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Figuring out protest in the movement to opt out of standardized tests: the experiences of students from a predominantly White and affluent U.S. suburb

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Abstract

This study explores how high school students from a predominantly White and affluent U.S. suburb understood their participation in the U.S. movement to opt out of state-mandated, standardized tests. Based on qualitative interviews of 13 former high school students who protested the Colorado Mathematics, English Language Arts, Science, and Social Studies Assessments (CMAS) and one school's "CMAS Protest" Facebook page, this study's findings suggest that the student protestors were evoking figured worlds of protest in the context of their organizing. Analysis of how these former student protestors had related, and continued to relate, to figured worlds suggests they were exploring a space of protest, trying on the role of protestor and navigating the extent of their commitment to valued actions, such as defying authority and struggling. These findings have implications for understanding how relatively privileged students imagined protest activity and engaged in forms of protest in ways that may have effected change, but also reinforced a competitive and unequal education system.

Keywords: opting out, standardized tests, student protest, figured worlds, privilege

This study explores how former student protestors understood their participation in the U.S. movement to opt out of state-mandated, standardized tests. In Spring 2015, over 500,000 students in the United States opted out of federally mandated standardized tests (Fair Test, 2016). Generally, reasons to oppose the test include protecting students from test anxiety; resisting corporate interference in public education (with test-making companies, such as Pearson, financially benefiting from the tests); resisting federal interference in public education (through the Common Core standards,[1] which many of the tests were designed to measure); protesting over-testing in schools (as opposed to hands-on, exploratory learning); and defending the rights of teachers (who have been, in some cases, assessed via the tests scores). Some social justice opt-out activists argue that state-mandated tests disproportionately damage low-income communities of color by focusing too much on individual performance (of students and teachers) and not enough on systemwide injustices, such as

[1] A 2010 U.S. education initiative identifying what students K-12 should know for each grade level in English Language Arts and mathematics

inequitable school funding mechanisms (Au, 2010; Dianis, Jackson, & Noguera, 2015). For example, for the national group United Opt Out, the goal is broader than ending tests: They seek "an equitably funded, democratically based, anti-racist, desegregated public school system" (United Opt Out, 2016).

Although the broadest portrayal of what has become known as the "opt-out movement"[2] may emphasize equity, opponents have argued, on the other hand, that the movement takes away from efforts to collect critical data, data that point to education inequities (Bennett, 2016). In 2015, civil rights groups, including the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the National Council of La Raza, released a statement: "When parents 'opt out' of tests—even when out of protest for legitimate concerns—they're not only making a choice for their own child, they're inadvertently making a choice to undermine efforts to improve schools for every child" (Leadership Conference, 2015). Opponents have also observed that rates of opting out (refusing to test) are highest in wealthier districts where the consequences of opting out are less acute: Wealthier districts are less dependent on federal funding and, therefore, do not feel the consequences of high-stakes accountability reforms that rely on test scores (Morial, 2015). Observations such as these raise questions such as whose interests are shaping the opt-out movement and education policy in general. They also raise questions about how opt-out activists understood, and continue to understand, their participation in the movement.

For such study, a "figured worlds" (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998) approach is useful. As Urrieta (2007) explains, the analytic power of figured worlds is that they can help illustrate the ways in which "people 'figure out' who they are in relation to those around them" (p. 120). In this way, figured worlds analysis can help us understand the role of privilege in a movement, a central concern of this study. This study suggests there is a relationship between White[3] privilege, middle-class privilege, and figured worlds of protest that led to a particular kind of activism.

At the height of the movement, in 2015, there were particularly high numbers of opting out in the states of New York,[4] New Jersey, Washington, and Colorado (Fair Test, 2016). In Colorado,[5] where this study was centered, only five (of 181) school districts had participation rates of 95 percent, the cut-off for federal funding eligibility (Engdahl, 2015). Also in Colorado, the protests began as early as November 2014, with students protesting, specifically, the Colorado

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[2] The term "movement" is widely used in media reports of opting out. In this paper, I understand the widespread protest of state-mandated, standardized tests as a "movement," following Jasper's (1997) definition: "when a collection of groups and individuals perceive themselves (and are perceived by others) as a force in explicit pursuit of social change" (p. 86).

[3] Throughout this paper, I capitalize references to racial identities (e.g., "Black," "White") to recognize them as indicators of "personhood, culture, and history" (Mack & Palfrey, 2020, para. 3).

[4] In the United States

[5] A state in the Western United States

Mathematics, English Language Arts, Science, and Social Studies Assessments (CMAS), a test created by the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC). PARCC, a multi-state effort, funded by the federal government, designed new tests, such as CMAS, to assess whether, and how well, high school seniors had learned the Common Core standards.

In November 2014, during the two-day CMAS testing window, as reported in Wilson (2018), seniors from several high schools across Colorado organized walkouts. The walkouts were most prevalent, with widespread local media coverage, in Washington School District (WSD),[6] the focus of this study. At Hamilton High School, in WSD, only nine of over 500 seniors took the test. Numbers were similar at two other similar-sized WSD high schools: At Madison High School, two students took the test, and at Jefferson High School, 10 students took the test. In addition to organizing a walkout, students from WSD wrote letters to state legislators; produced a video advocating for changes to testing policy; and wrote, signed, and distributed a letter making a case for the walkout to the general public. This open letter was written by two members of a core organizing group at Hamilton but was circulated to other high schools and contained hundreds of signatures from Colorado high school seniors, alumni, and underclassmen (the majority of the signatures were from WSD seniors). The letter outlined five overarching reasons to protest CMAS: (1) "Excessive standardized testing is harmful to our learning"; (2) "[t]he CMAS standards do not represent the material taught in Colorado high schools"; (3) "[s]tudies have repeatedly shown that standardized testing does not accurately measure teacher or student performance"; (4) "[w]e as students are subjected to these tests at the same time as Colorado is seeing cuts in education funding"; and (5) "[t]he CMAS standards are created by a for-profit corporation, not educators."

Following the CMAS protest, as reported in Wilson (2018), there were more protests across the state of Colorado. In Spring 2015, Colorado high school students—juniors, this time—protested the PARCC Math and English Language Arts (ELA) exams. At Hamilton, just eight juniors took the PARCC ELA exam; at Madison, just two juniors took it; and at Jefferson, zero juniors took it. In Spring 2016, in Colorado, nearly 25 percent of all ninth graders opted out of the PARCC ELA test, and only 58 percent of all high school students took the PARCC science test. In 2017, due to increasing pressure from education stakeholders, Colorado began its transition away from PARCC, replacing the ninth grade PARCC test with the PSAT (Garcia, 2017).

In 2016 and 2017, in Colorado, opt-out numbers varied widely from district to district, but one identifiable trend is that suburban schools, in aggregate, had the highest opt-out rates (Wilson, 2018).[7] WSD, a suburban district, fell in line

[6] While I name the state of Colorado (because the particular policy context is central to the case), all other district, school, and other proper names (students, teachers, etc.) are pseudonyms.

