Youth Participatory Action Research as Praxis, Relationality, and Resistance: A Counter-Hegemonic Methodology for Addressing Intersecting Identities Among Youth of Color

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Abstract: Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) functions as a counter-hegemonic methodology that operationalizes youth-led inquiry, intersectional analysis, and community-based action. Drawing from critical analysis of YPAR's principles and practices, I examine how the methodology creates transformative spaces for youth of color to resist structural violence by developing culturally responsive resources and interventions. Disrupting traditional research hierarchies by centering youth of color as knowledge producers, YPAR embodies healing praxis, care-based relationality, and abolitionist resistance to carceral logics embedded in educational institutions. I demonstrate how YPAR's intersectional framework addresses the multiple, overlapping systems of oppression that youth of color navigate, offering a methodological alternative that prioritizes community-based solutions over punitive regressions.

In the United States, educational resources provided for youth of color have often lacked quality, accessibility, substance, and cultural sensitivity. More troubling, traditional research methodologies used to evaluate these resources frequently reproduce the same oppressive structures they claim to address. Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) offers a counter-hegemonic methodology that operationalizes healing, care, and abolition frameworks by addressing the intersecting identities and structural inequities experienced by youth of color. YPAR accomplishes counter-hegemony by centering youth of color as knowledge producers, disrupting traditional research hierarchies, and creating spaces for intersectional analysis that challenges the structural violence embedded in educational institutions. To understand YPAR's transformative potential, we must first examine the sociopolitical and educational contexts that necessitate engaging marginalized youth as agents who are actively involved in all aspects of participatory action research (Rodriguez and Brown, 2009). In the contemporary United States, people are systematically encouraged to fear those who are economically disadvantaged or different as media portrayals depict them as alien and dangerous. This narrative serves to rationalize the widespread incarceration of working-class and impoverished populations, concealing underlying racial, ethnic, and class biases deeply ingrained in the United States' structures of opportunity (Love, 2023).

Since its inception, public education in the United States was never designed to educate citizens for democratic participation. It was, instead, conceived as a tool to safeguard power and suppress ideas. Contemporary American education continues to realize this unfortunate choice of educational ideal through high-stakes testing, zero-tolerance policies, standardized curricula, and other forms of modern scientific racism. Schools become carceral institutions to justify the continued captivity of minoritized groups. Love (2023) describes how the punitive power of educational reform has been consolidated over the last couple of centuries, marking the Reagan era as a breaking point in unjust educational reform. Reagan's war on drugs and the "American super predator" were effectively translated into education reform, turning a century of White supremacist subjugation into a newly branded form of systematic captivation that became mass incarceration. Private, for-profit prison corporations quickly turned toward educational institutions, crafting "the school-to-prison pipeline" through neoliberal education reform. The need to fill prisons for profit transformed public education into a recruitment mechanism to

ensure an ongoing and profitable supply of prisoner populations. For youth of color, carceral educational institutions function as sites of racial trauma not learning. Students from lower socio-economic strata, disproportionately of color, are more likely to struggle with discipline, academic achievement, attendance, and high-stakes tests. As Love (2023, p.142) illustrates through the story of Kia, a Black doctoral student who grew up in Chicago, the price Black girls pay for expressing their "Black girl magic" is criminalization in institutions that are supposed to be home places. When 15-year-old Kia arrived late to school due to a family emergency, a school resource officer "seized her by the shirt collar and book bag, pulled her out of the crowded classroom, and threw her against the hallway lockers. [then] handcuffed Kia and took her to a nearby precinct." Kia's experience demonstrates how marginalization and criminalization of youth intensifies their sense of helplessness, felt in their lack of influence over decisions about their everyday lives, particularly within educational institutions. As attacks on freedoms of marginalized youth escalate, personal agency to shape their everyday lives, especially within school systems, dwindles (Brown and Rodriguez, 2009).

