Freirean Radical Love and Transformative Empathy: The Multimodal Literacies of Adolescent Social Media Activism

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Abstract

The evolution of social media activism calls for a critique into the commonly accepted trope of adolescent political apathy and naivety. In this study, I explore specific examples of adolescents’ strategic use of social media platforms such as Instagram to disseminate and circulate their political beliefs. I trace a selection of memes used for spreading awareness of current social justice issues such as the #BlackLivesMatter movement in 2013 to the #StudentStandUp movement of 2018. The memes used in these social movements demonstrate how adolescents create and/or circulate memes and multimodal texts with the intention of forging empathetic connections (through words and images) to affect others into political action against social injustices. Drawing upon critical affect literacy and a Freirean model of Radical Love (1970/2005) – or an action-based love for humanity- I apply lenses of critique to examples of memes and discussions that adolescents have on online to demonstrate how critical literacy evolves and reveals their capacity to recognize and repeat patterns as a tool for sophisticated communication. The study reveals that adolescents are satisfying mandates of the Ontario English Curriculum while attesting to their empathetic use of a voluntary, leisurely, space of social media. I draw upon Dawkins (1976/2006) framework of cultural idea-meme evolution and couple it with the Foucauldian (1975/2008) idea of power relations to establish the foundational idea that power is present in the cultural competition of ideas, that creates the inequities adolescents are critiquing in social media. The study concludes that adolescents are competently using, circulating and/or creating memes to inspire revolution while demonstrating critical literacy skills.
Dedication

In loving memory of Khirul Nesha Mohamed.

Thank you for showing me how to love everyone without prejudice or agenda and encouraging me to choose kindness whenever possible. Thank you for teaching me to value education over any material possession. Being your granddaughter is my highest distinction.

I dedicate this work to you, my Sunshine.
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

In the spring of 2016, I completed my final practicum teaching two high school English classes on William Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. The experience bridged two areas I most value as a teacher: the pedagogical use of emotion in learning and the development of transformative thinking. At first, my students were indignant and hesitant to engage with the Elizabethan language, and argued that Shakespeare was too far-removed from modern lived realities. After several weeks of working through the text and making thematic connections, however, the students began forming opinions about the characters, identifying inter-character dynamics, and verbalizing why certain characters were more likable than others were. The students argued, for instance, about whether or not they felt Helena’s unrequited love plotline was worthy of empathy, as they tried to decide whether they perceived her as either desperate or passionate. What I noticed throughout, however, was that the students increasingly focused on competing notions of relatability. Only when Helena’s unrequited love became relatable on a personal level were they able, generally, to empathize with her desperation. I perceived this connection of relatability with the likability of characters as a key to overcoming their initial resistance to Shakespeare’s historical distance from their lived experience. The conversations in class about empathetic identification with the unrequited love story took several weeks to unfold, as the students exhibited increasingly explicit expressions of such relatability and likability, which they filtered through their personal use of social media. What had become observable to me during the time of my final practicum, then, was the persistent and supplementary use of social media in the classroom that inadvertently operated alongside our empathy journey.
Reflective Framing of this Thesis

Before each class began and just before it ended, I permitted students to use their cellphones. As they scrolled through popular social media sites such as Snapchat and Instagram, the content with which they engaged visibly affected them. Perceptible reactions such as laughter, frowns, or even eye rolling often resulted in further sharing with classmates and subsequent story-telling amongst the teenagers. This phenomenon intrigued me, and prompted me to study the use of social media in an educational context – especially in the context of a potential connection to empathy development. I could see, for instance, how interpersonal bonding between classmates occurred in conjunction with their exchange of memes. The meme-texts themselves functioned as the conduit for the relatability factor and sparked conversations between the students. As Lisa Zunshine’s (2006) argues in *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel*, there is likely a connection between empathy development and readerly responses to fiction or, as I will demonstrate, affective responses to social media memes. Although I did not study my students, the behaviour I took interest in – my students’ emotional responses – and my own familiarity with Instagram memes sparked what became the focus of my graduate research one year later.

I began by looking at memes more purposefully in order to analyze the affective components or the ways in which each meme’s pictorial image and verbal captions invoked sensory responses in a concise and immediate form. By applying close reading strategies to internet memes and by treating them as miniature texts, I recognized that they could serve as analogues to responses to literature. Student responses – be they emotional, physical, or social – through internet memes could potentially increase the likelihood of empathetic identification with an ‘other’ or marginalized being. As I moved forward with my own studies, the pestering
hunch that memes compelled my students to feel—both because of their sensory components and immediacy – led me to isolate my research to the internet space to trace the multiliteracies of affect and the examples of empathy articulated by adolescents who engage in online social justice conversations.

Over the course of my research from 2017 to 2018, my intuitive sense that adolescents were using internet memes for political consciousness raising proved to be prescient. Initially, I started out with an isolated focus on the #BlackLivesMatter movement, which afforded me the opportunity to trace the memes as they replicated and circulated in social media in their effort to inspire adolescent protest via social media activism. However, the emergence of the #StudentStandUp movement in response to the Parkland school shooting on February 14, 2018 tragically brought my project into unanticipated focus. Adolescents emerging as agents of social, political, and cultural change inspired and sustained the use of social media to garner support and affect change.

With this in mind, my initial text-centric approach to analysis needed to be re-thought, as the events in Parkland unfolded in real-time and my subject position as a researcher and online observer was registering on various forms of knowing and feeling within this moment of crisis. I was cognizant that Parkland affected me on various planes – physically, emotionally, philosophically, and spiritually – and yet, I was reducing this experience into an analytic language. Erroneously, I focused on a discursive progression – a cause-and-effect relationship between memes and transformative action – that revealed to me my own hesitancy to include emotional response as a legitimate form of discussing the phenomenon I was also experiencing. What was fuelling the online and subsequent offline protests by youth was a palpable feeling or discernible momentum that I needed to account for in this powerful, real-time example of
adolescent agency. I was feeling alongside the students I was observing online, and in order to fully capture the range of affect in transformation both online and offline, I needed to focus on the multiliteracies employed by the adolescents who were inciting this change.

Because memes, like their creators, are dynamic and adaptive tools of communication and products of literacy events, I began my research with the perception of the body as already affected before coming-to-be the literacy event. As Leander and Boldt (2013) contend, non-representational ways of knowing reveal the need to:

    reassert the sensations and movements of the body in the moment-by-moment unfolding or emergence of activity. Rather than naming preferred outcomes, […] follow the emergence of activity, including the relations among texts and bodies in activity and the affective intensities of these relations (p. 35).

Through both the representational and non-representational ways of embodying affective literacy, the relationship between text (memes) and body will aid in the analysis of empathy as a central component in these student-led campaigns for transformation. The affective intensity of this relationship between memes and adolescents is what I perceive to be an actualizing of a Freirean call for solidarity and liberation.

**Outline of the Remainder of the Document**

In my thesis, I will first outline the specific terms and concepts that underpin my research on the use internet memes as political tools that inspire empathy in adolescents and work toward emboldening them with a thirst for social transformation; this is captured in Chapter Two. Consequently, Chapter Three explores the methodology employed in this study.

Although there are many other social media movements for various socio-cultural issues – such as the #MeToo movement against sexual assault, for example – my study focuses on the
racial discourses in the #BlackLivesMatter movement and the advocacy for gun control in the #NeverAgain (also known as #StudentStandUp) movement. Ultimately, my study aims to discuss the traction these movements gained in social media because of the direct involvement of adolescents. The first social media movement is in detail in Chapters Five, which frames the circulation of memes employed in the #BlackLivesMatter movement and investigates how political consciousness is advocated, replicated, and disseminated into the public space in protest of police brutality toward the black community in America. Chapter Six connects this demonstrable use of internet memes for political involvement to the #StudentStandUp, as a case study of the real-time application of how adolescents’ savvy use of technology and their discernable political agency allowed them to use memes to affect change.

CHAPTER TWO: DEFINING TERMS

The following chapter explores the theories that frame my exploration of memes in social media. Firstly, I will begin with the concept of memes by drawing upon the key concepts outlined by Richard Dawkins (1976). I will then extend my discussion into the process of idea replication and circulation. Next, I will define the concepts of affects, emotions and empathy as they pertain to my study. The section that follows explains Critical-affect-literacy before I move into discussing how “Radical Love” is seen in social media activism. I then discuss how social media presents an alternative space for speaking to power, leading into an explanation of how panoptic power relations can be seen in social media, at the end of the section.

Theorizing Memes: Dawkins and The Selfish Gene

As memes are a relatively recent phenomenon, let me begin by establishing the origin of the term in Richard Dawkins’ (1976) seminal work The Selfish Gene, where he applies a
biological framework to the transmission of cultural codes. Derived from the understanding of the *meme* as, “an abbreviation for *mimeme*, a cognate related to the Greek ‘mimesis’ with its etymology overlapping the English word ‘mime’ and ‘mimicry’ or the French ‘mème’ (the same)” (Cannizzaro, 2016, p. 568), the meme is an expression of imitation. Dawkins expands the definition to include *idea-memes*: “tunes, ideas, catch phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches” (1976/2006, p. 192). That is, he applies the genetic replication of DNA and traits that are passed on to offspring—or a more biological definition—to the passing on of cultural practices, beliefs, and unique codes that transmit into the next generation. Dawkins argues that memes function, “just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs,” in that, “memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation” (1976/2006, p. 192). This type of biological replication and circulation of memes highlights an evolutionary force in which Dawkins notes that memes, “should be regarded as living structures, not just metaphorically but technically” (1976/2006, p. 192) to better understand the direct influence of culture on cognitive evolution. As memes “leap from brain to brain” through imitation, then, the transmission of their genetic contents directly correlates to the survival of their codes among a naturally competing meme-pool. Like a gene that ‘selfishly’ seeks its own survival and dominance without consideration of the other genes it displaces.

Dawkins’s notion of the way that the *selfish gene* functions in biological evolution is analogous to the way that the idea-meme functions in cultural evolution, as both processes strive to reproduce and transmit their codes to the next generation. Dawkins argues that a genetic predisposition for a competitive drive in humans results in the notion of, “universal love and welfare of the species as a whole [to][be] concepts that simply do not make evolutionary sense”
Just as human biological makeup is inherently selfish and coded for self-preservation and survival, so too do cultural ideas and practices compete and divide society. Aligning with the Darwinian likeness to the ‘survival-of-the-fittest,’ Dawkins extends this natural competitive drive to permeate the facets of human social organization – compelled to compete and dominant over others (1976/2006). He further argues that, 

our genes may instruct us to be selfish, but we are not necessarily compelled to obey them all our lives […] some would argue that culture is so important that genes, whether selfish or not, are virtually irrelevant to the understanding of human nature. (p. 3)

For Dawkins, culture provides the space for educating away from biological impulses to express human agency over genes. He contends that, “cultural transmission is analogous to genetic transmission in that, although basically conservative, it can give rise to a form of evolution,” and evolves, “at a rate which is orders of magnitude faster than genetic evolution” (Dawkins, 1976/2006, p. 214). In essence, what genes are to DNA and the passing on of genetic material, idea-memes are to the passing on of cultural material – but since human culture replicates and circulates at a faster rate than in a biological capacity, information contained in idea-memes are of the upmost importance for humanity evolving away from inclinations of the selfish gene. That is, memes, “must indulge in a kind of competition with each other” to determine the ideas that endure generations and, “dominate the attention of a human brain, [and] it must do so at the expense of ‘rival’ memes” (Dawkins, 1976/2006, p. 197). The competition for passing on one idea-meme over another has an evolutionary impact, as it directly shapes cultural memory and the preservation of what ideas and codes will be carried on.

The competition between cultural idea-memes allows for the possibility of altering which memes become more frequently replicated. Dawkins’ (1976/2006) work reveals how the
interactions between the selfish gene and the idea-meme can suppress selfish survival instincts. He argues that,

to build a society in which individuals cooperate generously and unselfishly towards a common good, you can expect little help from biological nature. Let us try to teach generosity and altruism, because we are born selfish. Let us understand what our own selfish genes are up to, because we may then at least have the chance to upset their designs, something that no other species has ever aspired to. (Dawkins, 1976/2006, p. 3)

Education, as Dawkins explains, is the key to overturning predispositions for the selfish gene, thus providing the space for human agency to transform society. Through education, Dawkins contends that the gene for selfishness can be replaced with socially responsible traits such as generosity and altruism – which I extend to the trait of capacity for love and empathy. Replacing the selfish gene with a meme of empathy satisfies Dawkins’ call to, “deliberately cultivate[e] and nurtur[e] pure, disinterested altruism – something that has no place in nature, something that has never existed before in the whole history of the world” (Dawkins, 1976/2006, p. 201). The educative function contributes to the acquisition of morally oriented behaviours rather than to a competitive drive for hierarchical dominance. The survivalist impulse for self-preservation leads to social attitudes which divide and organize desirable cultural practices, outlining which ones are worthy of imitation and which ones are subject to rejection, policing, and marginalization.

The replication of idea-memes and the literal internet meme demonstrates how society’s beliefs and discourses compete for social survival and superiority via the dominant modes of communication and education. The meme as a container of cultural ideas, and the genetic-like transfer of these ideas to assert social dominance, extends to the complexity of interpersonal relationships. As Dawkins says, “we are built as gene machines and cultured as meme machines”
The competition between genetic impulses and socialized ideas mediates relationships. Dawkins concludes that, “we, alone on earth, can rebel against the tyranny of the selfish replicators” (1976/2006, p. 201), as these tyrannical selfish genes are replaced by the active re-coding of memes to promote community-oriented support for the species as a whole. Although Dawkins’ (1976/2006) idea-meme does not explicitly refer to internet memes in his original conception, the educative function of these cultural and digital artifacts is evident their composition as, “information-rich and contagious units” (Cannizzaro, 2016, p. 568) that replicate and circulate in social media.

After the emerging popularity of internet memes in the early 2000s, scholars such as Sara Cannizzaro (2016) extend Dawkins’ competing idea-memes specifically to the semiotic analysis of internet memes. Dawkins’ assertion that the re-education of selfish gene can be transformative frames my own use of internet memes (transmitted through social media) and their discernible impact on the education of empathy in adolescent learners.

**Replication and Circulation of Internet Memes**

The replication and circulation of internet memes represents the ways in which we can perceive cultural idea-memes as units of culture and as vehicles for transmission. In a tangible form, the internet meme is comprised of visual and written components that articulate an idea or theme shared throughout social media platforms. The more the meme is liked – typically indicated by a virtual ‘thumbs-up’ that can be clicked to increase the statistical popularity of the meme or post – on social media, the more frequently it is replicated onto various pages where the meme or post is shared. Then, it circulates further by the use of hashtags, which hyperlink and connect across the internet. Instagram, for instance, collects and sorts memes that use hashtags into a larger repository, and attaches them to other posts containing a similar theme or message.
Mirroring the meme-pool collection of ideas (Dawkins, 1976/2006), the popularity of an internet meme increases as it leaps from page to page and garners the attention of the social media users based on the notion of what is *trending* – or, what has received the greatest number of likes and shares.

As the memes replicate and circulates, some users create their own adaptations of the memes, but use the original popularity of the meme to draw upon and pay homage to the original meme. The interconnection between the pages and individual adaptations of memes demonstrates the ways in which adolescents are compelled and inspired by the contents of the memes with which they engage. The sensory components and the captions translate into an action for the social media users. Either they contribute to the dominance of the memes’ presence in social media, or they feel compelled to create a form of a multimodal literacy event (be that in the form of a new meme or a written response to the idea in the comment section). What fuels this voluntary circulation of meme is desire – a desire to share and reproduce.

Kevin Leander and Gail Boldt’s study, “Rereading ‘A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies’: Bodies, Texts and Emergence” (2012), discusses the notion of desire fuelling the creation of the literacy products resulting from an *event-time* affected response. Bodies are compelled in moments of crisis, already reacting before they produce a multimodal text to communicate the ways event-time is operating upon the students. The sensory and cognitive reception of the *event-time pulse* harbours an affective intensity that registers on the body before it can be verbalized. Leander and Boldt (2012) contend that *out-of-school literacies*, like those produced on social media, are more successful because they emerge from the authentic, unrestricted desire of the student into a space that allows them to spontaneously unfold. Rather than being mandated to produce texts to demonstrate literacy competence and communication skills, students
voluntarily use memes to engage in online discourse, often politicized, to demonstrate their ability to communicate effectively. Their online engagement with internet memes can be perceived as both products of an affective response to an event-time crisis and as affect-inducing texts that replicate and circulate, thereby galvanizing other youth into action. Graphically, I perceive this process in an Invoked Affective Response model (see Figure 1), as adolescents process emotional responses to #BlackLivesMatter memes and #StudentStandUp posts that further lead to action to speak out against an injustice. Fuelled by their desire and voluntarily demonstration of their capacity to engage in social media activism, adolescents are using internet memes and multimodal texts for socially transformative purposes.

The use of social media can be problematic, as it provides very little control over the racist content that is accessible to young social media users. As much as educators would hope otherwise, students can direct all their social learning to the easily accessible cyber community and formulate their own ideas and opinions in this unmediated space. However, as my model suggests, the adolescent learners’ intentional sharing of #BlackLivesMatter memes and efforts to garner support for the #StudentStandUp highlights their key role in self-development of effective literacy skills and independent critical thinking. For example, the decision-making process involved in sharing a meme or post in alliance with a polarized topic, such as support for the lobbying against gun laws in America, is a politicized act, as the user is making the decision
Figure 1. Invoked Affect Response Model. This model explains the encounter with political memes that employ the use of the body to invoke affect. In my study, memes that invoke this I term as affectively-charged memes and multimodal texts.
to associate themselves with the movement online, visible to all other users in the public space. The choice to share one meme over another directly impacts the popularity and subsequent circulation of the meme and the underlying message contained within it. For example, Figures 2 and 3 below exemplify the ways in which memes speak to one another and compete for dominance through their ability to be circulated and replicated on various pages.

The two memes featured in Figure 2 and 3, as a pair, speak against a masculine structure of power through the perspective of a feminist and maternal reaction to gun rights and the Second Amendment discourses after the Parkland shooting on February 14, 2018. Figure 2, captioned, “The NRA is a Terrorist organization,” frames the slogan “NRA No Lives Matter,” and was posted on February 22, 2018 after the Parkland school shooting. The use of the phrase “no lives matter” draws upon the popularity and familiarity of #BlackLivesMatter to unify the idea-meme toward a common target: the National Rifle Association (NRA). Adaptations in internet memes rely on familiarity, recollection, and recognition to forge an alliance between competing ideas – or a desire to imitate patterns to make the world recognizable. Before they can be replicated, the relationship between the memes must garner a level of support, drawing back to this notion of relatability or a recognizable theme to invoke an affective response. Figure 2 uses the rhetoric of #BlackLivesMatter, and uses hashtags such as #theresistance to signal the solidarity needed to propel the movement forward.

