Radical Listening, Action, and Reflection at the Boundaries of Youth Violence Prevention

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Homicide is the third leading cause of death among youth ages 10-24 in the United States; it is the leading cause for African American youth and the second leading cause for Latinx youth (Heron, 2021). The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) estimates that each year youth homicides and assault-related injuries result in $21 billion in medical and work loss costs for the country. Youth violence takes a heavy toll on families, schools, and neighborhoods and harms the witnesses, victims, and perpetrators. The extent of the problem, the complexity of its causes, and its racialized impacts make youth violence a wicked problem (Rittel & Webber, 1973). Despite its complexity, youth violence intervention has focused on individual-level youth risk factors, such as defiant behavior; fatalistic view of the world; drug use; low school commitment; and illegal gun ownership (Howell, 2012). Even youth violence models that acknowledge structural factors such as the lack of affordable housing, unemployment, and racism, predominantly produce individual and family-level interventions that place both the solution and the problem on marginalized people (Copeland-Linder et al., 2010). Our experience with the Youth Violence Prevention Initiative (YVPI) has shown that individual and family-level interventions may produce aggregate reductions in youth violence; however such interventions are insufficient to reduce racial inequity in youth outcomes.

The YVPI is a cross-sector organizational change response to youth and young adult violence in a city in northeastern United States. Launched in 2015, the YVPI is chaired by the mayor and city manager, and has a robust organizational structure with a Governance Committee, Working Groups, and an Operations Team. This organizational structure enables information sharing, collective data review, and cross-sector training and problem-solving. The Working Groups have generated close to $6 million to implement strategies. Significantly, the YVPI has seen improvements in key performance indicators; there has been a 43% reduction in gun and knife incidents involving young people under 25 years old since 2015. Rates of youth violent crime have declined more significantly in this city than similar ones in the region, largely

due to the YVPI (Gebo & Bond, 2020). Yet, racial inequities persisted; by the end of 2020, Black and Latinx youth were still over 4 times more likely to be involved in gun or knife incidents as a victim, witness, or perpetrator than White youth (Ross et al., 2021).

The first author on this article is the YVPI's research partner. Her team conducts a youth violence assessment every three years, which city leaders use to guide decision-making and resource allocation. She centered the 2021 assessment on the following question: "Why does racial inequity in youth violence outcomes persist, even as overall rates have declined in the city?"

Several design features differentiated the 2021 assessment from prior years. First, it was conducted within a graduate level practicum course, in collaboration with seven community members—all Black or Latinx men with lived experience and/or who work directly with young people involved in violence. These men, who we refer to as community collaborators, were monetarily compensated for their participation. While prior assessments had been conducted within

the practicum, people with lived experience had only been involved as interview and focus group subjects, not collaborators. Second, we were guided by anti-racist research practices that centered relationship-building between the community collaborators and students to facilitate knowledge co-creation and reflexive cycles of reflection, learning, and action (Brown, 2017).

The 2021 assessment results were substantially different than prior iterations (see Table 1). Past assessments included analysis of quantitative data that described youth violent behavior and family trauma. The 2021 assessment shifted the focus away from the harms that young people inflict on each other and instead, through qualitative data, examined organizational and system practices that create and exacerbate conditions that produce violence. Framed as "The Causes of the Causes," some of the organizational and system practices identified include a lack of transparency in city government decision-making and funding practices that are not sensitive to the complexities of addressing youth violence. The 2021 assessment found that these

Table 1. Overview of 2015, 2018, and 2021 Community Assessments

	2015 ASSESSMENT	2018 ASSESSMENT	2021 ASSESSMENT
Primary questions	What are the factors that drive youth violence in Worcester?	What community, school, family, and individual risk factors contribute to increasing school discipline and persistent racial/ethnic inequities in arrests and suspensions? Which of these factors are not currently being addressed?	Why does racial inequity in youth violence outcomes persist, even as overall rates have declined in the city?
Findings about the drivers of youth violence	Family stress Unemployment Early childhood trauma Generational gang involvement Limited neighborhood recreation opportunities Punitive school discipline	Poverty & income inequality Toxic stress & trauma School funding & staffing levels Implicit bias	"The Causes of the Causes" Punitive policies and practices instead of problem-solving Lack of transparency & accountability in city decision-making Funding that maintains the status quo Lack of representation and lived experience among those in positions of power over youth
Sample Recommendations	Early childhood trauma intervention Restorative justice Street outreach to interrupt violence and connect young people to resources Reentry programs to reduce recidivism	Crisis intervention team to ensure 24-7 coverage Culturally competent mental health & substance use services Diversify school personnel Eliminate suspensions in PreK-3rd grade Robust diversion and re-entry services Network of men of color to mentor youth	Develop a Community Advisory Board to set priorities for youth violence funding and programming Develop Community Agreements to guide the YVPI's work Elevate the Youth Resource Network as the center of community dialogue and information sharing regarding youth violence

