

# Black Lives Matter to Latinx Students: Exploring Social Practices of Latinx Youth as Activists in the Rural Midwest

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*In June 2020, in a rural Rust Belt town in the Midwest, over 100 residents stood on the grounds of the county courthouse and publicly protested for Black Lives Matter. Once students began to arrive, the protest shifted. Latinx youth led chants, held signs, and stood in the front of the other protesters, moving the protest forward, away from the courthouse and toward the busy street of passing cars. I knew these de facto protest leaders well—they were my former students. This town is considered part of the New Latino Diaspora (NLD), a U.S. region not traditionally associated with Latinx settlement population. Here Latinx families represent almost 30% of the population and have been marginalized in community spaces and schools. Rural students are stereotyped, and Latinx students are marginalized as well, bearing layers of cultural and social inequity. This study disrupts the assumption of rural middle America as simple, homogenous, and conservative and, using geosemiotics, seeks to explore the intersectional ways in which Latinx youth position and identify themselves as activists, expanding current conceptualizations of rurality and literacy while examining how Black lives matter to Latinx youth.*

In June 2020, in a rural Rust Belt community in the Midwest, over 100 residents stood on the grounds of the county courthouse and publicly protested for Black Lives Matter. On the very front lines of the protest, students—particularly Latinx<sup>1</sup> youth—led chants and stood in the front of all the other protesters. Latinx students broke rank in protest lines and emplaced themselves farther from the courthouse building and into the intersection, leading chants, holding signs, and shouting at counter-protestors.

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this study I refer to participants as Latinx. I use the term *Latinx* in an attempt to be more inclusive of people who are not represented by binary terms of gender. When referencing other scholars' work, I reference and use the terms they use.

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I knew these de facto protest leaders well; they were my former students.

This town is considered part of the New Latino Diaspora (NLD) (Hamann, 2015; Hamann et al., 2002), a U.S. region non-traditionally associated with an increased Latinx settlement population. Here Latinx families represent almost 30% of the population and historically have been and continue to be underrepresented in community spaces and schools. As of the 2019–2020 school year, one teacher on the faculty identified as Latinx, serving as a Spanish teacher, and four support staff identified as Latinx, working across four elementary schools, one intermediate school, one middle school, and one high school. Despite constituting 30% of the population, no Latinx representatives were on city council or members of any municipal boards.

Rural students are stereotyped (Eppley, 2017), and Latinx students are marginalized as well, bearing layers of cultural and social inequity and navigating deficit discourses in institutions and policies (Nogueron-Liu et al., 2017). This study disrupts the assumption of rural middle America as simple, homogenous, and conservative and seeks to explore the intersectional ways in which Latinx youth position and identify themselves as activists. The research questions I explored include:

1. How were Latinx students protesting?
2. What did their actions and protest signs reveal about their own identities in this community?
3. How did Latinx youth affect discourses in place at this protest?

### Literature Review

This literature review focuses on the intersectionalities that Latinx youth face in rural communities throughout the United States. This review examines Latinx youth and the New Latino Diaspora, youth identity, and youth civic engagement in rural communities.

#### Latinx Youth and the (Rural) New Latino Diaspora

The term “diaspora” refers to people who have been forced to resettle away from their homeland, removed by political, religious, or economic forces (Brettell, 2006). It has become a significant concept in recent scholarship regarding migration, ethnicity, and transnationalism (Brettell, 2006; Hamann & Harklau, 2015). The term “New Latino Diaspora” was first used in the 1990s to describe the increasingly large number of Latinxs—both immigrants and those moving between U.S. states—who are settling in states that have historically not been known to be home for Latinxs, including Indiana, Illinois, Arkansas, Georgia, Maine, and North Carolina (Hamann et al., 2002; Hamann & Harklau, 2015; Murillo & Villenas, 1997). NLD members often settle in rural areas in these states because of a shift in labor market trends, as industries such as agriculture, construction, meatpacking, and manufacturing drive Latinx immigration (Kandel & Cromartie, 2004; Zúñiga & Hernández-Leon, 2005).

The NLD in Midwestern states is typically found in rural communities (Chapa et al., 2004). These communities have experienced a sudden, drastic, and unexpected influx of Latinx students, many of them hailing from Spanish-speaking homes (Hamann, 2003; Kochhar et al., 2005, as cited in Hamann & Harklau, 2015). Many communities and schools in which NLD members live, work, and study lack structural supports—teachers are not trained, institutions lack translators, and schools lack bilingual educators and policies to address the needs of many Latinx students (Bohon et al., 2005; Hamann & Harklau, 2015; McDaniel et al., 2017; Wortham et al., 2013). A common expectation among predominantly white<sup>2</sup> communities is for Latinxs to assimilate—without support—in order to obtain conditional

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this article, I intentionally do not capitalize *white*. This practice acknowledges that whiteness as an identity is not collectively in solidarity in relation to antiracism or antiracist work (Tanner, 2019).

acceptance, perpetuating stereotypes along with a deficit framing of Latinxs (Ortiz, 2016).

Stereotypes of people of color, created and perpetuated by white people, sustain racism and racial hierarchies and create purposeful oppressive barriers against interaction with one another (Delgado & Stefaniec, 1997; Ellison, 1953/1995, as cited in Lensmire, 2017; Fraley, 2007). Latinxs are often criminalized in media and politics (Cervantes-Soon, 2017; Chavez, 2012; Gomez Cervantes et al., 2016). These images, along with the lack of supports in place for multilingual families and the expectation of assimilation by white communities, further cement the perception among minoritized groups that education of their children is not politically neutral (Du Bois, 1903/2007), and this notion is important to consider when exploring intersectionalities of Latinx youth identities.

Stigma and stereotyping are also seen in rural contexts, including in the Midwest. Rural stereotypes of deficiency and uneducatedness are perpetuated in the media (Eppley, 2017), and the Midwest is consistently portrayed as uncultured, simple, uneducated, and conservative (Sanchez-Jankowski, 2002). Society creates and maintains barriers for young people in rural communities, and the burden falls to young people to overcome those barriers (Terman, 2020). These multiple marginalizations and stigmatizations affect Latinx youth in the NLD, not just as Latinx adolescents but also Latinxs geographically situated in the rural Midwest.

