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# Democratically Engaged Youth:
# Countering the Framing and Containing of Youth in Popular Discourses

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## Abstract

Youth is an unstable demographic encompassing an increasing age range, and popularly imbued with innate negative characteristics. Youth are often negatively portrayed and youth status invoked to suggest an inability to responsibly engage as citizens in order to undermine the impact of youths' positive political participation. They are constructed as violent, lacking positive coping skills, and apathetic. These negative constructions reinforce youth as on the margins of society, unable to responsibly participate as citizens. Despite popular negative portrayals some researchers have demonstrated the many ways youth are politically and socially engaged. Youth are engaged where they find meaning and feel they can have an impact. From organized activism through transformational resistance, and participatory action research projects youth are engaging in creative ways to shape the world they live in.

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***Introduction***

How do youth participate in Canada's democracy today? This paper takes a brief look at discourses about youth to develop an understanding of how youth are defined within society and how they seek to define themselves. 'Youth' is a socially constructed category that continues to be externally defined and applied to an expanding age bracket based on economic and social opportunity (Côté & Allahar, 2006). Currently, youth seek to navigate a post-industrial democracy with decreasing opportunity for democratic engagement (Kennelly, 2011), and in this new reality, youth have been studied extensively in an attempt to define, contain, and empower them.

The discipline of youth studies typically focuses on individual characteristics unique to youth to identify problems that account for trends in decreased participation in formal political processes and increased social and economic difficulties (Côté & Allahar, 2006). Politicians and popular media often invoke youth identity as a means to silence, discredit, and oppress active and meaningful participation outside of party politics (Kennelly, 2011; Quijada Cerecer, Cahill, & Brady, 2013; Solorzano & Bernal, 2001; Taft, 2010) and this is done disproportionately based on race, gender, class, and immigration status (see Ginwright & Cammarota, 2007; Giroux, 1996; Kennelly, 2011; Otero & Cammarota, 2011; Quijada Cerecer et al. 2013). 'Youth' as a construct has "always been mediated, in part, as a social problem" (Giroux, 1996, p. 34). This notwithstanding, youth are politically engaged where they find meaning, opportunity and supportive social conditions.

Critical youth discourses, like other critical discourses, place youth within their social, economic, and political contexts in order to draw attention to external causes for shifts in political, social, and economic participation. This paper first examines negative ways that youth

are popularly defined, and subsequently contained as a category for study, before illustrating how youth are in actuality politically engaged in new and old ways, demonstrating their ability to act responsibly as citizens.

### ***Youth as a Demographic for Study***

#### *The Creation of Adolescence*

Much like other attempts to categorize people, youth as a category is not stable; the application of this label is dependent on the needs of those doing the labelling. As a physical stage, the creation of 'adolescence' (the terms adolescence and youth are often treated as interchangeable) is credited to G. Stanley Hall (1904/1969) who identified it as a turbulent phase of development marked by hormonal instability. Hall's conclusions about the period of adolescence were based in racist philosophical and anthropological ideas, outdated psychological and physiological assumptions, and questionable leaps of logic; despite this, the notion of adolescence as a period of irrationality, instability and unpredictability still maintains popular favour. This designation of youth as a category of study problematically pre-supposes that youth is a homogenous and distinct developmental stage with unique psychological or physical characteristics (White & Wyn, 1998; Wyn & Dwyer, 2000).

Beyond adolescence, youth and the designation of youth status has come to be defined not by any actual physical developmental markers, but as a marginalized identity marked by an inability to access particular 'markers of adulthood' that are in reality the consequence of social, economic and political forces and not the product of any characteristic attributable to being under 30 years old (White & Wyn, 1998). As a social construct, youth is subject to changing definitions based on accepted social indicators, invalidating the ability to categorize youth as a

distinct stage. Studies of youth cover a wide age range including teenagers (see Taft, 2006), university students (see O'Neill, 2015; Otero & Cammarota, 2011), and more broadly those between the ages of 14 and 30 (Government of Canada, 2014).

