Under-served and un-deserving: Youth empowerment programs, poverty discourses and subject formation

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A B S T R A C T

Youth gardening empowerment organizations are growing in popularity as an urban model for youth-focused nonprofit work within the United States. These organizations aim towards progressive goals of poverty alleviation through holistic youth empowerment but encounter tensions between the imperatives of funders to distinguish (or discipline) youth in terms of performance and their own impulse to include all those in need. Despite benevolent mission statements, however, these organizations perpetuate long-standing poverty discourses that distinguish between deserving and undeserving poor subjects. I explore these tensions through fieldwork with Youth Grow, one such youth gardening empowerment organization in Seattle, Washington. I argue that residual poverty discourses persist due to the contradictory positioning of progressive organizations within a neoliberalized landscape of social service provisioning. This nexus, between donor dependence and cultural imaginaries about poverty, produces the mismatch between relational program goals and residual practices. I propose a more self-reflexive approach to programming that considers the subjective, lived experiences of youth participants in relation to the material and discursive frictions that create these tensions.

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1. Introduction

We are witnessing a unique moment for social service provisioning in cities across the United States. As states drastically cut their already-diminished social service budgets, many nonprofit organizations step in to provide a patchwork of direct services. However, there is also a growing group of organizations promoting alternative, more holistic approaches to poverty alleviation (Lahann and Reagan, 2011). Urban empowerment is touted as a means of helping marginalized communities through ideals of self-improvement, increased participation and self-advocacy (Scheyvens, 2009; Roy, P., 2010; Roy, A., 2010, 2012; Dingo, 2012). Such programs are increasingly directed at youth, following the long-standing belief that intervention at the transition to adulthood can help change the course of young people's lives (National Youth Empowerment Program, 2013; Hammett and Staeheli, 2011; Hammett and Staeheli, 2010; Skelton, 2010). Additionally, on the heels of a growing alternative food movement, the model for such youth empowerment is increasingly deployed through urban *gardening* programs (Pudup, 2008; Knigge, 2009).[1] Unlike international

development programs that approach empowerment through individualistic, economic means (Fernando, 1997; Nagar and Raju, 2003; Miraftab, 2004), youth empowerment organizations often approach impoverishment from a relational perspective. They recognize that young people are marginalized across *multiple* social and economic factors: age, race, class, gender, ability, language spoken, mobility, education, etc. (Cope and Gilbert, 2001). As such, their individual level interventions incorporate awareness of structural inequality. Unlike many urban social services that only provide direct services, youth empowerment programs practice whole person[2] service provisioning. They emphasize participation in decision-making, self-confidence, self-advocacy and self-efficacy: traits believed to help youth navigate their position within unequal urban systems, eventually moving young people towards more stable and 'successful' lives (Morton and Montgomery, 2013). Despite this vision and philosophy, which attempts to address complex and relational conditions of youth marginalization, these very same empowerment programs adopt funding and evaluation discourses that see poverty as residual: symptomatic, individualized and depoliticized (Harriss, 2009).

This project explores youth gardening empowerment programs as sites of poverty governance to better understand the tensions between relational goals and residual practices. I distinguish these

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[1] Including, but not limited to: Boston (The Food Project), Minneapolis (Youth Farm and Market Project), St. Paul (Community Design Center of Minnesota), Bellingham (Youth Grown), Olympia (GRuB), Santa Cruz (Food What!), Berkeley (Berkeley Youth Initiatives H.E.A.T program), Austin (YouthLaunch), Brooklyn (Added Value), Durham (SEEDS), and of course, in Seattle (Youth Grow, a pseudonym).

[2] I use 'holistic' and 'whole-person' here synonymously. This model addresses poverty alleviation through long-term, skills-based assistance, rather than proximate services championed by the state, such as direct food aid, temporary housing or emergency medical assistance.

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terms throughout my argument to signal conflicting understandings, explanations and approaches to poverty.[3] Residual understandings ignore the structural factors that lead to impoverishment, such as raced, classed, gendered biases, stereotypes and inequalities. Instead, residual poverty knowledge frames poverty as caused by poor choices and a lack of personal responsibility Relational understandings, on the other hand, recognize that impoverishment is not a result of individual faults, but rather an outcome of multiple factors: systemic inequalities that privilege particular bodies and places, the economic dispossession that accompanies capital accumulation, and the discursive framing of 'the poor' as a distinct social 'other' (Lawson, 2012; Harriss, 2009). Youth empowerment organizations are positioned within a national landscape of neoliberalized social service provision that shapes the localized discourses and material conditions for youth empowerment work in US cities. These organizations, though unique in their empowerment language, are but one example of a broader field of anti-poverty non-profit programs. Thus, I approach this work through two overlapping literatures: feminist geographers' critiques of neoliberalization (Larner, 2000; Cope and Gilbert, 2001; Jarosz and Lawson, 2002; Larner and Craig, 2005; Bondi and Laurie, 2005; Kingfisher, 2007; Dolhinow, 2005; Roy, 2010) and relational poverty studies (Goode and Maskovsky, 2001; Harriss, 2009; Hickey, 2009; Schram et al., 2010; Mosse, 2010; Lawson et al., 2008; Lawson, 2012). Feminist critiques of neoliberalization emphasize that there is no one uniform experience of neoliberalism. Rather, processes of neoliberalization are shaped through place, such as an urban youth organization where multiple actors and rationalities interweave. Relational poverty studies draws our attention to the ways poverty is constituted through material conditions and discursive framing of poor subjects. These processes inform poverty governance through formal and informal spaces, such as empowerment programs that address poverty alleviation. One approach to understand poverty governance has been through tracing poverty *discourses.* Specifically, relational poverty scholars trace the long-standing circulation of discourses that frame the poor as either deserving or undeserving. A relational, feminist approach to youth empowerment organizations makes visible how localized context leads to tensions between the progressive goals[4] and the circulation of dominant poverty discourses.