[7] And yet, in 2016 and 2017, some of the highest rates of non-participation were actually in small, rural districts. These differences reflect different accountability pressures, and inequities, across districts (Wilson, Moses, Taylor-Heine, & Hastings, 2020).

with this trend: There was broad community support—from parents, teachers, and administrators—for the WSD protests (Wilson, Taylor-Heine, Mommandi, & Hastings, 2020). WSD is, moreover, a relatively affluent and mostly White school district, one whose students have a history of generally high performance on state-mandated tests (Wilson, 2018). As a result, some WSD students, parents, and teachers viewed the state tests as unimportant because they believed that students should focus, rather, on tests that directly affected college admission outcomes, such as the Preliminary Scholastic Aptitude Test (PSAT), SAT, and Advanced Placement exams (Wilson, Taylor-Heine, Mommandi, & Hastings, 2020).

The context of the CMAS student protest was one of race and class privilege:[8] concentrated in a White, affluent, suburban community, with the support of parents, teachers, and administrators. This study seeks to better understand the emerging identities of privileged students engaged in a protest for education reform.[9] This goal shaped the study's research question: *How did high school students understand their participation in the protest of a state-mandated, standardized test?*

Figured worlds as analytic tool

This paper makes use of a "figured worlds" (Holland et al., 1998) approach in order to explore the question of how participants understood their participation in a protest. By "figured world," Holland et al. (1998) mean a "socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation in which a particular set of characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others" (p. 52). They are "'as if' realms" (Holland et al., 1998), or "imaginary worlds," and so a useful analytic tool for showing where, and how, students tried to figure out what it meant to be protestors; how they took on orientations to participate in a protest; and how their organizing was mediated.

Figured worlds are "figured" by people participating in historically, socially, and culturally organized activities. They develop through time as people make

[8] While this paper focuses on race and class privilege, students can be privileged in other ways, for their sexual orientation, gender identity, and documentation status, to name a few social identifiers. In the words of Swalwell (2013), "privilege represents a context-dependent, mediated process by which fluid dynamics produce complex, sometimes contradictory, identities" (p. 6).

[9] By "privileged" here, I refer to "net beneficiaries of privilege" (Swalwell, 2013, p. 7), meaning "people who, in general, garner unearned advantage in most situations and who more often than not can claim association with elite groups." While this word is useful (verbally efficient), it is also problematic: Its passive verbal construction denies agency, eliding recognition that those who benefit from privilege (due to race, socioeconomic status, gender identity, sexual orientation, and/or documentation status, to name some social identifiers) are oftentimes complicit in the preservation of their own privilege (Swalwell, 2013). Furthermore, the word "privileged," positively valenced, can "reinforce feelings of superiority" (Hernández Sheets, 2000, p. 19).

sense of their engagements with one another. Examples of figured worlds are that of a traditional classroom or a school walkout. Accompanying every figured world is its own set of characters, conceptual understandings, valued actions, and artifacts. In the figured world of a traditional classroom, a character would be a teacher who exercises decision-making power at all times, a conceptual understanding would be the belief that grades matter, a valued action would be obeying the teacher, and an artifact would be a gradebook. Central to figured worlds analysis—and a distinguishing feature of it—is a focus on artifacts; artifacts can serve as "pivots" whereby figured worlds are "'open[ed] up'" (Holland et al., 1998, p. 61) for participants.

Figured worlds analysis also focuses on improvisations, or "the sort of impromptu actions that occur when our past, brought to the present as *habitus*, meets with a particular combination of circumstances and conditions for which we have no set response" (Holland et al., 1998, pp. 17-18, their emphasis). With the word "habitus," Holland et al. (1998) borrow from Bourdieu (1989), his word for the "attitudes, beliefs, and experiences of those inhabiting one's social world" (MacLeod, 2009, p. 15). This concept has been used to study social movements (Haluza-DeLay, 2008; Horton, 2003; Tejada, 2016). Another Bourdieusian concept, "field," has been used to analyze the social structure of class privilege in social movements (Husu, 2013). A field is a "structured social space" (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 40) where people are positioned in relation to one another and vie for power (e.g., judicial, journalistic, political, and intellectual fields). These two concepts, "habitus" and "field," are interdependent and help explain the strategies people use to secure different forms of capital, in what Bourdieu calls a "logic of practice" (Bourdieu, 1990).

Figured worlds are like fields. They, too, are structured social spaces made of people who are positioned differently and often competing for power. People interpret their activities by drawing on the simplified interpretive lens of a figured world—proposing characters, beliefs, actions, and artifacts—to make sense of their own behaviors (and those of others) and assign value (Jurow, 2005). Evoking figured worlds, people shape them. In this way, figured worlds can be described as "social constructions of cultural worlds as envisaged by the people involved" (Choudry & Williams, 2017, p. 5). These social constructions are informed by the larger social structure, but also shaped locally by participants in activity. Here, scholars have argued that figured worlds go beyond Bourdieu by "offering more possibilities for envisioning world making and agency" (Choudry & Williams, 2017, p. 5).

From a sociocultural perspective, figured worlds, as sites for improvisation, imagination, and play, develop "zones of proximal development" (ZPDs) (Vygotsky, 1930/1978): what "defines those functions that have not yet matured but are in the process of maturation, functions that will mature tomorrow, but are currently in an embryonic state" (p. 85). In other words, figured worlds create ZPDs for stretching and expanding what is already known, for practicing identities, and creating opportunities for participating in, say, a school protest. From this perspective, participation in social movements can be full of

contradictions and behaviors that are not predictable (Bernstein, 2002). Individuals are often butting up against and moving in and out of more than one figured world, sometimes within one moment of interaction (Holland et al., 1998; Jurow, 2005). Here, figured worlds analysis is an alternative to other concepts commonly found in social movement research, such as "cultural repertoires" (Lindegaard & Zimmermann, 2016), in that figured worlds "highlight the importance of activity and improvisation" (Urrieta, 2007, p. 120) over "more essentialized and traditional perspectives of culture that look for behavior patterns."

Figured worlds analysis is also an alternative to the concept of "radical imagination," rooted in social movement research. Haiven and Khasnabish's (2013) conceptualize "radical imagination" as the "spark of *radical* social movements" (p. 481, my emphasis), or social movements seeking to "overcome the ideological and material structures of power and are able to imagine and fight for a different reality" (p. 482). Figured worlds analysis is a way to examine imagination as it operates in protest contexts that are not radicalized, but, rather, normalized. According to Meyer and Tarrow's (1998) "social movement society," the normalization of social movements in industrialized societies, such as those in North America and Europe, is, in fact, a trend.[10]

Identity development, or who one is becoming in participation, figures prominently in figured worlds analysis. Urrieta (2007) used a figured worlds approach to identify features of community practice that supported actions, values, and identities that mediated the development of what he calls "activist identities" in four groups of participants, all of whom self-identified as "Chicana/o Activist Educators": (1) undergraduate students planning to enter the field of education, (2) teachers K-12, (3) education graduate students, and (4) education professors. Figured worlds have also been used to help illustrate how youth built understanding "in and through interpretations of their experiences" (Jurow, 2005, p. 39): which valued actions became more salient; which valued actions became less salient; and how students navigated, tried on, and shifted roles in the context of their organizing. Such analysis can raise awareness about valued actions and role-playing in youth organizing with implications, more broadly, for better understanding the function of privilege in youth organizing.