*Youth Unemployment*

Expansion of the youth age category up to age 30 is a recent phenomenon linked to changes in a job market that has increasingly moved away from manual labour, resulting in decreased opportunities for unskilled full-time work and creating an extended gap (now called youth) between the categories of child and adult (Côté & Allahar, 2006). According to the Government of Canada Youth Employment Strategy (2014), youth includes those aged 15-30; this range was identified based on economic trends that showed a common experience of having difficulty entering the labour market. The collapse of the entry-level job market has been in part due to an increase in life expectancies resulting in decreasing worker turnover (Côté & Allahar, 2006). In addition, in a post-industrial society that is now largely dependent on the service sector, as opposed to the manual labor sector during the 19th and 20th centuries that ill-suited an aging work force, people are not aging out as early as they did before (Côté & Allahar, 2006). A developmental category that isolates individuals from full participation in society and that changes with social and economic trends is problematic.

Youth is a category of exclusion invoked to identify an inability to gain entry into adult status (Côté & Allahar, 2006). Adult status in Western capitalist democracies is largely indicated by economic security and participation in formal politics. Formal politics continues to focus on economics, as youth are increasingly excluded from the job market, and subsequently from financial stability, creating a multiplying effect that further alienates youth from adulthood. Access to adulthood based on these criteria is not distributed evenly across youth demographics

and marginalized youth are more likely to experience difficulty achieving these markers of adulthood. The Youth Employment Strategy identified specific demographics as experiencing increased difficulty entering the labour market, citing that single parents, those of Aboriginal descent, people with disabilities, recent immigrants, those living in rural or remote communities and those without a high school diploma, are at particular risk (Government of Canada, 2014).

Youth are at greater risk where these intersections meet, since not obtaining a high school diploma increases risk of unemployment, and youth disengagement from secondary schools has been identified as a problem disproportionately affecting youth who are living in poverty, with disabilities, or who are from visible minority or Aboriginal communities. Thus, the youth already experiencing oppression face further marginalization (Dunleavy & Milton, 2008; Galston, 2001).

### *Youth Violence, Resiliency, and Apathy*

Youth are often singled out as a homogenous category and held accountable for social problems. They are constructed as violent (Barron & Lacombe, 2005), in need of better coping skills (Garrett et al., 2014), and apathetic (Pammett & LeDuc, 2003). These negative constructions reinforce youth as on the margins of society, unable to responsibly participate as citizens.

Canadian media have propagated the notion of youth as a violent threat (Barron & Lacombe, 2005). Media coverage of youth violence often engages in "emotions contests," that feed into moral panic by highlighting emotional arguments over rational ones (Adjordan, 2011). Despite an actual decrease in the violent crime rate, isolated acts of violence are held up as endemic of a ballooning social problem (Barron & Lacombe, 2005). As discussed earlier with

the ability to access employment, youth from different groups are differently affected and categorized (Barron & Lacombe, 2005; Giroux, 1996; Lesko, 2012).

For example, female youth violence has been portrayed as “irrational, the product of an individual pathology capable of rearing its ugly head over petty reasons, such as slights about appearance, likeability and intelligence” (Barron & Lacombe, 2005, p. 57). Individualizing factors such as dysfunctional family dynamics, moral corruption, hot tempers, and paranoia are emphasized in popular media discussions of girl violence (Barron & Lacombe, 2005). Alternately, violence by black youth is held up as examples of a culture of violence inherent in black communities (Giroux, 1996), whereas violence by white male youth is explained as a product of individual pathology (Lesko, 2012). Portraying youth as out of control, a threat to social order, and a population to be feared functions to keep youth on the periphery.

