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Theorizing with assemblage

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Introduction

Research with and for youth has been generally dominated by humanist-centered approaches. While these approaches remain valuable, there are nuances methodologically that may be further illuminated by an ontological or posthumanist lens in education. For instance, a posthumanist undertaking of youth studies focusing on youth participatory action research may take into account nonhuman agents that often go unacknowledged in humanist-centered projects. Similarly, youth studies focusing on youth literacies may present new insights into what is produced on the page or what meanings one can gather from text and in what contexts they occur. Critical theoretical methods as the overall premise of this volume can offer lines of flight for engaging in analysis respective to our research interests. Posthumanist research disrupts the hegemony of Western humanism and the centrality of Man (Wynter, 2003), allowing for more complex examinations of institutions, power, and relationality. In this chapter, we draw principally on assemblage (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) to suggest alternative ways of paying attention to text and context in youth studies. We also borrow from dialogism (Bakhtin, 1935/1981, 1984) to point out influences of literary criticism in our thinking. As we will illustrate, our entangled thinking created an assemblage both in coming together for purposes of writing this chapter and in the re-reading of YPAR and youth literacies as examples in our work. It goes to show that we are not separate from the thing itself.

What is assemblage?

In line with difference and becoming, Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) assemblage provides a lens for seeing the complicated entanglement and co-constitution of bodies, events, or phenomena. Assemblage offers new insights into becoming, recognizing that all are in process, always territorializing and deterritorializing. Those entanglements are a sticky constellation of forces, be they human, nonhuman, and/or discursive. For example, youth spaces such as classrooms, afterschool settings, or internet sites are not pre-existing but are the constant moving together and moving apart of objects, practices, bodies, sounds,
feelings, technologies, and affects. Assemblage does not prioritize a humanist-centered approach but rather recognizes that each component of the entanglement has agency.

With the guidance of such theory, assemblage widens our analytical frame of reference – to reimagine what can be seen as data and to rethink our relationship to data. The application of assemblage disrupts notions of linearity all too common in empirical qualitative studies. Our aim in this chapter, then, is to present assemblage in creating possibilities for reimaging text and context particularly within youth studies. In other words, what is the sticky constellation of forces that produce certain texts, and how are those texts entangled with other human, nonhuman, and discursive bodies? Similarly, what entangled bodies co-constitute the context and how does the context come to co-constitute those bodies? Borrowing from literary criticism and posthumanism offers new methodological possibilities for repositioning and examining discourses, human and nonhuman bodies, and learning environments, among others.

Assemblage is an entanglement of various bodies that territorialize and deterritorialize (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Territorialization sharpens boundaries while deterritorialization destabilizes (DeLanda, 2006). Not only does an assemblage territorialize and deterritorialize, it ruptures binaries (Braidotti, 2018). Assemblages produce territories and these territories are not just space, but “they have a stake, a claim, they express” (Wise, 2015, p. 78). The assemblage is “a sticky constellation of a multiplicity of forces producing an event, situation, or composite grouping or body” (Dixon-Román, 2017, p. 36). The sticky constellations are not just bodies, “but also qualities, affects, speed, and densities” (Wise, 2015, p. 84). There is an emphasis of assemblage as an entanglement of multiplicities. Multiplicities can be bodies (human, nonhuman, and discursive), affects, speeds, etc. These multiplicities come together producing something new (Strom & Lupinacci, 2020). For example, in our coming together to write this piece our multiplicities came together producing a new entangled assemblage. Beyond seeing the assemblage as a thing, “it is the process of making and unmaking the thing, a process of arranging, organizing, fitting together” (Mazzei & Jackson, 2012, p. 747). Within this making and unmaking, we know what an assemblage is by understanding its function, what it does (Wise, 2015). The agency of the assemblage is owed to the “vitality of the materialities that constitute it” (Bennett, 2010, p. 34).