Connecting Critical Consciousness, Relational Praxis, and Structural Transformation

Healing emerges as a fundamental framework for evaluating resources designed for youth of color. Ginwright (2011) conceptualizes healing as the fundamental process of reinstating both individual and communal health and well-being. Within this framework, healing becomes a crucial facet of civic engagement, particularly pertinent in contexts where pervasive issues such as poverty, racism, and violence pose significant threats to the vitality of Black communities. Persistent experiences of trauma, coupled with feelings of hopelessness and nihilism, serve as barriers to active participation in organized collective efforts aimed at dismantling oppressive structures and fostering societal transformation (hooks, 1993). Healing, therefore, necessitates the cultivation of critical consciousness — a nuanced understanding of the social world rooted in political resistance. This critical consciousness equips youth of color with the necessary tools effectively to confront and challenge racism and various other forms of oppression. Resources that employ these principles provide healing for youth of color and measure their effectiveness by their ability to equip youth with tools to confront oppressive structures and systems.

Beyond tools and critical consciousness, care-based resources offer another framework for evaluating effectiveness. Nolan (2015) draws from care theory, theories of resistance, and culturally responsive pedagogy to develop the concept of care-based resistance. Using Noddings' work (1984, 2002, 2005), Nolan examines the distinction between "caring about" and "caring for," arguing that care theory provides a meaningful way to evaluate support given to Latine youth in public schools. Nolan conceptualizes care as relational theory, asserting that as humans, we desire and learn about being cared for in our early experiences, which provides a foundation for learning to care about others outside our immediate social world. Although "caring about" informs our sense of justice, it remains empty and aloof, and does not serve to cultivate caring relationships. Relational caring occurs in human encounters and is driven by "engrossment" — in schools that means being attuned to what students are feeling and engaged in. Engrossment is inherently dialogic; the educator listens, is receptive, and learns from the students, building trust and confidence through reciprocity. Valenzuela (1999) extends this framework by distinguishing between aesthetic and authentic care in education. Aesthetic care, characterized by insistence on obedience to school norms that potentially conflict with students' worldviews and lived experiences, lacks grounding in relationships understanding of students' perspectives. In contrast, authentic care aligns with an inclusive concept of education, encompassing the

cultivation of moral, social, and personal responsibility as the bedrock for all other forms of learning. Authentic care must be grounded in relationality and morality, resistant to pathologization, criminalization, and the exclusion of groups of people perceived as different.

Abolition provides a third framework for evaluating resources and services provided to communities of color. Woodall and Boeri (2020), evaluating resources employed in a penal framework, demonstrate the usefulness of an abolitionist approach through their anthropological study among drug users undergoing substance dependency treatment. Their findings reveal the intricate ties between recovery services and the criminal justice system, with police involvement in linking individuals to services and treatment centers often operating within prison facilities. This systemic criminal justice connection raises concerns about the perpetuation of control by the carceral state, even in seemingly effective programs. Woodall and Boeri describe the concept of the shadow carceral state — a term capturing the insidious reach of penal power as it extends into "alternative" institutional arrangements, camouflaging punitive measures within administrative sanctions that imperceptibly strip individuals of their liberty. Resources for youth in communities of color should be evaluated by their ability to empower communities to resist and survive the shadow carceral state by providing options that do not collaborate with carceral institutions. Davis (2003) conceptualizes abolition as an alternative approach to crime and punishment, championing a transformative justice system that tackles the root causes behind socially unacceptable actions and marginalization rather than relying on punitive measures. Love (2023) defines abolition in schools as working in solidarity with communities of color by drawing on the imagination, creativity, refusal, remembering, visionary thinking, healing, rebellious spirit, boldness, determination, and subversiveness of youth. Building on the strengths and histories of students of color is how abolition envisions justice, both in and out of school.