As this meme attaches itself to the #BlackLivesMatter movement, it subsequently joins forces and re-circulates the momentum of the cause by connecting it to the student resistance. This meme was created and posted days after the Parkland shooting, and registers the anticipatory feeling that action is needed to resist the power of the NRA and renegotiate the gun laws to restrict the accessibility of assault rifles to the public.
Figure 2. The NRA as a Terrorist Organization. Meme created with the embedded perception of the NRA’s negative influence in society. Retrieved from Instagram on February 22, 2018 from https://www.instagram.com/p/BfhbYtOAF4o/.

Figure 3. Mother’s Against Guns. Meme posted on celebrity supporter Dina Pulgiese’s Instagram account of a mother protesting against gun violence at the #MarchForOurLives rally. Retrieved from Instagram on March 24, 2018 from https://www.instagram.com/p/Bgv8McAHrVr/. 
The image of an American emblem of freedom is associated with the constitution and symbolizes the American preservation of ‘rights and freedom,’ a dominate idea-meme that links the right to bear arms, gun law regulation, and the American identity. This naturalizes the discourse of a masculine authority of gun ownership, with the juxtaposed idea of privileging weapons and profit gain from sales of those weapons over the lives of victims of gun violence. Feeding from the momentum of the #BlackLivesMatter social media attention, the meme creates the sense of urgency to address the “terrorism” that is at odds with the nation’s revered freedom and rights. Figure 3 demonstrates how the idea-meme evolves, as the initial post received 47 likes on Instagram, while the second received 6,046 likes by the #MarchForOurLives national protest event on March 24, 2018, which initiated a series of social action against assault rifle sales to the public. The popularity of the idea that the NRA and the right to bear arms are, “the enemy to beat” demonstrates the replication of this idea-meme – gun law reform – asserting its dominance among the competing notion of the loss of a “right.”

Posted just a month after the Parkland shooting, Figure 3 demonstrates how the memes speak to one another and acquire dominance by becoming more accepted in cyberspace. The caption on the poster of a protestor at the March reads: “When you are done Mansplaining about the right to bear arms, let me momsplain about bearing children,” which replicates the idea that the NRA and the right to bear arms is no longer the dominantly accepted idea-meme. The competing and circulating meme is now of the feminist, maternal discourse in charge of protecting the nation’s young against the injustices of masculine, militarized power. This is an attempt to destabilize, compete with, displace, and circulate the voice of women speaking against the “mansplaining” of Constitutional right to and perseverance of a militarized masculinity (Taber, 2015) which privileges violence over peace and solidarity. Figure 3 thus frames the
gendered perception of rationality and the authority to critique the social-cultural structures that are otherwise deferred to the “mansplaining” of political figures or corporate representatives. The ironic term is a response by feminists expressing frustration with the masculine tendency to explain things to women – in which the poster the woman carries directly rejects and calls attention to the mansplaining of gun laws. The invocation of the term *mansplain* is associated with the feminist critique of the attempt to preserve an element of masculine power through the politicized language of fixed American rights – to shut down the maternal critique of gun-related violence toward children. To juxtapose the notion with the term “momsplain” gives the protestor more authority to speak about what is the problem and refocus the attempt to derail that conversation about gun law reform. The adaptation and competition between the Mom-meme fighting against the NRA-meme replicates and circulates in the online space, and garners more support through the ability to affect onlookers into ‘liking’ and ‘sharing’ the new dominant message and cultural idea. Together, the two memes speak to the notion that the passive acceptance of militarism, as it is linked to the American identity, is no longer going uncritiqued – the violence caused by access to assault rifles is the object of change and becomes the dominant idea-meme and internet meme in social media. Statistically, the idea leaps from page to page on Instagram, and ultimately leaps offline to affect real-time protest movements. The desire to replicate or circulate a new meme exemplifies the affective response online and its tangible effects offline, as the components and ideas embedded in memes lead to the empathetic identification with injustice and the desire to seek to correct it.

**The Affects, Emotions, and Empathy**

After *meme*, the next major concept that underpins my research is *affect* and the academic—and, subsequent political – undervaluing of emotion as a function in sustainable
social change. Due to the variance in predictable emotional responses to stimuli (an event, piece of art, etc.), the use of emotion as a legitimate tool of analysis and to incite larger-scale political change has been met with resistance. The advocacy of reason over the passions is socially valued as a desirable form of objective critique that glorifies rationality through the suppression of emotion. The search for objective truths frames how critics William Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley (1949) minimize the value of feelings in literary analysis, for example. Wimsatt and Beardsley coined the term the affective fallacy (1949) in the mid-twentieth century, as they cautioned against the idea that feeling possessed critical literary value, in that a solely affective critique could not produce a fixed and generalizable set of data and is, “either too physiological or […] too vague” (Wimsatt & Beardsley, 1949, p. 45). The influential idea that literary analysis should reveal information that is applicable to both the, “individual and universal – a concrete universal” (Wimsatt & Beardsley, 1949, p. 48) aligned with mid-twentieth century forms of criticism that isolated literary analysis to just ‘what is on the page’ rather than to the more difficult to classify range of human feeling and emotion. It was not until after the demise of twentieth-century totalizing discourses that affect and emotions re-emerged as a popular paradigm in the mid-1990s – in what the social humanities movement coined as the affective turn (Clough, 2007).

Michael Hardt’s foreword in The Affective Turn (2007) describes the re-engagement with the mind-body relationship in affective literacy as a way of knowing and a legitimate form of critique and understanding. Hardt contends that Baruch Spinoza’s (1677) affect-theory is influential for the, “attention to the body and emotions, […] because affects refer equally to the body and the mind; and, in the second, because they involve both reason and the passions” (Hardt, 2007, p. ix). The relationship between the affects and emotion is the connection with the
body’s awareness and performance of emotional responses, and how it informs the other (i.e., how the act of crying may be a result of sadness). In contrast to the hierarchical division of reason and passion, Spinoza (1677) offers a connection between the once polarized perception of rational thought and irrational emotional response, suggesting that there is a correlative component between the power of the mind and the actions it carries out (Hardt, 2007). Hardt highlights two key components in Spinoza’s work on affect that connect rationality, the body, and emotion:

First, the mind’s power to think and its developments are [...] parallel to the body’s power to act. This does not mean that the mind can determine the body to act, or that the body can determine the mind to think. On the contrary, Spinoza maintains that mind and body are autonomous but that they nonetheless proceed or develop in parallel. (Hardt, 2007, p. ix-x)

Spinoza’s affect-theory therefore draws an alliance between thought and action that is autonomous but correlative, as aspects of these two forces develop in relation to one another. Poignantly, “the notion of correspondence here is importantly open and indefinite” (Hardt, 2007 p. ix) as the, “power of the mind to think and the power of the body to act” acknowledges the notion of behavior, movement, and action as linked with thought, intention, and agency – as well as the possibility of such action being random, unpredictable, and emergent before coming into thought. Secondly, Hardt (2007) contends that perception of, “a correspondence between the power to act and the power to be affected” (p. x) further connects the mind-body as,

the mind’s power to think corresponds to its receptivity to external ideas; and the body’s power to act corresponds to its sensitivity to other bodies. The greater our power to be affected, [Spinoza] posits, the greater our power to act. (Hardt, 2007, p. x)
This notion draws a connection between external forces causing a reaction/action in ourselves and others; the more the mind-body encounters stimuli that invoke responses, the more the mind-body learns to invoke desirable responses in others. The interaction between other bodies is of interest, as there is the space for positive/negative exploitation of affect where education – or, social forces – determine whether the sensitivities between bodies will be used for manipulation or empathy for this desired response from others.

As Hardt (2007) discusses, Spinoza’s *affects* can be actions carried out by internal causes or by passions carried out by external causes, as Hardt explains this presents, “the one side [which] we have reason, actions of the mind, along with actions of the body, which one might call provocatively corporeal reason; on the other side are the passions both of the mind and the body” (2007, p. x). The corporeal reason and passion of the mind-body exists in intentional and habitual action and thought. Hardt further suggests that Spinoza, “does not assume that reason and passion are the same, but rather poses them together on a continuum” (2007, p. x). This idea of the reason-passion continuum and the correspondence of mind-body frames the study of affects and its utility across disciplines such as psychology, anthropology, and the like in efforts to understand affect and emotion, or scientifically analyze the process of feeling.

The discussions about the *affective-turn* (Hardt, 2007) in the mid-1990s made significant contributions to feminist theory, queer theory, as well as critical and cultural theories in the wake of economic, technological, political, and cultural changes. For example, Lauren Berlant’s work, *Thinking About Feeling Historical* (2008), uses affective criticism to discuss emotion as a pre-individual and bodily experience as a response to the former dismissal of ‘feminine’ qualities, that are then given scholarly value in this shift in critique. Berlant (2008) asserts that:
The affective turn emerges within the long neoliberal moment of the attrition of the social, expressed in Margaret Thatcher’s claim that ‘There is no society’ just individuals, families, and neighbors’. Attempting to break the circuit of accountability between persons and political worlds, phrases like hers elide the difference between ‘public’ and ‘society’ in the hope of privatizing everything, including the experience of collective emotion. (p. 6)

The advocacy for emotion appeals to the social wellbeing of an altruistic society as a stark contrast to the neoliberalist ‘me-first’ approach to privatization. Instead, the focus on the individual or subject-position – and not a political collective identity – fragments, alienates, and stifles these affective desires to interact with other bodies. Michael Hardt highlights that, “both our power to affect the world around us and our power to be affected by it, along with the relationship between these two powers” (2007, p. ix) is a relationship with rational intelligence and passions and feelings, as the power to act has implications on perceptions of literacy and ways of knowing. Hardt discusses his example of affective labor that,

is meant to bring together elements from these two different streams and grasp simultaneously the corporeal and intellectual aspects of the new forms of production, recognizing that such labor engages at once with rational intelligence and with the passions or feeling. (2007, p. xi)

I argue that affectively-charged memes and multimodal texts operate precisely in this manner, as they engage the continuum of reason and passion in moments of cultural crisis and produce corporeal and intellectual forms of literacy that are integral for social transformation. The feeling invoked by acts of injustice inform the rationally posed resolutions to correct these injustices – our ability to affect and be affected sets the stage for empathy.
Critical Affect-Theory and Empathy Development

The emotional value associated with a pattern or a familiar object – like a red heart’s association with love – invokes feelings that can be positively exploited for socially transformative purposes. Readerly identification with patterns in literature provides a frame for aesthetic distance while orienting the emotions of readers through sensory language. Empathy studies theorist Lisa Zunshine (2006) suggests that empathy is forged from affective alliances in language, which compel readers to act against injustice – in essence, a call to choose against the coding for the selfish gene. Through both the reasons and passions, the evaluation of the social-cultural-political conflicts between humans can be fully understood as the clashing of rival memes (Dawkins, 1976/2006). Dawkins argues that humans are meme machines, and highlights that our competing cultural beliefs are rooted in the desire to dominate – and therefore, we need to be educated towards traits that consider intersubjective positions for a generous and altruistic society (Dawkins, 1976/2006). The suppression of feelings can lead to selfishness and negatively affects empathetic abilities, as it leads to the lack of consideration of the emotional well-being of ourselves and for others.

The relationship with affective responses invoked by literature or language in text is explained by empathy theorist Lisa Zunshine as being about strengthening interpersonal understandings that can lead to empathetic connections. Similar to Dawkins’ notion of “leaping from brain to brain” (1976/2006) is Zunshine’s (2006) discussion on the ways cognitive interactions with literary worlds and characters “teach us” (p. 6) how to better navigate the social world by mimicking behaviours we learn from literature. In Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel (2006), Zunshine contends that readers learn how particular actions invoke responses in others from this identification with characters in fiction, as they do in the text.
Zunshine (2006) refers to these phenomena as cognitive rewards, training one’s self with the ability to mind-read or predict the likely responses of another being. Cognitive psychologists developed the term mind-reading or theory of mind to describe, “our ability to explain people’s behaviours in terms of their thoughts, feeling, beliefs and desires” (Zunshine, 2006, p. 6). Zunshine further explains that this process is rooted in observable actions that correlate feelings and behaviours – for example, how a character or person reaching for water may signify their feeling of thirst (Zunshine, 2006, p. 6). Literature provides, a sustained representation of numerous interacting minds, the novel feeds the powerful, representation-hungry complex of cognitive adaptations whose very condition of being is a constant social stimulation delivered either by direct interactions with other people or by imaginary approximations of such interactions. (Zunshine, 2006, p. 10)

Fiction, in turn, provides the opportunity to identify the affective relationship on a ‘trial basis’ in the literary world, so that the affective relationships in the social world can be improved. These sustained representations of interacting minds allow for the study or the correlation between actions and response, as they provide deeper insight into the complexity of human emotive expression and interpretation.

Zunshine (2006) critiques the assumption that adolescents today have impaired empathetic abilities as they are no longer as interested in fiction as past generations were; they prefer to “watch television instead; as if […] making sense of an episode of Friends or Saved by The Bell somehow did not require the full exercise of the viewer’s Theory of Mind” (2006, p. 11). Much like the need to legitimatize and value emotional responses as a complex cognitive process, the cultural undervaluing of medium and popular-culture diminishes the perception of adolescent competency. Whether they choose to read about others in novels, television, or
internet memes, the training of their *theory of mind* or *mind reading* is still occurring and provides the opportunity to eliminate the, “improbable interpretations of behaviors” (Zunshine, 2006, p. 16) when interacting with others in real-time. Zunshine (2006) further explains that, “Mind reading is thus effortless in the sense that we intuitively connect people’s behaviour to their mental states” (p. 16) as an attempt to understand social relationships and interactions in literature, media, and in the social world.

In essence, the engagement with memes can also be seen as this intuitive sense of understanding the feeling of injustice, sensing whether or not an idea is competitive or empathetic, and then making the choice to act to correct it. Recognizing patterns in characters’ behaviours, Zunshine argues, engages,

our evolved cognitive tendency to assume that there must be a mental stance behind each physical action and our striving to represent to ourselves that possible mental stance even when the author has left us with the absolute minimum of necessary cues for constructing such a representation. (2006, p. 23).

The patterns we recognize in literature are similarly those we draw upon when attempting to navigate the social world – the desire to read others and decode their behaviours, thoughts, and beliefs to define them. According to Deleuze and Guattari, desire functions in literacies as, “the will to connect, to forge relations […] nothing can be known outside of its relationality – a relation to this and…and…and… Desire is the force of production that develops through relations,” (as cited in Ehret, forthcoming, p. 18). When applied to internet memes, the desire to connect and sustain relations is used to create a representation of injustice, to encourage and develop empathetic connections between and by adolescents. The calls to social action, for example, are embedded in the “minimal cues” (Zunshine, 2006) of internet memes to make their
plight more intelligible and recognizable to others in social media. In this capacity, adolescents are both creating and applying vehicles and mediums for theory of mind and mind reading to be exercised to advocate for a politicized empathy.

**The “Radical Love” of Memes in Social Media Activism**

Paulo Freire’s notion of *radical love*, outlined in his seminal work *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970/2005), frames my discussion of the adolescent call for change in social media as they use the tool of internet memes to enter into dialogue with a system of power. To speak out against oppressive structures, adolescents respond to the presence of oppression online to garner solidarity toward transformation in a form of radical love in meme exchange. Freire’s notion of *generative themes* aids in the analysis of internet memes and responses by adolescents in social media. Freire contends that,

> to investigate the generative theme is to investigate people’s thinking about reality and people’s action upon reality, which is their praxis […]. The more they deepen their critical awareness of reality and, in spelling out those thematics, take possession of that reality. (1970/2005, p. 106)

To decipher memes as an example of adolescent praxis, the generative theme of, “domination—which implies its opposite, the theme of liberation, as the objective to be achieved” (Freire, 1970/2005, p. 103) demonstrates how memes vying for power are necessary to interrogate. This idea that themes, “exist in people in their relations with the world, with reference to concrete facts” but critically addresses the extent to which, “the same objective fact could evoke different complexes of generative themes in different epochal sub-units. There is, therefore, a relation between the given objective fact, the perception women and men have of this fact, and the generative themes” (Freire, 1970/2005, p. 106). The interplay between the subjective and
objective relations or associations made through signifiers in memes differ in semantic meaning for those on the oppressed/oppressor binary. Generative themes allow for critical analysis to expose the cultural politics embedded in meaning-making and knowledge products. The variance between perceptions of injustice as an objective fact – to denounce oppression or address it – directly impacts the actions taken to respond to the theme in social media and policy-making at large. For my purposes, the generative theme of liberation or capacity for radical love as competing for emotional value attests to the importance of memes as a literacy tool able to speak to forms of power.

Freire’s (1970/2005) essential notion of radical love is the foundation for my argument that adolescents are affected by their engagement with internet memes, and are compelled into action through a desire to correct injustices. Access to empathy in public discourse is an essential tool for destabilizing the social value attributed to hierarchical competition rooted in the selfish gene. What Dawkins (1976/2006) perceives as evolutionary genes coded for individual survival, Freire (1970/2005) links to the absence of love for humanity as the precursor of oppression and domination. Freire states that as a result of the, “lovelessness which lies at the heart of the oppressors’ violence” (1970/2005, p. 45) it is the oppressed who must ,“from their stifled humanity, wage for both the struggle for a fuller humanity; the oppressor, who is himself dehumanized because he dehumanizes others, is unable to lead this struggle” (1970/2005, p. 47). As the interaction between the oppressed and oppressor affects both groups, the contradictory process of dehumanization can only be remedied by the struggle initiated by the oppressed for liberation of humanity. As he asserts that the unwillingness to seek out the interests for all of humanity renders oppressive leadership to be ill-equipped to improve the progress of the species, Freire contends that,
as the oppressed, fighting to be human, take away the oppressor’s power to dominate and suppress, they restore to the oppressors the humanity they had lost in the exercise of oppression. It is only the oppressed who, by freeing themselves, can free their oppressors. (1970/2005, p. 56)

As oppressors operate on a deficient perception of love, the correspondence between the oppressed and oppressors attests to the essential ability to be affected and affect, as radical love is rooted in action toward a cohesive society. In this respect, oppression is the result of a full expression of the selfish gene and the diminished capacity for love and empathy. Radical love can thus be understood as the solidary fight for the liberation of all humankind: an action-based love for justice and equity.