#### Rurality and Identity

The concept of rurality is complex, dynamic, and wielded for purposes of power (Corbett, 2015). *Rural* is a term that marks a location by its physical, cultural, and social geographies, often seen as both idyllic and marginalized (Corbett, 2015; Eppley, 2017). Areas considered rural are almost always bound together by population or geographical parameters, but each locality is its own unique place, a notion that is becoming more contemporized, thanks in part to new literacy studies work on multiple literacies (Corbett, 2015). To problematize the deficits and stereotypes of rurality and instead highlight the complexities and multiliteracies involved, Edmonson (2003) originated the term “rural literacies.” Donehower and associates (2012) expanded on this definition to consider the intersectionalities of place, literacy, and identity, focusing on the complex socioeconomic and sociopolitical issues embedded in discussions and conceptualizations of rural literacies, especially in a neoliberal globalized society. Intersectionalities of ruralities and literacies are also interwoven with globalization, social justice, and issues of mobility (Corbett, 2015). Exploring how Latinx youth in the rural Midwest designed signs and emplaced their signs

and bodies in protest is one new way of expanding on the relationship between rurality and literacy.

Leyshon (2008) sought to challenge the binary constructs of rurality by showing how research on youth in rural places positions them as marginalized, presenting a new conceptual framework on identity and space in the countryside. Leyshon posited that the majority of geographical research, while focused on youth and space, does not pay attention to the role that space plays in the formation of youth identity. Looking at identities as constructed by power relations, Leyshon also maintained that youth are typically simplified and “othered”; his research challenges these social constructs. First, Leyshon’s findings support the idea that youth identities are not fixed but rather are temporal and evolving. Second, their identities are constructed and linked to a sense of place that influences their social practices and movements in space. Third, meanings attached to places change—they can be safe or confining. Fourth, youth in rural communities are between binaries, both fragmented and stable. This betweenness situates them between being included and being excluded.

Sierk (2017) also found that Latinx students who live in the NLD in middle America navigate multiple hierarchies within their schools and explored how these experiences affected their decisions after they graduated from high school. Sierk’s findings show how students articulated different types of rural, challenging the binary notion of rurality as well as considering the nuances of their particular part of the NLD within a rural community.

The present study disrupts the assumption of rural middle America as homogenous and conservative by considering the intersectionalities of Latinx youth as activists in a rural area and by challenging deficit language and beliefs. Examining how Latinx youth participated in a protest can contextualize the idea of youth identity and expand the view of youth as defined by place, deficient by place, and homogeneously rooted in place.

### **Rurality and Civic Engagement**

Wiederhold Wolfe and associates (2017) combined the idea of place with identities of youth in rural places. They first posited that communities are not just created through language, “but also through everyday embodied practices of living, working, playing, and participating in collective behavior in a particular place” (p. 169). Their study looked at these embodied practices as young adults engage in everyday democracy and the choices they made regarding how to engage in stigmatized places, noting that youth articulated a need for place-based identity that they could share with others to be involved and engaged in civic

and community matters. Trying to avoid being stigmatized or stereotyped, young adults in a rural town removed themselves to liminal spaces in the community, never being wholly integrated or fully an outsider and instead trying to reposition themselves in new ways.

Terman (2020) also argued that young people who become involved in their communities are part of a larger network of other people involved in activism, which can produce a collective place-based identity. Terman’s findings also suggest that young adults “with some marginalized identities seem to be particularly thoughtful about their relationship to place, which could, with institutional and symbolic support, foster elective belonging among less privileged groups” (p. 30). At the University of Wyoming, Chicano students were joined by local high school students to organize a protest march and walkout to advocate for immigrant rights, suggesting that political protests contribute in the making and remaking of oneself through social interactions and practices and “have a robust influence on our critical sense of identity and wholeness” (Zamudio et al., 2009, p. 109). Zamudio et al. (2009) highlighted the complexities of minorities living in the shadows of “decisively homogenous” public spaces in rural areas (p. 108).

Studies have suggested that predominant factors in bolstering youth civic engagement include schools, families, and digital and social media (Hoffner & Rehkopf, 2011; Wiederhold Wolfe et al., 2017; Weinstein, 2014). Such factors can predict the likelihood of youth participation in national and global sociopolitical movements (Wiederhold Wolfe et al., 2017). A recent study by Metzger and associates (2020) found that youth in rural communities saw themselves as less capable of participating in political action than youth in non-rural communities, which could be attributed to feelings of disconnect and a lack of opportunities for civic engagement.

Very few studies have been published within the last 20 years on youth and rural protesting in the United States. Rural protest movements in the United States have been less developed than in other countries (Woods, 2003), which could account for the lack of robust research on this issue. This research study, situated within the rural NLD in the Rust Belt, provides a relatively new context for exploring youth response to social justice issues.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Keeping in mind the fluidity of youth identity and emplacement, this study uses intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) and geosemiotics (Scollon & Scollon, 2003) as two theoretical approaches.

### Intersectionality

In the late 20th century, Black feminists and feminists of color asserted that categories like gender, class, and race “were not stable and discrete but, rather, variable and changing constellations that are interrelated, co-constitutive, and simultaneous” (Tomlinson, 2019, p. 180). Examining the mutable dynamics of sameness and difference across categories in relation to power employs a framework of intersectionality (Cho et. al, 2013; Crenshaw, 1989). “Intersectionality offers a window into thinking about the significance of ideas and social action in fostering social transformation” (Collins, 2019, p. 41). Collins (2019) identified the key constructs of intersectionality: relationality, power, social inequality, social context, complexity, and social justice (p. 45). This study draws on intersectionality to understand different perspectives and positionalities, as well as Collins’s (2019) constructs of intersectionality as a roadmap for conceptualizing power relations and for thoroughly and concretely examining the ways in which antiracism is being addressed in the context of a Black Lives Matter protest.

Intersectionality is a spatial metaphor (Collins, 2019; Crenshaw, 1989) that brings to mind a mental image of place, of relationships, of social experiences. This framework fosters a focus on interconnections and relationships of categories such as race, class, age, and geography to help understand how Latinx youth position themselves in a community protest and call for social action and accountability. While intersectionality is not an identity theory (Collins, 2019), I use intersectionality to help critically situate the intersectionalities of youths as they navigate civic engagement roles in their community.