YPAR as Counter-Hegemonic Educational Methodology

Youth Participatory Action Research emerged as a reimagining of traditional research methodologies that often excluded the voices and experiences of young people and communities of color. Grounded in critical pedagogy and the broader field of participatory action research (PAR), YPAR can be traced to the 1940s and 1950s; but during the 1970s and 1980s, influenced by critical pedagogy and educators like Paulo Freire (1972), researchers more regularly began engaging young people in critical inquiry and reflection. Brown and Rodriguez (2009) established core principles that underpin YPAR, starting with the foundational belief that research must be "situated and inquiry-based." Gilmore et al. (2023), conceptualize abolitionist geographies as sites that ground PAR in the history, desires, and experiences of local community. PAR is not intended to reform institutions at a macro scale but to foster immediate grassroots research and action that aligns with community desires. Like PAR, YPAR works best when embedded not only geographically but also culturally in the specific social context of the community involved in the research considered in terms of both local structures and a global racial capitalist superstructure. As Brown and Rodriguez (p. 25) point out: "Our PAR work is situated within the social contexts in which our youth researchers live and learn. Their experiences within those contexts drive the personal, political, and intellectual content and the rationale for inquiry and learning. This is in contradistinction to 'test prep pedagogy', which co-opts learning and subtracts a youth's knowledge from intellectual experience in order to produce higher test scores." YPAR operationalizes healing frameworks by creating spaces for youth to develop critical consciousness through collective inquiry. Unlike traditional research that extracts knowledge from communities, YPAR engages youth as situated human beings who

desire to enhance the quality of their lives. The methodology fosters civic engagement by providing platforms for youth to analyze their experiences of oppression and develop strategies for resistance. This healing dimension becomes evident in how YPAR studies address trauma while building collective power. Rather than pathologizing youth experiences, YPAR creates opportunities for shared analysis that transforms individual pain and frustration into collective understanding and action. The research process itself becomes a site of restoration, where youth reclaim their capacity to name their realities and envision alternatives.

YPAR embodies authentic care through its commitment to reciprocal relationships between adult facilitators and youth researchers. The methodology refuses the aesthetic care that demands conformity to institutional norms, instead creating spaces where youth perspectives and experiences drive the research agenda. This represents a fundamental shift from traditional research relationships in which adults extract information from youth towards collaborative partnerships where knowledge is co-constructed. Unlike traditional research focused on outcomes, YPAR prioritizes the relationships and learning that occur throughout the research journey. Adult facilitators must practice "engrossment," being genuinely attuned to what youth are experiencing and learning from the insights of young people rather than imposing predetermined frameworks.

YPAR functions as an abolitionist methodology by refusing collaboration with carceral institutions and logics. The methodology challenges the pathologization of youth of color common in traditional research, instead centering youthful expertise and educated capacity for analysis and action. This represents a fundamental epistemological challenge to dominant research paradigms. No longer does research position youth as problems to be solved. Instead, YPAR enlists youth as agents of change. Aldana and Richards-Schuster (2021) highlight YPAR's powerful intrinsic potential to expand conventional perspectives on research methods in scientific inquiries. YPAR scholarship actively and critically seeks to disrupt the pathologizing narratives that have historically marginalized racialized youth. For example, "urban adolescents" have often been stigmatized as misbehaved, damaged, and dangerous. YPAR reconfigures these power dynamics, advocating for a collaborative approach according to which youth are recognized as experts of their own experiences.

Addressing Intersectional Identities Using YPAR

YPAR's strength lies in its capacity to address the multiple, overlapping systems of oppression that youth of color navigate. The methodology creates space for analyzing how race, gender, class, sexuality, and other identities intersect rather than treating these as separate categories. This intersectional approach recognizes that youth of color experience oppression through multiple, interconnected systems rather than singular identity categories. Recent iterations of YPAR have made this intersectional commitment more explicit. Aldana and Richards-Schuster (2021) urge scholars to reassess their engagement with YPAR, pointing out an initial oversight where many projects were not explicitly framed as antiracist. They advocate for a deliberate process of dialogue and reexamination to ensure that all projects align more closely with critical race methodology, thereby enhancing the antiracist impact of research and actions among youth of color. Aldana and Richard-Schuster articulate specific commitments designed to embed antiracist principles at the core of YPAR endeavors. The first commitment emphasizes recognition of multiple ways of knowing, advocating for openness to diverse and creative epistemologies. This approach challenges conventional reliance on dominant research methods