Researchers have documented the problematic phenomenon of privilege reinforcing privilege in the context of formal schooling (Eckert, 1989; Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009; Howard, 2008; Khan, 2011; Lareau, 2011; Stoudt, 2009). For example, Lareau (2011), in her book titled *Unequal Childhoods*, observes the ways in which teachers and school administrators reinforce, and subscribe to, a "cultural logic of child-rearing" (p. 31) that aligns with the parenting style and values of parents from middle-class families,

[10] And borne out by the social movements of the early 21st century, such as the Tea Party and Occupy movements (Meyer & Pullum, 2015)

translating into greater perceived achievement in the classroom for middle-class children (versus working-class and poor children).

We need to disrupt such forms of social reproduction in the context of privileged youth—for social justice. Understanding the interaction between movement participation, figured worlds, and privilege can facilitate such disruption. In this context, I was on the lookout for ideologies of Whiteness in my analysis.

Ideology of Whiteness

By ideology of Whiteness, I draw on Leonardo and Manning's (2017) conceptualization: "a socio-historical process that works to ensure White racial domination through various social institutions and through the maintenance of a white racial common sense" (p. 16). "Common sense" is challenging to eradicate, as it is omnipresent, operating through individuals and institutions, and accepted without question (Haney-López, 2003). This study is relevant to ideologies of Whiteness because the opt-out movement is one with White activist leaders protesting the very instrument that has been used to highlight inequities in the U.S. education system (Bennett, 2016; Morial, 2015). White opt-out activists run yet another risk: of seeing, and projecting, themselves as superior to those choosing to take the test, many of whom are people of color.[11] In this context, CMAS student protestors risked participating in, and perpetuating, a "color-blind" (Bonilla-Silva, 2014) ideology—not talking about race or failing to acknowledge its material and ideological effects, and not appreciating the full complexity of the choice to take the test, especially for students with different school realities.

There are opt-out activists explicitly fighting racism—protesting a test, they argue, that is inherently racist, with racist consequences: e.g., the test as a mechanism for charter school take-over, usurping local control and undermining the democratic purposes of public education in, primarily, low-income communities of color (Au, 2010; Dianis et al., 2015). But even social justice activists are in danger of perpetuating ideologies of Whiteness. Ideologies of Whiteness are, by definition, pervasive.

Research design

This study is one of former high school students who participated in varying ways in a protest in order to answer the question "How did high school students understand their participation in the protest of a state-mandated, standardized

[11] Testing has been used to identify schools for restructuring or replacement by privately managed charter schools, a sign of insidious neoliberal education reform from the perspective of many opt-out activists. The on-the-ground reality for parents and students from urban communities of color, however, is that charter schools are sometimes the best option for attaining a quality education, making opting out a complex choice (Taylor-Heine & Wilson, 2020).

test?" Criteria for participation in the study included anyone who protested the Colorado Mathematics, English Language Arts, Science, and Social Studies Assessments (CMAS) through activities that extended beyond staying home on test days. These activities ranged widely. They included signing the open letter to the community; encouraging classmates to opt out by distributing opt-out materials (e.g., an opt-out letter for parents to sign); and/or speaking publicly on the topic (e.g., at a rally, as part of a forum, to the media). I treated these activities as protest activities, as they were all activities that had the purpose of interfacing with others through a process of justification and/or persuasion.

Background to the study

This study is embedded in a larger project studying the contested rights and values in debates about standards in public education as well as questions about the extent of parents' and students' rights to refuse aspects of public education.[12] I worked as a researcher on this team. Our team pursued a variety of lines of inquiry, exploring, for instance, the civic potential of protests for young people (Wilson, 2018); the diverse and contextual reasons parents offered for opting out (Wilson, Taylor-Heine, Mommandi, & Hastings, 2020); and how opt-out leaders and organizing groups (local and national) negotiated tensions of race and power in the movement (Wilson, Contreras, & Hastings, 2021). I conducted my study of CMAS protestors in the context of this broader analysis.

Participants

I used three recruitment strategies for identifying former high school student protestors to interview: (1) scanning local (Washington) media coverage from Fall/Winter 2014-2015 in order to find names of those students who participated in the CMAS protest; (2) following up with participants from focus groups the research team facilitated in Spring 2019; and (3) "snowball sampling" (Weiss, 1994), following leads I got from interviews. I focused on interviewing former high school students from the Washington area because, as described in the introduction, Washington School District (WSD) had one of the highest opt-out rates in the United States. I focused on interviewing those who participated in the Fall 2014 CMAS protest because it was a concentrated moment of opt-out activity and close to 2015, the height of opt-out activism, when over half a million students opted out of state-mandated tests nationwide (Fair Test, 2016). Study participants were interviewed during the period from May 2018 to November 2019, a span ranging three and a half to five years after the CMAS protest.

For the purpose of analysis, I grouped the study participants into one of three levels of participation: "high," "middle," and "low": Participants with a "high"

[12] The project has been funded by the Center for Ethics and Education, the Spencer Foundation, and internal university grants. I have Institutional Review Board approval through the team's proposal.

level of participation were the leader/co-leader of their school protest (Spencer, Neil, and Oliver) or, if from Hamilton High School, participated in the activities of what two former Hamilton protestors, Tara and Karl, referred to, respectively, as the "core group of planners" and "core organizing team" (Kristina, Benton, Becca, and Sarah). Activities of this core organizing group included participating in discussions about how to protest CMAS, such as whether to organize a school walkout, and then, when the decision was made to organize a walkout, justifying the walkout to the public by participating in Hamilton's YouTube protest video and/or helping to write the open letter to the community. Participants with a "low" level of participation protested by signing the open letter, participating in a school walkout, and/or protesting the test as a member of a state youth council (SYC) (Lisa, Natalie, Tom, Brian, and Karl). SYC made K-12 standardized testing policy recommendations to the state legislature. Participants with a "middle" level of participation—just one, Tara, from Hamilton—participated in a way that was more active than just participating in a school walkout, signing the open letter, and/or serving as a member of SYC, but not as active as being a protest leader/co-leader or a member of the Hamilton core organizing group. (See Appendix A for a table with details about each interview participant.)

The majority of the study participants were from Hamilton High School: eight out of 13. This high Hamilton representation can be attributed to the participant recruitment strategy of "snowball sampling" (Weiss, 1994) and to the popularity of the Hamilton protest, both in terms of student participation and media coverage. In other words, there was a large pool of former Hamilton protestors from which to choose, and former Hamilton protestors were easier to find (due to the extent of media coverage of the Hamilton protest).