### Geosemiotics

Geosemiotics is a theoretical and analytical framework that views humans as “bundles of histories—of language, of discourses, and experiences, of social and political performances, as juggling multiple social roles and performances, largely unconsciously” (Scollon & Scollon, 2003, p.16). Geosemiotics examines how meanings of signs are “situated in the material world and shaped by social and cultural use” (Al Zidjaly, 2014, p. 63). These situated identities encompass a multitude of performances, potentially spanning multiple discourses (Gee, 1996; Wohlwend, 2020). A geosemiotic analysis considers how social structures are used by people who are interacting with each other to produce discourses in place. In other words, geosemiotics recognizes that “our bodies take up space” (Scollon & Scollon, 2003, p. 45)—whether purposefully trying to garner attention or trying to remain unseen, people are always performing in social and cultural places.

Geosemiotics recognizes the action that signs produce and invite, decentering the language of the signs and focusing on the context in which signs and bodies are emplaced (Scollon & Scollon, 2003). Researchers examine how materials “are shaped by discourses and histories of practices that underlie our shared expectations” (Wohlwend, 2020, p. 12), expanding the idea of text to include “traces of social practice” (Rowse & Pahl, 2007, p. 388). Designers produce artifacts, such as signs, and the production process sediments their interests, histories, practices, and identities into the artifact itself (Rowse & Pahl, 2007). A geosemiotics approach reconceptualizes artifacts as identity texts that produce meaning and are read as assemblages of histories, discourses, practices, meanings, and modes (Wohlwend, 2020).

The geosemiotics framework considers how place and visual semiotics impact and index meaning of language, noting that “the cultural location or where a sign is placed is as important as the depicted meaning or what the print says” (Wohlwend, 2020, p. 170) and considering how these signs are indexed in the world. Indexicality, a primary tenet of geosemiotics, is the way in which signs make meaning based on the specific place and time in which they are presented (Scollon & Scollon, 2003), emphasizing the role of place in meaning making. Whittingham (2019) offered the example of how a stop sign means something different to a pedestrian or motorist when placed in an intersection vs. the meaning a stop sign makes when it is sitting on a truck en route to being placed at the intersection. A geosemiotic approach looks at the systems that influence the meanings that signs make in specific places and times.

Geosemiotics examines the relationships of three semiotic systems: interaction order (Goffman, 1983), visual semiotics (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006), and place semiotics (Scollon & Scollon, 2003). *Interaction order* focuses on the relationships in a given space, noting how “our bodies make and give off meaning read by others because of where they are and what they are doing in space” (Whittingham, 2019, p. 55). Interaction order considers factors such as body movement, sense of time, position, posture, and interpersonal distance within a space. Visual semiotics is concerned with how signs visibly represent various forms of social interaction. This method has traditionally employed Kress and Van Leeuwen’s (2006) work for analyzing visual representation while also analyzing the indexicality of signs to show how place influences the meaning of signs. *Visual semiotics* are culturally specific. Thus, understanding the semiotic resources at play requires ethnographic attention and visual observation and documentation (Whittingham, 2019). In this way, attention is focused on the way a sign is placed in a space as well as how the interaction order is visually represented to determine how these factors influence a sign’s meaning (Whittingham, 2019). Finally,

*place semiotics* looks at how location serves as both a semiotic resource as well as an index to other social influences. In this way, place is a sign and communicates meaning (Scollon & Scollon, 2003). These relationships are the focus of geosemiotics.

This study combines intersectionality and geosemiotic frameworks to consider how Latinx youth in this rural town protested for Black Lives Matter, analyzing not just what their protest signs said but also where they emplaced themselves and their signs, how they were socioculturally situated and contextualized, how they connected across platforms to communicate and make meaning in place, and what the signs and emplacement revealed about power relationships and social positioning.

### Research Methods

#### Site

This research took place in a small community, referred to with the pseudonym Crossroads,<sup>3</sup> in the central part of the Midwest. This community serves as the county seat for a county in which almost 70% of the population voted for Trump in the 2020 election. Among families within the Crossroads town limits, 28% live below the poverty level. Crossroads is home to members of the New Latino Diaspora. According to U.S. Census data, in 2000, 15% of the population was Latinx; in 2020, it was around 30% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). As of 2017, 29% of students at the local middle school resided in Spanish-speaking households.

When driving through Crossroads, it was not obvious that it hosted a significant Latinx population. Two restaurants there, both of which sit on the periphery of the downtown area, were owned by Mexican families. A small Mexican grocery store inconspicuously sat on a side street. Other than that business, there was no indication of a significant population of Latinx residents. I lived on the south side of town for more than 10 years; it was not until I worked as a teacher in the schools that I realized the realities of the disparity and marginalization of a vast number of Crossroads residents.

In the early 2010s, the community began to see an influx of migrants from Honduras, and the schools reacted to this change by implementing immersion-based programs to meet the needs of new emergent bilinguals. Within the NLD in Crossroads, a significant number of people were undocumented residents, and undocumented families

experienced a heightened fear of deportation during the Trump presidency. As a teacher, especially in the 2016–2017 school year, I had several students tearfully ask me after class if I thought Trump would send their families back to Mexico and Honduras. Trump’s expansion of the role of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement and termination of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program in 2017 alarmed local educators so much that a small group of us organized efforts to protect undocumented families.

Whiteness was apparent in the lack of representation across Crossroads; it was also embodied in the historical and geographical framework of the community. I talked to several long-term residents who spoke about this town being a sundown town, with signs posted on the outskirts of the town limits well into the 1960s. As of 2019, Black families accounted for just 1.5% of the town’s population.

As a public school teacher, what struck me was the way my students of color were misrepresented and discriminated against, even by their teachers. A teacher was formally written up for using the n-word with a student. A group of Latinx students—some of whom were present at the protest—said the head coach of the high school football team publicly asked them if they were able to present green cards. If not, they would not be able to play on the high school team the following year. All of them were born in this town, and none of them went out for the team, even though they had played through middle school. I reported the incident to the principal and the district union president. The coach was never reprimanded or held accountable. Another student who was present at the protest had reported to me that a bus driver demanded she and her friends only speak using English on the bus, claiming it was suspicious that they spoke Spanish around him. I also reported this incident. Histories of racism are woven into the fields, the asphalt, the parks, the courthouse, and the school classrooms, needling histories of discrimination and oppressive power constructs into the very fabric of this community, affecting families and students.

#### Positionality

The impetus of my research study came out of wanting to center youth in this rural community who were disrupting and defying stereotypes, including my own, of youth and rurality. The decision to choose my hometown as a site of engagement was intentional. I was committed to reflexively considering the ways in which my own positionality situated this research, as well as how my positionality shaped the outcomes of my research. As a researcher, educator, and activist, I have, as Zamudio et al. (2009) stated, “a theoretical understanding and a political belief rooted in experience that activism and protest is transformative”

<sup>3</sup> I use the pseudonym “Crossroads” to protect the identity of my former students, as some of them pictured are minors and undocumented, and also to highlight the intersections of geography, race, and literacy these students navigate. Geographically, this community is also at the intersection of two U.S. highways.

