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Mentoring on the Borderlands
Creating Empowering Connections Between Adolescent Girls and Young Women Volunteers

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Abstract: This article focuses on the ways young women volunteers build empowering connections with sixth grade girls in the context of a girl empowerment mentoring program. Gloria Anzaldúa’s concept of “Borderlands” is applied as a theoretical metaphor for understanding how empowering mentoring connections are made in the face of binary positionings. Narrative analysis that focus on the rhetorical properties of stories reveal the significance of three key practices including resisting role modeling, knowing how to talk with girls, and seeing difference that enable connections in the face of borders that often seem impermeable. I offer a model of creating connections that explains how volunteer actions deconstruct the borders that exist between girls and volunteers as well as shows the paths to connection and disconnection. Theoretically, insights gained from this analysis call into question theories of girlhood and adolescence that are rigid and fixed and reinforce the idea that mentoring as a Borderland experience is inherently political. Practically, this work demonstrates what works well in building connections with adolescent girls and offers suggestions about how mentoring and girl empowerment programs can build on volunteer knowledge and experience.

I thought this was just an innocent free time for students, a much needed break in their otherwise highly disciplined and routine school day. However, as I walked naively into the gym, I found the music loud and the lights low. There was a DJ on stage spinning R&B (Rhythm and Blues) and hip-hop and I quickly understood why the girls were in such a rush to leave our mentoring program to get to “Fun Day.” “Fun Day,” an after school activity, transforms their everyday reality into a nightlife fantasy.

I maneuvered easily through a congregation of students to get a closer look at a group of dancers that seemed to be drawing a lot of people’s attention. In the center of a captivated audience, I watched four girls dance like they were in a music video. Each performed accordingly, challenging the others to create a more impressive move. The more impressive the move, the more shocked I became. The girls danced as if they were at least twenty-one, at a club, on a Friday night.

Dancing like that how could any one, no matter how strong, get past what they were suggesting and maybe even inviting? In Celebrating All Girls we spend ten weeks providing...
girls with the tools to build their selves up, encouraging them to remain strong, and ideally in their family a lifetime. Surely, these girls have learned that performing for others by shaking their booty is not the best way to get attention.

Then my song came on. Before I knew it, I was at the center of the circle, shaking it fast. A little concerned that a girl would look at me and think, “she dances like an old person,” I got over that quick and almost forgot where I was. In call and response tradition, the song asked “how low can you go?” I felt my self working down to the ground and then having just a little trouble working my self back up again. While I subtracted some hips and added a smile, I was beginning to realize that I should probably tone my gestures down to what’s “appropriate” for a middle school gymnasium. The girls’ approvingly pointed and laughed, quite in surprise that I accepted the singer’s challenge. As we clapped our hands, replacing the drum of old, and Cha-cha-cha-ed our way throughout the Diaspora, the circle became home. Our collective celebrations balanced effortlessly on the borders of Black woman/girlhood allowing us to see parts of ourselves in each other.

—Field notes on “Fun Day,” October 26, 2000

In my roles as “volunteer,” “political socializer,” and “girl empowerer,” I quickly dismissed the girls’ dancing as antithetical to Celebrating All Girls (CAG)\(^1\) program goals and who I wanted them to be. Standing outside of the circle, as I watched the girls my fear was grounded in the possibility that their eleven—and twelve-year-old, fully developed, womanish bodies prematurely allowed them access to dance in the way that demands the wisdom of women, not the curiosity of adolescent girlhood. My fear was magnified by the shameful belief that because Black girls and women too rarely draw an applauding and captive audience in public, the unique experience of dancing before a crowd of on-lookers would lead the girls to swallow it whole. Watching from outside the circle, I defined the girls as the problem; if girls didn’t do this kind of dancing, I thought, they would not need us to teach them about girl empowerment.

When I started to dance with the girls, however, we connected in a very powerful way. While dancing, my once judgmental gaze turned into a celebration of Black female bonding. Dancing together, we forgot the burdens of the world and focused on ourselves, individually and collectively loving who we are. Dancing provided an opportunity to displace temporarily how others defined us and instead to define ourselves—our personalities and our visions of the world—by the way we moved. Through our connection, I was able to convey more of my whole self—fearful yet hopeful, like the girls, and becoming more of my own woman. Through dance, I offered my body as a site of collective decision-making that authoritatively recognized who we were and wanted to be.

In Ruth Behar’s (1996) essay “The Girl in the Cast” she asserted, “If the woman is, in some ways, already harbored in the girl, and the girl in the woman it changes the definition of childhood, making room for more elusive border positionings of girls and women.” Heavily influenced by Carol Gilligan (1990) and Sandra Cisneros (1989), for Behar, the redeeming quality of their work is found in the defiant objection of a girl/woman dichotomy. What I know from the last four years of working with girls is that they just as much as I do, need a space in which we can talk and discuss our life’s struggles and successes. We all benefit from creating a space in celebration of all of who we are and that which we see in each other. My experiences at Fun Day showed me that the work and process of creating connections between women and girls requires the

\(^1\) Celebrating All Girls is an after-school mentoring program. The goal of CAG is girl empowerment for sixth grade girls through group mentoring. I conducted participant observation of CAG for three years.
negotiation of elusive border positionings that demand the abandonment of dichotomous ways of seeing and being. Creating empowering connections with girls means exposing the borders that keep us from acknowledging where we meet, where we don’t meet, and all the intimate spaces in between.

