Contesting Production: Youth Participatory Action Research in the Struggle to Produce Knowledge

Brian D. Lozenski,
Zachary A. Casey
Shannon K. McManimon
University of Minnesota

"The experience of a world that is 'taken for granted' presupposes agreement between the dispositions of the agents and the expectations or demands immanent in the world into which they are inserted" (Bourdieu, 1997, p. 147). The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu describes a particular state of existence in which human beings, either through rationalization, non-critical acceptance, or resignation, have come to understand their environment as inevitable and nonmalleable. It implies that once this "agreement" is reached in a person's mind (consciously or unconsciously), the person will not take actions to resist the "expectations or demands" with which she or he is confronted, even if those demands are detrimental. But, what happens when the dispositions of agents, or social actors in a specific context, are not in agreement with the demands and expectations (often enacted through structures and institutions) of the broader society? More importantly, what happens when agents are provided with conditions that encourage them to develop critical dispositions that do not allow them to take their worlds "for granted"? These questions are at the heart of this article, which seeks to make meaning of learning, cognition, culture, identity, and power while advocating for a transformational pedagogy meant to demystify the power structures and hierarchies that impact the lives of youth.

Students—youth—are often subjected to educational systems or are the object of education research enacted upon them that do not encourage critical dispositions. This article, a Marxist analysis through the lens of critical sociocultural theory (CST), examines how the research methodology and pedagogical practice of youth participatory action research (YPAR), instead, positions and identifies youth as active participants in knowledge production and as catalytic change agents in their own communities. We first explain youth participatory action research, especially as a decolonizing research methodology. We then turn to the Marxist conceptions of organic intellectuals and immaterial labor, as well as outlining three Marxist themes foundational to the work of YPAR.

After establishing these foundations, we look more specifically at how CST uniquely addresses action, agency, cognition, identity, participation, and power at their intersection. While a wide array of international research exists on participatory action research (PAR), we focus on YPAR, specifically on two research projects (in Kinloch, 2010, and Morrell, 2008) by students of color in large urban centers in the United States. Through analyzing these projects, we show

how YPAR confronts power structures as social constructions with the potential to be deconstructed. Using Lev Vygotsky's concepts of internalization and mediation and Valentin Voloŝinov's Marxist theories of language, we demonstrate the cognitive aspects of YPAR that help to shape critical action-oriented dispositions within youth. We establish YPAR as a "figured world" (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998) that privileges certain academic skills and offers youth agency to work in their own and their communities' self-interests in attempts to disrupt overarching "fields of power" (Bourdieu, 1993). We thus argue that YPAR's power as a truly epistemological process positions students at the center of knowledge creation (production) while simultaneously drawing on and reshaping their identities and agencies as they confront issues of hierarchical and oppressive power.

Youth Participatory Action Research

Critical sociocultural theorists Moje and Lewis (2007) write,

indeed, what makes learning so complex—and more than just participation—is that people bring their histories of participation to bear on each new act or moment of participating. Thus, learning can be conceived of as always being situated in participation, but not necessarily synonymous or reduced to participation. Learning goes beyond the moment of participation to constitute a history and to shape a future act of participating. (p. 16)

Moje and Lewis' focus on the historical and *future* acts of participation required for learning points to the development of a participatory disposition on the part of the learner. While learning—and particularly schooling and also educational research—often induces conformation to power structures and hierarchies that demand allegiance to particular expectations or demands, we contend that the dual research methodology and pedagogical project of YPAR serves to create the same critical disposition to participate, and hence learn, that Moje and Lewis articulate. Further, YPAR insists that knowledge *production* is a vital aspect of learning, which has much larger implications than the demand or expectation of individual academic success.

YPAR is a process through which youth engage their communities in critically investigating recurring themes that they and others in their community choose, in an effort to impact the community in a positive way. In this process, the knowledges and internal ways of being for each community are privileged. Communities can be defined in various ways, but in most empirical research on YPAR, youth work in the neighborhoods and sections of specific geographical locations where they immediately reside, although the issues they address often have much more global implications (e.g., gentrification, education policy, economic disparities) (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Kinloch, 2010). Through this process, youth foreground their identities as critical researchers, knowledge archivers and producers, and designers and advocates for new ways of being that do not serve to take the world for granted. As Cammarota & Fine (2008) write, "...the important lesson obtained from engaging in this pedagogical praxis [YPAR] is that life, or more specifically the students' experiences, are not transcendental or predetermined…and the students possess the agency to produce changes" (p. 6). Beyond learning a "lesson," youth engaged in YPAR are developing habits of mind that are critical, but also catalytic in the sense of becoming the impetus for the type of social change Moje and Lewis attribute to learning through a particular type of participation.

Importantly, YPAR assumes that youth are both consumers and producers of cultural practices. Youth are capable of, and are often already, engaging the world in critical ways that

shape and transform it socially, politically, and economically. YPAR aligns with certain aspects of cultural and critical literacy studies that assume that youth are savvy and are not duped into certain behaviors, but are able to read economic and political institutions of power with some degree of sophistication, especially with regard to the consumption of media and technology (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007). At the same time, YPAR also emerges from a Marxist tradition in its attempt to reconcile the ways in which economic and political forces seek to limit agency and mystify consumption in order to consolidate power in the hands of the elite in line with the nation-state's interests. At its best, YPAR positions youth to use their intellects and insights to grapple with power structures and resist any attempts to be coerced into a noncritical acceptance of hegemony's trends. Rather than taking youth for granted as consumers of unjust expectations and demands, YPAR seeks to position youth as a vital resource for social transformation through knowledge production. While this social aspect of YPAR is key to its educational power, important cognitive work also happens as youth engage in this method of research.

