

### Critical Creative Out of the Box Thinking in COVID Times

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic, the polarized political context, and the intensified racial justice movement delineate a time of crisis in the United States. In the field of education, the significant impacts of the turbulent situations represent profound darkness of people's lives, making the collaborative partnership between school, university, and community extremely constrained and critical. This article draws from an eight-week digital summer civic leadership program that took place during the time of COVID-19. We employed the framework of Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) and the concept of collective leadership to center youth's knowledge and critical voices. By integrating embodied, multimodal and reflective processes into the curriculum, the digital summer YPAR program provided an innovative approach to building a collaborative school-university-community partnership and enacting youth civic engagement through multimodal, digitalized, and artistic ways.

**KEYWORDS:** Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR), collective leadership, youth activism, art, COVID-19

**NAPDS NINE ESSENTIALS ADDRESSED:**

Essential One: A Comprehensive Mission: A professional development school (PDS) is a learning community guided by a comprehensive, articulated mission that is broader than the goals of any single partner, and that aims to advance equity, antiracism, and social justice within and among schools, colleges/universities, and their respective community and professional partners.

Essential Three: Professional Learning and Leading: A PDS is a context for continuous professional learning and leading for all participants, guided by need and a spirit and practice of inquiry.

Essential Four: Reflection and Innovation: A PDS makes a shared commitment to reflective practice, responsive innovation, and generative knowledge.

*“Everyone’s voice counts, and we all don’t have to have the same voices. But we do want our voices to be part of the transformation in our world and in our society. I would not have thought about this if I didn’t take this course.”*

*“There was so much I had yet to understand and to know about engaging with young people. I think I was so focused on the curriculum, English, and knowledge what I need to know to be a good English teacher that I forgot who is at the center of all the work, and that is the youth.”*

*“I learned a lot about youth actions and how youth’s voices can be represented in so many ways through art. The most pivotal learning experience for me was to learn about youth refusal to participate, and that was actually a form of participation when you refuse to participate.”*

*(Testimonies, Civic Digital YPAR Program Participants, July 2020)*

The year 2020 was a painful, unpredictable, and profoundly disturbing political time for diverse populations across the world. With no COVID-19 vaccine or cure available in the midst of a global pandemic, physical distancing and sheltering at home had become the norm in an attempt to slow the transmission of the virus (Ramesh et al., 2020). In the United States (U. S.) , the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted every aspect of social life for most of the nation’s population, requiring people to change their behaviors. On top of the health crisis, the killings of George Floyd and Breonna Tylor among many others incurred harm and terror in Black communities and triggered anger from many in the broader society (Hinton & Cook, 2020; McArthur & Muhammad, 2020). With the rise of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, national conversations about racial accountability, social justice, and interracial solidarity took place in varied participatory ways, both in person (e.g., protests and sport events) and digitally (e.g., #Blacklivesmatter and #icantbreathe).

Galvanized by the multifaceted crises of these times, we felt a sense of urgency in including a focus on politics in our education work. Therefore, as three community activists and university instructors, our response to the challenges was to develop a pedagogical civic leadership program that employed Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) (e.g., Harman & Burke, 2020) as a theoretical and empirical orientation to critical pedagogy. YPAR involves collaborative research that centers the knowledge and expertise of youth participants, especially their insights and vision about salient community issues and social change. By positioning youth as civic leaders and community activists, YPAR enacts a collaborative relationship among university researchers, school educators and young people who often come from underrepresented communities. The overall aim of the work is to solidify and extend multi-generational school-community-university partnerships that value youth as vital members of the collective (Mirra & Morrell, 2011; Mirra et al., 2015). We developed this work in collaboration with local administrators, teachers, and community. Our work purposely is aligned with the mission of our local school district. One of the goals linking our county schools’ missions together is a deep commitment to youth-centered practices that position inquiry as central to teaching and learning. Aligning with Jaworski’s (2006) belief that learning, individual or organizational, occurs when communities of practice are reconceptualized as “communit[ies] of inquiry” (p. 191), we see collaborative inquiry of youth and adults as being a powerful change agent in organizational learning as well as for individuals and groups (Yeo & Marquardt, 2010).

In these unprecedented times, implementing a successful YPAR program to center youth’s critical voices can be highly challenging. Within the context of COVID-19 social distancing, our work as teacher educators, researchers, and classroom teachers called on us to be creative and critical trailblazers, thinking beyond and against fixed norms of knowledge

production and deficient positioning of youth. We experienced formidable challenges in our collaborative school-community-university partnership in our small city in the southeast U. S. because of physical distancing guidelines for slowing COVID-19 infection rates, temporary school closures, and uncertainties about future modes of teaching (Viner et al., 2020). Indeed, we found ourselves obliged to move our participatory work with high school youth and graduate students online. Given that our school-community-university partnership focuses on civic engagement, artistic expression, and relationship building (e.g., Harman & Burke, 2020; Kinloch, 2010), the need to move to an online platform posed many challenges. We wondered how we could create a dialogic environment that embraced students' and teachers' needs personally, publicly, and pedagogically. Faced with these issues and challenges, our team of university and school educators and youth came together in summer 2020 to engage in our digital civic engagement and leadership program that we hoped would support high school youth and future educators.