Poverty governance and poverty discourses become localized in many spaces (Cope, 2001; Cope and Latcham, 2009), through explicitly disciplinary projects (Larner, 2000; Schram et al., 2010), by shaping neoliberal subjectivity (Rose, 1999; Brown, 2003; Newman and Clarke, 2009), and by informing the 'best practices' for nonprofit social service provisioning (Martin, 2004; McCann, 2004; Ward, 2006). Geographers have explored these operations, but through perspectives which do not adequately situate youth empowerment organizations in relation to the political economic and cultural landscape of progressive anti-poverty service provision. This existing work illustrates the uneven deployment of social services, either through welfare programs (Cope and Gilbert, 2001), the devolution of state resources to the shadow state (Trudeau and Cope, 2003), via participatory community development (Elwood, 2006), or through social movements' struggles (Leitner et al., 2007). Even as geographers address social service provisioning more broadly, youth empowerment organizations indicate a new model of anti-poverty programs that does not neatly fit any of these current literatures. These organizations warrant increased

attention, not only as new examples of social service provision, but as significant youth spaces, shaped by daily practices, discourses and relationships (Skelton and Valentine, 1997; Wridt, 1999, 2004; Hopkins, 2010). I extend this existing research by exploring the multiple rationalities, discourses and materialities that circulate through youth empowerment organizations. I analyze the discourses and practices that organizations undertake in the governance of poor subjects. What logics and limits interweave and influence this governance? How are programming practices actually experienced by program participants (i.e. poor subjects)? How do these lived experiences influence and impact participant subjectivities? What spaces exist, if any, for participants to articulate these experiences back to the organizations?

This paper draws on fieldwork with Youth Grow,[5] a youth empowerment gardening program in Seattle, WA, in order to understand the ways in which these types of organizations intervene in the governance and lived experience of the marginalized populations they seek to serve. To explore the tensions between stated goals and lived experiences, I draw on participant observation of the organization as well as interviews with youth participants, program volunteers and staff. I begin with a review of feminist critiques of neoliberalization and relational poverty studies to trace geographers' engagements with neoliberal poverty governance, subjectivity formation and social service provisioning. I draw attention to the empirical and theoretical gaps that fail to adequately position youth empowerment programs within a society that holds particular values about poverty and aid. Next, I present a case study based on my work with Youth Grow. I explore my findings in two stages: the first sets up the structural and political economic position of Youth Grow vis-à-vis current neoliberal imperatives and constraints. The second highlights the ways in which youth participants experience neoliberal values and ideologies. Finally, I weave these components together to show that, despite benevolent intentions, long-standing discourses of deservingness continue to be mapped onto youth participants. The paper closes with reflections as to how youth empowerment organizations, by engaging in more relational self-reflexivity, may become more aware of their contradictory political economic and social positioning.

2. The rise of youth empowerment organizations

To fully understand the discursive and lived experiences of any social service organization, we must better understand the political, social and historical context in which that social provisioning takes place (Cope and Gilbert, 2001). In the case of youth empowerment organizations, this means recognizing their political economic position within a neoliberalized social service landscape, as well as the positions of the youth whom they seek to serve. Low-income urban youth experience heightened vulnerability following state retrenchment of services such as education and social work (Gaskell, 2008). They may feel increased pressure to supplement family incomes through their own work, even as competitive job markets and increasing professionalization of the workforce shrink the likelihood of finding employment (Jeffrey, 2010). Youth empowerment organizations intervene in this landscape: their mission statements reflecting a desire to mitigate young people's material conditions of poverty, and their program goals reflecting a relational rather than residual understanding of poverty. And yet, facing structural constraints, empowerment organizations implement governance practices that follow century-old ideologies and discourses of dominant poverty knowledge, which see poverty as an individual's responsibility as well as their imperative to 'fix' (Staeheli, 2012).

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[3] A useful cross reference here is Byrne's (2005) *Social Exclusion*, which distinguishes between 'weak' and 'strong' explanations of exclusion, the former employing individualistic understandings, and the latter taking into account social context and marginalization.

[4] I refer to *progressive goals* to signal organizational attention to relational poverty issues. This means that programs emphasize long-term solutions to poverty, rather than only providing proximate, direct services that meet immediate needs. These goals often involve skills-training, social support, and comprehensive programming.

[5] All names have been changed to protect identity and confidentiality.

Today, most major US cities play host to a youth empowerment organization, a trend that has emerged only in the last 10–15 years (Gordon, 2012).[6] While the focus on empowerment organizations is new, decades of state roll-backs of social services has led the non-profit sector at large to assume greater responsibility for delivering social services (Peck and Tickell, 2002; Fyfe and Milligan, 2003; Harvey, 2005). This shift has been well documented by geographers attuned to the political economic impacts of neoliberalization, who explore the uneven impacts of neoliberalization across scale that shape the state provision of services (Staeheli et al., 1997; Cope and Gilbert, 2001; Elwood, 2002; Martin, 2004; Purcell, 2006; Trudeau, 2012). Under this model, market logics of efficiency prioritized profit and sought to let the market run free of regulation (Peck and Tickell, 2002; Jessop, 2002; Peck, 2004). Drastic cuts to state-run social services programs gutted the existing social safety net. Those in poverty found themselves in a precarious environment where social services such as health care, housing, mental health services and poverty reduction programs became less accessible. The services that remain viable have undergone heightened regulation and qualifications following the passing of PRWORA[7] in 1996 (Schram, 2000; O'Connor, 2001; Burnett, 2011).

The devolution of services to state and local actors gave rise to social service nonprofits, many of which sought to fill gaps left by the state.[8] Though every organization has its own particularities, the aforementioned political economic transition yielded two common trends for social service nonprofits: the first is that as state funds diminish, organizations must seek their own funding through foundations, grants and individual donor appeals. This can lead to competition among organizations with similar goals, or organizations shifting their mission and programming goals in order to fit particular grant priorities (Martin, 2004; Dolhinow, 2005; Smith, 2007). Second, and relatedly, social service nonprofits must present their worthy cause alongside an effective plan with which to reach their stated mission goals. In other words, it is not enough to want to serve a 'needy' population. In an era where philanthropy is increasingly viewed as an investment, the method of service delivery must be deemed effective, efficient, and promise sufficient return (Nickel and Eikenberry, 2009). Such funding constraints afford donors increasing in/formal influence on program goals and practices.