YPAR: A Decolonizing Methodology

YPAR may be seen as a powerful pedagogical practice that asks youth to draw from their own experiences and knowledges in order to develop technical and analytic skills. While YPAR can help youth hone certain skills that are privileged in academic spaces, much more is at stake in engaging youth in this type of educational environment. Young people doing this work potentially become part of movements of traditionally oppressed and marginalized communities who attempt to shift the paradigm of research from something that is done *on* them to something *through* which they address issues of vital importance to their lives. Developing critical youth researchers who recognize the dehumanizing role that Western research has played in the colonization of indigenous American, Asian, and African communities has powerful implications in the movement to decolonize research. Writing from an indigenous lens about the psychological and intellectual violence of European "research," Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) conveys the vital need for colonized peoples to reclaim what research means for them: "Our orientation to the world was already being redefined as we were being excluded systematically from the writings of the history of our own lands" (p. 33). She later writes, "What makes ideas 'real' is the system of knowledge, the formation of culture, and the relations of power in which concepts are located" (1999, p. 48). Smith describes the loss of not only a history and a way of inhabiting the world, but an epistemology that prevents the world from being taken for granted. The ownership of research amounts to the ownership of knowledge, which is why researchers played such a large role in the grand narrative of European imperialism. Smith contends that what was and continues to be contested is the very notion of *reality*.

The use of knowledge, culture, and power as the basis for making ideas real is integral to a critical sociocultural perspective of research. CST specifically addresses how learners' fluid identities shape and are shaped by their agency in the process of knowledge production within various structures of power (Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007) in connection with culture and language. From a critical sociocultural perspective, Smith (1999) contends that decolonizing research is about agency through identity transformation and reclamation, as indigenous knowledge producers. "Understanding how research produces knowledge is important because the production of knowledge is integrally related to learning…Rather than merely consuming knowledge, participants who collaborate with researchers engage in the production of knowledge" (Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007, p. 4). Beyond knowledge production, we argue that participants who see themselves as collaborative researchers achieve a sense of ownership of the

knowledge they produce, which then determines what they will do with it in the future (future acts of participation). YPAR seeks to blur, if not completely erase, the distinction between researchers and participants in order to socialize the ownership of research among the community in which it is being done.

Fals-Borda and Rahman (1991) describe this erasure in terms of a dialectical relationship between participants and researchers where "such a relationship must be transformed into subject/subject rather than subject/object. Indeed, the destruction of the asymmetric binomial is the kernel of the concept of participation as understood in the present context (researcher/researched)" (p. 5). The act of shifting paradigms of research inherently offers agency, as participants attempt to take control of how they are perceived, makes discursive meaning of their social conditions, and produces knowledge that is meaningful to them. This understanding of subjectivity is important because it allows for *resistance* in self-concept as opposed to *acceptance* of the perception of others in a historical, social, and cultural context (Lewis & Del Valle, 2009).

Marxist Foundations

We understand both YPAR and CST as deriving from a philosophical and ideological Marxist foundation. We approach YPAR with the radical attitude of Marxist scholars who seek to position intellectual/immaterial laborers as proletarian subjects, as revolutionary actors. The character of immaterial laborers, in the Marxist tradition, takes its first cues from Antonio Gramsci (2008) and his theorization of organic intellectuals. For Gramsci, organic intellectuals possess the ability to make philosophy (the philosophy of praxis, or Marxism, in Gramsci's terms) both historical and cultural in ways that inform the lives and experiences of the people they come from (here largely imagined in terms of social class, but we would include race, gender, sexuality, and any other number of *identities* from which organic intellectuals spring). Intellectuals, both traditional and organic, are essential in Gramsci's thinking because of what he termed the "subordination to the intellectuals" (p. 15). Importantly, an intellectual in this articulation is not necessarily one possessing enough educational capital (Bourdieu, 1984) to be credentialized into a class of intellectuals; instead, Gramsci argues that every class (or group) possesses its own intellectuals. This is where Gramsci's belief in the ability of the proletariat to articulate and actualize a counter hegemony (or what we might also think as a new hegemony) comes from; thus, intellectuals in this sense are creators of knowledge, knowledge producers rather than receptacles for knowledge deemed most worthy or most profitable.

In this work, we use the conception of intellectual/immaterial labor put forward by Antonio Negri (1989) as well as his collaborative efforts with Michael Hardt (Hardt & Negri, 2000; 2004) in order to argue for the proletarian subjectivity of those engaged in dehumanizing labor of a different sort than that largely theorized by Marx (1990) and others, whom one might consider "traditional" Marxists. Hardt and Negri (2004) are especially helpful here, as they work to explain their conception of immaterial laborers drawing from what they term "elements of Marx's method" (p. 141). They write,

> The hegemony of immaterial labor, that is, labor that produces immaterial products, such as information, knowledges, ideas, images, relationships, and affects…does not mean that there is no more industrial working class…[rather] the qualities and characteristics of immaterial production are tending to transform the other forms of labor and indeed society as a whole. (p. 65)

In other words, immaterial labor increasingly displaces and recodes labor as a whole, as a part of its global ascendancy in late capitalism. Hardt and Negri carefully call attention to the fact that the hegemony of immaterial labor has not seen immaterial laborers become the global majority, far from it. But, and here is the crucially important part, they do point out that at the time Marx wrote *Capital*, the capitalist mode of production and industrial labor "occupied only a portion of the English economy" and even lesser portions of other European economies, including Germany (p. 141). Thus, they argue, "the key is to grasp the direction of the present," rather than ignore the increasing hegemonic power of immaterial labor, especially in the context of the United States (p. 141).

