

# “I Don’t Even Know Why This is a Monument”: Exploring Multimodal Making in Early Childhood

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On a fall afternoon, three students—James, Sam, and Ben (all names are pseudonyms)—gathered around a laptop to review slides about the Christopher Columbus monument located at 59th Street in New York City. During their discussion, James said, “He traveled really far” then Ben replied, “and he stole people.” During this exchange, Sam began working on his reflection sheet and circled “no” in response to the question, “Do you think this should be a monument?” James looked at Sam’s paper, then started to do the same. At that moment their teacher, Noelle, crouched down beside them and asked them to share their thoughts. Sam looked up and said, “I don’t even know why this is a monument when he took Native people and enslaved them in Spain and he enslaved Africans.” In response, James, shaking his head added, “Where even is this monument? I’ve never been there.”

This vignette took place 6 months before the onset of the pandemic caused by COVID-19 in March 2020 and 9 months prior to widespread Black Lives Matter protests. It offers a glimpse into our initial exploration about monuments in our communities. In the edited collection *Octavia’s Brood* (2015), Walidah Imarisha writes, “Once the imagination is unshackled, liberation is limitless” (pg. 4). This quote reflects the ethos that informed our work with second graders in design-based thinking for social change. We spent a year exploring opportunities for media making that focused on issues of equity, justice, and community. In this article, we offer insights into the literacy practices that supported students’ inquiry and critical media making about the role of monuments in our society and what could happen if we shifted our focus toward people from the community who worked for social change.

## Situating the Study

Noelle teaches at a public elementary school on the Lower East Side of New York with just over 300 students enrolled. Nearly 80% of students in the school identify as Latinx, 15% as Black, and the remainder

as Asian, White, or other. A third of students in her school have individualized education plans (IEPs), and 7% are classified as learning English as a new language (ENL). Noelle’s second-grade class had 22 students in an integrated co-teaching (ICT) setting. This meant, 11 students had IEPs, and therefore the classroom had one special education teacher, and one general education teacher. At the beginning of our study, the second-grade team experienced a reconfiguration of students. As we began working on this unit of study, the make-up of her class had drastically changed.

Given this disruption, Noelle’s focus on community was foundational for our work. The class began to put routines in place to take care of one another, their community, and their selves. They began and concluded each day with a circle, they engaged in peer mediation each day after lunch, and they had a consistent practice of asking “Big Questions,” which the class defined as questions that evoke big feelings, questions that lead to other questions, or questions that they had to return to again and again.

These participation structures and community practices provided space for students to raise questions about the world around them, and in this case, the monuments that dotted their city. They gathered in circle each day to process what they were learning and felt stuck when they were unsure if the ideals the monuments represented were unjust or cruel.

## Why Focus on Multimodal Making?

Our work with students on this project is grounded in media making for social change. Specifically, we

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draw on principles from a pedagogy of multiliteracies (New London Group, 1996), critical multimodal literacies (Ajayi, 2015), and Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2009) to consider opportunities for students to repurpose, retool, and reconfigure materials in service of reimagining monuments in their NYC neighborhood. This work leans toward speculative literacies (Mirra & Garcia, 2020) that focuses on conceptualizing learning, designing curriculum, and teaching that is grounded in civic oriented literacies. Specifically, it calls for the type of active participation in designing and future making that the New London Group suggests while also attending to the political intentionality of sense-making from Black Feminist Thought as a means to disrupt deficit ideologies that circulate about communities of color. Throughout this study, we turned to scholars who leverage critical multimodal literacies with students to better understand how “the complexity of students’ literacy practices, dismantles deficit perspectives related to students’ participation in school learning, and opens new spaces for students to critique social issues and transform the lifeworlds that they care about” (Cappello, Wiseman, & Turner, 2019, p. 212). We have observed those assertions in action and would add to that list that students also begin to develop fluency and proficiency in selecting tools to compose in across modalities and genres for a variety of purposes and audiences. We draw on these frameworks because collectively they work to counter structural and educational inequities that students from marginalized communities experience in schools. They also position teachers as having the capacity to honor students’ lives, home languages, literacies, and cultural practices by centering the questions students bring to school and making space for them to share their learning in ways that amplify these practices.

