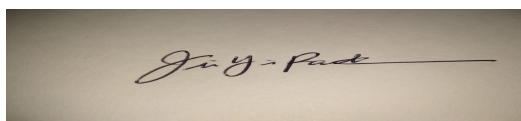


# Sharing Art is Choosing to Love: The Value of Art in Youth Research Spaces

Praxis Project Thesis: Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts — as part of the Community, Youth, and Education Studies Major at Clark University

**Natalia (Nati) Botero**

Committee Signatures:

A photograph of a handwritten signature in dark ink on a light-colored, slightly textured paper. The signature is written in a cursive style and appears to read "Jie Park".

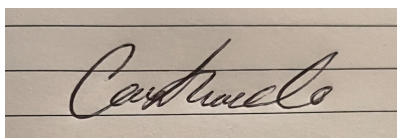
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Dr. Jie Park

A photograph of a handwritten signature in dark ink on a light-colored, slightly textured paper. The signature is written in a cursive style and appears to read "Eric DeMeulenaere".

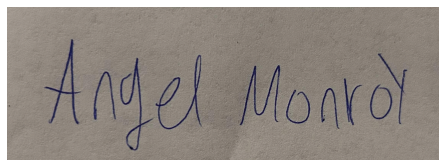
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Dr. Eric DeMeulenaere

A photograph of a handwritten signature in dark ink on a light-colored, slightly textured paper. The signature is written in a cursive style and appears to read "Cathy Alvarado".

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Cathy Alvarado

A photograph of a handwritten signature in dark ink on a light-colored, slightly textured paper. The signature is written in a cursive style and appears to read "Angel Monroy".

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Angel Monroy

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CYES Program, Clark University  
Worcester, MA

### *Abstract*

The objective of my research was to introduce art as a tool for sensemaking in the context of youth research. In doing so, challenges emerged, ripe with epiphanies that I continue to unpack and grapple with throughout this paper. To understand my own facilitation of art-based YPAR, I relied on critical and relational frameworks and collected data through fieldnotes, reflective journal entries, and transcripts. Subsequent data analysis and self-reflection revealed the innate role of critical consciousness in YPAR, the importance of building community for community's sake, and the many ways youth regard social change and their agency to enact it. The youth's research was concerned with the most recent presidential election and gauged the political engagement of local youth. They collected data through a series of interviews with other youth and as they started to make sense of the interview transcripts, I introduced art not just as a tool for data collection and analysis, but also as a space to rearrange, curate, and archive it.

Additionally, throughout this paper, I included pictures, both my own and from the internet, found as I forged digital [desire paths](#) on a daily basis. I incorporated them not because I think a picture is worth 1000 words, but because I think pictures enrich the words that are already there. I also wove these pictures with my words to offer a short and sweet resting place within and in between these sections, these big blocks of oftentimes overwhelming text; this is both for the reader and myself. I chose to include more pictures towards the beginning to ease the reader into my research and show them that the seemingly colloquial can also be(come) complex.



### *Acknowledgements*

Thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you. I could say thank you a million times and it wouldn't be nearly enough to express my infinite gratitude for everyone that has supported me throughout this journey. At times, this project felt eternal... but miraculously, here I am, tying the final ribbon onto what has become the most magical gift.

First and foremost, I would like to thank Professors Jie Park and Eric DeMeulenaere for their thoughtful guidance during a process that took many twists and turns. I know this didn't go as planned, so thank you for your unwavering faith in me and my research, in the many forms it took; it means the world. I also need to thank Mandy Gutmann-Gonzalez and Jeff Noh. While I didn't end up majoring in English or Creative Writing, both of you have taught me to trust my voice and wear my heart on my sleeve in every word. It's because of both of you that I'm not afraid to practice radical honesty in my writing. You are both incredible educators and writers and I will forever think fondly on the times I got to spend learning from you, in and outside of class. I would also love to thank Nastasia (Natty) Lawton-Sticklor and Cara Berg Powers. You both met me where I was at when I really needed it. Your teachings, in and out of the classroom,

have stretched my imagination and grown my passions for art and social justice in ways I never thought possible. In this vein, I also must thank James Maurelle. I never expected that taking an introductory sculpture class in my last semester of college would yield such a deep connection. Your mentorship this past year and a half has changed my life, truly. Jie, Eric, Mandy, Jeff, Natty, Cara and James: you've inspired me and taught me so much... you've pushed me to see myself in new ways and it's because of all of you that I can see myself as an educator and a changemaker in an everchanging world.

I would also like to thank the CYES Class of 2024 for their solidarity. I may be finishing this thesis a year and a half later than I anticipated, but I'm still incredibly grateful to have spent a year and a half learning from you all and the meaningful projects you did. I know all of you will continue to change lives and build community in beautiful ways; Praxis was just the beginning, and I congratulate you all on such a momentous milestone.

Of course, I owe a debt of gratitude to my family. To my extended family, in Miami, Colombia, and beyond, thank you for your support from afar, and thank you WhatsApp for keeping me connected to them; gracias por todo el apoyo familia. To my brothers, Nico and Juli, thank you for being the best brothers I could ever ask for. Nico, my lovely little brother, I am so happy you exist. You always make me laugh, even when you're mad about something stupid. You have such a bright future ahead of you and I know you will accomplish (and score) many, many goals in your lifetime. Juli, my beloved big brother, I'm so proud of you. Like me, you've had a long college journey and you made it through. *We* made it through! We've changed and grown a lot, and still, you've remained by my side. I can't thank you enough. Ilu, my stepmom, you've been a part of my life for a long time now and you've been a beautiful part of it; gracias por Nico y por mucho más. Apia, my gracious and generous grandmother, you have been my fiercest supporter in everything. Your scarves and your words have kept me warm through it all. Your apartment is a museum of everything you've ever loved and I feel blessed to be a part of it; I dedicate my introduction to you. Last but certainly not least, Mami y Papi, gracias por todo. I know these past five years have had a lot of ups and downs, and that hasn't been easy for either of you. You've offered me unconditional love and support, even when we've hit bumps in the road and had our disagreements. You've done and continue to do so much for me and without

you both, I would not have had the chance to go to Clark and experience everything it had to offer. I know you've had to sacrifice a lot and work really hard to get where you are, and to get me where I am, and I don't take that for granted; los quiero muchísimo.

I also need to thank my chosen family, my friends, for the magic you've brought into my life. I'm not going to list everyone because I have a million things on my mind and I'm afraid I'll forget someone, but you know who you are. Whether I've known you for a month, a year, or almost ten years, you've broken my heart wide open and shown me how good it can get; you've shown me how I deserve to be treated. I see you all everywhere, in everything. No matter where I am, I never feel alone. You are flying above me with the birds, walking with me in my shoes, sitting above me amongst the stars, humming the harmonies in my headphones... you are beating in my heart, always. Thank you for showing me that I should celebrate every day like it's my birthday, because it is. I am Forever Lucky!

Last, but certainly not least, I have to thank the youth. Angel, Cathy, Rediet, Markos, Sinaily, Storm, Abenezzer, and Pavel: thank you for building a meaningful, intentional community where we could learn from each other and laugh together. I feel incredibly passionate about working with high schoolers, and in the short time I spent with you guys, that passion has grown tenfold; you've set the bar incredibly high with your neverending insights and thoughtfulness. Wear your heart on your sleeve and never forget who you are and where you come from. Each of you is a star and I know you'll go so far! I'll be here for whatever you need along the way.

Someone once told me that I see poetry everywhere, and that is all thanks to the people I love, who also love me and continue to choose me every single day. Thank you for being a part of my memory quilt. I offer you all this poem, "Memory Quilt Manifesto," written in the final, emotional stretch of this thesis process. I hope it keeps you warm <3

### ***Memory Quilt Manifesto***

i learned how to sew because my Heart's always bursting  
at its seams, and it seems  
i'm not out of my mind, i'm in my Heart! i live in a museum

of everything and everyone i've ever loved, leaving  
space for the future, and everything  
it holds, softly

and sweetly  
i write letters to my friends  
i tell them about the ways i see  
them all around me, all the time

i am Forever Lucky  
i am sensitive  
i was (almost) born  
the year of the horse,  
so i sobbed hysterically  
the first time i heard  
"Wild Horses"

my Heart is an open field  
and everything feels infinite  
when i'm on the train, listening  
to a recording from a birthday party,  
sparkly sounds of the familiar  
and unfamiliar voices, softened  
by some drunken organ playing

over and over, i say thank you  
thank you for nothing  
thank you for everything  
thank you for coming  
thank you for leaving  
thank you for being

a thread that holds my heart  
together, glittering too

i am every sparkly woman  
wrapped in a memory quilt

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## INTRODUCTION



*Figure 1: Nati (2006?) in her truest, most whimsical form*

### *Warm Welcomes*

I don't like being late to things. I played a lot of sports growing up and whenever I was getting ready for practice, my dad told me that early was on time, and on time was late. That mindset is now embedded in my being and my deep desire to be punctual permeates every aspect of my life, for better or for worse. When I joined this group of youth for my research, their own research was well underway. Prior to my first meeting with them, Jie gave me a succinct summary of their investigation, so I would at least have an idea before entering the space. This

small group of youth researchers, ages 16-18, were a part of a YPAR<sup>1</sup> group through Upward Bound<sup>2</sup>, and they started their research in September 2024, while I joined in March 2025.

I can vividly remember the first meeting I went to. I wanted to make a good impression (I wanted the youth to think I was cool), so I wore a bunch of layers of the most whimsical and colorful things in my closet. Walking over to the education department, I was already dripping in sweat, but it was too late to turn back and change... so I just had to stick with it. Shy and sweaty, I stepped into the meeting space, sat down, and immediately took out a black notebook. I would use this notebook to take field notes, but in that moment, I just doodled aimlessly, desperate to fill the few minutes before the start of our meeting. Once Jie arrived, I felt more at ease, having the company of a familiar face to facilitate my introduction. When I introduced myself as “Nati” in an indecisive Spanglish accent of sorts, I had to spell it out to clear up some unfortunate misunderstandings... but the youth didn’t dwell on it too much, and we all laughed it off, my laughter more nervous in nature. In the lull following the laughter, Jie asked one of the youth to propose the check-in, which ended up being: Where would you go on an all expenses paid trip? What would you do? How many days would you spend there? This three part question caused a lot of commotion and playful controversy, as expected, and probably, as intended.

After this boisterous and beautiful introduction to the youth, they asked me a lot of questions, less about my role in their meetings, and more about myself. They were curious about what kind of art I made, the pins I was wearing, and what I was writing in my unassuming black notebook; I was completely honest with them about this, and they didn’t seem to give it a second

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<sup>1</sup> YPAR stands for Youth Participatory Action Research. The youth were interested in the most recent presidential election and gauging the level of youth political engagement in Worcester. Interviews with their peers in Upward Bound revealed that schools were not encouraging political engagement or fostering open dialogue about politics. The youth’s research is ongoing, with a pamphlet for teachers and a picture book for children in progress.

<sup>2</sup> Upward Bound is a federally funded educational program that aims to support low-income and first-generation college bound high school students.

thought. I meticulously took field notes for the rest of the meeting and I promised them I would decorate my notebook with some fun stickers before I saw them next. At the end of the meeting, as we all filtered out, one of the youth told me he liked my outfit. Maybe it was the air conditioning in the conference room, but suddenly, I didn't feel soaked in sweat anymore. As I walked back home, my stress about joining the research so late just melted away completely. The youth welcomed me with unwavering warmth and they met me where I was at; they made me feel like I was right on time.

### *Art and the In-Between*

My second meeting with the youth, I brought in some poems I had written in the past couple years, but I somehow neglected to tell them about my first published work. The first time my art was officially published was on the door of my grandma's fridge when I was ten. Surrounded by recipes and reminders stuck to the fridge with funky magnets of every shape and color, my short story, written in surprisingly good handwriting for a ten year-old, stood in the middle of the fridge. The most bland and unassuming magnet delicately held it up, so as to not take attention away from this prized relic. This story was about an alien named Meep, a character I was drawn to in an episode of the hit show *Phineas and Ferb*. In this page-long story, I expanded upon the storyline presented to me in a short episode, using lots of creative liberty, modifying real words like "beach" to be made up: "pleach" (Botero 2012). My grandma was one of the first to notice my creative inclinations, and certainly one of the first to put it on display for all those who entered her house to see.

Walking through her house felt like making my way through a museum, her fridge being a small section of such a space. It was probably the first museum I went to, without even

realizing it *was* a museum. Countless pretty paintings, small sculptures, and fancy picture frames were thoughtfully scattered between tables, walls, and rooms. Her home was a haven for art that meant a lot to her, and it was meaningful for younger me to see my own art on display. Up until I was 13, I was able to access this gallery often since I lived in Miami relatively close to my grandma's apartment. Her museum of a home became less accessible when I moved across the Atlantic to Spain, and I haven't been able to experience it regularly since going to college in Massachusetts, over a thousand miles away. I wish that I could fold up and pack my grandma's gallery every time I visit, but it just doesn't fit, no matter how big of a suitcase I bring with me; I'm an overpacker too, so that probably doesn't help. I want to take her gallery, that memorable piece of home everywhere I go, and hold it close to my heart.

Throughout my early and middle adolescent years, the in-between was my natural habitat. My parents divorced when I was three, and while I didn't have the language to name it then, I felt split between two worlds. In one world, disgustingly buttery microwave popcorn was considered a special treat: it was mom's house. In the other, my fingers remained perpetually orange with Cheeto dust: that was dad's house. In my backpack, I carried my grandma's house; no wonder it was always so heavy. I thought living in this bizarre borderland was the norm, and in the constant commotion of going back and forth between homes and between languages, I didn't notice how I was shapeshifting; not in the fun, whimsical ways that a superhero might, but in the painful, emotionally confusing ways that a child of divorced, immigrant parents does. I don't blame anyone for not noticing this, especially because I couldn't name how or what I was feeling then, and as a result, I was pretty good at hiding all of it. For better or for worse, that became my superpower, but I didn't feel like a superhero. I wanted my teachers to be superheroes, swooping in, saving the day, and solving all my problems.