To demonstrate this notion of territorializing and deterritorializing, Deleuze and Guattari (1987) put forth the entanglement of a wasp and orchid. The orchid deterritorializes by tracing the wasp, and the wasp reterritorializes the orchid by taking its pollen. Here, the wasp plays a role in the orchid’s reproductive process; it is becoming. Thus, there is a becoming-wasp orchid and becoming-orchid wasp. This is a rhizomatic becoming, a new assemblage. Such an example illustrates that territories are not fixed. They are always being made and unmade, producing and rupturing assemblages.

Deleuze and Guattari (1987) note the significance of rhizomes or a way of thinking about non-hierarchical entry and exit points for data, representation, and analysis. There are six characteristics of the rhizome: (1–2) “connections
and heterogeneity” – every part is connected to another part and they do not have to be the same nature; (3) multiplicity – no “relation to the One as subject or object”; (4) signifying rupture – “there is a rupture . . . whenever segmentary lines explode into lines of fight”; and, (5–6) “principles of cartography and decalcomania . . . perhaps one of the most important characteristics of the rhizome is that it always has multiple entryways” (McMahon, 2015, p. 50). This work allows us to move away from arborescent (e.g., trees, hierarchy, binary) representations of relationships to ones like that of the becoming-wasp orchid mentioned previously.

To more concretely articulate what an assemblage may look like, we pull from Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) classical discussion of the book as assemblage,

A book has neither object nor subject; it is made of variously formed matters, and very different dates and speeds. To attribute the book to a subject is to overlook this working of matters, and the exteriority of their relations.

Rather than seeing a book as a self-contained entity, the notion of assemblage allows us to see how the collection of multiplicities (forces, qualities, affects, speeds, events, situations, composite groupings, systems of signs, etc.) territorialized and came to matter. The territorializing does not concretize the book, but rather that assemblage is in constant flux, territorializing and deterritorializing. The assemblage has a “distinctive history of formation” and a “finite life span” (Bennett, 2010, p. 24). There is always a becoming.

**Assemblage as complicating educational settings**

We argue that a turn to assemblage in method and analysis is a turn toward that becoming. To us, assemblage is relevant to the understanding of text and context in youth studies. As noted, much of the work in youth studies is humanist-centered. While we respect and appreciate this work, posthumanist scholarship and assemblage allow for the accounting of those bodies and agents that may have otherwise gone unrecognized. Assemblage allows us to see the complexity of our systems of complicated entrapments and possibilities within, with, and through discourse, discursive practices, our bodies, relations between bodies, relations with nonhuman bodies, etc. (Davies, 2018). To briefly discuss this complexity we take note of the voice as assemblage (Mazzei & Jackson, 2019; Mayes, 2019) and envision a classroom as assemblage (de Freitas, 2012). Often within youth studies we position voice as emanating from conscious and self-contained entities. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) remind us of our always-complicated entanglement with others, as they noted in their writing of *A Thousand Plateaus*, “since each of us was several, there was already
quite a crowd” (p. 3). As we are thinking, speaking, and writing our words are never wholly our own. Voice is entangled with objects, affects, bodies (human, nonhuman, and discursive), and theories (Mayes, 2019). The words, utterances, and statements are rhizomatic assemblages – lines of flight – making and unmaking other assemblages. Mazzei and Jackson (2019) place “voice within the material and discursive knots and intensities of the assemblage” (p. 67). The voice as practice is inseparable from the other bodies. This complicating of voice forces us to make particular moves. We must (1) pay attention to the “spatial and temporal dimensions of voice,” (2) not evoke representationalist positionings of voice as data, and (3) reimagine interviewing (e.g., how are the elements entangled in certain ways at certain moments?) (pp. 75–76).