We start our paper by delineating our theoretical understanding of leadership within the context of YPAR. Next, we detail our YPAR processes of relating and learning, which aimed to foster critical awareness of social equity issues and transformation. In the last section of our paper, we reflect on what we learned from being part of this digital version of YPAR civic leadership program. With the belief that a strategic way "to lead people into the future is to connect with them deeply in the present" (Kouzes & Posner, 2009, p. 21), we hope our experience in this digital summer YPAR program can inspire educators and educational researchers to get creative about ways of engaging youth participants during this crisis and beyond; and to find ways to come together in school-university-community partnerships to face the present moment with love and strength. The overall aim is to challenge current systemic inequities by collectively bringing positive transformations to our social, racial, and political worlds.

### **Why YPAR? Why Collective Leadership?**

By centering youth voices and insights, YPAR practitioners aim to dismantle and disrupt elitist control over the means of knowledge production, including the social power to determine what is considered as knowledge (Apple, 1995; Ball, 2013; Rahman, 1985). It shifts research commitments from *for* or *on* communities to the viewpoint of being *with* communities (Fine & Barreras, 2001; Ozer et al., 2010). YPAR also provides youth with ample opportunities to engage in critical exploration of social issues by connecting them to their own interests, knowledge and lived experience. In sum, YPAR cultivates dynamic spaces for youth to engage in the social and political world as community activists, justice advocates, knowledge creators, and future leaders.

Over the years in our YPAR program, by intent, we have exposed youth to a series of social issues in the changing political context and have called for dialogic conversations through articulation of questions, concerns, hesitations, and resolutions. Embracing a Culturally Sustaining (CS) approach that centers youth's personal and cultural practices (e.g., Ladson-Billings, 2014; Paris & Alim, 2014), we honor youth's intelligence and voices as the medium to drive the civic agenda for themselves and for their communities. In this way, we break from the teaching-to-the-test and to-the-canon traditions, where youth are often positioned as passive recipients of knowledge. Instead, in our work, youth are the agents of change who own their full identity, subjectivity, and humanity and the ones capable of initiating fundamental transformations connected to their everyday lives (Tuck & Yang, 2014). To summarize, the aim

of the CS YPAR praxis (e.g., Harman & Burke, 2020) is to gather stories told by youth and adults who have been most systematically excluded, silenced, and oppressed (Fine, 2018; Torre, 2009); to feature distinct voices centering youth’s personal/communal wisdom and expertise (Mirra et al., 2015); and to nourish minoritized communities with a radical love that pushes us to probe the underneath of our existence in the world (Price-Dennis & Sealey-Ruiz, 2021).

Aligned with the collaborative nature of YPAR, we see leadership as collective, relational, and multigenerational (Fine & Torre, 2004). Informed by civil rights activist Ella Baker and her “group-centered leadership” (see Ransby, 2003), we believe leadership should be grassroots-orientated and that radical democracy cannot be achieved without social transformation. Therefore, leadership here is not considered as a set of skills or characteristics attributed to certain groups of people. Instead, we understand leadership as a dynamic process, which disrupts the inequities and injustice in schools and communities, thus transforming them into spaces of humanity and justice (Winn, 2018). At the core of our collaborative partnership, youth take the lead in identifying social issues, deciding the social semiotic approaches, and articulating their vision of a more just society. Adult researchers contribute to the collective by facilitating conversations and activities, by actively listening to and supporting youth’s meaning making, and by sharing research methods that can support youth in delving deeper into key social issues. Our critical stance on collective leadership and collaborative partnership, in sum, contributes to relationship building and civic engagement among youth and adults; through longitudinal work, it also can support transformation of hierarchical cultures and institutions (Zeller-Berkman, 2007).

## **Methods**

### **Dialogic and Reflective Authoring**

Informed by theories of reflexivity (e.g., Dervin & Byrd Clarke, 2014), our exploration in this study entailed a retrospective exploration of the ways that participants and teacher educators in the program grappled with the complexities of the COVID-19 pandemic, BLM, and economic insecurity through their multimodal and embodied collaborations. Specifically, we reflected on how YPAR and culturally sustaining approaches to multimodal and multilingual education (Harman et al., 2020) within robust school-community-university partnerships can provide insights for youth civic leadership development in a time when social norms are broken; when political, medical, and economical promises are in crisis; when youth, families, and educators are facing unprecedented challenges and uncertainties in every aspect of their lives.

The authors of this article are two YPAR program designers and one graduate student participant of the course. We inhabit Asian, Irish, and Americanized sociopolitical identities. Throughout the writing of this paper, we discussed and recognized our differential perspectives on the program. In shaping how to recount our perspectives on the summer of 2020, we decided to compose a narrative of the events in a way that would illustrate the highlights and the challenges we experienced during the digital summer YPAR program. We align with Connelly and Clandinin (2006), who consider the story as “a portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful” (p.375). Because our work is intimately connected with the journey of our youth participants, we three composed a collaborative story but highlighted from the beginning that it is just one of the many perspectives on the work.

