ABSTRACT

PENDER JACQUES-LOUIS, KRISTEN N. Reclaiming Mydentity: Counterstorytelling as Adaptive Coping for Racially and Economically Marginalized Emerging Adults. (Under the Direction of Drs. Elan C. Hope and Craig “Kwesi” Brookins).

Emerging adulthood is an important period of human development for understanding identity (Arnett, 2000; Schwartz, Zamboanga, Luyckx, Meca, & Ritchie, 2013; Steinberg & Sheffield Morris, 2001). Some research has offered that emerging adulthood may be defined and experienced according to social group affiliation and socioeconomic status (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007; Arnett, 2003; Thomas & Azmitia, 2014). Furthermore, counterstorytelling, counterspace, and narrative identity research all offer that narrative processes which counter dominant oppressive narratives may be used within youth programs to facilitate positive identity development (Case & Hunter, 2012; McAdams & McLean, 2013; McLean, 2006; Schwartz, Zamboanga, Luyckx, Meca, & Ritchie, 2013; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). In this qualitative study, I analyze interviews with 12 emerging adult writing leaders and 17 writing samples from a Summer writing program. Findings support counterstorytelling as an adaptive strategy for coping with oppression and also suggest that counterstorytelling for this purpose involves two major themes: (a) reclaiming identity and (b) co-creating a narrative community.

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Reclaiming “Mydentity”: Counterstorytelling as Adaptive Coping for Racially and Economically Marginalized Emerging Adults

by
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DEDICATION

To my friend, mentor, and soul sister, Kristen Nabril Riddick who once asked: *"What was psychology called before it became psychology? What did our indigenous ancestors call it?"*

I hope that you have found the answer to this and many other questions you so boldly asked. Soar high out there.

"I walk in abundance now and in the future. Love has always been my home."
-KNR

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Kristen Nichole Pender

BIOGRAPHY

Kristen Nichole Pender is a dynamic woman on a mission to liberate individuals from the shackles of oppression through the arts and movement. Kristen is a south Florida native and graduate of The University of Central Florida (B.S. in Psychology) and The University of Miami (M.S.Ed in Community and Social Change). In 2016, Kristen left home for North Carolina to pursue a doctoral degree in community psychology. Along her doctoral journey, she experienced high levels of stress related to feeling isolated, disconnected from her spirituality, as well as racial and gender-based oppressions. Kristen realized that she needed a healthy coping mechanism to survive her program. For Kristen, pole fitness and dance became that and so much more. While earning her doctoral degree in community psychology, Kristen also developed as a performance artist and entrepreneur. In 2017, Kristen began documenting her movement journey on Instagram. Since then, her platform has gained the attention of thousands of followers. In addition to being a psychologist, Kristen is also a certified fitness professional by the American Council on Exercise and XPERT Pole Fitness . In November 2019, Kristen created Polecology®, an online pole fitness and dance coaching business. With Polecology®, Kristen applies her expertise in psychology to guide her clients and students along a journey of self-exploration and liberation through pole fitness and dance.

Kristen's website: https://www.thepolecologist.com.

Kristen's latest interview: https://www.poletryinmotion.com/blog/thepolecologist

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Introduction

Emerging adulthood is an important period of human development for understanding identity (Arnett, 2000; Schwartz, Zamboanga, Luyckx, Meca, & Ritchie, 2013; Steinberg & Sheffield Morris, 2001). Initiated in adolescence, identity development continues to evolve during emerging adulthood (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1966). Emerging adults gain access to certain liberties (e.g. the right to vote, drink alcohol etc.) and either maintain the privilege of financial support from family or earn financial income for themselves. Emerging adulthood is recognizably distinct within industrialized nations such as the United States (Arnett, 2006). Emerging adults in the United States are typically enrolled in colleges and universities, are single and/or without children, and work part-time (Arnett, 2000). Therefore, the journey to find oneself is supported by these newfound privileges, financial means, and delayed milestones of adulthood (Arnett, 2000).

It is also important to understand identity development specifically among emerging adults who face multiple forms of oppression (e.g. racism, sexism, heterosexism). Cumulative stress from multiple forms of oppression may lead to increased levels of self-reported stress (Cyrus, 2017). Some research has suggested that multiply-marginalized emerging adults in college may construct identity through a process of filtering social factors such as stereotypes (Abes, Jones, and McEwen, 2007). Research also suggests that stereotypes play an important role in how racially marginalized emerging adults a) perceive themselves and b) desire to be perceived by society (Silvestrini, 2020; West, Donovan, Daniel, 2016). Stereotypes are harmful to human development because they perpetuate an oppressive narrative of their identities that is one-sided and favors the dominant culture (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Consequently, oppressive

narratives may become internalized by multiply-marginalized youth and thus hinder positive development of identity (McLean & Syed, 2015b; Quintana & Segura-Herrera, 2003).

Some researchers have also investigated various styles of coping that marginalized individuals use to mitigate stress (Meyer, 2003; Phinney & Haas, 2003). Counterstorytelling has been used to illuminate ways that multiply-marginalized individuals cope with oppression (Corbin, Smith, & Garcia, 2018). Furthermore, personal storytelling has been investigated as a coping mechanism for women in an online support group for breast cancer (Høybye, Johansen, & Tjørnhøj-Thomsen, 2005). However, to date, counterstorytelling has yet to be explored as a coping mechanism for emerging adults facing multiple oppressions. Counterstorytelling involves youth in the process of identity work, in which individuals glean meaning from their lived experiences to voice narratives of oppression, resistance, and reimagined identities (Case & Hunter, 2012; 2014). Therefore, counterstorytelling may offer a mechanism for optimal identity development among multiply-marginalized adolescents and emerging adults participating in youth programs. Youth programs that situate identity development within the context of oppression may produce a positive effect on participants' self-esteem, mental health, intercultural relationships and educational outcomes (Umaña-Taylor, Kornienko, Douglass Bayless, & Updegraff, 2018). Some research has even suggested that arts-based programs focused on identity development may influence young people to create optimal social identities around a desire to effect social action and promote community belonging (Sonn, Quayle, Belanji, & Baker, 2015).

While the literature presents positive outcomes of counterstorytelling among youth participants in a programmatic setting, questions remain as to how counterstorytelling may influence the identity development of youth working within youth programs. The current study

bridges identity development, counterstorytelling, counterspace, and youth programming scholarship to address this gap in the literature. I argue that counterstorytelling is an adaptive coping mechanism (Spencer, Dupree, & Hartmann, 1997) for positive identity development among racially and economically marginalized emerging adult youth leaders. In the current study, I sought to understand counterstorytelling among emerging adults as a dynamic process involving two major components: (a) reclaiming identity and (b) co-creating a narrative community.

Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory

I call upon the phenomenological variant of ecological systems theory (PVEST) to analyze counterstorytelling as an adaptive coping mechanism for identity development (Spencer, Dupree, & Hartmann, 1997). PVEST uses an identity-focused, cultural ecological perspective as a theoretical framework to understand the trajectory of human development from the locus of social positionality (Spencer, 1995; Swanson, Spencer, dell'Angelo, Harpalani, & Spencer; 2002). Challenges arise at any given stage in the life course and threaten to disrupt human development (Swanson, Spencer, dell'Angelo, Harpalani, & Spencer, 2002). PVEST directs attention to the interplay between phenomenology (e.g. the experience of being a multiply-marginalized youth) and the ecological system (e.g. out-of-school learning spaces, community, local school system, educational policy). This relationship provides insight into how individuals mitigate stressors to influence positive developmental outcomes in their lives.

PVEST comprises five components of human development: net vulnerability level, net stress engagement, reactive coping methods, emergent identities, and life-stage coping outcomes (Hope & Spencer, 2017). Net vulnerability level refers to characteristics in the ecological context (e.g. individual, family, community) that present a risk or offer protective factors for

development. Net stress engagement refers to the way an individual experiences a stressor and is affected by the availability of protective factors in the environment. Reactive coping methods refer to problem solving strategies that may be adaptive or maladaptive. Emergent identities refer to how individuals define themselves socially (e.g. race-ethnicity) and personally (e.g. self-appraisal). Lastly, life-stage coping outcomes are the products of reactive coping and may be either productive or adverse to healthy human development. Individuals appraise themselves on an on-going basis throughout this process. In addition, individuals cycle and recycle through PVEST throughout the life course as stressors emerge.

For this study, I focus my analysis on two facets of PVEST: coping and emergent identities. Racism, classism, sexism, and heterosexism are some environmental stressors that affect the identity development of marginalized youth (Velez & Spencer, 2018). Oppression shows up in the ways marginalized people think about themselves, the groups they belong to and those to which they do not belong. Oppression creates a breeding ground for stereotypes, which may challenge human development by muting the voices of marginalized youth. Consequently, the narratives of individuals experiencing intersectional marginalization become invisible to the dominant culture (Ghabrial, 2017). As a coping mechanism, counterstorytelling has the ability to engage individuals in psychological processes that promote agency and liberation (Jocson, 2011). Counter storytellers can use poetry to create community around proposing new ideas of thinking that amplify their marginalized voices (Weinstein & West, 2012). This process may even yield emergent identities that validate marginalized experiences. Some research also suggests that protective factors such as community spaces may promote positive identity development among emerging adults by challenging youth to confront oppressive circumstances and build community around meaning-making (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007; Case & Hunter,

2014; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2007; Velez & Spencer, 2018). As such, I argue that counterstorytelling acts as an adaptive coping mechanism for dealing with oppression and stereotypes.