In this article, I explore the process of creating empowering connections between girls and women in mentoring relationships that requires negotiating, mediating, and dissolving borders between girls and women. Empowering connections pose a direct challenge to dichotomous relationships between young women and girls, socializee and socializer, empowerer and someone in need of empowerment. In this context, mentoring on the borderlands give meaning to a female empowerment strategy based on the creation of shared power. I am conceptualizing power in the erotic sense that Lorde (1984) described as sharing deeply any pursuit with another person. Volunteers demonstrated such a use of power when they actively recognized and mediated borders between themselves and those with whom they work.

The following questions guide this analysis: What dichotomies are challenged when girls and women in mentoring relationships create an empowering connection? What borders exist as potential barriers to connections? How do volunteers recognize the intimate spaces between borders to create connections with girls in ways that affirm volunteers, girls, and who they can be together?

APPLYING ANZALDÚAN THEORY: MENTORING ON THE BORDERLANDS

At Fun Day, I learned that creating connections required exposing what Fusco (1995) discussed as “the mythology of borders”—the superficiality of structures that keep marginalized groups including girls and women divided. My experiences at Fun Day made apparent the borders of girlhood and womanhood, adulthood and childhood, and observer and participant, and it was finding the intimate space between these borders that enabled an unforgettable and profound connection.

According to Gloria Anzaldúa (1999; preface), borders are set up to define safe and unsafe places and to distinguish us from them:

> Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle, and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy.

For Anzaldúa, the U.S. / Mexico border was an unnatural boundary created by relations of power that inspired a mestiza consciousness, an embrace of dualities. The border is an elastic metaphor that can be repositioned to talk about many issues (Fusco, 1995). It is useful to identify the borders that arise in mentoring relationships because when connections are made between girls and women by negotiating the unnatural boundaries created by relations of power the work they are doing, often dismissed as volunteer and therefore apolitical, becomes politically significant. Specifically, mentoring on the borderlands of girl empowerment, inspires volunteer practices that may directly challenge white supremacist capitalist patriarchal systems (hooks, 1992) that privilege binary thinking and divisive relationships between females.

In this case, the new kind of consciousness that arises is what I call femtoring consciousness. Femtoring consciousness manifest through the actions of female mentors when they negotiate borders in ways that allow girls and women to see themselves in
each other. Femtoring consciousness underscore mentoring as an inherently political and public work by illustrating the political force of female relations typically kept out of social consciousness and public discourse (Taylor, Gilligan, and Sullivan, 1997). It is also demonstrative of how political consciousness emerges in the social context thus validating affiliation, caring connections, and community as valid political needs (Hardy-Fanta, 1997). By reconceptualizing mentoring as both political and public work, such learning experiences exist as a method of citizen education (Boyte, 1993) that connects people to the public sphere where learning takes place through doing, talking, and practicing (Rimmerman, 2001).

Conversely, when young women work with girls, connections should not be assumed, especially in absence of a femtoring consciousness. In Celebrating All Girls, volunteers did not always connect with girls. At times the result of volunteer practices was disconnection. As I initially watched the girls dance at Fun Day, my thoughts reinforced negative images of girls as weak and powerless. My experience was consistent with the research of Boyte and Farr (1997), who concluded that most youth-development workers see young people themselves as “problems” to be managed, clients to be served, or as consumers of knowledge—in ways that unwittingly limit their talents and potential. My initial interactions at Fun Day confirmed the idea that adults who volunteer or participate in many service-learning programs do so out of a patronizing, philanthropic, and therapeutic notion of “do-gooderism” (Boyte, 1993). When borders are not recognized and exposed, but are rather ignored and reinforced, the result is disconnection.

My femtoring consciousness was invoked through dance. At Fun Day, it was not until I danced with the girls that I began to understand our interactions as politically meaningful. We were taking up space, and the power we created at that time has since translated into a resourceful memory I often use when I find myself not celebrated and unable to dance. In the analysis that follows, I rely on volunteer stories to analyze the actions that informed their femtoring consciousness.

**Methodology: A Narrative Analysis of Volunteer Stories**

To analyze how girls and women created empowering connections in Celebrating All Girls, I utilize a methodology of narrative analysis based on semiotics and rhetoric. This particular methodology builds on the work of Feldman and Sköldberg (2002) and Feldman, Sköldberg, Brown, and Horner (2004) that emphasize the value of rhetorical properties of stories. As a unit of data, stories contain multiple arguments, highlight the storyteller’s logic, and describe how the storyteller knows and learns. In the context of CAG, volunteer stories provided understandings to why and how empowering connections occurred. Moreover, as a performative event, stories incorporate dramatic and aesthetic elements that explain the social organization of culture (Goodwin, 1996). In this way, the performative aspect of volunteers’ stories represent Celebrating All Girls artifacts, whereby the texture, tone, and color of their narratives suggest what they found meaningful about the structure and culture of the program. I analyzed formal patterns of logic embedded in stories to performed this particular rhetorical approach of narrative analysis that values the stories participants share in interview settings (Feldman, Sköldberg, Brown, and Horner, 2004). Storytellers often structure their stories in ways that demand listeners to fill in or interpret the meanings of stories. This analysis is based on a systematic approach of interpreting the implicit and explicated arguments found in the stories volunteers
shared about their mentoring experiences.

This narrative analysis is primarily based on the interviews of sixteen volunteers. I identified 262 volunteer stories from interview transcripts. To identify stories, I read each interview transcript and paid particular attention to the stories volunteers told. I defined stories as those distinct sections of the interviews that contained a plot with a clear beginning and end. Not all of the interviews yielded the same number of stories. Some of the volunteer’s responses were descriptions and not stories. The primary difference is that stories contained arguments about the how and why of volunteering, whereas descriptions were groupings of words that merely conveyed characteristics.