Youth empowerment organizations arose in this environment with the goal of serving marginalized, often low-income youth populations (Morton and Montgomery, 2013). While empowerment programs in the global South have been heavily critiqued for incorporating individuals into a market economy as self-sufficient economic actors, youth empowerment programs in cities of the United States operate with different goals (Fernando, 1997; Nagar and Raju, 2003; Roy, A., 2010; Dingo, 2012). These programs still focus on individual level programming, but with the goal of teaching "life skills" to help address multiple, relational experiences of poverty rather than solely through economic measures. Said differently, youth empowerment organizations address the material realities facing low-income youth through anti-poverty programs that envision longer-term solutions inspired by relational poverty discourses. Within this discourse, organizations believe that intervening in young people's lives can shape their route to adulthood; with the right set of skills, this route can lead impoverished youth to self-sufficient adulthood.

Three related phenomena disrupt the implementation of relational programs, creating a contradictory environment in which proximate, residual practices predominate: (1) decades of dominant poverty discourses that demonize reliance on social services (Goode and Maskovsky, 2001); (2) increasing emphasis on values such as individual responsibility, self-sufficiency and entrepreneurialism (Rose, 1999; Brown, 2003); and (3) the trend to equate 'success' with the achievement of these values. Critical poverty scholars draw attention to the way poverty discourses of the last century consistently frame welfare recipients as lacking the above values; in other words, as dependent, irresponsible, undeserving poor subjects (O'Connor, 2001). The following excerpt describes these values and their translation via market logics:

> Importantly, distinctions between the deserving poor and undeserving poor that are over a century old have been reshaped in accordance with the ideology of market triumphalism (cf. Katz 1989, 1993). The deserving poor are now those who embrace the spirit of entrepreneurship, voluntarism, consumerism, and self-help, while the undeserving are those who remain 'dependent' on the state (Goode and Maskovsky, 2001, 7–8).

While Goode and Maskovsky focus their critique on state welfare programs, nonprofit social services have, in many ways, replaced such state programs. Notions of 'deservingness' now pervade many anti-poverty organizations, signaled by the dominance of values such as entrepreneurialism, voluntarism and self-help in their discursive practices. Youth empowerment programs are no exception. By teaching job and marketing skills such as customer service, work ethic and workplace discipline, organizations promote a model of 'self-help', aiming to inspire responsibility and self-sufficiency. In this way, despite their history and holistic visions for whole-person empowerment, many organizations privilege the neoliberal, market values that distinguish self-sufficiency and self-reliance as signals of success. These values have already transformed state welfare programs and are increasingly taking hold amidst organizations with progressive leadership and goals. Empowerment programs that champion entrepreneurial values position their work and participants within an intrinsically residual and neoliberal framework of 'deservingness'.

Due to the political economic moment of competitive funding and donor reliance, these neoliberal ideologies and discourses of deservingness deeply influence both youth *spaces* and the participants themselves. They shape the way organizations self-reflect, how they execute their programming, and how they explain their program to donors. Dominant, residual poverty discourses see poverty as symptomatic, with particular causes and particular places for intervention (Harriss, 2009; Lawson, 2012). In other words, they understand that poverty can be 'fixed', that poor subjects are to blame for their own poverty, and thus poor subjects require intervention in order to 'fix' their poverty (O'Connor, 2001; Hickey, 2009; Lawson et al., 2008; Staeheli, 2012). Thus, residual poverty knowledge fails to acknowledge the structural and systemic inequalities that inevitably lead to a concentration of wealth at the expense of those deemed undeserving or ill-equipped to adopt 'market triumphalism'. This becomes problematic for three reasons, each of which will become visible in the empirics that follow. First, the particular framing of poverty as a proximate, individual problem predisposes a particular set of *solutions* that position poor subjects as the sites for poverty governance. Second, these depoliticized discourses pervade much dominant poverty knowledge,[9]

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[6] While I do not trace the rise of similar programs in the UK and Canada, there are similar trends as far as youth programming, austerity measures, and neoliberalizing social service sectors (Fyfe and Milligan, 2003; England and Ward, 2007; England et al., 2007; MacLeavy, 2008; MacLeod and Johnstone, 2012).

[7] The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act was passed by the Clinton Administration, and is frequently referred to as *welfare reform* in the US context.

[8] While I won't afford this sector a great deal of attention in this paper, its rise has been well documented by scholars in geography (Wolch, 1990; Wolch and Dinh, 2001; Cope and Gilbert 2001; Mitchell, 2001; Trudeau and Cope, 2003; Herbert, 2005; Wolch, 2006; Trudeau, 2008).

[9] Examples of dominant poverty knowledge can be seen in organizations such as the World Bank or the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, as demonstrated by Ananya Roy (2010).

shaping the values, expectations and agendas of donors large and small. Third, and most substantively for youth, framing poverty as residual means that only *certain* youth with *certain* characteristics in *certain* places will be helped. Those young people that cannot rise above the multiple structural barriers and disadvantages can/will not be served by these empowerment programs.

Somewhat paradoxically, organizations appear to adopt a more holistic, relational approach to youth poverty as they identify goals and structure their programs. Organizations recognize that youth face daily, material barriers around workplace qualifications, educational expectations, health care, transportation, language, substance use and/or stable housing. Socially, many youth are marginalized based on gender, race, class, sexuality, ethnicity and age (Gaskell, 2008). These material, discursive and social barriers position youth within multiple axes of difference in urban spaces and youth empowerment programs seek to intervene through a diversity of programmatic approaches. However, I argue that while organizations take a relational approach to mission development, they fail to see the underlying tensions between their own progressive goals of holistic youth empowerment and the neoliberal environment in which they inhabit, fundraise, and provide their services. Greater organizational self-reflection would highlight these tensions, allowing organizations to better serve their populations and work towards alleviating material *and* discursive experiences of poverty.