## Getting Started

The NYC school curriculum for second grade focuses on monuments in the city (Fariña, Commitante, Contreras, & Weinberg, 2014–15). However, based on the students’ questions about these monuments, we felt the curriculum missed an opportunity to engage students in critical inquiry about those cultural artifacts. We use the idea of critical inquiry to signal an approach to literacy pedagogies and practices that seek to understand power dynamics in relation to equity. In the chart below, we show the learning

experiences and assumptions from the district curriculum about monuments and changes we made to center questions and ideas students raised that address power, social change, equity, and representation (see Table 1).

To help the students make sense of what they were learning, Noelle began collecting information about monuments in the city and made the following materials available for students to support their inquiries:

Geo Mapping

Images of Monuments

PowerPoints with historical context for monuments

“Big Questions” Inquiry Chart

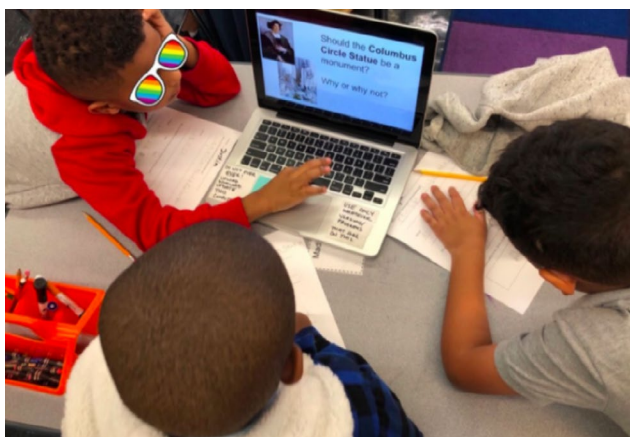
During this same time, we began to imagine what this unit could look like if students from Detra’s Media, Culture, and Education course partnered with students from Noelle’s class to engage in principles of design justice (Costanza-Chock, 2020) to prototype and develop monuments. Specifically, we thought about what Detra’s graduate students were learning about media making, digital tools, and materiality and how it could be applied when working in a community with a local second-grade class.

To begin this process, the students in Noelle’s class focused on locating and identifying monuments around NYC with a specific focus on who they honored and why these people or places were selected (see Figures 1–3). Next, they began to conduct research about the people and events the monuments represented, alongside their emerging ideas and questions. As their questions moved toward greater representation of people who should have monuments, Noelle introduced them to community activists that spoke to their interest in social change and collective action. As Noelle’s students learned about people from their community who made a difference, they began to shift their focus to which of these people or events they should focus on for their monuments. Next, the students from Detra’s class began to plan how to support the students in representing what they learned. This ideation process involved discussing the contributions of each activist, why these contributions mattered to members of the community, and brainstorming what type of structure they could design that could capture these ideas. Below we highlight the work students engaged in during each part of the process.