The current emphasis on individual responsibility has had negative outcomes for youth and has paradoxically created an increased emphasis on uncovering ‘resiliency’ factors (Wyn & White, 2000). Resiliency has been constructed as numerous positive individual characteristics that aid in coping with stressors (Holden, Bradford, Hall, & Belton, 2013; Miller, 1999). Resiliency studies are paradoxical as they acknowledge social factors that contribute to increased stress, such as racism and poverty; however, they continue to focus on cultivating individual strengths, promoting a tacit acceptance of oppressive social conditions (Wyn & White, 2000).

For example, externally triggered mental health issues are reframed as a lack of positive coping, therefore increasing responsibility on individuals who are not successful in the face of oppression (Garrett et al., 2014). Suicide is often constructed as an individual response to mental health issues; however, a societal issue is indicated when specific groups of people are disproportionately affected, like Aboriginal and LGBTQ youth in Canada (MacNeil, 2008;

Saewyc, Konishi, Rose, & Homma, 2014) and should therefore provoke work on societal solutions. The victimization of LGBT individuals is a systemic societal issue based in heterosexist and homophobic attitudes and not an issue housed in the person being victimized, yet this is where intervention is often focused (Walton, 2005). This creates an impossible situation where youth are victims and perpetrators of their own oppression.

### *A Catch-22*

Neoliberal discourses of individualism have essentialised youth along racist lines as becoming increasingly lazy, self involved, apathetic and oblivious, violent, and threatening mainstream (white, middle-class) values (Giroux, 1996, pp. 27-28). The neoliberal shift from social responsibility toward individual accountability has had negative outcomes for youth (Giroux, 1996). This misdirection of blame and intervention has resulted in an "epistemological fallacy … the tendency for young people to take an individualistic perspective about aspects of their life circumstances that are better explained in terms of the structural conditions of late capitalism" (Wyn & White, 2000, p. 165). Relying on individually focused solutions for what are ultimately social problems misdirects resources and maintains oppressive conditions by framing symptoms as individual issues.

Shifting the focus from society onto individuals, "neoliberal capitalism has helped to construct a mystifying illusion of equitable treatment and acceptance of difference (race, class, gender, and sexuality)" (Giroux, 2004, p. 12). The focus on individualism has increased the emphasis on individual responsibility for what are actually socially constructed outcomes (Giroux, 1996, p. 28). Critical studies place youth back in the social and political contexts that

have alienated them and denied them entry to adult status. Further, critical studies of youth have provided insight into the ways that youth are engaging in society and politics in positive ways.

### ***Democratically Engaged Youth***

Mainstream media that target youth as responsible for declining political engagement ignore larger ideological and political shifts that have made democratic participation less effective. Cries of youth apathy in popular media have focused on a steady decline in voter turnout, especially among youth eligible to vote for the first time (Pammett & LeDuc, 2003). For example, a recent op-ed in the *Ottawa Citizen* (Bednar, 2014) calls youth apathetic and suggests that the act of voting is the pinnacle of democratic participation. In the article, Bednar (2014) states that we have a "crisis in democratic disengagement," and voting in party politics is heralded "as the most potent expression of political preference." The problem with low voter turnout of those between the ages of 18 and 34 is considered to stem from a lack of understanding of party politics (Bednar, 2014).

A lack of knowledge of party politics has been heralded as a key issue affecting voter turnout. The term "political dropouts" has been suggested to describe "young citizens who are so inattentive to the political world around them that they lack the minimal knowledge needed to distinguish and thus to choose, among parties or candidates" (Milner, 2005, p. 4). This lack of interest spirals into ever decreasing participation as youth's lack of interest results in decreasing political knowledge, a "declining sense of civic duty" and are then increasingly less likely to vote (Milner, 2005, p. 7). Milner (2005) proposes that switching to a system of proportional representation is one avenue to increase youth interest, knowledge, and thus participation in party politics. He states that proportional representation provides a system that is clearer and

"stable across time and space" making it easier for voters to identify with a specific party and understand "complex issues and actors over time" (p. 9). While declining rates of voter turnout are troublesome in a democracy, maintaining and supporting democracy involves critical participation in actions that range far beyond singular acts of voting.