Now that I am 23 and have gone to public school, private school, and essentially completed a degree in Community, Youth, and Education Studies, I can safely say that most schools do not offer teachers enough support to be the superheroes that I so desperately wanted them to be when I was a kid. The lack of resources available to teachers, which can be more severe depending on a number of different factors, directly impacts the quantity and quality of support that students are able to receive. In my own past experience during my childhood, and in my current experience working with youth, I find that those most affected by this are the least understood and least privileged within the “system of imperialist white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy” (hooks 2009, p. 8) that we live in today. While these are unfortunate circumstances, I have to give my childhood self some credit and acknowledge that I didn’t need saving. I was, in fact, a superhero, using one world to make sense of another, and my teachers were meant to guide me through my journeys in uncharted territories. I hope I’ve provided some kind of guidance to the youth I’ve worked with... I hope they’ve found some comfort in having more questions than answers, and I hope they’ve found empowerment in the in-between.

In this oppressive infrastructure, intersectionality, shape-shifting, and in-betweenness are seen as too complicated, and not worth understanding. This limiting theory of knowledge serves to exclude those who hold a multiplicity of identities that intersect, interact, intertwine in such unique and beautiful ways. Up until the beginning of my college career, I would often hold on to the identity that fit the best with the social situation I was entering into until I forgot the rest of myself. The more I took on falsified identities, the more they became embedded into my subconscious; this normalized assimilation scared me then and it scares me now.

### ***Youth Work and Existing as Our Full Selves***

I share the first vignette about the “in-between” to explain how I view youth work and my commitments as a youth worker. In working with youth, I want to find ways to repurpose this fear of not fitting in and transform it into radical self-love, where every person in the room feels like they can exist as their full selves, unapologetically, whenever and wherever.

I remember I had a job interview a couple years ago, to be a Communications Intern at the Regional Environmental Council (REC), a local food justice non-profit that champions urban farming and youth development through a number of initiatives. In all honesty, I wanted a role that was more hands-on, where I could see and enact tangible change in the community, but I wasn't in any position to be picky, and I thought it would still be a good opportunity for professional and personal development. Naturally, I was nervous for the interview, but the answers came to me with ease... until I was asked a question I had been asked many times throughout my college career, in a number of different contexts: “What do you see yourself doing as a career, post-grad?” and as I scrambled for a response that sounded put together, all I could think of was “I want to help cultivate spaces where there isn't any pre-determined politic limiting people from being their full selves.” I felt really smart (especially for saying “cultivate” given the organization's interests and expertise), and the interviewer seemed to be pleased with my answer. I ended up getting the job, and I learned so much from it that I won't even begin to share here, but what still sticks with me the most is that response that I gave in the interview. When asked that question, by my advisors, parents, counselors, therapists, distant relatives, my cop-out answer had always been “I don't know, but I'm figuring it out” and in giving that answer in that interview, I realized that I *do* know what I want to do, and it's a lot of things, in a lot of different fields and realms, but the common thread tying it all together is the intense desire to

help create and curate spaces where people, especially youth on the verge of adulthood, youth who find themselves in the in-between, feel welcome and empowered to be their whole selves.

*And Art Plays a Role...*

This room, pictured below, is the last room I inhabited in Worcester, and this picture is from February 2025, mere weeks after I moved in. It's changed a lot since then, with new items stuck on the wall, and old ones falling off as if they know I'm leaving soon. This is a space that remains alive whether I'm in it or not and it's a space where I've been able to exist as my full self, with infinite ideas emerging, some half-baked and some fully formed... all meaningful. My room, this room and the ones that have come before it, has served as a comforting reminder that I am constantly growing and moving and shapeshifting; in my room, the in-between transforms from a source of limitation to one of inspiration. It was just about perspective, and finding luck, beauty, whimsy, magic in the world around me, in the altars I unintentionally put together and rearranged.



*Figure 2: Nati's final room in Worcester (February 2025)... organized chaos, altars everywhere*

Art, and the altars you make of it, exist in the everyday. I would see it as a kid, at my grandma's house, with the organized chaos of the art, pictures, books, and tchotchkes she had collected over the course of her long, vibrant life. I see it now, in my own room, with the same (but ever so different) organized chaos of the art, pictures, books, and tchotchkes I've collected over the course of my shorter (but still vibrant) life. My grandma instilled in me a love for material things, not in a consumerist capitalist kind of way, where novelty and luxury are prioritized, but in an "everything has meaning" kind of way, where my stuffed bunny, worn to the nonexistent bone, is God in a fuzzy form. That love of the sentimental material realm, of things you can hold tightly to and infuse your love into, heavily informs my artistic practice and philosophy. The time you spend with objects can be ephemeral, but the time you share with them, long or short, ensures that you carry them with you forever, like I carry my grandma's house, her gallery, with me everywhere. I am a museum of everything I've ever loved

Of course, I can't physically carry the physical space that is my grandma's house, but galleries don't just have to manifest as physical spaces; they can be "miniature traveling galler[ies]" (Allen, 2011, p. 43) in many forms, such as a magazine, or a children's book, which is one component of my Praxis Project. Additionally, in the spirit of a children's book being a "miniature traveling gallery," I wanted to incorporate elements of a physical gallery space into the children's book, making it a multimodal medium that feels much more accessible and interactive than a physical gallery.

I am interested in how projects like this can be sustained for years to come and how arts-based YPAR can serve as a tool for community building and youth empowerment in academic spaces and beyond. When I was initially invited into this space, I had many curiosities, which I distilled into these research questions: **What did I learn from YPAR and the youth**



**involved in it? What did I learn about creating and curating spaces where they can be their full, unapologetic selves and expand beyond that?** Given that so much of this project emerged organically and out of order, more questions arose throughout my research and my writing and I welcomed them with open arms. I investigated such questions through a practitioner inquiry framework, involving field notes, transcriptions from field recordings, and reflective journal entries.

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## POSITIONALITY

### *1. Relationships are reality*

Before getting into my own positionality, I must recognize that it's impossible to think of your own positionality without thinking about it in relation to the people around you and the spaces you inhabit with them. I guess it's not *impossible* to think of your positionality as this singular, isolated thing, but I think doing so is a disservice to yourself... It is also a disservice to the people you will inevitably work with in your research and the people you interact with on a daily basis, people who impact your life in ways you may not realize until later on in your life.

In his book *Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods* (2008), Indigenous researcher Shawn Wilson posits that "relationships do not merely shape reality, they *are* reality" (Wilson, 2008, p. 7). This philosophy is integral to my life as a whole, but in the context of my research, it leaves a big imprint on both my theory of change *and* my positionality. When I first wrote a draft of this over a year ago, I had a completely different project in motion, or in mind, rather. The project didn't gain much traction and I felt really stuck where I was for a number of reasons beyond some unfortunate personal issues I was working through *at* the time and *for* some time. When I was drafting this section, amongst many others, it came after my theory of

change and before my methods, as outlined in the template that was given to me and my cohort in the Spring of 2023 when I started this long and winding process. I thought I had to adhere to this structure and bend to its will, but after pivoting and reimagining my praxis project many times over the course of the past year and a half or so, I finally settled on this project, and I realized I could bend this structure to *my* will and make it work for me and the work I was doing.

I chose to include my positionality before my theory of change because my positionality, beyond being a researcher, directly affects the way I think about making change in the world; it's not the other way around. So, it felt unnatural to introduce my theories of change before giving you, the reader, a chance to get to know me, both as a person and a researcher. What good would those theories of change be if they weren't grounded in any sense of self?

With that being said, though, I think the way I want to talk about my positionality has changed drastically since I drafted this almost two years ago. It could be thought-provoking to include bits and pieces of what I had previously written for this section, as a way to analyze and reflect on my growth in real time, synthesising it all right in front of you instead of just in my head, and maybe I'll do that, maybe not... but regardless, I think it's essential for me to talk about positionality in a way that feels wholly and utterly genuine to me right in this moment, which is something I'm still figuring out, and you're on that journey with me.

I think of quilts a lot as an art medium, but I mostly think about them as a metaphor for my life and how I relate to myself and others. And if you haven't realized it already, metaphors and stories are how I make sense of things, from the simplest ideas, to the most complex concepts. Anyway, one day in my notes app on my phone, I just wrote down "memory quilt" and I thought it was going to be one of many notes that I would go back to years later and delete because it didn't make any sense then or now... but that wasn't the case at all. If anything, these

words only started to take on more meaning as more time passed, and I made more memories. I vividly remember going to an art exhibit at the American Folk Art Museum in New York City in October 2023, completely on a whim, because I needed a way to pass the time while my friend was at work. My grandma, who is seemingly all-knowing when it comes to museums anywhere and everywhere, told me that this museum was free. I like free things and I like art, so of course, I had to go. I adventured across the city from Brooklyn to Manhattan, bagel in hand, and after I ate my bagel and piqued the interest of some pigeons on a table next to me, I walked into the museum. It was smaller than I thought it would be, but the exhibit, on quilts throughout history, had no small impact on me.

Seeing people's memories and identities stitched and woven into every thread of these quilts really struck me, and made me rethink the way my identities relate to each other and those around me. How do our own memory quilts, identity quilts, tether to those around us? When we reckon with our identities, their consonance and dissonance, how does that reverberate to the people and environments we inhabit?

## ***2. Tethered to Teenagehood – Am I an adult or youth researcher, or both?***

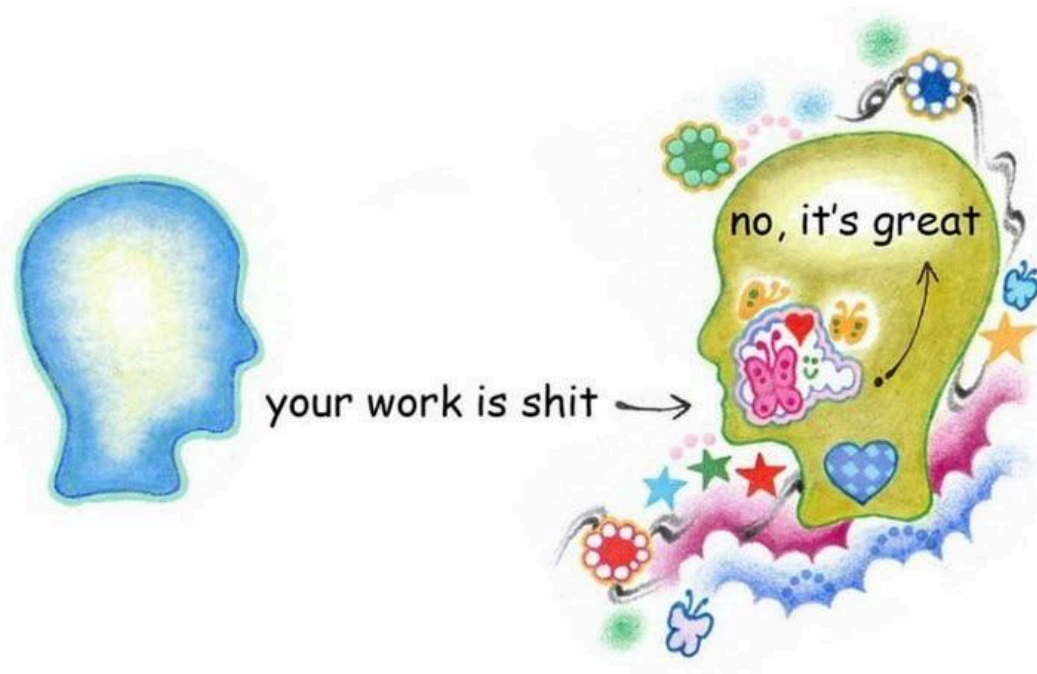
I reckon with the intersections of my identity on a daily basis, but a salient reckoning that specifically emerged throughout my research was one with my identity as a researcher, and particularly wrestling with how I still feel tenuously tethered to teenagehood. I will say, with complete candor, that I haven't always wanted to work with youth, and I only started to feel called to it once I started taking classes for CYES and meeting people who were so passionate about it. Most of the people I connected with in my cohort wanted to work with the elementary or middle school age group, which I'm not opposed to doing, but it's not where I see myself

making the most profound impact. I had some limited, but incredibly fulfilling, experiences working with youth in high school (ages 14-18) when I worked with the REC, a time of personal growth that I referenced in my introduction. I was a little younger then, being 21, but I realized I had a harder time connecting with the younger age bracket, the freshman and sophomores in high school.

I thrived those first two years of high school, getting consistently good grades and involving myself in a myriad of extracurriculars that ranged from intellectually stimulating (Model UN) to physically demanding (field hockey); I felt like I was on top of the world. Once I reached my junior year, however, everything came tumbling down. Classes got exponentially harder, and I got depressed and overwhelmed and couldn't keep up. I wasn't failing, but I wasn't performing at the level that everyone expected me to. I felt like I was letting everyone down, myself included, and I didn't feel supported by the majority of my teachers and the administration. Why didn't they care? It turned out that my principal just didn't have me on her "radar," a regard that I dismissed then but am dismayed by now, because *every* student should be on your radar, no matter their previous pattern of academic performance.

I'm not going to unpack those last two years of high school in full... but I wanted to provide some background as to why I find the most fulfillment working with juniors and seniors in high school, a vocation that I only realized I really wanted to work towards by building community with this group of youth for my thesis. I'm really proud of the person I've grown into. In high school, I didn't dress in weird and colorful clothes, I didn't dye my hair or do anything drastic to it, I didn't have any tattoos or piercings (to my parents content), and I considered myself to be extremely introverted, with an extreme aversion to being the center of attention. Now, more than five years out of high school, I still don't love being the center of

attention, but I *do* think what I have to say is worth paying attention to, and I didn't always have that unwavering faith in myself and my words (and my worth!)