Like the voice, our learning environments (e.g., classrooms, afterschool spaces, online platforms, homes, streets, etc.) are rhizomatic assemblages (de Freitas, 2012). Honing in on the example of a classroom we can recognize that there are many different agents (human, nonhuman, and discursive) playing a role within that assemblage. The blackboards, desks, handouts, discourses of teaching and studenting, announcements over loud speakers, posters in the space, student scribblings on desks, pens, pencils, and disciplinary forces all play a role in the classroom assemblage (de Freitas, 2012). Agency is not just in the hands of the humans, but is also distributed amongst the various bodies (see Barad, 2007; Bennett, 2010). By widening our view of agents and their entanglements, we account for our understanding of the various lines of flight produced by the multiple assemblages. As has been noted, assemblage complicates notions of individuality and the human as self-contained. The notion of rhizome ruptures conceptions of linearity by demonstrating how all are always in-process and becoming, no beginnings or ends (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Assemblage disrupts the human-centered work in youth studies by allowing for a widened acknowledgment of the agents involved and encourages posthumanist framings. Humans are but one agent within the assemblage; they are not the center. For the classroom as mentioned, students scribbling on the desks, loudspeaker announcements, and posters within and outside the classroom all add to our understanding of youth engagement. One would be remiss to overlook the role they play.

As Mazzei and Jackson’s (2019) work on voice demonstrated it is not just that the text or context is an assemblage, but so too is the act of conducting inquiry. As Fox and Aldred (2015) noted, the research-assemblage is entangled with the phenomena under examination. The research-assemblage includes the bodies, researchers, events being studied, methodological tools (e.g., surveys, interviews, recording technologies, data analysis software, etc.), models, and theories guiding the research (Fox & Aldred, 2015). Within the research design there is attentiveness to intra-action (Barad, 2007) between assemblages. How do bodies come to be entangled, and what is produced from those entanglements (e.g., the territorialiszing and deterritorializing)? Data collection calls for a nuance of alertness to a variety of bodies (human, nonhuman, and discursive) and those that appear to be animate and inanimate. Data analysis also requires
that we not only look at bodies, but how those bodies come to be and what is territorialized or deterritorialized via the assemblage (Dixon-Román, 2016; Fox & Aldred, 2015). Similarly, data analysis also necessitates recognition that the researcher is entangled with the assemblage and findings (Fox & Aldred, 2015). There is no outside; the researcher is entangled with that which they study (Barad, 2007). That said, traditional empirical research that may not place considerable weight on this entanglement qua assemblage as method can overlook deeper meanings regarding specific phenomena studied.

**Re-reading YPAR and schooling assemblages: example 1**

In theorizing assemblage within the context of youth studies we explore one session of a YPAR project from a 9th grade Ethnic Studies class during the 2017–2018 school year. To understand the classroom space is to first understand the larger school context. Vantage High (all names in this project are pseudonyms), located in western Massachusetts, serves approximately 1,200 to 1,300 students and 72% of those students identify as Latinx. Over the last 20 years, the school’s student racial demographic has shifted quite dramatically. Despite this change, the teaching force within the school has stayed overwhelmingly white. Public narratives (online news articles, student protests, teacher/student MI testimonials), discipline data, and school observations have indicated a deep racial rift within the school.

The school was under state receivership as a consequence of the state labeling the school chronically underperforming. Thomas (first author) was involved with a teacher professional learning community in the school, and within that professional learning community multiple teachers had mentioned that the state takeover added pressure to their classrooms (e.g., more teacher observations and administrative pressure for teachers to raise state test scores).

One of the necessary steps of engaging with assemblage is the move to displace humans as the only agents within an entanglement and recognize wider actors and multiplicities. In thinking about the school context as assemblage, the entanglement of the school’s racial divide with the state pressure to turn the school around produced a tense school climate. This tension spilled over into the 9th grade Ethnic Studies classroom. Nancy, a first-year Ethnic Studies educator, was leading the endeavor. Nancy was new to the school, but not to teaching. Prior to coming to Vantage, Nancy taught for eight years at a neighboring school and took an eight-year hiatus following that experience to focus on parenting. The 2017–2018 school year was Nancy’s return to teaching. Nancy was one of the few teachers of color within the school. Reflecting upon her experience, Nancy stated, “it was hard working in the school, as racism was everywhere and I felt very little support as a teacher of color.”