CODING

I used NUD.IST (Non-Numeric Unstructured Data Indexing Searching Theorizing), a qualitative software program to code data. For the purposes of this analysis I was most interested in those stories that explained or described creating empowering connections. This technique invokes a grounded theoretical perspective, whereby themes emerge from data and not by a predetermined hypothesis (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Playing close attention to formal patterns of logic embedded in stories, I recorded themes that emerged repeatedly across different stories and began to use those themes as the initial categories to which I would assign codes to stories in NUD.IST. The program itself allowed me to introduce new categories to the initial coding structure as subsequent analyses were performed.

Of the total 262 volunteer stories, 124 focused on making connections with girls. Within stories coded as “Connections,” thirty-six focused on differences, eighty focused on talk, and nine focused on role-modeling. Each story was coded once. Taking into consideration both frequency and intensity of how empowering connections were created in Celebrating All Girls, I continuously danced between theory, data, coding, and analysis to construct a model of volunteering connections based on volunteer stories:

This model explains how volunteer actions informed by a femtor consciousness resulted in the creation of empowering connections in Celebrating All Girls. The model begins with volunteer practices, placing emphasis on the action—the doing—the work of building connections between vol-

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A Model of Creating Empowering Connections

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unteers and girls. In this analysis I focus on three key volunteer practices that emerged from the data. These practices include: resisting modeling, knowing how to talk with girls, and seeing difference. With each of these practices, volunteers identified borders of concern. The model suggests that two things may happen in the presence of borders. First, volunteer practices may inspire mechanisms of reflection that allow girls and volunteers to see part of themselves in each other in ways that ultimately lead to connections. I call these actions “reflective mechanisms.” Reflective mechanisms deconstruct the mythology of the border. The connections inspired as a result are generative; creating an intimacy that affirms the volunteer’s practice and symbolizes political resistance in a culture that has arguably no language to describe connections between women and girls.

However, not all volunteer practices led to connection. The model shows that volunteer practices can also inspire borders that are not dissolved, crossed, or negotiated and as a result led to volunteer disconnection. The mechanisms that lead to volunteer disconnection are called mechanisms of reinforcement. Reinforcement mechanisms reinforce borders rather than transcend them. In the case of volunteer disconnection, most volunteers were well aware of and spoke freely about the borders and mechanisms that did not work. This awareness provides an opportunity for volunteers to reengage borders using reflective mechanisms that lead to volunteer connections, provided that the girl or volunteer was not hurt or harmed in the previous process.

Volunteer Practice #1: Resisting Role Modeling (Sin Fronteras)

The perception is that being a role model implies perfection. As a role model, volunteers presented the image that there was something so right about what she had done or who she was that she deserved to be put on a pedestal so that girls might model her behavior, actions, and appearance. The volunteer practice of resisting role modeling meant rejecting this role model stereotype. Resisting role modeling is a volunteer practice that led to reflective mechanisms that enabled volunteer/girl connections. Resisting role modeling as a volunteer practice was accomplished through reflective mechanisms that allowed volunteers to make their flaws, struggles, and vulnerabilities just as visible as their accomplishments, successes, and talents. The volunteer practice of resisting role modeling identified vulnerability and perfection, sharing stories and not sharing stories, volunteering and role modeling, and authenticity and image as significant borders.

To expose the mythology of these categories one volunteer used the reflective mechanism of testifying. The gist of the volunteer’s story “It’s Really Possible,” is summarized by the following storyline: building connections with girls means actively working to make public the less celebrated aspects of volunteer life experiences so that girls can express and define for themselves who they are and what they have overcome in ways that enable them and volunteers to see themselves in each other.

“It’s Really Possible”

Maybe a lot of the girls haven’t seen a lot of girls or older people that they know who have gone to college and not only just gone to college but went to college and did other stuff. I sort of want them to know that it’s really possible to be well rounded and do a lot of things, like not just school-related, to do—endeavor in a lot of things. I don’t remember what the topic was but it made me think about my relationship with my father and I don’t know for certain, but I think when the girls look at you or Karen or me, they tend to think—I don’t think that they think that
we’ve had any trouble in life, and I don’t think that they think that we can really, really understand what they go through at home, because I don’t think they think that we’ve been through that. In one of the upcoming weeks, I wanted to sort of address that and let them know that me being at [the university] does not mean that I came from Bloomfield Hills and I have both my parents and you know, everyone in my family is perfect and we all have wonderfully paying jobs, we all drive Bentleys. I don’t want them to get that misconception. I kind of wanted to clear that up that misconception if it’s out there.

In CAG, the unwritten rule is, volunteers are required to be college students. Implicit in this volunteer’s story is that her status as a university student is automatically equated with success and privilege. Successes based on privilege reinforce volunteers as role models, thus reifying borders between volunteers and girls. This volunteer challenged these borders through the practice of resisting role modeling as she defined herself through her testimony. For this volunteer, testifying allowed her to escape the identity CAG privileged, namely “college student,” to equate being a volunteer with something more than her student status.

For this volunteer, a meaningful connection was made by sharing not only her successes but also her struggles and vulnerabilities. In a CAG session centered on “Dreams for the Future,” this volunteer shared her personal testimony of coping and resisting family struggles with alcoholism, depression, mental illness, and domestic violence. Her testimony allowed the girls to see that she is like them, vulnerable and not above having problems. The volunteer’s testimony enabled girls to express how they overcame certain obstacles and survived their own negative family situations, bearing witness to the complexities of their young lives. Through testifying, this volunteer created a connection and generated intimacy that validated the precariousness of girls’ life journeys.