*Figure 3: My past self talking to my current self... my confidence is unshakeable now*

I want to instill that same faith in youth, because I know that 16, 17, and 18 are tough ages, nearing adulthood and feeling pressure from everyone and everything to have things figured out. I don't have everything figured out, far from it, and I have friends, older and younger, with (and without) Bachelor's degrees, Master's degrees, PhDs, with (and without) full-time jobs related to what they studied... and none of them feel like they have everything figured out, and I think that's amazing and I want youth to think that too. I think it's important to have drive and ambition and aspirations, but over the years, I've been given so much unsolicited advice that has clouded my thoughts to the point where I'm not even sure if they're mine anymore. I want these youth to know that everything happens for a reason and at the right time. I still feel like a teenager a lot of the time, reverting back to old habits when I visit home, or when I'm sick with a cold and I just want to be taken care of. I needed someone like me now at their

age, at 16, 17, and 18, when I mistakenly thought it was the end of the world, because I didn't have the tools to make sense of such a tumultuous time in my life.

I've reflected on my positionality countless times in my life, implicitly throughout my middle school and high school experiences, and explicitly throughout my college classes, and I once thought that being my age and working with this age group would be a disadvantage, because I was too close in age and didn't know enough yet that was worth sharing. Honestly, that concern wasn't even my own, but rather, it was brought up to me, sometimes politely, oftentimes bluntly, by some of my peers who wanted to work with younger age groups. I know I have a lot to learn, but I think there's a lot of value in learning that in these YPAR spaces, and my positionality as a researcher that straddles the blurry line between teenagehood and adulthood. I feel lucky to occupy this foggy middleground, because in all the fuzziness, I realize that there is so much I don't know... that I have more questions than answers; I have things to teach the youth and they have things to teach me, and we also all have things to unlearn together. I work with these youth not to find and extract the answers to lifelong questions, but rather, to collectively discover different ways to ask questions that get us all closer to making sense of the world around us and how we fit into it.

### ***3. "The personal is political" – Identity Politics & Intersectionality***

It would be remiss of me to only dissect my positionality as a youth worker and not address salient identity markers such as class, gender, language, and race. In discussing these identities, I think it is key to forefront Black feminist thinkers that have informed my thinking on identity politics and intersectionality. Prior to the formation of Black feminism, Black women had been heavily involved in social movements around the world, and yet, none of these

movements prioritized their plural identities and the multiple, simultaneous struggles that came with those identities; such movements lacked intersectionality, and thus, Black women had no choice but to carve out a space for themselves through Black feminism, which was guided by identity politics, asserting that “the most radical politics come directly out of [one’s] own identity” (Combahee River Collective, 1977, p. 212). They also maintain that the “the personal is political” (Combahee River Collective, 1977, p. 213), and the personal is plural and interconnected – a point that is also connected to the relationality of positionality. The Combahee River Collective does not explicitly name intersectionality as a driving force in their thinking, but they clearly outline it, saying they “often [found] it difficult to separate race from class from sex oppression because in [their] lives they are most often experienced simultaneously” (Combahee River Collective, 1977, p. 213). The way I think about my positionality, both in my daily life and in my research, is heavily informed by these simple yet complex and poignant notions expressed in the Combahee River Collective’s Black Feminist Statement (1977). Even though it was written almost 50 years ago, it still rings true for me.

I recognize that although I am the child of immigrants and divorced parents, I have had the privilege of growing up upper-middle class and I am white passing, with fluency in both English and Spanish. I was educated in public schools and private schools, with the most recent being Clark, and for a lot of my life, I took this for granted; I sometimes still do, honestly. I was never worried about not getting into college or not being able to pay for it, and I am immensely lucky that this has been (and continues to be) the case. What’s weird about positionality and these identities I hold is that I didn’t really choose them. I look the way I look because of my parents and my lineage, and I know English and Spanish because my parents decided to teach us both growing up, even naming my brother and I names that would be easy to say in both English

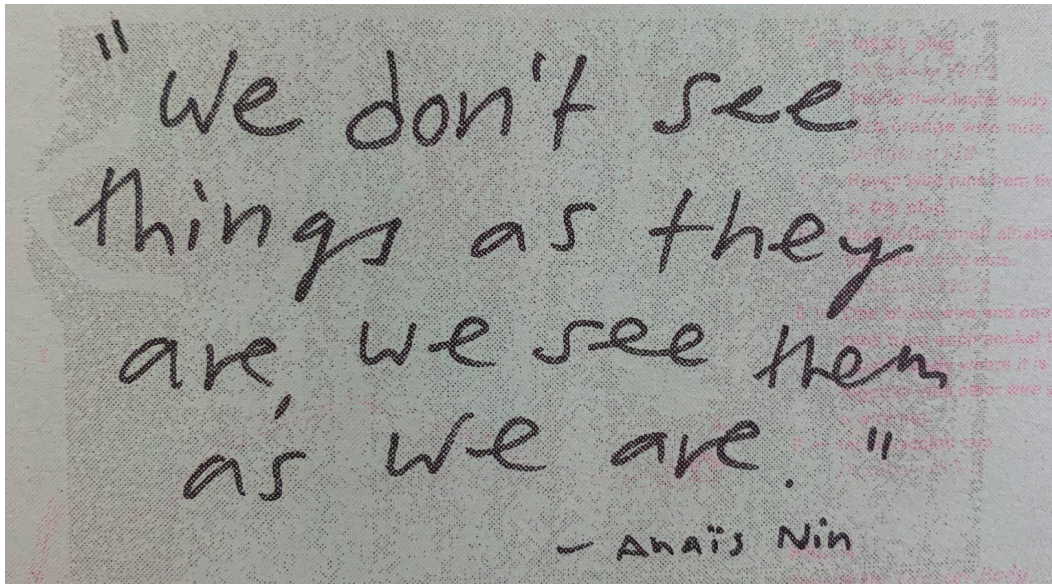
and Spanish (Natalia/Nati and Julian/Juli). At this stage in my life, I'm not completely financially independent yet, and I've luckily had financial assistance from my parents and from Clark for college, and I never had to work a full-time job in college to support myself. I guess I could've worked a full-time job while in school, but I had the luxury of not needing to do that, and so I didn't. I know that's not the case for a lot of these youth that I'm working with, who are already working jobs starting in high school to support themselves and their families. Yes, there are people at Clark (and in general) who are more privileged than me in every single way, but I already hold a lot of privilege in the positionalities I possess. There's no use in playing Oppression Olympics and feeling sorry for yourself, especially if you're writing a thesis and getting a Bachelor's Degree at a predominantly white institution like Clark. Like the Combahee River Collective said, "the personal is political" so choosing what to do with all the intersecting identities you hold is a political choice, whether you do anything with them or not.

To finish this section, I've decided to include an excerpt of what I had written for it more than two years ago, words of my own and words from June Jordan that still ring true and provide a bridge to my theoretical framework:

What is "the difference between a common identity that has been imposed and the individual identity any one of us will choose, once she gains that chance" ? (Jordan, 1982, p. 14). I see the difference (or at least *a* difference) to be that a common identity is condemned to a space within a binary existence that is dictated by either spoken or unspoken expectations (rules, really) that dictate how to speak and act in such a space. An individual identity, however, seeks to create a new space, a third space beyond the binary, where you can make your own rules and those rules do not dictate what you say



or do, but rather you dictate the rules themselves, allowing for fluidity and plurality in your existence.



*Figure 4: An Anaïs Nin quote I saw at a zine store in New York City, Printed Matter. I have more than 36,000 pictures on my phone and I always find myself coming back to this one*

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## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

My theoretical framework is primarily grounded in critical and relational frameworks. To begin with, I must introduce a seminal text in the world of theory, which is “Theory as Liberatory Practice” (1991) by activist-author multihyphenate bell hooks. hooks “came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend-to grasp what was happening around and within [her]” (hooks 1991, p.1). I can strongly identify with that, and I know for a fact that I’m not the only one. The fact that hooks even wrote about this in the first place demonstrates the deep need for a rethinking of theory and our approach, our relationship to it. This piece of literature aims to make theory more accessible, and it’s setting the example already, communicating to us in simple terms. Communicating something in simple terms doesn’t necessarily mean it’s trivial. There can be so much complexity in simplicity, and more often than not, I find that to be the case. The texts

that I examine in this theoretical framework all have their own voices, which is valuable and sometimes hard to find in academia, where intellectuals want to replicate the same tone, use the same complicated words... It's important to note that "complicated" and "complex" are two very different things. I'm not here to provide the dictionary definition for these words, because you could easily just search them up online, but instead, I want to interpret the meaning of these words in the context of theory and hooks' insightful read on it. She expertly states that "any theory that cannot be shared in everyday conversation cannot be used to educate the public" (hooks, 1991, p. 5) and this is exactly what I mean when I say "complicated" and "complex" are two entirely different things. Theory should be complex, conveying knowledge and worldviews in its many facets, but it should not be so complicated that it cannot be used to educate the general public. It should not be so complicated that youth can't connect with it. It should allow the youth to tap into their capital.

In her article, "Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth" (2005), critical theory scholar Tara J. Yosso touches upon the different ways youth have capital, the ways they connect to theory and put it into practice in their own experiences on a daily basis. I touch upon the different forms of cultural capital in the previous section, but there are a couple of points that Yosso makes in her discussion of them that I think are important to spotlight in my theoretical framework. When introducing these forms of capital, she says that "aspirations are developed within social and familial contexts, often through linguistic storytelling and advice (*consejos*) that offer specific navigational goals to challenge (resist) oppressive conditions" (Yosso, 2005, p. 77). While aspirational capital is the first thing mentioned here, she is also relating it to familial capital, social capital, linguistic capital, navigational capital, and resistant capital, which goes to show how all of these forms of capital

are interconnected, constantly informing each other. Certain contexts will give one of these more of a spotlight than others, but explicit or implicit, all of these notions of cultural capital are perpetually present, and “these forms of capital draw on the knowledges Students of Color bring with them from their homes and communities into the classroom” (Yosso, 2005, p. 82).

Sharing knowledge and experiences goes both ways, though. Researchers cannot expect youth to share about themselves if they are not also vulnerable with them, which is a concept that multicultural education scholar and professor Django Paris touches on in his article entitled, “‘A friend who understand fully’: notes on humanizing research in a multiethnic youth community” (2011). Paris says that “sharing of self in dialogic process, I believe, led youth to share their selves in more genuine and honest ways. This genuine and honest sharing led to richer and truer data than the model of the somewhat detached, neutral researcher...” (Paris, 2011, p. 139) I knew going into this YPAR space, that I would have to share parts of myself, beyond my identity as a researcher. In this vein, Paris’ work is in conversation with June Jordan’s.

In her piece “Report from the Bahamas” (1982), which I cited in the previous section, she urges us to move beyond who we are and instead, focus on *what we can do for each other*, which is one of the core tenets of YPAR. I did not want to be the “detached, neutral researcher” that Paris describes in brief, because taking on this sterile stance would mean fewer field notes infused with emotion, fewer journal entries and in turn, less valuable data; I would probably still have data, but I don’t think I would have as much to say about it. Even beyond data collection, acting like an apathetic and disengaged researcher would be a betrayal to the YPAR’s theory of change and in turn, a betrayal to the youth I worked with. I wanted to help the youth build an ever growing bank of “knowledge worth knowing” and I could not do that if I took the easy route and didn’t share anything about myself and what I know (and don’t know).

Paris also emphasizes the great importance of forming real relationships with participants, not just relationships that are contingent on and confined to the research occurring. He says, “We can be friends with our participants. We can, in small ways, come to understand. We can inspire them as they inspire us. We can humanize through the act of research” (Paris, 2011, p. 147) and also says, “humanizing research does not end when the study does” (Paris, 2011, p. 147) Humanizing everyone involved in the research, making it “a more humane interaction – one where both parties are willing to share about the problems of interest as both parties, researchers and participants, explore those problems in the search for understanding and voice” is key for meaningmaking and data analysis that isn’t devoid of emotion, which is exactly what I want to champion and prioritize in my research process.

*In summary...*

My theoretical framework is critical because it is in constant conversation with the work I’ve done, the work I’m doing, and the work I will continue to do. In our “system of imperialist white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy,” (hooks, 2009, p. 8). complacency reigns supreme; it’s a system that frowns upon questioning and extolls ignorance. In citing thinkers like bell hooks, Tara Yosso, Django Paris, and June Jordan, I am planting a garden that will grow to critically confront a system that aims to kill it.



*Figure 5: Changes comes from connection, and connection comes from change*

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## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In my conceptual framework, I draw from three key concepts that are all, in some way, connected: positive youth development, community cultural wealth, and third space theory. Throughout every stage of my research, these three frameworks have shaped my approach, especially informing my theory of change and my findings. While I am highlighting these three notions in this section, my conceptual framework has also been informed by mentors, present and past, and in the case of community cultural wealth, I was introduced to it early on in my college career, and it has been embedded in my research approach ever since. I'm drawing on these concepts because they all address different key components of identity and positionality, as it pertains to both me and the youth; these components have to do with race, class, language, and the relationship between adult and youth researchers. Intertwined with each other, these concepts shed light on the aforementioned identity markers and how they contribute to spacemaking, youth research, and youth development.

### *1. Social Justice & Positive Youth Development –*

#### *Frameworks to empower youth and effect social change*

To introduce current youth development models and their alternatives, I wanted to draw from Shawn Ginwright and Julio Cammarota's research, represented in their article titled "New Terrain in Youth Development: The Promise of a Social Justice Approach" (2002). To introduce this new terrain, they dwell on old terrain in youth development, rooting us in an unfortunate reality that needs to change. They claim that the "limits of current youth development models are bound by an inability to examine the complex social, economic, and political forces that bear on

the lives of urban youth” (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002, p. 82). In other words, today’s youth development models lack critical consciousness; they do not interrogate the structures that severely limit abundant possibilities and successful outcomes for urban youth. I completely agree with this and I also agree that the way these frameworks exist now is an “assault on youth of color” and “it treats individuals, families, and communities as the causes of their own problems and does not adequately address the most significant problems facing urban youth” (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002, p. 82). They then bring in social justice youth development (SJYD) as a remedy to current, contaminated models of youth development. They posit that a “social justice model for youth development provides youth workers, researchers, policymakers, and young people with a new lens for examining old problems” (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002, p. 93), therefore fomenting “critical consciousness among young people and encourag[ing] them to act toward achieving a sociopolitical vision” (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002, p. 92). Keeping this in mind, I employed a social justice youth development framework in my meetings with the youth, whether I was taking field notes, actively participating in the conversation, or facilitating one of our sessions. Youth have intrinsic knowledge from lived experiences that can translate to material change, and I hope, throughout my research, I embodied this concept well enough for them to tap into what I think is an innate ability to enact change.