Identity Development: Emerging Adulthood in Context

Emerging adulthood is described as a unique developmental period that follows adolescence and comes before adulthood. When individuals are aged 18 to 29, they typically postpone traditional markers of adulthood (e.g. marriage and parenthood) to instead further explore autonomy and embark on a wider net of opportunities than what is available in adolescence (Arnett, 2000). Researchers contend that though identity development peaks in adolescence, it continues to be the focus of human development during emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000; Erikson, 1950; McLean & Syed, 2015). Emerging adults are able to focus this level of attention on self-development with newfound access to the privileges of adulthood while many also maintain the financial security that parents and guardians provide (Arnett, 2000). Emerging adulthood is therefore a time for youth to explore identity through developing social networks, career interests, life experience, and to define for themselves what it means to be an adult.

Oppression is both a condition and process that dehumanizes individuals and communities by disrupting the natural human capacity to reflect upon, critique, and change adverse conditions in the environment (Freire, 1970; Quintana & Segura-Herrera, 2003; Watts, Griffith, & Abdul-Adil, 2002). Race, gender, and socioeconomic class represent hierarchies of identity that were created to oppress some while privileging others (Collins, 2002). Therefore, emerging adulthood is also a time when individuals question the meaning and salience of race, gender, class, sexual identity (Azmitia & Thomas, 2014; Schwartz, Côté, & Arnett, 2005;

Wagaman, 2016). This process influences the underlying beliefs and attitudes an individual has about their minority racial-ethnic group (Phinney, 1989; Sellers et al., 1998), and sexual identity within a heterosexist and cis-normative context (Anzaldua, 1987; Kiesling, 2017; Collins, 2002).

Some research has offered that emerging adulthood may be defined and experienced according to social group affiliation and socioeconomic status. For example, one study shows that emerging adults from marginalized racial-ethnic backgrounds report familial and collectivist values as criteria for adulthood more often than non-racially-ethnically marginalized emerging adults (Arnett, 2003). Furthermore, a longitudinal study among emerging adults in college suggests that socioeconomic status may play a significant role in the college experience (Thomas & Azmitia, 2014). The authors interviewed and surveyed more than 100 ethnically diverse college students about their experiences of social class as it relates to social identity. Participants reported that social class was more salient than gender, race and ethnicity as they are made aware of their social class through peer networks. This and the previous study both demonstrate that it may be important to situate identity development among emerging adults within the context of oppression.

Emerging adulthood extends self-exploration in multiple domains of social identity (Schwartz et al., 2017). The Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (Jones & McEwen, 2000) asserts there are two components of a multidimensional identity, the core identity and the outside identities. The core identity consists of personal attributes and characteristics that are most central to the self. The remaining outside identities are informed by social constructions such as race, culture and gender. The MMDI posits 4 important premises: (1) each identity must be understood in concert with the other identities, (2) the ways in which an individual constructs their identity is deeply influenced by the changing context and so, (3) identity is both fluid and

dynamic and lastly, (4) each identity dimension may be experienced concurrently. Abes, Jones, and McEwen (2007) reconceptualized the MMDI to include how contextual factors (e.g. culture, social norms, stereotypes) influence how individuals reconcile having multiple, and sometimes socially contradicting, identities. According to the reconceptualized MMDI, identity development occurs when individuals reflect on how identity is constructed through filtered cultural messages and sociopolitical influence.

Oppression plays a significant role in the identity development of young people. For example, Kumar, Warnke, and Karabenick (2014) examined identity development among Arab-American male adolescents. Participants identified the threat of being stereotyped as a terrorist in the United States as a major challenge to their development of masculinity within the school context. Some participants articulated countering stereotypes through dialogue as a transformative coping strategy for mitigating stress. Adaptive coping methods may enable youth to develop resilient identities in the face of oppression (Case and Andrews, 2014; Hope & Spencer, 2017). A qualitative study of 12 queer Iranian-American emerging adult women explored identity dissonance as an experience resulting from queer delegitimization from the ethnic culture (Abdi & Van Gilder, 2016). Participants shared that the dominant discourse from their community defined queerness as antithetical to Iranian culture. More specifically, participants mitigated friction between their queer and Iranian identities by disconnecting themselves from their Iranian family and community. Some participants also shared that creating a space between oneself and Iranian culture helped them to cope with the tension, though being Iranian was still an important part of the self that they carry with them. Together, these two studies offer examples as to how oppression matters to the ways young marginalized people

understand and construct meaning around identity as well as evidence of counterstorytelling as coping strategy.

Research suggests that individuals may begin to use a critical lens to confront oppression as well as to define and name themselves and their experiences as early as early adolescence (Godfrey et al., 2019; Hope, Skoog, Jagers, 2014). Individuals continue doing so with advanced cognitive abilities and more life experience to draw upon in emerging adulthood (Schwartz, Côté, & Arnett, 2005). For multiply- marginalized emerging adults, identity can feel both stifling and liberating (Wagaman, 2016). Wagaman (2016) reveals this insight from analyzing in-depth interviews of 15 racially-diverse LGBTQ-identified emerging adults. Participants were asked to discuss what facets of their social identities affected how they understand themselves as queer. Their narratives revealed resistance as an important coping mechanism for these youths. More specifically, participants resisted the confines of social categories in many ways. Some participants chose to enact agency to control sources of influences in media by viewing television shows and films that casted queer and transgender actors. Some participants chose to reject social categories by creating an entirely new identity for themselves. Other participants shared that resistance to social norms gave them the freedom to express their true personalities. This insight corroborates the importance of using a critical lens to understand identity development. Therefore, I situate identity development among emerging adults participants of this study within the context of oppression.

Counterstorytelling within Counterspaces

Counterstorytelling offers insight into the ways that people and communities circumvent the oppression they face on a day-to-day basis. For example, Muños & Maldonado (2011) analyzed counterstories of legal status among Mexicana college students. The authors used a

case study approach to understand how Mexicana students navigate their complex identities and respond to hegemonic oppression while pursuing a college education. Findings reveal that Mexicana college students in the study countered stereotypes in the college context by creating a positive self-image characterized by multiple strengths and wisdoms connected to Mexican identity. Similarly, Means (2017) conducted interviews among a small group of Black queer college student about their relationship to religion and spirituality. Their interviews—analyzed as counterstories—demonstrate resistance to oppressive forces and agency as important to their identity development. More specifically, participants exercised agency and resistance by a) interrogating spiritual messages embedded in homophobia; b) embracing both spiritual and sexual orientation identities; c) developing a personal relationship with a high power and; d) developing spiritual counterspaces. This insight demonstrates that challenging oppressive messages may be an important step to positive identity development in the face of oppression (Means, 2017). Another study explored how African American youth challenged the stereotypical narratives of Black youth in media (Dunn, Neville, & Vellanki, 2018). More specifically, the authors analyzed written, oral and visual text gathered from a college preparatory program that engaged youth in critical analysis of oppression in their communities to promote an asset-based conception of identity and positive outlook toward a future of liberation. In a counternarrative video produced by the program, one participant challenged a dominant deficit perspective of urban youth with a sign that read "I will graduate + go to college. I will not be another STATISTIC." These studies offer that counterstorytelling can help young people push back against oppressive forces to affirm their identities and desires for themselves.

Counterstories may also be developed within counterspaces. A counterspace is a community space that promotes adaptive responding to oppression among a group wherein

shared experiences of social marginalization are salient (Case & Hunter, 2014). As an extension of counterstorytelling, counterspaces function on the settings-level to counter environments that perpetuate dominant, deficit perspectives of marginalized identities (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Counterspaces may be physical or conceptual in nature (Ong et al., 2018). For example, a counterspace can be situated within a larger institution (e.g. classroom or department) or function as a mentoring relationship between youth and adults or among peers experiencing similar oppressions. Counterspaces facilitate this work by promoting human agency to resist and counteract oppressive circumstances as natural and necessary to human development (Case & Hunter, 2012). In essence, counterspaces may guide individuals to collectively mitigate the stress they experience.

Counterstorytelling may offer one mechanism for positive identity development in the face of oppression. Counterstorytelling is a narrative-based process that calls marginalized individuals to share experiential knowledge about themselves to resist the deleterious effects of dominant, deficit perspectives of their identities (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). My understanding of counterstorytelling is gathered from critical race theory (CRT). CRT centers race and racism as ubiquitous and therefore imbedded within systems and institutions. CRT theorists define race as a social construct that is manifested through power and domination. The effects of oppression on mental and physical health may also culminate from the interaction between multiple forms of oppression (Cyrus, 2017; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; McConnell, Janulis, Phillips, Truong & Birkett, 2018; Szymanski & Sung, 2010). Some critical race theorists even use counterstorytelling as a research method to challenge deficit perspective of participants of color and instead emphasize intersectionality in the research process (Means, 2017; Solorzono & Yosso, 2002).