Counter to popular discourses that blame youth apathy for the decline in voter turnout and beyond the current system of representation, there may be other issues with the political process that deter voters. One example is the recently approved changes to the *Canada Elections Act*. Introduced into Parliament by the Conservative government, these changes have the potential to reduce Elections Canada's ability to inform the public about voting and to exclude eligible voters without government ID from voting; young voters are among those most likely to be affected (Hall, 2014).

The decrease in youth voter turnout may reflect an increased access to the hypocrisy involved in party politics (Galston, 2001). The downward spiral of youth political engagement summarized by Galston (2001), affecting multiple ways of engagement in the realm of formal politics, has been criticized by some youth as being the result of "politics, which they see as corrupt, ineffective, and unrelated to their deeper ideals" (p 220), and their lack of "confidence in collective acts, especially those undertaken through public institutions whose operations they regard as remote, opaque, and virtually impossible to control" (p. 220). While there may be systemic reasons many youth choose not to vote, holding up voting as the most important democratic act discounts other forms of democratic participation, moving them to the periphery (Shragge, 2013).

Democracy can and should be understood more broadly as the underlying ideology emphasizing active participation, whereby people are able to control aspects of their lives

through *various* avenues of expression (Shragge, 2013). Some critical scholars have highlighted the ways that youth are channelled into engaging in civic and political action in ways that fail to challenge underlying social inequalities (Kennelly, 2011; Llewellyn, Cook, & Molina, 2010; Taft, 2010). In the global north, for example, teenage girls are targeted for their contribution through the market: "it is primarily as consumer citizens that youth are offered a place in contemporary social life, and it is girls above all who are held up as the exemplars of this new citizenship" (Harris in Taft, 2010, p. 6). "What we are seeing is an intense process of individuation associated with the social fragmentation and atomization accompanying neo-liberal economic and social policies" (Wyn & White, p. 172). Kennelly (2011) makes the argument "that forces of neoliberalism are in many ways the antitheses of political engagement, premised as they are upon an ideology of individualized consumerism and meritocracy and the erosion of collective ties" (p. 8). She identified two ways the Canadian State and neoliberal governmentality undermine activist practices: 1) by limiting imagined possibilities via construction of the "good citizen," and 2) by restricting means for activism to individualized acts of consumption. She suggests that this ideological shift has changed the way youth conceptualize themselves in relation to the world

*Youth Activism*

Activist involved youth are often accused of being untamed, unschooled, and unable to responsibly engage in politics, while school-based forms of civic education homogenize what it means to be a good citizen (Kennelly, 2011). A review of civics education documents from across Canada revealed a primarily knowledge based and rote learning approach to teaching civics (Llewellyn, Cook, & Molina, 2010). Civics curriculum guidelines emphasize knowledge of political structures, procedures, and values as predecessors to engaging in responsible

citizenship. Llewellyn, Cook, and Molina (2010) found an emphasis on constructing Canada as a socially just, multicultural and tolerant nation, juxtaposed with a history of past wrongs that have been remedied through the development of democracy. This emphasis on blind patriotism as democracy eclipses teaching critical thinking and methods of active engagement in Canadian politics.

Even as civics education continues to emphasize political participation within formal politics, research has found that many youth are less attracted to engaging in party politics, instead putting their energy into activities that involve direct action (Harris, Wyn, & Younes, 2010; Kahne, Crow, & Lee, 2013). Through direct action in familiar contexts youth are able to engage where they are experientially knowledgeable and can be witness to the results of their actions. Political action is "possible because agents, who are part of the social world, have knowledge of this world and because one can act on the social world by acting on their knowledge of this world" (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 127). When action within formal political boundaries becomes meaningless as the political system becomes less responsive, people are potentially discouraged from participation, and may withdraw from an arena that is no longer relevant in order to focus their activity elsewhere. In a study with 20 youth in Canada, some youth participants at once declared the importance of voting in a democracy *and* the intent not to vote due to a lack of faith in politicians upholding their political platform once in power (Chareka & Sears, 2006). A political structure's continuation is dependent on tacit acceptance of its legitimacy (Bourdieu, 1991).