A unique setting like YPAR has the power to catalyze positive youth development, also known as PYD. Youth development work doesn’t have to (and shouldn’t) take a deficit orientation, but instead, it should serve to foster critical consciousness and build community cultural wealth, where youth are seen as bringing a lot to the space from the jump, and not seen as people you need to fill up with this knowledge. Scholar Yoshitaka Iwasaki introduces the idea of social justice youth development, or SJYD, which “involves youth’s awareness of their

personal potential, community responsibility, and broader humanity, and the engagement in social justice activities that counter oppressive conditions” (Iwasaki 2015; 268), and he emphasizes the need to use PYD and SJYD in conjunction with each other, stating that “to effectively address oppressive conditions that influence youth, a blend of PYD’s focus on individual skill building, engagement and empowerment – joined with SJYD’s emphasis on building youth’s self-awareness of how race, gender, class and other dimensions of power affect their lives – is needed” (Iwasaki 2015; 268). Both PYD and SJYD seem focused on championing community in order to achieve certain goals, aligning with the notion of “instrumental community” (Matusov et al., 2012). In my findings, I decided to focus on the ways youth challenged this idea, but I think building community for community’s sake, and to fulfill outcomes, are both valid and valuable ways to foster community.

Using lenses in tandem like this is a key tenet of my research practice, as highlighted by the combination of the both critical and interpretive lenses in my methodology and epistemological stance later on in this paper. I want this YPAR space to incorporate both PYD and SJYD as key components of youth empowerment, because as Iwasaki says, “The power of youth in mobilising systems/social changes should not be underestimated” (Iwasaki 2015; 277), and “the focus of the research is on honouring/highlighting youth’s voices and mobilising youth into actions for social change” (Iwasaki 2015; 269). I may be involved in this space for my research, but this space is ultimately for the youth and by the youth, and I want to center that as much as I can, because as Ginwright and Cammarota expertly “young people have always been in the vanguard of social change” (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002, p. 93) and we must treat them as such!

Below, I present a diagram that connects the concepts of PYD and SJYD to community cultural wealth and third space theory, because after all, they are intertwined and constantly informing each other:

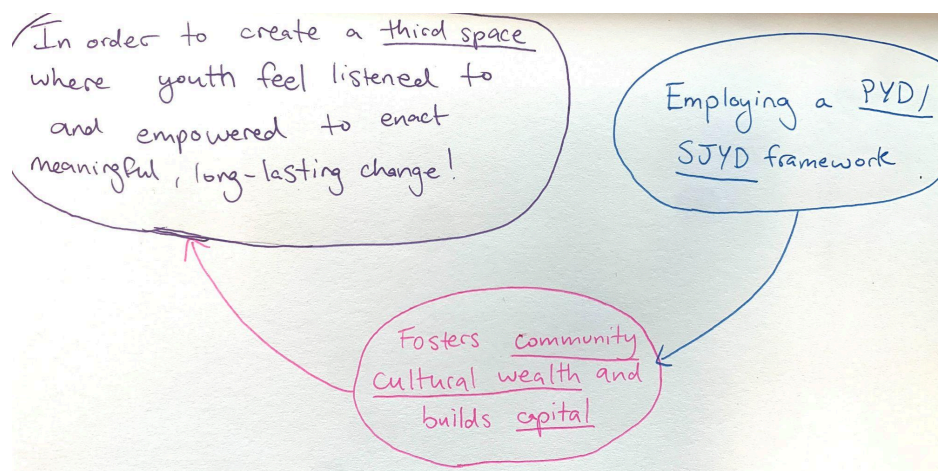


Figure 6: A handwritten diagram conveying the connection between PYD/SJYD, community cultural wealth, and third space theory. All things are delicately connected!

The color coding is intentional here. Combining blue (PYD and SJYD) and pink (community cultural wealth and capital) leads to purple (the creation of a third space!)

## 2. "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" –

### *An exploration of community cultural wealth*

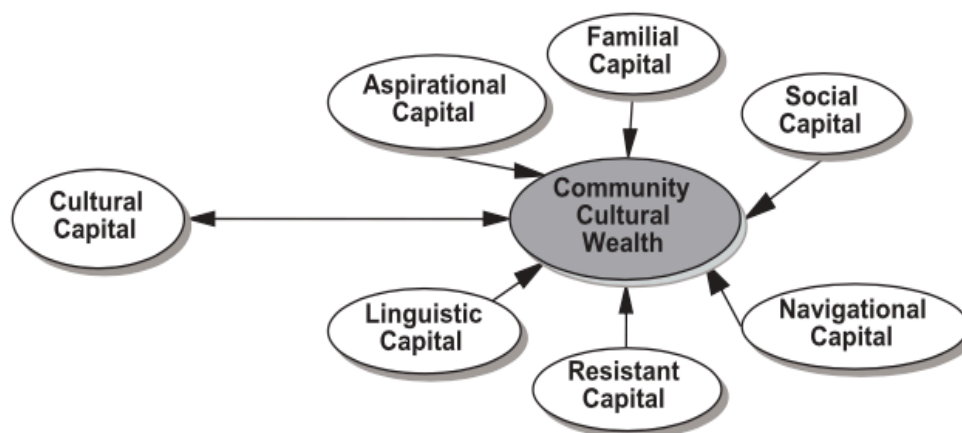
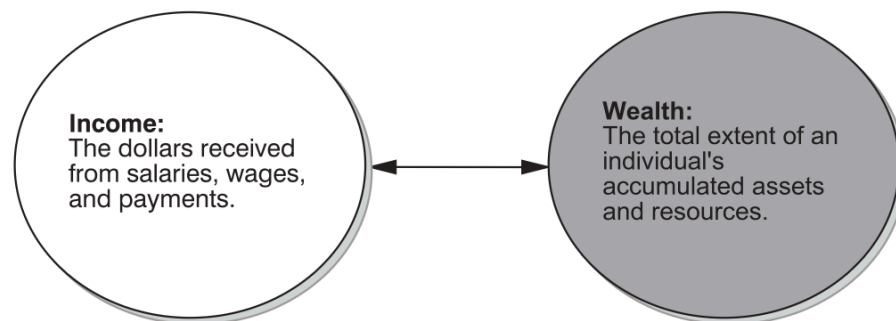


Figure 7: A model of community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2008, p. 78)



In her article entitled “Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth,” Critical race theory scholar Tara J. Yosso introduces six different forms of capital that make up her framework of community cultural wealth, as denoted in the figure above. I think it is important for me to unpack the definition of each of these that Yosso offers, but first I must bring up cultural capital, which ties all of these together, and which French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, in Yosso’s own words, defines as something that “is not just inherited or possessed by the middle class, but rather it refers to an accumulation of specific forms of knowledge, skills and abilities that are valued by privileged groups in society” (Yosso, 2005, p. 76). This limiting definition is intimately intertwined with a question that Yosso poses earlier on in the article: “Whose knowledge counts and whose knowledge is discounted?” (Yosso, 2005, p. 69) and this is a question that guides my conceptual framework and my research as a whole.

In laying out the different definitions of capital, and specifically cultural capital, Yosso aims to expand the very meaning of the word capital, moving away from the narrow definition posited by scholars such as Bourdieu, and offering a more holistic picture of wealth and capital, beyond just income and money, a notion that is succinctly communicated in the figure below:



*Figure 8: A diagram rethinking limited ideas of wealth (Yosso, 2008, p. 78)*

Yosso lists the following forms of cultural capital: aspirational capital, linguistic capital, familial capital, social capital, navigational capital, and resistant capital. Before getting into these and explaining their role in my conceptual framework and research, it is important to note that these forms of capital primarily apply to systemically marginalized groups that don't fit into Bourdieu's extremely limited idea of cultural capital.

Before examining the various forms of capital that comprise community cultural wealth, I want to ground them in the words of Audre Lorde, who staunchly identified as a “Black, lesbian, feminist, socialist, mother, warrior, poet”: “*the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house*” (Lorde, 1983, p. 99). In saying this, Lorde urges us to transmute what society perceives as weaknesses into strengths, strengths that an oppressive society cannot co-opt. Every kind of capital that Yosso lists explores relates back to Lorde's scathing and succinct reflection on the “the system of imperialist white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy” (hooks, 2009, p. 8) we live in and what it values and devalues. Youth possess all these forms of capital, and this possession isn't a privilege, but a necessity.

Firstly, there's aspirational capital which “refers to the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers” (Yosso, 2005, p. 77). Many of the youth I'm working with face very real barriers on a daily basis, not only perceived ones. These barriers present themselves in and outside of school and in many cases, these barriers are normalized, which is not a great thing, but it *does* build a robust sense of aspirational capital. Next, there is linguistic capital, which out of all the forms of cultural capital Yosso outlines, is the most central to my research. Linguistic capital “includes the intellectual and social skills attained through communication experiences in more than one language and/or style” (Yosso, 2005, p. 78). This is especially important to my research given that art is a form of linguistic

capital, communicating what cannot be as easily communicated through words. In the meeting I facilitated with the youth, I talked about how art is a form of collecting and analyzing data. The youth had already collected their data, so I was mainly focused on art as a form of rearranging data to convey it in new, refreshing ways that appeal to all kinds of learners and that make sense for them as researchers, because it's important for something to make sense to you first before you present it to others. Making art builds linguistic capital, and these youth, all of which speak more than one language, can also find a new language in art.

Then, there's familial capital, which "refers to those cultural knowledges nurtured among *familia* (kin) that carry a sense of community history, memory and cultural intuition" (Yosso, 2005, p. 79). Every single one of the youth have a cultural knowledge they bring to the table, and this is something that is important to talk about in and outside of the research context, because it can be really easy to intellectualize and commodify this knowledge in academia, where it can so easily be stripped from the person and culture it's tied to. After that, there's social capital, which is the only form of capital I had heard of prior to reading this article for the first time a few years ago. Yosso describes social capital as "*Social capital* can be understood as networks of people and community resources" (Yosso, 2005, p. 79). As a researcher in this YPAR space, I want to be a resource to these youth that they can depend on in and outside of meetings. Being a part of this research at an institution like Clark, they have resources available to them that they may not have otherwise and I don't want them to feel intimidated by that, but rather, I want to help them navigate that, which leads in perfectly to Yosso's next tenet of cultural capital, which is navigational capital. Navigational capital "refers to skills of maneuvering through social institutions" (Yosso, 2005, p. 80). These youth already have a great deal of navigational capital and that is, in part, because they've had to foster their resistant capital, which "refers to those

knowledges and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality” (Yosso, 2005, p. 80). Resistant capital would certainly not fit into Bourdieu’s idea of cultural capital, because his idea of it applies to a group of people that wouldn’t have to build any sort of resistant capital; there’s nothing to resist if you already inhabit an incredibly privileged role in society, where inequality doesn’t affect you directly. This notion is intertwined with the idea of critical consciousness, which was a prominent part of the conversation with the youth at our meetings; I expanded on this further in my findings.

These forms of capital are not mainstream knowledge, and they don’t aim to be. They serve as a foundation for youth to tap into their strengths that society has never recognized to be strengths at all. In this vein, Yosso cites renowned multihyphenate Gloria Anzaldúa who said that “‘If we have been gagged and disempowered by theories, we can also be loosened and empowered by theories’ (Anzaldúa, 1990, p. xxvi)” (Yosso, 2005, p. 70). And it’s true! Where scholars like Bourdieu see weaknesses, there are strengths, strengths that these youth possess and bring into third spaces, like this YPAR space that I’m conducting research with.

### ***3. YPAR as a Third Space teeming with possibilities***

Literacy scholar and professor Kris Gutiérrez spends some time conceptualizing third spaces in learning and literacy, in her article “Developing a Sociocritical Literacy in the Third Space” (2008). Gutiérrez sees the third space as a place “in which students begin to reconceive who they are and what they might be able to accomplish academically and beyond” (Gutiérrez, 2008, p. 148). In the context of my research, YPAR acted as a third space in which the youth thought of themselves beyond the limited identity of a student and instead, accessed their multifaceted identities as youth. Subsequently, Gutiérrez hones in on third spaces and their

complicated relationship to the classroom setting. While this doesn't apply to my research in particular, it does shed a light on the importance of YPAR spaces, which can offer refuge from the sometimes suffocating environment that a classroom can be.

A third space can be defined as a place that isn't home or work, and in the scope of my research, it would be school instead of work. A lot of youth spaces could be thought of as third spaces. I can think of a few from when I was younger, like private lessons for flute, field hockey practice, and practice for all the other sports my parents had me try as a kid. The third space in my research, this YPAR space, is a little bit different in nature from the spaces I just named, in that it is a space trying to resist school, but it still emulates school in some ways. It is a space focused on research, which is academic in nature, but this space is one that prioritizes experiential learning, which is often not the case in a school setting, where a certain curriculum must be followed and it is imperative to follow it strictly. It depends on the class and the teacher, of course, and how much space they are willing to make for students' stories and life experiences outside the classroom. This YPAR space, however, is much smaller than a typical class, and so, there is inherently more time and space to share experiences along with other forms of knowledge. I believe this YPAR space allowed the youth to realize how much agency they really held, given that they were recognized as a multifaceted group of youth and not a monolithic student body. In this expansiveness, they were able to tap into their already existent agency, and I elaborated on this in my findings section later.

### *In summary...*

This may be *my* conceptual framework, but it is heavily informed by the youth, shaped and reshaped by their stories and their strengths that inspire me to tap into my own.

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## LITERATURE REVIEW

In examining the literature pertaining to my research scope, I encountered ideas both familiar and unfamiliar to me, and I embraced any confusion I had, transmuting it into critical interrogation, evaluating the holes I found in the literature and forefronting them throughout my research process. In my theoretical framework, I laid the foundation for my research process, discussing critical and humanizing schemas, and in my conceptual framework, I expound on these schemas, fleshing out the frameworks through the concepts of positive youth development, community cultural wealth, and third space theory. Now, I want to get into the core of my research: arts-based YPAR.