As Allan (2004) reminds us, teaching and continuously learning to teach is not a linear process nor an arrival at a fixed goal, but is a journey, a wandering, with various lines of flight. Each wandering and line of flight creates new assemblages and new learning. This wandering illustrates the notion of
rhizomes and pushing against linearity and arborescent (e.g., tree-like, hierarchi-

chal, binary) frameworks that often permeate traditional research processes and methods. A second consideration of applying assemblage is a pushing against linearity and recognizing the messiness of rhizomatic lines of flight. Too often within schools there is a focus on the instructional core: the teacher, the student, and the content (see City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009), without an acknowledgment of the agency of the nonhuman actors. In viewing teaching through assemblage, it complicates our notions of agents and actors within the context. Teaching as assemblage requires a reconsidering of the role of the various agents – the humans, nonhumans, and discourses (Strom, 2015). The teaching is shaped by all of the agents – the classroom, the handouts, the texts, the students, the technology, etc. They are not disconnected; they are entangled. For example, within Nancy’s class, Nancy’s identity (a new Ethnic Studies educator, a returning teacher after a long hiatus, and woman of color), the students (teenagers first entering high school, their experience within and orientation towards schooling), the context (an Ethnic Studies course, the class having over 30 students), content (YPAR, Ethnic Studies, texts, handouts, etc.), and other nonhuman agents played an active role in producing the territorialized assemblage. Thus, a third consideration is that assemblage requires a reimagining of what is considered data, the relationship between data and researcher, and a recognition that all are entangled.

Moving from the school to the classroom, we recognize the class as rhizomatic (de Freitas, 2012). Within each class session, and from session to session, there are various rhizomatic lines of flight. As has been noted, the classroom is composed of various bodies (human, nonhuman, and discursive) that move together and apart, territorializing and deterritorializing. The assemblages include the desks, students, pens, computers, papers, schooling language, teacher, texts, “as well as disciplinary forces whose power and agency are elicited through various routines and references” (de Freitas, 2012, p. 562). The routines, references, and administrator-teacher-student hierarchy entangle to demonstrate that power is not distributed evenly in the school or classroom assemblage (de Freitas, 2012). Nancy had over 30 students in her first period class.

Near the end of the year, Nancy introduced YPAR to the class and the youth took on various YPAR projects in an attempt to make change within the larger community. Students conducted projects on topics ranging from depression and suicidal ideations among youth to expanding the reach of Ethnic Studies in the high school. Within the classroom there were various lines of flight as students would demonstrate acts of being engaged/disengaged, excited/bored, and active/passive.

To more deeply explore the issue of assemblage in the context of youth studies we look at one session within the YPAR project. Prior to this specific session, the youth had already learned about YPAR (e.g., the work being youth centered, participatory, research based, and leading to action addressing a problem), created their project ideas, and started conducting research on their topic.
During this session, Nancy was introducing a handout to the students. Nancy briefly spoke to the students about the contents of the handout and how it was simply to be used as an aid and was not a graded assignment. This handout had a variety of tools for the youth to utilize. There were Venn diagrams, places to create action plan timelines, lined space to write thoughts, open space to draw, and a variety of other tools for mental organizing. Nancy had spoken to Thomas about the handout and stated her intention was to provide the youth a document that allowed for them to express their ideas in a variety of ways. However, when Nancy gave students the handout they almost immediately went to filling out the handout like an assignment.

Rather than looking at the handout as a tool to help guide their process, the students engaged with the handout as if it were an assignment. As one student Samantha noted, “Honestly, I am just trying to fill this out to get a grade.” Other students attempted to go section by section filling out the handout. As the researcher in the space, Thomas was confused and had to take a step back to ruminate on what was happening. Did the teacher not introduce the handout in an accessible way? Did the students not correctly interpret Nancy’s introduction? Did the students not understand what they were doing in their YPAR projects? Did Nancy not provide adequate explanations and examples of YPAR? In hindsight, these initial reflections were saturated with humanist-centered approaches. I was specifically focusing on the students and the teacher. I neglected the handout, the larger discursive apparatuses, and the other non-human agents at play within the assemblage.