Freire (1970/2005) describes the notion of oppressor lovelessness that is at odds with the aims of radical love and hinders the development of an altruistic and cooperative society. The dehumanizing of the oppressed stems from their translation “into apparently inanimate ‘things.’ This tendency of the oppressor consciousness to in-animate everything and everyone it encounters, in its eagerness to possess, unquestionably corresponds with a tendency to sadism” (Freire, 1970/2005, p. 59), as people become another object that can be dominated and controlled in the dynamics of ownership. The lovelessness of oppressors, and their tendency to reduce beings to objects of possession, is the desire to exert power over life, determine its conditions, and directly control life outcomes. The treatment of the oppressed as objects or ‘things’ leaves them to, “have no purposes except those their oppressors prescribe for them” (Freire, 1970/2005, pp. 59-60) and shapes the asymmetrical formation of the consciousness. The translation into objects removes the agency of the oppressed and hinders their ability to imagine a world outside of the constraints imposed upon them. The prescribing of identity and purpose become an
educational “practice of domination” (Freire, 1970/2005, p. 81), as it prevents independent thinking and creates limitations for the oppressed within the world they inhabit. It mediates and forging a reality in which they are permanently fixed into the inferior position of the binary – perpetually the recipients of deposited, predetermined knowledge about themselves and the world in a banking model of education (Freire, 1970/2005). Freire contends that, “Any situation in which some individuals prevent others from engaging in the process of inquiry is one of violence. The means used are not important; to alienate human beings from their own decision-making is to change them into objects” (1970/2005, p. 85). To continue to allow decisions to be made on behalf of the oppressed is to deny their capacity to control their own mind-body interaction with the world and deny them the agency to use their voice to articulate their needs. The direct involvement of the oppressed in the re-designing of their world not only necessitates revolutionary change, but also re-configures the perception of humans as a whole. A shift to an educational and philosophical framework of liberation stifles the indoctrination of false realities that engender levels of human status, worthiness, and aptitude, and intervenes in the repetition and circulation of the dominant social values that lead to oppressive enforcing of these realities.

Freire (1970/2005) further explains how the dehumanization of marginal groups in society impedes the relationship between humans through a skewed perception of reality that turns away from a radical love for humanity. Freire argues that, “people, as beings ‘in a situation,’ find themselves rooted in temporal-spatial conditions which mark them and which they also mark” (1970/2005, p. 109), highlighting the shifts in cultural understandings of social-political realities over time and the evolving perception of human agency to act upon these pre-existing realities they inherit from generations prior. Freire (1970/2005) advocates for the essential shift in perception to a,
problem-posing education [that] affirms men and women as beings in the process of becoming – as unfinished, uncompleted beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality. Indeed, in contrast to other animals who are unfinished, but not historical, people know themselves to be unfinished; they are aware of their incompleteness. In this incompleteness and this awareness lie the very roots of education as an exclusively human manifestation. The unfinished character of human beings and the transformational character of reality necessitate that education be an ongoing activity. (p. 84)

The recognition of human beings as historical and conscious beings locates a site of power or manipulation; humans differ from animals as a result of their, “awareness of the past, present and future” (Freire, 1970/2005, p. 84). It is this temporality and spatiality that Freire (1970/2005) argues allows for the consciousness that drives human desire for education: to seek out the information that brings us to completion. It is the variance in what constitutes that knowledge that can determine the selfish preservation of a fixed history of oppression versus the transformative realization of a malleable future in which those who are presently oppressed can emerge from this position of ‘object.’ As conscious beings, Freire contends that humans, will tend to reflect on their own ‘situationality’ to the extent that they are challenged by it to act upon it. Human beings are because they are in a situation. And they will be more the more they not only critically reflect upon their existence but critically act upon it. (1970/2005, p. 109)

In contrast to the banking method of education and indoctrination that falsely align with a fixed and unalterable perception of human reality, the process of conscientization, he offers, is the process of critical consciousness raising that lays at the root of awakening the oppressed to seek emancipation and re-claim agency to transform the reality of their social position (Freire,
This process of conscientization is also applicable to the “oppressor consciousness” (p. 55) that is likewise expected to transform their own false perceptions that often deny the existence of oppression (Freire, 1970/2005). The correspondences between critical thought and action is essential in emancipation from the ideological and physical means supporting the system of oppression.

Radical love necessitates the correspondence between critical reflection and the societal intervention into cultural and political inequities. A tool for fostering this love is what Freire locates in the power of dialogue. Language and communication between the oppressed and oppressor determine the sustainability of efforts for social transformation toward equity. The power of speech has a direct impact on the outcomes of social justice initiatives, as they require radical love that recognizes the humanity of all. The oppressed – having been, “denied their primordial right to speak their word” (Freire, 1970/2005, p. 88) – have been deprived of their agency to name the world and claim this right to, “transform it” (p. 88). Freire further argues that the process of dialogue is an, “existential necessity” (1970/2005, p. 88) and a recognition of the humanity in another. The following key passage highlights the convergence between love and dialogue, as Freire (1970/2005) argues that a radical love is at odds with the act of domination:

Dialogue cannot exist, however, in the absence of a profound love for the world and for people. The naming of the world, which is an act of creation and re-creation, is not possible if it is not infused with love. Love is at the same time the foundation of dialogue and dialogue itself. It is thus necessarily the task of responsible Subjects and cannot exist in a relation of domination. Domination reveals the pathology of love: sadism in the dominator and masochism in the dominated. Because love is an act of courage, not of fear, love is commitment to others. No matter where the oppressed are found, the act of
love is commitment to their cause – the cause of liberation. And this commitment, because it is loving, is dialogical. (p. 89)

The dialogic component distinguishes radical love from the oppressive organization of the social world. If profound love is absent in the conversations about oppression, the attempts are coined as acts of, “false generosity” (Freire, 1970/2005, p. 133) which are meant to appease and sustain inequitable system of power. Love as an act of courage, as Freire argues, signifies the commitment to ongoing efforts for change, fairness, and justice. It is a call to protest, a love for the preservation of life and progress rather than the love of control and enforced stasis. This love is action-based, as he contends that, “love cannot be sentimental; as an act of freedom, it must not serve as a pretext for manipulation. It must generate other acts of freedom; otherwise, it is not love” (Freire, 1970/2005, p. 90). For Freire, the stark distinction between radical love and the lovelessness of oppressors is this commitment to others, to protect them from dehumanization and to not mislead them into forms of manipulation. He further states, “if I do not love the world – if I do not love life – if I do not love people – I cannot enter into dialogue” (Freire, 1970/2005, p. 90), which fortifies the relationship between love, empathetic listening, and action to correct injustice as discerned in political discourses.

As he asserts dialogue is a key feature of the radical love needed for transformation, Freire also acknowledges that that dialogue requires, “an intense faith in humankind, faith in their power to make and remake, to create and re-create, faith in their vocation to be more fully human (which is not the privilege of an elite, but the birthright of all)” (1970/2005, p. 90) – as change can only be ascertained in a collective acknowledgement of the need for it, as well as a firm belief in human beings’ capacity to work cooperatively towards that goal. To avoid reverting back to existing dynamics of oppression, dialogue between the oppressed and
oppressor is needed or a lack of faith, “inevitably degenerates into paternalistic manipulation” (Freire, 1970/2005, p. 91). Establishing trust between the polarized groups requires that dialogue be founded on, “love, humility, and faith, […] which leads the dialoguers into ever closer partnership in the naming of the world” (Freire, 1970/2005, p. 91) and the power to transform it away from the constraints of the oppressor consciousness. The oppressor, Freire cautions, must bring humility into the dialogue in order for the agency of the oppressed to be actualized and for transformation to be more than a gesture from the elite.

The contentious space of social media is where ideas of domination and liberation interact and compete for social power; adolescents demonstrate their radical love and praxis by using memes to disseminate a call-to-action and model an intense faith in the future of humanity where they are actively involved in the re-naming of their world and the transforming of inequitable social and political realities. However, the cultural devaluing of the medium and forum in which adolescents use to carry out their call-to-action often hinders the legitimacy afforded to adolescents’ proposals for transformation. Henry Giroux (2004) argues that power dynamics are present in everyday interactions and conversations between people – even conversations online. These ideas paired together are instrumental to my argument that adolescents are confronting and re-writing narratives of fixed political realities through internet meme exchange, as they enact Freire’s call-to-action. As adolescents use social media as a tool to interrogate the oppressed/oppressor binary and challenge the dynamics of object/ownership, a re-evaluation of the social value afforded to internet memes and social media activism as a whole is required to allow their voices to be heard and to materialize the change they seek.
Alternative Spaces for Speaking to Power

Henry Giroux’s work *Cultural Politics, Public Pedagogy and the Responsibility of Intellectuals* (2004) begins with the key reading of culture as an educational forum immersed in the political struggle for domination and liberation. Founded upon the notion that culture is, “the social field where goods and social practices” (2004, p. 59) interact and reproduce, Giroux further explains the learning that occurs in these exchanges between people and the beliefs, values and ideologies that frame this process requires critique. He explains that,

Culture is partly defined as a circuit of power, ideologies, and values in which diverse images and sounds are produced and circulated, identities are constructed, inhabited, and discarded, agency is manifested in both individualized and social forms, and discourses are created, which make culture itself the object of inquiry and critical analyses. Rather than being viewed as a static force, the substance of culture and everyday life – knowledge, goods, social practices, and contexts – repeatedly mutates and is subject to ongoing changes and interpretations. (2004, p. 59-60)

This definition of culture is useful to extend to social media culture, in which processes of meaning-making are mapped out and re-defined, negotiated, and disseminated to the masses online forming a part of the “circuit.” Documenting the “substance” of everyday life, social media records and produces narratives about society in real-time, minute-by-minute, thus forming a reality of the daily lives of groups of people across the global network. Adolescents work through this “circuit of power” with their use of memes as a knowledge producing force – this notion of “mutations” in a Dawkins (1976/2006) genetic-likeness attests to the possibility to recode or redefine naturalized power imbalances in the social imaginary. Giroux asserts that the malleability of cultural narratives is, “both a site of contestation and a site of utopian possibility,
a space in which an emancipating politics can be fashioned” (2004, p. 60) as cultural values, ideas, and beliefs directly influence perceptions of permanent realities, histories, and political-social order. Giroux positions the, “issues of democracy, citizenship, and the struggle over the shaping of identities and identifications” (2004, p.60) in the relationship between culture, power, and politics that he terms public pedagogy. The collective forging of realities is steeped in power relations – extending to even the seemingly most distant areas of culture like that of social media. Giroux explains that, “the diverse ways in which culture functions as a contested sphere over the production, distribution, and regulation of power,” positions culture, “symbolically and institutionally as an educational, political, and economic force” (2004, p. 62) – in which cultural spaces harbour the potential to recreate existing perceptions of realities, as well as nourish the solidarity needed for transformation.

Giroux layers into his discussion the essential notion of cultural pedagogy that occurs in these cultural spaces suggesting that pedagogy links, “learning to social change outside of traditional sites of schooling” (2004, p. 61). He further explains that,

   Pedagogy is not simply about the social construction of knowledge, values, and experiences; it is also a performative practice embodied in the lived interactions among educators, audiences, texts, and institutional formations. Pedagogy, at its best, implies that learning takes place across a spectrum of social practices and settings. (Giroux, 2004, p. 61)

As a result, the influences of elements of public pedagogy, the influential interactions between humans in any given space, conveys a process of social learning that, “not only mediates history but shapes it” (Giroux, 2004, p. 62). He advocates that this, in turn, must shift the perception of all components of culture, like that of popular culture, to contribute to politicized conversations
on various forums. As technology provides a new method for engaging in these political
discourses – and consequently impacts the recording of history from multiple perspectives – a
shift is required to, “assess the political significance of understanding the broader educational
force of culture in the new age of media technology, multimedia, and computer-based
acknowledgment of these alternative spaces – like that of social media – where knowledge is
being produced reconsiders these forums as more than leisurely entertainment spaces with no
political consequence.

For example, social media has significantly affected the speed of information exchange,
and the speed of organized responses by the public to participate in mass activism. These
demonstrations exemplify the ways in which social media culture similarly, “plays a central role
in producing narratives, metaphors, and images that exercise a powerful pedagogical force over
how people think of themselves and their relationship to others” (Giroux, 2004, p. 62). The
relationships formed between users is shaped by the political values they hold, which they bring
to any medium that allows for interaction with others. Social media activism and culture affects
the learning of adolescents’ responsibilities to each other and to humanity as a whole. These
interactions online can be seen to,

- both a mode of cultural production and a type of cultural criticism that is essential for
  questioning the conditions under which knowledge is produced, values affirmed,
  affective investments engaged, and subject positions put into place, negotiated, taken up,
  or refused. (Giroux, 2004, p. 63)

This process of critical reflection, echoing that of Freire (1970/2005), is action-based, as the
critique of cultural beliefs exposes the dynamics of power and shapes whether or not these ideas
lay roots and reproduce as common knowledge or ‘truth.’ The negotiation of accepted or refused values highlights the collective effort needed for a critical analysis that not only changes, “how people think about themselves and their relationship to others and the world, but also in energizing students and others to engage in those struggles that further possibilities for living in a more just society” (Giroux, 2004, p. 63-64).

While Giroux addresses the critical pedagogical responsibilities of the educator in this process, he also reveals the pressing need to theorize popular culture and acknowledge the importance of, “new electronic technologies and the emergence of visual culture as a primary educational force” (Giroux, 2004, p.67). The legitimizing of visual culture and digital affective intensity produced by multimodal texts supports my argument that the use of internet memes offers variations on traditional narratives and definitions of the otherness that directly shape public memory. Specifically, memes are used as a tool for speaking against inequitable power and mobilizing other bodies toward a cultural shift to liberty, spearheaded by student social media activism. As a result, the use of social media in the recent protest movements I have selected in my work directly reveal how meme exchange in social media emerges as the primary force for mobilizing radical love in the battle for liberation among adolescents.

**Panoptic Power Relations in Social Media**

Michel Foucault’s (1975/2008) *Discipline and Punish* provides an analytic frame to view the use of adolescent social media activism to evade the panoptic model of a disciplined society. As a tool for resistance and disruption to mass obedience, adolescents use internet memes to penetrate social control – which, as Giroux (2004) also explains, infiltrate even the most casual forms of social interactions. Adolescents use internet memes to undermine surveillance and control by engaging in competition with capillary power in the form of rival memes (Dawkins
1976/2006) in social media. This demonstrates the ways competition between internet memes subvert relations of power and destabilize the status quo and obedience. We can then see particular rival memes circulate as an attempt to contain and control the ‘contagion-like’ call for social action against power imbalances embedded in the status quo.

Foucault explains the panoptic schema was initially created in the eighteenth-century to allow police the uncontested freedom to pursue criminals and supervise, “plots, opposition movements and revolts” (1975/2008, p. 191) during the time of the plague quarantine. The notion of surveillance as omnipresent forges a direct line to the center and the perception of a constantly “policing” society. He explains that the police,

[are] an apparatus that must be coextensive with the entire social body and not only by the extreme limits that it embraces, but by the minuteness of the details it is concerned with. Police power must bear ‘over everything’: it is not however the totality of the state nor the kingdom as visible and invisible body of the monarch; it is the dust of events, actions, behaviour, opinions – ‘everything that happens’” (Foucault, 1975/2008, p. 190)

The observation of actions, behaviours, and opinions highlights the ways in which the capillary function of power operates through the institution of the police, enforcing desirable and undesirable behaviours – or the strict observation of abnormal bodies that require more supervision than others. He explains that this in turn resulted in the observation and documentation of “‘every moment,’ [and] those unimportant things” (as cited in Foucault, 1975/2008, p. 190) to sustain omniscient power, and propel the reproduction of thinking and action in an oppressed/oppressor binary. The normalizing of the effects of power function to suppress resistance to ever-present control over every detail and interaction in society – like that of interactions in social media. Foucault’s (1975/2008) discussion of police as an institution and
form of state apparatus is an essential frame for the connection between the panoptic function of
surveillance and control as a parallel to the argument that #AllLivesMatter (ALM), for example,
emerges to reassert dominance and power over #BlackLivesMatter. As a means of linking
communication between, “the center of political sovereignty” (1975/2008, p. 190) to the masses,
Foucault’s discussion frames how power can be exercised through observing and reporting all
forms of dissent to order – to the “policing” of revolutions to asymmetrical power on- and off-
line.

The emergence of competing idea-memes about racial tensions in social media exemplify
the ways power becomes, “omnipresent and omniscient […] [and] subdivides itself in regular,
uninterrupted ways” (Foucault, 1975/2005, p. 180) in daily life. The disciplined society, Foucault
reveals, is vulnerable to the, “penetration of regulation into even the smallest details of everyday
life through the mediation of the complete hierarchy that assured the capillary functioning of
power” (Foucault, 1975/2008, p. 180) which can function even without the explicit presence of a
hierarchical figure/tower watching over. In this respect, certain rival memes are charged with the
task of, “controlling their relations, of separating out their dangerous mixtures” (Foucault,
1975/2008, p. 180) and determining who should be treated as a contagion threatening the pure
functioning of a disciplined society. However, the dominance asserted by adolescents’
circulation of liberation coded-memes demonstrates their use of internet memes as a tool for
resistance, speaking directly against the presence of capillary power in social media.

I will now address my use of seemingly conflicting theorists Freire (1970/2005) and
Foucault (1975/2008) and their treatment of power relations. Foucault (1975/2008) explores the
ways in which we are participants in the circulation of power, in that we sustain and reproduce
hegemonic ideas or ascribed “truths”. However, he also advocates for the questioning of truths
and naturalized discourses in a similar way that Freire (1970/2005) extends to the critical analysis of realities. Freire (1970/2005) actively discourages the passive reception of false realities and deposited knowledge; Foucault (1975/2008) similarly deconstructs the production of knowledge and authority in his work. Both theorists agree to the existence of asymmetrical power relations in society—Freire’s (1970/2005) treatment of the oppressor/ oppressed binary alludes to the participation in social position when thought and action are not met with critical reflection and action. The process of conscientization is what “frees” us from the oppressor consciousness (Freire, 1970/2005). Awareness of our social position is one step—the critical action towards one’s own liberation is entirely the other. Freire (1970/2005) and Foucault (1975/2008) converge on the point of education and action. I operate on the unity of these theorist’s discussion that education and action must unite to order for critical awareness to translate into action to correct injustice. Be that from the oppressors who must confront their own acts of domination or the oppressed who cannot imagine a reality outside of the one that was created for them – those who have been transformed into objects and believe themselves to be fixed and powerless. Education is the process that helps interrogate our role in asymmetrical power relations and critical reflection outlines what we must do with this knowledge.