and the pervasive myth of objectivity, suggesting a more inclusive and flexible framework for knowledge production. The second commitment addresses the need to counter paternalistic dynamics within research, advocating for the creation of equitable spaces that empower youth. By fostering a dialectical process, this commitment ensures that young participants can develop their ideas, amplify their voices, and fully engage in joint decision-making, thereby acknowledging and navigating inherent power dynamics, biases, and privileges within collaborative research settings. The third commitment focuses on the structural dimensions of racism, aiming to cultivate critical consciousness among youth participants, particularly those from Black, Indigenous, and other racially minoritized communities. By centering experiential knowledge, creativity, and voices of young people, YPAR seeks to document and perform intersectional analysis of structural racism, leveraging these insights to drive social change and influence policies, practices, and institutions.

Beyond traditional YPAR, new interpretations have been developed to enhance its transformative potential by widening its scope. Bettencourt (2020) highlights YPAR's powerful liberatory qualities and its opposition to adultism. In the United States, widespread adultism undermines the value of youth perspectives and experiences, contributing to their marginalization. Bettencourt defines adultism as marginalization and objectification of young people, who are often viewed as incapable of expressing their own views and treated as property of adults. Meaningful youth research provides a platform to challenge adultism by empowering young people to express their voices and exercise agency. Unlike traditional educational models that operate within hierarchical structures, YPAR emphasizes recognizing and utilizing the strengths and assets of youth. Research becomes a tool for liberation, especially when approached as a contact zone that incorporates problem-posing education and prioritizes process over outcomes.

Towards Transformative Educational Research Methodology

Despite YPAR's transformative potential, scholars such as Malorni and her co-investigators (2022) critique the ambiguity of YPAR methods. They note that YPAR projects often fail to disclose the steps taken to collect and analyze research findings. Through a systematic literature review of 40 articles discussing YPAR in youth development and out-of-school settings, Malorni et al. identify practices designed to facilitate critical dialogue, power-sharing, and the cultivation of collective identity. However, the opacity of methods can undermine YPAR's epistemological objectives and limit the integration of critical inquiry into actionable outcomes. This lack of transparency can sometimes prevent youth from being meaningfully integrated into crucial aspects of the research process. YPAR projects also face significant limitations based on their institutional settings. Dominguez (2021) notes that school-based Youth Participatory Action Research initiatives face particular challenges. While these projects can serve as catalysts for Latine students to recognize research as a means of effecting transformative changes, they also face constraints imposed by institutional structures. Some studies highlight potential challenges faced by Latine youth, such as feelings of failure and racial battle fatigue, which may hinder their ability to confront present systemic barriers while they participate in studies. Inculcated negativity affects their ability to remain engaged and have transformative experiences within project duration. Moreover, YPAR facilitators must possess robust understanding of YPAR processes to effectively guide youth through the research journey. Inadequately prepared facilitators risk perpetuating injustices rather than mitigating them. The participatory nature of YPAR is shaped by the extent to which young individuals willingly engage in the research

process. While certain studies underscore consistent incorporation of participatory dialogues with youth throughout all stages of PAR projects, other literature presents contradicting evidence, indicating this may not always be the case. Despite well-meaning efforts of educators and researchers, PAR projects are susceptible to flaws that can inadvertently worsen school conditions and impede positive outcomes for youth.

Limitations of specific studies, however, do not compromise YPAR's transformative promise or its overall effectiveness. YPAR offers a blueprint for transforming research methodologies in ways that embody healing, care, and abolition. Rather than treating these as add-on considerations, YPAR demonstrates how these frameworks can be embedded in research design from conception through dissemination. This methodological transformation requires researchers to examine how their approaches either reproduce or challenge systems of oppression. Traditional evaluation metrics for youth programs may perpetuate harm by ignoring structural factors and focusing on individual deficits. YPAR prioritizes community-defined outcomes and transformative processes over standardized measures.