Though we narrated the collaborative story in a “we” voice, we recognize that our different positionalities, lived identifications (Hall, 1996) and experiences shaped our responses to the digital summer YPAR program. Throughout the reflective writing, we deliberately created spaces for open conversations, which we call a dialogic and interactive authoring process. Across the conversations, we paused and made ourselves consciously aware of our privileged social identities as teachers, educators, and university researchers in an academe that sustains historical lines of hierarchy. We repeatedly revisited the video recordings and artifacts generated during the summer, each time with renewed interpretations and comprehensions. As we proceeded in the writing process, we also sent invitations to previous participants and asked whether they would like to have informal chats with us and recall moments of their YPAR memories. These chats, after we watched the summer recordings several times, also made us more acutely aware of the pain and criticality that we never know enough about (Harman et al., 2016; Gallagher et al., 2013). Hence, the dialogic collaborative writing triggered our reflective thinking and fostered our critical consciousness. It was indeed a journey of thinking, learning, and growing.

### **Pedagogical Design of Digital YPAR**

Our summer YPAR program is embedded in a graduate level education course at a large, research-focused public university in the Southeast of the U. S.. The program was first co-designed by two university faculty in collaboration with school district educators to fight summer slide, or summer learning loss (Alexander et al., 2016; Slates et al., 2012) and to provide a dynamic art-based youth-oriented program for local students. In previous summers, embodied, multimodal, and reflective processes were always integral parts of our curriculum (e.g., Harman et al., 2020). We included these processes because, following other scholars (e.g., Bui & Harman, 2019; Canagarajah, 2018; Halliday, 2003), we see the body’s interaction with resources and objects as integral to the meaning-making process. For our work with youth, then, meaning making and, by extension, embodied learning necessarily involves developing bodily and spatial awareness, experiential reflection and action, and an understanding of the body’s participation and positioning in the social world (Nguyen & Larson, 2015). To support this work in our previous programs, we used geographical mapping of neighborhoods, artistic designing of new structures for our city, theater performance, and argumentation to local city commissioners. Overall, the purpose of our YPAR praxis has been to ensure that youth’s funds of knowledge (Gonzalez et al., 2006; Moll et al., 1992) were validated and integrated into the co-construction of community knowledge.

However, when faced with the need to move from in-person to online instruction in summer 2020, we felt panicky and incompetent. How could we replace the highly experiential and face to face dynamic encounters with the flat affect generated by Zoom and other online sessions? To prepare, we went through a multi-step program design. First, we invited youth from our local school districts to sign up for our free digital space. However, the trajectory of our recruitment was more complicated than expected. Several youth who were interested in the program could not participate due to the unavailability of high-speed Internet connection in their local housing area. By the end of April 2020, we brought together a diverse group of eight youth participants, who came from working- and middle-class families across different regions of the city. We also recruited graduate students interested in social justice and collaborative work with youth. The graduate students in our YPAR collective included 12 participants who differed in years of teaching experience (i.e., nine pre- and in-service teachers, and three full-time graduate

students), race (i.e., Asian, Black, Latine<sup>1</sup>, and White) and gender (eight female and four male). Once we had an idea of who was in our program in terms of youth, teachers, and graduate students, we began to think through the digital redesign of the approach. We began by thinking about what activities and modalities (e.g., oral discussion, drawing, mapping, writing) and community issues (e.g., sustainability, structural racism, food insecurity) would provide participants with ways to engage in critical work as youth leaders and creative re-mixing of available designs and systems in an online context. We had to then decide how our time with the participants would support their embodied and multimodal engagement with social issues. We achieved that by dividing participants into three research teams and class time into two sessions: Tuesday whole-group sessions for introducing different modalities such as mapping and drawing; Thursday small-group sessions for high school youth and adults to be together to make sense of and play with the modalities we introduced on Tuesdays. Each session lasted approximately 60 minutes and by the end of the eight-week summer YPAR program, youth and adult co-researchers chose from these modalities to build final artistic pieces that represented their collective vision of key social or personal issues they saw as pertinent. As a culminating product, a website was published that featured the collective work of youth and adult co-researchers. Through this work, we aimed to support our participants in recognizing and appropriating available designs and resources for their own re-mixing purposes (Bezemer & Kress, 2016).