(p. 106). I was a participant-observer at this protest—as a former public school teacher and longtime community resident and activist.

As I had done community organizing in our town, I was asked to help co-organize this protest by providing logistical support around city policies and permit issues. I helped organize the event, but even more significant in terms of my positionality was that these teenage protesters were mostly my former students. I taught at the public middle school for several years through 2018. I knew many of these students and their stories, especially the students who led the chants and were looked to as *de facto* leaders. Their activism was a potential disruption to the dominant discourse on rurality and youth that must be further examined, and I was motivated to center their stories and analyze more closely the ways in which they protested and communicated with their signs and emplacement of bodies.

In this research study, I acknowledge my nuanced privileges, membership access, and geographical situatedness, all of which afforded me the opportunity to conduct this research. I recognize my own critical orientation toward this project, as well as my historical praxis of implementing culturally responsive pedagogy in classrooms with these students. My upbringing in this region—specifically, my own youth experience in this community—influenced the ways in which I experienced and observed the placemaking practices of youth protesters. In high school, I was surrounded by predominantly white neighbors and classmates. I did not realize or understand the disparities that existed socioeconomically in our community until I returned to live here as an adult.

It is important for me to share my own positionality so that I reflexively continue to position myself within this research. I commit to working to amplify and advocate for youth who are marginalized in multiple ways, including Latinx students in this specific context. I continue to question and reflect on my own positionality, my historical experiences, and the ways in which I co-construct space.

### **Data Collection**

In this study I analyzed publicly sourced photographs of the grassroots Black Lives Matter protest, focusing on students and their signs. These photos ranged in proximity from the entire layout of the protest at a given moment, as in Figure 1, to focusing on students' positions and signs, as seen in Figures 2, 3, and 4 (pp. 45–46).

I turned to social media, both Facebook and Instagram, and looked for photos that had tagged the Black Lives Matter Crossroads event or posted directly to that social media page. This search led me to photos from local radio and news media sites, as well as a few participants with public sites. I gathered 42 photos and began a process of

looking for images of Latinx students and their signs. Using my participation and observation at the protest as a way of checking, the photos I gathered showed multiple angles and perspectives that encompassed the range of action at the site of engagement.

I acknowledge, however, that one limitation of analyzing photographs of an event is that not all aspects of the protest were captured, as the action at the protest was constantly moving and changing. As a former teacher, I had the unique opportunity and positionality to be able to recognize most of the protestors as my former students, even with their face masks. Not all participants at the protest were my former students, but the vast majority of students in attendance either had me as a teacher or knew me from a school-related setting.

### **Data Analysis**

This study used a geosemiotics approach (Scollon & Scollon, 2003) for data analysis. First, I analyzed each image according to the three main systems of geosemiotics: interaction order, visual semiotics, and place semiotics. I adapted a rubric (Pierce, 2009) and used it as a guide for initial analysis each image. These analyses can be found in the article appendix.

After my first analysis, I mapped each image according to Scollon and Scollon's (2003) geosemiotic mapping process to reveal how these three systems interworked to produce a social action. The reason for the mapping of each image was to show how place is a significant factor in an action's meaning. On each image, I indicated the interaction order, visual semiotics, and place semiotics, demonstrating how these systems interacted together to co-construct a social action within a place, noting that "the full utility of a geosemiotic analysis is only achieved when interaction order, visual semiotics, and place semiotics are attended to simultaneously" (Whittingham, 2019, p. 69).

Each image included a number of social actions, as each contained multiple interactions among various social actors. Every one of these social actions could be analyzed according to a geosemiotic approach. For the purposes of this study, I specifically focused my attention on looking at the social action of Latinx youth and their signs in each image to explore and understand the complexities and intersectionalities of Latinx youth as protesters. The mappings were created using Google Drawing.

In this round of analysis, using Scollon and Scollon's (2003) geosemiotic mapping process I identified the elements to reveal the action taking place in this space. However, these mappings did not help me identify the significance of the emplacement and co-construction of space. I needed to identify and analyze the ways in which meaning was being co-constructed and also understand

**Figure 1***Site of Engagement: Local Black Lives Matter Protest*

the discourses in place. To this end, I used nexus analysis (Scollon & Scollon, 2004). As Wohlwend (2020) explained, “Nexus analysis is the critical analysis of literacies that move and matter, that is, it unpacks how people enact and mobilize meanings that largely go without saying” (p. ii). It provides methods for closely examining literacies in motion in multimodal texts, including photographs.

Nexus analysis is a helpful method when one seeks to understand the literacies and power relations communicated through spaces, materials, action, and bodies (Wohlwend 2020). Informed by Bourdieu’s (1977) notion of *habitus*, nexus analysis focuses on the mediated action of social actors within a space (Scollon & Scollon, 2004). Nexus analysis offers a way of examining bodies, discourses, and the ways in which people interact in a space to reveal what embodied and historical practices are expected for belonging, as well as who is potentially included and excluded based on their actions. Nexus analysis allowed me to consider the various

discourses at play among Latinx students as they protested for Black Lives Matter in the rural Midwest.

Situated in nexus analysis, I annotated each photograph to identify the predominant signs (Whittingham, 2021). I used Google Drawing and openly coded each identified sign according to the apparent discourses in place. Every discourse is not represented in the photographs presented below, and some signs represent multiple discourses simultaneously. I used axial coding methods to make connections and validate the integrity of the emergent themes across the images. I looked across images, mapping analyses, and codings to identify emerging themes and patterns.

### Findings

Figures 2, 3, and 4 are images from the analysis. I chose to feature these images in this article, as they show several

of the discourses in place and exhibit the patterns and themes that I identified. I used Google Drawing to conceal unmasked faces in the images to protect protestors' security and safety.

### **(Disruption of) Discourses in Place**

From analyzing the interaction order, visual semiotics, and place semiotics across images, one resounding theme was the ways in which Latinx students complicated or disrupted discourses in place. I identified these themes as discourses of order and place and discourses of protest.