organizationally-produced harms have generated community distrust of formal institutions, as well as rifts within the community that interrupt collaboration. Key informants identified these as the factors that contribute to racial inequities in youth outcomes.

This article describes how we arrived at these substantially different assessment outcomes. An in-depth discussion of assessment findings is beyond the scope of the article. Our focus is to make visible the collaborative pedagogical and research practices that allowed the community collaborators to become co-educators and co-researchers in the work. We use Third Generation Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) as a conceptual framework to make visible how learning and change occurred in the boundary zone of our eight differently situated organizations (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011). We tried to avoid practices that "translated" knowledge across boundaries; the collaborators identified "translation" as invalidating and exploitative of community knowledge. Rather, we employ a practice of radical listening in our boundary dialogue, negotiation, and management. Radical listening is defined as hearing what is being expressed without judgement or imposing one's own ideas and identity on what is being said; the act of radical listening shifts the center of power to community and permits authentic problem-solving (Agnello, 2016; Tobin, 2009). Kress & Frazier-Booth (2016) have found that radical listening allows teachers and researchers to hear "beyond the white noise of 'what is'" (p. 102) in order to make visible structures of oppression, and open up possibilities for transformative action. In this article, we demonstrate our use of radical listening through the inclusion of boundary dialogue excerpts that show how this practice generated more authentic understandings of why inequity has persisted in youth violence.

Boundary Analysis: Third Generation CHAT

Third Generation Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) is a conceptual framework to analyze the structural and cultural dimensions of the boundary zone in which research, learning, and action occur (Engeström, 1996). Third Generation CHAT has been used to analyze dynamics between universities and community partners in service-learning (McMillan et al., 2016) and in research-practice partnerships (Penuel et al., 2015). We apply and expand on these insights for community-based learning/research courses. By making processes and practices visible, this framework offers great potential for understanding how experiential learning, broadly defined, can contribute to community justice.

The Building Blocks of CHAT

CHAT recognizes that learning and action is developed through dialogue and reflection in the context of relationships in communities of practice (Foot, 2014), making it a useful framework to visualize how power is negotiated within the boundary zones of a partnership. Activity systems are the building blocks of boundary zones. Activity systems consist of six components that interact to produce knowledge and action. We define these six components and show how they were represented within the practicum activity system.

- Subjects are the individuals involved in the activity; our subjects were nine students and one professor.

- Community is the broader group interacting in the activity of which the subjects are a part; our larger community is our university.

- Rules encompass formal and informal agreements, norms, habits, conventions, and routines that govern the behavior of the subjects. In our case COVID-19 restrictions, the course syllabus, and IRB policies represent formal rules that shape the terms of our engagement.

- Division of labor refers to the different roles played by subjects in the system. In our case, the professor's role was to structure the class and recruit and orient collaborators; the students' roles were to be learners and participants in the youth violence assessment.

- The object is the reason for the activity system. These include our course learning objectives, which were to have increased awareness of how one's identities affect one's role as community development practitioners; and the ability to develop a theory of the problem and a theory of change with community collaborators.

- Tools are what the subjects use to generate action on the object. In our case tools include readings, discussions, speakers, class activities, and interviews.

These six components are illustrated in Figure 1.