Research also suggests that positive identity development may be facilitated by the environment itself. For example, Sonn, Quayle, Belanji, & Baker, (2015) examined the effects of counterstorytelling within a non-profit participatory theater program for racially and economically marginalized Australian youth. Data were gathered from two different performances that enacted counterstories of oppression. Performances were created based on African Australian male youth's negative encounters with police and Aboriginal elders historical accounts of pre-colonial experiences. The researchers found that program participation enabled African Australian performers to reclaim and perform citizenship by starting a dialogue on criminalization of Black male youth in their communities. By performing aboriginal narratives, youth of multicultural backgrounds created new identities concerned with social action and community connectedness. Spaces that honor counterstorytelling guide participants to mitigate experiences of oppression by recognizing their human agency to resist and counteract oppressive circumstances (Case & Hunter, 2012). I gather from this literature that narrative processes which counter dominant oppressive narratives may be used within youth programs to facilitate positive identity development.

Narrative Identity Approach

Narrative identity scholars posit that in order to understand an individual's sense of self we must understand their life story (McAdams & McLean, 2013; McLean, 2006; Schwartz, Zamboanga, Luyckx, Meca, & Ritchie, 2013). According to narrative identity researchers, human beings are natural meaning-seekers who create a life story out of social experiences and memories, a process known as autobiographical reasoning (Habermas & Köber, 2015). The use of narrative may serve a different purpose according to one's age. For instance, McLean (2008) conducted a cross-sectional analysis on the function of autobiographical reasoning among older

and younger adults. In this study, emerging adult participants used narrative to explore and understand the self while older participants used narrative to confirm a stable sense of identity. Another study emphasizes that coherence and specificity of a narrative is an important indicator of how well narrative functions as a meaning-making mechanism (Waters & Fivush, 2015). More specifically, Waters & Fivush (2015) asked 109 undergraduate students to write narratives about significant events in their lives. Analyses revealed higher self-reported levels of psychological well-being among students who wrote coherent narratives to specifically work through issues related to personal identity.

While narrative identity research typically isolates personal identity constructs from social identity and context (McLean & Fournier, 2007), some scholars are pushing the field to ask questions about social identity that look beyond demographic variables (McLean & Syed, 2015b). For example, McLean & Thorne (2003) assessed how Asian American, Latinx, Mixed, and white emerging adults talk about a time when their ethnic identity felt particularly salient. Their narratives reveal that ethnic identity is salient in situations where one feels marginalized, underrepresented, and discriminated against. Further, a majority of participants from the study identified cultural meaning-making as an important characteristic of narrative identity. Similarly, Hammack & Cohler (2009) conducted an ethnographic study to explore sexual narratives of Czech men who have sex with men. Narratives from this research revealed that participants' sexual identities were connected with time and context. More specifically, Czech male participants' made sense of their sexual selves by recounting the ways their relationships to sexuality changed throughout their life. All participants embarked on this process through recounting memories of historical events, life milestones, and cultural phenomena (McCajor Hall, 2009). Further, Neville & Cross (2017) conducted a phenomenological study about Black

awareness among Black individuals of diverse national and ethnic backgrounds. When participants were asked to share how they came to understand their Black racial identity, they answered with reflections on educational, cultural, and activism-related experiences in their lives. Taken together, these studies align with counterstorytelling and counterspace literatures by emphasizing the significance of context in human development.

McLean & Syed (2015b) differentiate three types of narratives: master narratives, alternative narratives, and personal narratives. Master narratives are stories that inform how to be an ideal member of society. These stories do not originate from the individual but instead reflect the imbedded social structure of society. Master narratives are rigid and perpetuate systems of oppression such as heterosexism and racism. Alternative narratives are stories told by the marginalized that resist the structural oppression that master narratives communicate. Individuals must then negotiate between the demands of identity from society and sociopolitical resistance to construct the personal narrative (McLean & Syed, 2015b). In reference to intersectionality theory as applied by psychologists, we know that it is important to anchor identity within the context of social inequalities to understand how the relationship between human development and the sociopolitical environment. Therefore, counterstorytelling is also a mechanism for marginalized individuals to construct alternative and personal narratives that challenge oppressive narratives.

Intersectionality and The Role of Community Spaces

Intersectionality theory offers a framework of oppression that emphasizes a connection between identity development and interconnecting systems of power (Crenshaw, 1991; Collins, 2002). Emerging from Black feminist and critical race theories, intersectionality attends to the multidimensional identities of multiply-marginalized groups, particularly women of color, by emphasizing the influence of power on identity and pushing back against the forced isolation of

identity categories (Weber, 1998; Crenshaw, 1991; Collins, 2002). Intersectionality theory offers a lens to the field of psychology with which psychologists use to re-frame research questions in ways that speak to the complexity of power and domination. For example, Cole (2009) applies this insight to the field by urging psychologists to consider social categories and identity constructs beyond risk factors and group differences. The author specifically asks psychologists to consider the experiences of individuals that take up categories, the role of inequality, and to home in on areas of commonality between and within categories. Cole (2009) importantly articulates that important insight can be learned from the lived experiences of diverse groups of human beings.

Some research suggests that community learning spaces grounded in social justice may play an integral role in how emerging adults navigate multiply-marginalized identities (Winn, 2019; Wright, Alaggia, & Krygsman, 2014; Sing, 2013). Take for instance Winn's (2019) ethnographic case study. This qualitative study explored how Dominican and African-American alumni of a writing program continued to sustain critical literacy identities after leaving the program. These participants' narratives spoke to the ways immigration, cultural values, gender roles, and socioeconomic class influenced their understanding of themselves as multiply-marginalized poets and writers. They engaged in a collective learning process that supported, inspired, and challenged them to think critically about their experiences. Alumni became a part of a "lifetime circle" that forever bonded former students to the program. Relatedly, Ghabrial (2017) set out to understand identity in relationship to community, multiple marginalization, and stress among racially marginalized LGBTQ+ individuals. The study reveals that community can either promote resilience or exacerbate minority stress. Contemplation of community belongingness induced stress for many participants. Out of 11 participants, five indicated

choosing to participate in LGBTQ-People of Color (POC) communities specifically to avoid microaggressions rooted in racism and heterosexism. This insight suggests that community spaces which promote a wholistic sense of self-acceptance may also buffer against the deleterious effects of microaggressions among young and older community members who experience racialized heterosexism. Taken with the previous study, this information offers that encouraging multiply-marginalized individuals to construct a positive, authentic identity within an inherently oppressive context may positively influence the way identity is understood (Purdue-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008).

The Current Study

The current study uses phenomenological variant of ecological systems theory to examine the role of counterstorytelling in identity development among racially and economically marginalized emerging adult youth leaders of a program called Youth Write (YW). I specifically investigate how counterstorytelling functions as an adaptive coping strategy for youth leaders. In semi-structured individual interviews, I asked how youth leaders describe their social identities; ways the program allows exploration of identity; and how poetry and storytelling has influenced the way youth leaders understand their identities. I consider how oppressions manifest in youth experiences related to social identity and how these youths use their work within a writing program to navigate the intersectionality of multiply-marginalized identities.

Counterstorytelling scholarship suggests that storytelling may be an optimal mechanism for adaptive coping with oppression (Case & Hunter, 2014; Dunn, Neville, & Vellanki, 2018; Means, 2017; Muños & Maldonado (2011); Solórzano & Yosso, (2002). Further, identity development literature emphasizes that emerging adulthood is a critical period for identity exploration (Arnett, 2000; McLean & Syed, 2015) and meaning making (Habermas & Bluck,

2000; McLean & Thorne, 2003; Waters & Fivush, 2015) within an oppressive context (Azmitia & Thomas, 2014; Schwartz, Côté, & Arnett, 2005; Wagaman, 2016). In the current study, I bridge these two literatures and contribute a deeper understanding of how youth use counterstorytelling to re-write their own personal and cultural narratives.

Method

My method is guided by interpretive and critical ontologies. Qualitative methodology widens the scope of empirical evidence to position participants and researcher narratives as valid sources of interpretation (Guba & Lincoln, 1986; Hesse-Biber, 2016). I use qualitative methodology to consider the interpretations of identity experiences among racially and economically marginalized emerging adults. I also use a qualitative approach to consider the influence of institutional power systems in shaping these realities (Tuck, 2009). I recognize participants of this study for having the innate capacity to challenge and critique systems of oppression that shape identity development. I use these methods to situate positive identity development within a social justice framework. Consistent with intersectionality theory, the qualitative methods used in this project seek to honor the ontological experiences of multiply-marginalized adolescents and emerging adults by critiquing the presence of a cis-heterosexual, white, male, capitalist patriarchy as a complex oppressive force in their daily lives as well as their capacity to resist this force (Carmen et al., 2015; Cole, 2009; Collins; 2002; Crenshaw, 1991; hooks, 2000; Dill & Zambrana, 2009; Rosenthal, 2016).