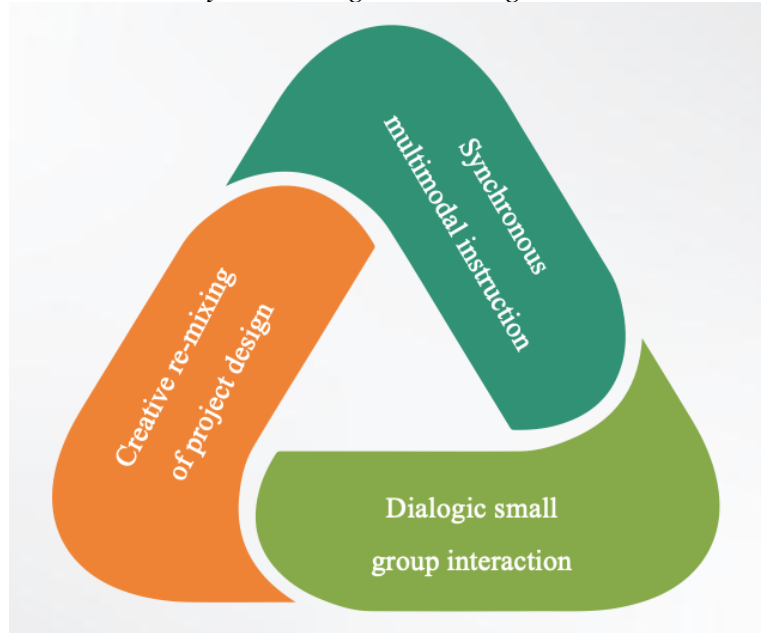
Figure 1 and Figure 2 below show how our YPAR design aimed to support youth and adult allies in moving through a recursive set of creative processes, dialogic and formal interactions, and creative re-mixing of designs.

**Figure 1**  
*Multimodal Components Centering Youth Inquiry*



<sup>1</sup> We adopt Jason Mizell’s use of the term Latine instead of the original term Latino in this paper as one way of breaking down the binary that may be produced by using the term. Latino generally implies that one is either male (Latino) or female (Latina). Latine is used to express that within the community of those who identify culturally, linguistically or otherwise with those who reside in Latin America there exist numerous ways of identifying other than as simply male or female. (see Harman & Burke, 2020, p.15).

**Figure 2**  
*Sequential Instruction in Culturally Sustaining YPAR Program*



We designed our curriculum to integrate deepening levels of artistic and embodied activities (see Figure 1). As illustrated in Figure 2, the sequence of instruction (e.g., synchronous multimodal instruction, dialogic group interaction, creative remixing of final project design) supported participants in deepening their critical semiotic awareness. By experiencing the entwined circuits of activities participants could begin to see how their unique configuration of visual, aural, and embodied work made strong political and artistic statements for our current sociopolitical context (e.g., Harman & Fu, 2020).

### **Walking in the Unknown and Uncertain**

From the beginning of the program, we tried to cultivate a healing and nourishing space for all participants. Initially, faculty advisors and graduate assistants met online before the official start to prepare and plan the roadmap of the program. During these meetings, we explored the epistemology and curriculum design of the program; mapped out the modalities, activities, and structures; and acknowledged our central beliefs about working with youth. We made sure our plan was flexible as we prepared ourselves for challenging questions to emerge while working with youth. In the next section, we present the sequenced activities in detail: from artwork slow looking to neighborhood mapping; to rapping and poetry writing; and to collaborative art making.

### **Visual Art Appreciation and Slow Looking**

Research has well established that art appreciation can function as an aesthetic rigorous approach to support youth's deeper intellectual cognizance of their social being and foster critical awareness of systematic issues (Cahnmann-Taylor & Siegesmund, 2017; Ngo et al., 2017). In our past summers, immersion in experiential activities in the art museum had been an essential starting point that provided a vital space for youth to become keen observers and independent thinkers of artistic work (see Harman & Burke, 2020). While our physical visits to

the State Museum of Art (SMoA) had to come to a temporary stop in 2020 because of COVID-19 restrictions, we redesigned the activity into a vibrant virtual museum tour. The virtual museum tour gave us access to high resolution giga-pixel images of the collections at the SMoA gallery. To support our educational objective of using art to stimulate discussions of ongoing sociopolitical events, all art pieces included in the collection were carefully and thoughtfully selected by a SMoA collaborator, who provided textual descriptions of each work. Our hope was that the virtual museum tour could function not as a constrained digital substitute, but a dynamic artistic immersive experience.

In this art-based activity, we employed the technique of “slow looking” from Shari Tishman (2017), who defined it as a mode of learning and a means of discovery through observation. In our rapidly-paced world, we tend to take a quick look and make interpretations based on our first impression, but slow looking can give us the structure to look carefully and slowly. Especially in a time when the world around us seemed to be crumbling, our engagement with art through slow looking encouraged us to look inwards, to appreciate and find deeper meanings from the works of art. All program participants were first given access to a “package” of pieces from the gallery collection. After browsing the artworks, participants chose one particular piece to focus on. Through the practice of slow looking, participants immersed themselves in the complexity and richness of the artwork by taking the time to observe over time, thus building a multi-perspectival understanding of the object as well as the world via the artists’ lens.

The slow-looking observation turned out to be a profound personal experience for us to pause, wonder, and connect. For example, in the observation and discussion of “the Great Wave” by the Japanese ukiyo-e artist Hokusai, one youth in our first communal session talked about “The Great Wave” as representing Japan’s push for exploration, imperialism, as well as a cultural connection with nature. Then we extended the breadth and depth of the dialogue generated from the artwork by considering what would be our great wave or symbol for what we were experiencing in current times. Brenton<sup>2</sup>, another youth in the group, said his identity of being both Black and Filipino kept him in the middle of the debate about the BLM movement and defunding the police. While his mother’s side of being Black seemed to be in strong support of the BLM movement, his father’s side of being Filipino did not express as much interest in it. As he said, “Eliminating racism in our institutions is a lofty goal, it will take a lot more than simply defunding the police” (Brenton, June 18, 2020). The personal knowledge tied him to the great social and racial wave. Through a combination of artistic observation, group discussion, and individual expression, the slow art activity supported participants in engaging their lived experiences and social identities in exploration of complex social circumstances.