Visualizing the Boundary Zone

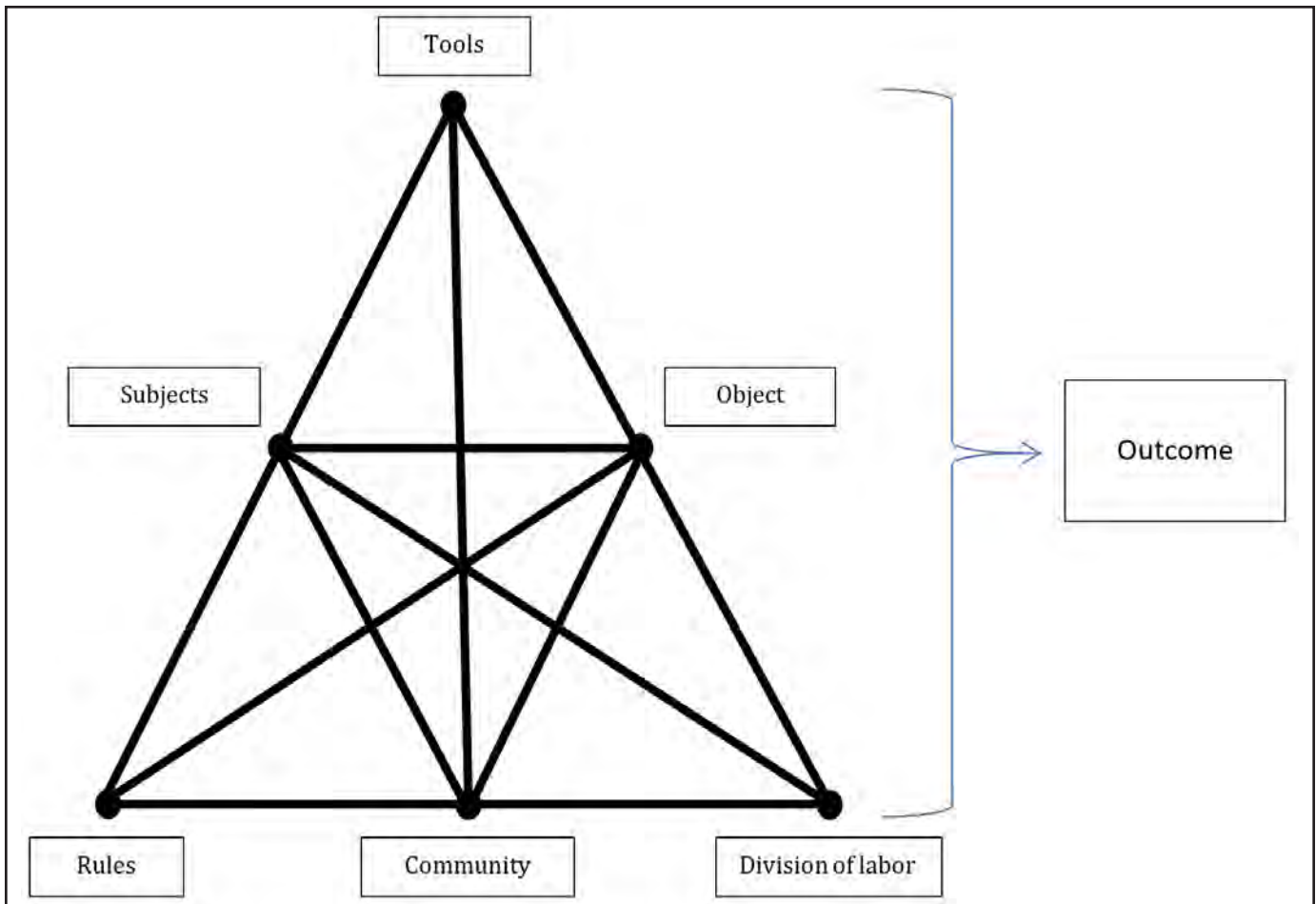In Third Generation CHAT, two activity systems are the minimal unit of analysis (Akkerman & Bakker,

Figure 1. Single Activity System adapted from McMillan et al., 2016

2011; Engeström, 2001). Joining multiple activity systems together around a shared outcome creates a boundary zone. Our shared outcome was the youth violence assessment, a collaborative effort that brought together seven additional activity systems represented by collaborators' organizations. Even with the shared outcome, bringing together differently-situated individuals and organizations means that boundary zones can be "places of challenge, contestation, and playing out of power relations" (McMillan et al., 2016, p. 23). Making uncertainty, disagreement, and tension visible creates conditions for constructive and mutually beneficial collaboration with community partners.

Our goal was not to force unity of beliefs; nor were we trying to have subjects of one activity system "cross" into other activity systems, as is the case in traditional service-learning (Cameron et al., 2019). Rather, we aimed to work at the boundaries to foster authentic collaboration to co-generate change in a context in which people have different world views, histories, sources of knowledge, and practices (McMillan, 2011). Radical listening became a key ability for generative boundary work (Agnello, 2016).