Site

Data were collected at YW, a three-week long summer writing program for racially and economically marginalized adolescents and emerging adults in the Northeastern United States. However, participants were not incentivized for their participation. YW takes place in a wealthy

suburban, academic community. The population of the host community is 81.8% Caucasian, 12.3% Asian, 3.7% Latinx, 2.5% Black or African American, and 2.1% multiracial (US Census). YW purposefully recruits participants and writing leaders from The City, a neighboring under-resourced and racially marginalized community. In 2017, The City had a median household income of $39,627 and a poverty rate of 24.2%. Latinx community members represent the most common racial/ethnic group living below the poverty line (Data USA).

YW's mission is to use a social justice lens to promote positive youth development via writing among racially and economically marginalized young people. At YW, identity exploration is an organic, ongoing process that youth are challenged to interrogate through creative and reflective activities. Such activities include journaling, workshops, extracurricular activities, and small group time. The program uses critical pedagogy to situate writing and community building within the context of oppression. Embedded within each activity is critical dialogue on sociopolitical topics such as racial and economic oppression. The City has a strong history of immigration and sociopolitical activism which is supported today by model programs such as YW in a continued effort to support the educational and creative development of young people using a social justice lens.

YW refers to youth leaders as writing leaders. The program uses a youth-led model to offer more equitable leadership opportunities for writing leaders. Writing leaders are typically former participants of YW, who return as paid staff to lead new and returning participants in program activities. For example, writing leaders lead program activities and participate in decision-making at programmatic meetings. Writing leaders work with program participants to

help guide their writing. Writing leaders also model writing and spoken word by participating in all writing activities alongside participants to lead by example.

Participants

Participants of the study were 12 writing leaders from YW (Appendix A). Four participants identified as women, with one self-identifying as cisgender, or identifying with the gender she was assigned at birth, in the interview. Two participants were non-binary, or not relating to women or men, and 6 identified as men. The youngest writing leader was 16 and the oldest was 21 years of age. A majority of writing leaders have racial and ethnic roots in the Caribbean, Central and South America, and Eastern Asia. More specifically, writing leaders identified with multiple races/ethnicities (4), Latinx (4), Afro-Latinx (1), Black/African American (1), and White/Caucasian (3). The shortest time spent in the program was one summer whereas the longest time was 11 summers. In addition, it had been the first summer in YW for 3 writing leaders (see appendix A).

Procedure

The current study comes from a larger mixed methods project that explored youth development within community programmatic settings. YW received a stipend from the lead researchers of this project in exchange for their participation in this study. However, participants were not incentivized for their participation. This qualitative dissertation focuses on counterstorytelling and identity development, specifically. My role as a researcher was shaped by being immersed in the community of young poets and residing within the site's academic community for 3 weeks in the summer of 2018. Every day I walked to campus to conduct ethnographic observations of the program and interviews with participants and writing leaders. I observed day-to-day programming throughout the span of the program. Eight participants and

twelve writing leaders completed semi-structured interviews on topics including program experience, identity, and critical consciousness (Appendix B). Participants of the program were interviewed by myself and two other researchers. However, I interviewed all writing leaders. In addition, the program gave permission to analyze the current year's annual anthology of participant and writing leader poetry for the purpose of this study.

On a typical day, the program began at 9am. Participants, writing leaders, adult staff, and I all meet in a black box theatre on a private school campus. Every day a different writing leader or adult staff started the schedule off by leading a short writing prompt. Participants had between 5 - 10 minutes to respond. They were frequently reminded of the option they had to free write on any topic of their choosing or to write nothing at all. Participants were also told they could write in any language of their choosing. Participants and writing leaders both wrote in their journals quietly during this time. The opening session closed with the first sharing session of the day. Participants and writing leaders would form a line at the front of the black box theatre in preparation to share their writing at the mic. The audience seating was in the shape of a horseshoe. Each individual was met with applause, snaps, and positive feedback from their peers, leaders, and adult staff.

Next in the schedule is the workshop session. Every one to three days a new guest speaker(s) facilitated a writing workshop around topics such as oppression, social identity, and social justice. Facilitators introduced their workshops with a performance of their own. The room always responded with praise. Facilitators constructed an interactive performance/workshop with the audience of participants, writing leaders, and adult staff. For example, one workshop facilitator invited the entire room to take a selfie with him. Some facilitators were former

participants of the program while others were longtime friends of the program. We departed for lunch after the workshop and walked together across campus for free lunch in the dining hall. Participants and writing leaders socialized and ate together. I took this time to organize my field notes independently.

After lunch, we returned to the black box theatre. Participants were assigned to small groups to further develop writing in an intimate setting. Each group was facilitated by 1 - 3 writing leaders. Small group time was spent socializing, writing, and discussing. Writing leaders also took this time to help participants prepare their submissions for the annual anthology of poems due during the final week. Small groups were free to spread out across campus to an area of their choosing. I observed the same group throughout the duration of the program for a closer look at group dynamics over time. When small group time finished for the day, we returned to the black box theatre for activity time. Activities included identity and makeup, singing, sports, and visual arts. I took this time to organize my field notes some more. After activity time, we returned to the black box theatre for one last open mic session. This open mic session was the highlight of the program. Participants and writing leaders were invited to share anything they had ever written including pieces that were unfinished or ideas they were wrestling with. Each individual was affirmed and celebrated with applause and chants.

I personally asked each writing leader if they would be interested in participating in an interview as part of my dissertation. I explained my dissertation topic and that interviews would allow me to get an understanding of their experience in the program and how the program helped them to explore their identities. I approached individuals before, during, and after each scheduled day. Additionally, I was invited to a program meeting and recruited writing leaders there. Twelve

of twenty- one writing leaders agreed to be interviewed. Interviews were scheduled daily, one before the start of the program at 8am and one more after the program ended at 2pm. However, some interviews were divided into two parts because of length. Part one of these interviews was typically started in the morning or afternoon and part two was finished within one week of part 1. I sent interview reminders to writing leaders via text message the night before the scheduled interview. Some interviews took place within the same building as the black box theatre. I was also able to interview some participants in another closed theater located inside the building. However, most interviews took place in the hallway. Interview questions were kept at minimum to encourage participants to delve deep into their stories (see appendix B). During this time, the school was hosting many summer programs. Privacy was a privilege that was inaccessible to many participants. I combatted the presence of passers-by and loud noise in the hallway with frequent pauses and repeated questions. I would also ask for clarification. In addition, I emphasized that it was okay to stop the interview at any time. The average interview lasted 1 hour. The shortest interview was 33 minutes and the longest interview was 1 hour and 46 minutes.

Every summer, the program publishes an anthology of poetry submitted by the current cohort of participants and writing leaders. Writing samples written by writing leaders were gathered from the programs anthology of writing published in the Summer of 2018. Writing samples were also collected at individual interviews with writing leaders. I manually entered data from a paper copy of the program’s anthology and paper copies of writing samples collected at interviews into google docs. A transcription service was hired to transcribe interview data. I further cleaned each transcript by correcting any typos and used my conversational Spanish skills

to translate text to English. Translations were confirmed with a native Spanish speaker of the Dominican dialect.

Data Analysis

Data were triangulated to increase the trustworthiness of the analysis (Matthison, 1988) such that more than one method of data collection was used. I gathered data from writing samples and interviews. I combined deductive and inductive analysis strategies to acknowledge the influence of background knowledge gleaned from the literature while also allowing emerging themes to become apparent (Braun & Clarke, 2018). Both data sources are analyzed using Braun & Clarke's (2018) six steps of thematic analysis. In step one, I familiarized myself with the data by listening to interviews and reading through the transcripts and anthology. This step was repeated for three rounds. In the first round, I passively read each poem. Poems that were within the scope of the research question and written by a writing leader who consented the use of their work were manually entered into one google document. For interview data, I passively listened to the audio and read through each transcript. In addition, I corrected any misspelled words or added any text to the interview transcripts that were missed by the transcription service. In the second round, I began to actively think about what the data mean and made small notes to myself as comments in the google document. In the third round, I continued to actively make sense of the data by adding annotations directly on the poem document and interview transcripts. I made memos to practice researcher reflexivity (Case, 2017). More specifically, I used memoing to critique the implications of my own biases on how I interpreted writing leader narratives (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I memoed the assumptions I held about writing leaders and the program as well as my connection to writing leaders. For example, I had entered the program under the impression that youth leader role was one-sided. Through my time in the program and during

interviews with writing leaders, I learned that the work writing leaders do at YW is not limited to leadership and that these youths participate in the program as well.

Next in step two, I used open coding and memoing to identify how counterstorytelling functions as an adaptive coping strategy for writing leaders. I looked for deductive codes from PVEST as well as counterstorytelling, counterspace, and identity development literatures (See appendix C). In addition, I looked for descriptive and interpretive codes related to the research question. For poems, I used line-by-line coding combined with chunking when appropriate. Any unrelated chunks were left uncoded. Data were coded individually by myself and a graduate research assistant (GRA). The GRA and I then coded together. We held two meetings to come to a consensus on coding for half of the data corpus. At these meetings, we discussed which codes to combine, remove, and which codes remain as they are. As we read through each transcript, codes were revisited and modified to reflect the emergence of insight from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2018). A codebook was the product of this process and was generated from the fully coded and collated transcripts and texts (Appendix C).