The popularity of the Hamilton protest could have been due, in part, to strong adult—parents, teachers, even the district administrator—support. All the study participants who attended Hamilton described a protest context where there was not only lack of opposition to their protest activity, but also tacit—and, in some cases, active—support for it. Located in Washington, an affluent and mostly White community, the Hamilton High School community's alignment with opting out fit national trends (as described in the introduction).

Data sources

The primary source analyzed for this study is interviews with 13 young adults who, as high school students, participated in a CMAS protest during Fall 2014. In addition, Oliver, one of the co-leaders of the CMAS protest at Jefferson High School, invited me to the Jefferson "CMAS Protest" Facebook page, which was shared with Jefferson seniors a week before the Jefferson protest. Analysis was also informed by the findings of the larger opt-out research project. Understanding of the national context was critical when it came to thinking about the significance of this study's findings in response to the research question "How did high school students understand their participation in the

protest of a state-mandated, standardized test?"—situating the talk of the study participants in broader U.S. realities and trends.[13] For example, my work on the larger study primed me to be on the alert for the role of Whiteness in the movement, as we understood cross-race coalition building to be a challenge for the movement (Wilson, Contreras, & Hastings, 2021).

Analytic approach

I used semi-structured interviews, following an interview protocol designed to draw out how former high school protestors understood their participation in the CMAS protest while also raising new questions, as they came up over the course of the interview, in order to establish a "research relationship" (Weiss, 1994) and follow the lead of participants (e.g., when they raised their own interests and concerns) in the service of in-depth understanding. All participants consented to my audio-recording the interview, and all the audio-recordings were transcribed.

During my first readings of the interview transcripts, I noticed that participants were trying to figure out how to think about themselves and their actions in relation to protesting a test. They seemed to be navigating a space of uncertainty. I decided to make use of a figured worlds approach to see how students were orienting to the context of their protesting (Holland et al., 1998). Figured worlds analysis helped me see, and code for, what kinds of values, actions, characters, and artifacts—including transforming and overlapping ones (Jurow, 2005)—were evoked by the participants in their descriptions of, and reflections on, participation in a protest.

When analyzing the Jefferson Facebook page, which came to me later in the study (after I had conducted the interviews), I looked for evidence—confirming and disconfirming, rethinking my hypotheses, and seeking out negative cases (Becker 1998)—of the figured worlds I had noticed while beginning to analyze the transcripts. I approached the artifacts on the Facebook page as "pivots" (Vygotsky, 1930/1978) that people use to "shift into the frame of a different world" (Holland et al., 1998, p. 50), or a figured world. More generally, the Facebook page facilitated analysis of how youth used social media to inspire, discuss, and coordinate their protest activities.

Limitations

A limitation of this study is that it relies on interview data about protest activities that occurred three and a half to five years prior. During this period, there was opportunity for not only memory lapses, but also a conflation of reasons, beliefs, and attitudes from the time of the protest organizing and the time of the interview. From interview transcripts, I cannot always distinguish

[13] Trends whose dates track, by and large, the dates of the larger project: 2016-2019 (as defined by the year we started applying for grants and the year we stopped collecting data)

current reasons, beliefs, and attitudes from earlier ones (i.e., of participants' high school selves). It is also likely that, if asked, the participants themselves would not have always been able to make such distinctions. This study's findings may or may not apply to emerging identities in, exclusively, participation in a protest, then; they may also apply to identities years after a protest, still in formation, in response to a range of experiences and a variety of forms of participation outside the CMAS protest context. Also, the sample size of the primary data source is small: interviews with just 13 former student protestors. This study's findings still can, however, contribute to a general understanding of what kinds of conceptual understandings, valued actions, and tensions are potentially in operation among youth who engage in the work of protesting, in both the moment of participating and the moment of remembering.

Understanding protest: navigating figured worlds

This study suggest that the youth drew on figured worlds of protest in the context of protesting the Colorado Mathematics, English Language Arts, Science, and Social Studies Assessments (CMAS). They described a process of exploring unknown territory, improvising in and butting up against the valued actions of figured worlds. Specifically, they wrestled with the question of to what extent they should, and were willing to, defy authority figures and forgo privilege, or struggle, to advance their cause. In the analysis below, I draw on interviews and social media to show how the youth drew on figured worlds of protest to explain their participation in the movement.

Figured worlds: images and artifacts

Every figured world has its images and artifacts (Holland et al., 1998). For insight into what images and artifacts—and, thus, what figured worlds—were invoked during the CMAS protest, we can look to the Jefferson "CMAS Protest" Facebook page: to start, its header image of raised fists. The raised fist has a long life in the history of social movement organizing, particularly as linked to Black consciousness and Black power (Joseph, 2016). In one of its most iconic forms, it is the gesture of Tomie Smith and John Carlos receiving Olympic medals in Mexico City in 1968 to protest racism around the world. It has since come to take on a more generalized meaning of "racial, cultural, and political solidarity" (Joseph, 2016). Around the time of the CMAS protest, it was a symbol used by hip-hop artists revitalizing Black political radicalism and Black millennials protesting racist policing. As portrayed on the Facebook page, against a red background, the fists take on the connotation of socialism and movements against capitalism (protesting the U.S. wealth gap and wealth inequality). In fact, the raised fist was deployed by the Occupy Wall Street movement in 2011, just a few years before the CMAS protest (Cushing, 2011).

Also on the Facebook page was a song playlist posted by a student in response to the suggestion that "it would be really cool," the days of the protest, to "play songs that kind of help the cause like protest songs":

> *Excerpt 1*
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> I dunno, something like We're Not Gonna Take it by Twisted Sister is the first thing that comes to mind. No More Weapons By Steel Pulse, Them Belly Full by Bob Marley and the Wailers, April 29th 1992 by Sublime, Revolution by Authority Zero, Ball And Chain by Social Distortion, Anything by The Sex Pistols, Anything by Bad Religion, War Pigs by Black Sabbath, Anything by Rise Against would be more suggestions. I would say Another Brick In The Wall Pt. 2 by Pink Floyd, Fuck Da Police by NWA, and Bad Reputation by Joan Jett but it would kinda defeat the purpose.

This list invokes the musical genres of heavy metal, reggae, ska punk, English rock, hip-hop, and punk rock, with punk rock most heavily represented. Punk, at its height in the late 1970s, and most visible in the United Kingdom and the United States, has been defined as "a subculture best characterized as being part youth rebellion, part artistic statement" (Sabin, 1999/2009, p. 2). Strong representation of male artists (just one female artist, Joan Jett) in the playlist suggests that, for this student, a figured world of protest was, moreover, gendered: i.e., men fighting oppressive structures and institutions.[14] Also, the majority of the bands listed in the playlist are no longer together, suggesting that, for this student, there was a nostalgic quality to their ideas about participating in a protest.[15]

The first song on the playlist, "We're Not Gonna Take It" by Twisted Sister, is described by the playlist creator as "the first thing that comes to mind," perhaps because the music video to the song was posted the day before. In the video, the song is prefaced by a nearly 3-minute narrative: a fantasy of escape from middle-class, White, suburban life, with the lead singer of Twisted Sister, in the form of his boyhood self, exacting revenge, with the help of his mother, on his abusive father who yells at him for not cleaning his room, not standing up straight, and playing the guitar—a barrage of accusations culminating in the thunderous question "What do you want to do with your life?!" And then the song begins. Framed by this question, the song is eerily suggestive of the anxiety potentially induced by a standardized test: anxiety about the test as unjustly predictive of one's future and controlled by a brute and unforgiving force, such as test-making companies (like the father featured in the video).