In this story, the inspiration behind the reflective mechanism of testifying came from a previous discussion between the girls and the volunteer. This discussion somehow reminded the volunteer of her relationship with her father. While volunteers were all marked by their identity as university students, this volunteer also implied that her role as a daughter was the greater impetus for connection, possibly because more girls and volunteers can relate to what it means to be a daughter than they can to being a college student. Given this volunteer’s experiences with her father, she also implied that the lessons learned from that relationships was more definitive of the kind of person she is and perhaps more worthy of modeling, than what she does professionally. These ideas are completely implicit in the volunteer’s narrative but were revealed through syllogistic analysis.

According to Lani Guinier (1997), the practice of resisting role-modeling exists as specific concern of Black women in role model positions. Guinier finds that role model arguments typically diminish the role outsiders play (in CAG’s case it would be the girls’ family, for example) and is often used as a pacifier to maintain the status quo. Guinier (1997; 76) wrote:

As prototypes of achievement, role models illustrate, through example, the possibility of success for their constituency. In fact, Black role models may become powerful symbolic reference points serving as camouflage for the continued legacy of past discrimination. Institutionally acceptable role models may simply convey the message ‘we have overcome’ in language calculated to exact admiration from, but not necessarily to inspire

\footnote{All names used in this article are pseudonyms.}
those not yet overcoming.

In the context of Guinier’s assessment, creating connections between girls and volunteers depended on rejecting the role of role model that places volunteers on a pedestal. Especially for Black volunteers and presumably volunteers of color in general, making public how they define success and what has made them successful, includes expressing the way their life is structured by systems of oppression and dominance that among other things leave them vulnerable and sometimes courageous. At the same time, many Black women resist being made spokespersons for an entire group. This is the meaning of “clearing up any misconceptions,” as stated in the “It’s Really Possible” story; this intervention enabled the volunteer to tell her individual story in the presence of group and non-group members to account for the collective acknowledgment of shared experiences with racism, sexism, and other systems of power (ibid.). By clearing up misconceptions, intimacy was created that brought the girls and volunteers closer together and that validated this volunteer’s practice of resisting role modeling.

The practice of resisting role modeling identifies borders of vulnerability and perfection, image and authenticity, sharing stories and not sharing stories, and volunteering and role modeling. These borders were turned upside down and made false when the volunteer testified. Testifying provided a way for the volunteer to tell her own story while validating the complexity of girls’ own lives, serving as a reflective mechanism that allowed girls and volunteers to see parts of themselves in each other. This volunteer recalled the girl in her that has a complicated relationship with her father. The girls, then, identified in the volunteer and in themselves the part of them that is and possibly will become a woman who survives.

The next story, “What Would They Think?” demonstrates another volunteer practice of resisting role modeling. The gist of “What Would They Think?” articulates the necessity of girls seeing the volunteer, not as a “socializer” providing the service of girl empowerment, but as a girl becoming a young woman who is entrapped in the very same structures the program is attempting to work against.

“What Would They Think?”

About body image we tell them: Look at that girl in that picture, she’s dressed like that, and it makes me think, I’m like, “Yeah, but, I don’t”—it makes you think twice about college, cuz you get involved with this, like little world of yours that you don’t realize you’re still affecting 12 year old girls. I wasn’t critical of the topic at all—it’s so important—but maybe the volunteers need to be trained in a way too, before we go in, that we’re not trying to tell them—and it’s not even us. I think they expect us to have—hold them at a certain standard, so they know—that we want to hear them say, “That girl looks really bad,” or, “She shouldn’t be dressed like that.” It’s really easy to put yourself, like, put them at this level, and because these girls are in these pictures and hold them—it’s much easier to point the finger, and feel separate from—pop culture. But then, when it comes back to actually our lives, if we do those things, then we might not be critical of it. Do you know what I mean? So I guess kind of add in a piece about their body image. I think that it just would be really interesting to see what they would say if I was a volunteer, and I was like, “I dress like this sometimes.” Because is it at a certain age that it’s not appropriate, or is it that even at our age—they don’t want to see us like that. I don’t think any of those girls would feel okay with seeing us like that ever. That just made me think, something’s just weird about that—not that it’s bad, because the message is good. I just thought maybe think twice about, when we go out and do stuff. It’s not bad—I never thought that, but—I don’t know. Everybody has different values. I’d be interested in finding out if they would hold us—if they saw
us wearing really low cut, high shirts, with low jeans—and we were out with a guy, like, in some of these ads, and you were—with the little bottle of [alcohol]. What would they think, you know? And you know what? Like, a lot of volunteers are gonna do that—and so they don’t know us like that—because they want to think of us only as this way. But I don’t know.

In this story, the named borders include role model and volunteer, critical and not being critical, hypocrisy and authenticity, and socializer and socializee. As in the previous story, this volunteer also disagreed that her status as a college student was definitive of who she was as a volunteer. This volunteer resisted playing the role of college student—"socializer"—volunteer as she defiantly suggested that such a distinction sets up false expectations.

This volunteer desired to transform these artificial borders because like the girls, she too struggles with cultural messages regarding how girls and women should act, look, be, and dress. The reflective mechanisms that allowed her to transform borders are critical thinking and reflection. Reflection and critical thinking enabled the volunteer to connect with the girl in herself, which ultimately led her to the conclusion that she is a part of the same structures CAG is working against. As a volunteer, she resisted role modeling tendencies that would in any way suggest to the girls that once you become a young woman, college student, volunteer, you have mastered popular culture dicta. This volunteer desired to connect with girls by sharing how she really dresses and how that may or may not be inspired by cultural messages. In this way, the volunteer connected with the girls in the program by reflecting and critically thinking about the ways in which she viewed herself via the girls and vice versa.