After solidifying the codebook with the GRA, I proceeded to step three. Here, I actively generated themes independently. Themes were created from clustered codes and reflected a coherent and meaningful pattern in the data related to the research question. In step four, I reviewed potential thematic candidates and compared them with the codebook. Braun & Clarke (2018) recommend to: (a) differentiate each theme from the codebook, (b) ask if the quality of the theme is useful and relevant to the research question, (c) consider the boundaries of the theme, and (d) ask if the data support the theme and if it is coherent. These considerations are a guide to developing a coherent set of themes. After reviewing all themes in relation to the data

set, I reconvened with the GRA to finalize themes. Themes were finalized when consensus was reached.

Next in step five, I began to construct an analytic narrative of the data by first naming and defining each theme. I then used an interpretive and critical lens to interpret the data and connect the findings of the study to counterstorytelling, counterspace and identity development literatures. Step six is the final step and is where the story is fully developed and written. Although this is the final step, it is important to note that thematic analysis involves writing iteratively with analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2018). Themes were generated in step six. Further, the finalized results section of the document was reviewed by one writing leader from YW for member checking. I addressed feedback that fell within the scope of the research question.

Positionality

I am a cis-gender, bisexual, millennial Black queer feminist-womanist. I recognize that my marginalized identities interlock with the privileges I hold as a cis-gender person and academic scholar. Through my work, I aim to emphasize the significant connection between identity development and sociopolitical context. It is natural that my worldview informs and constructs my research. Therefore, I hold myself accountable for interrogating the biases I bring to this work through memoing, consultation with my dissertation committee and a second-coder, as well as consultation with the community organization.

It is important to ground my positionality within a shift in my identity development that occurred during this project. I transitioned from solely a queer Black feminist approach to a queer Black feminist-womanist approach by way of becoming a Black mother. While the original source of inspiration for the dissertation was my own cultural experience as a multiply-

marginalized youth of color, I began to consider the experiences of racially and economically marginalized youth from the perspective of a developing Black mother. Black Mothering in womanism is conceptualized as a deep sense of compassion for others, specifically young people, that is inextricably linked with praxis (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002). A womanist's interaction with young people goes beyond service-provider or researcher-participant relationship to offer similar care and concern a mother would provide to her children. Womanism emphasizes mothering as an important component of Black women's pedagogy (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002) as well as the use of decolonized research methodologies that honor dialogue, socialization and spirituality (Lindsay-Dennis, 2015).

My personal development as a Black mother transformed my connection to this work. For example, one day I participated along with program participants in a writing activity. We visited different art exhibits within the institution's art museum. One exhibit in particular was called *Intersections*. The piece was in the center of a large room with white walls. The piece takes cubic form and displays a designed cutout pattern along each area of the surface. The piece encases a light which causes shadows to appear on every wall in the space. The design is reflected everywhere, consuming the space. The artist, a Pakistani Muslim woman, was inspired to create this work by her childhood experience of gender oppression. The gallery tour guide shared this background information and offered a writing prompt:

What are two parts of your identity that meet? How can this piece inspire writing about who you are, intersections of life. Describe how it makes you feel.

I reflected on my responsibility as a mother to support the development of my child's life at the intersections:

> There is a light that shines inside of me
> I carry this light
> It is my job to bring this light into the world
> This light
> will become a human being
> with multifaceted identities
> that intersect
> Some given some chosen
> I am the protector of this light's identity
> I honor this privilege

As a community psychologist and a Black mother, I extend this responsibility to the youth of this study. I connect to this project as a person who was once a multiply-marginalized youth who developed into an adult whose identities continue to meet at the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and socioeconomic class. I shared counternarratives from multiply-marginalized young people as a method of amplifying their voices. Furthermore, I practiced open and honest communication, and use the information produced to maximize the well-being of individual participants, the community, and society (iupsys.net, 2018; Sánchez Vidal, 2017; Bond, Serrano-Garcia, Keys, 2017). In this project, I demonstrated respect for the community by giving free and informed consent, prioritizing privacy as well as confidentiality, and practicing fairness and justice. In addition, I ensured open and honest communication by being transparent. Further, I consulted with Youth Write during data gathering and the analysis process as well.

Results

Results from this study support counterstorytelling as a vehicle for adaptive coping and emergent identity among racially and economically marginalized writing leaders. These emerging adults interrogated and redefined identity in ways that reflect identity in between and beyond categories. Writing leaders also embodied collective consciousness to co-create a space for empathy and connection. Analyses from this study reveal that counterstorytelling is a

dynamic process involving two major themes: (a) reclaiming identity and (b) co-creating a narrative community.

Reclaiming "Mydentity"

Evidence of how writing leaders use counterstorytelling as an adaptive coping process emerges from YW's Summer 2018 theme. Writing leaders named the theme *Mydentity* to bring to the fore the ways that theses youths' narratives are influenced by the interflow between racial identity, gender identity, sexual identity, and socioeconomic status. It is important to note that the theme of the program is separate from the research question. Mydentity was born out of a conversation that took place between writing leaders about how their and participants' identities expand beyond single categories. Like many emerging adults in the United States, writing leaders identify in ways that challenge traditional essentialism of race and ethnicity (Harris, Russell & Sullivan, 2017). During interviews and conversations with staff, I learned just how salient biracial and multiracial identity was to writing leaders and program participants. At first, "bi-dentity" was proposed to symbolize the biracial and biethnic identities of many writing leaders and program participants. However, it became evident that an understanding of identity beyond the binary better represented the mission of the program. For example, Yayi, who identifies as non-binary and Afro-Latinx describes how *Mydentity* emerged as YW's Summer 2018 theme:

> It's funny how that word came about because we were talking about bicultural, bi this, bi that. And when we were in our orientation, I said bidentity. I said B-I-dentity. Because it was like an acknowledgement of two or more. Like bisexual, you know. For me, as a queer, I was like, bidentity makes sense. Not just two, it just means two or more, bidentity. And then people were like, eh. And then one person said mydentity. And then it was like, oh, there's the click. So I loved it already because I was already on that wave of bidentity. Mydentity is intersectional. That's such a huge wave right now.
>
> *-Yayi, Afro-Latinx, queer/non-binary, age 21*

Writing leaders chose to name the theme "Mydentity" as an intentional position to acknowledge identity beyond binaries. Their conceptualization even extends beyond ethnic and racial identity to also incorporate other facets of social identity such as sexual orientation. Here are some examples from interviews of writing leaders connecting to the theme:

> I feel like it gives me the opportunity to
> explore different parts of my identity that I'm both proud of
> and also parts of my identity that I'm somewhat ashamed of,
> or that need more discussions. And I think that's really
> important.
>
> *-Reina, Black/African-American, undecided,16*
>
> I think what I love about *Mydentity* is the freedom it gives you to identify, like, truly as yourself whether it's something you can put into words or not. Thinking about, like, my sexuality, like I don't really identify as gay, I guess. I identify as queer, because gay is limiting, and it's like you are 100 percent sexually attracted to males all the time. But sexuality is, like, always evolving and all of this stuff. So, like, in that sense, that's what I really love, like, the *Mydentity* theme.
>
> *-Sylvi, White/Caucasian, gay, cisgender man, 19*
>
> The theme almost shifted to like taking hold of that identity that you have and that pull you feel between all of them and understanding that they're yours, which I thought was really, really cool, like really interesting that we went down that path. It was a very subtle but, I think, important shift. I think that for me, personally, I've always tried to understand the importance of intersectionality with identity and privilege and sort of like the whole mechanism of things.
>
> *-Symia, White/Caucasian, non-binary/queer, age 17*
>
> Looking [at] it on the wall, *Mydentity*, what that means to me is, like, you're claiming an identity that no one can take away from you, like a lotta time the world wants to tell you what it sees you as and what it thinks you are but I feel *Mydentity* is taking that back and saying, "No, I'll tell you what I am, this is *my* identity."
>
> *-Paulo, multiethnic, cisgender, queer, man, age 18*

As evidenced above, Mydentity offers a space for young people to unpack and explore what it means to be oneself in the context of oppression. Most importantly, it offers the safety to do so in an environment that encourages young people to use their agency to name themselves and on

their own terms. *Mydentity* informs the themes that were extracted from interviews with writing leaders and from their writing samples. The first theme, reclaiming *Mydentity* is comprised of two subthemes: (a) interrogating social boxes and (b) "escaping definitions."