**Table 1**  
**Existing Scope and Sequence Standards and Evolved Objectives**

NYC DOE Scope and Sequence for Gr. 2 <i>My Community and Other Communities</i>	Changes we made
<div style="background-color: #d9e1f2; padding: 5px; border: 1px solid black;"> <p style="font-size: 2em; font-weight: bold; margin: 0;">2</p> <p style="margin: 0;"><b>UNIT 2:</b> New York City Over Time</p> </div> <div style="background-color: #003366; color: white; padding: 5px; border: 1px solid black; text-align: center;"> <p><b>NOVEMBER – DECEMBER</b></p> </div> <p style="margin-top: 10px;"><b>Essential Question:</b> How and why do communities change over time?</p> <p><b>2.6 Identifying continuities and changes over time can help understand historical developments. (Standard 1)</b></p> <p>Changes over time 2.6a, 2.6b</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Changes over time can be described using dates and timelines</li> <li>▪ Changes over time can be examined by using evidence such as maps, population charts, photographs, paintings, newspapers, biographies, and other historical artifacts</li> <li>▪ New York City has changed over time and will continue to change in the future</li> <li>▪ The architectural landscape of New York City includes old and new features (historic buildings, skyscrapers)</li> </ul>	<div style="background-color: #003366; color: white; padding: 5px; border: 1px solid black;"> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>New York City: As we see it and how we imagine it could be</b></p> </div> <div style="background-color: #008080; color: white; padding: 5px; border: 1px solid black; text-align: center;"> <p style="text-align: center;">October – November</p> </div> <div style="background-color: #ffff00; padding: 5px; border: 1px solid black;"> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Essential Questions:</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">What do we notice in NYC? What are monuments, why do we have them, who decides what they honor? How do monuments contribute to how our city is represented? How do we wish our city was represented through monuments? What kinds of values do we want to see when we talk through our city?</p> </div>
<p><b>2.7 Cause-and-effect relationships help us recount events and understand historical development. (Standard 1) 2.7a</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ New York City in the 1600s was inhabited by various Native American peoples</li> <li>▪ European explorers arrived in present day New York City (Henry Hudson)</li> <li>▪ The Dutch and English influenced the development of early New Amsterdam and New York City <small>cont.</small></li> </ul>	<div style="background-color: #ffff00; padding: 5px; border: 1px solid black;"> <p><b>Evolved objectives</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Changes over time can be examined by using evidence listed in Scope and Sequence, including monuments</li> <li>• The architectural landscape of NYC was decided by people with specific goals and it's received by New Yorkers in different ways</li> <li>• NYC has changed and will continue to change over time</li> <li>• Changes impact varied communities in disproportionate ways</li> <li>• Who is honored in monuments can be reimagined</li> </ul> </div>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ New York City changed and grew during the 1700s, 1800s, 1900s                         <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Physical environment</li> <li>– Population/immigration/migration</li> <li>– Size, shape, homes, and buildings</li> <li>– Use of natural resources</li> <li>– Methods of transportation</li> <li>– Jobs and industry</li> <li>– Technological advances</li> <li>– Evolution of communities and neighborhoods</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<div style="background-color: #ffff00; padding: 5px; border: 1px solid black;"> <p><b>Evolved objectives</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We can examine and critique what we notice in our city</li> <li>• We can reimagine how our city will evolve</li> <li>• NYC changed and grew through many centuries because of varied interests, often at the expense of marginalized communities</li> <li>• We can use multimodal media making to further our understanding of an evolving NYC</li> </ul> </div>

**Figure 1**  
Students Exploring Content about Christopher Columbus Monument



Note. The color figure can be viewed in the online version of this article at <http://ila.onlinelibrary.wiley.com>.

## Who Do We Honor in Our Community?

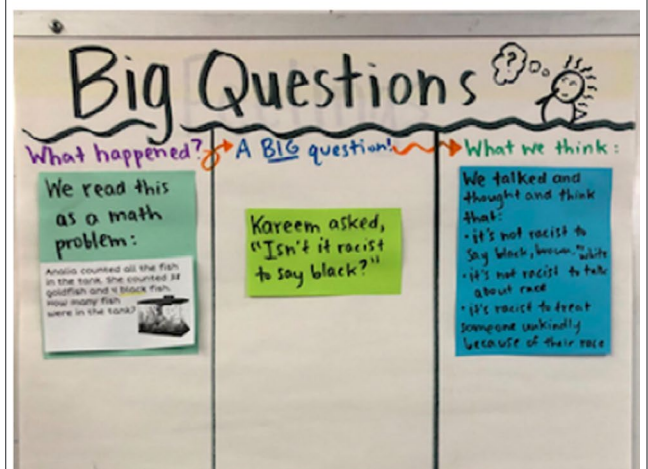
During the unit, the students engaged in close introspection of monuments, statues, buildings, or other structures constructed to remember a famous person or event. The monuments they studied were Christopher Columbus, the Washington Arch in Washington Square Park, and the African Burial Ground.

