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YPAR, Critical Whiteness, and Generative Possibilities

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Abstract

In this response to the article by Tanner and Corrie, the authors provide three critiques of the methodology and theoretical framing of the study with the hopes of informing future scholarship and practice. Specifically, the three critiques addressed in this paper include the integration of CWS frameworks and YPAR methodology, the application and description of CWS and YPAR frameworks, and the role of power in the relationship between educator and student that served as the central medium for the study.

This article is in response to:

Tanner, S. J., & Corrie, C. (2016). Sam and Cristina: A Critical Dialogue Between a Teacher and Student About the Commoditization of People of Color by Schools. *Democracy and Education*, 24 (2), Article 3. Available at: http://democracyeducationjournal.org/home/vol24/iss2/3

THE COMMODITIZATION OF students and people of Color,[1] both through and within theoretically democratic educational settings, creates a dynamic in which the very spaces in society that are championed as egalitarian are more often tools for the reproduction of oppression and white supremacy. While we in the United States frequently uphold education as the ultimate means of self-improvement and opportunity, the reality is that for many learners, and particularly for students and people of Color, these educational spaces serve to silence their stories and histories (Cammarota & Romero, 2006). As both education and educational research practices become profoundly antidemocratic, the challenge to educators and scholars alike becomes creating education and research spaces that include students in the process and bring voices of Color to the forefront

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1   We capitalize words that refer to the racial identities of people of Color both to confer respect to individuals' racial identities and histories and to differentiate between racial identity and simple colors not referring to race (Black vs. black, Color vs. color, etc.). At the same time, we intentionally do not capitalize the words *whiteness* or *white* as a symbolic representation of the desire to challenge white dominance and white supremacy.

(Cammarota & Fine, 2008). In particular, students of Color, given their lived experiences and personal interactions with racism, are in a unique and important position to critique whiteness in education systems. Unfortunately, their perspectives are rarely centered in literature or research methodologies that focus on critical engagement with whiteness. Within this context, "Sam and Cristina: A Dialogue Between a High School Teacher and Student about the Commoditization of People of Color," by Tanner and Corrie (2016), is an example of a new and novel approach to democratic scholarship. The piece serves as a potential model of critical pedagogy that could be modified and applied by educators throughout the K–12 system in the aim of democratizing their educational praxes. Additionally, the thorough critique of the way that educational institutions exploit and commodify students of Color to improve their reputation and status works to shine a bright light on the oppressive practices that are all too common in today's schools.

Utilizing a Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) methodology to challenge issues of systemic whiteness in the K–12 education system, Tanner and Corrie (2016) worked to critique racist educational practices through a methodology that should theoretically bring educator and student onto a more equal playing field. In coauthoring this piece, they not only aspired toward the democratization of education but also the democratization of research and scholarship. As commentators, we were thrilled to see scholars take this much-needed and extremely relevant approach to educational research. Moreover, as researchers who hold the application of Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS) frameworks to critical research on educational systems in high regard, we were immediately interested to see how Tanner and Corrie would integrate a CWS framework with a YPAR methodology to address issues of the commodification of students of Color in K–12 education. While we have respect for the authors and the work that they have put forward, as reviewers we believe that all scholarship can benefit from external perspectives and recommendations as to how to refine and improve upon a piece of academic work. To that end, we offer three specific commentaries on Tanner and Corrie's piece with the hope of expanding and advancing the quality and diligence of similar work moving forward. The following review addresses these three areas: (1) the integration of CWS frameworks and YPAR methodology, (2) the application and description of CWS and YPAR frameworks, and (3) the role of power in the relationship between educator and student that served as the central medium for the study.

Whiteness and YPAR

Tanner and Corrie's (2016) contribution to the CWS literature is novel and important as they integrated this framework with a methodology in YPAR that has not been widely used in either education or CWS research. While diverse methodologies have been applied to CWS in education (for reviews that highlight the diverse methods, see Jupp, Berry, & Lensmire, 2016; Jupp, Leckie, Cabrera, & Utt, under review), the only published empirical studies we identified that utilize YPAR as a methodology and CWS as a theoretical frame are authored by Tanner (Tanner, 2015; Tanner 2016). Because of the power of YPAR and other democratic forms of

research and scholarship to inspire "transformational resistance" in youth researchers (Solórzano & Delgado-Bernal, 2001), CWS would benefit from a wider and more robust implementation of YPAR in the field, particularly as it relates to educational research.