Importantly, it was the curriculum activity itself that inspired the volunteer’s practice. Deconstructing advertisements found in girl and women’s mainstream magazines was a canonical CAG “Body Image” session activity. The primary goal of this session was to get girls to focus on having pride in what their body can do when centered on health, and not what their body looks like in comparison to popular standards of beauty. However, the “What Would You Think?” story articulated a perspective held by many volunteers who felt like this activity in particular required them to condemn advertisements that did not have an explicit “girl empowering” message. Volunteers often felt uneasy about this activity and found it overly simplistic. It was not unusual for volunteers to experience dissatisfaction with themselves and the girls after Body Image sessions in which girls repetitively hurled “she’s nasty” observations at advertisement after advertisement.

This volunteer’s story illuminates the frustrations held by many volunteers who felt a lot less empowered as “socializers” and more empowered when they began to think of themselves like the women and girls in the advertisements, and the girls in the program. The message in “What Would You Think?” implies that volunteers become separated from the curriculum when they are assumed to be masters of it. By contrast, when volunteers reflected and analyzed critically their own positions, they connected with the girls in the program by connecting with the girls in themselves that were perhaps asking the same kinds of questions and facing similar fears as girls.

When volunteers resisted role modeling, the borders that arose as result may be perpetuated by curriculum activities. As the volunteer explained, even though she argued for resisting role modeling, the manner in which volunteers performed the curriculum reinforced girls’ false expectations—that role models know best. Even though the volunteer suggested reflection and critical thinking through the refrain of “think twice,” the curriculum remained a
border. What would have allowed her to overcome this border was what she called “having real conversations.” Real conversations, according to the story, means thinking, talking, and questioning how girls and women’s lived experiences are mediated by popular culture imagery. The practice of resisting role modeling conjured up borders for this volunteer that were rendered indistinguishable by popular culture. She connected with the girls by throwing an anchor to the girl in herself that remains subject to contemporary beauty ideals and to the woman desiring transcendence.

In terms of establishing a meaningful connection, both stories in this section are concerned with the practice of resisting role modeling. Role modeling makes borders and boundaries seem impermeable and led to volunteer non-connection. In contrast, volunteers argued that empowering connections depend on reflective mechanisms that allow girls to see them as all of who they are, not just the privileged aspects of their identity. Volunteers capitalized on these in-between border spaces by implicitly and explicitly using reflective mechanisms, including reflection, critical thinking, real conversations, and testifying that allowed girls and volunteers to see part of themselves in each other. To thrive on the Borderlands of mentoring, volunteers learned that they must live sin fronteras (without borders), and be a crossroads (Anzaldúa, 1999).

VOLUNTEER PRACTICE #2: SEEING DIFFERENCE

“The eye pins down the object of its gaze, scrutinizes it, judges it. A glance can freeze us in place; it can “possess us.” It can erect a barrier against the world. But in a glance also lies awareness, knowledge.” (Anzaldúa, 1999; 64)

“I think some of the differences, it takes me a little bit longer to like adjust to and negotiate with, as far as how to react to them. I guess my initial response is respecting those differences, but also being able to communicate through them.” —A Volunteer

In CAG, volunteers identified several differences that emerged as borders when creating connections with girls. The differences most often named as borders included: race, age, class, and life experiences. Most volunteers acknowledged that while these differences are rarely the kind of borders that become exposed as myths given the short term nature of after school programming, it is possible to find the intimate space between race, class, different performances of gender, and sexual orientation to connect with girls. All volunteers who enjoyed empowering connections with girls, even if they shared a similar identity as the girls, practiced negotiating differences. Yet what is also true is that differences that arose as borders varied depending on the volunteer and the girl, and their particular relationship with each other. Volunteers’ stories suggested that sometimes how they see themselves and the girls is raced and/or gendered and sometimes it was not. What remains clear is that although differences may exist as some of the most rigid borders, they are by no means impenetrable.

In a confessional mode only an interview context can muster, volunteers often reported that whiteness may be the greatest border between volunteers and girls. White volunteers were often initially concerned about whether or not racial differences represented an inherently divisive border. Except for one semester in four years, the majority of volunteers identified as white women from middle- to upper class backgrounds, and the majority of girls were African-American from working class families. For this reason, white volunteers were skeptical of their unique contribution to
CAG. One volunteer referred to it as “the guilt of privilege.” The guilt is based on white volunteers’ beliefs that they are less capable of providing African-American girls with tools and strategies to resist racism, and an acknowledgement that they may unconsciously reproduce racist assumptions and practices in their work. In contrast, volunteers of color did not automatically assume whiteness to be an enigmatic border, and typically admitted that although shared race did not represent a border, it inspired others. African-American volunteers asserted that race alone did not guarantee volunteer connections and that shared similarities beyond race can be equally powerful in connecting with girls, something most white volunteers usually learned in the process of volunteering. The next story, told by a white volunteer, details how she came to a similar insight as she successfully negotiated the racial borderlands that existed between her and the majority of CAG girls.

“Why Are You Talking To Me?”