There are two competing forces at play with youth empowerment organizations. The following case study will highlight the emergent mismatches and tensions between organizational missions that acknowledge structural barriers to youth and the actually-enacted empowerment practices that elide such relational visions. Specifically, I highlight how organizations, constrained by their reliance on donors, perpetuate discourses that frame poor youth subjects as either deserving or undeserving. In the case of youth empowerment organizations, this distinction is leveraged along the axis of age, through imaginaries of youth transitioning to be successful, responsible and self-sufficient adults. While the inspiration and impetus for youth empowerment stems from a holistic and relational understanding of the conditions which yield impoverishment, this project traces the conditions that produce barriers to progressive practices.

3. The case for Youth Grow

As explored above, many urban youth organizations seek to empower their participants by teaching skills that will lead to a better life (Roy, P., 2010; Morton and Montgomery, 2013). Despite language that implies holistic youth development, 'empowerment' cannot be divorced from the current political economic moment of social service provisioning in the US. Thus, 'empowerment' signals imaginaries of successful, economically rational adults who are self-sufficient and responsible (Brown, 2003; Schram et al., 2010; Lawson, 2012). In the case of youth programming, the goals are clearer: help young people to become successful adults by 'empowering' them with tools, skills and opportunity. While these goals may be valuable within the *current* neoliberal moment, they do nothing to address the deeper structural inequalities facing low-income, impoverished and underserved youth. Additionally, this type of model abandons those youth who are deemed undeserving, thus only serving those youth who can navigate and overcome the multiple social and material barriers they face. This article seeks to better understand how the deployment of neoliberal values alongside imaginaries of 'successful youth' influences young people's lived experiences. In the case study that follows, I discuss my time as a volunteer and researcher with Youth Grow and reflect on the tensions and mismatches between the organization's mission and

goals, how these are conveyed to donors, and how this impacts the youth participants.

Youth Grow is a small organization in Seattle that "empowers" youth through garden-based education and employment. The organization employs homeless or 'underserved' youth through urban-farm and market programs. Youth Grow is promoted as a garden based program, championing the ways that the youth "take ownership of the farm", how they learn about organic food systems, and how they convey this knowledge to customers at the farmers market. Promotional materials include smiling youth surrounded by plants they have grown or are selling.[10] Though Youth Grow's language and image indicates a focus on gardening, their actual programming extends much more broadly, emphasizing the holistic approach to service provisioning that would prepare the youth to overcome multiple structural barriers to employment. Each week, they might tackle any or all of the follow activities: farmers market shifts, job skills training, resume / CV building, field trips, weekly feedback, cooking with guest chefs, team building, education and leadership development.

The program operates on a three-season cycle, employing 12–15 youth each season to work and learn on their quarter-acre urban farm plot. New youth are recruited every season, though as I will explore in the empirics in Section 4.2, 'successful' youth are invited to continue. Most youth are found through drop-in centers or referred by social workers and/or case managers. The youth are all low-income, many are either homeless or lacking stable housing, and range between 16 and 22 years old. During the time of my fieldwork, the youth were primarily African American, White, Latin@[11] or East African immigrants. Given the seasonal nature of the program, the youth only learn a limited set of garden skills corresponding to the seasonal needs. During the spring and fall seasons, the youth come three days a week after school, for many this is a long commute, involving hours of time and bus transfers. They commit to additional Saturday shifts where they work at a farmers market, selling the produce they harvested that week on the farm. Those that get involved in the summer arguably have it the best: selling tomatoes at the farmers market on the weekends and working full days in the sunshine rather than dusky, drizzled afternoons.

Importantly, Youth Grow is overseen by a much larger Seattle-based urban/organic agriculture nonprofit organization, and this parent organization shapes how Youth Grow fundraises and promotes itself. Youth Grow employs one full time program manager and one part time coordinator, receiving administrative support from the parent organization for fundraising, publicity and support work. For the day-to-day programming, Youth Grow relies heavily on volunteer mentors: a seasonal position with weekly attendance. Mentors get to know the youth, provide garden guidance, and are meant to be present, supportive adults. During mentor training, the organization emphasizes the precarious position of the youth: in a mandatory youth-homelessness workshop, staff explain that many of the youth, regardless of their housing status, lack stable, positive adult role models, thus laying the expectations for mentor-youth relationships. While I volunteered, there were usually 3-5 mentors onsite each day, the vast majority of whom were women, college-educated, white and in their twenties. The mentors were, indeed, cheery, positive and upbeat. However, strict privacy and confidentiality rules limit the extent to which mentors can engage with the youth outside of the program, constraining the level of

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[10] This is certainly apparent in their materials, though including them here would jeopardize anonymity, given the prominent position of the organization's logo and name in these materials.

[11] In the United States, *Latin@* refers to individuals or communities that identify as Latino/a, but allows for gender neutrality. It is generally used in activist and academic circles (i.e. Chican@ and Latin@ Studies at the University of San Francisco).

involvement or continued commitment to the youth beyond weekly work shifts.

I became involved with the organization in the summer of 2011, and remain involved as a volunteer in varying capacities. However, my paper draws on one 'season' with Youth Grow, in the fall of 2011. I participated as a garden mentor, offering my knowledge and skills with urban agriculture, youth programming and leadership development. I conducted participant observation during my weekly volunteer sessions, as well as through the farmers markets, feedback sessions, harvest prep, guest chef sessions, and end of the season celebration. After developing rapport, I conducted seven interviews with youth participants, staff members and volunteers in order to contextualize the urban agriculture efforts and understand the relationship between the organization, its mission and goals, and the participants. The youth, all between 18 and 20 years old, received gift cards for their involvement in the research. Interviews lasted between 40 minutes and an hour. I recorded and transcribed these interviews, and coded them together with my field notes for emergent themes. The predominant themes included: gardening, 'good work', neoliberalism, organizational structure, responsibility, community and social, cultural and economic obstacles. All youth, mentors and staff knew of my dual role as volunteer / researcher, though this role challenged my own assumptions and positionality as a mentor within the program. Simultaneously practicing critique while providing mentorship services tested me personally, but it strengthened my ongoing relationship and commitment to the organization. The following stories, quotes and observations highlight first how Youth Grow is situated within the structures and political economy of a neoliberalized social service nonprofit sector, and second, tracing the lived experiences and observations of staff, volunteers and youth participants.