Time and time again, art has grounded me in my brain and body, and oftentimes, in research spaces, I feel connected to my brain, but my body feels absent from the process. I grappled with the desire to be present in my meetings with the youth while taking detailed field notes, which sheds a light on this imbalanced power dynamic between my brain and body. The one meeting where I truly felt at home in my brain *and* body was the meeting I facilitated about the importance, and the need, for art to be a part of YPAR, showing the youth that making art is a valuable way of collecting and analyzing data, whether it be making something new or rearranging, curating, archiving. The literature I examined capitalizes on these ideas and leaves room for reimagining, a key tenet of arts-based YPAR.

### *Embodying Experiences through Arts-Based YPAR*

YPAR in itself is incredibly valuable for a number of reasons, but I want to use this literature review to hone in on arts-based YPAR, evaluating the importance of incorporating arts in YPAR spaces like the one I will be in throughout my research. In her article, “Arts-Based

Youth Participatory Action Research: Latinx Performances of Multidimensional Identity and Transformational Resistance” (2022), scholar, educator, and artist Ashley D. Domínguez says that ABR (arts-based research) “can use any art form such as literary forms, performative forms, visual art, audiovisual forms, multimedia forms, and multimethod forms. This transdisciplinary approach gives the creative arts a place to exist in research as tools for inquiry” (Domínguez, 2022, pp. 31-32). There’s nothing wrong with YPAR that doesn’t use art, but “ABR promotes empathy and appreciation for other human lives when language is expressive, accessible, and contextualized it creates a space for empathic understanding” (Domínguez, 2022, p. 32). Therefore, the combination of arts-based research and YPAR creates a beautiful and generative third space, or even fourth space, considering the fact the YPAR space is already a third space in itself. YPAR aims to empower youth to be the researchers that they’ve always been, even though they may have not ever thought of themselves that way.

In another article, entitled “TEACHING CREATIVE WRITING: Arts-Based Youth Participatory Action Research” (2021), Domínguez elaborates further on arts-based YPAR, explaining its applicability and benefits in the classroom. When talking about her former students, Domínguez remarks that “Their real-world experiences and cultural backgrounds pushed them to acquire a wide variety of skills needed for their success” (Domínguez, 2021, p. 87), and prior to that, notes that most of her students came from Latinx backgrounds. This directly relates to my conceptual and theoretical frameworks, particularly to Tara Yosso’s exploration of community cultural wealth and capital. Yosso maintains that cultivating capital, specifically in the context of community cultural wealth, comes out of lived experiences not reflected in the mainstream, which was clearly the case with the youth Domínguez worked with. Domínguez also said that “it also pained [her] to witness how the skills and knowledge they had

gained in their homes and communities were not deemed as transferable currency in school” (Domínguez, 2021, p. 87). Once again, this goes back to the notion of community cultural wealth, illustrating the indispensable role this framework plays (or should play) in YPAR and arts-based YPAR.

Domínguez shares many examples of arts-based YPAR, such as theatre activities and collective storytelling, and she contextualizes them in a classroom. While this setting isn’t completely pertinent to my research scope, there is still substantial value in these methods, and they perfectly preface Domínguez’s discussion on the benefits of arts-based YPAR. She sees YPAR as an opportunity for youth “to investigate the world as it is and imagine what it could be” (Domínguez, 2021, p. 87), and lists out the following benefits of enacting arts-based YPAR: activating imagination, understanding injustice to anticipate change, exploring identity, rehearsing for future action and fostering healing (Domínguez, 2021, pp. 88-89). A common thread weaving through all of these is embodiment. How can art help us embody change and not just conceptualize it? How can art help us make sense of our lived experiences? These questions remained ingrained in my mind throughout my research and significantly influenced how I approached my research with the youth.

### *Arts-based YPAR as a Pedagogy of Love*

In addition to Ashley Domínguez’s insights on arts-based YPAR, I wanted to shed light on important research done by scholars Megan Call-Cummings, Melissa Hauber-Ozer, Maria Rybicki-Newman, Elisabeth Chan, LeAnne Beardsley, Katelyn Sultana and Emily Scicli, in an article called “Courageous Conversations: Un-silencing as Transformative Resistance through Arts-based YPAR” (2022). These authors cite a number of other scholars in the field of YPAR,



which I found to be incredibly helpful in my research process. They say “Caraballo and Soleimany (2019) have written, the YPAR approach is a ‘pedagogy of love’ that ‘has the power to disrupt... traditional roles and hierarchies’ (p. 84) by fostering critical consciousness about oppressive power structures and developing problem-solving skills to work towards liberation” (Call-Cummings et al., 2022, p. 201). I chose the title of my thesis (“Sharing Art is Choosing to Love: The Value of Art in Youth Research Spaces”) before I read this article, but it is clearly reflective of YPAR’s values and value, and I’m grateful to have been in alignment with that “pedagogy of love” throughout my entire research process.

Call-Cummings et al. distinctly frame arts-based YPAR as an approach that allows youth “to process, question, and document evidence of unjust structures,” and they elaborate further, noting that this approach “can offer new paths and opportunities for sharing and creating knowledge with youth who may be socialized to consider their own knowledge as unworthy, not valuable, or uninteresting” (Call-Cummings et al., 2022, p. 201). Participants in the research conducted by Call-Cummings et al. “expressed a yearning for adults to hear them, to recognize and accept them as they are” (Call-Cummings et al., 2022, p. 201). While I can’t control any adult, in or outside of a school environment, I can make a conscious effort to listen to youth and meet them where they’re at. This is exactly what I did (or tried my best to do) throughout my research. The research carried out by Call-Cummings et al., involved high schoolers, similar to my own investigation; however, the research itself, like Domínguez’s, is definitely different from my own. Even so, their explorations and explanations offered me a lot to reflect on and learn from as an amateur practitioner and facilitator of arts-based YPAR.

### *In summary...*

Beyond data collection and analysis, art is a valuable tool to disseminate findings, and I

would like to see more literature that forefronts this and looks at it in tandem with art as a way of collecting and analyzing data. Embodiment through art, whether it's data collection, analysis, or dissemination, can lead to "reimagin[ing] a better world and creat[ing] radical possibilities for social transformation" (Domínguez, 2022, p. 36).

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## THEORY OF CHANGE

Change is impossible without relationships, as "relationships do not merely shape reality, they *are* reality" (Wilson, 2008, p. 7) and I believe in this unequivocally and wholeheartedly. This notion is foundational to my theory of social change. A mentor of mine once told me that "relationships move at the speed of trust" (brown, 2017). My theoretical framework illustrated how I navigated my relationships with the youth throughout my research. My theory of social change is meant to expand on this, and further highlight my own thinking around changemaking; I even outline my action plan later on in this section, which I enacted with the youth throughout and beyond my research process.

I am inevitably inspired by past mentors, both in and outside of an academic context and the way I conceptualize change draws largely upon my identity as a queer person and how I take up space in and interact with the world around me. Just as human beings aren't easily defined, art isn't easily defined, bringing to mind a quote from Shawn Wilson's book *Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods* (2008), which says "the closer you get to defining something, the more it loses its context" (Wilson, 2008, p. 8). When you define something, you are putting it in a box with no windows, with seemingly no way out, immobile. When you *don't* define something (or someone) so rigidly, you are allowing it/them to exist wholly, you are giving

it/them mobility and autonomy, and you are giving it/them community, and community (along with collective care) is a central tenet to my theory of social change.

Aforementioned in my positionality section, Indigenous researcher Shawn Wilson posits that “relationships do not merely shape reality, they *are* reality” (Wilson, 2008, p. 7), and I repeat this here to emphasize it further. We are constantly in relationship, with people, with nature, with food, with art, with everything around us. Unfortunately, where we live (known as the global north, among other things) promotes a culture of individuality and isolation, and our geographic circumstances reflect that, with the United States being built around cars and not people, with urban green spaces diminishing in quantity and size, and public spaces/services becoming extremely privatized and inaccessible (i.e. anti-homeless architecture and expensive public transport), for example.

Even the public spaces that don’t appear to be privatized and inaccessible at first glance actually are, because they have an invisible, predetermined set of rules to follow that people only know if they fit into that space, and the people who know these rules are often cis white folks of a high socioeconomic standing, also known as those who benefit the most from (and play the biggest role in upholding) the “system of imperialist white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy” (hooks, 2009, p. 8). Oftentimes, arts spaces (digital, tangible, and especially, physical), and academic research spaces, uphold this predetermined politic that dictates who can enter the space and how they have to act once they’re in it. I want this project to disrupt and abolish this limiting precedent, allowing the space to be molded by the participants in its communal creation, with all of us learning (and unlearning) from each other.

### *Action Plan*

In enacting my theory of change in this project, I worked with a team of youth with a variety of skillsets to create and curate a children's book. Building community was prioritized over a culture of individualism, as everyone involved played a role in putting together the children's book. All decision making was a communal process, and this started in my last meeting with the youth, where I presented a variety of options for the action plan. There were three different ideas and given the great enthusiasm for two of them (an informative pamphlet for teachers and an interactive children's book), we decided to do both and have the youth choose which one they wanted to be involved with, with one person in each group playing the role of holding people accountable to their responsibilities and keeping the group on track to complete their tasks pertaining to the project. A diversity of skill sets and perspectives in the group made for a children's book that was not only aesthetically diverse, but aesthetically and thematically cohesive. This children's book is an eclectic amalgamation of art and writing that children (and teachers) of all kinds of backgrounds can find some connection to. I am hoping that the children's book, a tangible, accessible space that can be shared with others, can both help foment cross-cultural, sustainable community.

In putting together the children's book, I wanted to make sure I helped uplift perspectives of everyone involved. It was incredibly important to maintain open communication amongst everyone involved in this to make sure people felt valued and fulfilled with the work they were doing and to address any issues in the moment they come up and not later on. With this approach, the children's book came to fruition in a way that felt meaningful to every single person involved; I wanted everyone involved to feel like they were an instrumental part of this

project, like they were not (and *are* not) disposable, like this project wouldn't have been the same without them, because it undoubtedly wouldn't have been.

Prior to the children's book, I facilitated a session where I introduced art as a tool of data collection and curation. I brought in some posters from my wall to look at and generate a conversation about archiving and its importance. For a long time, I didn't view archiving and curation and anything in the realm of rearranging and reframing as an artistic practice. It used to live in the periphery of my mind, but now it is at the core of my being, as an artist, as a person, and as a researcher. I didn't expect this to be the case for the youth in just one session, in just a little over an hour... but had an extremely productive conversation about the topic, which I will elaborate upon in much greater detail in my findings section later on.

I wanted my action plan to consistently prioritize community and community care no matter the obstacles that arose.

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## METHODS

### *Site*

This project took place at Clark University, particularly in the Education Department, which has served as the meeting place for my weekly meetings with the youth, and has been their meeting place since last Fall, prior to my involvement in their research. Clark University is a predominantly white liberal arts institution that hosts a total of approximately 3400 undergraduate and graduate students who live both on and off campus in the Main South neighborhood. Clark boasts about their Fifth-Year Accelerated Master's program and their undergraduate and graduate studies in the Psychology and Geography departments, as well as

others. Clark also claims to have a healthy and sustainable relationship with the Main South community, describing Clark as an open campus that local residents are welcome in.

However, this relationship is tainted by a clear power imbalance, with Clark, and specifically Clark admin, taking the reins and making many decisions that affect the surrounding community, a community that has a stronger relationship with the physical space around them than Clark does. Such decisions include (but are not limited to) buying an abandoned lot on Park Ave, and building new facilities, requiring constant construction that not only affects Clark students, but also Main South residents, especially those living extremely close to Clark. Speaking from my own experiences of the past four years, I have observed fellow Clark students and especially the parents of Clark students claim on multiple occasions that Main South is a drug-ridden, crime-ridden neighborhood that is extremely dangerous. I even remember a teacher at my high school making a face at me, seemingly expressing concern, when I told him I was going to Clark; he had never even lived in Worcester, but being from New England, he had, through no fault of his own, heard false and harmful narratives that the neighborhood around Clark was not safe.

I noticed across the board that the people who I had seen express disdain for Main South were overwhelmingly white, upper-middle class or upper class, had lived in a suburban bubble, only spoke English, and made no concerted effort to connect with the community outside of the Clark bubble they found themselves in, comfortable and complacent. These privileged outsiders (insiders at Clark, outsiders in the greater, surrounding community) had misguided ideas about Main South that were often rooted in classism and racism, and they also lacked any cultural or linguistic literacy; of course, they were bound to be uncomfortable in the culturally and linguistically diverse urban neighborhood of Main South, unless they did some serious work to

unpack their prejudiced preconceived notions and connect with the community around them, such as (but not limited to) the youth who participated in this research.

### *Participants*

This research centers around eight youth researchers, all involved with Clark University's chapter of Upward Bound. They are all local to Worcester and they come from a variety of ethnic, racial, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds, many of which intersect with that of their fellow youth researchers. While there are numerous students involved in Upward Bound across the city (and the country), these particular youth had the unique and enriching opportunity to be involved in this research, facilitated by Professor Jie Park, and aided by myself, student research Bào Nguyen, and former Upward Bound employee (and CYES alumni) Rory Carrara.

Even though these youth are high school students, attending two schools around the city, they are not just students in this space, but youth, and youth researchers, rather. Every single day they're at school and even outside of school while they're doing school-related things, they fall into the identity of "student" and that can feel extremely limiting, and sometimes, patronizing; I know this from experience. Their active participation in this research as youth gives them the chance to connect the intellectual with the emotional. In this meeting space, boisterous laughs were just as present as fiery debate, and of course, none of that could happen without some snacks to get us by.

My involvement may have been limited in the grand scheme of things, considering that they started meeting last fall and I joined this past March, but all in all, I got to know these participants, and each and every one of them played a significant role in this research, each

bringing their own positionalities, theories of change, and experiential learnings to the table, sometimes without even realizing it.