I think that Jasmine and Imani definitely just automatically had a connection with them, and it was a really subtle connection, but you could start to see like in the third or fourth week...like the girls would just kind of like stand by Jasmine and like put their arm on her sweater or like little things like that that weren’t really noticeable but just kind of to let her know that they were standing right there...just the way they talked back to the girls, it was never fake, it was never like they were there for charity work. Some of the other volunteers, not that they didn’t connect, it just wasn’t so strong. I think all the volunteers connected with the girls and, I think Selena did this especially after she did her presentation and her dance and—because they thought this is somebody who’s cool and she’s different and interesting. I did think it was harder for some of the white volunteers to connect, especially with this group of kids. And from past years, Melissa has said things that wasn’t that hard or didn’t make that big of a difference, but I really feel like it does. I feel like I connected with them, but even in my small group, Kendra would say things when we were very first talking about stereotypes and body image and stuff, like I was lumbering out, “Well, are white girls—” you know. It was because I was comfortable bringing that up, but I was different, like to them it was almost a shock, I was recognizing out loud that I’m different than them! But once I did that they seemed much more relaxed with me than they did at first. Like at first it was like you’re different and why did we have you in our group? It wasn’t conscious, but it was definitely like looks and kind of things like that. Then after I started recognizing that I’m white, I’m different from you, but I can still talk to you, it was like a whole different kind of attitude towards me and coming up to me beforehand and saying stuff. I just saw some of the volunteers struggling even in the large group when they were eating snacks. They’d go over and talk to a group of girls and the girls would kind of look at them like, “Why are you talking to me?”

In “Why Are You Talking To Me?” the borders that are named as relevant are shared race and different race, seeing difference and non-recognition, charity and work, automatic connection and strained connection. In the beginning of the story, the volunteer observed how girls seemed to automatically connect with volunteers of
the same race. This observation of immediate connection was subtle noting for example, the difference in girls’ use of space around Black volunteers and white volunteers.

This volunteer observed that one girl expressed a preference for volunteers that shared the same race. Although racial differences may be negotiated in ways that lead to volunteer connections, as detailed later in this story, girls’ preferences may represent a more resistant border. In this case, a girl refuses and resists seeing herself in the volunteer, therefore choosing non-connection. In this story, disconnection occurred when Blackness became synonymous with charity and whiteness was synonymous with those who perform “charity work.” In this situation, racialized borders were reinforced and volunteers did not experience connections. White volunteers who did not work to disrupt these perceptions, for example by “struggling” to talk with girls during snack, seemed like they were there to do charity thus their actions led to disconnection. In contrast to charity, when girls and volunteers negotiated difference through mechanisms of authenticity, it resulted in connection. In this story, authenticity was the reflective practice of talking with girls that was not “fake.” Being fake meant white volunteers were there for charity, not to connect with girls.

Importantly, when whiteness was recognized as a border, volunteers and girls enjoyed connections. This volunteer found the space between whiteness and Blackness through the mechanism of seeing difference. The volunteer recognized herself as white, and it reflected back to the girls, a respect for difference, demonstrating that they could reflect back a Blackness that would not be criticized or endangered. This is consistent with the research of Taylor, Gilligan, and Sullivan (1995; P. 136) which concluded that women’s joining with girls across differences of race, class, and culture requires that they be aware of and responsible for their own power, which includes recognizing race and class privileges and listening to girls. This volunteer took it upon herself to recognize what it means to be racially different from the girls and therefore made it okay to talk about race, and in turn enabled the volunteers and the girls to connect.

The gist of the stories told by Black volunteers mentoring Black girls is that even though volunteers and girls may look alike (in terms of race and sex), there is nothing inherent about creating connections between girls and women. Volunteers that shared a similar racial background as the girls were typically most concerned about class differences as a border that could lead to volunteer disconnection. Oppositional borders included middle-class Black and middle-class whites, and middle-class Blacks and working/poor Blacks, highlighting class and class invisibility, have and have nots, class-consciousness and classism. Importantly, race and class were just a few of the differences that mattered in creating empowering connections. Age, ethnicity, life experiences, culture, sexual orientation, and different performances of gender, also represented necessary borders to expose in creating empowering connections.

**Volunteer Practice #3: Engaging Wild Tongues: How to Talk With Girls**

“So, if you want to really hurt me, talk badly about my language. Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself.” (Anzaldúa, 1999; 81)

In CAG, talk is the stuff of which volunteering relationships are made. The con-
tent of talk is organized by the CAG curriculum. Typical CAG sessions include: “Getting to Know Each Other,” “Self-Love and Respect,” “Friendship,” “Healthy Relationships,” “Mental and Emotional Health,” “Knowing Our World,” “Girls Change the World,” “Diverse Issues, Diverse Interests,” “Teasing and Harassment,” “Advocacy,” “Media Literacy,” “Body Image,” “Boy Panel,” “Campus Tour,” “Dream Building,” and “Dreams for the Future.” The curriculum defines the content of program talk but is not limited by it. Beyond content, creating empowering connections is dependent on how volunteers talk with girls. Many volunteers struggled with this issue of practice. Although volunteers were trained, they were not taught how to talk with girls, or advised on its importance. Nevertheless, volunteers frequently told stories that explained that knowing how to talk with girls was directly related to whether or not empowering connections were created.

Whether or not volunteers knew how to talk with girls often depended on the volunteer’s previous experiences working with children, common backgrounds, intuition, or shared language. At the most basic level, knowing how to talk with girls required speaking the same language, or the recognition that there was a language barrier. In CAG, many of the girls spoke African-American English and negotiating the border of language became relevant when creating connections. Fluency in African-American English, asking questions, and accepting girls’ voluntary translations were named as mechanisms of reflection that led to connection for those who spoke the language and for those who did not. In CAG, volunteer reactions to African-American English unfortunately included volunteers talking badly about girls’ language. They did this through imitation, mockery, and condescending critiques—all of which were explicitly frowned upon by CAG staff, as they were mechanisms guaranteed to lead to disconnection. The following story provides an in-depth look at how the practice of knowing how to talk with girls is complicated by language borders.