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[14] Punk subculture is associated with gender-transgressive behaviors and identities, however, so the "man" invoked in this figured world of protest is also, importantly, potentially gender-transgressive.

[15] Throughout this article, I use a plural, gender-neutral pronoun (e.g., "them," "their") to refer to a person when I do not know their gender identity.

As revealed by the Jefferson "CMAS Protest" Facebook page, the CMAS protestors were invoking figured worlds through their participation in a protest. Like the Chicano/a activists of Urrieta's (2007) study of "activist identities," who took up the Mexican flag and indigenous clothing, the Jefferson CMAS student protestors took up cultural artifacts, too, as part of a process of identity production in the context of their organizing. The cultural artifacts on the Facebook page suggest that the CMAS protestors were orienting to figured worlds of other social movements, such as the Black Power movement of the U.S. civil rights era and the punk subculture movement, positioning themselves as oppressed, fighting for the broad cause of social justice, and resisting oppressive and conventional social structures.

Exploring figured worlds: improvisation and contradictions in practice

Improvisation

As mentioned in the conceptual framework, Holland et al. (1998) discuss the important role figured worlds have to play in leading to improvised actions. Figured worlds, by facilitating improvisation, and play, create ZPDs that stretch participants' understandings and identities. A finding from this study is that some of the protestors improvised actions within a figured world of protest in the style of "sticking it to the man." The phrase "sticking it to the man" is typically used to describe resistance to authority—male and usually White—in the face of oppression. It has roots in the 1960s and 70s and has been linked to a host of social movements, including feminism, Black Power, and gay liberation (Nette & McIntyre, 2020). Two of the study participants used the phrase in a way that suggested they tried on the role of sticking it to the man, moving in and out of a style of protesting, in an improvisatory mode.

Lisa, a former Hamilton student, who signed the open letter to the public and refused to take the test (but did not participate in Hamilton's student-organized walkout), used the phrase "sticking it to the man" to describe the role she played, and how she felt, protesting the test. In the following excerpt, she attempts to recall arriving home on the day of refusing to test:

Excerpt 2

Lisa: I'm sure I walked through the door and was, like, "Guess what I did?"[16]

Interviewer*:* Yeah, yeah, nice.

Lisa: Stick it to the—

Interviewer: to the man.

Lisa: That's what it felt like. It felt pretty cool. I didn't do it—I didn't participate as much as some of those guys, but it did feel kind of good to be able to voice

[16] See Appendix B for transcript conventions.

> your opinion at school where you're almost always just told—like, like that was kind of the beauty of it, now that I think of it. Because we didn't receive personal grades or anything. The chance was sort of there to not go, you know what I mean?

There are several aspects of this excerpt of talk that suggest that, for Lisa, sticking it to the man was an identity she was trying on. First off, the words "I'm sure" (line 1), an extreme case formulation, indicate she is, rather, not entirely sure. She is trying to remember: trying the memory on, in the moment of the interview. In this sense, her proud return home, after refusing to test, is an act of construction, a performance of sorts. In addition, the memory itself is suggestive of a performance in that, in it, she is quite literally calling out to an audience: "Guess what I did?" (line 1). She is underscoring that her protesting is worth noting and getting noticed.

Furthermore, in Excerpt 2, Lisa suggests that protesting the test was an opportunity to suspend, temporarily, the reality of school. She notes her participation in the protest was limited ("I didn't participate as much as some of those guys," lines 5-6), but she, nevertheless, values the feeling of it, how it felt "kind of good to be able to voice [her] opinion at school where you're almost always just told—" (lines 6-7), and here she interrupts herself, but the implication is "where you're almost always just told" *what to do*. In this sense, protesting the test was a bounded, fleeting moment when Lisa could pretend to be someone who didn't care about the consequences of a school test. Her refusal to test facilitated a temporary suspension of some of the sober realities of school, where "you're almost always just told" (line 7) what to do; you "receive personal grades" (line 8); and attendance is obligatory (you don't have the "chance ... to not go," lines 8-9).

Lisa seems to be conjuring a "counter-world" (Holland et al., 1998), one in opposition to a figured world in the style of sticking it to the man: a counter-world of traditional school. Counter-worlds, as described by Holland et al. (1998), "show us what should not be, what threatens us" (p. 251). Improvising the actions of a figured world seems to help Lisa formulate a critique of the counter-world of traditional school: its mechanisms of control and externally imposed obligations. In this sense, a figured world in the style of sticking it to the man gave Lisa an identity, a place of belonging, and some solace ("it did feel kind of good," line 6) in the context of an emerging understanding about the ways in which school life can be oppressive.

Oliver, who led, with a friend, the CMAS protest at Jefferson High School, also used the phrase "sticking it to the man" to describe his protesting: "But I remember that was a big topic of conversation as graduation approached was, um, was how we as a senior class really toppled the system. It was like—it's like the whole ultimate childhood, you know, stick-it-to-the-man ((laughs))." With "ultimate childhood" before "stick-it-to-the-man," he suggested that sticking it to the man was, for him, a childhood dream or fantasy. And with his laughter, he suggested that "toppl[ing] the system" and "stick[ing] it to the man" were

hyperbolic, indexing the dramatic aspirations of his former, 17-year-old protestor-self. Like Lisa, then, Oliver had positive associations with this style of protest, one he, moreover, characterized as a temporary stance and as a bit playful.

The idea that Oliver was trying on a role in the context of his protesting also comes through in his description of his and his co-organizer's initial interaction with the school principal:

> *Excerpt 3*
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> So, uh, we sat down with the principal, Dr. Jenkins. Uh, I believe that was her name. Um, and we, we definitely did it as you would expect a 17-year-old kid to do it. We walked in, and we were pretty, uh, pretty aggressive and just flat-out said, "The, the student body isn't going to do it. We're not going to do it. Uh, it's ridiculous that you're gonna make us do it." We expressed a lot of pushback.

Later in the interview, I asked Oliver if he knew, during this encounter with his principal, that the other seniors weren't going to take the test. He responded with laughter:

> *Excerpt 4*
>
> Oliver: No ((both laughing)). We just came and in, uh, and we were guns blazing, ready to go, ready to fight—
>
> Interviewer: Ah, that's funny ((laughing)).
>
> Oliver: Which I'm shocked she didn't see right through, but.