In response to a political climate that is increasingly responsive to corporate interests while becoming less responsive to citizens, Naomi Klein (2000) draws attention to how "ethical shareholders, culture jammers, street reclaimers, McUnion organizers, human rights hacktivists,

school-logo fighters and Internet corporate watchdogs are at the early stages of demanding a citizen-centered alternative to the international rule of the brands" (p. 446). Some of this activist work is being done by youth, supporting the central objection to the claim that youth are apathetic. They are pursuing alternative actions to voting since they no longer find party politics meaningful in a globalized and neoliberal world (Harris, Wyn, & Younes, 2010; Klein, 2000). Participating in politics in "unconventional" ways, such as in political protests, demonstrates interest in and knowledge of politics (Milner, 2005, p. 4).

There is a false ideological schism between engaging in activism and engaging in formal party politics as democratic participation. Responses in the media to youth activism, as a demonstration of democratic rights, are overwhelmingly negative, while forms of 'good' citizenship, taught to youth in education programs, arguably for the purpose of creating self-regulating citizens who are easy to control, are rewarded (Kennelly, 2011). Media representations of youth involved in activism echo general discourses of youth, being portrayed as "unruly, unorganized, and shallow" and put a negative spin on their activism (Kennelly, 2011, p. 2).

Kennelly (2011) studied youth in Vancouver, Toronto, and Montreal to understand how youth are engaging when "the possibility for creating a public sphere of contestation within liberal democracies is being continually and increasingly placated, repressed, and commodified through institutional, cultural, and social factors" (p. 3). Kennelly suggests: "that discourses of 'youth citizenship,' and the desirable qualities that are attached to this status… function as a form of governmentality designed simultaneously to shore up state power and disperse potential threats to that power" (p. 25). Kennelly found that the largely white, middle class youth she studied engaged in socially acceptable activism that focused on acting on behalf of 'others'

through awareness campaigns about social issues they were geographically removed from them and did not expose underlying issues of power and systemic oppression within Canada.

In her study of 'girl' activists across the Americas, Taft (2010) found significant differences between the activism in Canada and that in Venezuela and Mexico. Canadian youth activism was largely based on the belief that Canada is a "'just' and 'fair' multicultural nation" (p. 103), a belief system in line with what Kennelly (2011) identified as 'good citizenship.' Taft focused on high school aged youth, as they have largely gone unstudied, and found that the experiences and ways they participate are mediated by limited access to political processes. She refers to girl activists as being in a "structural location" as minors, and as such "they are excluded political subjects, marginalized within formal politics and within social movements" (p. 9). In a cross-cultural analysis that incorporates the influence that living histories of youth activism have on constructing an activist identity she found that constructing an activist identity was an "active, engaged, culturally embedded" process (Taft, 2010, p. 8). Taft's research supports a social construction theory for developing political engagement, which means it can be nurtured and channelled, or alternatively actively discouraged.

Congruent with Taft's (2010) analysis of a socially constructed theory of political engagement, second generation Tamil-Canadian youth involved in Tamil Student Associations in universities were often raised with a keen understanding of the political history in Sri Lanka that lead to their parents' immigration to Canada (O'Neill, 2015). The political demonstrations held in Toronto, Montreal, and Ottawa following the defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka were organized with youth involvement. Tamil Student Associations nurtured the development of collective, political Tamil-Canadian identities (O'Neill, 2015). Following the defeat of the LTTE Tamil-Canadian youth actively conceptualized their hybrid

identities, rejecting “aspects of the LTTE narrative when they were no longer relevant . . . while remaining committed to the project of Tamil autonomy and human rights” (O’Neill, 2015, p. 132). Second generation Tamil-Canadian youth actively engaged in political demonstrations and continued their engagement through participation in collective organizations created by and for youth.