To connect this work back to Gramsci, we can look to Negri's (1989) work to elaborate what he calls "an eminently intellectual labor force" (p. 50). He is working here to argue that "the new subject is an intellectual subject" —new in the sense of the neoliberal or postmodern subject and intellectual in the Marxian-Gramscian sense. What we wish to argue here is that youth (as such, or as students) ought to be seen as intellectual/immaterial laborers, exploited for their own surplus labor value (as test takers now, as workers now and in the future) to the capitalist state. The needs of students in schools are regularly made synonymous with the needs of the capitalist economy, and represent a clear point of entry to understanding the neoliberalization not only of school policy, but also of pedagogy and practice (Casey, 2011). The myriad ways in which students come to be positioned as bodies in need of discipline, as receptacles for knowledge that only has value if it can result in successful test scores, as pre-workers, pre-laborers, and pre-humans, need not be rearticulated *ad nauseum* here. What must be made clear is this: we can easily recognize in the critical education literature the ways in which youth/students are exploited and dehumanized; we must couple this recognition with a conception of youth/students as proletarian subjects.

A question that must be asked, in a discussion of *youth*, then, must be whether or not intellectual/immaterial labor is the accurate term and conception for the dehumanizing experience of so many young people across the United States in the face of neoliberal education. While we have elaborated the consciousness raising and pedagogically rigorous (in the Freirean sense) elements of the theory and practice of YPAR, we find a lack of accounting for the radically subversive potentiality of an intellectual/immaterial laborer whom one might normally refer to as *student*. And, with YPAR's commitment to understanding youth as knowledge producers, we arrive back at Gramsci's notions of intellectuals. Gramsci (2008) writes, as though he were anticipating YPAR itself, "To discover a truth oneself, without external suggestions or assistance, is to create—even if the truth is an old one" (p. 33). Thus YPAR as a praxis is intellectualizing as well as proletarianizing. It enables and makes available new forms of resistance and newly conscientized subjects capable of acting on and transforming their realities. And, understood as intellectual/immaterial labor, YPAR has the potential to extend our present conceptions of the commons, of the multitude, in ways that can truly articulate an authentic and intellectual opposition to neoliberalism.

Further, three essentially Marxist themes will be evident throughout the remainder of this analysis: 1) Human behavior is historically and socially constructed; 2) Knowledge is dialectical and contains contradictions; and 3) Domination is displayed through social relations based on production (Feuer, 1959; Marx, 1990). These themes work together to provide a theoretical lens through which we can begin to understand YPAR as a liberatory practice that has developed from the groundwork of both critical theory and sociocultural theory. The understanding of

human behavior as historically and socially constructed is important because it helps demystify the development of social hierarchy and positions seemingly static institutional structures as being adaptable through a process of social deconstruction.

The dialectical nature of knowledge provokes us to question where and how knowledge is produced. Heilbroner (1980) writes,

> A Marxian approach to philosophy stresses the *production*, rather than the passive receipt of knowledge—the involvement of the act of inquiry, in shaping, as well as in discovering, knowledge…Thus, the unity of theory and practice…finds its roots in the dialectical insistence that "philosophizing" can only be vindicated and validated by some kind of activity; that reality is not merely what "is," but what we make it. (p. 31)

In the above analysis of the decolonizing qualities of YPAR, we have already begun discussing reality as a contested realm of interpretation. Marx's understanding of the activity within knowledge is closely tied to how knowledge is used to impact the material realities of people's lives. As Marx writes in his *Theses on Feurbach*, "The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to *change it*" (as quoted in Lukács, 1972, p.1). Knowledge is only useful when intimately connected to actions.

Production as the impetus for domination is the final Marxian theme that is present throughout this analysis. While Marx uses production in a strict material sense to describe the control of labor and resources, we use a similar framework to argue that the control of the production of knowledge contributes to the same conditions of domination and socially constructed oppression. While appreciating critiques of Marxism as being a Western, post-Enlightenment epistemology, we continue to perceive a Marxist lens as an adaptable and worthy mechanism for understanding and eradicating structural hierarchies that persist today given the dialectical nature of Marxian praxis (Eagleton, 2011; Freire, 1970; Lukács, 1972). If nothing else, Marxism refuses to allow us to take our world for granted, and in the remainder of this work we employ a Marxist lens to develop a theorization of YPAR that is radically humanizing and liberatory.

Conceptual Framework of Discussions

We want to briefly set up the major sections that follow by discussing the complexity and interconnection of its parts. While we are separating the major sociocultural entities of cognition, agency, and power into three distinct sections, they are of course very much inseparable and interdependent. We begin by focusing on the cognitive processes of individual learning and the co-construction of meaning, drawing from Vygotsky as well as Vološinov to emphasize the explicitly Marxist conceptions of cognition made available by these two theorists. We then move on to discuss agency or what Moje and Lewis (2007) define as "'the strategic making and remaking of selves' within structures of power" (p. 4). This definition is useful because it positions individuals and communities in a space where they must simultaneously adapt to and resist power structures through their own constructions of identity and reality. Finally, we situate our analysis within a framework of macro level structures of power that have been institutionalized through systems and hegemony. The purpose of this text is to illustrate how YPAR impacts youth learning in ways that help them collaboratively make meaning so that they can become agents of change to disrupt and transform hierarchies that produce inequitable and oppressive conditions in their lives. We do not want to suggest that cognition, agency, and power

have any sort of linear relationship; rather, we understand them all as operating around us and negotiating within all human beings constantly.