This chapter on defining terms explains how I perceive empathy in social media as the training of the intuitive sense of how our actions or events impact another human being: how they are feeling and thinking through corresponding bodily (re)action. For Dawkins (1976/2006), the training away from the selfish gene brings us closer to a cooperative and unselfish society, while for Freire (1970/2005), radical love brings about the solidarity needed for liberation. As students replicate social-justice oriented memes over racist sentiment, for example, the choice exemplifies their capacity for empathy and desire to fully engage with their political agency. It is
the connection between selflessness and the desire to understand the plight of another that can compel them into action to correct injustices in society. From overturning the gene, and seeking out a better understanding of others that are targets of hierarchal division, “we have the power to defy the selfish genes of our birth and, if necessary, the selfish memes of our indoctrination” (Dawkins, 1976/2006, p. 200). As I perceive it, adolescents are actively overturning the compulsions for the selfish gene through their advocacy of critical consciousness raising in their tool of internet memes. Internet memes replicate and circulate themes of liberation and radical love to compete with the counter-narrative by creating and circulating memes to speak back to power. Internet memes personify the competition of idea-memes in the #BlackLivesMatter movement and #AllLivesMatter counter-movement, as social media users employ a multisensory approach to verbalize how #AllLivesMatter distorts their call and reasserts existing structures of power. As Foucault (1975/2008) reveals, the constant surveillance and attempts to reassert control threatens to silence the call for revolution of asymmetrical relations. As social media users “record and watch” each others movements on online, the rival memes attempt to shut down the organization of revolutions.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

This chapter explores the two primary methodologies employed in this study: digital ethnography and sensory ethnography. I begin with an explanation of each research approach and the key contribution each method possesses. I then explain the process of combining the methodologies for the purposes of my research to best articulate the observations I made while studying adolescents online. The section then moves into a discussion of internet memes and their applicability to the Ontario English Curriculum for Secondary students.
Digital-Sensory-Ethnography

Investigating the use of social media for student activism, I employ a combination of digital ethnography and sensory ethnography in order to position myself in a space to both observe and be immersed in internet culture. Components of both approaches to ethnography—digital and sensory—allow for various planes of experience to be accounted for in analysis, extracting the physical, emotional, and spiritual nature of social media activism. The central focus of my work is the relationship between the image-text in the internet meme; extracting the sensory language will provide the codes from which I argue affect is both being engaged and used to engage others in the digital space. Underberg and Zorn (2013), in their description of digital ethnography, explain that, “ethnographic storytelling involves creating closure on the story while simultaneously recognizing it as a part of an ongoing process” (p. 21), which demonstrates the ways in which social media’s minute-by-minute unfolding of stories and rapid exchange of narratives is always dynamic and emerging. Using this idea that memes and multimodal texts are telling a story and “creating closure” is evident in the structure of my samples, as a theme can be quickly extracted (i.e., the advocacy to support a protest group) while attesting to the action still needed to work towards policy change. Through tracing these likes, shares, and posts in digital culture, I can analyze how adolescent participation and interactions with political matters online compel them to speak out against injustices by urging them to keep moving forward in the process of protest.

To fully mobilize the youth into further action offline, the focus on sensory language and images in memes allows me to argue the mind-body, reason-passions, is engaged in social media activism. Sarah Pink (2009) describes sensory ethnography as, “a methodology based in and a commitment to understanding the senses provides a route to forms of knowledge and knowing
not accounted for in conventional forms of ethnography” (p. 45). From the position of an observer immersed in the culture of the study, the researcher includes analysis of the senses. Pink argues that because sensory ethnography, “situate[s] the emplaced ethnographer in relation to the sociality and materiality of the situations […] through active participation in practice” (p. 42), the attention to the senses in digital culture is essential to my argument that memes invoke responses to compel protest action. As a researcher, I will seek to understand this relationship with adolescents and memes by occupying, “similar, parallel or related places to those people whose experiences, memories and imaginations” (Pink, 2009, p. 42) fuel the movement of internet memes in social media activism. This involves what Pink argues is, “a personal engagement and embodied knowing” (Pink, 2009, p. 42) to articulate paralleled senses within digital-sensory research. By immersing myself in social media, I observe and feel the affective intensities permeating the minute-by-minute unfolding of events while tracing the function of affectively-charged multimodal texts.

I will be using the senses – invoked by images in memes, call-and-response in video posts of protest chants, etc. – to discern how the body registers anticipation or outrage, for example, as affective responses and precursors for transformative action. As I argue, the memes are created and disseminated with the intention to invoke affective responses in onlookers, and being cognizant of my own, “intentionality and subjectivity” (Pink, 2009, p. 43) will allow me to engage with ways in which appeals to reason and passion garner support and solidarity for protest action. The senses, as a central focus in this ethnographic approach, consider, “both our power to affect the world around us and our power to be affected by it” (Hardt, 2007, p. x), as I will demonstrate how adolescents are mobilizing the senses to overturn selfish compulsions.
Sensory ethnography relies on embodied and emplaced knowing, and is critiqued for sensory subjective bias. However, Pink (2009) contends that, “rather than essentializing the individual as having just one subjectivity, we should recognize that people may shift between different subject positions, depending on the contexts in which they find themselves” (p. 53). My position in a digital-sensory-ethnographer role operates through an observer/participant space. Pink (2009) advocates for the perception of a sensory intersubjectivity in that, “our social interactions are certainly not based solely on verbal communication and visual impressions. Rather, they are fully embodied and multisensory events—even if actual physical contact does not take place” (p. 53-54). While I am experiencing the affective intensities of observing political meme exchange, my focus will be on how adolescents use and/or articulate a capacity to become empathetic in their demonstrations of Freirean radical love – that is, the replication and circulation of the language-images expressing the collective valuing of radical love to advocate for policy change.

To situate myself within the digital-sensory approach, I began with a broad-based Google search with the key words and phrases such as “#BlackLivesMatter” and “#TakeAKnee” memes, to sift through the internet’s repertoire. I was then brought to external proxy sites that collected and organized the memes in trending topics or catch phrases to orient the users to other memes with similar content. The proxy would then connect through a hyperlink to the original main site where the meme was taken from before being reproduced on the proxy site. I then isolated my focus to sites that had a higher frequency of adolescent participation, as the focus of my study is the relationship between affect and adolescent social media activism. To verify what sites are the most popular for youth users, I referred to the PEW (2018) research which reported that Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter where the most frequently visited sites for adolescents. Using
a publicly accessible route to each major site ensures that I am only using material that was
voluntarily chosen by the user to be seen by the public. The use of Instagram and Twitter adheres
to fair use polices, in which the users have selected to forego the option of the private profiles or
settings that limit the audience to their personally selected followers. My treatment of the memes
and public comments are used to trace the memes, hashtags, and images as internet signs and
signifiers. Engaging with the multimodal texts allows me to work closely with the affective
language and responses, in compliance with the pre-existing social media agreements that
releases information to the public audience with their consent. The content is traceable and in the
public domain. No personal information will be used aside from usernames, age, and
engagement with political discourses – all discoverable through the public hyperlinks and
hashtags in my research.

I then decided to interrogate the use of internet memes in the context of Ontario
curricular expectations. Reflecting back on my experience with teaching Shakespeare and the
way the students made sense of the text after making personal connections – like that which they
had been experiencing in their social media use all along – I realized the broader out-of-school
use of internet memes. The visceral and immediate connections with the meme-texts have the
potential for political activism in a way that also achieves curriculum goals.

Curricular Alignment and the Internet Memes

The Ontario Ministry of Education (2007) establishes guidelines for the formal
instruction of literacy in the English curriculum documents. The ‘in-school’ literacy stressed in
schooling supports the overarching purpose of creating literate citizens for future participation in
democracy. Sifting through the curriculum documents, I narrowed my focus to the Grade 11
University preparation course to analyze how the adolescent learner emerging into voting age
may be asked to demonstrate more explicit social critique. The curriculum mandates that students attain skills that enable them to read and write proficiently and with, “increasing complexity” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 47) as they progress in grade levels. In other words, students are asked to demonstrate their ability for close reading strategies and their ability to decipher the sophisticated uses of language and discourse. The emphasis on perspective-taking (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007) is a general and noteworthy goal throughout the documents in that they foreground the notion of an interconnected and cooperative society, one that upholds the imperative that individuals be able to speak to and comprehend each other. For example, the Reading and Literature section of the curriculum documents, in the “Extending Understanding of Texts” component, explains that students should demonstrate the ability to:

- Extend understanding of texts, including increasingly complex or difficult texts, by making appropriate and increasingly rich connections between the ideas in them and personal knowledge, experience, and insights; other texts; and the world around them (e.g., compare the thinking and responses of a fictional character in a crisis with their own probable reactions in similar circumstances; explain how their understanding of literary theory helped them interpret a theme in a work of fiction; compare the perspective on a current social issue expressed in an editorial with the perspectives expressed in at least two other texts on the same issue; explain how the portrayal of a particular human experience in a novel compares with the depiction of a similar experience in a popular film). (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 47)

Essentially, the curriculum mandate is that students be able to make connections between the texts they study and real-world situations. These connections carve the space for empathetic

The study of internet memes aligns with components of the curriculum documents by providing space for the analysis of current social issues that the memes portray and by which they are actively shaped. Memes offer a multimodal text with competing perspectives that require the consideration of audience, complexity, and narrative perspective. Familiarity, however, is the key feature. Created by young people, memes speak to young people with the purpose of forging alliances. Memes provide an opportunity to develop formal skills necessary to engage in political commentary while making, “rich connections between the ideas in them and personal knowledge, experience, and insights; other texts; and the world around them” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 47) with the added benefit of enacting their political agency in the replication and circulation of discourses.

The teacher prompts in the curriculum documents are intended to facilitate the reading of plays in the classroom; however, they are also applicable to the analysis of memes as they push discussion into action. The questions in the prompts include: “how did your research into the social and political realities of the period affect your understanding of the play?” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 47). If applied to memes, the mention of social-political realities provides the opportunity for conscientization (Freire, 1970) in that research into these “realities” begins the inquiry into asymmetrical power relations that have otherwise been normalized and passively received. Students are then presented with a current political debate, in real-time, and could do the work of forming their own knowledge and root their opinions in their research into the issue rather than have a teacher prescribe a particular belief to them. The use of memes meets
the requirement of extending the understanding of texts for deeper meaning, while also creating
the dialogic classroom environment Freire (1970) proposes as being key to reinventing the
oppressed/oppressor power dynamic. I propose memes as a text for affect-literacy analysis. As
Leander and Boldt (2012) contend, a shift in perception of multimodal texts produced from ‘out-
of-school’ literacies can be more inviting to adolescents to demonstrate their competency.

Drawing upon the New London Group (1996) definition, they contend that, “moving the
field from ‘literacy’ to ‘literacies,’” validates the, “multiple ways of communicating and making
meaning, including such modes as visual, audio, spatial, behavioral, and gestural” (p. 23). As
memes embody many of these modes in social media, the use, creation, and dissemination of
these texts function to display their complexity of thought as well as political interest. These
texts playfully articulate the understanding of classical methods in formal schooling and
adolescents’ ability to affect and be affected by their connections to the world, to the text, and so
forth. For example, Figure 4 below demonstrates an acute understanding of the meaning of
hyperbole. In the wake of the Parkland shooting, students organized a march and used protest
signs to show support for the #StudentStandUp political aims of addressing gun control. The
student in this meme demonstrates how literacy skills typically associated with formal schooling
– understanding the meaning of hyperbole – is used in the protest event #MarchForOurLives.
The ironic comment is intended as a rebuke to bureaucrats in charge of mandating the literacy
curriculum, including the understanding of literary terms. The meme indicates the student’s
sophisticated understanding of a figure of speech as he takes on the teaching position
Figure 4. Student’s Clever use of Hyperbole. Meme created of a student protesting at #MarchForOurLives with a sign playfully explaining the literary device of Hyperbole. Retrieved from Instagram on March 24, 2018 from https://www.instagram.com/p/BguF-gxnZza/.
instructing the instructor, while simultaneously contributing, in real-time, to the mobilization of the political address to an injustice. The distinction between ‘out-of-school’ literacies and those of formal ‘in-school’ literacies become blurred in examples such as the hyperbole meme in Figure 4. As Giroux (2004) cautions, the dismissal of social media as a mere form of entertainment undercuts the potential potency and influence memes have in political culture, and undervalues the competency of adolescents that employ these modes of expression and creation. Leander and Bolt (2012) contend that the use of multimodal texts and these out-of-school literacies enable students to recognize themselves, “as global citizens of an increasingly connected yet diverse world” and is, “important for legitimating new literacy practices in pedagogy and research, particularly with the rise of digital technologies that provided rapidly expanding ways for youth to produce multimodal texts” (p. 23). Although the English Curriculum considers various mediums and forms of expression in the “Media Literacy” sections, it does not directly refer to the use of internet memes as a viable text, which I argue is a forum for which affective-criticism can be applied.

The perception of the internet meme as a text provides the opportunity to analyze the formal literary elements that structure the meme. As multimodal texts, memes allow for sensory connections to be fostered through language-image interplay. The relationship between the image and text in a meme employ the senses to bridge unfamiliar experiences with the recognizable features through sensation and emotion. The attempt to invoke an emotional response through the language-image interplay is used to garner a collective response to correct social injustices. In treating memes as texts, it is possible for teachers to address the instructional goals of the literacy curriculum, as students are required to:
analyse texts in terms of the information, ideas, issues, or themes they explore, examining how various aspects of the texts contribute to the presentation or development of these elements (e.g., explain how the theme of a poem is reinforced through repetition, diction, and choice of images [...]). (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 47)

Examining how or why particular perspectives in memes are pitted against another perspective provides a useful opportunity to assess how repetition and patterns are used to work upon their audience. The structural composition of memes reveals the collective meaning-making process in social media that uses a series of recognizable literary elements to circulate an effective politicized meme.

The curriculum suggests that teachers prompt students into textual analysis that directly focuses on sensory language. The prompts include: “How do the metaphors in this poem help the reader understand the ideas and emotions the poem describes?” and, “Why do you think this story is told from the point of view of a young person?” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 47). These areas are applicable to memes, and the use of ideas and emotions are used to strengthen the protest movement against an injustice. In a study of memes, students are encouraged to decipher the relationship with politicized language that employs ‘us/them’ binaries. Adolescents engaging with the collective process of meaning-making in internet memes are actively involved in the reproducing, disseminating, and creation of adaptations of memes promoting themes of love and solidarity. Adolescents are essentially attempting to overturn the compulsions of the selfish gene and the enactment of their power to determine which meme becomes dominant and leaps from the “meme-pool” (Dawkins, 1976/2006, p. 192) of cyberspace. For my purposes, these memes act as competing and living embodiments of discourses which have the capacity to invoke sensory and emotional reactions as students discern
which narratives become dominant cultural artifacts of their time. They select which narratives will capture and disseminate the story of their generation’s impact on human history.

CHAPTER FOUR: INTERLUDE

Initially, I began my thesis with the intent to focus solely on the social media activism of the #BlackLivesMatter movement to demonstrate the ways memes worked to portray radical love in action, and to show how literary analysis functions in memes. Tragically, the Parkland school shooting in February 2018 provided a clearer model with which I could work in real-time, as the adolescent response and use of social media became a dominant tool for targeting specific policies that could incite change. As a result, the #BlackLivesMatter examples work as a paradigm that I will connect to the real-time analysis of the #StudentStandUp and the support garnered by and through social media activism in the form of meme exchange. This, in turn, will trace the increased use and success of social media memes for activism from #BlackLivesMatter origins in 2014 to the initial phases of the #StudentStandUp in 2018.

The #BlackLivesMatter Movement

The #BlackLivesMatter movement was born in response to the deaths of Tamir Rice, Trayvon Martin, and Michael Brown between 2012 and 2014. Two of those young, unarmed, black men were shot and killed by police officers under circumstances that did not require the use of lethal force, while a neighbourhood watch-guard took the other life. The accused killers were later acquitted of the charges against them (between 2012 to 2014), and the community outrage initiated a series of national protests to speak against a justice system that did not protect black lives from harm – and instead, was the very system designed to treat their bodies as criminal, suspicious, and expendable. Social media platforms were instrumental in establishing the grassroots response to speak out against the racial injustices that have systemically plagued
America throughout its history. The call-to-action online reached larger audiences through the speed of information exchange and increased the sense of urgency to hold the justice system accountable for the deadly consequences of racial profiling.

The overlapping timeline of these three deaths resulted in the emergence of the multi-state protest movement to garner national awareness and support in exposing the legal system’s inadequacy to protect and defend black lives. Initially, the perpetrator in was not prosecuted in Trayvon Martin’s death in 2012, as the volunteer neighbourhood watch-guard that shot him claimed that Trayvon Martin had posed an imminent threat to his life (Lowery, 2017). The ongoing trial was awaiting a final verdict by the time police officers fatally shot Michael Brown and Tamir Rice in 2014. Officers murdered unarmed 18-year-old Michael Brown despite reportedly having both hands in the air in compliance and shouting, “Don’t shoot!” as he surrendered to them (Lowery, 2017). This phrase and his alleged last words signalled a frightening trend for young black men in America: lethal measures were still being used despite complying to police orders. Images of his lifeless body left out on the street circulated in the media coverage as officers conducted their investigations. His body left out in the heat, on display, intensified the anger and fear that this was the reality for all black lives in America. Police officers also shot Tamir Rice, who was 12 years old at the time of his death; the responding officers shot him after the young boy had a toy-gun tucked into the back of his pants and was throwing snowballs in the park.

A spectator recorded the incident, which later went viral on the internet; the video generated anger and spread across various social media outlets, and was still weighing on the consciousness of audiences by the time officers fatally shot Michael Brown in Ferguson. By this time, outlets had announced news of Trayvon’s trial verdict, and the courts acquitted his killer
from his charges. On January 17, 2017, Wesley Lowery’s article in *The Guardian* (2017) coined the reception of the verdict alongside these deaths to be the pivotal moment in which:

> peaceful black America was awakened by the Zimmerman verdict, which reminded them anew that their lives and their bodies could be abused and destroyed without consequence. Trayvon’s death epitomised the truth that the system black Americans had been told to trust was never structured to deliver justice to them. (2017, para. 38)

Disillusioned by an inequitable justice system, citizens took to social media seeking a platform to voice their concerns. The hashtag, extracted from co-founder Alicia Garza on her Facebook poem, consoled citizens and rallied for a resistance to the power and oppressive culture of racial profiling. Alicia Garza’s post concluded with the message, “Black people. I love you. I love us. Our lives matter” (Lowery, 2017, para. 40) – to which Patrisse Cullors created a found poem from the lines, “BlackLivesMatter.” A Twitter handle translated this phrase, which activist Opal Tometi then converted into a larger organized social networking group, with the intent to gather allies for activism offline.