Interrogating social boxes. This subtheme encapsulates how writing leaders constructed narratives that challenged societal and cultural beliefs about identity. Out of 17 total poems, 11 explored this theme. In addition, 8 out of 12 writing leaders spoke about this theme during interviews. One writing leader in particular, Zeni, wrote about this theme in a poem she contributed to the program's anthology. Zeni only contributed her work and did not participate in an interview. An excerpt from Zeni's poem on identity:

> Someone once told me there's
> Different levels to being Dominican.
> They said I don't look it but
> That they can tell I feel it within me.
> Since when do others determine my
> Race and ethnicity?
> Do not question MY existence.
>
> *-Zeni, cis-gender woman, Afro-Latinx, age 21*

Zeni questions the power that members of her cultural group have to evaluate her level of ethnic identity. Zeni immigrated to the United States from the Dominican republic as a child. The levels of Dominican identity that Zeni refers to may be connected with the varying experiences of Latinx identity between those who continue to reside in the homeland and those who immigrate (Tummala-Narra & Sathasivam-Rueckert, 2016). This may also refer to the mélange of skin complexions and colonialism as well (Chavez-Dueñas, Adames, & Organista, 2014). Zeni reclaims her identity by commanding that her Dominican identity is not up for question and cannot be arbitrarily determined by anyone else's standard or expectation.

This theme was also apparent in interviews. For example, Gina reflects on an oratory speech she once gave during her senior year at a predominantly white religious preparatory school. In her speech she spoke about sounding white:

> …And in it I talked about conflict with my identity, and the fact that I sound white, which always was – I always hated hearing that, because it's like, "No, I'm Latina. What are you talking about, I sound white?" Like, "What? What does that even mean, to sound white?"
>
> *-Gina, Latinx, cis-gender, questioning woman, age 20*

Gina's reference to "sounding white" closely mirrors the "acting white" phenomenon (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Gina recognizes sounding white is something she does while also rejecting the imposition of colonial standards on her identity. Gina's dissonance is in support of the current state of acting white research that shows how students of color continue to persist in academic environments despite feeling frustrated with acting white. Gina works through this label to reclaim her salient Latinx identity from being muted by the imposition of whiteness.

Dissonance was also expressed by another writing leader called Aloe. Aloe identifies as Black, Filipino, and White American and describes himself as having a multiracial identity. He shared during our interview that he feels a closer connection with his Filipino and Black cultural customs and experiences than with his white parent's culture. As a child, Aloe experienced being othered by white family members on his father's side of the family which resulted in feeling shame towards his whiteness:

> I rep "I'm not _________, I'm mixed" and
> at the same time denying part of my identity
> Because I am ashamed of it
> I rep never having enough boxes to click
> Or fill out on forms because people sometimes
> Forget that mixed people exist
>
> *-Aloe, cis-gender, bisexual man, Multiethnic, age 18*

Aloe also recalled what it felt like to be one of the only people of color at a well-known elite country club in the North East:

> …going there absolutely ruined me and my sisters because we were the only people of color aside from our mother in a 30-mile radius. Or – not really. But that's how it felt. And I just have that experience. I've talked about it with my sisters and with my mom. We can – just that feeling of being literally – *[laughs]* I like using this quote. A friend of mine, he said, "It feels like being the lone raisin in a bowl of milk." That's how I felt. *[Laughs]* Like a lone chocolate chip in a cookie.
>
> -*Aloe, cis-gender, bisexual man, Multiethnic, age 18*

The shame that Aloe experiences is felt by many biracial and multiracial individuals whose racial and ethnic identities include whiteness (Reynolds & Pope, 1991). During the interview, Aloe acknowledges that though he is Black, Filipino and white, he is perceived by the public world as a monoracial Black male. While Aloe pushes back against the idea of identity as an imposition, he also acknowledges the complexity of it all.

By interrogating social boxes, writing leaders demonstrate that reclaiming identity is a challenging process. Writing leaders interrogate social boxes by taking ownership of how they identify. Writing leaders also expressed a desire to push back against social boxes while also identifying with dominant ideologies or feeling shame. This subtheme shows the complexity of constructing identity. For writing leaders at YW, interrogation of current cultural and political ideologies around identity is an important step in the process of building an adaptive identity in the context of oppression.

"Escaping definitions." This sub-theme refers to identity within and beyond labels. In every interview, participants spoke about the limitations of labels and the burden of being a representation of their entire racial or ethnic group. Writing leaders at YW expressed that *Mydentity* allows them the space to explore the depths of their identities beyond colonial borders. For example, Ruben, an 18-year-old Latinx of Mexican origin states:

> …it just really makes you think about who you are, and where – It makes you think about, well, not only your parents, because obviously you've got – that's where you come from, but it makes you think about maybe your ancestors, or where they grew up, where did your parents grow up, where did you grow up – all probably different. And it just really gets you thinking about yourself.
>
> *-Ruben, Latinx, heterosexual man, age 18*

For Pierre, mydentity was an opportunity to think about his identity in connection to family and culture. Pierre's questions support Arnett's (2003) study which suggests that emerging adults of color value a collective sense of identity in relation to familial and cultural values more often than white emerging adults.

The name for this subtheme was taken from a poem about hope for the future of queerness by Yayi. Yayi is openly queer and has identified themselves as a representative for young queer and questioning youth of color in the program to talk to and confide in. Yayi told me when we met that they use she and they pronouns and asks that people use both pronouns interchangeably. To respect Yayi's right to name theirself, I will be using she/they pronouns interchangeably for them. Yayi's poem is a response to a prompt that asked writing leaders and participants to share what they "spit" for. In this context, spit refers to speaking. In other words, poets are asked to share who or what they speak for. In the poem, Yayi writes:

> Spit for the culture
> Spit for Rainbows and primary colors
> Spit queer not like gay,
> But Spit queer like escaping definitions
> -*Yayi, queer/non-binary, Afro-Latinx, age 21*

Yayi's intentions behind this poem are to inspire people that may share their experiences. During our interview she said to me, "…I always try to do at least one piece on identity in terms of being queer and a queer POC in general. I make it a point to do that for the program at least once and let people know that they can come to me." Yayi's poem calls to distance 'queer' from 'gay' to

instead redefine queerness as a rejection of the need to categorize. Another writing leader, Paulo, spoke about how Yayi's poem "Spit Your Truth" inspired them to write about being queer:

> …I've written, like, my whole life and I've never been able to write about being queer, yet, and, after hearing that poem, I couldn't get my pencil off the page, like, it was just coming out, it was just flowing out. It wasn't a choice, like, it was just gonna happen and so that's I felt like if it weren't for the community and if it weren't for that moment of having someone else that is like me that I can look at and almost model myself after so and that kind of goes in line with the ethos of the Writing Leader…
>
> *-Paulo, cisgender, queer, man, multiethnic, age 18*

Through Yayi's counternarrative where they described pushing back against ascribed labels of identity, Paulo was propelled to explore his own. Paulo's connection to Yayi's story was facilitated by representation. It was a powerful encounter for Paulo to witness another person of color connect with their queerness through writing. For Paulo, *Mydentity* offers a space to counter dominant narratives that place limitations on racially and economically marginalized youth. Here, Paulo takes ownership of his ability to define himself for himself. Ruben, another writing leader shared how his identity is connected to where he is from:

> ...To answer the question of where I am from
> I, myself am not even sure
> I have lived and traveled to various places around the world who helped me become the person I am and to give one simple answer would be to discredit the other places that have formed who I am
>
> *-Ruben, cisgender, heterosexual, man, Latinx, age 18*

Ruben's poetry explores his identity as tied to multiple places and spaces. Ruben is one of 5 writing leaders who is a child to immigrant parents. He spoke about traveling back and forth between Central America and the United States in childhood with his family. Ruben spent a majority of his childhood and adolescence residing in the Midwest with family, away from his parents. He attended predominantly white institutions and realized later as an emerging adult that he was the only person of color in his classes:

> I mean, I never really thought about it as much 'til recently, just because – I don't know, I just – It's the way I grew up. To me, it was just normal. But as I've been growing and I'm trying to think about different things, I just think about my high school experience, and middle school. And I'm like, "Wow, it's really weird thinking about that." I was the only kid of color in some of my classes, and it's just kinda interesting to think about that now.
>
> -*Ruben, cisgender, heterosexual, male, Latinx, age 18*

Like Aloe, Ruben experienced being "the lone raisin in a bowl of milk" (pg. 33). This experience became memorable in emerging adulthood. Perhaps this realization was facilitated by increased cognitive abilities in emerging adulthood and the social justice approach of YW. Writing has become monumental to Ruben because it allows him to give voice to the person he is:

> I feel like I'm laying it all out there of who I am, and really not shying away from it. Just putting it out there, and rereading it, you think, "Wow, yeah, that's who I am." Especially when I write about where I come from and everything, to me it's always really special, because I just say who I am, and really [put] myself out there.
>
> -*Ruben, cisgender, heterosexual, male, Latinx, age 18*

Ruben embraces vulnerability through his writing. He shares the story of his ancestry and identity. In a way, Ruben creates himself through his writing. This is an idea that relates closely with Weinstein & West (2012) "self-making", the idea that self is created through spoken word poetry. The safety and group comradery that YW provides may help to foster the support needed for writing leaders and participants alike to create identities for themselves.

Writing leaders escape the entanglement of social categories by centering their authentic voices and experiences. These narratives demonstrate that given a safe and encouraging environment, emerging adults have the power to explore parts of themselves that may be otherwise untapped and to reframe dominant narratives about who they are supposed to be and what labels they should ascribe to. Such an environment is imperative to the process of identity development through writing and spoken word poetry (Weinstein & West, 2012).