“Just A Different Way Of Speaking”

I’ve worked really hard just to relate to them as I would anyone else and not like talk down to them. I really, really look at that as like a fault, if I ever do that. If I ever change the way I’m speaking. I just use whatever words I feel comfortable using. And they’ll ask. Like if I use kind of a bigger word like they’ll be well what does that mean? So I’ve just been talking to them like I would a friend. I think that they relate well to that. Because they feel like we’re all on the same level that way. I feel like they kind of—my home group, anyway, I feel like they respect me… and with like the language difference. Like [my volunteer partner] is like all about it. She totally like—they’ll be communicating and they’ll be using words that I don’t fully get. I mean I kind of envy that. Because like she’s just right with them or whatever and she can say things to them that makes perfect sense. And I’m like can we step back. I feel very like out of the loop sometimes, with that. I remember we were talking—oh like one of the first days [my volunteer partner] was like where do you stay at, like to the girls. I was like where do you stay at? What do you mean stay? She was like where do you stay live? I was like oh, okay, okay. I was like oh stay, like I think visit. Like where do you stay? I was just kind of like what is it. It’s just like different phrases like that. If [my volunteer partner] uses, that the girls use too. When they’re talking to each other like that I’m just kind of like that’s not how I talk. There’s nothing wrong with that way of talking or anything like that, it’s just not how I talk. It’s not—there was nothing in any of the communities that I lived in that would’ve caused me to pick up on any of that lingo. But there was nothing really in my youth or even right now that would—cause me to know like just a little bit. It’s just a different

4 These are the curriculum ideas outlined in the 2001 “Curriculum Ideas” CAG guidebook.
way of speaking. She speaks to them different than I speak to them.

As reflected in the story the volunteer that does not understand “Black English” is “out of the loop,” and thus language exists as a border. This story seems to support that idea that it is the mechanism of work that led to volunteer connection, as opposed to mechanisms of service. Volunteering is public work (Boyte, 1993), and negotiating borders of language requires the work of translation. Talking down to girls in this story was also represented as a mechanism that led to volunteer disconnection. In this volunteer’s story, an example of talking down to girls is implied as actions that require girls and volunteers to change how they usually communicate. “Talking down” is contrasted in the story with talking relationally with girls. Talking relationally facilitated volunteer connection, and was interpreted as talking to girls with the same respect one would give a peer. Talking relationally also made asking questions a valid and respectful strategy.

At the same time, this volunteer used mechanisms of solidarity to create empowering connections. Although she admitted that she was envious of her volunteering partner who could say things that made “perfect sense,” the volunteer recognized that they brought different resources to the volunteering relationship. Differences in language were rarely acknowledged in CAG, yet borders of language demonstrated just how different were girls and volunteers’ realities. Also, on the issue of language, it is significant to know that Celebrating All Girls mentoring groups are called “home groups.” In these home groups, girls spoke their home language, which was rarely standard American English. Lessons from bilingual education then become increasingly important to creating empowering connections as volunteers who respectfully recognized girls’ home language while also creating together an agreed on way to communicate while in that space enabled everyone to be heard and understood (Jordan, 1998).

The next story provides a detailed example of what happens when the practice of knowing how to talk with girls leads to volunteer disconnection. The relevant borders in this story included real talk and candy-coated talk, girl and woman, youth and adult, and talking to girls and talking with girls. The gist of the story is that during a CAG session on “Media Literacy,” Invincible, a female emcee visited the program and talked with girls in a very “real” way. Her way of talking with the girls stood in direct contrast to how some volunteers in the program talked to girls.

“They’re Not Stupid”

I liked it kind of in the same way that I didn’t like it. But the same reason I didn’t like it, because it wasn’t, like, candy-coated or anything. Not that we intentionally meant to do that though. It was kind of very real and I think the girls definitely understood it. It’s not like anything that they saw or they heard, they didn’t know it was going on. They knew…it was just shell shock to be sitting in a classroom, I’m sure, and hearing stuff like that, or watching stuff like that. I think a lot of times I try not to do it, but I know that’s what a lot of people do, and I probably do too. But, when you talk to them, like, they’re thirteen years old. They’re not stupid—and a lot of people do that. Tonya does it a lot—she talks to them like they’re four you know? “Okay guys, now this is what we’re gonna do,” My niece and nephew are six and seven, and I don’t even talk to them like that. Cuz when I do, they’re like, “What are you doin,’” “I’m not stupid.” I think the media literacy one we kind of didn’t do that, cuz, like, Invincible really, when she did her thing, she was just like, “You know, this is how it is.” I think it [Invincible’s presentation] kind of just maybe validated the fact that, like I said they see sex, and they hear swear words or—and drugs and all that kind of stuff. They’re not stupid, they’re almost in high school. So I think it just kind of
more made them think about it a little bit more—about what it means to see stuff like that. And, helped them, cuz obviously they think things when they see stuff like that, or when they hear stuff like that—or hear about it. And I think that just kind of helped them put it in a little bit different kind of context.

The practice of knowing how to talk with girls challenges definitions of girlhood based on age and gender. Treating girls “like toddlers” is a patronizing mechanism that leads to volunteer disconnection. In order to have what is perceived as “real” conversations, this volunteer dissuaded others from negotiating language borders by “candy-coating talk.” She implied that volunteers should not talk to them as “girls.” Girl talk is interpreted as refraining from talking about things that are typically treated as taboo, including sex, drugs, and curse words. Creating empowering connections through reflective mechanisms of talk, as suggested in this volunteer story, required finding the intimate space between borders of age and gender.