When Noelle's students read about Christopher Columbus, they learned that he was an explorer and that he was credited with "discovering" the Americas. They also learned that he enslaved, captured, and killed Indigenous people and African people. When they read about George Washington, they learned that he was the first president of the United States, he fought in the Revolutionary War, and he also enslaved people. When they read about the African Burial Ground, they learned that enslaved Black people had been buried throughout Lower Manhattan and there was significant development on top of their burial ground—the African burial ground was an effort to honor the enslaved Africans who built New York.

As her students began to discuss the purpose of monuments, who has a monument, and the location of these monuments, more questions about whose values and experiences the monuments represented in NYC began to emerge. Students asked questions such as:

- Who is this monument remembering?
- Why?

**Figure 2**  
Community Meeting. Big Questions Chart



Note. The color figure can be viewed in the online version of this article at <http://ila.onlinelibrary.wiley.com>.

- Do you think it should be a monument? Why or why not?

When presented with information about the city monuments, the second graders thought it was evident that Christopher Columbus should not have a monument. The class was mixed on the Washington Arch in Washington Square Park (many of them voted that it should not be a monument and one group voted it should be a monument). However, every student thought the African Burial Ground should be a monument and they wondered why there were not more monuments honoring the people who actually built New York (see Figure 4). This led to more questions such as:

- Why were these people represented throughout New York City?

**Figure 3**  
**Christopher Columbus Statue. Washington Square Arch. African Burial Ground**



Note. The color figure can be viewed in the online version of this article at <http://ila.onlinelibrary.wiley.com>.

- Who made these decisions?
- Who should be represented throughout New York City?
- What does it say to people walking around what the values of New Yorkers are?

All of those experiences with reading, talking, and processing information about monuments in the city led the students back to their neighborhood. They thought about the values represented in their classroom: community, asking big questions, being gentle, and showing up for each other and for themselves. They began to ask about and research historical community activists on the Lower East Side. As they read and discuss their research, they learned more about the Lenni-Lenape, the Indigenous people of Manhattan and enslaved Africans who had built Manhattan. They learned all about Jane Jacobs, a housing rights activist on the Lower East Side who went toe-to-toe with Robert Moses and preserved many neighborhoods in the Lower East Side. They also learned about Miguel Algarín the founder of the Nuyorican Poetry Cafe, an institution in the school neighborhood (see Figure 5). The students made compelling arguments for why each of these people or groups should have monuments on the Lower East Side.

During this same time, Detra's class began to plan how to support the students in synthesizing and representing what they learned. This ideation process involved discussing the contributions of each activist, why these contributions mattered to members of the community, and brainstorming what type of structure they could design that could capture these ideas.