Discussion 1 - Cognition

Harlem YPAR Study—Youth on Gentrification. Valerie Kinloch's (2010) work with two African-American youths in Harlem, New York, is documented in *Harlem on Our Minds: Place, Race, and the Literacies of Urban Youth.* Kinloch and public high school students, Phillip and Khaleeq, take us on a cultural journey through Harlem, based on their lived experiences, the social construction of Harlem's history, and recent gentrification initiatives that have dramatically changed the landscape of Harlem with regard to race, class, and economics. Throughout the text, Kinloch names and foregrounds the multimodal literacies her students use in their research on the impact of gentrification on their community. The students' research uses Harlem as a unit of analysis through which they engage historical canonical texts describing Harlem's history in order to situate themselves in Harlem's transforming contemporary landscape. They interview old and new residents, youth, and adults to develop a narrative of the stakeholders their research seeks to address. They also film video of their experiences as Harlem youth, residents, and researchers.

Vygotsky in Harlem? In the first chapter of *Mind in Society* (1978/1930), the Marxist psychologist Lev Vygotsky asks, "What is the relation between human beings and their environment, both physical and social?" (p. 19). In the Harlem YPAR project, Phillip and Khaleeq examine this question, trying to make sense of their changing environment and how they are situated within it. Although Vygotsky worked with younger children, his questions and findings still apply to the learning that is happening with the two Harlem teenage youth. Specifically, Vygotsky's understandings of internalization and mediation can help make sense of YPAR's power and influence in the lives of these two young men.

Internalization. Vygotsky (1978) conceives of internalization as a process by which children begin to understand (construct) external interactions (operations) with others in internal ways. For instance, he uses the example of children learning to point to objects they want. Initially, the child grasps at unreachable objects, which adults then give to the child. Eventually the child comes to understand the context of the situation, learning that a pointing gesture symbolizes to others a desire for a certain object. What is more intriguing, though, is Vygotsky's (1978) notion of "the internalization of social speech":

> The greatest change in children's capacity to use language as a problem-solving tool takes place somewhat later in their development, when socialized speech…*is turned inward*…When children develop a method of behavior for guiding themselves that had previously been used in relation to another person, when they organize their own activities according to a social form of behavior, they succeed in applying a social attitude to themselves. The history of the process of *the internalization of social speech* is also the history of the socialization of children's practical intellect. (p. 27)

As the two young men engaged in YPAR have likely never before experienced a learning environment in which they were drivers and producers of knowledge, we might see them as in the early stages of what we will call the "internalization of academic speech." Traditionally, students from marginalized communities (and even privileged communities) are not asked to turn academic speech inward; this speech is taken for granted, carrying with it (only) external

demands and expectations. Students are asked to receive it and then regurgitate it without having altered it to fit their own needs, what Freire (1970) labels a process of "banking education." As Phillip and Khaleeq engage with others who possibly have conflicting understandings of the history of Harlem and the impact of gentrification, they will need to internalize highly complex social speech and academic speech to theorize what is occurring in their community. This internalization of speech is further important in attempts to decolonize research and to create positive social change because as Valentin Voloŝinov (1973) argues, "the word is the most sensitive *index of social changes*, and what is more, of changes still in the process of growth, still without definitive shape and not as yet accomodated [sic] into already regularized and fully defined ideological systems" (p. 19). In working out a Marxist philosophy of language, Voloŝinov stresses the materiality of language and its implication in every contact between people. As youth, such as Phillip and Khaleeq, change their relationship to words, to knowledge, they engage in the process of "register[ing] all the transitory, delicate, momentary phases of social change" (Voloŝinov, 1973, p. 19). Internalizing forms of speech previously for others can thus allow youth to see processes of ideology and change at work and enable them to engage as producers of different forms of speech.

Vygotsky concludes that the internalization of social speech is paralleled by the socialization of practical intellect; perhaps the same parallels are occurring with the internalization of social and academic speech and critical intellect in the unique type of collaborative, qualitative research in which these youth are engaged. An analysis of Phillip's writing shows how he processes the qualitative data he collects.

> Some of you reading this response might not be faced with the realities and effects of gentrification…You might say to yourself, "How does this affect me?" Well, I believe that even if where you live is not being gentrified, or even if you can afford the cost of gentrification and welcome its presence, you should really consider what it involves. Try to understand how gentrification affects people like poor and working people, from what they might not be able to afford to pay rent increases to how they fear being displaced from the place they call home. (*Phillip* in Kinloch, 2010, p. 36)

In this brief example of Phillip's writing, he not only processes information from multiple perspectives, but also advocates effectively for a position. He makes a compelling case by asking the reader to change perspective and internalize the knowledge he produces. This example marks a radical shift in the paradigm of education, not because Phillip advocates for a position (students frequently write position papers), but because he is responsible for creating the very context of the argument. Voloŝinov (1973) writes that "production relations and the sociopolitical order shaped by those relations determine the full range of verbal contacts between people, all the forms and means of their verbal communication" (p. 19). Here, YPAR positions students such as Phillip to produce their own knowledge, which then has the possibility of changing the contacts and connections between them. In producing knowledge and sharing through words, which Voloŝinov argues always have a material basis, youth can be the catalysts for social change in the sociopolitical order. Imagine if this were the habit of mind that we were asking our students to develop regularly.