While confronting his principal, Oliver admits, he did not know if he would be able to follow through on his threats to organize a test boycott. Furthermore, with "guns blazing, ready to go, ready to fight" (lines 1-2), Oliver casts himself as the hero of an early twentieth-century Western. That we are both laughing supports an interpretation of Oliver's self-portrayal as intentionally full of humor and self-effacing—as if calling himself out for, quite literally, playing a part, one generated by his younger, naive self. And when Oliver says, "Which I'm shocked she didn't see right through, but" (line 4), he explicitly recognizes he was playing a role with his principal. When someone can see "through" you, they can see past the artifice—"through"—to another version of self that is presumably more real, more true (and, also, of course, historically, institutionally, socially, and culturally shaped). In this case, Oliver implies, his principal failed to see "through" him: failed to see, or call, his bluff.

Both Lisa and Oliver described a sense of personal mobility in their ability to move in and out of a figured world, to play with the protest style of sticking it to the man. Such freedom underscores their privilege, as linked to both race and

class (Lisa and Oliver presented as White,[17] and we know they came from a community of class privilege, given the demographics of Washington). It is well documented that schools with "Zero-Tolerance" policies and philosophically aligned policies are more commonly found in inner-city schools serving a majority of students of color (Kim, Losen, & Hewitt, 2010). Under Zero-Tolerance policies, a school administrator facing Oliver's self-described entrance—"guns blazing, ready to go, ready to fight," albeit figurative—may not have the options of Oliver's high school principal. Zero-Tolerance policies require that school officials consistently deliver harsh punishments. In these conditions, Oliver would likely have been suspended or expelled (Gjelten, 2020).

Contradictions in practice

Figured worlds analysis is attuned to the ways in which individuals not only move in and out of figured worlds, but also come into tension with figured worlds (Holland et al., 1998; Jurow, 2005). The young adults described their participation in the CMAS protest as a process in which they both oriented to and bumped up against the valued actions of figured worlds of protest, experiencing contradictions in practice. These contradictions can be seen in the context of, specifically, two valued actions: defying authority and struggling.

Valued action: defying authority. In a figured world of protest, students seemed to ask "To what extent should I defy authority?" For example, Oliver, his initial aggressive approach with his principal notwithstanding (see Excerpt 4), described ultimate alignment with his principal about how to organize a protest: "She wanted us to do it in the right way and process it in the right way." Here, Oliver suggests he agreed with his principal about the "right way" to organize a protest. He went on to describe what this "right way" looked like: "[W]e brought a lot of paper and pens and envelopes, and we were writing letters to the state government that, that put this test in order. We were doing homework, we were applying to colleges." As described by Oliver, his organizing, in the end, took a form akin to student council or study hall where students had the option to, also, work on homework and college applications.

Oliver's principal likely helped plant the seeds for this alignment through her receptive response to Oliver and his friend during that first meeting about the test. As Oliver recalled this meeting, his principal told him and his friend she would prefer if they, and the other Jefferson seniors, took the test, while adding, "'Well, we can't compel you to do it [take the test]. ... [W]e can't force you not to [organize against the test].'" In the end, as Oliver remembered it, his principal

[17] Throughout this article, I operate on the premise that race is not always a matter of self-definition. It is also socially, historically, and interactionally constructed, and so how one is perceived, racially, matters (Omi & Winant, 1994).

in fact facilitated their organizing, giving them a designated space in the school to meet and plan.

When it came to the actual work of organizing, Oliver quickly came to share a definition of "right way" (of organizing) with this principal. This shift in Oliver is what Urrieta (2007) calls a "shift in procedural identity production" (p. 131), shifts in participation reflective of a new worldview. Oliver's first instinct—to bust into the principal's office, "guns blazing"—is transformed, conformed to the practices of traditional school: a hybrid study hall/letter-writing campaign, materials provided. Oliver also experienced a process of what Urrieta calls "conceptual 're/figuring'" (p. 126), a shift in perspective that implicates oneself in relation to others. Oliver took on a new role with this principal, refiguring his relationship with the most proximate, accessible figure of authority to defy in the context of his protesting.

Further evidence of Oliver's alignment with school is how he answered students' questions in the context of Jefferson's "CMAS Protest" Facebook during the week leading up to the protest. In one instance, a student asked, "Does the school's officer know about this? In case some people try to disrupt the whole thing," to which Oliver responded, "Carlton [the name of his co-leader] and I talked to Mrs. Jenkins, and Hamilton students cleared it with the superintendent. School officers know what is happening." In his response, Oliver suggests he is in-the-know of key adult figures at the school (the school principal and the district superintendent) and seems to be speaking on their behalf. To the extent that Oliver aligned with figures of authority at his school suggests his organizing was "schoolified," a term Doherty (2007) uses to describe a process of receiving knowledge from adults, as opposed to learning "through direct experience and experimentation" (p. 7).

Tom, who participated in—but, unlike Oliver, did not lead—the protest at Jefferson, also expressed alignment with authority in the context of his protesting. Responding to the question of whether he had to negotiate any points of difference with other protestors, he said, "I don't think so. ... I mean, everybody, uh, protested on the same day, so at least in, uh, there, there wasn't any, you know, graffiti, or any kind of, um, improper conduct during the protest." This reference to graffiti is ironic in the context of the figured worlds invoked on the Jefferson Facebook page, including the Black Power movement of the U.S. civil rights era. By drawing the line of proper conduct at graffiti, one of the key components of hip-hop culture, Tom, who presented as White, disassociated from and in fact seemed to condemn hip-hop "resistance practices" (Lamotte, 2014) calling for social change. One possible interpretation of Tom's talk, then, is that his definition of improper, here, was based on cultural values of Whiteness. What is improper, according to Tom, privileged some forms of protest over others and was racialized, suggestive of a code of conduct he culturally inherited and assumed as correct.

Of all the study participants, Sarah, one of the Hamilton protest organizers, most explicitly and self-consciously described a process of organizing that involved navigating the question of how far to go in defiance of authority. She

described a process that was, on the one hand, defiant of authority: of, specifically, the district superintendent, by not following his advice to send emails to state legislators and meet with his suggested contacts in lieu of a school walkout. Sarah remembered her response, and the response of the other Hamilton student organizers, this way: "'[W]e will try these avenues, but we're concerned that people aren't gonna listen to us if it's just a bunch of 18-year-olds writing letters to congressmen. So, like, how do we make them pay attention to us?'"

At the end of the interview, however, when asked what she learned through her organizing at Hamilton, Sarah said,

> *Excerpt 5*
>
> Understanding—like, like, the humility of understanding that you're 18, and you don't actually know that much about the education system. But you're also the one experiencing it, right? So, like, learning how to balance being the person with the direct perspective and then also understanding that the people that you're speaking with are a lot more experienced with—than you. And, like, trying to hear and, like, act on their opinions and, like, their thoughts, um, and, like, really understanding where they're coming from.

In this excerpt, Sarah articulates her understanding of what she learned through her organizing at Hamilton as a lesson of "balance" (line 3): balancing recognition of the limited knowledge of her 18-year-old self with recognition of the validity of her "direct perspective" (lines 3-4) as a high school student with proximity to the experience of taking a standardized test. While describing a process of complex navigation, Sarah lands on the side of deference to authority, with the word "humility" (line 1) at the front of her talk and repetition of the word "understanding" (four times: lines 1, 1, 4, and 6), which she directs at, in the first two instances, her limitations as an 18-year-old and, in the latter two instances, "more experienced" (line 5) others.