Boundary zones can be challenging places to inhabit, but are places of deep and significant learning. In a community-based learning course, the boundary space allows contradictions and tensions to become visible and to be felt by learners. Navigating the boundary zone toward a shared outcome requires trust and relationship building (Van Meerkerk et al., 2017). We did not ignore or eliminate boundaries, but rather as the included boundary excerpts show, we sought ways to harness boundary tensions to deepen our collective learning about ways to address persistent youth violence racial inequities.

Course Methods for Racial Justice: Formation of the Boundary Zone

The practicum course was a collaborative space between the students, who had varying levels of experience in youth violence prevention, and the community collaborators whose lives and work were deeply entwined with this issue. Within this group were several "boundary spanners," participants who approached the work from both an academic and community-engaged perspective. These boundary spanners included the course instructor, who has

served as the city's research partner on youth and gang violence issues for close to 20 years; and Freddie, one of the students who grew up in the city where the university was located and was working full time in the city's parks and recreation department.

The class met for three hours on Wednesday mornings. Each class began with a student check-in. Collaborators joined virtually about an hour into class; each week anywhere from four to all seven collaborators joined. Due to COVID-19, the first two sessions were held on Zoom. Starting the third week, the students and professor met in-person, but the collaborators remained on Zoom due to university protocols. Concerned about being disconnected from the collaborators, students opened Zoom on their laptops so that collaborators could see everyone's faces. This strategy helped build the relationships needed to navigate boundary tensions. Below we describe the creation of our boundary zone.

Week 1: After introductions, the students expressed their motivations to take the course and the collaborators shared what inspired them to do their work. Students and collaborators got into virtual breakout groups to get to know each other, and then introduced each other to the whole class. Enthusiasm to work together set the tone for the rest of the project.

Weeks 2 & 3: After reviewing the 2015 and 2018 assessments, we asked, "How can we do the 2021 assessment differently to address persistent inequity?" Engaging in radical listening with the collaborators through the prior assessment review led students to want to tell an authentic story of youth violence. Our reading of Brown (2017) inspired our mutual intentions to have transparent, trustworthy, relationship-centered research and action processes. Maintaining these principles became as important as producing the assessment. As the work became more complex and tensions emerged, we would return to Brown's (2017) concept of fractals—or the connection between the small and the large. Brown's (2017) construction of fractals prompted us to consider that how we attended to our relationships in the class would manifest out to the larger community. This proved to be a powerful reminder that we can enact transformation in the world through attention paid to our own actions and relationships.

One pivotal event deepened the collaborators' trust in the students. One of our collaborators, Dave, had been renovating a building called the Junction as a youth and community arts and trades center, with a collective of activists for over a decade. This was his

labor of love. He did not own the building but had an informal occupancy agreement with the owner. One morning, Dave Zoomed into class letting us know that the Junction building was going to be sold. He was devastated. This threat to community catalyzed and unified the class in a fight to save the building. By supporting fundraisers, attending block parties, and listening to Dave's stories about the Junction, the collaborators realized that the students were committed to the work and were willing to be guided by the community.

Week 4: A community organizer led students and collaborators in a workshop on conducting one-to-one relational interviews to learn how to build relationships aimed at revealing mutual self-interest. With this grounding, the team was better equipped to build relationships with each other and have intentional conversations as a form of action research.

Weeks 5 & 6: The students broke into teams to develop literature reviews on topics we collectively agreed should frame the assessment. These topics included definitions of violence; causes of community distrust in systems and institutions; practices and programs that work; and gender dimensions of violence. Working with collaborators, each team developed a conceptual framework, research questions, and research designs that utilized qualitative methods that would guide their assessment process. During this time, students began to meet collaborators in their offices to share food, updates, and advice. These informal meetings helped to build and maintain relationships of trust and transparency, and provided opportunities for students to engage in community collaborators' activity systems.

Weeks 7-12: The class deliberated over the research proposals and developed a collective work plan that included a division of roles and responsibilities. The groups began collecting data, developing focus groups and key informant interview protocols. Students and collaborators identified and prioritized lists of people to engage and the collaborators helped to establish connections. The interviewees were people who had important perspectives to share, but who had not had the opportunity to contribute their wisdom and lived experience previously. As the team conducted the interviews, we entered responses into an online form to facilitate collective data analysis.

Weeks 13 & 14: The class and collaborators analyzed the findings and identified cross-cutting themes that are presented in Table One. Collaborators identified the findings to develop further and discussed how to make the assessment useful beyond

the semester. Students created "mini-reports," which contained powerful quotes from respondents and suggested recommendations and future research areas.