### **Neighborhood Mapping**

Our second activity focused on neighborhood mapping. We created the mapping activity to encourage a slow and steady exploration of our neighborhoods, to observe and become aware of the ways spatial changes of urban geography are shaped by political and economic dynamics. Indeed, this critical orientation to mapping supported our understanding of physical space management as an insidious tool of colonialism and redlining (Katz, 2005; Pacheco & Velez, 2009). Therefore, the idea of using participatory counter-mapping with YPAR participants was to provide multiple new entries to deeply understand, reflect, and re-envision how space impacts

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<sup>2</sup> Pseudonyms are used for all research participants and locations.



the lives of youth and their communities, and how it can be re-constructed for their own use (Bui & Burke, 2020; Literat, 2013). We asked the question “What’s the intertwining relationship between systematic racism and urban restructuring?” We looked at the 2010 U.S. Census Mapping of Chicago as an example, and as one of our faculty advisors in the program illustrated, the racial redlining continued through the years with ongoing urban modelling and planning. What we also noticed together was how stark and clear the boundary lines were between affluent neighborhoods, including the university campus, and low-income communities. As we delved deeper, we recognized that the vocabulary of “urban frontier” (Wade, 1959) is used often as a justification for gentrification and displacement of working-class residents and people of color in urban neighborhoods (Lipman, 2003).

In the next part of the mapping activity, graduate students and youth were invited to trace the geographic boundaries of their everyday lives. By sharing these neighborhood changes and narratives, we spoke also of the deliberate boundaries in our neighborhoods that acted as a physical barrier to minoritized<sup>3</sup> communities. In our discussions and mapping, for example, a veteran educator in our group who grew up on a Caribbean island shared:

Our neighbors were predominately Black working class and middle-class families, with the exception of one family who was half Colombian and half Palestinian. Most of my formative childhood and adolescent years occurred on this hill where the border lines extended between both bottom parts of the hill. This border was our neighborhood family's lines. The neighborhood families knew and trusted each other. Sunday meals were often shared via a child being sent with a plate of food to So and So's house. The sense of community was strong, and I always felt safe. However, within the past decades, we have had a high influx of White and African Americans relocating from the mainland to the islands, and sadly enough, claims of racist behavior and incidents have become increasingly prominent (Javan, July 2, 2020).

The mapping activity supported us in exploring intersections of race and spatial changes in urban development. Through the process of mapping, all participants began to make sense of the neighborhood changes and racial disparities, thus visualizing the impact of sociopolitical forces on everyday lives in more concrete ways. Our mapping praxis supported us in seeing and speaking of the social injustice and inequity embedded in systematic urban development, thus moving us to think about how we could disrupt and dismantle these insidious forces.

### **Hip-Hop and Creative Writing**

We used Hip-hop rapping and writing as our third component in the sequential multimodal activities. Since the early 1970s, scholars have seen hip-hop as one of the most influential artistic and cultural channels for youth to read, analyze, and act upon the sociopolitical world (Chang, 2005; Freire, 1970; Stovall, 2006). For us, hip-hop foregrounds poetic functions of knowledge in rap lyrics and freestyle verses, supporting our participants in sharing their insights on social issues that may play against normative discourses about race, class and equity (Akom, 2009; Love, 2016). It is a language, a voice, a unique medium of expression that can elevate youth and young adults’ resistance and consciousness of the

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<sup>3</sup> We use the term “minoritized” to highlight how ethnic and racial groups are positioned as minorities through systemic oppressive structures as opposed to any characteristics of the groups. In other words, the term “minoritized” indicates that racial and ethnic categorizations are social constructs used to benefit dominant groups in a country or global context.

oppressive system. Particularly, in the contemporary context of the COVID-19 pandemic and nationwide call for criminal justice reform, hip-hop is a powerful platform for young people to articulate anger towards systematic police brutality and to synthesize message and poetic delivery.

In our YPAR program, we first facilitated a rapping workshop, demonstrating how local hip-hop artists employ the complex genre to engage in political and racial discussions. One of our program organizers, who is a local hip-hop artist, civic activist, and doctoral student, performed a hybrid hip-hop piece that showed clearly how a combination of civic advocacy and artistic meaning making can support communities in stepping out for justice and equity. Their linguistically and artistically dexterous performance not only generated a musically uplifting space for our participants, but it also delivered the transformative message that a more just world and a better community needs every one of us to be part of the collective power for making the change. As they stated in the lyrics:

Bottom line is from bottom up, coast to coast there is a lot of us  
If a hundred nine ran for offices we seize the power and resolve this  
I was never the ideal candidate but I will never kneel candidly  
So I'll hand to you what was handed to me: if you aint running is you really standing, b?  
(Mara, course performance, June 16, 2020)

After long and deep conversations about hip-hop writing, rhyming, and meaning making, we then moved into a participatory creative writing (e.g., lyrics, poetry, storytelling) workshop. One of the goals of the activity was to initiate our reflective thinking and support us in relating our lived experiences to the sociopolitical world. Below we present one of the poems written by a youth participant to articulate her loving note to people living in the chaotic pandemic world.