Co-creating a Narrative Community

Additional evidence demonstrates how writing leaders co-create a space for storytelling grounded in collective consciousness. What is shared at YW is created by and for the collective. Youth leaders indicated feeling transformed by their interactions with one another within this space. They speak about collective consciousness—connecting with one another's stories and empathizing with emotions and feelings shared—and also learning more about themselves through the lens of peer counternarratives. For example, Paulo shared with me his thoughts about collective consciousness at YW. He states, "when you're writing in community it doesn't just come from you, like, it comes from everyone in the space." Of the 12 youth leaders I interviewed, 3 identified as white/Caucasian. One of these individuals is also one of the youngest writing leaders, Symia. Symia spoke with me about empathy at YW extensively during their interview:

> What's also cool is people – when they write poems about their own identities and then share them, like I was talking about earlier, you can almost empathize. The writing kind of – you feel a connection to them when it's shared. They're sharing it with you. They want you to know, "this is what I wrote. This is what I worked on." You can almost, through their writing, understand and know their – when I say know, I don't mean know every piece of their experience and feel it as your own. I mean like be aware and understand that it exists and that it's true and that's, for them, their life. So, you can – this is so trippy and almost sounds like hippie-ish, but you can feel their identity and how they interact with those parts of themselves. I feel like I learn more and feel more and understand myself more when I hear about other people.
>
> *-Symia, White/Caucasian, non-binary/queer, age 17*

Here, Symia describes an emotional connection to peer counternarratives. Symia also shares that they are emotionally connected to the counterstories shared by participants and other writing leaders. Symia also explains that insight about theirself is revealed through the lens of peer experiences. Another white writing leader is Chris. Chris is an 18-year-old white heterosexual

male. During his interview he spoke with me about the becoming aware of the experiences of marginalized people through the lens of his peers:

> …the general consensus of what is happening has, again, opened my eyes to the bigger picture…other people's writing has changed how I think of myself in this world, because it has humbled me, for sure. It has definitely brought me to realize that I am very fortunate to be in the position that I am, and that I might think I have troubles in my life, but other people are going through things so much worse, and I don't think that's fair, and I want to do something about it.
>
> *-Chris, White/Caucasian, cisgender heterosexual man, 18*

Chris speaks about becoming aware of his privileges. Helms (1997)'s white racial identity model assigns this as an important step for white individuals to become aware of what it means to be white in the context of race-based oppression. Furthermore, Chris's narrative also indicates an orientation to social justice action that aims to address the disadvantages that marginalized individuals face. While writing leaders of color create meaningful identities to counter the oppression they face, Chris's narratives show that white writing leaders at YW may be undergoing a critical process to unlearn and dismantle an inequitable system.

Writing leaders also shared poems about taking action to ensure that someone they care about feels safe and affirmed. An example:

> I rep for the people who don't feel loved.
> I rep for the people who don't feel like they've got their own,
> For the ones who cry at night in bed and don't call their friends
> And don't tell their moms and dads or brothers or sisters or me.
> I rep with "I'll always be there for you."
> I rep with "I'm sorrys" and "That sucks" and "Tomorrow is a day separate of today."
> I rep with "How are you?" texts because "What's up?" just isn't enough.
> I rep with "Are you safe?"
> I rep with hugs and "Let's listen to sad songs and cry in your car."
> But then I rep with ice cream and smiles and "Let's forget about them or that for now because we're together and we're eating ice chocolate ice cream."
> ...I rep for guys, gals, and nonbinary pals.
> I rep for you, and you rep for me.

> I promise to be your person, and I know you promise to be mine, so let's go rep for people who don't got their own
>
> *-Sylvi, White/Caucasian, gay, cisgender man, age 19*

In this poem, Sylvi aligns himself with individuals at the lower margins of society. Sylvi assumes a responsibility to support queer people and calls on the community to protect queer people. This poem represents the collective nature of YW. Sylvi demonstrates that focal point is to establish a solid connected between community members. Another example is from Noelle, an18 year old female who identifies as Latinx. She shared with me:

> …although you're with these people for only sometimes three weeks or sometimes one week if some students end up leaving or coming back and there's new ones that come in every now and then, it's – you'd expect it to be difficult to open up to other people but it's such a safe space that everyone just lets themselves go. You're kind of accepting the way you are whether they like it or not.
>
> *-Noelle, Latinx, heterosexual woman, 18*

Noelle's sentiments echo her peers' thoughts on feeling safe and free to explore at YW. YW is a writing space that encourages writing leaders and participants to honor the connection shared with one another. Furthermore, all 12 writing leaders who were interviewed described YW as a safe space for youth to reflect on their experiences in community with folx that honor youth's right to self-expression.

Writing leaders co-create a narrative community that promotes safety, collective learning, and empathy. Their counterstories are products of introspective and collective thought. YW enables writing leaders to model to one another the challenging process that of countering oppressions in narrative self-work. The above evidence suggests that as a counterspace, YW fosters identity development through empathy and collective consciousness.

Discussion

In the current study I examined how counterstorytelling functions as an adaptive coping strategy for writing leaders at YW, a summer critical literacy youth program. Interviews and writing samples reveal that for writing leaders, counterstorytelling is a process that involves two major themes: (a) reclaiming identity and (b) co-creating a narrative community. Writing leaders reclaimed their identities by owning the ways that being who they are transcends a binary system of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual identity. Writing leaders also reclaimed their identities by challenging societal and cultural beliefs that place restrictions on how young people can identify themselves. Lastly, the results from this study demonstrate that not only do counternarratives facilitate identity development for the storyteller, but also for the community of listeners.

Reclaiming identity is an important feature of identity development. This finding supports Means (2017) qualitative work that suggests both resistance to oppressive forces and agency are germane to identity development. The writing leaders in my study resist oppressive forces by reclaiming themselves at their intersections and enact agency by daring to name themselves, authentically. We know from the literature that emerging adults must filter through and balance cultural expectations and social messages from the environment to understand what it means to be who they are (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007). For immigrant youth in particular, identity development may also be accompanied by cultural and psychological shifts related to the stress of navigating a new culture and society (Tummala-Narra & Sathasivam-Rueckert, 2016). Given this insight, it makes sense that for these youth, reclamation becomes a strategy for coping and promotes adaptivity to oppression.

Reclaiming identity also includes the subtheme, interrogating social boxes. This finding speaks to the notion that identity development is both “constraining and liberating” (Wagaman,

2016, p. 225). Individuals with marginal and dominant cultural backgrounds have to reconcile what it means to be a person of color at the margins while also working through a familial relationship with whiteness (Reynolds & Pope, 1991). For example, some research demonstrates that while interrogating social boxes may be used by multiracial individuals as an adaptive coping mechanism, there is also the risk that multiracial individuals may feel inauthentic and therefore struggle with internalized race-based oppression (Shih, Wilton, Does, Goodale, & Sanchez, 2019). For queer emerging adults of ethnically diverse backgrounds, meaning-making may be a process that includes both pushing back against social categories to self-define as well as consulting with identity-related traumas from childhood or adolescence (Wagaman, 2016). Research on white racial identity development, in particular, suggests that it may be important for white individuals to engage in intentionally antiracist behaviors such as being an ally to POC and social justice action in order to mitigate the oppressive aspects of what it means to be white (Malott, Paone, Schaefle, Cates, & Haizlip, 2015). My results further emphasize the complexity of identity development by providing rich insight from a narrative approach.

Some youth leaders in the study designate the term queer as a marker of identity beyond the binary system. The term ‘queer’ itself offers an example of reclamation. Qualitative work has brought to the surface the many challenges youth face by living in a binary world (Harris, Russell & Sullivan, 2017; McLean & Syed, 2015b; Saltzburg, & Davis 2010). In other words, a dominant binary worldview stigmatizes identities that fall outside (or in between) dualities such as Black or White and male or female. According to Queer theory, the term queer is used to reconstruct a language to describe and understand marginalized sexualities (Jagose, 1996). Queer youth of color indicate that constructs and labels can feel forced and disaffirming to them (Singh, 2013; Wagaman, 2016). Youth are therefore faced with a conundrum of wanting to reject

limiting categories all together while also feeling a desire to practice their natural human right to create language that better represents their identities and experiences (Brockenbrough, 2015). My results echo this research and also offer counterstorytelling and community as methods of coping with these oppressions.

My results also shed light on the acting white phenomenon. The acting white literature suggests that students of color may be accused of acting white if they practice certain behaviors such as speaking standard English and valuing academic achievement (Bergin & Cooks, 2002). Acting white has also been defined by Black and Latinx college students as pretentious behavior, certain music and style preferences, proximity to and normalization of whiteness, and having an orientation towards achievement overall (Durkee, Gazley, Hope, & Keels, 2019). Colonial standards of linguistics communicate to Black and Latinx youth in particular that their native languages and speech homes do not belong in the education system (Martinez, 2017). They are therefore indoctrinated to distance themselves from their languages in schools (Martinez, 2017). Anzaldúa (1987) refers to the oppression of language and people as "linguistic terrorism" (p.80). Though students of color may feel frustrated with the idea of acting white, acting white does not inherently deter students of color from aspiring to academic achievement (Durkee, Gazley, Hope, & Keels, 2019). Perhaps acting white is less of a reflection of the educational values of communities of color and more of a product of a white supremacist ideology that has created a toxic learning environment for students of color (Tyson, Darity, & Castellion, 2005). My findings extend this research by suggesting that the acting white phenomenon does not abate the way emerging adults of color feel about being members of their racial and/or ethnic group.