Week 15: To celebrate the end of the semester and to stay true to valuing within-group relationships, students and collaborators met together for a cookout and bonfire at the professor's house. The group spontaneously reflected on their experiences in the project and shared positive affirmations on qualities, skills, and traits of their teammates.

This is where the practicum ended. The assessment was picked up by a fall 2022 Community Needs and Resources Analysis class that stayed connected to the community collaborators. This class conducted additional interviews and focus groups. Between the two classes, 25 key informant interviews four focus groups with adult stakeholders, and three focus groups with young adults were completed. Findings were refined through a community dialogue with people who participated in the assessment as a collaborator, key informant, or focus group participant in November 2021 (roughly 15 people). A larger community meeting, attended by roughly 60 people, was held in December 2021 to do a final review of findings and to develop a set of recommendations to address the 'causes of the causes.'

Learning in the Boundary Zone

In this section, we include excerpts from two boundary zone dialogues. The excerpts illustrate tensions we encountered and how radical listening fostered learning that ultimately allowed us to develop findings that moved away from individual level risk factors to organizational and system factors, or "the causes of the causes." Following each exchange, we use CHAT to make visible the boundary learning.

The first excerpt is from a discussion where students shared preliminary findings with the collaborators. The collaborators had emphasized the importance of youth perspectives informing the assessment. Honoring that request, Freddie raised a theme from the youth focus group:

> A quote from one of the youth that I'm trying to sit with and unpack is that they feel violence occurs randomly, that it is not a choice. That it happens when young people are at the wrong place, wrong time and that it cannot be expected. I'm trying to unpack that within my own understanding...

Ricardo, one of the collaborators, offered a response that affirmed the youth perspective and added his long-time puzzlement about young people understanding violence as random:

> Doing this work for a long time, when you talk to young men, women and you ask them, "How did this all start?" They can't really answer. They say, "you know they're just a different breed...."So sometimes they view each other as something so different that something has to happen.

Hector, another collaborator, jumped in with an example that illustrated the youth's perspective:

> It's funny you saying that Ricardo, because I was talking to a kid a couple weeks ago. I was like, "yo, how did you get involved?" He said that he came from Boston and started hanging around guys in Westside Apartments who he met at school. The guys from the North associated him being in that crew. Every time they'd ask him, he would say "no, I'm not west side." But it all changed when he was walking home and a group of guys jumped him. He was like, "yo if they're already associating me with these guys then I might as well get down and have some protection and go to war with them." So that's something you hear. It's not a choice, they're forced into it. . . they run to the streets for protection.

One of the students, Rebecca, entered the conversation:

> I noticed a connection between what Ricardo said, and something from the focus group. Ricardo said "they're a different breed. . . ." I don't remember the exact quote from the focus group, but they talked about how you don't put an elephant and a lion in the zoo together. I know there is research on dehumanization as an intentional step. It is something that happens before you are able to enact violence. It is part that process of seeing someone as not like you, but very, very different from you in a concerning way.

We apply CHAT to highlight the learning dynamic that emerged among *subjects* in different *activity systems* collaborating on the jointly held *outcome*—the assessment. The *object* the students brought into the space was the focus group excerpt. Freddie held a *role* of boundary spanner and was able to convey the question about youth understanding of violence with a depth that may not have been possible for a differently situated student. The *objects* that the collaborators brought into the boundary zone were stories and reflections from decades of work. The rich boundary dialogue on these *objects* focused less on the idea of violence as random and more on the notion that young people find themselves in situations where they feel that they do not have a choice but to engage in violence due to threats to

their safety. The students' practice of radical listening, as illustrated by Rebecca, allowed them to make connections to other interviews and the literature in ways that affirmed youth perspective and clarified an emerging theme from the assessment. This insight led us to develop recommendations on organizational practices that could maintain high risk youth's safety.

The second excerpt demonstrates how a tension in the boundary zone was navigated and used to clarify assessment findings. Students had been analyzing interview transcripts for evidence of theme convergence and divergence. Sarah, one of the students, raised the theme of community distrust in government leaders and asked the collaborators if they could think of divergent perspectives from the relative consensus that seemed to be emerging:

> There seems to be a pretty large consensus that people want city government to listen, to be transparent, and be a part of the change and not just feel like they're wasting their energy when they meet with the city. . . . So mistrust was one example [of convergence]. We didn't know if you guys had any examples of divergence.