For instance, another generative outcome is Phillip's advocacy for those impacted by gentrification. As a resident of Harlem who sees his environment transforming, Phillip can either take the change for granted or insert himself into the mechanisms that are causing the changes,

thereby influencing the outcome. We don't want to go as far as concluding that YPAR is the sole reason why Phillip chose the latter; however, the research in which he engages has a provocative influence on his thinking and ability to act in a very real problem-solving capacity. Through internalizing academic speech, developing critical intellect, and participating in collaborative action research practices, youth may, for the first time, become actively engaged in producing theory that can lead to catalytic community change.

Mediation. Very much connected to internalization is Vygotsky's (1978) depiction of *signs and tools.* Through the use of tools (external mechanisms to change "objects of activity") and signs ("internal activity aimed at mastering oneself"), children begin to achieve this process of internalization by participating in culturally mediated activity. Again, we are not suggesting that the Harlem teens are comparable to young children just beginning this process; however, legitimate parallels can be drawn in how the cultural mediation of YPAR helps these teens *become* critical scholars. For instance, if we understand Harlem as a culturally mediating environment, wherein Phillip and Khaleeq use signs (e.g., gentrification, changing landscape) and tools (e.g., video cameras, interviews) to make meaning of their roles within this community, we may see a sophisticated internalization process occurring as the youth begin to change their role from passive recipients of socially constructed phenomenon to active agents in the development of their environment and production of knowledge about it. This distinction is quite significant. The larger structural forces that create the conditions for devastation in urban areas are often seen as insurmountable, especially when those being impacted by these forces have overwhelmingly internalized passivity (even though it may manifest in numerous other forms of resistance to dehumanization [Freire, 1970]). YPAR attempts to internalize action and participatory transformative practices in youth that disrupt rationalizations of inequity. So as Harlem shapes and defines Philip and Khaleeq, they are positioned to redefine themselves and reconstruct their understanding of Harlem in intentional ways that have more potential to be transformative. This idea of shaping and defining for oneself, or "the internal reconstruction of an external operation" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 56), bears large-scale implications for the actions that individuals take. It can change the "dispositions of agents" (Bourdieu, 1997) and influence whether or not they take their world for granted: at the heart of YPAR is the goal of youths realizing their agency in attempting to transform their world.

Discussion 2 - Agency

Los Angeles YPAR Study—Training Youth as Public Intellectuals. In Cammarota & Fine's (2008) edited volume of Revolutionizing Education: Youth Participatory Action Research in Motion, Ernest Morrell recounts his work with the Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access (IDEA) in Los Angeles. Morrell describes various aspects of this YPAR initiative, which exists as a collaboration between UCLA and high schools and communities around Los Angeles. IDEA provides a summer seminar for low-income, traditionally marginalized high school students who receive college credit for being trained in the theories, methodologies, and techniques of critical participatory research. The students then engage in a wide variety of research projects with their communities, addressing issues such as educational disparity for low-income students of color, youth culture and resistance, national discussions of local politics, and the influence of media. As with all YPAR, the researchers engage in action to create positive change around the issues they are investigating. The primary mechanism that IDEA uses to achieve this is student advocacy and positioning students to adopt the roles of public intellectuals. The students have lobbied politicians, presented their research at national academic

conferences, and created multimodal outlets for disseminating information to the communities with which they conduct research (Morrell, 2008).

The Figured World of YPAR. In this section, we continue to weave through understandings of cognition, identity, agency, and power by exploring their interdependency and how they are conceived of and reshaped through YPAR. Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (1998) provide a coherent tracing of this framing. They write, "Vygotsky's exposition of semiotic mediation as a means to agency gives us a good vantage on the social and historical creation of identities as means to self-activity" (p. 40). Here, agency is framed as the ability of individuals to control their behavior. Identity becomes increasingly important in that it is how we perceive ourselves; that perception dramatically impacts the actions in which we engage. Holland *et al.* contend that our identities and, thus, actions are historically and culturally created and that these creations exist as spaces they describe as "figured worlds."

Rethinking Agency. Before we enter into an in-depth analysis of YPAR as a particular type of figured world, we want to spend more time framing a conception of agency. We want to extend agency beyond simply having the ability to make choices or control behavior because this does not necessarily imply the ability to make (produce) meaning. For instance, people faced with immediate threats to their physical well-being may make behavioral choices to avoid being hurt, but one should not consider a person to have agency if choices are between a specific behavior and violent consequences. Holland *et al.* (1998) cite Inden who, in describing human agency, says that it involves "the realized capacity of people to act upon their world and not only to know about or give personal or intersubjective significance to it. That capacity is the power of people to act purposively and reflexively…" (Inden, 1990, p. 23). The idea of acting upon the world with purpose and reflection implies that the world is not being taken for granted; however, it does not imply that there is dispositional agreement between agents (people) and societal expectations or demands (power structures). Inden continues, "People do not act only as agents. They also have the capacity to act as 'instruments' of other agents…" Here is a key point. Agency must lie in people acting in their own self-interests. Often our self-interests align with the self-interests of others (or power structures), but when they do not, we enter a contested space (what Bourdieu calls social space) where a hierarchy of interests becomes immanent (Bourdieu, 1997). It is in these social spaces where agency is truly tested.