In this story, knowing how to talk with girls is a practice that when successfully mediated allowed empowering connections to flourish. Invincible is committed to hip-hop culture, and may explain why she simply “kept it real” when talking with the girls. An historical idiom in the hip-hop community, “keepin’ it real” may be translated for purposes of this scenario as straight talk that does not rely on gender conventions or age stereotypes to define how one talks. Invincible’s conversations included no candy-coated words and no baby talk. She talked about sex, drugs, misogyny, and accidentally used a swear word. Invincible’s practice of keepin’ it real translated an authenticity to the girls that facilitated an empowering mentoring connection. This authenticity however, was not that cursing or swearing is inherently hip-hop and therefore Black. In this case, what was authentic in Invincible’s performance was that she was authentically human, thus deconstructing the role of the “empowerer” who does not make mistakes. Invincible cursed, then apologized, code switched from African American Vernacular English to Standard English, and publicly acknowledged that she wasn’t used to performing for such a young crowd asking the girls to hold her accountable to write more progressive rhymes. Invincible embodied a wild tongue—and this tongue was perceived as authentic and reflective of girls’ own struggles negotiating multiple spaces (home, school, after-school), audiences (volunteers, teachers, peers, family), and languages (Black English, Standard English, commercial hip-hop, and others).

CONCLUSION

“I think the closer that they can see their selves in you, the more that they’re gonna identify with you.” —A volunteer

Empowering connections invited girls and volunteers to see themselves in each other. This analysis has revealed that the work of creating empowering connections depended on three key volunteer practices. The practices detailed in this article included: resisting modeling, seeing difference, and talking with girls. Each of these practices inspired a consciousness that challenged volunteers to find the intimate space between differences that facilitated connection or exposed the border’s superficiality altogether. The mechanisms each volunteers used varied, as there was no single way to mentor. Importantly, not all volunteers created empowering connections. Volunteer disconnection, involved more taking than giving, as borders became barriers and were exacerbated by reinforcement mechanisms. Yet, even volunteer disconnects present opportunities for change. Typically, volunteer practices that led to
disconnection created such huge borders that it became clear to the volunteers what was standing in the way of their connection. In this case, willing volunteers can learn how to use reflective mechanisms and try again.

Theoretically, these insights call into question theories of childhood that presume a concept of girlhood and/or adolescence that is rigid and stereotypical. My work takes a step toward imagining a theory of girlhood that does not assume a shared identity based upon age or physical maturity. Theorizing girlhood as a social construct invites a fluid understanding of girls and women, and encourages more studies of childhood that focus on contested meanings and symbolic representations. Connections between girls and women can be negotiated in a way that promotes a deeply meaningful and powerful connection. As a result of my Fun Day experience, I learned how the power in girl empowerment programming has to be recognized and reconceptualized as an intimate energy created when girls and women work to see parts of themselves in each other, and reject static and illusive positionings of girl/womanhood. Applying Gloria Anzaldúa’s concept of the borderlands enabled me to understand how the goal of celebrating all girls is dependent on celebrating ourselves as women, becoming women, and refusing to forget the girl within.

Although often portrayed as an inherently good thing to do and be, mentoring is anything but natural. Theorizing mentoring as a borderland experience that exists when two people, usually from very different locales, each with unique histories, come together under the banner of “empowerment” reveals a process that is inherently political. When girls and women facilitate processes that allow them to see themselves in each power is shared, and borders are illuminated. This in turn, defies concerns for power and authority and reinforces political needs for affiliations, connection, and community.

This analysis also highlights several important practical lessons. Increasing volunteer skill-building capacities requires recognition of volunteer practices as public work. When worked at, self-reflective mechanisms that allow girls and volunteers to see themselves in each other often interrupt sites of memory, authenticity, power, and privilege. Since much of what worked for volunteers was implied and intuitive in their practice, creating reflective spaces in the context of the organizational structure, so that volunteers may share stories about what they are doing and how it is connected to memory, authenticity, power, and privilege would not only give a name to what volunteers are doing well, but also benefit volunteers that are less successful. A space for open and honest reflection must encourage participants to think about the political implications of their work, and how their personal interactions are connected to larger systems of power and social movements.

Programming concerned with girl empowerment and mentoring strategies for the purpose of building connections must avoid a top-down approach in defining who the participants are and what they are accomplishing. Volunteer stories reveal that the ways girls are defined play a major role in determining the quality of their relationships. Girls as “in need” of empowerment, reinforces borders of identity and difference that do not promote connection. Likewise, when volunteers are defined as the “empowerers” or set up to do the socializing, it places a unfair burden on volunteers that often cannot live up to their expected role of modeling the standard. As an oppositional mentoring practice, mentoring on the borderland renders oppositions moot and inclusion the name of the game. Adolescent girls are not the only ones in need, nor are volunteers the only participants capable of doing the work of empowering.
From the volunteers’ perspective, success is defined in volunteer practices that disrupt binaries. The key binaries that volunteers challenged include girl versus volunteer, socializee versus socializer, empowerer versus those in need of empowerment, and client versus service provider. Volunteers who created empowering connections understood these binaries and others as being inherently divisive. Creating empowering connections were driven by practices of inclusiveness that valued diverse and disruptive performances of girlhood. Activities and curriculum then should strive toward participant self-definition, grounded in women of color feminisms, popular education, and other forward-thinking principles of relating across differences.

REFERENCES