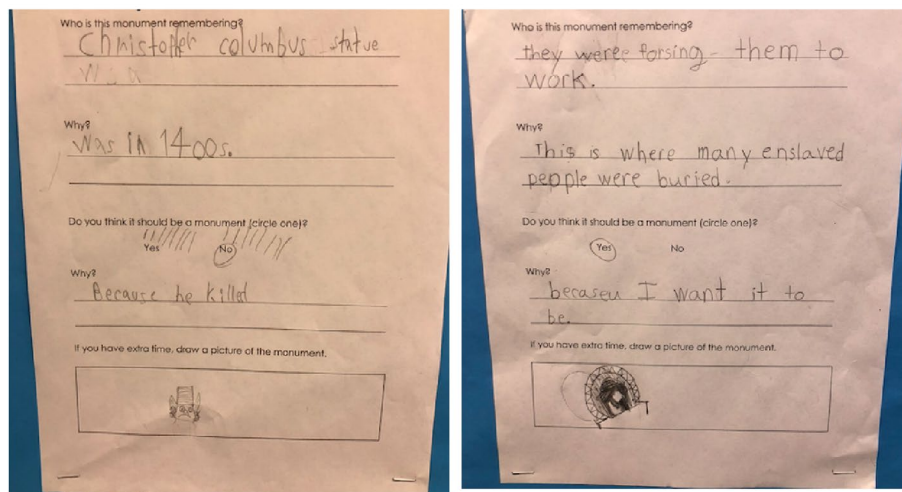
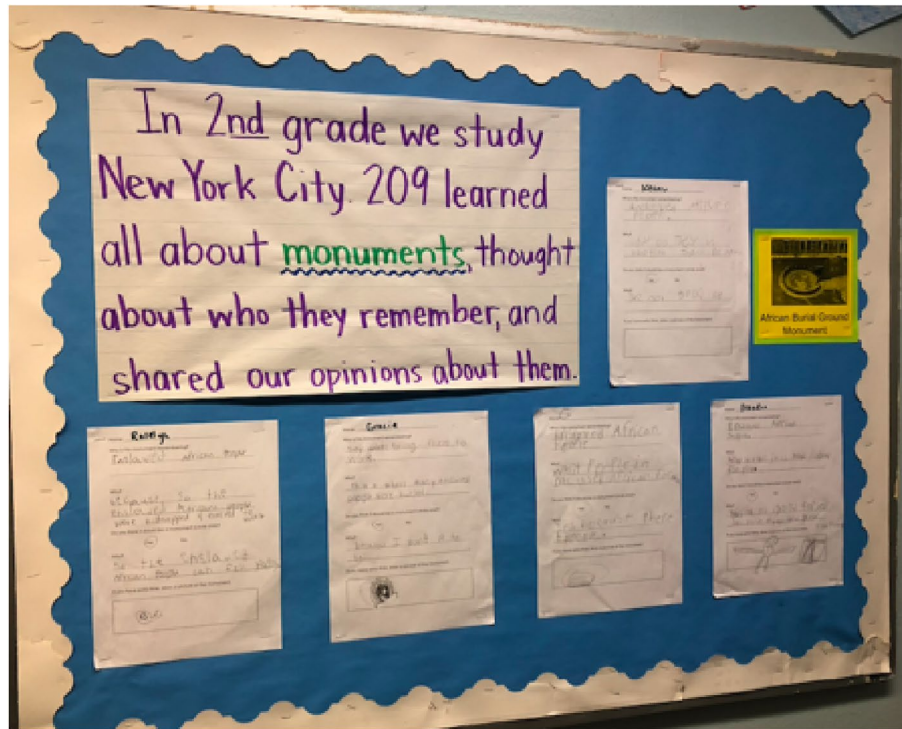
Each group of second graders and graduate students collaborated to build their sketched plans. They used varied materials including clay, construction paper, tissue paper, markers, paints, and tape (see Figure 6).

At the conclusion of the study, the second graders shared their ideation process with the school community in the library (see Figure 7).

This process (see Table 2) involved reading, small-group discussions, concept mapping, drawing plans that looked at form, content, scale, materials, and color, and then moved into the prototyping phase.

Throughout this process, students were engaged in intellectual work as curators of stories rooted in social change with hopes of creating a model that could represent the impact community activists had on their neighborhood. For students to engage in these types

**Figure 4**  
**Hallway Bulletin Board Showing Kids' Evaluations of Existing Monuments. Student Reflection on Monument of Christopher Columbus. Student Reflection about African Burial Ground**



Note. The color figure can be viewed in the online version of this article at <http://ila.onlinelibrary.wiley.com>.

of complex literacies, they had to move across sign-systems (i.e., print, image, video, color, scale) to construct new possibilities. In practice this meant:

- a Taking notes
- b (Re)presenting the ideas from their notes in a concept map
- c Discussing the concept map to reach consensus about which ideas to move forward
- d Selecting materials to represent those ideas
- e Constructing artifacts with those materials in service of their vision

**Figure 5**  
**Small-Group Discussion. Detra with Second Graders and Graduate Students Working. One Student Showing a Clay Model of Miguel Algarín**



Note. The color figure can be viewed in the online version of this article at <http://ila.onlinelibrary.wiley.com>.

During this iterative process, these second-grade students were thinking critically about the world around them and using materials to create an artifact that could amplify a different narrative.