Lastly, collective consciousness was also another important feature of youth leaders counternarratives. Together, youth leaders co-created a narrative community that facilitated

identity development for both storytellers and listeners. This finding relates to the Afrocentric worldview of the self-concept. Nobles (1976) writes that colonial oppression works to separate the communal and spiritual connection between human beings. African philosophy therefore counters Eurocentric philosophy of individuals by emphasizing that what happens to the individual, happens to the collective (Mbiti, 1970). This finding is also supported by Winn's (2019) qualitative study on the features of a writing community that become integrated with individual values. According to Winn (2019), these values become so integrated with former members of small close-knit writing communities that such values become how emerging adults choose to navigate the world outside of their communities. Relating with counterspace literature, this finding also emphasizes that setting is an important factor in the positive identity development of youth leaders (Case & Hunter, 2012). Co-creating a narrative community extends previous research by suggesting that empathy and a collective sense of identity may also facilitate identity development through counternarratives for the entire community of storytellers and listeners.

Limitations and Future Directions

Overall, my results contribute to the literature a nuanced understanding of how identity development is facilitated through counterstorytelling for both storytellers and listeners. A major strength of this study is the application of PVEST. To date, my paper is one of very few studies to solely ask a qualitative research question with this theoretical framework. A second strength of this research is the extent of my involvement within the program. During my time at YW, I lived within the community and built rapport with writing leaders outside of the program. Some writing leaders even volunteered to transport me to my apartment and give me a tour of their hometown, The City. I believe youth leaders embraced me because I am close to their age and I

was so authentic with them. However, my study is not without limitation. It is important to consider that only 12 out of 21 youth leaders consented to interviews and 17 out of 21 shared writing samples. Therefore, the narratives shared with me do not represent every individual's experience in the program. Future researchers may choose to dig deeper into the research question by employing a mixed method design to better understand the long-term effects of counterstorytelling as an adaptive coping mechanism. A mixed method design may also reveal differences in experience as a function of time spent in the program. It may also be interesting to follow youth leaders beyond the program. Investigating identity develop outside of the counterspace context may illuminate the effects of counterstorytelling and counterspaces on experience in dominant settings. More specifically, if and how counterspaces change the how marginalized youth experience oppression or their perspective of experiencing oppression in dominant settings.

Conclusion

The writing leaders in my study shared counternarratives that reflect identity as a journey towards accepting one's multidimensional layers as well as any competing beliefs. Perhaps for these youth identity is not about directionality or achieving an optimal status (Marcia, 1966;1987), but instead identity development is a qualitative process involving critique and negotiation, exploration, self-acceptance, and community. In a nutshell, Identity is the story an individual tells about their experience. This idea of identity as a story relates closely to the narrative approach to identity development (McAdams & McLean, 2013; McLean, 2006; Schwartz, Zamboanga, Luyckx, Meca, & Ritchie, 2013). The literature tells us poetry that counters dominant narratives can enable young people to create values and ideologies that help them to combat the oppressions they face (Davis, 2018). My results extend previous research by

suggesting that counternarratives and counterspaces allow emerging adults to reframe identity as a process that is sometimes complicated and sometimes beautiful, but most importantly offers an opportunity to ask questions and find meaning through it all. Community spaces that provide creative outlets, such as writing and spoken work poetry, offer an opportunity for young people to unpack the complexity of their identities. Therefore, my research advocates for a shift from the identity status approach to the life story approach so that researchers and practitioners alike may help young people to appreciate both the beauty and complexity which make them who they are.

Furthermore, findings from this study echo Case & Hunter (2012) by suggesting that members of a counterspace may intentionally share adaptive coping strategies to one another as a form of resistance to oppressive forces (Case & Hunter, 2012). At YW, veteran writing leaders model counterstorytelling within counterspaces as an adaptive coping strategy for newer writing leaders. Writing leaders' experiences suggest that perhaps these relational transactions can be facilitated indirectly. We have to take into account that storytellers engage in cognitively taxing work to challenge social structures which may in turn expose them to psychological risks (Schechner, 2003). Therefore, it may be important to the process to structure an environment that promotes safety and comradery among participants and leaders (Weinstein & West, 2012). Emerging adults in my study co-created a narrative community by affirming one another, listening to one another, and allowing themselves to be challenged by the wisdoms shared. The role of the community in this study suggests that counternarratives may become adaptive when shared within counterspaces.

This work has implications on the field of psychology as well. I align my work with Rosenthal's (2016) considerations for the field of psychology, which asks psychologists to think

about how our work can advance human development especially for marginalized people. More specifically, the author asks psychologists to commit to: (a) engaging and collaborating with communities (b) addressing and critiquing social structures, (c) working together and building coalitions (d) attending to resistance in addition to resilience and (d) teaching social justice curricula. These practices to hold the field of psychology accountable for using research and practice-oriented methods that advocate for well-being at individual, community, societal, and policy levels. I urge psychologists to apply these considerations with the intention of collectively pushing the field toward a psychology that seeks to address structural oppression in research and practice.

Practitioners working with multiply-marginalized emerging adults can learn from this study that youth benefit from the opportunity to explore, unpack, and give voice to their lived experiences. More and more young people are rejecting the idea that identity is a social category to adhere to (Harris, Russell & Sullivan, 2017). Instead, emerging adults are deciding that identity is an experience to reflect on (Habermas & Bluck, 2000) and share through performance (Weinstein & West, 2012). Adaptive coping is promoted best when young people are given the space to take ownership of themselves within the safety of a co-created narrative community. Practitioners should consider that while emerging adults develop identity through sharing their stories, identity development may also be facilitated through collective consciousness and empathy. Listeners develop identity through empathizing with and learning from peer stories. As such, I encourage practitioners to remember that youth leaders of community programs are also developing identity during the experience. Encouraging their participation in the program will better allow them to be transformed by the experience and to also model this transformation to peers and participants.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	# of Summers in the Program	Age	Gender	Race/ethnicity
Noelle	9	18	Woman	Latinx
Gina	8	20	Woman	Latinx
Paulo	2	18	Man	American Indian, Latinx, Black, White
Reina	1	16	Woman	Black/African-American
Yayi	11	21	Nonbinary/ gender queer	Afro-Latinx
Mary	2	18	Woman	White/ Caucasian
Eric	2	20	Man	Latinx
Aloe	1	18	Man	Black, White, Asian
Ruben	1	18	Man	Latinx
Simia	8	17	Nonbinary	White/Caucasian
Chris	1	18	Man	American Indian/Caucasian
Sylvi	2	19	Man	White/Caucasian

Appendix B

ABBREVIATED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Introduction: We are going to ask some questions about your experience at ABL and about how you think about who you are and your role in your communities. With this, we are going to ask some questions about how you engage in society. There are no right or wrong answers. You are welcome to skip any questions that you do not want to answer.

Background Information (Rapport Building):

- What is your name?
- How old are you and what grade are you going into?
- How long have you been coming to ABL? What has your involvement with ABL looked like?
  NOTE: For Writing Leaders How has their experience with ABL changed over time?

Identity

- How would you describe your identities (race, sexuality, gender, religion, class etc.)?
- In what ways does ABL allow you to explore your identities?
- Has poetry/storytelling influenced how you understand your identities? If so, how?

Wrapping Up:

We are trying to understand how ABL shapes youth's development as people and as members of society. Is there anything else that you would like to add that we did not ask?

Do you have any questions for me?

Appendix C

Codebook

Counterstorytelling Process	
Category/Code	Definition
Category I: Reclaiming Identity at the Intersections	Taking ownership of multiply-marginalized identities
Code: Identity commitment	Any talk of commitment to ideologies, roles, decisions relating to social identity.
Code: Reimagining	Any evidence of changing the way one thinks about themselves; reinventing themselves; or thinking about oneself in a different way.
Code: Agency	Any evidence of asserting ideas or narratives.
Category II: Interrogating social boxes	working through identity, struggle, and calling out codes clustering
Code: Working through identity	Any evidence of processing identity through reflection
Code: Struggle	Any evidence of struggle linked with marginalized identities.
Code: Calling out	Any evidence/talk of calling out people, systems or self as problematic
Category III: Co-creating a narrative community	Creating a storytelling community for collective consciousness, collective learning and empathy
Code: Connecting through storytelling	Any evidence of connection, empathy, or sense of community through peer/participant poems.
Code: Affirm	Any evidence of strongly asserting values or beliefs connected with marginalized identities. or having identity affirmed by peers.
Code: "Escaping definitions"	Any talk of challenging social limitations on identity.
Code: Naming	Any intentional language used to name complex processes or ideas connected to marginalized identity.