Valued action: struggling. Those students who were most supported and protected by the adults in their community—namely, the Hamilton students—wrestled with the dissonance between the valued action of struggling for a cause, as linked to a figured world of protest, and the reality of their protest context.

Of all the high school contexts that were part of this study, the Hamilton context stands out for the extent to which students received adult support. By all the accounts of the eight former Hamilton protestors interviewed, Hamilton parents, teachers, administrators, and even the district superintendent assured students they would suffer no negative consequences for organizing a protest against the test. By the memory of Tara, a former Hamilton protestor, it was in fact a Hamilton teacher who planted the idea for a protest. As Tara recalled the

origin of the protest, a teacher asked Tara and her classmates if they knew about the new state test, students responded in outrage, and then the teacher jokingly brought up the idea of a protest: "And someone joking—oh, our, our teacher was the one who said, 'Ha ha, it would be really funny if you all, like, opted out altogether.'" Kristina and Sarah remembered meeting with the district superintendent, who tried to get them to consider other options, such as writing to state legislators, before making the more extreme choice to stage a school walkout. But in the end, he assured them, as remembered by Kristina, a walkout would be "'not a violation of district policy.'"

Other study participants remembered Hamilton teachers actively supporting their organizing. Becca remembered a teacher offering her classroom and even class time for protest organizing. As Sarah recalled, all the Hamilton protestors had a "trusted adult" to whom they could talk. For her, that trusted adult was a teacher who seemed to support her in a context of "facilitation" (Kirshner, 2008), as advisor (but not joint participant): helping her "figur[e] out who to talk to and how to talk to them," "how to not sound like a whining teenager," and by "providing perspective on what the other side of it is." Benton recalled having to make a concerted effort, in fact, to communicate to his classmates that "students are running this, so that it's not just a teacher-led effort, but it's a student-led effort." When asked if she faced any resistance, Kristina replied, "You know, not a ton. Um. I think, like, now that I think back to that, I'm, like, surprised we didn't get more resistance honestly."

Against this backdrop of adult sanction, there is evidence that some of the Hamilton protestors felt unease, that they valued struggle in the context of a protest and understood that their actions did not qualify as such. Kristina drew a contrast between her own protesting "where, like, we knew that, like, no harm would possibly come to us from it" and protesting that is "meaningful" and "sacrificing": "like, meaningful, right, like, there's some people who, like, would be, you know, actually, like, sacrificing something by not taking a standardized test." By raising up the figure of sacrificing protestor, Kristina distinguished her own protest activity from the more "meaningful" act of sacrifice, or struggling for a cause.

In addition, Kristina, at one point in the interview, seemed to overtly critique the adult support she received. In the following excerpt, she describes her response to the media's praise for the open letter she was largely responsible for writing:

> *Excerpt 6*
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> I remember, like, there was, um—I think *Washington Daily* had done an article, and they were, like, "a seven-page letter with," like, "with footnotes." And I was like, "Well, of course (I'm gonna put in) footnotes. Like, I'm citing stuff." Like, "That's what I'm taught in school. You cite stuff. You use footnotes."

One reading of this quotation is that Kristina felt condescended to by the journalist. More generally, her response is a negative one and seemingly connected to a show of adult and institutionalized (in the form of the media) support. In this sense, Excerpt 6 is further evidence supporting a reading of Kristina as ambivalent in the face of all the adult sanctioning of her protest activity.

Benton, another Hamilton protest organizer, spoke directly to the process of navigating the extent to which he was willing to struggle in the context of his protesting. On the one hand, he evoked a figured world of protest in which suffering was a valued action. Recalling the Hamilton walkout, he described how cold it was—"zero degrees Fahrenheit," "unbelievably freezing"—and revealed that discomfort was a feature of what he thought a protest should involve: "[I]t also, in a way, helped our cause because it looked like 'Well, we're, we're still doing this. Even when it's not comfortable for us.'" As Benton saw it, his protesting was rendered all the more valid to others for being "not comfortable." Benton revealed himself as in tension with this valued action, however, when he recalled a conversation with this father:

> *Excerpt 7*
>
> Benton: And he [*a teacher*] wanted me to be the head of it [*the Hamilton walkout*], which my father asked me not to do, um, because he was afraid that this was going to backfire. Uh, and that it was gonna paint me in a negative light (during) the college application process, which, um, to him, I was—he was very adamant and would not let me be the hea—kind of the physical face of, um, I guess, martyr, uh, in a way, but not so much.
>
> Interviewer: Like scapegoat, maybe?
>
> Benton: Scapegoat, in a way. Um, so I opted to help out in the background. So, I worked with my friends, and we kind of decided not to have really a face. So, it was a group of us that worked together instead of one single head of it, and we all did different—we all did different tasks.

Here, Benton seems to align with his father's view about the importance of college. He also seems to draw a boundary around his protesting, defining the degree to which he is willing to relinquish his privilege. Within a figured world of protest, he seems to be bumping up against his own desired future of getting into college.

The Jefferson "CMAS Protest" Facebook page is also revealing of student protestors butting up against the valued action of giving up privilege, imagined futures. Many of the posts on the Facebook page are related to questions of procedure and official permission: e.g., questions regarding the logistics of turning in the parent letter of approval and the parameters for student behavior during the protest ("This is not going to be a party," replied Oliver, a Jefferson protest co-leader). The Facebook page shows student protestors wanting assurance that school administrators wouldn't "punish" them and that other

negative consequences would not ensue, such as a rescinded college acceptance. In an exchange seemingly initiated by Oliver posting guidelines for behavior during the protest including "They [school administrators] CAN BE VERY SERIOUS if we do not act in this manner" (his emphasis), a student responded, "What does VERY SERIOUS mean?" (their emphasis). Carlton, the other Jefferson protest leader, explained:

> *Excerpt 8*
>
> VERY SERIOUS means that it could compromise our futures. If there were to be uncivil behavior, then the school could punish us. Colleges are also aware if you have a disciplinary history, and it could compromise our acceptance status. Maybe not for just one person. (his emphasis)

In this excerpt, we see a CMAS protest leader not only enforcing guidelines for behavior during a protest, but leveraging what he understands to be the values of his classmates: getting into college, a middle-/upper-class rite of passage, which he, like Benton, seems to conflate with a figured world of an imagined, desired future ("our futures," line 1).