**Competing for Mass Solidarity Online**

The creation of the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag increased the speed and reach of social media activism, as it acquired an initial 27 million hyperlinked posts and statuses across digital platforms, and organized thousands of allies together to march in protest offline (Lowery, 2017). The ability for the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag to leap offline into protest marches in response to Zimmerman’s acquittal is analogous to Dawkins’ idea-memes becoming, “a living structure” (1976/2006, p.192), as it generates an affective force to move people, leaping from brain to brain and rallying supporters across state lines to join the protest. Shortly after, #BlackLivesMatter successfully attracted the international formation of the protesting faction in Toronto, Canada –
BlackLivesMatterT.O – and this mimetic effect exemplifies the viability of this cultural meme to quickly replicate, circulate, and compete for attention. As ideas in social media demonstrate their ability to survive and replicate with such speed and efficacy, the competition to control which idea becomes dominant arises. Twitter and Instagram, for example, connect all use of the hashtag across their social networks and link with any other social movements that apply the hashtags.

The ‘hyperlinking’ can be perceived as a forging of electronic alliances and as an extension of solidarity with the #BlackLivesMatter movement. Adolescents use the hashtags and memes to advocate for dialogue, solidarity, and continued action to preserve the humanity of all beings – a praxis that embodies the components of radical love – in the harmony of critical reflection and action (Freire, 1970/2005). Each post or meme attached to the protest movement furthers the cyber community’s critique of racism and systemic oppression in society. However, #AllLivesMatter emerges to compete with and respond to the veracity of #BlackLivesMatter as a hashtag and idea-meme. The following pair of memes in Figures 5 and 6 are an example of the competition for alliances that exist online through competing-ideas in memes. One advocates for solidarity, while the other uses ‘facts’ to discredit the need to protest for change. Together, the memes offer an example of the competition between #BlackLivesMatter and #AllLivesMatter, as they vie for dominance in cyberspace and employ hashtags to move, replicate, and circulate their desire for survival through alliance formation.

These memes set-up the two camps in this politicized debate, in which one group works to clarify the intentions of #BlackLivesMatter as a liberation movement, while the other group works to distort and redefine the validity of the goal. Figure 5 depicts the deconstruction of the #AllLivesMatter (ALM) movement, as young people use memes to draw attention to #AllLivesMatter as a racist manifestation of the oppressor consciousness. Figure 6 is a meme
posted by another teen, in support of ALM. As they are challenged to disprove the circulating ‘facts’ in Figure 6, adolescents use memes to combat and inspire further dialogue into inequities in an attempt to replace it with the idea-meme of radical love. The caption in Figure 5 states, “it’s crazy how saying black lives matter causes people to get upset, almost as if...black lives don’t matter to them, which is the exact reasoning for black lives matter.” The caption forefronts the idea that “black lives do not matter” to those that are angered by the #BlackLivesMatter movement as a whole. Amidst the negative and divisive responses by some adult users that attempt to derail the call for solidarity, an exchange under the meme occurs between two teenagers who comment on the polarization. Instagram user johnny_panic3402 comments:

you realize you are holding millions responsible for what a small handful of people in power do. It all starts with loving your neighbour. Having a real conversation with people you don’t agree with. Humanity trying to see one another eye to eye. That’s how these racist [profanity removed] in power get voted out. As long as the hearts and minds of masses stay unchanged we will keep repeating the same mistakes as a society.

(johnny_panic3402, 2018)

The extended commentary reveals this user’s capacity for the Freirean-like call to transform inequities, which Freire contends, “is not possible if it is not infused with love” (1970/2005, p. 89). Echoing the Freirean (1970/2005) call for solidarity and cooperative action for all of humanity, he places emphasis on the democratic process to vote out racist leaders – directly speaking against the divisive nature that sustains power relations. User johnny_panic3402 argues that unity and recognition of the humanity in others is essential to actualizing change in society, as he emphasizes the need to “see eye to eye” or work together for a better understanding of societal needs.
Figure 5. Reactions to BlackLivesMatter. Circulated and liked by teens trying to understand the angry towards the philosophy of #BlackLivesMatter. Retrieved from Instagram on March 29, 2018 from https://www.instagram.com/p/Bg68Fwjh91l/.

Figure 6. Teen posts a Meme of Racialized Crime Statics. Teenage girl posted to her account with a username that supports Trumps campaign. Posted to Instagram in July of 2018; retrieved from https://www.instagram.com/p/BlzWAdJFnDI/?utm_source=ig_share_sheet&igshid=1s1wub4icyrzc.
His acknowledgment of neighbours’ responsibilities to one another in this process of empathetic listening brings transformation to the level of the masses, starting with a cooperative community working toward equity. While positioning himself as an ally, he simultaneously calls to others on social media to change their “hearts and minds,” rather than allow the wrong message – or, “society’s mistakes,” as Johnny terms it – to endure into the next generation.

The Freirean call for dialogue is evident in his expression that conversation with those you disagree with forges the path for the empathy and solidarity needed to combat racism. Freire states that, “dialogue cannot exist, however, in the absence of a profound love for the world and for people […] Love is at the same time the foundation of dialogue and dialogue itself” (1790/2005, p. 89). The advocacy for the use of the “heart and mind” of the masses attests to the critical awareness needed to affect the oppressor/oppressed consciousness. Aimed at the deconstruction of the oppressor/oppressed binary, this adolescent embodies the goal of radical love: mobilizing the awareness of dehumanizing oppression in his language of not replicating “mistakes” of generations prior. This prompts the response from teen user Jesuus323, “yes! Preach it please! [emoji removed] we need more people doing these things in order to achieve our goals as a nation” (Jesuus323, 2018). The extended conversation between the adolescents is rooted in their goals for transformation and solidarity needed to support praxis; these youth demonstrate the willingness to engage in the process of conscientization as well as the desire to correct injustice. We can say that both Freire (1970/2005) and johnny_panic3402 pinpoint the same key thought: it is only through dialogue and love for all of humanity that change can be possible. However, Freire (1970/2005) contends that when, “confronted by this ‘universe of themes’: in dialectical contradiction, persons take equally contradictory positions: some work to maintain the structures, others to change them” (p. 102). In this regard, when applied to the
circulation of #AllLivesMatter memes, Freire’s thought can be seen in ALM’s attempt to suppress the dialogue needed for radical love and solidarity online as they strive to preserve relations of asymmetry and privilege. Doing the work of, “maintaining these structures” of oppression, ALM competes for attention in social media.

Figure 6 outlines a list of statistics that mimic the rhetoric of #BlackLivesMatter to appropriate its popularity and compete for alliances. #AllLivesMatter replicates the hashtag style and structure, as the use of meme-texts allows #AllLivesMatter access to the same forum to compete with the original text of #BlackLivesMatter. By making itself recognizable online, #AllLivesMatter repeats the style only to adapt it and replace the dominance of its predecessor, which was successfully replicating in social media. However, the ironic use of “all” lives in the slogan is used to directly delegitimize the claim that black lives are being targeted by police officers unjustly. Figure 6 stands as an example to demonstrate the thriving potency of #AllLivesMatter as an idea-meme, as it attaches itself to the frame of the #BlackLivesMatter memes-texts to distort its call-to-action with the invocation of ‘facts.’ In a Dawkins-like notion of genetic selfish replication (1976/2006), #AllLivesMatter uses the ‘facts’ of racialized statistics to adapt and replace the argument of police brutality with the idea-meme of black-on-black crime – which the meme explains accounts for 97% of the murders in the black community. ALM’s replication of the meme-texts and hashtag structure of its language-image pattern carries out the competition between the #BlackLivesMatter and #AllLivesMatter idea-memes to distort the message and work upon the audience. Analogous to Dawkins notion of the idea-meme and its capacity to “leap from brain-to-brain” (1976/2006), #AllLivesMatter can be perceived as an emergent gene/meme that replicates with the intent to evolve and replace the popularity of the
solidarity-meme’–#BlackLivesMatter–to prevent it from continuing its successful regeneration to the masses.

Another aspect driving the popularity of the #AllLivesMatter idea-meme is the association with legitimate authority figures. On one hand, the #AllLivesMatter hashtag and idea-meme dismisses the need to protest and delegitimizes the call-to-action to protect black bodies from undue lethal force. On the other, #AllLivesMatter acknowledges the police violence in the black community, but attempts to justify it by criminalizing black bodies. Social media users and media outlets immediately disproved the use of these crime statistics after they revealed that several of the facts were doctored to inflate the crime relationships with and between racial categories. When I interrogated Figure 6 in order to trace the origins of the meme, I was able to see that the creators of the meme used and circulated false data to sway the opinions of others online. The current President of the United States, Donald Trump, tweeted out the meme in November of 2015. The circulation power of these falsified ‘facts’ can be attributed to the social power of the Presidential figure, who tweeted this image to his 53.6 million followers on Twitter. As a way to deter support from #BlackLivesMatter, the ‘facts’ used to create the meme were revealed by media outlets to be from an unverifiable source, with inflated percentages between categories (The Washington Post, 2015). Another user’s account subsequently used the tweet in November of 2016 in a retweet in support of #BlackLivesMatter to call attention to the perception of #AllLivesMatter as a racist backlash and what I perceive to be an extension of ALM’s preservation of white privilege.
Figure 6b. Doctored Crime Statistics. A meme generated from the tweet Trump posted on November 22, 2015. Retrieved from Twitter on November 4, 2016 from https://twitter.com/tariqnasheed/status/794700310140755968.
Social platforms discredited each of the crime categories within hours of the President’s Twitter post in 2015. The retweet sets up the ways in which memes speak to one another on social media by mimicking their text-image structure and distorting the idea of the original. The retweet emerged a year after the original to remind the masses that #AllLivesMatter consistently tried to invalidate #BlackLivesMatter, and that American’s hierarchical figurehead even supported it. As I interrogated the statistics, I began to see that the cause for the endurance of falsified data links to the allegiance to authority and racist ideology. While all the numbers cited in the meme and tweet posted in 2015 were incorrect, the categories that struck me the most – because of my interest in empathy and radical love – was the relationship with interracial crime. Trump’s tweeted data was comprised of inflated the statistics of black-on-black crime and deflated the statistics on white criminal activity, which The Washington Post critiques was information cited from an unverifiable source, “The Crime Statistics Bureau of San Francisco” (Bump, 2015). At the time the meme was tweeted out, San Francisco had not yet released the data for 2015 (Greenberg, 2015).

According to the crime statistics of 2014 on the official Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) website, the U.S. Justice Department reveals that other white people killed 2,448 of the 3,021 white people murdered in 2014, compared to the 446 white people killed by black offenders (U.S. Department of Justice, 2014). This suggests that more white people were victims of murders carried out by other white people, rather than the Trump-meme’s assertion that, “whites killed by whites – 16%” and “whites killed by blacks – 81%.” While the crime data for black-on-black murder reveals a similar trend in crime within their own community, the doctored interracial stats are coded for xenophobia – supporting the idea that white people should fear black people who are both violent to each other and white people, as well.
The attempt to form a body of knowledge about black lives is evident in reducing them to just bodies or objects of statistics, thereby functioning like an unalterable reality or a fixed narrative pattern about black bodies. Figure 6, posted by teen user _keeping_america_great_2020_ in 2018, attests to the endurance of idea-memes after acquiring dominance, as they resurface despite being disproved, as a result of #AllLivesMatter and Trump’s association with an already familiar trope of the dangerous black body. As both groups continue to compete for alliances, each meme in Figure 6b teaches us how to read the other. The President’s association with the falsified statistics justifying police brutality toward the black community is replicated and circulated by #AllLivesMatter supporters (as seen in _keeping_america_great_2020_ (2018), for example). President Trump tweeted out this list of ‘facts’ as a way of delegitimizing the central concern of the #BlackLivesMatter movement a year after the movement began to increase in popularity as a viable idea-meme. As a way to undercut the replication and circulation of liberation ideas in social media, the center or the figurehead of power in America equips his #AllLivesMatter followers with the tools to discredit the uprising of the #BlackLivesMatter movement, on the fringes of power. The alliance between #AllLivesMatter and Trump supporters fortifies and galvanizes more followers and becomes an influential rival meme to usurp the attention and success of the #BlackLivesMatter meme and call-to-action.

**Working Through Asymmetrical Power**

Responding to the competition between the idea-memes of #BlackLivesMatter and #AllLivesMatter not only exemplifies the critical awareness of social media users, but also suggests an overall literary competency that is needed to produce viable memes to survive and thrive in the space. Adolescents have demonstrated an acute understanding of literary devices
and rhetorical elements to make their memes both intelligible and persuasive to their audience. The response by adolescent supporters of #BlackLivesMatter, as seen in Figure 7 below, demonstrates the clever and articulate ways social media users overcame the appropriation and distortion to their cause. To control which narrative successfully competes, the memes attach, adapt, and replicate their own content, by orienting how we should read the oppositions’ memes and political agenda.

For example, upon closer inspection of the above meme in Figure 7, the use of formal literary skills outlined in the English curriculum, such as metaphor and satire, communicate the deconstruction of #AllLivesMatter by adolescents on Instagram. This meme explains the reception of the #AllLivesMatter hashtag through the image-text relationship of a person actively avoiding the house on fire, by investing energy and resources into the house that is perfectly safe. What becomes clear in the two metaphoric houses in the meme is how one group advocates for transformation and equity, while the other emerges to re-establish the status quo and the preservation of white privilege. The example demonstrates how adolescents respond to the polarization by circulating parodies of the #AllLivesMatter movement to show, quite effectively, how the reactionary formation of the group belittles the attention to the issue of police brutality and racial profiling. Adolescents employ visual and textual methods to articulate with clarity their rejection of the #AllLivesMatter meme that distorts that focus.

The creation of the parody cleverly mitigates the #AllLivesMatter attempt to distort their message, while exemplifying the abilities of adolescents to use curriculum mandates effectively and accurately – as they voluntarily use their tool to speak back to power relations that threaten social media activism.
Figure 7. Parody of #AllLivesMatter. Retrieved from Instagram on July 23, 2017 from https://www.instagram.com/p/BW4j1HVITLZ/
The image of the man in the meme seems unfazed by the house consumed in flames – in a position to help, the figure merely closes his eyes. This infers a relationship with #AllLivesMatter being guilty of ‘turning a blind eye’ to the political asymmetry between the police and black community rather than coming to the aide of the house next door, altruistically. The parody itself is an effective use of image and symbol to advocate for a re-reading of the emerging narrative of #AllLivesMatter as a political counter to the #BlackLivesMatter movement. The perception of #AllLivesMatter as an extension of white privilege demonstrates how the competition between memes exposes the ways #AllLivesMatter functions as a racist backlash to #BlackLivesMatter, created to needlessly insulate itself – dousing the house that is not on fire – rather than promoting solidarity to address the treatment of black bodies in America. This perception positions adolescents on social media as agents of change that have to negotiate the competition and distortion of their cause by speaking to power structures that aim to discredit the legitimacy of the oppressed altogether. The responses of the #BlackLivesMatter memes demonstrates their resilience and courage to love despite the insidious power of #AllLivesMatter by evolving and adapting the memes to continue to successfully compete for attention in the Dawkins-like rivalry of ideas in the meme-pool.

As adolescents respond to adaptations and distortions in memes, they create a dialogue through an exchange of internet memes to make these asymmetrical power relations between #BlackLivesMatter and #AllLivesMatter more visible. Memes are an entry-point into critiquing larger systems of inequity as adolescents advocate for solidarity and critical thinking. We can perceive their social-political critique online, then, as the enactment of Freire’s (1970/2005) process of conscientization and a display of their effective use of curricular objectives. While demonstrating the literary competency to construct and decode idea-memes, adolescents
intervene in the process of #AllLivesMatter reinforcing political realities in real-time. As they begin and sustain the dialogue between the oppressed/oppressor online, it transfers and leaps into action offline.

CHAPTER FIVE: ANALYSIS

The following chapter will trace the timeline of the competition between #BlackLivesMatter and #AllLivesMatter in order to analyze how this evolution of meme-texts both satisfies curricular goals and enables political action. Getting stronger and acquiring more solidarity, the replication of patterns in memes evolves in a sequence from its roots in the tragic deaths of Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, and Trayvon Martin – among many others – to the creation of #BlackLivesMatter from the period of 2012 to 2014. Then, the emergence of the #AllLivesMatter competition leads to the sympathetic formation of the #TakeAKnee movement to assert the alliance with #BlackLivesMatter and clarify its intentions during the period of 2014 to 2016. This chapter will demonstrate how #AllLivesMatter responds to and distorts the religious, devotional, respectful gesture of ‘taking a knee,’ which is then adapted by the #AllLivesMatter supporters to mean something disrespectful. The competition will then set the frame to interrogate how the replications of patterns are not identical, but rather evolve and adapt to acquire more political potency than the original – leading into the #StudentStandUp as a latter part of the evolving sequence of protest in 2018. What my analysis will reveal is the that the key use of an evolving pattern in meme-texts allows for messages of solidarity and transformation to endure, all the while demonstrating adolescent literary competence to use these patterns for activism.

Firstly, I draw upon the Grade 11 English Literature curriculum, which outlines that a central aim of literacy is to develop the ability to ask critical questions about perspectives and
discern the power relations embedded in language. Memes used in the political exchange between #BlackLivesMatter and #AllLivesMatter provide a useful forum to assess and address these curricular goals. The mandate of critical literacy includes the expectation that students demonstrate an ability to,

identify and analyse the perspectives and/or biases evident in texts, including increasingly complex or difficult texts, commenting with growing understanding on any questions they may raise about beliefs, values, identity, and power (e.g., explain, on the basis of research, how the historical and/or cultural context of a novel accounts for the social attitudes expressed by its characters; compare the perspectives on current events or social or environmental issues expressed in the editorials or feature articles of different newspapers or magazines). (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 47)

In the commenting and sharing of competing perspectives embedded in memes, adolescents – in exactly the terms outlined in the curriculum – demonstrate their ability to negotiate conflicting points of view. For example, Figure 6 and 6b used in Chapter Four compare a #BlackLivesMatter meme with a competing #AllLivesMatter meme to reveal a high degree of sophistication, as the contents of both memes are circulated and interrogated in online discussions. The competing memes invite participants to unpack the inferred meanings embedded in each perspective. By participating in the online discussion, students engage in the inquiry process into the, “beliefs, values, identity, and power” that shape each idea-meme in cyberspace. The consideration of, “historical and cultural context” if applied to the #BlackLivesMatter and #AllLivesMatter memes, lends itself to an in-class analysis of how the competition between polarized political topics in social media shape the, “social attitudes” that
underpin each perspective. In one camp, messages of equity and solidarity emerge, while on the other, social attitudes of racial division and hierarchy regenerate.