#### *Discourses of Order and Place*

Importance of order and place was noted in the interaction orders visible across these images. Protesters were organized into rows. In Figures 2 and 4, most of the protesters stood in the grass, closer to the courthouse. When the students arrived, the neat, orderly lines were replaced, but a line is still recognizable. The crowd of youth stood together. This line of youth shifted from the grass and reached the edge of the sidewalk, still forming a line. As seen in Figure 3, the social distance between each person decreased, but there was still a long row of students. Once

again, youth maintained discourses in place set by the community. They were on the sidewalk, not in the street or among motorists, gathered together where they were publicly allowed to gather. Some of their feet hung over the sidewalk, but they stayed on the sidewalk, in the place where they were told they could legally gather. The sidewalk was the border that kept order, even within a protest—a border to which protesters adhered. Shifting the protest from the grass to the sidewalk was a noticeable disruption in the discourse of order in place.

The Latinx teenager foregrounded in Figure 3 further disrupted the discourses in place, moving his body in such a way that it was out in front of the others. This boy positioned himself in front of the crowd, reached out over the sidewalk, bending his body to do so. In Figure 2, three Latinx teenagers stood at the front edge of the sidewalk, close to the street. Behind them was a traffic light. From the perspective of this photograph and the noticeable interaction orders, there was considerable distance between these three boys and the rest of the protesters.

At first protesters were organized into what appeared to be neat rows, starting at the back edge of the sidewalk and working up into the grass on the courthouse lawn. As a participant-observer, I noticed this arrangement when I was in attendance. People could easily move in and out of the

**Figure 2**

*Honk for BLM*



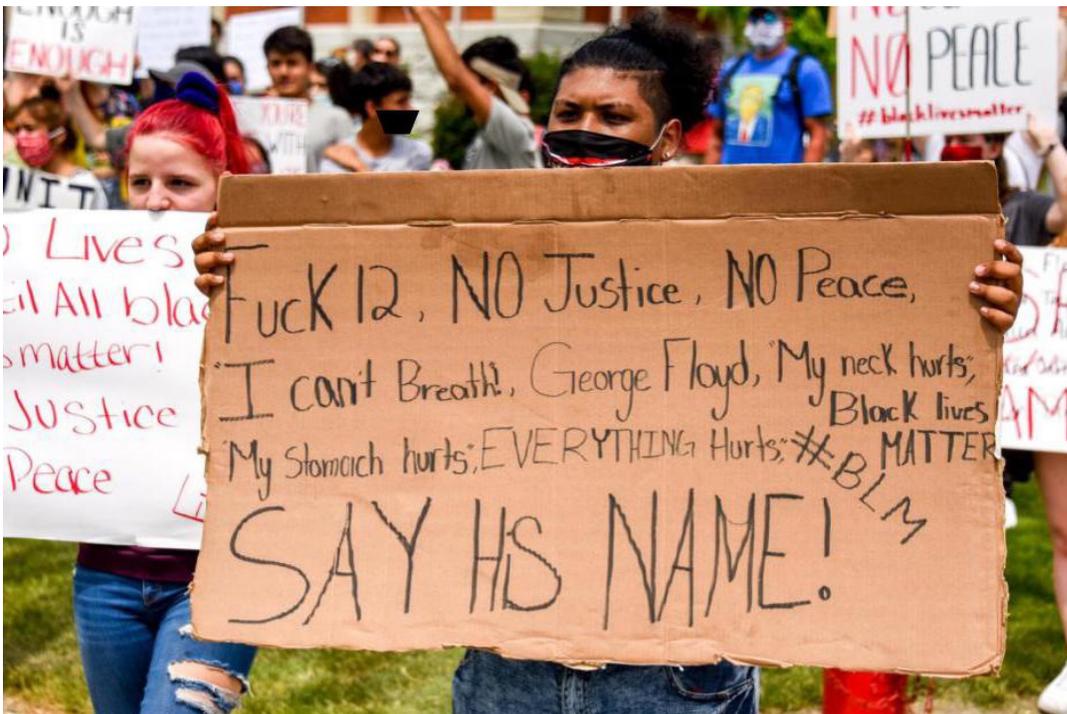
**Figure 3**

*If You're Not With Us, You're Against Us*



**Figure 4**

*Say His Name*



rows without bothering or touching people next to them. COVID-19 could have influenced the interaction order here. The salient interaction was how the three Latinx teenagers broke rank with the rest of the protesters but still stayed in a line—an impenetrable line in which they stood much closer to each other (Figure 2).

Within the crowd of protesters (Figure 3), there was not much interaction. Rather, the crowd gave the impression of a type of collective performance. In the crowd, no one seemed to be talking to each other or even looking at each other. There was a noticeable lack of social interpersonal action taking place in this image. The only indication that synchronous activity was not taking place is the protesters' gaze. They were clearly a collective body at a platform event (Goffman, 1983), standing together. Everyone was facing forward; some participants looked straight ahead, others looked off to something happening on the side, and some looked to the three boys and the photographer. The three boys emplaced themselves in the intersection, away from the other protesters, disrupting the discourse of order in place, but again maintaining order by forming a new line. In Figure 4, rows were visible, and the Latinx student emplaced himself on the sidewalk, in front of the other protesters.

The observed expectation of the Black Lives Matter protest in Crossroads was to organize neatly in rows, away from the street and closer to the courthouse. These rows suggested parameters of belonging. Though the three Latinx boys broke rank, they still followed certain community rules and community discourses in place. Each of these protesters stayed on the sidewalk. They did not go up to cars or walk into the street. They were at the intersection but did not interfere with the flow of traffic. However, these teenagers began a shift, purposefully designing signs and emplacing themselves closest to the road in an intersection to communicate and solicit interaction with vehicle drivers. Although the spatial organization of the protest was predetermined by adults, Latinx youth movement was "autonomous of adult influence" (Whittingham, 2019, p. 68), therefore disrupting these discourses in place.

### *Discourses of Protest*

The design of these Latinx students' signs and the emplacement of their signs and bodies out in front and at the intersection—even if it meant being separated from the rest of the protesters—suggested an agential purpose in their protest. One consideration was how they were the farthest away from the county courthouse, with their backs toward it. The courthouse is a place that serves as a symbol of the institutional and systemic racism that affects people of color in this community, yet the protesters' attention was

not toward the institutions. Their signs were all written in English, and not one was in Spanish, despite the fact that almost 30% of Latinx students here hail from Spanish-speaking families. The three boys emplaced themselves as close to the intersection as they could without being in the street. Their intent and reach were not seemingly directed at bureaucrats and policymakers, nor at all residents of Crossroads. Their emplacement and sign designs suggested that their calls for action and solidarity were for white non-protesting residents. These students seemed to demand a response from passing white drivers to act in solidarity and identify themselves as either antiracist or, if they failed to honk, racist.