4. Tensions, mismatches and perpetuating deservingness

4.1. The current moment: Youth Grow's neoliberal positioning

Youth Grow's political economic position as a progressive empowerment organization structures the logics and limits for their work and programs. Given their mission to empower youth through garden-based education and employment, they exemplify a new model of anti-poverty programming that goes beyond the shadow state, community development and social movement examples most often discussed by geographers. Rather than fulfilling direct service mandates from the state, responding to community needs assessments, or reporting to large foundations, Youth Grow is accountable to individual donors and the youth themselves. However, their seemingly vague mission of 'empowerment' yields similarly vague methods for self-reflection and evaluation. Most commonly, publications, website presence, informal communications and fundraising events convey organizational success based on the 'success' of the youth.

Youth Grow did not always maintain such a heavy reliance on individual donors. Until four years ago, Youth Grow's funding came from a large grant from a local faith-based Council. However, when this Council lost their funding, Youth Grow went dormant. Today, Youth Grow exists due to their incorporation into the parent organization. They recognize the precariousness of large grants and foundations, and instead use the parent organization to appeal to individual donors for the majority of financial support. Unlike large foundations or state mandates, potential donors hold multiple values and imaginaries of success. In an effort to appeal to a range of donors, Youth Grow's promotional materials deploy empowerment language with vague signification, attempting to appeal to multiple donor interests. Donor values and individually held discourses influence which skills and programs are necessary to constitute a 'successful' young person (Gaskell, 2008; Cope and Latcham, 2009). This is an idea that I will expand upon in my discussion of the youth's materialities and subjectivities in Section 4.2.

By the logics in place at Youth Grow, certain mismatches and tensions emerge between their stated goals and actual practices. Even though their mission statement emphasizes gardening, the most consistent mismatch I observed was how little gardening is actually performed. Julian, the program manager explains that "We're about 40– 50% education... it becomes really difficult to incorporate everything we'd like to incorporate and to do it well" (Julian interview 11/2011). By their own admission, the emphasis on multiple programs and activities means that the focus is spread too thin to teach a comprehensive set of gardening skills. When asked what skills they knew in the garden or if they felt inclined to start their own gardens, youth emphasized specific tasks such as "making beds" (for the plants) or doing manual labor around the farm (such as mulching and removing invasive species). Given the structure of the program, the youth rarely learned how to independently care for a garden, from planning to harvesting. It deserves mention that the message and signal that consistently gets conveyed to donors is that empowerment takes place *through* the garden-based program: young people take ownership over the farm, they learn to grow organic produce, and they sell it at the farmers market.

There is also a slippage between the goals of holistic empowerment and the fact that Youth Grow is a paid job-training program. The desire to teach 'soft skills', such as communication, confidence, self-advocacy and goal-setting abut against the high expectations for workplace discipline. The youth reflect this tension, many expressing their frustration toward the educational components of the program that take time away from working in the garden. Both Sage and Rodrigo expressed that it was "a lot of kids talking about their feelings", or that too much time was spent doing "paperwork" (Sage and Rodrigo, 10/2011). However, these educational components represent a key step towards the whole person empowerment goals at Youth Grow, so much so that they are the focus of nearly half of the programming.

In an attempt to unite their diverse goals, Youth Grow utilizes a program called Straight Talk, designed by a Boston-based urban youth empowerment program. Straight Talk provides a weekly space for constructive feedback between staff and youth, though mentors are not present for this process. This is also a space for the youth to be disciplined, as they can receive verbal warnings, monetary deductions, or even be fired for violating the Youth Grow rules. Julian explains, "I mean, getting a job is one thing. Keeping a job is another. So, like, we're pretty strict, but there's a reason for that" (Julian interview, 11/2011). While these rules are in place to maintain certain workplace expectations, they are at odds with the 'come as you are' mentality that Youth Grow strives to model. Again, the reliance on individual donors with differing priorities and values means that certain donors will place a higher value on job-training and work skills, while others might support the broadcasted organizational goals of empowerment through holistic, personal development.

Finally, the program lacks the funding or staff to expand the size and scope of their operations. As a result, there is a very clear mismatch between the well-intentioned goal of helping homeless and underserved youth and actually providing services to youth in need. Each season, the staff and mentors recruit new youth for the crew, whether through other job training programs, case managers, social workers, or school counselors. Given their constraints, Youth Grow must be fairly selective in who they let into the program. Julian explains that,

I think in the past they took anyone... like, they took *the most desperate*. And we're realizing that we're not really staffed for the most desperate... So we're kind of aiming *a little bit higher than that*, for those that have barriers to employment. You know, like, we still take homeless, we still take criminal offenders, we still take, you know, the ones that are kind of... you're not, completely knocked off their feet, but kinda *getting their feet back up*. You know, they're just starting to get their feet back, and *they need a hand up*... there are other organizations for people that are really destitute, and they're better off to go there (Julian interview, 11/2011 – emphases added).

In response to funding and resource constraints, Youth Grow must be selective in who they recruit, prioritizing young people who they think are capable of 'success'. "Desperate" youth would not fare well in this program, would not be deemed 'successful', and are thus not offered the opportunity to participate. Instead, they gravitate towards youth that are "ready to make change in their lives".[12] In the post-recession moment of economic crisis, low-income and urban youth face increasing barriers and need for employment; however, this is paired with decreasing funds, creating a tension between increasing need and increasing selectivity in who Youth Grow can serve. These structural limitations to who Youth Grow *can* serve articulate with discourses and frames about who *deserves* to be served, as I will demonstrate more fully in Section 4.2 that follows.