Another example is seen in the following set of memes that demonstrate the skillful use of irony employed by adolescents to critique the competition that arises as #AllLivesMatter forms to maintain an asymmetrical status quo. Figure 8 provides a visual representation of a white hand of power trying to silence the voice of the oppressed black body. A user posted Figure 8 to Twitter in August of 2015, and it re-circulated several times on various user accounts. The meme’s caption states, “black people created #BlackLivesMatter and then white people created #AllLivesMatter” with the pictorial representation of a hand covering the mouth of crying woman. The effective use of image and language interplay in this meme invites a critique into the curricular focus of, “raising questions about beliefs, values, identity and power” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 47) in an impactful, concise, and visceral way. The two bodies set up the binary between race and silence – a representation of a story of injustice not being heard. Figure 8 generates its affect through sight; like the metaphoric houses in Figure 7, the critique relies on the complex relationship with visual cues and inference. The visual component forefronts, in direct cues, that the loss of life for the black community is being minimized by the #AllLivesMatter attempts to displace and discredit the protest group. By 2016, the replication in Figure 9 is adapted on a new account, reaching another set of 296 followers and 340 likes. The image of a bloodied, lifeless hand with the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter being met by a cultural sign of being ‘flipped off’ is written on the hand of the ##AllLivesMatter supporter. The use of red in this meme makes the association between danger to the black body, in contrast to the previous use of red font to invoke fear of danger caused by the black body used in the crime statistics in Figure 6.
Figure 8. A Visual Representation of Silencing BLM. Memes replicated and re-circulated by young people depicting ALM as actively silencing the protest concerns of BLM. Left image posted to Twitter on August 5, 2015; retrieved from https://twitter.com/furiousglorious/status/629011612662374401. Right image reposted on July 8, 2016 on another Twitter account; retrieved from https://twitter.com/trapp_21/status/751520461259837440.

Figure 9. Adaptation of Silencing BLM. Young people continue to like and share image that critique the creation of ALM as a response to BLM concerns. Posted to Twitter on March 11, 2016 (the second image is an expansion of the initial image, accessible from the same post); retrieved from https://twitter.com/projectfem4all/status/708400524907905028.
However, the responses by adolescents exemplify their ability to decode and expose the intentions of #AllLivesMatter in the ironic image in Figure 9, as the #AllLivesMatter hand blatantly disregards an injured black body. The meme received 24 retweets originally, and each time that it was reposted, it was further accessible to the followers of each of those 24 accounts. For example, Peggy, an 18-year-old Twitter user, retweeted this meme on her profile, which was then visible to her 1,263 followers – who will consequently make contact with the critical reading of the #AllLivesMatter movement in this meme. The adaptation demonstrates how the original idea changes shape and becomes more critical of the power relations between the opposing groups.

The following Figures 10 and 11 exemplify how the peaceful route to protesting asymmetrical power evolves, as the memes begin to favour more image-word interplay. This image-word relationship coincides with the evolution of forms of protest offline. As the competition between #BlackLivesMatter and #AllLivesMatter sprouts the growth of the #TakeAKnee protest in solidarity and support of the #BlackLivesMatter movement, it links to the historical gesture of peace and respect. In response to the backlash #BlackLivesMatter received, the sympathetic formation of #TakeAKnee emerges to rival #AllLivesMatter and the attempts to distort the call-to-action. In support of the #BlackLivesMatter movement, American NFL star Collin Kaepernick began to kneel during the playing of the national anthem before each football game in September of 2016. To show his support for the #BlackLivesMatter protest, Kaepernick used a historically familiar gesture to call attention to ongoing racial injustice in America (Witz, 2016). His gesture translated into a hashtag, and users created memes in both support and refute for his act of protest. Kaepernick’s solidarity with #BlackLivesMatter became the object of criticism, as rival memes emerge to distort the gesture from its original meaning.
Figure 10. Rejecting Peaceful Protest. Meme capturing the inconsistently of ALM's rejection of BLM peaceful protest methods. Posted on Instagram on June 23, 2017; retrieved from https://www.instagram.com/p/BVrs5pFl5B6/.

Figure 11. Ironic #ALM Arguments. Meme gaining popularity as the image becomes more direct in its critique against #ALM rejection of #BLM's concerns. Posted on Instagram on October 19, 2017; retrieved from https://www.instagram.com/p/BZlyFwdFwDm/.
For example, in 2017, the above memes circulate as #BlackLivesMatter addresses the social critique the offline protests have acquired from #TakeAKnee. The image captures the calm, mature face of Usher juxtaposed to the screaming, irate woman who needs to be physically restrained from attacking an implied target. Both of these memes demonstrate how the idea in the meme evolves as it responds to the #AllLivesMatter accusation of #BlackLivesMatter being ‘too violent.’ Ironically, the white woman is more violent and aggressive in this adaptation. The rejection of #TakeAKnee by #AllLivesMatter echoes what I perceive as the Freirean critique that,

For the oppressors, […], it is always the oppressed (whom they obviously never call ‘the oppressed’ but—depending on whether they are fellow countrymen or not—‘those people’ […] or ‘savages’ […]]) who are disaffected, who are ‘violent,’ ‘barbaric,’ ‘wicked,’ or ‘ferocious’ when they react to the violence of the oppressors. (1970/2005, p. 55-56)

The idea of blaming the oppressed and re-coding their protest as “barbaric” and “violent” is also demonstrated in the pair of memes and the overarching competition between #BlackLivesMatter and #AllLivesMatter. However, as these memes emerge, I can see the creations and conversations initiated by adolescents reveal their competency to de-code and re-code the mutations to their call-to-action. Figure 11 demonstrates how the meme-text acts as a substitution or adaptation of Figure 10, as the direct reading of the white woman condemning a peaceful form of protest as violent replaces the adult-like figure of Usher. Growing in popularity, Figure 11 acquires 23,847 likes by October of 2017, compared to the initial 1,576 likes on Instagram in June of 2017 in Figure 10.
The circulation power garnered by the stronger adaptation inspires an exchange between two teens in their reading of the white woman screaming at a peaceful form of protest. One teen comments under Figure 11, “that’s not protesting, that’s disgracing the country” (alex.redmond, 2018), prompting this response by another teen: “he’s practicing his right to freedom of expression. I’d find police getting away with murder more of a disgrace to our country but I bet you’d find an excuse for it” (hobbes.09, 2018). As the teens weigh in on the debate over Kaepernick’s act of protest, they model how meme-texts inspire voluntary engagement into critiquing power relations. The intentional use of the word “murder” directly aligns hobbes.09 (2018) with the central argument that the hands of the police take black lives unjustly. His response to the idea of Kaepernick’s gesture of taking a knee as “disgracing the country” signifies the distortion of a historically respectful sign – #AllLivesMatter re-brands the gesture as un-American and disrespectful. The sequences of memes evolve as adolescents like, comment, and share the memes to unpack and dissociate from the mutations of their message.

In this capacity, young people like hobbes.09 (2018) embody the Freirean process of conscientization as the harmony of critical thought and action leads to the engagement with the debate, and he offers a critical analysis of inequity being disgraceful to the country. In his choice to comment and critique the anti-patriotic idea-meme, this teen exemplifies both the competency to decode counter-narratives and irony, while dialoguing with an opposing view. Together, this constitutes the Freirean concept of radical love, as hobbes.09 (2018) does the work of social media activism in support of Kaepernick’s offline, peaceful protest. His critical reflection brings him to speak out against the attempt to distort the meaning of the ‘take a knee’ gesture for solidarity, and his curricular fulfilment is evident in his deconstruction of an ironic and inconsistent argument.
Peaceful Protest Evolves

The ‘take a knee’ movement grows from an alliance with #BlackLivesMatter as it comes to aid in the battle against #AllLivesMatter. The adaptation demonstrates how the ideas evolve akin to biological evolution; an idea put forth in Dawkins’ *The Selfish Gene* (1976/2006). The replication of patterns and ideas in internet memes demonstrate the ways adaptations emerge to challenge the “rival meme” (Dawkins, 1976/2006), to increase its chances of survival over originals. The desire and ability to increase the leaping from the meme-pool of ideas from brain-to-brain, as Dawkins (1976/2006) explains, functions similarly in internet memes, as the replication of genes or memes uses a likeness to the original, but evolves to become stronger and more persuasive than the previous idea-meme it adapts from.

To consider this point further, I paired the following memes together to explore how they begin to circulate to remind the masses of the peaceful roots of the ‘take a knee’ gesture. As #AllLivesMatter supporters create rival memes to sever that connotation of peace with #TakeAKnee, the memes evolve so that it can further compete with the efforts to derail and misinterpret the call-to-action. Threatening the #TakeAKnee idea-meme’s survival, #AllLivesMatter accuses the gesture as being disgraceful and un-American. The supporters of both #BlackLivesMatter and their allies in #TakeAKnee respond by using the powerful images of Dr. Martin Luther King to nourish the connection of the gesture as a religious and devotional act of respect.
Figure 12. Homage to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Image circulated by young people to remind others of the peaceful roots of the take a knee gesture. Posted to Instagram in August of 2018; retrieved from https://www.instagram.com/p/BmALcKWF-7P/?taken-by=love_dogs_hate_trump

Figure 13. Solidarity Between Players. Celebrity football star re-circulates image of peaceful protest with a caption that critiques the misrepresentations of BLM's cause. Posted to from Instagram in August of 2018; retrieved from https://www.instagram.com/p/BmQppLiljH9/?tagged=takeaknee
As a pair, these two memes demonstrate the pattern of an ongoing, historical fight for equity and social justice. The first meme employs the image of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. taking a knee among his supporters in the well-known Civil Rights Protest era in America in 1960s. The image speaks, as this meme contextualizes and attaches itself to the modern civil rights movement through the hashtags. Operating on inference and cyber-connectivity, the hashtags directly address the point – with hyperlinks including “#peacefulprotest,” “#blm,” and “#TakeAKnee” to clarify and respond to the #AllLivesMatter charge of this gesture as disrespectful and rude.

The meme evolves a few days later into Figure 12 posted in August of 2018, with a substituted image of all the players whom have shown solidarity with Kaepernick and have taken a knee on the NFL stadiums across America. The quotation in Figure 12 from player Aaron Rodgers reads, “it was never about the anthem; it was never about the troops; it was always about social equality and racial injustice.” This meme uses the image of NFL players joining Kaepernick in re-focusing the argument on racial injustice. The account holder, another player, uses his account to clarify his position: “The sad part is EVERYONE knows this... ‘certain’ people just CHOOSE to make it about the flag, or the anthem, or the military so they don’t have to deal with the REAL ISSUES OF SOCIAL EQUALITY, RACIAL INJUSTICE, and POLICE BRUTALITY” (realdlhughley, 2018). The meme and depiction of the evolving peaceful route to protest signifies the collection of allies gaining more attention and traction in the meme-pool, as the meme itself leaps from 330 likes on Instagram to the 36,527 likes in the 6-day period separating Figure 11 (posted on August 3) and Figure 12 (on August 9) in 2018. The idea of defending civil rights thus takes form and dominates in social media to support the offline displays of peaceful protest.
These memes demonstrate the ways in which the evolutions directly respond to the accusations of #AllLivesMatter that the #TakeAKnee solidarity gesture is defaming to the flag and country. In Figure 12, the images of various teams and players kneeling in solidarity with Kaepernick extends into their support for #BlackLivesMatter; while most players kneel symbolically alongside Kaepernick, others stand beside their teammates with lowered heads and hands on their teammates’ shoulders. The gesture embodies a Freirean (1970/2005) call-to-action, in which the players, as allies, come to the aid of those whose rights have been denied. The players enact radical love in this capacity, as they gear their peaceful protest toward an issue that affects all of humanity – directly focused on dismantling the oppressed/oppressor binary. Adolescents directly demonstrate the desire to spread memes of coded for solidarity over the meme that distorts #TakeAKnee and reasserts asymmetrical power; their desire to share these memes mobilizes their critical thinking and spreads awareness to others by encouraging them to re-read and re-think the #AllLivesMatter discourse. For example, to engage in the competition, #AllLivesMatter backlash attempted to re-brand the gesture as anti-patriotic before it could be firmly traced back to its peaceful historical roots.

The following figures model this shift in connotation and the creation of the #AllLivesMatter alliance #VeteransAgainstKaepernick. As the idea of players kneeling during the national anthem evolves from being disrespectful, into the idea that Kaepernick’s act is unpatriotic and ungrateful to American soldiers who fought for American rights and freedoms. In the same way that #TakeAKnee sprouts from #BlackLivesMatter to support its intentions, so too does the formation of #VeteransAgainstKaepernick to re-present the argument that the gesture is disrespectful to the troops whom protect and defend the flag. Distorting the meaning of the gesture, the caption in Figure 14 posted on September 3, 2016 highlights the ways the creation of
a new hashtag and focus on the flag and anthem attaches to the idea that war veterans fought in the battle to protect the symbol of America freedom – the flag – directly cued in the hashtag #VeteransDiedProtectingThatFlag. Ironically, the soldiers fought to protect what the flag represents, and not the flag itself: a nation that is free from injustices and upholds the standards of true democracy. This leads to the clarification of #VeteransForKaepernick, for example, which further supports the authenticity of the #TakeAKnee gesture and the right to protest in the land of the free. Upon the consideration of freedom and silencing, the paradox revealed to me the missing dialogue between the oppressed and oppressor that is required for the fulfillment of democracy and true liberation.

As Freire argues, “to glorify democracy and to silence the people is a farce; to discourse on humanism and to negate people is a lie” (1970/2005, p. 91), which I can see is evident in Figure 15 where Trump’s comments stifle dialogue and re-cast it as inappropriate and even punishable. As the figurehead of democracy, the America President delegitimizes the gesture and deems it not worthy of attention. However, the veterans and players who come to Kaepernick’s defense do the work to realign the gesture with principles of democracy that target injustice – not targeting those who speak against injustice. The #TakeAKnee solidarity movement is then able to successfully compete and overtake its rival meme and becomes a viable and enduring idea-meme offline and in social media.
Figure 14. Veterans Against Kaepernick. Posted to Instagram; retrieved from https://www.instagram.com/p/BJ4hOVDAT13/?tagged=thisveteranthinksyousuck

Figure 15. Donald Trump’s Attack on Peaceful Protest. The President uses social media to reject the concerns of BLM and dismisses the merit of Kaepernick’s act of solidarity. Posted to Instagram; retrieved from https://www.instagram.com/p/BmTXKzbHOlp/?taken-by=consciouslee
The President’s comments in Figure 15 circulate on Instagram and Twitter to starve the peaceful roots of #TakeaKnee in social media. Armed with the charged language, “find another way to protest,” the focus on the gesture as un-American gains traction with Trump supporters and the #AllLivesMatter network online. As #AllLivesMatter continues to adapt and distort the protest in veracity and form, the Foucault-like process of isolating the “abnormal” can be seen in the re-branding of the gesture. As CNN reports, the idea became so catching that, “players had to prove their patriotism to legitimize their message” or risk being labelled “unpatriotic, ungrateful, disrespectful of flag, military and country” (Willingham, 2017). This process echoes what Foucault explains in his work as the, “controlling […] relations, of separating out […] dangerous mixtures” (1975/2008, p. 180) that threaten the pure functioning of disciplined society. As a disciplined society needs to control the idea of revolution, I can see that #AllLivesMatter evolves by treating the gesture as a “dangerous mixture” that must be separated from the masses to prevent its infectious spread – something that should be feared, like a plague or sickness that directly effects the stability of racial hierarchy.

Rather than have the critique and growing support of #TakeaKnee further reproduce, Trump and his followers emerge to reinforce asymmetrical power relations. However, as #AllLivesMatter debates and rebrands a peaceful protest’s legitimacy, adolescents continue to pierce through competition and asymmetrical power. Leaping on and offline, adolescents adapt and evolve their forms of protest and respond directly to the power that aims to negate them.
Figure 16. Students Support Kaepernick. Posted to Instagram on April 1, 2018; retrieved from https://www.instagram.com/p/BhDeGCElr0/.
As seen above in Figure 16, students began to show their support for Kaepernick and solidarity with the fight for racial justice in replicating the gesture offline, as well as circulating memes in support of #TakeAKnee. Considering the re-creation and circulation of patterns in the memes as texts, I draw upon Lissa Paul’s “Intimations of Imitations: Mimesis, Fractal Geometry and Children’s Literature.” I am interested by the idea put forth in her work connecting mimesis in children’s poetry and the desire to recreate familiar patterns as a way of making sense of the world. In her discussion of Prendergast’s, The Order of Mimesis (1988), Paul explains that, “mimesis is not exactly about making poems like animals, it is about how the language of poetry makes animals recognizable” (1992, p. 73). Paul’s connection with self-similarity in fractal geometry and mimetic replication reveals that both processes employ, “the capacity to see repeated patterns, and the capacity to recall them at will, and experience pleasure in the recognition of patterns- exactly as children who recognize the pleasure of hearing a story again and again” (Paul, 1992 p. 77). When this idea is applied to Figure 16, it can be seen that repeating the pattern of kneeling in protest forges an affective relationship with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s peaceful route of protest, as it evolves into the modern #TakeAKnee fight for social equity.

Sara Cannizzaro’s discussion on adaptations of internet memes also offers the idea of internet memes being a type of digital, “‘riff on a given visual, textual or auditory form’” which are, “‘then appropriated, re-coded, and slotted back into the internet infrastructures they came from’” (as cited in Cannizzaro, 2016, p. 567). The “riffs” on an original pattern becomes recognizable and familiar in internet memes, but they are then nuanced so that it can survive in a new context/environment. #AllLivesMatter, on the other hand, uses the #BlackLivesMatter patterns in memes/hashtags and rhetoric to substitute a pattern of ‘fight for liberation’ in place of
‘maintain status quo.’ I can see that the mimetic process – the process of replication – depends on the fact that copies are not identical. What makes them ‘live’ is their capacity to change, to compete, to shift the formation of self-similar patterns that – as I perceive in internet memes – function through, “a series of regular substitutions of one pattern for another” (Paul, 1992, p. 75). Each version or adaptation of memes become stronger, more competitive, and viable to be passed on to the next generation. The use of internet memes as a tool to garner support and critique rival memes is an indication of adolescent agency and resilience in the face of oppressive structures that set out to isolate, control, and delegitimize individual acts of protest. The solidarity garnered by social media inspires continued efforts to question, critique, and transform political inequities. Armed with survival instincts, but coded with messages of solidarity, adolescents play an active role in nuancing competitive memes by repeating patterns for empathy and altruism.