William, one of the collaborators asked, "Sarah, could you give a more concrete definition of what you mean by divergence?" Sarah responded: "Divergence would be places where stakeholders and collaborators and community members did not see a consensus. [In this case], on ways that mistrust was formed. . . ." With this better understanding, William shares:

> I'm theorizing that . . . the majority of times there's engagement, the community has to come to the power structure. Rarely do we see the power structure going to the community. We'll set up a public meeting. And those things are cool. But in the larger scheme . . . those are performative. You're not going to get much work done in that space. Conversations that generate connection and trust don't happen in those spaces. They happen, for lack of a better term, behind the scenes in authentic dialogue, hence why we did one-to-ones, right? That's where trust can be developed, where I can hear the other person's heart truth.

Sarah reflected back what she heard:

> This conversation provided a lot of clarity. The most important way that we can voice divergence would be explaining that there are different stakeholders in the community and the community not agreeing with those stakeholders with what needs to be done, lack of communication, the community sees this as a way that mistrust emerges. . . .

William clarified:

> Sarah, sorry to interrupt. We have to be careful because that lack of communication is very nuanced. Everything you said they're gonna have an answer for. We got to think through how do we be more specific? I don't have the answer, but I'm telling you, I know the deal.

Rebecca connected this discussion to a key informant interview:

> I feel like that's what we were hearing. 'Stop insisting on all the things you're doing. When we come to you with this persistent problem . . . don't tell us that you're doing it. Tell us why it's not working or listen to us on the nuances.' I feel like what we're finding . . . is more like evidence that they're not recognizing the nuances.

William summarized an alternative approach:

> Let's go all the way back and full circle to the conversation around distrust. When we're doing it together, those types of experiences accelerate, catalyze connection and trust, and build community. When I'm outside of it, telling you what to do and not sharing it with you. that's where that lack of transparency, that divergence, all those things really have a space to, to grow.

In her reflections, Sarah expressed frustration about this dialogue: "I was very exhausted during the last class on Zoom. It was frustrating and felt disjointed for me." She felt grilled on the topic of divergence. Yet, Sarah recognized the validity of William's perspectives and the importance of getting the message right, stating that "the city is going to feel attacked by the report." In the end, Sarah's learning experience was positive: "I learned how to start building meaningful connections, gaining trust, and establishing myself in the community. By no means is this an easy task, and I think it is work that can last a lifetime."

In addition to this dialogue being a significant learning experience for Sarah, it was generative for the assessment. Community mistrust of government proved to be one of the major findings about the persistence of racial inequity in youth outcomes. The boundary dialogue allowed us to delve deeply into this theme, identify corroborating evidence, and recognize the care that will be needed to communicate this finding to city leadership.

Radical Listening in the Boundary Zone: Implications for Experiential Education for Racial Justice

The assessment questions we asked, the key informants we engaged, the data analysis we undertook,

and the substantially different types of findings that emerged were a function of relationship building and radical listening in the "boundary zone." Third Generation CHAT gave us the conceptual tools to see course design features that facilitated radical listening and that managed boundary tensions so that community members could be co-educators and researchers. One of the most significant features was grounding the learning and research in Brown's (2017) concept of "emergent strategy." We engaged in practices that built trust, such as opening Zoom when the collaborators could not enter the physical classroom, fighting together for the survival of the Junction, and sharing food in community space. Students sought collaborators' guidance throughout the process, including themes for literature reviews, research design, interview questions, selection of key informants, and analysis of the data. Students and collaborators were able to ask clarifying questions and delve deeply into the examples and experiences people shared—objects brought into the boundary zone. At the end of the semester, students did not present their findings to the collaborators, but rather as the boundary zone dialogues show, continued a process of knowledge co-creation.

Throughout the class, we centered relationships and process rather than products and outcomes. In the end, we produced findings on what is driving persistent racial inequity that resonated with the affected community. We were able to do this because of our collaboration with the people doing the work and experiencing the inequity. Radical listening, through differences and tensions that arose, became the end rather than the production of an assessment. We conclude that practices that foster radical listening in boundary work can reframe experiential learning for racial justice. Our experience suggests that using CHAT to make visible partnership practices would not be limited to youth violence projects; rather it would be applicable to any community-based learning/research course that includes community partners as co-creators. ∎

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