After stepping away from the work and re-reading the classroom space through a posthumanist lens Thomas was able to see a different interplay of actors. Assemblage as method demands a new way of engagement. One is entangled with a variety of agents and must account for the entanglement. Rather than looking at the session as a failure of the teacher or students, Thomas recognized a specific assemblage of teacher, student, handout, schooling discourse, and various other nonhuman agents. As Taylor (2013) reminds us, “objects and bodies are entangled intra-active forces in the spatial assemblage of the classroom” (p. 694). The handout was an agent in the assemblage. The handout had thing-power, “the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle” (Bennett, 2010, p. 6). The handout intra-acted with the students, teacher, and discourse of schooling to produce a schooling assemblage. A schooling assemblage is an intra-action of various entangled bodies that produces and reinforces traditional modes of hierarchy, students as passive rather than active agents in their education, and emphasizes prescriptive entanglements.

During a conversation with Samantha, the aforementioned student, she expressed that “YPAR is just another school activity, I don’t think we can change society.” In further discussing schooling, Samantha noted, “I am so used to being told what to do.” This statement was not unique as other students made similar claims. For example, another student Nicole said, “Damn . . . no
one has asked me that question before.” Another student Derrick noted, “in most classes . . . it [curriculum] is standardized . . . we aren’t unique.” Schooling as shared through students’ experiences is prescriptive and inflexible. For much of their experience in schools they have either been lectured at or told to fill out handouts. Critical scholars have noted how schools often operate as a tool for social regulation and reproduction (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Patel, 2016; Vaught, 2017). This schooling emphasizes standardization. Schools often “side-step student agency” (Rombalski, 2020, p. 3).

So, when these students were provided the space and autonomy to conduct youth-centered work, they were also entangled with the larger discursive apparatuses of schooling, their schooling experiences, and the other non-human agents in the space. Rather than seeing the handout as a tool, the students engaged with it as an assignment; that is, the handouts they were given in schools were mostly treated as assignments. Thus, the thing-power of the handout worked in service of schooling. In other words, the handout was working in service of schooling and being entangled with the students, teacher, students’ experiences in school, and the discourse of schooling. These entanglements produced a schooling assemblage. We would have missed the complicated entanglement of the more-than-human intra-action if we did not frame the work through posthumanism and acknowledge the assemblages at play.

Re-reading youth poetry and literacies as assemblage: example 2

Apart from schooling assemblages, our coming together in this writing is an example of a textual assemblage. Thinking together has produced an assemblage that enables us to also recognize the intra-actions within this endeavor and, thus, the mutually constituted text as part of the analysis. The previous example of YPAR pushes our entangled thinking to a re-reading of related work centered on youth poetry. Korina has conducted various studies that focus on the literacy practices of young people across educational contexts. One context in particular is through June Jordan’s Poetry for the People program in Northern California. Youth poets in the program revealed not only the power of writing but the specific ways in which poems generate a sense of meaning-making in shaping youth’s identities (Jocson, 2008). The view of literacy as ideological and situated within context is influenced by sociocultural theories of learning. For this segment, it is important to show the relevance of dialogism and the notion of carnival in processes of becoming that are central to theories of assemblage, to illuminate in part how they advance our understanding of text and context in youth studies.