Fall in love.  
Maybe doesn't have to be with someone.  
Fall in love with music, art,  
dancing in the dark,  
car rides at 1 a.m.,  
the glistening of the start,  
the colors of the sun as it rises,  
the smell of flowers,  
the feeling of adrenaline that takes over your lungs with joy,  
good friends who bring out your best,  
silence, noise,  
fall in love with little things that make you feel most alive and find purpose.  
Fall in love with life.  
Just like a rainbow fallen from the sky.  
(Anna, personal reflection, June 19, 2020)

As shown above, Anna chose the image of the rainbow to represent her call for those within the pandemic to capture a sense of joy and love in their lives. In general, creative writing provided youth and adults with an artistic entrance to making sense of the connectedness of people, community and the social/political issues that we grappled with every day. From a YPAR and

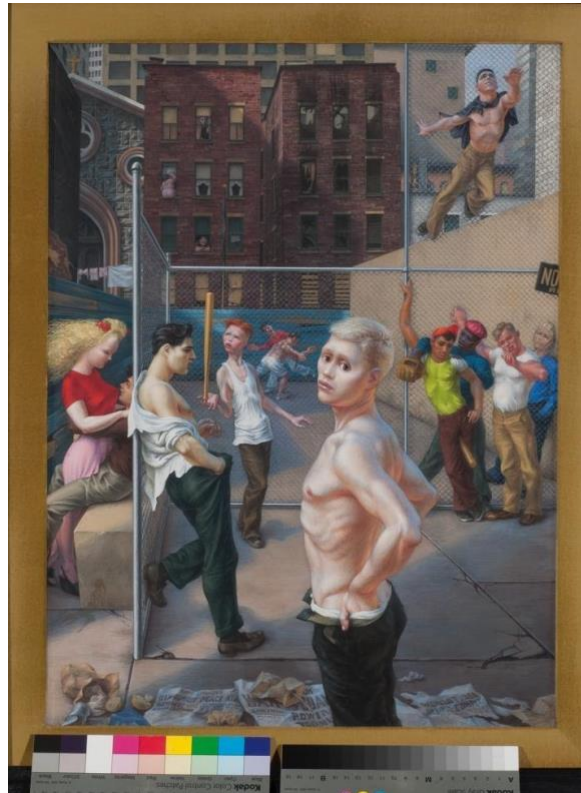
culturally sustaining perspective, youth brought their lived situated knowledges (Harding, 1995) to the virtual platform, establishing connections with each other, and shifting the way they viewed personal accountability and responsibility (Cahill, 2007).

### Critical Art Making

In addition to the activities of slow looking, neighborhood mapping, and creative poetry writing, we further enriched the embodied experiences of participants by adding the component of critical artmaking. As research has shown, artmaking can be used as an analytical tool to examine young artmakers' everyday experiences in the process of inquiry about the world and engaging with the past and present issues they face (Wright, 2020). Incorporating critical artmaking in justice-orientated education provides new possibilities of engaging youth with a variety of arts practices to connect, describe, examine the world from critical lenses (Bell, 2007; Goessling, 2020; Harman et al., 2020; Kraehe & Brown, 2011). For youth and young adults, art can be considered as tools, strategies, and resources for them to learn to become activists and provide new visions for their identities, realities, and the system (Dewhurst, 2014). In this activity, we first facilitated learning activities by providing radical and compelling examples to demonstrate how artists incorporate their identities, experiences, and perspectives into artistic creations. For example, one painting we chose in the collection of SMOA was *Playground* (1948) (see Figure 3) by Paul Cadmus (1904-1999).

### Figure 3

*Playground (1948) by Paul Cadmus*



*Note.* Copyright 1970 by Georgia Museum of Art, University of Georgia. Reprinted with permission.

We chose this artwork for a collective in-depth analysis, not just because of its classic portraits of characters and Cadmus’s renowned egg tempera painting methods. More importantly, Playground was chosen because of its artistic representation of an ominous time and place that had primary relevance to our contemporary COVID-19 context. This picture depicted a group of adolescents, Black, Brown, White, each individual performing different actions, demonstrating unique characteristics, and with noticeable postures that suggestively tell a time of sexual awakening (i.e., the desire to pull off unbuttoned pants, wearing tight shirts showing off the contours of the body, boys standing sensually and leaning upon the fence). As we zoomed into the picture, however, we also noticed the crumpled newspaper thrown on the ground. Although they had been discarded as trash, the decipherable headlines read “Power” and “Would Force All to Comply” and grasped our attention as they forged a rich representation of the post-WWII era and the ominous introduction of the compulsory military draft for all young men in 1948. As we observed and interpreted the painting, we sensed the anomie and restlessness in a postwar world and took it also as a reflection of our turbulent present. Together we envisaged the complicated lives of people navigating between hope and uncertainty; we used this grounded artwork to guide us in moving forward with our own artistic work.