4.2. Discourses, materialities, subjectivities: moments from Youth Grow

Youth empowerment organizations feel the constraints and limitations of neoliberal state restructuring through heightened competition for funds, increasingly vulnerable youth populations, and decreased service capacity. These material conditions shape Youth Grow's programming practices, through which different discourses, logics and subject formations are lived. In the following examples, I focus on moments where Youth Grow identifies its successes and conveys these to donors. This serves two purposes. First, it highlights the values and discourses that shape Youth Grow's imaginary of what successful youth *should* look like. Second, it sheds light on how an organization like Youth Grow self-evaluates. Through this attention to 'successful youth', I illustrate a persistent gravitation towards dominant, residual poverty frameworks that differentiate between deserving and undeserving poor. In this case, this long-standing dichotomy is further leveraged along the axis of age: those that are 'successful' are deemed deserving of support as they transition to self-sufficient adulthood. Those that are 'unsuccessful' are deemed undeserving and left adrift in a perpetually dependent state of adolescence.

Youth Grow's position as a job-training program contradicts its holistic vision of empowerment, prioritizing work behavior and job skills as the consistent programming focus. Emphasizing "good work" distinguishes youth based on their ability to perform particular work roles and shapes acceptable norms and behaviors in the places in which the youth meet, work and perform (Wridt, 1999). At the farmers market, the youth must demonstrate customer service skills, appear approachable, and be knowledgeable about the produce. When they are on the farm, they are meant to focus, work hard, identify leadership opportunities, and communicate effectively. During field trips and education sessions, they are meant to learn actively, as well as think about how to apply the skills and knowledge towards their future endeavors and job opportunities. Lily, a longtime mentor, explains that the emphases are on:

...showing up to work on time, being motivated to do the work... the most important expectations for youth are the ones that involve basically being a team player, having a good attitude about the work, um, not complaining when it's not something that you don't want to do (Lily interview, 11/ 2011).

The different spaces of these types of "work" inform and shape the youths' roles and expectations. However, there are also encounters and interactions taking place in these spaces that are coded by embedded social norms and relations.

The farmers market is a coded space that influences the youths' subject formation. As critical food scholars have noted, farmers markets tend to cater to primarily white and upper/middle class alternative food movement consumers and advocates (Guthman, 2008; Slocum, 2007). The youth, who are all low-income, and predominantly either East African or Latin@ immigrants, African American or White, repeatedly encounter customers from different socioeconomic subject positions. Lily, the mentor, sees a benefit to these situations:

I hope that, not that they will *become* the farmers market community, but just that they are interacting with people who are different from them.... That they see that there are a lot of choices in life, um, they get to have goals... I think it's good for them to be exposed to more people who make different choices, just so they can see what that, what that looks like (Lily interview, 11/2011).

Lily is careful not to say that she thinks the youth will "*become*" the alternative food movement. However, her belief in "exposure" to those who "make different choices" assumes that the underserved youth have something to gain by their proximity and exposure to predominantly middle class local food consumers. Further, her invocation of "*becoming*" signals an imaginary trajectory of a successful youth's future that involves choice, goals and diverse interactions. Finally, the use of "choice" invokes a powerful framing of rational liberalism, in which choice is equated with freedom, a framing that erases structural barriers and inequalities (Harriss, 2009).

Lily's hope that the youth "get to have goals" harkens to Youth Grow's own goal of producing future-thinking, aspirational subjects. College access workshops and education sessions play a large role in constructing such future aspirations. Of college, Lily later says, "It doesn't have to be your goal, but it's not everybody's goal, and it's not necessarily a good goal for everyone, but if you want it, it's there, and you can do it" (Lily interview, 11/2011). Julian recalls this same sentiment when he describes the goals of college access workshops, "just the idea that school is a possibility, and there's resources available to them... I just want to make sure that they're aware of them" (Julian interview, 11/2011). Similar to the proximity sentiments of the farmers market, exposure to college access programs allows the youth to develop new goals, as if to say these goals would not exist without Youth Grow's intervention. Given that these goals will play out after the youth leave Youth Grow, these further shape an imaginary of a successful youth: setting goals and having choices, some of which might be to apply to college.

While goal-setting encourages an aspirational quality of being a 'successful' young person at Youth Grow, more specific qualifications of 'success' are marked through their weekly feedback and disciplinary sessions. The Straight Talk program, meant to both encourage positive work behaviors while disciplining deviant ones, promotes particular values over others. Responsibility is a consistent value shaped by the programming. And, consistent with neoliberal values, responsibility and self-sufficiency are key values for 'successful' subjects. In the Youth Grow program, those that are responsible for their actions are rewarded: for instance, if a youth

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[12] This sentiment was echoed by Lily, a volunteer, in passing and during participant observation.

is going to be late, a phone call to preface this lateness saves them from a financial deduction or violation. These disciplinary guidelines impact the way youth identify their own deservingness. I draw on two quotes by Sage, a longtime youth crew member, to explore how notions of 'responsibility' circulate with the youth. After she mentioned the word 'responsibility' numerous times in our interview, I inquired further:

Sage: I think I'm a really responsible youth. Um...
Me: What does that mean to you?
Sage: Like, how am I responsible? Or what does responsibility mean?
Me: Both!
Sage: Responsibility means, taking care of yourself? Because that's what you're responsible for, I guess. I'm responsible for that. I'm responsible for things like getting myself to school and finding out what works for me.... I don't miss work unless I'm sick, and I really am sick. I don't miss school. I don't skip class. I do my homework (Sage interview, 10/2011).

Sage internalizes her experiences of responsibilization, as she articulates in the above exchange. Her daily activities of school, homework and job show daily, lived experiences of responsibility. However, this attention to personal responsibility for one's actions reflects a deeply pervasive turn towards *responsibilization*. This notion reflects the synthesis of individualization with responsibility: that one's own shortcomings, be they financial, health or emotional, are one's own responsibility. These individual level discourses exemplify residual poverty discourses that blames individuals, rather than situating their struggles in relation to structural inequalities such as racialized, gendered, aged and classed barriers (Lawson, 2012). Sage's list of responsibilities above indicates those things she has been able to gain control over. However, there are much deeper inequalities and barriers in her life, such as unstable housing, for which she and other youth may *not* be able to take responsibility, which might prevent them from attending school or work. This tension between mundane, daily practices and deeper obstacles plays out in Youth Grow's practices. For instance, mentors participate in a training that emphasizes structural inequalities and acknowledges the uphill battle facing many homeless youth. One such training actually explores substance (mis)use as a legitimate coping strategy, even a form of family ties for street youth. However, at Youth Grow, showing up under the influence of drugs is grounds for immediate termination. There is no relational understanding for circumstance, emotion or context. It is an expression of insufficient personal responsibility with striking results: no more job.