Integral to poetry as a medium of expression is the notion of utterance and heteroglossia. In The Dialogic Imagination, Bakhtin (1981) defines heteroglossia as “multiple social discourses” or ways of seeing the world made up of
alien words, “shared thoughts,” and “points of view” that weave “in and out of complex interrelationships, merges with some, recoils from others” (p. 276). The word, for Bakhtin, is a concrete living utterance shaped by various historical moments in dialogically agitated social environments. Directly related to the formulation of one’s language, this notion of utterance explains how alien words become appropriated, adapted, and owned. It shifts away from formalism to give attention to the way words are born in social context and also extends structuralism’s linguistic model to emphasize that there exists a relationship between individual speakers and texts. According to Bakhtin,

"The word in language is someone else’s. It becomes “one’s own” only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language (it is not, after all, out of a dictionary that the speaker gets his words!), but rather it exists in other people’s mouths, in other people’s contexts, serving other people’s intentions: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one’s own."

(1981, pp. 293–294)

This articulation of owning one’s words, a social yet private act of the speaking subject, is useful to understanding how authoring through dialogic interaction takes place. It emphasizes the dialogic nature of language use by recognizing the role of others from whom speakers or writers have learned the words or the anticipatory language of those whom they are addressing or answering in particular social spaces (Bakhtin, 1986, 1990). The non-sequential or horizontal dimension in the dialogic interaction characterizes the complexity of their similarities and differences in the exchange. At the intersection where subject, addressee, and context meet are the ambivalent elements where words as textual units are absorbed and transformed. As such, the interplay between textual and social spaces is deemed central to the process of becoming literate, to manipulate language and other signs, in ways that reveal the different social interests (Volosinov, 1973) and ideological becomings of individuals in their environments (Bakhtin & Medvedev, 1978; also see Freedman & Ball, 2004). Ideology in this sense is at the heart of the struggle over signs and meanings. Here, words as dynamic social sign systems are treated as situated within historical contexts, thereby rendering utterances as intricately shaped by existing social relations. Individuals’ social interests and ideological becomings reflect the class struggles present in communities as they share words, cultural symbols, and values to extend possibilities for communication, learning, and development. Take, for example, a child who grows up in a working-class multilingual household will not only pick up words and phrases (i.e., utterances) over time but will also develop ways of being and becoming in the world through the lens of particular cultural symbols and practices that may or may not be consistent
with those of the dominant culture (i.e., English-only movement in the U.S.). Simply put, there is much complexity behind a seemingly simple uttered word.

In Bakhtin’s view, the nature of the novel—or novelness—represents three concepts related to dialogism: polyphony, chronotope, and carnival. The first, polyphony (or multiple sounds), relates to heteroglossia and utterance as shaped by specific historical moments. The second, chronotope, refers to time and space, the axial ground essential for concretizing events, giving material form to representation, and “permitting the power of art to do its work” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 250). The intrinsic connectedness between time and space is laden with emotions and values to allow the flesh of narrative events in the represented work to enter the world of the reader or listener and thereby participate in the creation and renewal of the text. This connectedness also binds the novel as literary work to its temporal and spatial relationship with actual reality, or what Bakhtin calls the continual mutual interaction between the real and represented worlds. The third concept of novelness, carnival, emphasizes the embodiment of otherness. Carnival represents a historical phenomenon as in carnival events and, in literary form, is associated with breaking form in the spirit of free thinking. In Rabelais and His World, Bakhtin (1984) draws a parallel between the novel and the body. He describes the body as a living entity, as becoming, as grotesque, as different, and as continually created or re-created by the world, similar to the novel as intertextual and conceived from a web of relationships with the world. The novel in this light is said to be carnivalesque as it attempts to make the familiar strange, while also distinguishing itself as original from larger bodies of literary work.

Most salient to us in drawing on Bakhtin’s work are the literary tendencies that relate to dialogism or specifically the construction of words and meanings through dialogic encounters. Specific to youth literacies, for example, poems produced by youth, inclusive of spoken word performances, are influenced by others’ voices and writing styles with some utterances drawn directly from existing literary texts.