We suggest that human agency is determined by one's ability to act in social spaces in one's own self-interest. What often transpires in social spaces is that the agency of the dominated gets appropriated or consumed by the agency of the dominant, either by force or by consent (Gramsci, 2008). When it is won by consent, the dominant has achieved hegemony because the dominated person then acts as an "instrument of other's agency." Willis (1977), for instance, described this phenomenon in *Learning to Labor*, as disaffected youth, through their own "agency," defied school authority only to then end up reproducing the very economic system that worked against their own interests. One could argue that these marginalized youth did exhibit agency because they acted upon their world with purpose and reflection; however, due to the mystification of the social space they inhabited, they ended up in a self-defeating scenario. We are not suggesting that these students were wrong to resist school authority because schools play a major role in social reproduction, and the students may not have been better off consenting to schooling. But there must be other options for youth to resist (oppressive) schooling while not ending up perpetuating the very systems that necessitate their subjugation. YPAR gives youth (and particularly marginalized youth) a pathway to work in their own self-interest, and not as

"instruments of others' agency," while gaining academic skills that serve as social capital in the broader society and producing their own knowledge.

A cogent example of YPAR leading to this type of generative resistance can be found in Morrell's (2004) "critical resistors," as students who see the repressive conditions of schooling, but are able to constructively navigate them in order to transgress and transform these conditions. He suggests that students who have developed the identities of critical researchers participate in the educational process in these counter-hegemonic ways. Morrell writes,

> These students became openly critical and challenging of classroom environments that they labeled as racist and oppressive. They also attempted to discuss their research with peers, to lobby teachers and administrators to make curricula more relevant to students' lives, and to create classroom space less hostile to students of color. (p. 133)

This type of critical resistance demonstrates a hyper level of participation in schooling that seeks to take ownership of educational spaces. This goes beyond even the students who embrace cognitive, decontextualized education environments, for those students are content with the status quo, while critical resistors imagine another possibility for education. The privileging of this conception of critical agency is part of the figured world of YPAR.

Making Meaning in Figured Worlds. Figured worlds are important to this discussion of agency and identity because they provide an avenue through which we can link Vygotsky's theory of mediation to Bourdieu's conception of the fields through which power is exerted. Holland et al. (1998) describe a figured world as "a socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others" (p. 52). Within this definition are links to both cultural mediation and internalization. We could approach figured worlds as realms through which humans internalize socially constructed signs that they have come to agree upon as symbolically significant. For instance, in the figured world of certain sports, like U.S. football, it is common for a man to smack another man's buttocks as a symbol of excitement and support for a great demonstration of athleticism. Both the man smacking and the man receiving the smack agree that this is an accepted form of expression to show support and camaraderie. No sexual assumptions are made with regard to this particular sign in the figured world of football. However, if the same two men engaged in this smacking ritual in a college classroom, a separate figured world with different interpretations and significance of certain acts, it would raise questions as to the men's sexuality and the heteronormative appropriateness of the ritual, even if it was in celebration of a good test score or another act of intellectual achievement. The point is that culturally mediated significance is given to external acts as they are internalized, which can differ depending upon the figured world that an individual currently inhabits. Different identities are foregrounded and privileged in different figured worlds. In football, an athletic identity is privileged to the point where an athlete's success is given more weight than a perceived act of intimacy with another man in celebration, whereas in a classroom, intellectual success does not receive this privilege over the assumption of (and often stigmatization of) homosexual behavior.

If we think of the Los Angeles YPAR initiative, IDEA, as a figured world that students enter, we can posit which types of identities, acts, and outcomes are privileged that may or may not be valued in the figured world of the students' traditional schools. A brief analysis of an IDEA student's writing provides evidence for these privileged acts and identities.

Being a critical researcher has changed the way I look at things in many ways. For one, I have realized that I could question any time I want if I feel there is anything wrong or when I disagree with anything…I no longer read text without questioning it…there are many things I could do to make change where there needs to be a change…I no longer feel powerless like I used to in school. Every time the school did something I didn't agree with and didn't like, I just took it without saying anything like most kids do. That isn't going to happen anymore because now I know that my voice counts… (Unidentified student in Morrell, 2008, p. 155)

This student nicely juxtaposes the figured worlds of IDEA and school by identifying several key changes in the social and historical constructions of these separate spaces. Let us first analyze how the student conceives of her or his identity: first and foremost as a critical researcher. It is unique for a high school student to identify as a researcher, let alone a critical researcher. The figured world of IDEA privileges the intellectual work of research, emphasizing and valuing critical characteristics in researchers such as a commitment to equity and social justice, or an awareness of inequality with regard to class, race, gender, sexuality, etc. Further, not only does s/he value the ability to question, but the student also suggests that this is a drastic change. Thus, in the figured world of school, questioning was not something valued by the broader collective of individuals who formed that specific figured world. In many schools, questioning is valued only as long as it is the right type of question. The type of question that challenges a teacher's top-down knowledge or the official curriculum is not an acceptable form of questioning in most spaces. In this student's mind, a paradigmatic shift has taken place due to a change in the culturally mediated environment.