The youth carry these beliefs of personal responsibility and personal shortcomings as much as, if not more than, the staff and mentors. These beliefs begin to translate into discourses of deservingness within their own peer group. In my second interaction with Sage she reflects her own responsibility and thus, deservingness, in relation to those youth that are irresponsible:

Me: Why do you think it is that a lot of people drop out?
Sage: Because... they have no interest in what they're doing.... A couple people had to drop out cuz, one I know, was stealing from us. They got let go. One... three were high or smelled like weed when they came here. So they got fired. And then a lot of people just didn't call. Just...
Me: You were saying that you think a lot of people maybe, end up dropping out or maybe getting fired because they weren't interested, maybe because there's no passion?
Sage: Because they weren't ready. For the responsibility. I'm really self-motivated. I have no sympathy, and I'm actually kinda mad, like, when people don't take this opportunity...

Like, it's a very easy job to go to. It's very easy rules. You can like, make several mistakes and still be there. If you can't get to Youth Grow, you can't, you won't have a job, basically. So, I have no sympathy for you. You need to grow up!"

Sage has "no sympathy" for those that weren't "ready" for the responsibility of Youth Grow. Given that it's a job-training program, Sage believes that there is a lot of hand-holding. It is a *program*, first, and a job second. As she closes this quote, the idea of "growing up" also points to the internalized vision of a successful transition to adulthood encompassing responsibility.

Finally, youth success is gauged by how and what youth do after the program. While those that pursue additional job training programs or specialized vocations are praised, those that leave, whether by choice or force, are further reinscribed as undeserving. Lily, a long-time mentor, explains that, "The other youth that have not continued have gone onto job training programs, which is fabulous... a lot of them are leaving because of good opportunities. The ones that are not getting fired are leaving for good things" (Lily interview, 11/2011). Lily strikes a bold distinction between "good" opportunities in contrast to those youth that are "getting fired". Julian echoes this theme, explaining that:

Most often, it is something else. They either get a job, or another program or, um... an education opportunity or something like, it's usually something of that nature. Sometimes it's just not a good fit. Sometimes we have to fire people, and you know, a couple people have stolen at the market. And we just don't have any tolerance for that (Julian interview, 11/2011).

Interestingly, regardless of whether or not youth elect or are asked to leave the program, there is no formal tracking for youth after exiting Youth Grow. The youth that take the "fabulous" opportunities to which Lily alludes are lauded, hailed in promotional materials, and used as anecdotes of the program's success. However, the lack of formal tracking procedures leaves those unsuccessful youth in a precarious position. Not only are they deemed undeserving of Youth Grow's further care and attention, they are discursively positioned as having "failed" the program, thus undeserving of job-training or 'empowerment' more broadly. They become invisible reminders of the limits to Youth Grow's reach: the handful of self-regulating, responsibilized young people may succeed in this limited program, but deeper, more relational challenges to structural inequality are impossible given Youth Grow's own constraints, programmatic choices and structural limitations.

Youth Grow's internal discourses provide imaginaries of successful participants as responsible, goal-setting, positive workers, and appreciative of the opportunity to interact with those that "make different choices". These powerful images do more than exist discursively: they are projected as material realities through promotional and fundraising materials, and they are further internalized as youth form their own subject positions. Sage reflects on how these imaginaries are conveyed, as she describes being a "poster child":

Sage: I mean, when I talk about Youth Grow, it's basically like, with passion I guess.... I should really be their poster child.
Me: Why do you say that?
Sage: I don't know, isn't the poster child, like, the perfect representation?
Me: Mmhmm
Sage: Well, I'm like their perfect representation. Like, I'm not in the program, go home to the family, goof off at school and spend all my money. I'm the perfect example of how this is like, changing somebody's life. I'm a full time student, I have a part

time job. My career path directly relates to that, whether that's selling my stuff at a market or having my own farm (Sage, 10/2011).

One clear example of this 'poster child' in action is at Youth Grow's annual auction and gala. In the fall of 2011, the farm manager invited two returning youth to speak at the dinner, including Sage, who is repeatedly flagged as one of the organization's success stories. Donors pay around $70 for a seat at the dinner, and are then encouraged to bid through a silent and live auction. The 2011 gala dinner raised over $60,000 in one evening. Given Youth Grow's model of appealing to individual donors, this gala is a powerful site of interaction with the program. It might be the only face-to-face interaction that donors have with the program leadership, staff and selected youth. The week after the gala, Julian came back to the youth crew beaming about the gala. He shared an anecdote, trying to explain to the youth how it could be possible to raise that much money in one night.[13] Julian shared that the success stories, whether via speeches, movies and/or stories, makes it nearly impossible for the donors not to want to give more. At one point he laughed and explained that even though they pay to be at the gala, they keep paying more once they hear how successful the program can be. This glowing interpretation of the gala is in stark contrast to Rodrigo's experiences as a speaker:

> It was my first time, to be in front of three hundred people, and it was like, I was really... I don't know. I was confused. Or, not confused, but nervous. Because it wasn't in my first language...[I talked about] the difference between my country and here. How I come here. How the program helped me (Rodrigo 10/2011).

Regardless of Rodrigo's discomfort at the gala, his story is used to signal how the program has helped him: he is a successful member of the program and thus deserving of further support. This visible and discursive praise for the model successful youth is projected back to youth participants through their initial selection into the program, the disciplinary feedback throughout the program, at the point of program completion, and through the ongoing fundraising efforts.