The emplacement of these signs and bodies reinforced how "objects in place contribute to the production of space" (Whittingham, 2019, p. 68). The design of these signs was with the place in mind and for a specific purpose—not just to stand and declare themselves in solidarity with Black Lives Matter, but to solicit a reaction from their community and call residents to antiracist action. The emplacement and design of signs also worked together to make meaning of the intended audience. Protesters faced approaching traffic—traffic of community members who were not protesting—and held their signs at eye level of passing drivers. These signs, while suggesting solidarity with Black Lives Matter, were designed to interact with people who would not be protesting alongside them. With messages such as "Honk for BLM" and "Honk if you're not racist," they called drivers to antiracist action. Although they did not emplace their bodies directly into the street, the protesters designed signs that forced drivers to make a decision: either drivers honked to show their solidarity, or they did not honk. Figure 3's sign focused drivers' attention by changing the color of the words *with* and *against*. These signs suggested a rigid dichotomy between being racist and antiracist without leaving any room to be in between, and these messages seemed to be for white residents. This approach disrupted the discourse in place of solidarity by extending the purpose of gathering to garner action and response from passing motorists.

### **Protest Literacies and Social Practice**

I want to state that I proceed with caution in this section, as my analysis of social and cultural practices of these youth activists is based on my observations. A follow-up focus group session with these students is planned but has been perpetually delayed due to COVID-19. There is no way of knowing the full depth and intentionality of students' design choices without talking to them. However, not mentioning the observed literacies that youth protesters practiced in this space would seem to be a disservice

when considering students' intersectionalities and depth of knowledge conveyed in their acts of protest and sign design in this space.

Noticing students' design choices and emplacement creates opportunities for understanding how students use semiotic resources to demonstrate knowledge and critical understanding of issues like racism and social justice (Siegel, 2012). Thus, to highlight their complexities and how they communicate antiracism through community protest, I provide an initial analysis, mentioning themes of social and cultural practices that emerged in this space situated in my own observation using nexus analysis.

### ***Cultural and Historical Knowledge of Racism***

Hashtagged words, phrases, and acronyms were typically found on social media posts related to the protest. In Figures 2 and 4, #BLM referred to an online social knowledge which, when emplaced at a protest supported by and formed in part by a social media movement, showed a discourse in place (Gee, 1996; Scollon & Scollon, 2003; Wohlwend, 2020). Not only were the protesters indicating a social media presence, but they were also using the hashtag to show support and solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement. Figure 4's sign included both "Black lives MATTER" and "#BLM." This text further delineated the usage of #BLM as a social media signifier in support of the Black Lives Matter movement while also declaring that Black lives matter.

Figure 4 situated this protester's solidarity with several causes that pointed to the protester's deeper knowledge of anti-Black racism. The first phrase on his sign was "Fuck12," an anti-police reference made popular by Atlanta-based hip hop artists such as Gucci Mane and Migos starting as early as 2015 (Sargent, 2020). This student used hip hop discourse to situate the murder of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter protest. "NO Justice, NO Peace" can be understood as a reference to riots in the 1980s in New York, after which it became a ubiquitous protest movement slogan (Zimmer, 2013). It was unclear to what historical depth this protesting student situated this phrase, but its use suggested that his solidarity and protest moved beyond the murder of George Floyd and was a protest of anti-Black racism. "I can't breath[e]" was associated with George Floyd's murder but has been uttered by many other victims of police brutality, perhaps most often previously attributed to Eric Garner upon his death in 2014 (Wedell et al., 2020). In Figure 4, George Floyd's name was in the center, surrounded by the statements he made to police while he was held down. The largest words on the sign were "SAY HIS NAME!"—written in all capital letters and centered on the bottom of the sign. While this sign communicated a protest for George

Floyd, it also pointed to greater cultural understandings about anti-Black racism and police brutality.

In Figure 3, the phrase "If you're not with us, you're against us" suggested layers and histories of cultural meaning. It draws from Biblical texts (the book of Matthew). This polarizing phraseology has also been used in politics, stated in recent years by George W. Bush at the launch of his anti-terrorism campaign (Voice of America, 2009). It has been used in pop culture and in song lyrics (Rossdale, 2008). While analysis cannot determine the historical and contextual knowledge the protester means by holding this sign, this phrase indexed sociocultural relevance outside of the Black Lives Matter protest.

The red and black words on white background on this foregrounded sign chosen by the designer conveyed an intensity and boldness (Figure 3). The words "with" and "against" were the only words in black, and the sign included no hashtags or slogans specifically indexing it to the Black Lives Matter movement. This Latinx boy positioned himself in front of the crowd of protesters and faced dozens of passing motorists. His face mask was pulled down. The use of "us" indicates that this protest was an expression of solidarity, but it also suggests a personal identity. "Us" included at least himself. Because of the emplacement of the sign and protester, this sign indexed a social history of marginalization in this community.

### ***Religious Knowledge***

In Figure 2, the framing of words on the sign on the left suggests that this protesting youth situated Black Lives Matter as a moral and spiritual issue. In visual semiotics, sometimes frames connect and disconnect elements or indicate belonging in certain cultural contexts (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006). The sign here included a scripture reference, Matthew 18:10–14, and the text inside the framed box stated, "Jesus left the herd to keep one safe! Why can't you?" "Why can't you?" appears to be a message directed as passing motorists. #BLM and the scripture reference were outside the frame and joined together. Based on this sign's design, analysis suggested that this protester used faith and religion to argue the moral imperative of Black Lives Matter and to situate his question of solidarity to the larger community.

### ***School-Related Practices***

Latinx youth indexed school-related practices in a few ways at this protest. In Figure 2, two signs actively solicited responses from drivers: "Honk for BLM" and "Honk if you're not racist." "Honk for BLM" was a message specifically for passing drivers, and it also served as a rally

cry among protesters. “Honk for BLM” elicited responses in the form of car horns, which drivers often honked for the duration of the protest. Student protesters erupted into a symphony of cheers every time a vehicle honked. As a participant-observer, it reminded me of a pep rally or a football game: eliciting a response from the crowd in support of a team or group and cheering when they received a response.