### Learning from the Students

We learned that multimodal making with print-based and digital tools provided an opportunity for the students to engage in critical historical analysis

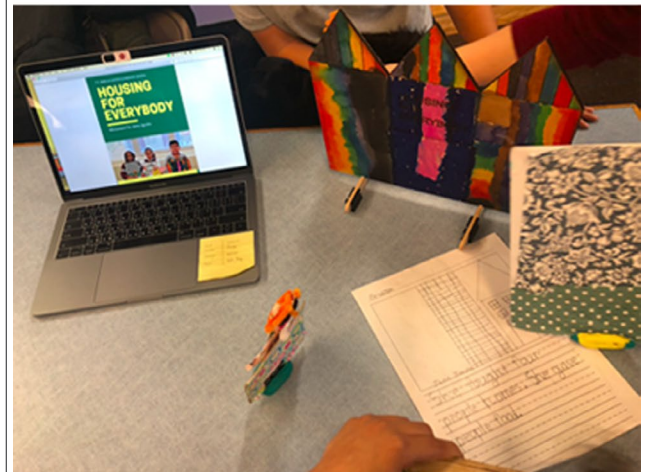
**Figure 6**  
**Model of Housing Monument Made of Paper, Popsicle Sticks, Pipe Cleaner, Marker, and Tape. Inside view of Nuyorican Poetry Café Prototype (made with Fabric Scraps, Clay, Tape, and Cardboard)**



Note. The color figure can be viewed in the online version of this article at <http://ila.onlinelibrary.wiley.com>.

of the monuments in NYC with layered discussions about what elements of memorializing people or events that we should bring forward in the future.

**Figure 7**  
**Students Sharing their Prototypes and Last Printed Monument Model of Nuyorican Poetry Café. Fair Housing Project. Students Sharing their Monument Model along Canva Created Pamphlets**



Note. The color figure can be viewed in the online version of this article at <http://ila.onlinelibrary.wiley.com>.

This type of critical making pushed us to identify, name, and deconstruct hierarchies in our society that allow certain people to be memorialized regardless of how their choices may have promoted violence, genocide, racism, sexism, and exacerbated inequalities that left a legacy many children and families contend with on a daily basis. This work also revealed three big ideas about the convergence of students' critical literacies and making as evident through their projects.

**Table 2**  
**Collaborative Planning Process**

Week	Literacy Practices In Action	Second graders	Graduate students
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Reading</li> <li>■ Writing</li> <li>■ Analysis</li> <li>■ Sharing questions</li> <li>■ Creating and participating in surveys</li> <li>■ Discussion</li> </ul>	Consider existing monuments	Supported discussions about content and created charts to keep track of important ideas
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Reading</li> <li>■ Writing</li> <li>■ Analysis</li> <li>■ Synthesizing</li> <li>■ Brainstorming</li> <li>■ Sharing questions</li> <li>■ Decision making/negotiation</li> <li>■ Developing arguments for discussion</li> </ul>	Learn about local community helpers; consider how they could be represented	Created concept maps to begin ideation process
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Reading</li> <li>■ Writing</li> <li>■ Analysis</li> <li>■ Synthesizing</li> <li>■ Brainstorming</li> <li>■ Sharing questions</li> <li>■ Decision making/negotiation</li> <li>■ Making across materials and tools</li> </ul>	Worked on designing monuments in small groups (sketching, collaging, written description)	
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Reading</li> <li>■ Writing</li> <li>■ Analyzing</li> <li>■ Synthesizing</li> <li>■ Brainstorming</li> <li>■ Sharing questions</li> <li>■ Negotiating how to represent what they learned in the form of their monument</li> <li>■ Exploring materials and experimenting with design</li> <li>■ Forming hypothesis about how materials work together and making decisions about design</li> </ul>	Second-grade students created prototypes of their monument using a variety of art materials. Graduate students took prototypes back to the Teaching and Learning Lab to use laser cutter and 3D printer to create models.	
5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Reading</li> <li>■ Writing</li> <li>■ Analyzing</li> <li>■ Synthesizing</li> <li>■ Brainstorming</li> <li>■ Sharing questions</li> <li>■ Negotiating how to represent what they learned for public showcase</li> <li>■ Exploring sign-systems to design infographic</li> <li>■ Writing script for visitors</li> <li>■ Rehearsing script</li> <li>■ Public speaking</li> </ul>	Developed materials (infographics, signs) to share their thinking with school community and other communities; Hosted a gallery in school library to share their work	