IDEA has opened an entirely new set of possibilities for this student and others who have become participants in this figured world. While figured worlds are based on shared meanings, values, and perceptions, and although they sometimes are connected to actual physical spaces (e.g., schools), they are symbolic worlds that are socially constructed. That being said, they have definite material impact on the lives, identities, and behaviors of the individual and groups that inhabit them: "The conceptual and material aspects of figured worlds, and of the artifacts through which they are evinced, are constantly changing through the improvisations of actors" (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998, p. 63). This notion of figured worlds as dynamic and evolving is crucial to YPAR as participants are never seen as finished products, but rather as perpetually changing and reforming as they read and are read by the world. This is a key concept that comes out in the IDEA student's writing, who identifies a realization of power not perceived before entering the figured world of IDEA. Perhaps just the recognition or imagining of being in a position of power provokes students to confront other power structures in an effort to realize the agency that they possess. What becomes apparent is that the potential of critical agency most likely lies in one's self-actualization (hooks, 1994).

Discussion 3 - Power

Fields and Power. Cognition is socially mediated through cultural interactions, which then have the self-actualizing potential of leading to critical agency. Developing critical agency is necessary to not simply resist power, but to confront it in ways that correspond to self-interest, all while also realizing that individual self-interest lies within the self-interest of the collective. We have positioned YPAR as a decolonizing epistemology and a methodology (Smith, 1999) that creates a figured world where students internalize a process of community engagement and

inquiry that revolves around a Marxian-Freirean conception of praxis or the symbiotic relationship of theory and practice (Freire, 1970). In this final section, we will discuss the ways in which the figured world of YPAR confronts and disrupts the field of power (Bourdieu, 1993) through a process of exposing the mechanisms through which power remains invisible.

Bourdieu's (1993) concept of field is closely tied to that of figured worlds in that it addresses socially constructed and relational spaces with their own rules, meanings, symbolism, and privilege—spaces of struggle. Bourdieu (1993) defines field as "a separate social universe having its own laws of functioning independent of those of politics and the economy" (p. 162). He goes on to write that all fields exist within the principal "field of power," which is intricately connected to the totalizing effects of politics and the economy and the struggle for symbolic and material resources. If we more or less equate fields with figured worlds (they are nuanced in several ways, but we will use them interchangeably), then we see that individuals exist in multiple fields, some by choice and some by birth (e.g., family, religions). However, we all exist within the field of political and economic power because this field creates the structures and laws that run our lives, as well as dictates the ways in which we are able to acquire the resources we need to survive. "[Fields] are instead relatively autonomous, for the relationship any field has to other fields or to the field of power is refracted by the mode of cultural production specific to the field" (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998, p. 63). Holland et al. are establish that these fields exist in constant interaction with other fields that are inhabited by others or even the same people at times, and each of these fields is then subject to the structures imposed by the field of power. This complicated intermingling of symbols, actors, activities, values, and impositions creates an array of structural barriers to the ways in which critical agency can be realized, especially when two or more fields are in a contested social space. So how can a figured world such as YPAR negotiate this conglomeration of activity to allow its participants to disrupt *the* field of power? The answer lies in the idea that the relationship of fields "is refracted by the mode of cultural production specific to the field."

The question of how culture is created depends upon one's definition of culture. Here, we write of culture as a dynamic entity that is embedded in how we interact with the world. Culture is transmitted and displayed through language, customs, symbols, aesthetics, knowledges, histories, and myriad other forms; it is an embodied practice that exists within us and is manifested in the ways we talk, walk, dress, perform gender, perform sexuality, etc. Inherent to this embodied understanding of culture is a naturalized understanding of culture that is almost hidden from us, in that we do not always think about culture, but simply enact it. This naturalized, hidden notion of culture is very much tied to its production, especially with regard to power.

In describing the relation of *habitus* ("the durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisations…" [Bourdieu, 1977, p. 78]) to fields, Bourdieu (1997) writes:

> It is in the relationship between habitus and the field, between the feel for the game and the game itself, that the stakes of the game are generated and ends are constituted…The game presents itself to someone caught up in it, absorbed in it, as a transcendent universe, imposing its own ends and norms unconditionally…and the illusio is an illusion or "diversion" only for someone who perceives the game from the outside, from the scholastic standpoint of an "impartial spectator." (p. 151)

Bourdieu speculates that part of the power of fields, and specifically with regard to the power of the political and economic field of power, is that people are so enveloped by the field that they don't realize it is even there. Only someone who can step back and be an "impartial observer," not in the sense of ideological neutrality but as someone not playing the game, can perceive that the field even exists. Perhaps this is the essence of YPAR: that it creates conditions for young people to develop the habits of mind to step back from the game and see that others have created the rules in their own favor. Cammarota and Fine (2008) write, "YPAR teaches young people that conditions of injustice are produced, not natural; are designed to privilege and oppress; but are ultimately challengeable and thus changeable" (p. 2). In declaring YPAR's intention to demystify and deconstruct power structures, and then transform them in order to construct a new reality, a critical agency is privileged for those youth who choose to participate in this figured world.