Discussion

This study has implications for understanding how relatively privileged students imagined protest activity and engaged in forms of protest in ways that may have reinforced the status quo. In the cases of Oliver and Tom, we see students applying hegemonic and "schoolified" (Doherty, 2007) understandings of what is "right" and "proper" protest conduct. Oliver was quick to align with the most proximal figure of authority, and embedded in Tom's ideas about what was "proper" in the context of a protest were "common sense" (Haney-López, 2003) judgements about what constitutes an improper protest—namely, graffiti, a form of social protest associated with political artists attempting to speak on behalf of marginalized communities. And for Benton and at least some of the Jefferson student protestors, a competitive understanding of school (i.e., school as a competitive field for getting into college) was reinforced and legitimized. These student protestors seemed to see the activity of protest as something close to an extracurricular activity, facilitating college application, while drawing on artifacts of protest. These findings are in line with those from other studies that have shown youth participating in school-sanctioned activities, such as sports, and learning to conform (Eckert, 1989). Here, this study builds understanding about how students learn to conform and offers this question for the further study of social movements: "Under what conditions does protest become mainstream?"

One hypothesis in response to this question, as suggested by this study's findings, is that protest becomes mainstream when authority figures in a system that reinforces privilege accept and tacitly approve of forms of protest. The

Washington School District (WSD) student protestors, for the most part, did not have to defy figures of authority nor did they experience resistance in the context of their protesting. In light of other student protests and their consequences, including dismissal and clashes with the police (Agrawal, 2020; Bee, 2019), this absence of pushback is significant. Key WSD authority figures, such as the superintendent and the Jefferson High School principal, seem to have accepted, and even accommodated, the valued actions of figured worlds of protest. This acceptance may have neutered the oppositional potential of these figured worlds. Such acceptance on the part of authorities corresponds with Meyer and Tarrow's (1998) "social movement society," a thesis that brings attention to the proliferation of "less disruptive" (p. 26) approaches to protest. This theory also notes that such approaches go hand in hand with other changes in civic life, including a police force that is more strategic about minimizing disruption in the face of protest.[18] As framed by the social movement society theory, the authority figures of the Colorado Mathematics, English Language Arts, Science, and Social Studies Assessments (CMAS) protest context were, likewise, perhaps engaged in a form of strategy, or damage control. By this framing, the student protestors were not only shaped by their protest context, but also shaping a protest context.

For Meyer and Tarrow (1998), the social movement society has implications for the integrity of contemporary democracies. They ask, "To what extent have these changes done away with the special role of the movement as a challenger to the polity?" (Meyer & Tarrow, 1998, p. 26). A version of this question applied to this study is "To what extent does the normalization of protest do away with the potential for the student protest to challenge a dominant and unequal education system?" Dismantling systems is not what the CMAS student protestors set out to do. And yet, this question is pertinent to the future of social movements and the evolution of U.S. society more generally. What will be the impact, if any, if privileged students continue to engage in protest activity that reconstitutes privilege? For equity and social justice, we need "radical social movements" (Haiven & Khasnabish, 2013, p. 481), movements that seek to "overcome the ideological and material structures of power" (p. 482) and are "able to imagine and fight for a different reality." U.S. school leaders and administrators need to be self-vigilant they don't send a message—granted, tacitly and unintentionally—that students of White and middle-class privilege need not shoulder the burden of such work.

This study suggests that students from a largely White and affluent suburb drew on figured worlds of protest in ways that had both possibilities and limitations. They imagined protest activity and engaged in forms of protest in ways that may have effected change. They conjured figured worlds and improvised in the context of their organizing, suggesting social organizing a fertile site for identity development, one that affords youth opportunities to expand their concepts of

[18] Meyer and Tarrow (1998) note other changes, too, accompanying less disruptive forms of protest, such as increasing dependence on formal and bureaucratic processes within social movements and a public more accustomed to, and tolerant of, forms of protest.

self and experience shifts in participation and perspective. The CMAS protest also seems to have served as a site for youth organizers to self-reflect and navigate complex questions, such as, in the case of Sarah, to what extent she should learn from more experienced others (versus act based on direct experience) and, in the case of Benton, to what extent he should sacrifice a desired future for a social cause. Furthermore, there is indication that the lack of push-back on the part of teachers and administrators in these school contexts conferred value on the work of activism. But this study also suggests that students from a largely White and affluent suburb may have drawn on figured worlds of protest in ways that limited too, reinforcing privilege. We need to prepare all students for the grueling work of dismantling systems. Sometimes there is good reason for—wisdom and power in—the raised fist.

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Appendix A: Table of Interview Participants

	Name (in order interviewed)	*High School*	*Year of Graduation*	*Level of Participation*	*Form(s) of Protesting the Test*
1	Spencer	Riverside	2015	high	led Riverside CMAS protest; featured in local media for his opt-out activism; spoke publicly on opting out, as a member of local opt-out panel (May 2015) and at an education reform organization rally (April 2018); participated in dialogue of opt-out activists (facilitated by larger opt-out research team, Fall 2017)
2	Tara	Hamilton	2015	middle	participated in Hamilton CMAS protest; spoke publicly on opting out, at a rally at the state Capitol (March 2015) and as a panel member of community forum organized by larger opt-out research team (Spring 2017)
3	Brian	Fairfield	2016	low	As a member of a state youth council (SYC), collected data and made K-12 standardized testing policy recommendations to state legislature (which included replacing CMAS

					with existing data, such as the ACT); school protesting limited to informing students of option to opt out through a school-wide survey he helped develop (as SYC member).
4	Neil	Hayward	2016	high	led Hayward CMAS protest (handed out flyers, distributed information in school parking lot); as a member of SYC, collected data and made K-12 standardized testing policy recommendations to state legislature (which included replacing CMAS with existing data, such as the ACT)
5	Karl	Hamilton	2016	low	participated in Hamilton CMAS protest; as member of SYC, collected data and made K-12 standardized testing policy recommendations to state legislature (which included replacing CMAS with existing data, such as the ACT)
6	Kristina	Hamilton	2015	high	part of core CMAS protest organizing group at Hamilton, co-wrote open letter
7	Lisa	Hamilton	2015	low	signed open letter
8	Benton	Hamilton	2015	high	part of core CMAS protest organizing group at Hamilton, appears in Hamilton YouTube protest video
9	Becca	Hamilton	2015	high	part of core CMAS protest organizing group at

					Hamilton, co-wrote open letter
10	Natalie	Hamilton	2015	low	participated in Hamilton CMAS protest
11	Sarah	Hamilton	2015	high	participated in Hamilton CMAS protest, featured in state education association YouTube video (November 2014), wrote letter to the editor (December 2014), member of youth opt-out panel hosted by local university (March 2015)
12	Oliver	Jefferson	2015	high	co-led Jefferson CMAS protest: created Facebook page, wrote letters to state legislators and media, generated student waiver form
13	Tom	Jefferson	2015	low	participated in Jefferson CMAS protest and signed open letter

Appendix B: Transcript Conventions

[*italicized text*]: author's note (in some cases to protect proper names, to preserve anonymity)

((   )): nonverbal communication (e.g., laughter, physical gestures, facial expressions), as relevant to the analysis at hand

(   ): where talk/recording is hard to hear, so transcript uncertain

—: interruption, new clause/train of thought

"   ": quoted speech/text

… : omitted talk (in order to feature only content relevant to the analysis at hand)

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