In the United States activist youth have been constructed in popular discourse as ‘citizens in the making,’ disengaged, unorganized and in need of discipline (Otero & Cammarota, 2011). Contrary to this belief, youth are engaging as citizens in organized resistance to what they see as social injustices (Otero & Cammarota, 2011). Through their examination of largely youth led and organized protests against proposed legislation that would dismantle Ethnic Studies departments and subsequently Mexican American Studies in public schools in Arizona, Otero and Cammarota (2011) uncovered a highly informed, organized and mobile resistance. Despite the highly organized protests and clearly stated, valid, articulate objections to the legislation, the proponents of the legislation portrayed the protesting youth as delinquents acting out of self-interest, and in direct opposition to American values. In this example, the ability to actively engage in democracy was limited based on xenophobic and racist assumptions of motive, and vehement nationalism. This effectively reserved the ability for democratic participation and sentiment to those already in power.

Recognition of youth activism as democratic participation and the creation of space for youth activism play a significant role in shaping popular discourse about youth political participation. Canadian disability organizations have reported an absence of youth leadership, however, Kelly (2012) found the opposite when a Youth Activist Forum was held to create a disability-positive space for youth. The speakers at this forum presented new and creative

approaches to engaging in activism that are outside the typical approaches documented in Canadian disability movements (Kelly, 2012). Examples of unconventional activism presented at the forum included story-telling, comic books, and 'stair-bombing' "where inaccessible environments are taped off with caution tape and a sign reading 'out of order' (p. 1093).

Recognizing different forms of activism and providing space for youth to organize can positively change the dialogue about youth and simultaneously increase the social and political impact of youth activism. For Example, the work of the Aboriginal Youth Advisory Committee comprised of 15 youth who direct activities at the Graffiti Art Programming Inc in Winnipeg, Manitoba have made significant community impacts (Skinner, 2013). This program is a "free, drop-in community-youth art centre that provides a space for marginalized youth to work with local artists to develop and use art and performance as tools for expression, community capacity building, and social change" (Skinner, 2013, p. 212). One of the initiatives that has grown out of the Graffiti Art Programming Inc. is:

> Power Line; a number you can call in North and South Point Douglas to anonymously report criminal or suspicious activity in a house or building. The initiative was reported to have reduced crime in the areas by 70% within only eight months. (Skinner, 2011)

Also in Manitoba, Sloane and Wallin (2013) conducted an arts inquiry study into the use of theatre for "broadening and deepening democratic engagement between diverse citizens" with a community centralized around a high school (p. 454). This project focused on engaging refugees to create, name and invent different possibilities for their experiences as refugees in a small Canadian town. Of the 33 participants who responded to the call out, 26 were youth. Sloane and Wallin found that the "theatre of the commons" connected "public education to the pursuit of transformative democracy" and created "a space for marginalized voices to influence decision making" (p. 454).

Similarly, focusing on the ability of youth to develop critical civic praxis Ginwright and Cammarota (2007) found that the existence of space where youth can access "networks, ideas, and experiences" supports the development of "individual and collective capacity to struggle for social justice" (p. 694). Critical civic praxis is defined as a "process that develops critical consciousness and builds the capacity for young people to respond and change oppressive conditions in their environment" and therefore creates the "potential to create social change" (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2007, p. 699). Given the right social conditions youth have the capacity and desire for collective organization and political engagement.

*Transformational Resistance*

Stories of youth engaging in *transformational* resistance are underrepresented in the popular narrative that instead focuses on self-defeating and rebellious resistance to create a caricature of youth that allows for easy dismissal (Solorzano & Bernal, 2001). The concept of transformational resistance is developed by building on Giroux's assertion that "resistance has the following two intersecting dimensions: (a) Students must have a critique of social oppression, and (b) students must be motivated by an interest in social justice" (cited in Solorzano & Bernal, 2001, pp. 316-317).