The shift from traditional research to YPAR requires funders, institutions, and researchers to reconsider what constitutes evidence and impact. YPAR's implications extend beyond individual research projects to institutional transformation. Educational institutions must confront their complicity in perpetuating racial and class inequities. YPAR offers a model for transforming institutional practices by centering community expertise and challenging top-down approaches to program development and evaluation. YPAR methodology suggests that meaningful change requires sustained commitment to power-sharing and structural transformation rather than superficial modifications to existing programs. Institutions must be willing to cede control and create authentic partnerships with communities they (claim to) serve. YPAR's evolution continues as scholars and practitioners develop more sophisticated approaches to intersectional analysis and abolitionist practice. Future research should examine how YPAR projects navigate tensions between institutional requirements and abolitionist principles, identifying specific practices that most effectively address intersecting oppressions. Additionally, more research is needed on how YPAR principles can transform traditional academic and community institutions. This includes exploring how the methodology can be adapted across different contexts while maintaining its commitment to youth leadership and structural transformation.

YPAR functions as a counter-hegemonic methodology that operationalizes healing, care, and abolition frameworks through its commitment to youth-led inquiry, intersectional analysis, and community-based action. By centering youth of color as knowledge producers and disrupting traditional research hierarchies, YPAR creates transformative spaces for resisting structural violence while developing culturally responsive resources and interventions. YPAR's intersectional framework addresses the multiple, overlapping systems of oppression that youth of color navigate, offering a methodological alternative that prioritizes community-based solutions over punitive interventions. The methodology embodies healing through its cultivation of critical consciousness, care through its relational approach, and abolition through its refusal of carceral logics. However, YPAR's transformative potential depends on practitioners' commitment to authentic power-sharing and structural transformation. The methodology's limitations — including methodological ambiguity, institutional constraints, and power dynamics — require ongoing attention and critique. Nevertheless, YPAR offers a compelling model for research that serves communities rather than extracting from them. As youth of color continue to face intensifying forms of structural violence, YPAR provides essential tools for resistance and

transformation. The methodology's evolution toward more explicitly antiracist and intersectional approaches suggests promising directions for future development. Ultimately, YPAR demonstrates that research can be a practice of freedom when it embodies the values of healing, care, and abolition that communities deserve.

Statement on Research Positionality

As a member of research communities and to honor the reflexivity essential to YPAR (Brown & Rodriguez, 2009; Dominguez, 2021), I wish to conclude by reflecting on my own positionality as a researcher, along with the love and burdens I bring to this work. I was born on the Ecuadorian coast and identify as an Andean woman of mixed Indigenous, African, and Spanish descent. My family lineage can be traced to the Quechua people, once members of the Incan Empire. I am a queer brown femme raised in Brooklyn, New York, by two immigrant parents. Growing up, my family was affected by various forms of structural violence that significantly compromised the health of two family members during the early 2000s. Although we have since found ways to support each other and alleviate some illness symptoms, there are no perfect solutions. Most of my work with youth and communities of color occurs within education. I have held various positions in primary, secondary, and post-secondary schools. Currently, I am a school leader in a grades 5-8 school in Queens, NY. My experiences working in schools taught me learning is one of the most sustainable and healing practices available to our communities. I approach this work with deep love for teaching and learning, as well as acute awareness of how our quality and access to education can significantly affect our lives and well-being. I also recognize tools for healing already exist within our communities and our ancestral knowledge. My positionality in research is rooted in both yearning and love, as well as burning rage against the injustices surrounding us. My reflexivity is crucial to ensure that my own positionality does not overshadow the stories and actions of research participants. I engage in significant reflective work to ensure that my emotions do not dominate collective efforts. On the other hand, I am also aware that my love and commitment to youth of color will enable me to prioritize the relationships I am eager to develop. The transformative healing that will occur through research is something I deeply desire, yet I approach it with careful consideration. Above all, I look forward to participating in the small incremental steps of building community resources that envision a world where reliance on carceral institutions is no longer necessary.

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