There was a direct intent to target these signs toward passing drivers—these student protesters designed the signs to provoke responses from non-protesting residents. Not included in images provided for this article, another image showed one of these same students holding a small, white megaphone, the same kind used by cheerleaders and at pep rallies at the local high school. These protest practices indexed school-related practices of garnering support and collectively gathering to rally in support of their cause or team.

### Discussion

Through analysis and diagramming, geosemiotics focused on the interconnectedness of visual semiotics, place semiotics, and interaction order of Latinx youth and how all three worked to produce social action. Social action refers to social change (Scollon & Scollon, 2003). When examining youth involvement in a rural Black Lives Matter protest in the New Latino Diaspora in the Midwest, geosemiotics was helpful in focusing on the social action and noticing how place, relationships, and text worked together to make meaning. Nexus analysis was helpful in identifying discourses in place and paying attention to the ways in which Latinx youth disrupted expectations in this place of protest. This approach can be a resource to future researchers who seek to understand the complexities and intricacies of Latinx youth activism.

Analyzing how Latinx youth placed themselves at this protest demonstrates the need for researchers to consider the importance of place, not just from a rurality standpoint but as a semiotic system that dictates and shapes meaning. Latinx youth were agents of their own activism, breaking rank and moving into the intersection to be seen and heard, even if meant disrupting discourses in place. The social action in this place calls into mind bell hooks (2014), who wrote, “What is new is our visibility, our speaking out without change, our solidarity” (p. 122). Latinx youth communicated social, cultural, and historical practices through the choices of their signs, the emplacement of their signs and their bodies, and how they interacted with others. Their commitment to Black Lives Matter in this way elucidated the importance of studying rural activism and the numerous ways in which students resist in their towns.

Students’ intersectionalities were visible in several ways at this protest. These Latinx teens separated themselves from the other protesters, inserting themselves into places of greater visibility and holding signs that called for action and called out inaction. These teenagers situated their own identities into their protesting by bringing in their religious beliefs and situating racism as a “for us or against us” issue. They seemed to use knowledge of school practices, as well as hip hop knowledge and social media literacies, to increase support for Black Lives Matter. These intersections of youth, race, religion, school, culture, social media, and activism are just some of the ways local youth navigate space in this rural community.

As a former teacher watching some of my former students protest and then closely examining their activism in new ways, I was aware of the multiple marginalizations Latinx youth navigated in Crossroads. These teenagers were from Spanish-speaking households in areas of higher poverty within the community. I thought back to the day after Trump was elected president in 2016. As a teacher, I observed white kids waving Trump flags and shouting things at Latinx students like “Build the wall!” in the cafeteria. The racist rhetoric was egregious. I canceled my lesson plans, and we spent the time in circle talks and critically engaged in texts and projects focused on issues of race, inclusivity, empathy, and citizenship for the rest of the year.

Racism toward Brown and Black people in this rural community is not just on the margins—it is made hyper-visible as immigration policies keep kids and families on the borders in cages, and politicians intentionally use criminalizing and dangerous rhetoric when publicly speaking about immigrants (Rizzo, 2019). This discourse is felt both nationally and locally. The public activism of these Latinx teenagers can be seen and felt as a challenge to a discourse that threatens to delegitimize their value, citizenship, and cultural equity. Holding the sign, “Honk if you’re not racist,” the protester challenged the dominant views of racism by asking white community drivers to honk if they are not. These signs seem to remove the supposed middle ground—the ability to be colorblind or to turn away from facing the realities of racism in this community, fueled by local and national rhetoric and discrimination. These Latinx youth exercised both individual and collective agency in their protests.

Through their practice of what I refer to as *protest literacies*—a culmination of social, cultural, textual, and historical knowledge used to challenge dominant power structures—Latinx students as activists disrupted multiple discourses on both local and national levels. Their activism defied assumptions of rural middle America as homogenous and conservative. It challenged the ways in which Latinx youth in rural places were culturally stereotyped. These

disruptions of discourse and protest literacies can be reframed as strengths and assets to this rural town. Latinx youth knew how to behave, displaying cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986); knowing the rules well enough to break them in powerful ways shifted the protest and resulted in their obtaining positions of power, enabling them to renegotiate the power structures within the community and the protest itself (Wohlwend, 2020). When students exercised agency during the protest and shifted attention from the grass to the intersection, they complicated but did not completely disrupt discourses of order. They still contained themselves inside the geographical boundaries of the protest. They still somewhat formed lines. Analyzing the spatial practices of Latinx youth at this protest is one area that deserves further attention.

While a geosemiotics approach afforded an opportunity to identify social action in a place, geosemiotics and social semiotics in general have limitations. This research focused in part on the ways in which protest signs could index meaning, and geosemiotics was helpful in identifying ways in which interaction of bodies and emplacement influenced a sign's meaning. However, identifying social action was not enough to understand the multiple intersectionalities of Latinx youth and the ways in which they were disrupting discourse. Combining geosemiotics and nexus analysis was one way to bridge the microanalysis and macroanalysis, identifying here-and-now mediated action while also recognizing that action and texts could be pointing to greater meaning. The use of geosemiotics here was an initial response at viewing Latinx youth who were protesting for Black Lives Matter in the rural Midwest.

Corbett (2015) argued that understanding new, fluid forms of rurality and literacy and the relationship between them is essential. Researching rural literacies is still in developing stages and exists in small circles across the globe, including in the United States (Corbett & Donehower, 2017). Corbett and Donehower (2017) highlighted how rural literacies research that focuses on material engagements is relatively new and needed in future scholarship. This study analyzed youth, rurality, and activism and pushed the boundaries of the conceptualizations of literacy and rurality, drawing on students' historical, cultural, and social practices and observing how they use this knowledge to make meaning in a space of protest.

A significant gap exists in education research on resistance of youth in rural places (Woods, 2003). Studies involving Latinx youth as protesters in a rural, Rust Belt town in the Midwest, part of the New Latino Diaspora, are rare. Greater attention is needed to places like the New Latino Diaspora in the Midwest to understand cultural, historical, and social trajectories of antiracist action in support of Black lives beyond this time and place, and to consider how historically marginalized youth are responding, changing,

and leading the action in rural places. Further research on youth in these communities will continue to challenge and expand our understanding of race, rurality, and youth.