1. Technologies function as tools for process and production. The use of technology helped the students process and produce what they envisioned for their monument. As the second graders learned about the community activists, they worked across print and digital tools, materials, and engaged in literacy practices with these objects to make sense of what they were learning. The tools were part of the process, not just used to produce a final product.
2. Students constructed monuments to honor collective action for humanity. When designing this unit of study, we assumed the students would recreate common monuments found throughout New York City by replicating elements of the genre, specifically, architecture designed to remember specific people or a specific person. Instead, every group created a monument where communities could be represented or remembered, not an individual person. Even the small groups who wanted to remember Jane Jacobs and her fight for housing in Lower Manhattan did not recreate a statue of an isolated individual, like the state of Christopher Columbus at 59th Street, they built homes with people in them, including Jane Jacobs. The kids who wanted to honor Miguel Algarín built a model of his Nuyorican Poetry Cafe and wrote about how all people, especially brown and Black people, were welcome there. They leaned into their communal priority of collective value and made sure it was manifested in the structures they built.
3. Students developed interconnected and fluid literacy practices. As students moved across platforms, materials, and sign-systems to make sense of the content they were learning, they made connections among the genres, modalities, and materials they were using. For example, students recognized the importance of scale, dimension, font, and color when creating their monuments and infographics. They discussed how each of these elements conveyed meaning and emotion to people who viewed them and began to make deliberate choices in how to move across these sign-systems and even combine them to convey a specific effect.

We learned the skills students developed and literacy practices they engaged in during this unit of study could be translated to other learning

experiences such as the podcast work we began in the spring. As a result of their multimodal making, they were able to create artifacts and apply their analytical thinking and divergent literacies to new content.

## Considerations

For teachers thinking about doing this kind of study, there are many considerations to keep in mind. First, the heroes' narratives that are inscribed in monuments tend to diminish the sociopolitical context that could reveal harmful ideologies and uphold individuals over the collective. To counter this tendency, we recommend providing students with multiple opportunities to explore how the monuments in their community came to be and what the impact of those who memorialized has been on all people in the community across time and space. Second, we recommend creating opportunities for students to process what they are learning in across participation structures and deciding how to share their findings with the larger community. In our experience having a one-off celebration of learning about social justice activists sets the tone that this work is an add-on to the curriculum. In our work, these sharing sessions are part of a larger focus on equity that occurs throughout the school year. The last recommendation is to find a partner to work with on projects that require more hands in the room. The graduate students in Detra's course provided significant help for students as they explored materials and became more comfortable with using different technological tools.

## Conclusion

We began this study trying to understand how to make the required curriculum accessible and meaningful to the students in Noelle's classroom. In essence, the curriculum, the narratives implied in the curriculum, and the materials needed to enact the curriculum did not work. So we created something new. This process forced us to confront how power differentials are reflected in the curriculum and replicated across institutions in our society so that we can find ways to dismantle them. For us, disrupting the system begins with reexamining the curriculum and asking whose narratives are being told and how those narratives sustain White supremacy? As we continue to think about the lessons we learned from this study, a few questions still linger:

- How can we reimagine ways to seed critical inquiry with students about topics that matter in their lives and communities?
- How can we develop hybrid textual practices grounded in students' cultural ways of knowing?
- In what ways can we curate multimodal media that is produced by students about topics that matter to them?
- How can we center collective problem solving and collaboration that generates self-directed learning?
- And how can we reimagine the role of creativity in curation, production, and dissemination of student created artifacts designed and intended for multiple publics?

Critical multimodal making should spark students' radical imaginations about their world because all tools are available for processing and composing new realities. Engaging in this type of work with young learners promotes criticality, fosters creativity, invites interaction and collaboration, functions as an expression of joy and possibly resistance to narratives that students want to explore. It should feel active with space for play, practice,

experimentation, and production. These elements were present throughout this study and positioned students as creators and teachers in their school community.

## Conflict of Interest

None.

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