**From #BlackLivesMatter to #StudentStandUp**

The peaceful protest sequence takes on a new form fuelled by the tragic events that took place on February 14, 2018. The school shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High in Parkland, Florida demonstrates how adolescents’ protest methods evolve from the sequence of social media activism used in #BlackLivesMatter and #TakeAKnee in 2014 into the formation of the #StudentStandUp protests against gun violence in 2018. Primed by the success of other memes – such as the #BlackLivesMatter memes promoting critical awareness, solidarity, and action, or radical love – the students of Parkland understood that after the tragedy of the shootings at their school, they had the tools at hand to take action on gun control.

In asserting their right to ‘stand up’ against the powerful National Rifle Association (NRA), with its insistence to protect the Constitutional rights of Americans to bear arms, the
survivors of the Parkland shootings recognized that they had a collective voice, one that could reshape the American political landscape. Their grief transformed into a call-to-action to prevent future mass school shootings in America. The organizers of #StudentStandUp vowed that they would work to prevent school shootings from happening again. Like the example of #BlackLivesMatter social media activism, students forged solidarity by creating an online network to organize marches and petition against the gun rights that they argued were responsible for these preventable deaths (Levenson & Sterling, 2018). Just a month after the tragic events unfolded, a group of Parkland survivors mobilized their call for gun law reform, attached and circulated through the hashtags #NeverAgain and #StudentStandUp in March of 2018. The #StudentStandUp movement was created, reproduced, and transmitted, and successfully incited collective action against the National Rifle Association (NRA) unlike any other previous outcry for gun law reform in American history.

The next chapter will demonstrate how adolescents evolved the patterns of peaceful protest and activism to speak against inadequate gun laws in America. I will first begin by discussing the tragic events leading to the protest campaign #NeverAgain and its evolution into #StudentStandUp in 2018. I will then briefly discuss the history of school shootings in America that exponentially increased in recent years. Then, I will connect the increase in school shootings to the Second Amendment, and will discuss how the connotation and discourse of “inalienable rights” affects gun law reform. I will then trace how the sequence of protest evolves – from human rights, to civil rights, to the right to life – and is woven into the evolving understanding of the law and legislation itself. As adolescents take up the fight on gun violence, they both pay homage to and evolve from the roots of the #BlackLivesMatter movement, and transform social media activism methods to ensure its survival.
CHAPTER SIX: THE #STUDENTSTANDUP

After a former student of Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida entered the school with an assault rifle and opened fire on his peers, he killed 14 students and 3 teachers, injuring another 14 students and faculty members (Levenson & Sterling, 2018). Sadly, The Parkland shooting was recorded to be 1 of 23 school shootings in the first 21 weeks of 2018 alone (Ahmed & Walker, 2018). However, these shootings are tragically among a series of other recent mass school shootings like Columbine (1999), Virginia Tech (2007), and Sandy Hook (2012) that shattered the American public’s belief that school was a safe place for young people. The public outrage over the Sandy Hook massacre in particular, “reverberated across the world” (2018), as Jugal Patel argues in The New York Times. Sandy Hook’s staggering loss of 20 first-grade students and 6 faculty members in Newtown, Connecticut (Patel, 2018) that truly sparked the nation’s interest in gun law reform. However, debates over restricting the sale of assault rifles to the public – in the wake of Sandy Hook – did not materialize into policy change. The Gun Violence Archive, which began tracking school shootings in 2012, reveals that since the Sandy Hook massacre, “there have been at least 239 school shootings nationwide. In those episodes, 438 people were shot, 138 of whom were killed” (Patel, 2018). Despite the increasing public outrage about gun violence, political action is confronted by fixed ideas about the American Constitution and the National Rifle Association (NRA).

The Second Amendment and Gun Law Regulation

At the core of the argument to preserve American gun culture is the Second Amendment of the American Constitution (1791). It states that, “A well-regulated militia being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed” (as cited in Howard, 2015). Howard – the historian whom I draw upon for some background –
discusses the consequences of Second Amendment over time, as the Supreme Court, “generally upheld criminal laws regarding firearms, but it did so without attempting to establish a guiding interpretation of the amendment” (Howard, 2015). This, in turn, did not solidify whether or not America can treat the amendment as either an individual or Constitutional right, or something that the state could control. Howard explains that, as a result, there was a hesitancy to mandate uniform regulation of the right to bear arms across The United States of America.

Howard (2015) then attributes two recent landmark cases with attempting to provide some clarification on enforcing the Second Amendment. Chief Justice John Roberts and the Supreme Court’s ruling in the District of Columbia v. Heller (2008) case, “struck down portions of the Firearms Control Regulations Act of 1975, which barred residents of the District of Columbia from owning handguns, automatic firearms, and high-capacity semiautomatic firearms” (Howard, 2015). Reacting to the Firearms Act, a group of D.C. residents argued it was a violation of their Second Amendment rights. Howard explains that the Supreme Court ultimately ruled that the, “Second Amendment applies to federal enclaves such as the District of Columbia and that it protects the right to bear arms for individuals even if they do not belong to a militia” (Howard, 2015). The second ruling by the Supreme Court in the McDonald v. Chicago (2010) case ruled that the Second Amendment, “applies to individual states as well as federal enclaves because it is incorporated by the Fourteenth Amendment’s due process clause” (Howard, 2015). Together, these two rulings support the perception of the right to bear arms as an individual right. In both cases, Heller (2008) and Chicago (2010), the central issue that becomes apparent is the competing understandings of what constitutes ‘weapon regulation’ and ‘individual rights infringement.’
The National Rifle Association (NRA) implanted this space between regulation and Constitutional rights in their corporation’s inextricable link with the preservation of rights through the sale of weapons to all American citizens. The variation between Constitutional rights and policy regulation, for example, highlights the powerful relationship with governance and the mandate of a fixed, unalterable law. Where the connotation of a policy provides the legislative space for the negotiation of laws to account for shifting cultural values over time, gun law reform has to compete with the permanence associated with the concept of Constitutional rights. To silence the victims and survivors’ call for gun law reform, this perception of an unalterable situation is an exercise of control in a disciplined society. Namely, I perceive this dynamic to embody what Foucault explained as, “a type of power, a modality for its exercise, comprising a whole set of instruments, techniques, procedures, levels of application, targets; it is a ‘physics’ or an ‘anatomy’ of power, a technology” (1975/2008, p. 192). The power of institutions such as law, government, and the Constitution create the belief that changing a legal reality is impossible – that the masses have no control over defining and redefining the law as outlined in the Confederacy. However, despite the efforts to criminalize and silence calls for policy-change, adolescents emerged with their tool of social media activism to speak directly to this perception of an unalterable political reality. As they carefully navigate the contentious terrain of social media competition, adolescents use their emotional sensitivity and competency to create a community working toward policy change.

**The Birth of the #StudentStandUp**

Recognizing that the NRA and the Second Amendment was at the center of hindering gun law reform, the Parkland survivors used their collective voices, with a firm belief in the democratic process, to mobilize and enact change. After the Parkland school shooting, a few
Marjory Stoneman Douglas High survivors created the #StudentStandUp against the NRA to confront beliefs about American gun culture and heritage. Spearheaded by Parkland survivor Emma Gonzalez in February of 2018, a group of teens worked together to speak out against the biggest obstacle that had been preventing gun law reform from reaching fruition over the years: the NRA. Just a few days after the shooting, Gonzalez gave a speech at a gun control rally held in Fort Lauderdale that would set into motion a series of protests targeted at policy change. CNN captured her pivotal speech on February 17, 2018, as Gonzalez concludes,

[…] Politicians who sit in their gilded Houses and Senate seats funded by the NRA telling us nothing could have been done to prevent this, we call BS. They say tougher guns laws do not decrease gun violence. We call BS. They say a good guy with a gun stops a bad guy with a gun. We call BS. They say guns are just tools like knives and are as dangerous as cars. We call BS. They say no laws could have prevented the hundreds of senseless tragedies that have occurred. We call BS. That us kids don't know what we're talking about, that we're too young to understand how the government works. We call BS. If you agree, register to vote. Contact your local congresspeople. Give them a piece of your mind. (CNN, February 17, 2018)

Gonzalez’s speech is both a powerful display of emotion and competency, as she speaks against the idea that her young age should be used to discredit her and other young adults from having a voice in reshaping political realities. In her rally-call for adolescent agency, she also takes a stand against corporate influences that delegitimize the link between gun laws and mass school shootings. As I watched the CNN coverage of Gonzalez giving this speech at the rally in Fort Lauderdale, it became clear that the use of emotion – her tearful call for justice – evolved from effective political protest methods from earlier protest movements. I then noticed that in the
same capacity that the emotion and empathy from the rally-call “our lives matter” was translated into the activist slogan #BlackLivesMatter, Gonzalez and her youth supporters formed the #StudentStandUp from the momentum garnered by the battle cry, “we call b.s.” As the youth organized and networked over social media, they initiated a series of rallies and marches, demanding politicians to acknowledge the wishes of the people to see tangible policy reform action.

The gruelling battle began as Gonzalez and the Parkland survivors first took on the deeply engrained American reverence and trust in the NRA. Since its establishment in 1871, the NRA rooted itself in the rhetoric of the constitution, claiming to be “the nation's leader in firearm education and training for law-abiding gun owners, law enforcement and the armed services” (National Rifle Association of America, 2018). Their enduring cultural influence and lack of support for gun reform is evident in their assertion that the, “NRA continues to uphold the Second Amendment and advocates enforcement of existing laws against violent offenders to reduce crime” (National Rifle Association of America, 2018). This was posted on their website as representatives from the NRA speak directly against Gonzalez and the other leaders of the #StudentStandUp in their insistence to uphold existing gun laws as they are. The Association’s advocacy of “existing laws” in the wake of the Parkland tragedy positions the NRA as another viable competing idea-meme in a Dawkins-like collection of ideas, which must survive by any means necessary – or, as he phrased, at the expense of other rival memes (2006/1976). In this way, the idea that the sale of guns is directly related to mass school shooting tragedies is rejected by the NRA and met with the competing idea that to ban the sale of assault rifles is a Second Amendment infringement. The rejection of the #StudentStandUp by the NRA is also steeped in a
power dynamic that Freire discusses through the lens of oppression, as he critiques oppressors’ love of ownership and power over a love for human beings. Freire states:

The oppressor consciousness tends to transform everything surrounding it into an object of its domination. The earth, property, production, the creations of people, people themselves, time – everything is reduced to the status of objects at its disposal. In their unrestrained eagerness to possess, the oppressors develop the conviction that it is possible for them to transform everything into objects of their purchasing power; hence their strictly materialistic concept of existence. Money is the measure of all things, and profit the primary goal. For the oppressors, what is worthwhile is to have more – always more – even at the cost of the oppressed having less or having nothing. For them, to be is to have and to be the class of the ‘have.’ (1970/2005, p. 58)

Although the NRA does not explicitly mention profit as one of its fundamental aims, the Freirean idea of ownership dynamics is echoed in the NRA’s response to Gonzalez and #StudentStandUp advocacy for reform. Even when confronted by the statistics of the cost to human life that is associated with accessibility of assault rifles to the masses, the sale of these weapons persists under the authority of the NRA and with the support of politicians, as Gonzalez notes in her speech in February of 2018. As the gun industry is considerably profitable in America, the Freirean idea of advocating “purchasing power,” regardless of the undeniable dangers posed to human life, is applicable to what I see is the NRA’s “materialistic concept of existence” (1970/2005, p. 58). In that, the NRA’s focus on buying and selling of guns takes precedent over developing methods and policies to address the leniency of current gun law policies. The NRA privileges a large market clientele rather than stricter laws that will bar their potential buyers and result in loss of profit. Rather than hear any proposals to tighten the
restrictions on who can purchase assault rifles, the NRA shuts down the discourse by stating existing laws are sufficient. While the youth rebel against it, the backing of the NRA by some members of society suggests the biggest hurdle may be disentangling the ideological belief in the NRA as an infallible staple of the American identity – as the idea of the NRA as the protector of Second Amendment rights emerges as the rival meme to preserve the status-quo.

Recognizing the NRA’s influence on society and the gun industry, adolescents collectively decided ‘enough is enough.’ This became the central battle cry to re-focus the loss of profit to the loss of human life, as the creation of the hashtags from this key phrasing embedded in Gonzalez’s speech became a part of larger movement working toward making the school environment safe for children. The students collectively and competently used the protest sequence modelled from #BlackLivesMatter and evolved to make the specificity of their goal impossible to ignore. Their use of internet memes evolved offline before returning back into the online space, creating a continuous and evolving sequence of protest action, producing idea-memes that replicate “from brain to brain” (Dawkins, 1796/2006 p. 192) via constant and multiple forms of messaging.

**Parts of a Whole: From Human to Civil Rights**

Following Gonzalez’s speech at the gun rally in February of 2018, marches and protests were organized across America in solidarity for more strict regulation of assault style rifles. Information circulated quickly through hashtags online, and the #StudentStandUp began to attract international attention before leaping offline into mass displays of protest and solidarity marches in other countries like the United Kingdom, countries that have already experienced their own success from harsher gun laws. The grief and devastation quickly turned into a collective anger for the children lost to senseless and avoidable violence. With a likeness to what

we saw in the #BlackLivesMatter movement, the collective voice spoke directly to those in power through social media activism and the strategic use of multimodal meme-texts. The hashtags – hyperlinking – to other forms of protest exemplify adolescent competency to recognize and adapt patterns as an effective tool for communication. The hyperlinking also demonstrates the desire for affective relationship formation on- and off-line, across time-periods, to create stronger and more impactful messages of protest and human rights activism as it evolves in method.

Generating emotion through recognizable historical gestures of protest, Figure 16 below attests to the adolescent competency in their use of “parts of whole,” or synecdoche, to articulate the devastation of mass school shootings throughout American history, with a powerful display of 7,000 pairs of shoes placed in front of Capitol Hill. Exactly a month after the Parkland shooting, students gathered to place these shoes – made to represent the lost lives of children by gun violence – to haunt the grounds of the very institution that failed to protect them. Using their emotional sensitivity, the gesture also demonstrates a replication of the other mass protest displays where shoes were used to represent the loss of lives – missing bodies – in Auschwitz during the Holocaust. Visually, the image of the shoes serves to connect and remind leaders of the historical consequences when policies fail to protect a nation’s young. Verbally, the banner in the image uses a hashtag #NotOneMore as another synecdoche to articulate the message and frame the reception of the shoes. The banner offline, and its connection and format for cyber activism, orients how the masses should read the display of protest: the loss of children’s lives have always been historically perceived as horrific, and change is needed to prevent America from reproducing that legacy.
Figure 17. Protest Demonstration at Capitol Hill. To represent the thousands of children's lives lost to gun-violence, many gathered to place shoes to represent the missing bodies; received 85,529 likes. Posted on Instagram on March 13, 2018. Retrieved from https://www.instagram.com/p/BgRiNK1HEQS/
However, the adolescents leading the #StudentStandUp in 2018 have challenged the idea that the youth of today are passive and in need of protection – they use their agency to speak directly to power and demand that their voices be heard in shaping their future. The empowered voices of the young take on many forms as they engage in dialogue in social media, and interact and carry out a call-to-action in each meme-text they produce and disseminate for their cause. The emotional literacy is discernible in the exchanges between Instagram users that interact with the polarity of this meme-text of the shoe protest on The Capitol Hill. The image of the shoes received 85,529 likes from Instagram users, as the meme speaks to adolescents and compels further engagement online. Teen user _e._.v._.e,’s (2018), for example, is compelled by the image-text into a an empathetic response as she debates with a pro-gun supporter that defends the position to arm teachers to make schools more safe. She states:

> It[']s just a very heavy load to carry on your back as a teacher that one day you may have to kill one of your students. In the end its like saying "Wow there are a lot of people with cavities...so lets give people more candy in de[n]tist[']s offices." It just logically doesn[’]t make s[e]n[s][e] (_e._.v._.e, 2018).

As she reflects on the proposal to arm teachers to prevent future mass school shootings, she thinks through the consequences of teachers who will inevitably be faced with the decision to use those weapons against a potential student assailant. This response demonstrates a technical understanding of a cause-and-effect relationship – a foundational literacy skill – while exemplifying the emotional competency to empathize with the position of a teacher. By making a strong inference, she concludes that teachers having weapons will only increase the likelihood of an altercation with their own students. She then draws upon a literary device to further verbalize the nonsensical solution proposed by pro-gun supporters as she compares it to a dentist
being concerned about cavities and then providing more sugary candies at the very site meant to promote healthy eating habits to reduce the risk of cavities. She is then met with the competing idea-meme that re-directs the focus of her deconstruction of the idea-meme. Another teen responds to her comment that, “they should put the shoes of the amount if children killed by abortion so far this year if it would fit” (kevinthesr.slaughter, 2018), as the questioning of “children’s lives” enters into the larger political debates over the right to life. The evolving idea-memes compete for control over shaping the perception of human rights and civil rights. The tactic continues to confront, evolve, and mutate as the pro-gun supporters try to split the alliances by layering into another equally contentious issue: abortion.

However, as adolescents are familiar with diversion tactics like those used to delegitimize the #BlackLivesMatter movement, the adolescents work together to unify the solidarity of the #BlackLivesMatter advocates through the invocation of human and civil rights. Preceding the protest action at Captiol Hill, the awareness and support lead to the highly anticipated #MarchForOurLives event held on March 24, 2018. In contrast to the absences of bodies indicated by the shoes, the method of protest evolves into the presence of thousands of bodies protesting for change. At this event, thousands gathered to show their support for the #StudentStandUp and the Parkland school survivors’ call to end gun violence in America. Social media users comment under the picture of the crowd, with an out-pouring of support for the powerful effect of people gathering in solidarity over such an important social issue. The momentum garnered from Emma’s speech and the Capitol Hill demonstration leads up to this main event, which attracted an international gaze. A pivotal moment at the #MarchForOurLives event was the connection made with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. through Yolanda Rene King – his granddaughter – who addressed the crowd with her own adaption to lines from her
Figure 18. Thousands Gather in Solidarity at #MarchForOurLives Rally. Posted to celebrity personal account attracting her millions of followers. Posted on Instagram on March 24, 2018; retrieved from https://www.instagram.com/p/BgV8McAHrVr/
grandfather’s well-known speech. In contrast to the idea-meme that surfaced to splinter alliances over another debate, Yolanda Rene King, as an advocate and ally for the #StudentStandUp, now evolves the protest to the next part of the sequence to include #BlackLivesMatter. In her speech, she uses the recognizable liturgical pattern of call-and-response to evolve in method as well as idea. Firstly, King carries out the evolution of the idea-meme through her recitation of her grandfather’s speech, “I have a dream” as she adapts and unifies the civil rights history with the overarching connection with the impact of gun violence as it intersects with human rights. King’s speech replicates a similar rhythm and pattern that her grandfather used in his iconic speech, with the substitution (or evolution) of the idea of a world without racism to a world without gun violence. King chants in her speech:

My grandfather had a dream that his four little children would not be judged by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream that ‘enough is enough.’ And that this should be a gun free world, period! (Yolanda King, 2018).