### ***Methodology & Epistemological Stance***

I sat down to write this section at my favorite coffee shop in Worcester: Cordella's. After putting on some ambient music in my noise-cancelling headphones, sliding my blue light glasses up my nose, and burning my tongue on the first sip of my tea, I resolved to get this section done. I got a couple other things done, but not what I had initially intended, so I left feeling caffeinated and defeated. At the start of my 30 minute walk home, I decided to respond to a friend's voice memo, a friend I frequently exchange voice memos with, and after acknowledging and responding to what she chronicled in her message, I told her what I *had* gotten done, and started thinking out loud, thinking through my frustrations with this section. While writing is certainly an outlet for me, I tend to process things best by talking about them, whether it's to myself (and my voice memo app on my phone) or to friends, via phone calls, voice memos, and in-person conversation. Just the other week, I stayed up all night talking to someone, someone who I'd just met, and that's not the first time that's happened to me. Talking (and listening) has taught me a lot about myself, other people, and the world around me, both in and outside of the classroom.

I believe wholeheartedly that as long as you keep living your life and opening yourself up to luck, you will never run out of things to talk about... but what does that have to do with my methodology and my epistemological stance? I'll tell you about it in a voice memo, which is my unorthodox way of "writing" this section. Of course, I could not "write" a whole thesis in a voice memo for a number of reasons, and probably the most pressing one being that I don't have enough storage for that... But this entire project has taught me to trust the process, no matter



how turbulent, and in doing so, I trust my voice, my learnings and unlearnings (and my voice memo app) to walk you through my methods and why I'm using them.

### Methodology & Epistemological Stance

#### ***Limitations***

While I found this research to be fruitful, I can certainly name some limitations I encountered while collecting and analyzing data. To preface these, I think it's important to recognize that these limitations do not detract from my research and subsequent findings. Rather, they will help inform future research in the realm of arts-based YPAR, as well as my own future research and the ways I approach it.

I'd say the limitations I encountered throughout my research were out of my control. I think joining the group as late as I did was definitely a limitation, but I had to exhaust all my options before finally landing on this project, which I didn't even know was an option for my research until Jie proposed it to me. While I felt extremely welcomed in the group from the beginning, they all seemed pretty close-knit already, and I'm sure that joining earlier would've allowed me to bond with them more and of course, I would've been able to collect data over a longer period of time. That would mean having more data to substantiate the claims made in my findings, but again, this limitation was bound to come up considering my unique circumstances with this project. Another limitation I encountered was inconsistent attendance, both on my part and the youth's. Since joining the group towards the end of March, I can safely say that I was not at every meeting, even though that was my initial goal.

All research has limitations, no matter the field it's in, but lots of the limitations that come up during research that specifically works with people (and not samples in a lab) are

limitations that can't be helped. The limitations presented to me during this project are not limitations that you can necessarily prepare for in the future, given that they are products of their specific environment, timing, etc. I think my biggest takeaway from these is that research with humans must make space for limitations, in whatever shape or form they come in. Limitations can present themselves in all stages of research, beginning, middle, and end... You just have to cross those bridges when you get there, and there will be boundless fields waiting for you, fertile with new learnings, opportunities, and questions.

### ***Data Collection & Data Analysis***

As outlined in my abstract as well as some subsequent sections, I collected data through personal journal entries outside of meetings, extensive field notes taken during meetings, and transcriptions from meeting recordings. I found this data, which is both data I was given access to and data I collected, to be extremely generative despite any limitations I had to confront throughout my research. I transcribed all applicable data into separate Google doc for ease and accessibility, allowing me to more efficiently sift through it, recognizing both patterns and anomalies in it. By applicable data, I mean that I transcribed relevant portions of particular recordings that would provide sufficient evidence to the claims made in the upcoming findings section; I combed my field notes and analyzed the relevant sections.

My personal journal entries have been incredibly illuminating. They've helped me navigate the rollercoaster of emotions I've experienced throughout this process and they've shown me what I need to give my attention to in this research, and though vulnerability is a core principle of my research (and my relationship to myself and others), some things must remain sacred and so, they will not be revealed in this context. Relationships have boundaries and so

does research! That being said, I think the data I've collected (and communicated in this paper), as well as data collected by the group at large, gave me ample space to make meaningful connections between complex concepts and experiences, which is explored in detail in my findings that follow.

Data analysis cannot happen without data collection, and now that I've shared my data collection process, it is important to shed light on how I arrived at each of my three findings. As I've said throughout this paper, everything is connected, constantly in relationship with each other, and this sentiment certainly applies to my findings and how I happened upon them.

During one of my many check-ins with Jie, I expressed frustrations pertaining to the lack of research questions in my project. Since this project occurred organically out of order, I ended up collecting data before I had any semblance of a research question. In order to facilitate my findings section, which would later lead to the emergence of research questions, Jie encouraged me to think of at least three things I learned from the youth. My homework was to journal about it before our next check-in a few days later. I knew I'd learned things from the youth, many, many things... but I was having a lot of trouble putting pen to paper. I ended up journaling an hour before my meeting with Jie, and the first thing I thought of was the importance of sharing thoughts without specifically naming or framing them with certain terms or theories. Jie pushed back on this learning a bit and told me to dive deeper into my field notes, the meeting transcripts, and my own, reflective journal entries; doing so gave way to my first finding about theory and critical consciousness and the essential role they play in YPAR spaces.

My second finding, on "instrumental community" (Matusov et al., 2012) and how the youth challenged it, also surfaced during a check-in with Jie. I didn't know what "instrumental community" (Matusov et al., 2012) meant, but Jie said it was something along the lines of

building community to fulfill a purpose or achieve certain goals. I don't think there's anything inherently wrong with that, but in the context of my project, I observed (and became involved with) the youth building community for community's sake, so I wanted to focus my energy on dissecting and honoring that in my findings. The youth paved the way for honest and fruitful conversations that undoubtedly shaped me and my findings; they also shared their affinity for community building in their written introductions to our upcoming book about YPAR. I think this particular finding is a container for all of my findings, or rather, it is the largest nesting doll holding everything inside it. I care deeply about building meaningful, intentional community as a researcher and as a person, and it became increasingly clear to me that the youth care deeply about it too.

Lastly, my third finding about youth agency, arose from a reflective writing activity in one of my meetings with the youth. Jie prompted them to think about an issue they confronted in school and write about whether or not they thought they could change it. I elaborate on this activity, and the generative conversation it yielded, in my findings. We talked a lot about shame and fear, as well as love and trust, as mechanisms of social change that exist and that the youth have access to. Change cannot be enacted without meaningful community, and meaningful community cannot happen without candid conversations that name what we already know is happening around us.

Jie pushed me to notice what was there from the ground up, but I already had certain lenses going in: relational components like community cultural wealth, and humanizing research frameworks, for example. These lenses allowed me to intentionally interrogate and illustrate my findings as they emerged, even the findings that challenged my initial ideas and surprised me at times.

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## FINDINGS

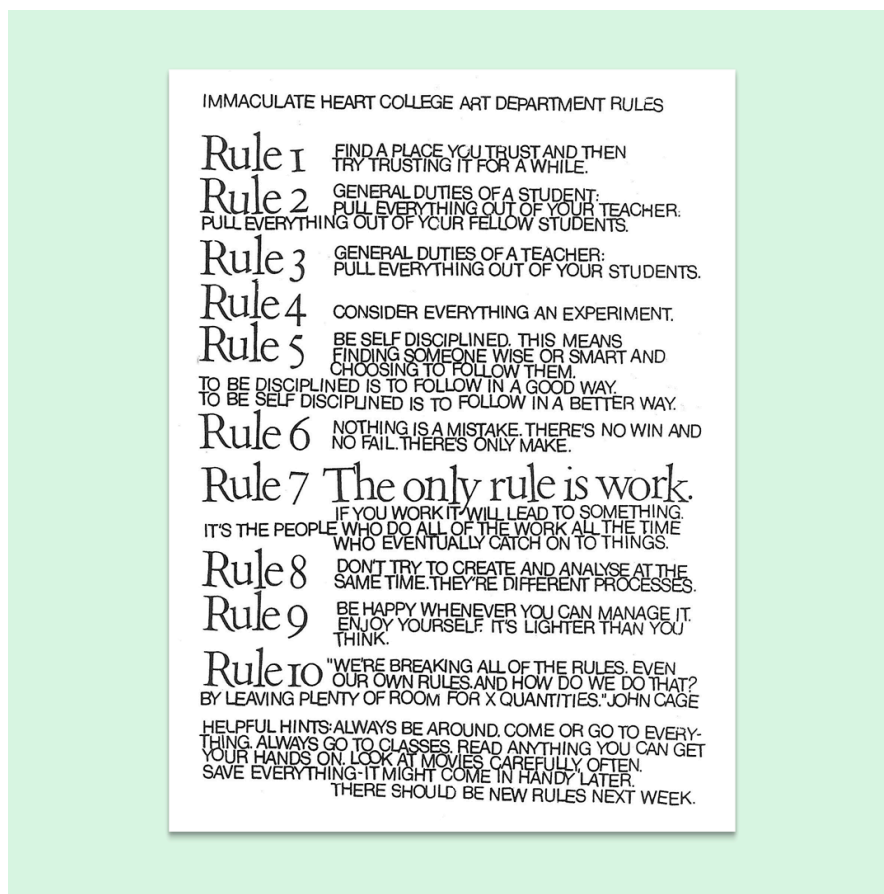
### *Finding, Found – How do I remain in conversation with my research?*

Before I delve into my findings, I wanted to forefront the fact that my findings are in constant conversation with my theoretical framework. The findings section, in any research paper, aim to demonstrate what we now know having done the research we did. But what do we *really* know? We only know what we ask... these words were a driving force all throughout my research and from those words, I distilled a couple research questions: **What did I learn from YPAR and the youth involved in it? What did I learn about creating and curating spaces where they can be their full, unapologetic selves and expand beyond that?**

These questions, or curiosities, rather, paved the way for even more questions to be asked, and they remind me that questions are just as important (if not *more* important) than statements in a conversation. I've always loved asking *other* people questions, being a naturally curious person, but I haven't always liked when people asked *me* questions, especially in academic environments. In so many of my classes, I grew increasingly frustrated when I would encounter academic texts that generated more questions than answers. It wasn't until a professor reframed that for me that I truly started to understand that having more questions than answers was actually a good thing; it ensured that you'd be a lifelong learner.

In the following section, I reflected on how my theoretical framework informed my findings, and how my findings have shaped my theoretical framework. I largely did so through questions that I will forever be intimately wrestling with.

# 1. *Who frames what? – Reflecting on critical consciousness and theory in YPAR*



*Figure 9: Corita Kent's "ten rules" from the 1960s, dissected in detail in one of the meetings I facilitated, which was meant to center the significance of art as form of meaningmaking*

I've never really liked shapes with sharp edges. I like spirals, which are just circles hugging each other infinitely; stories are spirals. I like stars too, which I guess have sharp edges, but I don't draw them that way. I soften every egregious edge, transforming the stars into a new shape entirely, and I didn't know what that shape was until my friend Madi told me recently that my stars look like people... but anthropomorphic shapes aren't my focal point here, theory is.

Theory, and the terms that emerge from it, can give our thoughts shape, and theory has a shape of its own. College was my first formal introduction to theory and it didn't make the best first impression on me, or as I would later come to discover, I didn't make the best first

impression on theory. I saw it (or rather, chose to see it) in its most abrasive form, every jagged edge sharpened by every concept I didn't understand, puncturing my psyche with every word. It was only when I read "Theory as Liberatory Practice" (1991) by bell hooks that I felt welcome; my wounds were starting to heal. bell hooks starts off on a vulnerable note with the following statement: "Let me begin by saying that I came to theory because I was hurting-the pain within me was so intense that I could not go on living" (hooks, 1991, p. 1). hooks saw theory as a "location for healing," but now, I see theory as one of my anthropomorphic stars, stretching in all directions, beyond the pages of my journal. I realize now that my pain was self-inflicted, and theory just wanted to let me in, let me take (and find) form in a comforting and infinite container.

My junior year at Clark, I took a class called "Building Community Through Research *With*" taught by Natty Lawton-Sticklor, and I learned a great deal about myself and the way I think, both inside the classroom with my peers, and outside of that in countless meetings with Natty, meetings that would leave me feeling overwhelmingly sure of myself; at the time, I was going through my very first breakup, so I held on tight to this feeling. My whole life, my brain has functioned in incomplete sentences and because I didn't realize for so long, I got to be really good at hiding it... but in class and in meetings with Natty, she made a point of embracing what she called "half-baked thoughts"; I've always liked half-baked, soft and chewy sugar cookies, so I liked the sound of this. This mindset shift, from incomplete sentences to half-baked thoughts, has proven to be invaluable in my approach to research, and particularly, my approach to theory. I've found this framework to be foundational in the truest sense of the word; without half-baked thoughts, there's nothing for theory to give form to.

I came into this YPAR group extremely late, joining at the end of March, while they had started all the way back in September. I had a lot of catching up to do and as a result, I had a lot

of half-baked thoughts... but this space was about centering the youth and *their* half-baked thoughts, so besides two meetings I helped facilitate about the importance of arts-based research, I took on the role of a proactive listener and archivist, taking copious field notes. In one of our meetings, while coding one of their interview transcripts, there was some confusion and debate about how to define a critique in this context, which allowed Jie to expertly introduce the concept of critical consciousness. She framed it in the simplest of terms: “it’s our ability to see power and structures” and she even elaborated further, expressing that “we’re tied to systems and structures that are either made for us or not”; she was beaming when she said “the reason I love working with youth researchers like you is because all of you have it [critical consciousness].” When you’re a part of a group that the system doesn’t work for, you’re more likely to have critical consciousness, brainstorming new ways to make the system work in your favor, not because you *want* to, but because you *have* to. Jie ended this thread of thinking with the following insight: “it’s a lot harder to teach critical consciousness to people with a lot of privilege, because they don’t really have to care (because the system was made by people like them, to benefit them).”

