go to the WNBA because the wage gap and the injustice is not fair at all. But if I could play overseas, that would be great.” Mya declared, “I'm super strong about...female women's rights. I'm super strong on LGBTQ+ rights. I'm super...passionate about those things.... So I hope that I still have those morals.... I hope I'm still sticking up for stuff like that.”

Clinging to hope, nestled in critique, these students can still imagine a more equitable future. Alyssa explained, “I'm holding on to that hope...I have faith in New York at least.” Nathan remarked he hoped: “For everybody to have equity instead of equality.” Alondra added: “I hope that...laws and regulations are put in place to prevent global warming to become bigger and also a lot of laws in [are put] place to prevent...police brutality.... When I...think of the election, I don't have hope for that at all.... I wish that Bernie Sanders never dropped out.” These youths are prepared and motivated to fight for a more just future.

Becoming Somebodies, Building Toward Collective Well Being

This participatory, intergenerational research project situates the perspectives of youth of color from immigrant families at the center of knowledge production and analysis. They have been socialized, in middle school, to view history and the present through a critical race lens. They have the courage to forge difficult conversations at home, in school and in their communities. They care much, dream big and now they carry their own and others' stories into an archive on the history of the present.

From their interviews, we can see how public protest functions as popular education for young people who are watching, tweeting and on the street. We learn that social protests educate and provoke the political imagination—like W.E.B. DuBois' pageants (see DuBois and Aptheker, 1985). Through the uprising young people recognized individual wounds stitched to collective desires and they understood that communities stand together to teach and learn, for mutual aid, to fight injustice and dream aloud about what else is possible.

In this project, we also see how culturally responsive pedagogy and critically engaged participatory research in the form of oral histories, designed, conducted, analyzed and curated by the S2 youth researchers can excavate, animate and enliven knowledges buried in bodies, families, communities and histories of struggle. As students and emergent scholars, the S2 researchers know they are "somebody": knowledge producers with a responsibility for the precious stories they have gathered.

We hear from these young people that they are becoming racially conscious social analysts, able to think critically about their own ethnic identities and with curiosity and solidarity about others' racial and ethnic identities. They seek to engage in a bold civic life for collective well-being and are willing to discuss, with respect and conviction, with elders and peers why solidarities matter. These young people are building capacity and solidarities as critical producers of knowledge and care; curating collective ethics for speaking out, and indeed becoming "somebody" responsible to educate the next generation.

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