A re-reading of youth poetry in the manner described here is without a re-reading of our own processes of becoming as writers, thinkers, and collaborators within youth studies. For instance, while attuned to dialogism and the ways utterances are lifted from others’ words or derived from literature, Korina also recognizes the assemblages that influence one’s writing and how they materially and discursively shape the text produced. What might a post-humanist approach to youth poetry yield to help expand theory and practice in literacy studies? How might a consideration for literacies as assemblage shift how we understand the text produced or the context in which it is produced? How might a consideration of our own processes of becoming influence how we view text and context in youth studies? Next is a poem Korina wrote in response to a critical race moment some years ago. It serves as an example to echo curricular material from June Jordan’s Poetry for the People, in particular a racial profiling prompt that many youth poets, students, and student-teacher-poets including Korina
herself encountered in the program. It also serves as a heuristic for what possibilities may come when everyday experiences become living entities for analysis and exchange. The untitled poem is as follows:

When are racist and sexist jokes
Not racist and sexist? One could argue
They depend on context, person, or tone
To whom? Too many have let their guards down
Dangerously assume jokes are only jokes
Subtle ones, at best, betwixt.
Comfortability and camaraderie
Inevitably soft laughter in between
The privileged (in this case a middle-aged White Man) does not realize the joke, the ramifications
Of the joke or transparency through which
The joke reveals itself. Normalcy
Of ignorance and another (non)sense
Of entitlement privilege the teller to say
What is really on his/her/their mind
There are untold stories, here
Stones still unturned. It is time
Once again to rage about curiosities,
The elephant in the room. It is time
To revisit the past. Otherwise, we risk
A chance of bequeathing dangers
We have known for generations
All bets are on the table.

In stepping back to think about the various intra-actions that shaped what is revealed in the poem, Korina has asked herself (and perhaps you – the reader – might do the same), “How does this particular moment of writing, of everyday living, of racialized and gendered experience continue to inform the ways I engage youth literacies in my work? What might be missed when my own processes of becoming and enfolding possibilities remain in the sidelines of theory and research?” Even the questions posed within the poem remain relevant and are worth re-asking at this juncture in U.S. history – with a presidential election underway and a potential for change toward racial and social justice. The questions also become all the more important in the midst of a continued global health pandemic. Again, Bakhtin’s dialogism provides an important frame for further theorizing with assemblage in youth studies.

Implications for research in youth studies

Posthumanism and assemblage destabilize the hold of humanist-centered research by providing the acknowledgment and analysis of rhizomatic relations,
nonhuman agents, and becomings. For researchers interested in youth studies, they can help to generate new questions, embolden analyses, and just as important enable a more nuanced lens into examining institutions, power, and relationality that may be missed in only employing traditional approaches. As the poem reminds us, “all bets are on the table.” The re-reading of youth text and context via a posthumanist framing illustrates the complexity of educational contexts. There are various bodies that are constantly in-tra-acting, moving together and apart, territorializing and deterritorializing, making and unmaking assemblages. Beyond a humanist-centered framing, what we have presented here (an assemblage in itself) complicates understanding of the various bodies and their agency. For example, in Thomas’s work, if there were to solely be a humanist-centered approach, then there would have been an oversimplification of the context and bodies in-tra-acting. Any intervention to follow this research would have fallen short as it would not have recognized the nonhuman agents and the entanglement of the various bodies. The posthumanist framing allowed for a re-reading of the space to see the agency of both the handout and the larger discourse of schooling and how those agents were entangled with the youth. In Korina’s work, if poems on the page were strictly treated from a humanist, sociocultural lens, then there would be missed opportunities for considering in-tra-actions and the moments still folding at the time of the writing. What are those in-tra-actions and moments, and in what ways do they shape (how we view or treat) youth’s literacies across various social and educational spaces? In what ways can they better illuminate text and context in the study of schools and schooling generally, or literacy practices of youth specifically? From what we have argued, a posthumanist framing can help to illustrate how we as researchers are always a part of the phenomenon being studied. Because, simply, we are not outside of any project. A posthumanist framing enables us as researchers to pay attention to agential bodies that often go unacknowledged in traditional humanist-centered approaches.

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