Conclusion

Smith (1999) contends in *Decolonizing Methodologies* that the very notion of reality was being contested and struggled over during the early stages of European imperialism. Through a critical sociocultural lens, we can see that reality is socially and historically constructed, culturally mediated, and fluid enough to allow for certain forms of agency. The challenge becomes trying to continually expand agency to a point where knowledge can be produced in ways that fracture, reveal, and then confront the inadequacies of the dominant power structures, including those of oppressive schooling and education systems. Fine (2008) writes,

> Participatory action researchers ground our work in the recognition that expertise and knowledge are widely distributed. PAR further assumes that those who have been *most* systematically excluded, oppressed, or denied carry specifically revealing wisdom about history, structure, consequences, and the fracture points in unjust social arrangements. PAR embodies a democratic commitment to break the monopoly on who holds knowledge. (p. 215)

It is quite significant that Fine uses the term "monopoly" to describe ownership of knowledge. Fundamentally, YPAR is its own form of knowledge production, a decolonizing epistemological and methodological practice of participation. If we equate the production of knowledge to a Marxist understanding of production, we can understand that those who control the means of production control the spoils of its use. The same understanding can be applied to knowledge production: if there is a monopoly on knowledge production, then there becomes only one hegemonic reality for all of us. YPAR attempts to radically redistribute the capacity to produce knowledge. This is why a Marxian vision of knowledge must be an active as opposed to a passive vision, meaning that those engaged in active knowledge production create their own reality rather than receiving someone else's reality, someone else's expectations or demands. Positioned as intellectual/immaterial laborers, youth engaged in YPAR are able to construct knowledge and meaning that can undermine the existing relationship to the means of production. Youth are knowledge producers, changing the world as they come to name it (Freire, 1970).

We began this article by asking, "What happens when agents are provided with conditions that encourage them to develop critical dispositions that do not allow them to take their worlds for granted?" We positioned YPAR as a figured world that provided these very conditions for young people. Through a critical sociocultural lens, we attempted to provide a

context with which we could analyze what happens when students are able to develop critical dispositions. We see the result as a radical shift in the balance of power with the potential to create a more human existence for a significant number of people around the world. Power that produces asymmetry in society depends upon a critical mass of people taking their world for granted. YPAR attempts to provoke enough students to resist this disposition in order to reach a tipping point where youth take control of defining, redefining, and redesigning reality. Youth can achieve this through YPAR, which positions them to internalize social and academic speech, resulting in the potential for a critical form of agency with which they can produce knowledge and eventually define reality.

References

Bourdieu, P. (1977). *Outline of a theory of practice.* New York: Cambridge University Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgment of taste*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1993). *The field of cultural production: Essays on art and literature.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1997). *Pascalian meditations*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Cammarota, J., & Fine, M. (Eds.) (2008). *Revolutionizing education: Youth participatory action research in motion.* New York: Routledge.

Casey, Z. A. (2011). Toward a reconceptualization of needs in classrooms: Baudrillard, critical pedagogy, and schooling in the United States. *The Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies*, *9*(2), 77-90.

Duncan-Andrade, J,. & Morrell, E. (2008). *The art of critical pedagogy: Possibilities for moving from theory to practice in urban schools.* New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc.

Fals-Borda, O., & Rahman, M. (Eds.) (1991). *Action and knowledge: Breaking the monopoly with participatory action-research*. New York: The Apex Press.

Feuer, L. (Ed.) (1959). *Marx & Engels: Basic writings on politics & philosophy.* New York: Anchor Books.

Fine, M. (2008). "An Epilogue, of sorts." In J. Cammarota & M. Fine (Eds.) *Revolutionizing education: Youth participatory action research in motion* (pp. 213-234). New York: Routledge.

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed.* New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, Inc.

Gramsci, A. (2008). *Selections from the prison notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (Q. Hoare, Trans.). New York: International Publ.

Hardt, M., & Negri, A. (2000). *Empire*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Hardt, M., & Negri, A. (2006). *Multitude*. London: Penguin Books.

Heilbroner, R. (1980). *Marxism: For and against.* New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

Holland, D., Lachicotte, W., Skinner, D., & Cain, C. (1998). *Identity and agency in cultural worlds.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. New York: Routledge.

Inden, R. (1990). *Imagining India.* Oxford: Blackwell.

Kinloch, V. (2010). *Harlem on our minds: Place, race, and the literacies of urban youth.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Knobel, M., & Lankshear, C. (2007). *A new literacies sample*r. New York: Peter Lang.

Lewis, C., Enciso, P., & Moje, E. (Eds.) (2007). *Reframing sociocultural research on literacy: Identity, agency, and power.* New York: Routledge.

Lewis, C., & Del Valle, A. (2009). "Literacy and identity: Implications for research and practice." In L. Christenbury, R. Bomer, & P. Smagorinsky, (Eds.), *Handbook of adolescent literacy research* (pp. 307–322). New York: Guilford.

Lukács, G. (1972). *History and class consciousness: Studies in Marxist dialectics*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Marx, K. (1990). *Capital: a critique of political economy* (B. Fowkes, Trans.). New York: Penguin Books.

Moje, E. & Lewis, C. (2007). "Examining opportunities to learn literacy: The role of critical sociocultural literacy research." In C. Lewis, P. Enciso, & E. Moje (Eds.). *Reframing sociocultural research on literacy: Identity, agency, and power* (pp. 15-48). New York: Routledge.

Morrell, E. (2004). *Becoming critical researchers: Literacy and empowerment for urban youth.* New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc.

Morrell, E. (2008). "Six summers of YPAR: Learning, action, and change in urban education." In J. Cammarota & M. Fine (Eds.). *Revolutionizing education: Youth participatory action research in motion* (pp.155-184). New York: Routledge.

Negri, A. (1989). *The politics of subversion: A manifesto for the twenty-first century*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Smith, L. T. (1999). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples.* New York: Zed Books Ltd.

Vološinov, V. N. (1973). *Marxism and the philosophy of language.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Willis, P. (1977). *Learning to labor: How working class kids get working class jobs.* New York: Columbia University Press.