In the next step of our process, youth and graduate students used art to reframe their own stories and highlight the social issues that impacted their communities and their lives. As we engaged with the creative process culturally and artistically, artmaking helped keep us grounded and learn to be more mindful of the present moment. For example, one student showed us his home-sewn face mask that represented the deep fractured soul when everything seemed to be abnormal. As represented in Figure 4, the two pieces of fabric were lined up “incorrectly” to create a mismatched cat face in the center. The face mask documented an unusual creative lens on an essential object during COVID-19. The creative artistic design of the asymmetrical cat face indicated a conflicted racial and political reality in the pandemic society. Within the process of critical artmaking, participants released emotions of pain, empathy, anger, and depression into their artistic products.

**Figure 4**  
*Creative Artifact by Culturally Sustaining YPAR Participant*



When engaged in these embodied activities and especially through their intergenerational relation building with youth members, the pre-service educators in the program were able to grapple with the serious impact of COVID-19 on their lives and to think ahead to the lives of the children they would soon teach. As research has suggested, the complex and responsive processes of youth programs such as our YPAR praxis provide rich opportunities for future teachers to engage in critical professional development. In one study, for example, Abu El-Haj and Rubin (2009) discussed how novice teachers chose to design and implement culturally sustaining curriculum in their classrooms after immersion in youth-oriented programs. Indeed, Rubin et al. (2016) found that pre-service teachers who were engaged in youth programs tended to develop social justice pedagogies that “help students to interpret, resist, and creatively address the forces that affect their lives” (p. 434). Because our work continues each summer, the relationship building in the collective also enhances the network of relations in the larger PDS context (McGraw et al., 2017; Van Buren et al., 2019). In sum, the collective artwork and meaning making in our collective not only captures the response of youth and adult participants to contemporary social events, but also documents innovative collaboration among schools, communities and universities in an era of social trouble, generating hopes and new possibilities as these partnerships move forward into the future.

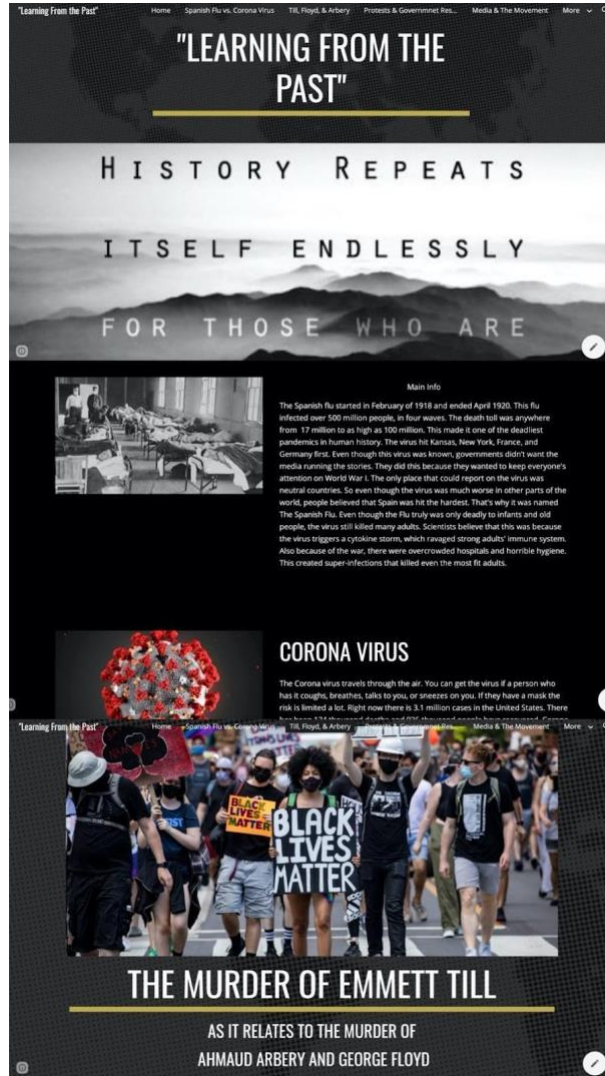
### **Final Project: Multimodal Art on Collaborative Website**

Over the course of the program, youth and adult co-researchers discussed and determined what social issue we would focus on, which methods we would choose, and how this project spoke to questions of justice and critical consciousness. Together, we created final projects to advocate for racial solidarity, designing web pages that looked at past crises to understand the present, and building a collection of photographs to express our feelings of the contemporary historical moment. The final artistic artefacts paid witness to the growth of participants’ sense of civic leadership, confirmed the earnest engagement of each team member, and provided clear evidence that immersion in artistic and multimodal activities over the course of the program had had an impact. Looking through these projects in July at the end of the program, we as designers of the program were deeply impressed but also frustrated that we could not have a live performance event for our local city and school district, as we had done every year in the past. The live performance always gave youth the sense of being recognized and being heard, thus empowering them to continue adopting the role of “youth civic leaders” beyond the summer YPAR program. But in the contentious and chaotic times of COVID-19 summer 2020, we worried about our ability to provide our youth with a large audience that would appreciate their work in a broader social context. After exploring several possible ways of representing the projects remotely, we decided to build a collaborative website for exhibiting youth’s multimodal artwork.