Jie bringing up critical consciousness in this meeting brought up a lot for me, namely that Jie and I had an important role to play as the adult researchers in this youth research space. I can’t speak for Jie, of course, but I can speak for myself in saying that I feel caught in the middle, and by that, I mean that I don’t necessarily feel like an adult researcher in the same way that Jie is, but I also don’t necessarily feel like a youth researcher in the same way that these youth are. I’m 23, I still don’t have my Bachelor’s degree (yet), which doesn’t mean anything, and I guess that’s my superpower in a way. In occupying this weird, confusing middleground, my perspective is widened and I can see beyond the periphery; I might not see clearly all the time,



but I can see what's there and maybe find ways to understand it, and it's impossible to understand *anything* if you can't even see a rough, blurry outline of it. My unique positionality grants me the coveted opportunity to see multiple truths coexisting, two of these truths being that (1) adults have the responsibility of offering tools that allow youth the agency to give their thoughts shape and that (2) youth can sometimes offer adults some of the same tools, without it being their obligation in the same way it is for adults. These truths can be distilled into a core tenet of YPAR: intergenerational learning.

In one of my one-on-one meetings with Jie, she asked me to write about three or four things the youth had taught me and report back on that at our next one-on-one meeting two days later. For the next 47 hours, I racked my brain and I grew increasingly frustrated that I wasn't able to name anything I had learned from the youth, and my frustration largely stemmed from the fact that I *knew* I had learned things from these brilliant youth, but I just couldn't figure out how to name them. I couldn't show up to this meeting with nothing to share; I didn't waste my time or Jie's, for that matter. So, the morning of my meeting, about an hour before it started, at 8:28am, I started journaling, unsure of where I was going, but knowing that I had to get somewhere, much like how I started writing this. I wrote almost three pages until I reached what felt like an organic ending to my train of thought. Jie and I only had 30 minutes to meet, so I got right into it and shared my first learning:

i guess they've taught me that you don't need the right language to express things the right way. in college, and in academic circles, we get so caught up in all the terminology and the jargon that sometimes we forget to describe things in simple terms, and we forget to think out loud, and rather, we often opt to put together a perfectly polished and put-together thought, rather than going with a half-baked thought and letting our peers

help us out. i think this mentality has sometimes posed an obstacle in classroom spaces but also in my thesis-writing process. i'm so afraid of the half-baked thoughts that i'm waiting until they come out fully baked, fully formed and that often leaves me frozen, looking at my computer screen, feeling helpless

After sharing this, I was ready to get into my other two learnings, which we did touch on briefly, but there was some pushback from Jie on this first one, which I'm immensely grateful for, because dissecting this learning in detail became the basis for what I'm writing about right now.

There was definitely some validity and truth to my learning, but Jie urged me to think about it further and recognize the importance of naming things, using terms like critical consciousness, for example, that are talked about at length in theoretical texts. I found myself in agreement with this notion, and I married it to my initial learning, ultimately coming to the conclusion that it's important to express things organically before naming them and giving them form. Organic expression seems to come to youth a lot more naturally than adults, because as adults, we can feel paralyzed by our aspirations to perfectionism, yearning to look as put together as society thinks we should be by our age. More often than not, I observed these youth just say what was on their mind without a second thought, and of course, there would be moments of hesitation, or even moments of ever so slight regret after saying something they weren't sure of, but they said it nonetheless and that's what matters.

Critical race theory scholar Tara J. Yosso breaks down the different forms of capital that contribute to community cultural wealth in her aforementioned article. The youth I've been working with in particular, coming from a diverse array of racial, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds, possess all these forms of capital that in some shape or form, and I think it's

important to highlight that, especially linguistic capital, when it comes to their inadvertent approach to theory. Yosso cites a key example in another scholar's research:

Marjorie Faulstich Orellana (2003) examines bilingual children who are often called upon to translate for their parents or other adults and finds that these youth gain multiple social tools of 'vocabulary, audience awareness, cross-cultural awareness, "real-world" literacy skills, math skills, metalinguistic awareness, teaching and tutoring skills, civic and familial responsibility, [and] social maturity' (p. 6).

I can say with complete certainty that every single youth involved in this YPAR group is bilingual, and while I cannot say with certainty that they are all called upon to translate for their parents or other adults, I believe there is still something to be gleaned from this. These bilingual youth (who may even speak more than just two languages) have a wealth of vocabulary and knowledge to draw from in their cultures that, whether they notice it or not, informs their pluralistic way of thinking. I know first-hand, being the child of Colombian immigrants, that switching back and forth between thinking (and speaking) in different languages can be mentally draining, with translation (to others and within ourselves) being an emotionally and mentally draining task, but I know that if I can't find the word for something in Spanish, I can probably find it in English, and vice-versa, and it's comforting that that's the case, even if it's a little tiring sometimes. I may have come to that realization already, but the youth may have a harder time getting there, so I hope I can help frame things for them, or give them all the resources I can to point them in the right direction; this way, their incisive and insightful ideas can form a shape that will be recognized in dominant (white) spaces, without compromising the steadfast integrity of these ideas.

bell hooks showed us that theory can be a liberatory practice, but like I said before, without half-baked thoughts, or even fully baked thoughts, there's nothing for theory to give form to. Theory doesn't float around formless like our thoughts often do; theory offers us an infinite amount of cookie cutters, shaped like anthropomorphic stars or whatever odd, beautiful shape(s) your thoughts take... and I want to cultivate spaces where youth feel comfortable as they figure that out for themselves.

This relates back to my theoretical framework, grounded in hooks' manifesto on theory, and it also calls in Django Paris' vocalization for vulnerability in YPAR. It requires immense vulnerability to share half-baked thoughts and fully baked thoughts that will ultimately inform theory that's accessible. Furthermore, thinking about Tara Yosso's work on community cultural wealth and youth capital, present in my theoretical and conceptual frameworks, I ask the following questions, of myself and of anyone who's reading this: In what ways can youth contribute to theory formation? In what ways do they already contribute to it? How can adult researchers in YPAR spaces facilitate fruitful conversations on theory that make it feel liberating rather than intimidating?

## ***2. Challenging the notion of “instrumental community”***

It may seem obvious that majoring in Community, Youth, and Education Studies would leave me well-equipped to build community easily wherever and whenever, but I didn't find it to be that obvious to me throughout my college career. In many of my classes, community appeared to be almost theoretical; it was often rendered a source of analysis to learn *from*, rather than something tangible and multidimensional that we could learn *in*. Working with youth in this YPAR space, I not only saw meaningful community flourishing in real time, but I actually felt

like I was a part of it; *they* made me feel like a part of it, even though I joined the group so late. On the surface, it may seem like the only purpose for building this community was research, with the youth's research at the forefront, and my own research adding on to it. It became increasingly clear to me, however, that this community would extend far beyond the confines of this research, beyond an "instrumental community" (Matusov et al., 2012) that only existed to achieve something.

Every single meeting, without fail, we had a check-in question that would get everyone talking, even those that weren't really talkers. I always included the check-ins in my field notes, with questions ranging from "what's your favorite kind of cookie?" to "where would you go on an all-expenses paid trip?" and believe it or not, both questions (and almost every question) sparked some playful debate amongst the youth, with many of them asserting their answers (their opinions) as fact. I remember one of the youth frazzled with my detailed documentation of these check-ins when I first joined in on the meetings, wondering why I would need that information for my research, and that certainly made me question how much value there was in including these check-in questions and the varied (and sometimes, contentious) responses.

Usually, the youth would come up with the check-in questions at the very beginning of our meetings, on the spot, but I recall one particular day where a check-in question for the following meeting was proposed at the end of the meeting, and it wasn't really a question. For the next meeting, you had to say something the person next to you is good at, or their special talent, to put it in fewer words. I wasn't at the next meeting so I don't even know if this check-in activity actually happened, but what I do distinctly remember about the meeting I *was* there for, when the activity was initially proposed, is that one of the youth asked me "do you know us well enough yet?" I tried to be completely candid in my response to this question, but my response

came out rather cryptic and ambiguous: “I guess we’ll see!” And while we didn’t see in the next meeting, it was in (and after) our last meeting, a month later that I did, in fact, realize that I knew these youth beyond just being incredibly talented researchers.

In addition to the children’s book illustrated in my action plan, a collaborative book about YPAR will be another powerful product of the youth’s research, and will render them not just talented researchers, but talented (and published!) authors. For the first chapter, the youth researchers, along with the adult researchers, wrote introductions. I got to know the youth even more in reading these, and I also observed some implicit insights that challenges “instrumental community” (Matusov et al., 2012) that I wanted to highlight here. A foundational component of these insights and the way they grapple with “instrumental community” (Matusov et al., 2012) is the context they exist and came to exist in, and I wanted to touch on this before foregrounding the actual content of the youth’s introductions. During one of our meetings, Jie gave us time to write these introductions. While she offered some guidance regarding what to include, she kept it fairly open-ended as far as how to express this information. She emphasized that these introductions were a chance for the reader to get to know the youth and everyone involved in the book, so we didn’t have to write within rigid, academic parameters; she told us to write in a way that felt natural and aligned with our true selves, however that looked. Jie didn’t tell the youth to go about it this way to achieve a fixed outcome; she just wanted to prioritize freedom of expression over formality, which would, in my opinion, allow the reader to connect more with the youth and the book as a whole. Taking that into account, the approach to this writing process completely contests the idea “instrumental community” (Matusov et al., 2012) and so, it is no surprise, that the content of these introductions authentically reflected the polar opposite of

“instrumental community” (Matusov et al., 2012) which is building meaningful, intentional community, and caring about that community without reservations or ulterior motives.

“Making new connections is important to me...” This is one of many stark and simple statements in the youth’s introductions that showcases a commitment to fostering meaningful and intentional community. It is clear to me that this commitment is embedded in the youth’s way of being and thinking, whether they realize it or not. One of the youth remarked that “every week, during our meetings, I got to learn so much, not just about our world, but also about my classmates and myself” and to me, that conveys an unwavering appreciation for and dedication to community in its purest form. Another youth expressed that the reason they joined YPAR “was to learn about research and meet new people” and said that the reason they stayed wasn’t just because of the research itself, but also because “we were able to express ourselves without people judging you.” In that same vein, one of the youth framed the YPAR space as “a family free of judgment.” These reflections are both heartwarming and incisive, and while they don’t mention “instrumental community” (Matusov et al., 2012) explicitly, they are deeply connected to it and at odds with it. Even the Combahee River Collective didn’t have the word “intersectionality” in their vocabulary, but they were fundamentally and wholeheartedly in conversation with it.

Throughout this section, and this whole paper, I made the conscious decision to describe the youth as “youth” and not “students” or a different label. At an event unrelated to YPAR, with some other CYES students, I lingered on the periphery of a conversation where someone asked Jie, “Why do you call them ‘youth’? Why not call them ‘kids’ or ‘students’?” and the moment I heard this, I quickly inched closer to be included in this conversation, anxiously awaiting Jie’s response, because I had been wondering the same thing... I just hadn’t thought to ask about it. I

don't remember her exact response, as I wasn't in research mode, taking field notes, but to paraphrase, she said that calling them kids was infantilizing and too juvenile for their age, and calling them students unfairly confined their identities, with the identity of "student" having a lot of expectations and restrictions attached to it. Calling them "youth" allowed for a more expansive exploration of their identities, especially in a research space, considering that historically and systematically, many research spaces left out youth perspectives and treated youth as people to be researched *on*, rather than research *with*. YPAR aims to break down these sorts of barriers, but that's not what I want to underscore here.

I want to recognize these youth as the multifaceted people they are. Yes, they're researchers, their curiosity bouncing off the walls from the moment we'd check in, but they're also brothers, sisters, siblings, older, younger, and in between. They're athletes and they're artists. They're children of immigrants. And beyond all that, they're people, just like you, just like me... They may have a lot left to learn, but they know so much already, and they've taught me a ton too, which has been such a gratifying and eye-opening experience for me, and something that will permeate my pedagogy for years to come, maybe even forever, but I'll repeat the cryptic and ambiguous answer I once gave the youth when they questioned if I truly knew them: I guess we'll see.

I wasn't taking field notes at our final meeting, as I was facilitating part of it, and I also wanted to be fully present, a dilemma I often encountered when taking field notes... a dilemma I've journaled about and reflected on, sometimes excessively. I did, however, journal about this final day, and rather than paraphrase my own words, I'll just share them as they are, transcribed straight from my journal, with no edits:



i thought there would be more of an air of sadness, and while that was definitely palpable to a degree, the energy and the mood was overwhelmingly happy, with so much love and gratitude for the work done so far and the work that's yet to be done. it didn't feel like an end, but rather a beginning and dinner felt like a moment to celebrate a bittersweet end, but also a beginning. these youth, every single one of them, are so intelligent, but also funny, caring, generous, boisterous, and so much more, and all of that was on display at dinner. i've heard so much about research in their words, but it was nice to get to know a bit of what's going on in their personal lives, and i feel honored that they felt comfortable to talk about that stuff around me. i honestly didn't think i was coming to the dinner, because i joined too late or something... but when storm gave me that little rubber duck, i knew i was more than welcome there

Earlier, I said, "I guess we'll see" and what I *did* see, crystallized before my eyes at our last meeting and the celebratory dinner that followed, was a beautiful community built not for the sake of research, but for the sake of building community, challenging the idea of "instrumental community" (Matusov et al., 2012), proving that community is not a means to an end, but rather, the process of building community is itself an accomplishment and it's valuable. Before getting into my own sense-making and analysis of this, I wanted to put a magnifying glass on these sacred moments with the youth, especially this final meeting and subsequent dinner. I really want this section, and all of my findings, for that matter, to be a space to honor the youth and let them shine like the stars they are, holding the space for everything I bore witness to while I was in their orbit.

A couple years ago, I picked up a book called "Be Not Afraid Of Love" by Mimi Zhu, an author I had become familiar with via Instagram, a platform where many budding authors find an

audience these days. Zhu (they/them) had cultivated a dedicated following there, a beautiful digital community of individuals who resonated with Zhu's delicate but piercing musings on memories, mortality, and more. When I heard they were publishing a book, I knew I had to get it immediately; I could finally support them and their writing in a more tangible and material way, beyond merely liking and commenting. I devoured the book in practically one sitting, and when I was finished, I was left with a lot to process. This book, a memoir of sorts, found Zhu reflecting on a past abusive relationship and not only how they lost themselves in it, but how they found their way back to their authentic self. This isn't meant to turn into a book report about their book, though I could certainly write one. I want to focus on an idea that Zhu mentions in a chapter about apologies, because I think it applies to the concept of "instrumental community" (Matusov et al., 2012) and how the youth challenged it in every single one of our meetings.