5. Beyond benevolence: concluding thoughts

'Success' and its associated imaginaries shape youths' material experiences and subject formations by discursively positioning individual youth as either deserving or undeserving. Through its multiple spaces, Youth Grow continually promotes values of responsibility, goal setting and positive work behaviors. By exploring the examples above, it is clear that deservingness is leveraged based on whether 'success' is achieved at multiple stages throughout the program. The structural constraints of limited funds inform participant selection through existing social values of *possible* successful youth, and, thus, youth are deemed deserving of the program based on their current stability and demonstrated preparedness for future work. Once in the program, those youth that can successfully follow the rules, self-regulate, and act responsibly are deemed deserving of the program and its donors. Their ability to generate new goals and adapt/perform the various roles in Youth Grow's workspaces proves their deservingness to be in the program. This image reifies the circulating discourses of success, and gets projected back to donors along with the public, through promotional materials and spaces like the gala. Finally, the youth who complete the program and go onto 'better' jobs

are further deemed successful. In this discourse, the youth emerge from a job-training program with the skills to apply to other jobs, thus beginning the transition to a self-sufficient, future adulthood that leverages them out of poverty. However, those who do not make it into the program in the first place, could not self-discipline to stay in the program, or do not come back to the program, are positioned as unsuccessful, and thus, undeserving. They are undeserving of further attention, as demonstrated by the lack of follow-up with all but the most exemplary youth. They are undeserving of care and outreach, perhaps being cast back to the category of 'destitute' youth that are some 'other program's' responsibility. Discursively, they are positioned as dependent, needy and irresponsible. Materially, they are denied programmatic support and are made more deeply vulnerable.

These powerful discourses circulate at empowerment organizations like Youth Grow despite the benevolent mission and goals as well as the care of the staff and mentors that are aware of relational conditions of impoverishment. They result from the fact that organizations rely on donors who are collectively informed by dominant poverty knowledge that, when paired with imaginaries about 'successful youth', promote practices that reify discourses of deservingness and teach individual skills that elide any attention to structural inequalities. In the case of Youth Grow, the current political economic moment of social service retrenchment constrains resources while young people experience greater need. Despite a rhetorical emphasis on gardening, the existing empowerment practices champion neoliberal values of responsibilization, individualization and residual poverty knowledge. Deservingness discourses further marginalize low-income and youth of color who already experience the material and discursive realities of youth and impoverishment at two temporal scales. In the first instance, those youth deemed undeserving fail to receive any of the skills Youth Grow attempts to provide. The most vulnerable youth are the ones that lose. In the second instance, residual poverty knowledge blames individuals for their own poverty, warranting individual level solutions. This type of poverty governance cannot and will not ever address the structural barriers facing low-income urban youth.

Youth Grow, an urban youth empowerment organization exemplifying a new model of anti-poverty programs more broadly, leaves behind these undeserving youth. By turning our attention to these youth that do not 'succeed' in the program, it becomes clear that youth empowerment organizations perpetuate material and discursive realities for young people who already face a vulnerable and precarious life. However, much more attention and scholarship is needed to better understand the multiple outcomes and processes for *all* youth served by empowerment programs, not just the ones that succeed. For instance, it is not predetermined that all youth empowerment organizations produce neoliberal subjects. What, if any, are alternative subject formations, or alternative imaginaries of 'successful youth'? As this case study has introduced, donors play a key role in shaping the direction, imperatives and evaluation practices of empowerment organizations. These processes require deeper engagement in order to understand donors as integral to the shaping of material, lived experience for young people. There is also a need to understand how discourses and imaginaries of 'success' circulate through spaces such as youth empowerment programs.

Let me be clear in this critique: it is not to say that youth empowerment organizations should cease to exist, or that residual poverty discourses are the fault of empowerment programs alone. Rather, this case study provides insight into the challenges and contradictions facing organizations like Youth Grow, which seek to intervene in young people's lives during a political economic and social moment that is severely limited by neoliberal values, constraints and discourses. This critique matters precisely because

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[13] To put this in context, this is more than three times the annual income of an average youth in the program (or their family, depending on housing status).

it shows that even while a handful of youth may reap the proximate benefits of empowerment, these organizations inhabit a contradictory field, where expectations for youth service provision collide with donor expectations, residual poverty discourses, and material financial constraints. The result of this contradiction is felt deeply by the most vulnerable youth, who do not receive the limited benefits of empowerment programs. By perpetuating long-standing discourses of deservingness, marginalized young people are further left out of future programming and approaches to poverty alleviation.

I close with some reflections for the future paths of youth empowerment programs. Certainly, not every organization will yield the same experiences for their youth participants, but the neoliberal landscape of social service provisioning remains rather constant across cities of the United States, Canada and UK. While these organizations alone cannot change the political economic landscape, they can engage in critical self-reflection that will, at the least, acknowledge many of the tensions and contradictions facing organizations as they work towards their goals. Current methods of evaluation and self-reflection, demonstrated by websites, media presence and fundraising events, cater strongly to donors. While the immediate effects may not be visible to organizations with already-stretched resources and staff, it is a vital step towards programs being more accountable to the youth they *currently* serve, as well as the future, increasingly vulnerable young people they *seek* to serve. This self-reflexivity would and should entail awareness of constraints by exploring the ways 'empowerment' language gets deployed through programming and is reflected back by youth. Finally, youth empowerment organizations owe it to their present, past and future participants to track and follow up with not only the youth that 'successfully' complete the program, but those that do not.

Many of these insights can happen as staff and youth engage in conversations addressing structural inequalities, broader systems of power, and the ways that young people are positioned relationally within these systems. Similarly, the lived experiences of the youth, made invisible by empowerment programs, may begin to highlight organizations' broader political economic and social positioning. Attention to the questions, methodologies and insights of feminist critiques of neoliberalization and relational poverty studies do much to inform these calls for self-reflexivity. By looking beyond proximate causes and long-standing residual poverty discourses, youth empowerment organizations may find themselves more attuned to their position within a neoliberal field of social service provision. With awareness of organizations' own relationality, perhaps donors, staff and participants may live and experience possible discursive and material realities extending beyond the cultivation of neoliberal subjects.

Acknowledgements

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