The successful 2012 Quebec student protests that resulted in the resignation of the Liberal government were mobilized through information campaigns and situated within a socio-political context that values democratic access to education (Bégin-Caouette & Jones, 2014). Prior to the strikes that involved over 300, 000 university students, coalitions were formed in order to inform students, begin mobilizing the student body, and develop political action plans (Bégin-Caouette & Jones, 2014). During the months of student strikes various strategies were employed to keep the media spotlight including the use of mass and social media, theatre performances in public

spaces, decorating "trees with red banners…sewing groups, backward walks, and symbolic weddings" (Bégin-Caouette & Jones, 2014, p. 417). American filmmaker Michael Moore used his twitter account to call for international support and inspired staged walks in four American cities in solidarity with the Quebec student protests (Bégin-Caouette & Jones, 2014). The ongoing media and international attention placed significant pressure on the Liberal government that led to their resignation and the election of the Parti Québécois who then rolled back tuition fee increases. The success of the Quebec student protests were embedded in a strong and recent history of successful student activism, in a province that is more open to activism in general, and engaged the use of thoughtful and creative means of garnering and maintaining public and media interest and support. As Bourdieu (1991) stated, the combination of active engagement with knowledge can result in successful political action.

Solorzano and Bernal (2001) explored transformational resistance through two examples of organized student protest by Chicana/Chicano high school and university students in Los Angeles in 1968 and 1993 respectively. In 1968 more than 10,000 students walked out of their East Los Angeles high schools to protest the lack of quality education. These walkouts followed years of attempts to influence positive change through accepted channels and successfully garnered widespread support. In 1993, protesting the Chancellor's refusal to support the Chicano Studies Program to become a department, UCLA students orchestrated over two weeks of protests, sit-ins, and hunger strikes. Both of these movements were organized, had clear positive goals, and were carried out after attempts through mainstream channels failed. Useful in understanding people's social and cultural interaction, "resistance theories demonstrate how individuals negotiate and struggle with structures and create meanings of their own from these interactions… by acknowledging human agency" (Solorzano & Bernal, 2001, p. 315).

In recounting the narratives of three openly gay youth who became "educator activists and cultural workers" in order to bring about Gay Straight Alliances (GSA's) in their high schools, Grace and Wells (2009) illustrate powerful examples of youth engaging in transformational resistance (p. 34). Because of their experiences in school of marginalization and violence based in homophobia Ryan, Jeremy, and Bruce "engaged in queer critical praxis to liberate themselves and their LGBTQ peers in their schools and communities" (p. 35). These youth emphasized the GSA's as sites "where LGBTQ youth can build community, solidarity, and find support" (p. 37). Through engaging in transformational resistance, these youth intentionally interrupted dominant narratives of homophobia and heterosexism and created space where other youth could continue this work.

Transformational resistance involves both a critical examination of oppressive structures and a goal of positive social transformation. Similar to the examples of the student protests in Quebec and Los Angeles, and the development of GSA's in Canada, the activism of the Tamil youth groups, the Graffiti Art Programming, the creative activisms of the refugee theatre project, and the youth disability activists can all be considered forms of transformational resistance.

*Youth Participatory Action Research*

Participatory action research (PAR) with youth has been increasing in popularity as a way to actively engage youth for the purpose of social change (see Flicker et al., 2008; Irizarry, 2009; Mirra, Morrell, Cain, Scorza, & Ford, 2013; Ozer & Wright, 2012; Quijada Cerecer et al., 2013). PAR has its roots in a theory of social transformation based in the belief that people experiencing oppression are the most knowledgeable about their oppression (Kindon, Pain, & Kesby, p. 10). Paulo Freire's (1974/2010) concept of conscientization, "the development of the awakening of critical awareness…[developed through] dialogue… concerned with social and political

responsibility" (p. 15), informs the Mestizo Arts and Activism Collective (MAA) in Salt Lake City Utah (Quijada Cerecer et al., 2013). Their approach "draws upon critical pedagogy, asset-based community development and organizing" (Quijada Cerecer, Cahill, & Bradley, 2011, p. 589). MAA is "a participatory action research collective made up of young people who focused their research on the educational rights of undocumented students, coupled with the emotional and economic impacts of stereotypes of immigrant communities" (Quijada Cerecer et al., 2013 p. 216). Quijada Cerecer et al. (2013) propose the effectiveness of a:

> community based YPAR approach to involve young people as agents of change in researching their own communities. Youth researchers frame questions, collaborate on decisions, and develop creative strategies as to how to represent their concerns most effectively to diverse audiences. (p. 218)

YPAR values youth perspectives and understandings of the impacts educational policies have on their education and lives. Quijada Cerecer et al. (2013) consider youth able to engage in praxis "that merges collective action and reflection to reorient policy and transform education" (p. 217).

Speaking on one of the collective's social art pieces, Quijada Cerecer et al. (2011) state that it "extends 'the space of exchange,' making voices tangible in visual form and generating theory from the ground up" (p. 590). Through collective creation they transform the world around them and themselves. The youth contend that language is limited in its ability to express complexities of experience and multiple oppressions and value creating a space for continued dialogue (Quijada Cerecer et al., 2013). Through participation in the MAA's PAR, youth are given a space to actively and critically engage with their social and political worlds.

Youth PAR is a difficult methodology to engage in as it requires direction from the bottom up. This necessitates, as is the case with the MAA that the research questions, methods, and modes of dissemination arise out of the community rather than be pre-directed from an outside organization. A model of participatory action research involving technology (e-PAR) was

developed over numerous sites by engaging youth through various existing youth serving organizations (YSO's) in order to involve youth in health promotion (Flicker et al., 2008). This model was developed through the TeenNet Research Program at the University of Toronto (Flicker et al., 2008). Although research parameters were imposed onto the participating youth by the research team, the e-PAR model as described by Flicker et al. (2008) was successful in engaging youth in research and activism through technology. Illustrating the capacity of youth to understand, ask questions, and develop creative solutions to the social and political issues that affect them. Further work bridging communities with research institutions could facilitate more youth directed research for social change.

### *Conclusion*

Youth studies have been criticized for dually suggesting that youth are responsible for their social location and that they lack agency, turning them into passive 'victims of circumstance,' and in need of fully actualized adults to find solutions for their circumstance, such as "homelessness, unemployment, or poverty" (White & Wyn, 1998, p. 317). As discussed above, not all youth are constructed as passive victims; youth of colour are more likely to be marked as dangerous and in need of containment (Giroux, 1996; Quijada Cerecer et al., 2013). Both portrayals of youth conveniently ignore the creative ways that youth understand, engage with, and shape the world they live in. They both fall short:

> Fueled by public perceptions of youth as apathetic, violent, drug-addicted, and sexually promiscuous, the category of youth makes young people accountable for societal debates without talking with them. Such categorization continues to position youth developmentally, as a state of transition toward future realities and adulthood, thus overlooking their present conditions and contributions to social justice. (Quijada Cerecer et al., 2013, p. 207)

## Democratically Engaged Youth

Youth are neither passive recipients, ‘citizens-in-the-making,’ nor are they violent threats to democracy. A focus on voting as the ultimate expression of democratic participation allows for the actions of youth to be ignored, wider democratic participatory forms to be taken for granted, and rights to active democratic participation to be slowly eroded by those in power. Recognition and support of youth led activism, whether in the form of unconventional activism, thought provoking works of art, or framed as critical praxis, transformational resistance, or YPAR is critical for shifting societal discussions *about* youth towards discussions *with* youth. Opening up the field of political engagement beyond party politics we can approach conversations with youth as already actively engaged citizens, whether they are of voting age or not.

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