### Conclusion

This study calls attention not just to rural students, but specifically to rural Latinx youth to disrupt cultural assumptions—a relevant and timely issue as education researchers focus on dismantling systemic hierarchies that perpetuate racism in our institutions and communities. As long as deficit language and assumptions about youth regarding race, gender, class, and geography remain, education research must continue to find ways to uncover new meanings and findings that help reframe the way equity is perceived and power is wielded. Latinx youth in this rural Rust Belt Midwestern town protested for Black lives. Their participation—their protest sign design choices, where they emplaced themselves, and to whom they communicated—influenced and shifted an entire community protest. Findings suggest that Latinx youth used cultural knowledge and social and historical practices to make meaning in this place of protest, calling white community residents to antiracist action. Examining teens as activists in public rural spaces can add to our understanding of literacy, rurality, and the intersectionalities of youth as they resist racism and call for action.

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### Appendix

**Table 1**

*Geosemiotic Analysis Rubric*

Geosemiotic analysis factors	Descriptors
Interaction order	Body gloss; embodiment; movement mapping; markers; personal fronts; civil inattention; monochronism/polychronism; people processing and gatekeeping encounters; types of activity involvement; platform events; and singles/withs.
Visual semiotics	Eye/body vectors; body movement; information/ material modality; information salience and placement; material indexicality, inscription, and information code preference
Place semiotics	Discourse in time/space; code preference; inscription; emplacement; use of body, items, perceptual spaces, and personal distance to create social performances and personal fronts; item indexicality; item placement issues.

*Note.* Adapted from Pierce (2009).

**Table 2**  
*Geosemiotics Analysis for Figure 2*

Geosemiotic analysis factors	Descriptors
Interaction order	<p>Protesters are organized into lines.            3 Latinx boys together but separated from the rest of the protest crowd, still in a line.            Arms and signs overlapping each other.            Standing in a line across the sidewalk.            The next row of protesters is at the back of the large sidewalk, a considerable distance apart and to the right, more in front of the courthouse than the intersection.            The other protesters file behind in the grass.            Rows organized neatly.            No social interpersonal action happening in the frame, but 2 boys engage with the photographer.            All bodies facing forward.</p>
Visual semiotics	<p>Two of the boys' eyes gaze straight into the camera.            The boy to the right is facing to the side and smiling.            The other two boys wear masks.            Behind them, bodies face forward but gazes are in several directions: forward, to the boys/photographer, and to the side.            Honk for BLM in the center of the image.            #BLM sign: cardboard and black marker.            Salient points are #BLM and the question mark.            Framing separates the statement from #BLM and the Bible passage. Honk for BLM: No hashtag.            Saturation of neon and black.            Materiality again typical of protests: black permanent marker on thick cardstock paper.            Saliency is M.            BLM is indented, almost centered.            Third sign: Honk if you're not racist.            Written in single strokes with black permanent marker on white poster board.            All three signs are held at eye level of a vehicle driver.            Boys are situated in front of the traffic pole that signals an intersection on the second busiest street in the city.</p>
Place semiotics	<p>Boys standing out in front of crowd, a considerable distance away, closest to the road.            Traffic pole shows they are at the intersection.            They stand together, but the boy holding the neon sign is in front.            The two boys grip their signs with both hands, hunched over.            Their proximity is closer to the road and further from the courthouse.            Middle of the day on a Friday.            Hashtags, Bible verses, acronyms.            Situated semiotics.</p>

**Table 3***Geosemiotics Analysis for Figure 3*

Geosemiotic analysis factors	Descriptors
Interaction order	<p>Performing as part of a collective.</p> <p>Gaze is focused, indicating involvement.</p> <p>Mask is pulled down of boy in center, as are several other participants in this shot.</p> <p>Students all grouped together.</p> <p>Vast majority of students looking in the same direction. Noticeable exception is boy with his head down (civic inattention?).</p> <p>Lack of social verbal interaction, with the exception of the participant turned toward a distant protester with his mask down. Signholder is not meeting eye contact but rather looking off toward the side, as are most of the other participants.</p> <p>Latinx boy is in front, leaning forward with his body.</p>
Visual semiotics	<p>Materiality is smaller posterboard and red and black permanent marker.</p> <p>High saturation.</p> <p>High tonal contrast.</p> <p>Capital letters.</p> <p>Thick, single stroke lines. No punctuation.</p> <p>“If you’re not with us you’re against us.”</p> <p>“With” and “against” are only words in black.</p> <p>Gaze is past the camera.</p> <p>Arm is taut and firmly holds sign on the side.</p> <p>Other hand does not appear as firmly grasping the side of the poster.</p> <p>Equal spacing among words.</p> <p>Words take up majority of space on the poster.</p>
Place semiotics	<p>Appears to be all youth standing together.</p> <p>Standing in somewhat of a line.</p> <p>Standing now on the front edge of the sidewalk.</p> <p>Emplaced on the front line of protesters.</p> <p>Boy positions body so as to lean forward—body leans forward into the road.</p> <p>Holds sign at eye level of passing cars.</p> <p>Boy looking down holds sign above his head, away from his body. He faces the ground, a sign of civil inattention.</p> <p>Capital letters on sign.</p> <p>Freshness of sign.</p> <p>Situated semiotics.</p>

**Table 4**  
*Geosemiotics Analysis for Figure 4*

Geosemiotic analysis factors	Descriptors
Interaction order	<p>Latinx teen out in front of other protesters.            “With” as a platform event; within platform event, unable to determine.            Two protesters in front gazing out into the street in front of them            All gazes, all bodies are looking in the same direction of all protesters with the notable exception of the two in the center background.            Those in front focused on what is in front, not on the photographer.</p>
Visual semiotics	<p>Noticeable size of the sign; takes up not just personal space but significant space on either side of the body of the protester.            Materiality: thin, large cardboard. Ripped on the sides.            Black permanent marker.            Written from left to right but also diagonally and clustered.            Most salient: “Say HiS NAME!”—all capital letters and font size.            Capital “NO” Justice, “NO” Peace            George Floyd is in the center of the layout of the sign.            Sign uses several slogans associated with Black Lives Matter movement.            Sign uses both Black Lives Matter and #BLM.            Sign intersperses quotations, names, hashtags, and phrases of solidarity.</p>
Place semiotics	<p>Sign indexes social media usage.            Sign indexes social media--sociopolitical campaigns and movements.            Latinx teen stands in front of a hydrant. Sidewalk is visible. Standing on the sidewalk near the intersection.            From photograph’s perspective, considerable distance between the Latinx teen, the white girl, and the rest of the protesters.            Place shows social acceptability of moving around during protest.</p>