Zhu says that one of the key components of a genuine apology is recognizing intention and impact, and by that, they mean that when you hurt someone, you need to recognize that although your intention may have been positive, your impact was negative. Certainly, it is more complex than that, but that idea, in simple terms, is one that I like to center when thinking about the ways we build (in)genuine community. The concept of "instrumental community" (Matusov et al., 2012) aligns with this almost perfectly. Within the framework of "instrumental community" (Matusov et al., 2012) the intention is to build community, of course, but that intention is tainted by a more hidden intention to build community for the sake of accomplishing a certain goal that may be imposed and not a common goal that everyone agrees upon, and therefore, the impact is not necessarily a good one, in my opinion. The youth, in challenging "instrumental community" (Matusov et al., 2012), don't have any hidden intention, and they're just there to build community and enjoy the process of building community as the fruits of their

labor. In this particular framework, the impact is invaluable, teaching youth and teaching me to enjoy the process for what it is and not for what it could accomplish. I find it really interesting the ways that things I've read years ago make their way into my writing now, when back then, I wasn't thinking about the applicability of Zhu's writing in an academic context.

Tying this all back to my theoretical framework, I am reminded of a remark I made regarding Django Paris' emphasis on vulnerability in YPAR spaces as an adult researcher. I said that I didn't want to be a dejected and detached researcher, because it would produce less valuable data. I elaborated on this further, not just focusing on data, but I want to interrogate this particular claim I made previously and draw on the notion of "instrumental community" (Matusov et al., 2012) to break it down and even refute it. In presenting this claim, I was subconsciously pedaling the idea of "instrumental community" (Matusov et al., 2012), and now having written about the ways my research has challenged this idea, I find my present self in disagreement with my past self. This was bound to happen at some point or another and I welcome it. I am also grateful for the existence of my robust theoretical and conceptual frameworks that allow for this conversation between my past and present self. It also facilitates an ongoing conversation with my future self, asking the following questions that I will perpetually ponder on: How can adult researchers in YPAR spaces help foster meaningful, intentional community? What else can youth teach us about building community for community's sake?

### ***3. Moving at the speed of trust, not shame –***

***How do youth think about social change and their agency to enact it?***

“We have power, but it goes unnoticed, even within ourselves...” I couldn’t think of how to start this section, and as I combed meticulously through my field notes and worked through some persistent brain fog, I found this gem, said by one of the youth, and decided it was the perfect way to start. I’m here to put a spotlight on the youth’s perspective, after all. This profound statement made me sad at first, as I realized that this was a common feeling amongst youth, and I only knew that because I’ve felt it before, and I still feel it every now and then. I may be 23, but I still find myself holding onto the tenuous thread of my teenagehood, and that’s why I was really excited for the opportunity to work with 16-18 year-olds in this YPAR group. Those years were some of the most difficult ones of my life for a number of reasons, but hearing this deeply vulnerable reflection from one of the youth, I realized that a big part of my struggle was not being able to tap into my own power and find outlets for it. In this group of youth researchers, I found myself surrounded by youth who are in the process of realizing the power they hold and how to effectively use it, and I’m honored to have played a role in that process, even if it was a small one. These youth are creating a new language in real time, a language that allows us to think more expansively about social change and the myriad of ways youth can enact it.

When talking about agency, it can sometimes feel like an abstract concept, until you give it a container. In one of our meetings, Jie started it off by asking the following question: “What is one issue that you find the most troubling at school?” She offered some space to reflect on this question and then opened up the floor for youth to share their responses, which included school start time, school size, changing from an application to a lottery system, among other pressing issues. After extensive dialogue about each issue presented, Jie then asked a series of follow-up questions: “Do you think you could change this issue? If no, why? If yes, how? What would your

strategy be?” These questions set the stage for the youth to reflect on their agency and whether or not they think they have it. We all journaled about this for a little bit, and when the youth started sharing their thoughts, I was honestly surprised by their responses. For one, there seemed to be a clear gender divide, with the girls thinking they could change this issue, and the boys thinking they couldn’t. One of the boys said, with a dejected tone, “People have been wanting to change this for so long, nothing’s changed” and that made me sad to hear. It’s this kind of mentality that keeps people stagnant and I don’t want hopelessness to become an epidemic, especially not amongst youth that still have so much life left to live and so much potential change to enact!

Unpacking the responses to these follow up questions led us to an extremely pertinent topic of conversation: theories of change. Jie asked the group, “What creates social change and what prevents it from happening?” In my own field notes, I wrote down, “sometimes it’s our own beliefs that stand in the way of making change, fear of failure or assumptions” and “and when we think something needs to change, we are urged to think about the following: what’s the alternative?” I’ve been in many heated discussions with my parents about things I’m frustrated about in the world, things I want to change, big and small. They always told me to think of an alternative, in detail. In those moments, that just made me more frustrated because how was I supposed to know? And I realize that that’s the whole point: I don’t know. These youth don’t have the perfect alternatives to resolve the issues they observe around them, issues that affect them, their peers, their whole world... but they recognize the issues at hand and that’s the first step to taking charge and tapping into your agency. I consider myself to be incredibly privileged in many regards, but at the same time, I went to school with people who were a lot more privileged than me, and as a result, they were safe to live in their own blissfully ignorant bubble. Going back to a prior conversation on critical consciousness, Jie pointed out that these youth

possess critical consciousness, whether they realize it or not. And this is because they all come from cultural, ethnic, and racial backgrounds that are pushed to the margins, forcing them to forge their own path in a world that has prescribed them a path that is only safe to traverse for a select few.

How do you get people to accompany you on this new path, or at least understand the reasons why you had to carve it out from scratch? How do you get people to care about your reality when it doesn't directly affect them? Sometimes it helps to think about this on a smaller scale, since it can be overwhelming to think about the agency you possess in a late-stage capitalist society with innumerable obstacles in your way on a daily basis. Jie knew this and posed a question that surprised all of us, from the looks of it: "How do your parents get you to change your behavior?" and followed it up with "Do they talk to you, punish you, or punish you when the talk doesn't work?" In the moment, it seemed (to me) like a mundane, unrelated question, but now, looking at the field notes I've accumulated and seeing how this fits into the larger conversation we were having, it made total sense... Jie knew that the youth would certainly have something to say about this, and it would serve as a less intimidating way to think about their agency. This question could let them tap into their own experiences growing up, and not just their experiences as students that seem to be the most salient at this point in time.

We all shared stories and laughed plenty, and then meandered towards a fruitful and illuminating conversation about public shaming and threats and the relationship they have with change. One of the youth remarked, "It's countereffective; I'm not gonna listen to you if you're the villain" and someone else declared, "threats or shaming don't change people, but they change the situation." I agreed with both assertions and both of them support the notion that shame is, in fact, a tool that can be used, but it is a risky one to employ when wanting to effect change in

some way. In that vein, another one of the youth brought up a powerful point: “Shame might work more if you’re fighting something bigger than you” and this incisive remark highlights the role of power dynamics when it comes to bringing about change. Most of these youth have unfortunately had the experience of feeling small and somewhat powerless, especially in school, made clear by their prior reflections on the role they play when it comes to the issues they encounter at school.

By the end of this meeting, the energy in the room had shifted from slightly demoralized to effectively empowered, especially when it came to the boys who thought they couldn’t change the troubling issues they pointed out at school. At the core of our conversation, a conversation full of incredible insights and difficult moments of reflection (as always), was the idea that change happens in relationships. Sometimes these relationships are inherently unhealthy, given the context, the power dynamics at play... but a mentor of mine once told me “change moves at the speed of trust” (brown, 2017) and these youth certainly seem to be building this trust in themselves and each other. If I could see that in just one meeting, then it’s bound to grow exponentially beyond that. The youth can really see what’s happening around them and that’s more than a lot people can say, and having that awareness allows them to plant a seed of agency that’ll grow and grow the more they engage in these kinds of meaningful dialogues, and the more they take action as a result of such dialogues. I think the youth’s connection with their own agency was facilitated by the nature of the YPAR space, given that it was a third space that not only allowed, but celebrated, an exploration of self. In this space, the youth were able to tap into their capital and the community cultural wealth they cultivated together.

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## CONCLUSION

### *Summary*

This project certainly did not go the way I envisioned. At the start, more than two years ago, I thought I was doing a completely different project, but it was something familiar: the second issue of an art and literary magazine entitled TRACKS Magazine, with the first issue published by CYES alumni Sophie Gill. I got to help out on this first issue and ultimately, driven by my passion for art as a tool for community building, I decided to take it on as my own. I knew it was going to be hard, especially with all the expectations conjured by the stellar first issue. And, in fact, it proved to be so hard that I did not publish the second issue of TRACKS, as you may have deduced by now... For a while, I was disappointed in myself for admitting defeat, so much so that it took me months and months to admit defeat in the first place and start over again. That being said, I'm incredibly proud of how far I've come as a person and as a researcher throughout this project. It's taken me on a winding journey, full of surprises and obstacles, good, bad, and in between.

This past spring, when I thought I had exhausted every option, Jie offered me this opportunity to work with a group of youth researchers, and I took it immediately. I like to think that everything happens for a reason, but I realize now that I wasn't applying that mentality to every aspect of my life, especially not my academics, and this whole process has proved to me that that mentality really does apply to *everything*. I didn't know I would end up here, finishing this thesis more than a year after I'd originally planned to... but I'm so grateful to be where I am now. Working with these youth has broken my brain and my heart open in the best possible way. It provided new, uncharted territory to explore my passion for art and social justice, and with this group of youth being my focus, I didn't feel the pressure to figure everything out on my own; I felt supported and held by them and their insights in every single meeting. It was with their



support that I was able to mold and shape my research questions: **What did I learn from YPAR and the youth involved in it? What did I learn about creating and curating spaces where they can be their full, unapologetic selves and expand beyond that?**

I know this summary is not supposed to be about what I learned personally, and rather, to summarize what I learned in an academic sense, but oftentimes, I have an immensely hard time separating the emotional with the intellectual. Such a notion connects back to my theoretical framework, which prioritizes profound empathy and relationship-building, a framework foreign to many academic research spaces. This paper has served as a wide open space for me to embrace how my emotional and academic learnings are deeply intertwined, and I'm excited to unpack that in the following sections.

### *Theoretical & Practice Implications*

I took the liberty of putting these two sections together instead of keeping them separate, because after almost five years of reading theory, the only way I'm able to see theory is in its real world applicability. I think anyone seeking to do research must acknowledge this fact and see it as a key component of their research. Theory and practice cannot be separated and when you try to do so in this kind of research, so much can get lost. This research is about relationship building, between people, between concepts, between theory and practice. Even scholar Tara J. Yosso recognizes this, citing Gloria Anzaldúa, saying that "she further asserts that beyond creating theories, 'we need to find practical application for those theories. We need to de-academize theory and to connect the community to the academy' (Anzaldúa, 1990, p. xxvi)." Yosso's work was an integral part of my theoretical and conceptual frameworks, a rich tapestry of relational philosophies that kept me warm and grounded throughout my research process.

I can't tell you what to do and what not to do if you decide to delve into this kind of research, but what I *can* tell you is to prioritize building community throughout the process, just for the sake of building community. When you do that, instead of building community with a particular objective in mind, you open up new spaces and stories and you find that everything (and everyone) is connected somehow. What you pay attention to grows and you start to become okay with having more questions than answers; that's what theory (and practice) has been all about for me... Letting the confusion be a source of knowledge instead of an obstacle to receiving knowledge.

### ***Significance & Closing Reflections***

While it's important for me to explain the significance of this research as a way to close out my paper, I think you can already guess why this research is significant to me personally. I had no idea I would be working with this fantastic group of youth, engaging in intellectually stimulating and emotionally restorative dialogue, week in and week out. They have made this project what it is, and despite a thesis being a difficult undertaking, working with them guaranteed me no shortage of things to share, analyze, and reflect on. I had the pleasure of learning about them and how they see the world, now and in an ideal future.

This research is significant because it shows the value of YPAR spaces, outside of a classroom where youth feel they must always align with their identities as students. They are confined to a curriculum that often lacks the proper tools for community building, and instead encourages individualism through unhealthy competition and standardization. YPAR doesn't exist to give students agency, because they already *have* that agency... it's all about reminding them of that. These youth, juniors and seniors in high school, are in an intense transitional period

of their lives, and more than five years removed from that, I still find myself in a transitional time; transitions are a part of life, in every stage of it. It's spaces like these that we must protect and create in order to weather these tough moments, working through them together while engaging in research that doesn't just privilege textbook knowledge, but shines a spotlight on experiential knowledge and its infinite value.

While my time with this project will come to an end once I graduate, my hope is that it can continue beyond my time at Clark and continue whether it's someone's research or not; to me, this work is for the community before it is for research purposes, and I feel immensely lucky it is something I'm able to do research with. When I started this process in Spring 2023, I didn't think I would end up here, but I'm grateful that I did, despite all the twists and turns and time it took. The seed of this work was planted in me long ago in my grandma's house, and when this project comes to fruition in the Summer of 2025, I hope more seeds of it can be passed on and planted for as long as it's needed in the community.

Sharing stories, sharing art, is choosing to love. And that's just it... it's a *choice* and research like this matters because youth should know they have so many avenues to express their knowledge, not just formal academic writing. They can write poems, draw pictures, make music, tell stories, and so much more. This whole research process taught me to embrace the unexpected, stretching and contorting myself to find new ways to share what I had learned all these years, going out of order as I wrote every component of this project. I hope you can find at least one little thing in this paper that sticks with you, that empowers you to contribute to a community that already exists and create a community that you have yet to find.



*Figure 10: Sharing art is choosing to love*



*Figure 11: Nati, running into a field, into a future, full of possibilities*

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