The connection King makes with the legacy of her grandfather builds upon the dream for a better world for children. While his focus was for a racially equitable world, King repeats and evolves this message to include the physical safety of all children through the dream of a gun free world in 2018. Adapting these lines not only demonstrates skillful wordplay and successful alliance formation uniting the two foremost pressing social issues, it is also a visceral and effective example of Freirean conscientization through the mass call for radical love and activism. Through the strategy of call and response, King compels a verbal oath as she chants and pledges in the video below that this generation will be great because of the action and solidarity they have demonstrated thus far. Her verbal strategies are then juxtaposed by the method chosen by Emma Gonzales in her address to the audience at #MarchforOurLives
Figure 19. Yolanda Creates a new Dream. An adaptation to her grandfather's renowned speech for civil liberties in the 1960s era. Posted to Instagram on March 24, 2018; retrieved from https://www.instagram.com/p/Bg3rN8ahyr4/.

Figure 20. Emma's Silence Speaks Volumes. Video posted of Emma's address at MarchForOurLives. Posted to Instagram on March 24, 2018; retrieved from https://www.instagram.com/p/Bgu4uH6BTR-/.
Comparatively, the image in Figure 20 was taken from a video of Gonzalez’s speech where she opted to use silence as her protest method. Her previously noted passionate speech at the gun control rally in February 2018 that ignited the call-to-action shifts from a verbal discourse to silence as the vehicle of protest at this event. As one of the founders and leaders of the #StudentStandUp or #NeverAgain movement, her address comes at the end of the event to invite a consolidation of the event’s purpose, goals, and next steps. Her silence allows the audience watching on media outlets across the globe to join her in a critically reflective moment, as her body becomes the text. Her facial expressions move from intense sorrow to tearful anger; the audience chants and encourages her as she carries out the six minutes of silence that mirrors the length of time the shooter attacked Marjory High. I perceive Gonzalez’s method and the audience’s reaction to her silence through the lens of the Freirean process of conscientization, or the harmony of thought and action toward injustice. He explains:

Action and reflection occur simultaneously. A critical analysis of reality may, however, reveal that a particular form of action is impossible or inappropriate at the present time. Those who through reflection perceive the infeasibility or inappropriateness of one or another form of action (which accordingly be postponed or substituted) cannot thereby be accused of inaction. Critical reflection is also action. (Freire, 1970/2005, p. 128)

Gonzalez’s silence and emotion moves the crowd to inward reflection during her speech, while King directly leads them through a call-and-response chant. The crowd engaged with both girls’ forms of address and after several minutes with their own thoughts, other teens in the crowd begin to cry and chant “Never Again,” the battle cry for policy reform. Both young girls demonstrate the nuancing of protest methods as the movement evolves through human rights, civil rights, and leads up to an evolution of the law. With each demonstration from a dream to an
assertion that ‘enough is enough’, the youth evolve their protest method to the specificity of gun law reform with the intent to adapt and evolve the ideas that framed its original inception. Each adaptation in idea and form attest to the adolescent ability to lead audiences deeper into the critical thinking process, into a space where taken action becomes undeniable.

Engaging with the Evolution of Law

The evolution of ideas, as posed by Dawkins (1976/2006), becomes applicable to my discussion of the youth engagement with the ideas behind the written laws, as they propose their own interpretation to compete with and replace other idea-memes in the pool. Specifically, Dawkins’ (1976/2006) idea of rival memes and competitive traits that selfishly replicate to dominate by leaping from brain-to-brain similarly functions in my analysis of the meme-texts that adolescents use. Specifically, in their negotiation of the law, they use emotional intelligence to work through the gaps in legal and political jargon. As I previously demonstrated, adolescents articulate themselves through an appeal to the familiar, successful, protest patterns of the past and adapt them to new forms and mediums to effectively communicate in a modern landscape. To make their messages survive and endure, they changed their tools of communication; but they also demonstrated in the meme-texts that there is an integral role of pattern recognition and repetition to pave the way for empathetic connection.

In particular, the students’ use of their emotional intelligence to engage with the law captures the feeling of dissonance between the written law and the lived reality of modernity. The misalignment with laws that no longer meet the needs of the evolving culture and time becomes an enduring and viable idea-meme created by the adolescents like Emma Gonzales and Beaniedrama (2018), who will be featured in the following meme.
Stemming from Emma’s speech, “we call b.s.” and her rejection of the idea that the youth do not know how government affairs work, Beaniedrama (2018) created and marched with the following poster, which was then posted to Instagram on the day of the #MarchForOurLives event on March 24, 2018. I have paired it with an example of a rival meme that encapsulates the competing notion that outlawing weapons will do little to prevent crime in Figure 20, in the attempt to demonstrate how adolescents, respond to and create more complex and specific analysis that directly confronts the history of the law.

The poster in Figure 21 simply and directly captures the point that laws should change as people change; as more knowledge is acquired, definitions shift, and so too should the law reflect that evolution in thinking and being over time. Human evolution in a biological sense, as Dawkins expresses, occurs at a slower rate than the evolution of culture (1976/2006). Written laws, as the poster contends, need to shift to represent this evolution of humanity in thoughts, ideas, and laws – what is morally acceptable evolves as humans evolve. In this case, the comparison with slavery highlights a very strong shift in thinking from one era to the next, as the legal and moral attitudes that supported the intuitional slavery of Black people in America is the same historical context that frames the Second Amendment and the right to bear arms. It reads: “when the 2nd amendment was written, it was legal to own other human beings!! Times have changed! Your laws should reflect that” (beaniedrama, 2018), with the use of red font signalling a sensory cue to be cautious of the dangers the laws can allow. The rival meme in Figure 22 is an example of the type of rebuttal to this argument: outlawing guns will not take guns out of criminals’ hands. However, this rebuttal is steeped more in inaction and is not a resolution or radical love response to the cries of injustice sparked by the Parkland shooting.
Figure 21. Student Engages with History and Law. Posted to Instagram on March 24, 2018; retrieved from https://www.instagram.com/p/BguAr_sjlvS/.

Figure 22. Outlaws with Guns. Argument in support of existing gun-laws. Posted to Instagram; retrieved from https://www.instagram.com/p/BmIZS_nr9_/?tagged=nationalrifleassociation.
Beanidrama’s (2018) response to debate under his meme in Instagram does represent the dialogue Freire argues is needed to pry society out of the clutches of oppression. Beaniedrama (2018) engages in the following debate as he responds to another user who states: “you can’t just take away our Second Amendment. How would you feel if someone tried to take away your right to protest because how many people do you think have died protesting?” (kaitlyn_sprague103998, 2018). This prompts his response:

@kaitlyn_sprague103998, We don't want to remove the 2nd amendment. We want to re-amend it to modernize it. At the time it was written, I could be owned. But times and social norms have changed, and so have our weapons. 18th century gun laws cannot control 21st century guns. We want tighter background checks and a ban on ASSAULT rifles. (beaniedrama, 2018).

As the political #AllLivesMatter is entirely set upon language and the power of words to frame a reality, adolescents rebel and reject this split by using emotional sensitivity and competency to remind us what the law should really be doing: creating an empathetic and cooperative society or protecting a human family. The argument becomes clear: the language of the law loses meaning when the words fail to reflect life as it is actually experienced in modernity. The words inaccurately reflect the larger majority of people that do not feel represented in the values that frame the Second Amendment. As beaniedrama (2018) mentions, the technology used in weapons has evolved, and so too should the laws that govern them. His resiliency is evident in his continued commentary on his own personal account (under a similar image of him holding his poster) in which another debate ensues. Beaniedrama responds: “I don't stand for a lack of self defense, I stand for no ASSAULT WEAPONS and no more Parklands, or San Bernadinos, or Sandy Hooks, or Columbines” (beaniedrama, 2018), reinforcing the idea-
meme that mass school shootings have always been the primary motivating factor driving the #StudentStandUp into action against gun laws. The call for sustainable change mobilizes online and offline to awaken capacities for conscientization and exemplify the active role adolescents take in overturning the *selfish gene*. More specifically, this represents what Dawkins coined the self-reflection and action that is needed to confront our own assumptions and dispel the “memes of our indoctrination” (Dawkins, 1976/2006, p. 200)—or, in this case, reflect on the assumptions society holds about violence, weapons, and American freedoms. However, the argument in Figure 22 suggests that citizens should have guns because to ban them would mean only criminals have guns. The two meme-texts offer a contrast in-depth of critical analysis, as well as attest to the capacity of youth to inspire and be inspired by their social justice work online.

Beaniedrama (2018) further alludes to the effect of online support in his journey as he states,

Thank you! Knowing that there are people that support this movement and really understand this sign is really uplifting. I’ve read a lot of comments on other posts from people who don’t really understand this sign or what this movement is all about. Your support and encouragement is really appreciated.

Here, he acknowledges the need for a collective effort to keep momentum and progress going despite the negativity and attempts to redirect and delegitimize protestors. Another debate that surfaces to retract the focus on gun control is the contentious issue of abortion. As previously mentioned, this debate circulates in an attempt to split and subdivide the alliance formation at various points throughout the movement; however, students address its recirculation by it adding an evolving understanding of the law. At the #MarchForOurLives event, students and supporters address the invocation of the abortion debate, as they confront and deconstruct the rival meme that if children’s lives really mattered, abortion would be illegal across America.
Figure 23. Invoking the Abortion Debate. Young people engage with the efforts to derail their cause. Posted to Instagram; retrieved from https://www.instagram.com/p/BlW3ERCFUrW/?utm_source=ig_share_sheet&igshid=jfejfssvd8u7

Figure 24. Pro-Life? Prove it. Young people point out Pro-Life Debate irony when dealing with school shooting violence. Posted to Instagram on March 24, 2018; retrieved from https://www.instagram.com/p/BguLN4aFhHA/.
Figure 23 and 24 capture the two camps of this debate and the on- and off-line work done to create this continued circuit of conscientization. As Figure 23 mocks the naivety of the banning of weapons, the caption draws upon the idea that banning abortions is just a way to encourage more illegal and unsafe abortions. Figure 24 turns this logic on its head by daring the opposition to “prove it” – that is, if they believe so strongly against abortion, then they should inherently be invested in the protection of children outside the womb, too. The tactic used in Figure 23 resembles Foucault’s (1975/2008) idea that in order for power to be successful in and obedient society, it is necessary to create an “abnormal enemy” be that in thought or physical identity. He states that power works to, “characterize, classify, specialize; they distribute along a scale, around a norm, hierarchize individuals in relation to one another and, if necessary, disqualify and invalidate” (Foucault, 1975/2008, p. 197). In this case, I can see that the youth call to ban assault rifles is branded with a similar abnormality and treated as an idea that is to be dismissed in political conversations. A teen Instagram user comments on Figure 24 of famous America actor Carter Jenkins’ photograph and declares that,

as a part of the nations[sic] young, I want to thank you for [being] apart of the fight. It’s so important that we come together and fight for a change and let our voices be heard. That is exactly what a democracy is and what it should look like. Enough is enough.

(officialraign, 2018)

The emotion garnered in the phrase “enough is enough” echoes the call form Yolanda King in her speech. Adolescents’ use of hashtags and key phrases function like a segment of an evolving sequence, recognizing that each voice is a part of the larger fight for a true democracy that responds to the voice of the collective. If that voice is loud enough, both on- and off-line, change is not only possible, but sustainable by the young leaders of America.
Affecting Change: Popular and Corporate Support

Since the early phases of the #StudentStandUp, the passion and commitment of the youth was able to acquire the backing of many corporations as well as popular support. Companies such as “Delta, United, MetLife, First National Bank of Omaha, Symantec, Avis Budget Group, Hertz and Enterprise Holdings” announced on social media that there would be a discontinuation of NRA member discounts for their services (DaSilva, 2018). Unwaveringly, the NRA released a public statement on February 24, 2018 stating their allegiance to the Second Amendment in response to their corporate partnerships:

Let it be absolutely clear. The loss of a discount will neither scare nor distract one single NRA member from our mission to stand and defend the individual freedoms that have always made America the greatest nation in the world.

(The National Rifle Association, 2018)

Other corporations responded by showing allegiance to the #StudentStandUp, as major companies such as Walmart – which is one of the major distributors for guns in America – also added to policy changes to ban, “items resembling assault-style rifles, including toys guns and air rifles” (DaSilva, 2018). Dick’s Sporting Goods, L.L Bean, and Kroger also pledged to, “no longer sell guns and high-capacity magazines to anyone under the age of 21. In addition to the policy changes, Dicks said it will no longer sell assault-style rifles in its stores” (DaSilva, 2018). Mountain Equipment Co-Op and REI announced the suspension of future orders from, “Vista Outdoor, the parent company of CamelBak and Giro, as well as Savage Arms, a manufacturer of AR-15-style semi-automatic rifles” (DaSilva, 2018) in an effort to, “sway its vendors to ‘work towards common sense solutions; to prevent more tragedies’” (DaSilva, 2018), as those who sell guns gesture at the humility needed to dialogue for change (Freire, 1970/2005). Levi Strauss and
Nike clothing companies have also been the latest to show support for both The #StudentStandUp and Colin Kaepernick’s #BlackLivesMatter protest solidarity; as Levi sets up a $1 million dollar Safer Tomorrow Fund and Kaepernick becomes the new face of Nike apparel this season (CBS San Francisco, 2018). As these companies make gestures to dissociate with the NRA’s policies, the removal of assault-style rifles and toy guns, for example, is a clear message that the #StudentStandUp destabilizes the normalizing of gun violence.

The #MarchForOurLives event held on March 24, 2018 received a considerable amount of popular support, as various celebrities and companies made gestures to support the student organized march to the White House in Washington, D.C. The donations from various fashion companies such as Gucci and social media site Bumble donated $500,000 each to support the march. Bumble also banned their users from using any images of guns on their personal profiles (Dasilva, 2018). Donations also came in from companies like Viacom Networks, who aired special features about gun violence prior to the event and offered free Lyft ride-sharing for protestors heading to rallies across the country (Dasilva, 2018).

Overall, these corporate policy changes and support demonstrate the affective power garnered by the students of the #StudentStandUp to move people into taking action. The actions taken show solidarity with this student-led activism and recirculate this call for change, ensuring its survival and dominance over competing narratives (idea-memes trying to counter and invalidate their message). Adolescents are emerging, competing with and confronting the power structures that dismiss them as powerless by successfully spreading their call online and offline in their evolving circuit of social media activism. They are also, of course, demonstrating that they are literate, able to argue and communicate more effectively than the literacy curriculum assumes. The ability of students to use internet memes to affect political change speaks to the
fact that their ability to communicate effectively is comparable to the legacy of the people who
wrote the pamphlets in the eighteenth-century advocating for democracy in the period leading up
to the American and French revolutions.

CONCLUSION

As I moved through my analysis of the #BlackLivesMatter movement, the unanticipated
but rich meme-texts sprouting from the #StudentStandUp revealed to me the powerful evolution
of adolescent social media activism. The idea that young people lack the capacity or care to
engage with political discourse is completely unravelled by their participation in the evolution of
protest methods and their critique of the law itself. Not only did they display a coherent
understanding of peaceful protest patterns of the past, but they also demonstrate the literary
competency to use and form affective relationships through meme-texts and multimodal forms
(such as audio and visual clips) to articulate the inconsistencies they perceive in society. In the
recent study, How Are Civic Cultures Achieved Through Youth Social-Change-Oriented
Vlogging? A Multimodal Case Study by Caroline Caron, Rebecca Raby, Claudia Mitchell,
Sophie Th´ewissen-LeBlanc and Jessica Prioletta (2018), the impact of youth civic engagement
online is explored through a case study of two video blogs (vlogs). The use of a multimodal
framework, allowed the scholars to perform a close analysis of the vlogs. Their analysis reveal
“that adolescents’ commitment to social change can be creatively achieved through video
making” (Caron & Raby et. al, 2018 p. 1). Poignantly, they conclude that their study of the youth
civic uses of vlogs “substantiate in some respect the democratic potential of emerging online
civic culture,” while also suggesting the vulnerability of “the promise of a democratic digital
public sphere” when faced with incivility online (Caron & Raby et. al, 2018 p.18). However, as
my work presents, youth can skillfully navigate and participate in this contentious political terrain and can use the space to incite tangible action.

The adolescent-led movement for gun reform is also a larger example of the agency and the love the youth have for all of humanity and for future generations to come. Their attempts to speak back to power through their tool of internet memes evolves into various forms of multimodal texts to create a powerful and direct line of communication to power structures. To deny them their voice or invalidate them would become what Freire describes as the lovelessness of the oppressor to deny a human right of reshaping political realities. Freire explains the idea of the loveless oppressor as acting from the position of,

self-sufficiency [that] is incompatible with dialogue. Men and women who lack humility (or have lost it) cannot come to the people, cannot be their partners in naming the world. Someone who cannot acknowledge himself to be as mortal as everyone else still has a long way to go before he can reach the point of encounter. At the point of encounter there are neither utter ignoramuses nor perfect sages; there are only people who are attempting, together, to learn more than they now know. Dialogue further requires an intense faith in humankind, faith in their power to make and remake, to create and re-create, faith in their vocation to be more fully human (which is not the privilege of an elite, but the birthright of all). (Freire, 1970/2005, p. 90)

As this dialogue is premised on an intense faith in humanity, the support the youth have received attests to the intense faith supporters and allies have put into students to lead this battle – the fierce struggle to help society reach a fuller humanity. Adolescents’ work with memes and multimodal texts engages in the dialogic process envisioned by Freire and in their enactment of radical love through activism, they also reveal their intellectual capacity for empathy. As they
demonstrate strategic and skillful use of literary curricular aims, the students model critical consciousness and praxis in the face of hatred and asymmetrical power relations. It is in this authentic, voluntary space of social media that adolescents willing engage in debate and create their own literary pieces that reveal the ways in which they are actively working to overturn what Dawkins’ coined as the “selfish gene.” The compulsions for selfish perseveration are replaced with the “competitive” messages coded for cooperative love and empathy. The adolescent spread of empathy and radical love in internet memes is a powerful example of what Dawkins’ (1976/2006) work called for us to do: confront the ideas of our own indoctrination and teach each other what does not come inherently in our genes: altruism. Adolescent social media activism gives us the, “chance to upset [our][biological] designs, something that no other species has ever aspired to” (Dawkins, 1976/2006, p. 3). In other words, young people are reminding us that what makes us human is our superior ability to behave humanely, and that is a choice to do so. Creating a space in the classroom for social media activism empowers and welcomes the political agency of adolescents – a space not offered on the pages of Shakespeare.
References


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