These final projects were beyond inspiring. They illuminated the insights of youth and graduate students, as critical citizens engaging with the past and present precarious lives and reflecting what could be learned as we moved towards the future. Take one of the final projects themed *Pandemic, Protest, and Patriotism* as an example. The theme originated from group discussions regarding what it meant to be a patriotic citizen of a country, in particular pertaining to the times of crisis. With the intention of “looking back for the answers we need now”, the youth and adult co-researchers in the group studied the Spanish Flu epidemic from 1918-1920 and compared it visually and verbally through image and text to the surge of COVID-19 and how the U.S. government responded. The group also discussed the close connections between the

death of Emmett Till and George Floyd and how each sparked a movement for social justice (see Figure 5.).

**Figure 5**  
*Collective Website Themed Pandemic, Protest, and Patriotism*



By integrating historical, social and political events, the group demonstrated expertise and assets of knowledge that asserted their capability of critiquing, challenging, and strategizing for innovative approaches in addressing problematic and unjust situations. For instance, John (July 20, 2020) reflected upon the study and stated, “During each of these movements, those fighting for civil rights and equal justice were faced with a variety of backlash for being too radical, communistic, and creating unneeded racial unrest.” In his call for action, John connected the current events with historical fights for justice, where people needed to fight despite being categorized as extremists and radicals. Through the profound artistic and verbal findings of each group, we could see evidence of deep thinking that originated in close collaboration among project members. Overall, the final artistic projects highlighted the power of collective approaches to youth civic engagement and leadership development.

### **Learning from the Past and Moving Towards the Future**

With the rising precarity and inequity in the U.S., we deem our current tumultuous period of time as a moment of disruption, but also as a moment of transformation. The pandemic disproportionately affected communities from ethnic and economic minoritized backgrounds and scaled up the education inequity to a staggering level (Fortuna et al., 2020; Van Lancker & Parolin, 2020). As the impact of COVID-19 unfolded, what minoritized communities like those in our city experienced came not only from a public health crisis, but also from a series of traumatic-inducing issues such as food insecurity, economic instability, lack of physical and mental health services, and educational disparities. The health pandemic indeed has magnified and exposed highly inequitable and fragile social and political systems. Witnessing these issues happening around us, we cannot help asking the following questions: What can we, as scholars, researchers, teachers, youth, and community activities do to shift the imbalance that became more evident in the times of crisis? How can we make our efforts contribute towards the radical goal of dismantling historical and systematic disparities?

Informed by our YPAR collective work that involves schools, community leaders, and universities, we urge members of schools, communities, and universities to become change agents in these critical times. Our current situation requires us to push the boundaries of typical school-university dyads (Sikma et al., 2018). Many times throughout our program, we wondered whether our small actions and efforts for individual transformation could make a difference in reforming an ubiquitously oppressive system for those in under-resourced communities. Humbling as our work is, given that we are always bound to fail in some substantial way (Burke et al., 2018), we adhere to the notion of collective leadership in program design and implementation. Through the spanning coalitions, school, community, and university, in the partnership we are able to stretch our minds from small-scale work to thinking bigger. It is our hope that by continuing to design and implement research collectives based on tenets of truly collaborative partnership, we can continue to develop innovative approaches, forge strong partnership commitments and further expand the work into larger communities.

Our experiences as part of the summer YPAR program have taught us how the knowledge and voices of minoritized communities has been left unrecognized and unheard. In our work, we have seen that youth and young adults have tremendous potential to contribute to the dismantling of structural racism and the envisioning of revolutionary social changes for the future generation. But there is a long way ahead of us. From our experience of recruiting youth participants this summer, we learned the hard lesson that long-standing economic disparities kept some youth excluded from our program. Some amazing youth, for example, could not take part in our collective as the COVID-19 pandemic required high-speed Internet connections and the physical and emotional space to contribute to our critical art making. We know that many could not contribute and also had difficulties attending school during the regular academic year because older children had to take care of their younger siblings or the elderly in families. The physical and mental pressure placed on the shoulders of these adolescents caught our attention. In further developing our work with youth researchers, we need to continue to build nuanced understandings of the difficulties that minoritized youth might be going through, acknowledge these issues, and consider ways to create more accessible participation.

As the health, economic, and racial pandemics in the 21<sup>st</sup> century continue to impact individuals and communities, we call attention to all teachers, educators and policy makers. Can we learn from these online experiences, humble as they were, to develop school-community-university partnerships in participatory multimodal approaches and collectively develop the

responsibility and accountability needed to build radical forms of leadership? Living in the era of inequities and uncertainties, we want to invoke the pedagogy of youth civic leadership and demonstrate the grassroots power that the younger generation holds. Heeding the systematic issues that take place in our neighborhood communities, we believe that an evolving critical consciousness and willingness for political participation will shine light on the broader social and political landscape.



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