While Participatory Action Research (PAR) and YPAR more specifically have not always been used in democratic and critical ways, the roots of YPAR both as a theory and as a methodology are profoundly democratic and subversive to systems of power and oppression (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Fals-Borda, 2006). In particular, fields that apply critical theory to race and racial oppression such as Critical Race Theory (CRT) and CWS are important venues for democratic methodologies like YPAR because of their commitment to intersectionality, counter story, and the dismantling of systems of racial oppression (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Torre, 2009). Torre (2009) quoted Guinier and Torres (2002) to highlight the power of democratic inquiry in critical race applications of YPAR:

> It is a fundamentally creative project, political project that begins from the ground up, starting with race and all its complexity, and then builds cross-racial relationships through race and with race to issues of class and gender in order to make democracy real. (Guinier & Torres, 2002, as cited in Torre, 2009, p. 118)

Yet CWS, and its framing in relationship to CRT (Cabrera, 2014; Gillborn, 2008), has seen little application of YPAR methodologies. Knowing that there have been many applications of PAR and YPAR that lack a critical frame, thus posing a danger that the method might become depoliticized (Fine, 2009; Torre, 2009), the critical lens of CWS paired with the collaborative, democratic nature of YPAR could offer new and powerful ways for the voices of the oppressed to be centered in research on whiteness in education. Additionally, as is the case in Tanner and Corrie's (2016) article, YPAR offers unique opportunities for collaboration across race, gender, age, and other identity constructions. Unfortunately, though youth of Color are frequently those in the best position to critique the whiteness and oppression within white-dominated educational systems (Freire, 2005; Matsuda, 1995), their voices are rarely centered in whiteness research. There is room, then, for the transgression of power relations in applying YPAR methodologies to CWS given that participatory research "entails reflecting on and engaging with the relationships between and among self and others involved in research and recognizing that, like teaching, research is a very human act" (Dentith, Measor, & O'Malley, 2009, p. 164). As such, Tanner and Corrie's article is an important entry into what could be a powerful union between CWS and YPAR in future research. However, the article does have considerable flaws and limitations, described below, that must be considered when accounting for its implications and conclusions.

(Mis)Applications of YPAR and CWS

YPAR is a form of critical, collaborative, democratic inquiry that is an intentional departure from the "normal" way that scholarly inquiry is conducted (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Dentith, Measor, & O'Malley, 2009). Central to this democratic project is a focus on

intersectionality, where the influence of multiple forms of oppression concurrently serve to empower and maintain systems of domination (Crenshaw, 1991). As such, the methodology is inherently one that pushes back against traditional, white-dominant forms of research that silence the experiences and epistemologies of communities of Color. To that end, we acknowledge that any critique of YPAR scholarship that calls into question the methodological soundness of a study will result in the imposition of boundaries on a form of inquiry that is at its core a challenge to rigid approaches to scholarship. Understanding the importance of the ongoing debates among YPAR scholars about how the method ought to be defined and implemented (Johnson, 2016), we have opted to align our critique, as did Tanner and Corrie (2016), with Cammarota and Fine's (2008) position on YPAR. As such, we apply Cammarota and Fine's perspective on YPAR as a subversive methodology to the work of Tanner and Corrie, while recognizing that this is but one perspective within the wider field of YPAR scholarship.

Cammarota and Fine (2008) explained that:

Stakeholders participating in PAR projects tend to be critical race researchers, adhering closely to the Critical Race Theory tenet of intersectionality (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Although understanding that race and racism are formative processes within their social contexts, PAR stakeholders look to analyze power relations through multiple axes. Thus, race intersects with gender, class, and sexuality within typical PAR inquiries. (p. 6)

Working from this definition of YPAR, an analysis of the data presented by Tanner and Corrie (2016) brings into question whether their work together ought to be considered a form of YPAR. Specifically, Tanner and Corrie utilized as data two pieces written by Corrie, one a reflection on her personal definition of and relation to whiteness and the other a college application essay about a time when she challenged a belief or idea. They also included written feedback from Tanner, along with a joint interpretation of each interaction as complementary pieces of data. While these exchanges between Tanner and Corrie are certainly critical and designed to interrogate experiences of racism and whiteness, it is our belief that they more closely represent a form of mentorship than an example of YPAR. Cammarota and Fine (2008) said that true YPAR is "specifically research such that participants conduct a critical scientific inquiry that includes establishing key research questions and methods to answer them" (p. 5). In contrast, the dialogue, both written and verbal, that took place between Sam and Cristina lacked the same groundings in intentional research methodology that are central to this notion of YPAR.

This is not to say that all YPAR needs to be explicitly "scientific" so much as grounded in some form of clear organization and research inquiry that involves intentional forethought and critical exploration. Tanner and Corrie (2016) went as far as to say, "The conversations that began in our YPAR collective continued over the next two years in organic ways that were rooted in the method and theory described" (p. 5). As they suggested, the foundations of their mentoring relationship were clearly informed by the same

democratic commitment to education that is central to YPAR. Yet the specific data used in this study was not produced through a clear research design that is needed in order to differentiate it as YPAR as opposed to personal reflection or another methodology. If any sort of collaboration can be considered YPAR simply because it is generally rooted in the democratic principles of YPAR, what exactly makes YPAR a method?

While this critique is in no way intended to diminish the power and immense value in the reflection and learning that occurred in these interpersonal interactions, the content that was used as data in this study did not appear to result from any form of democratic empirical research investigation, and as such, seems to fall short of Cammarota and Fine's (2008) conception of YPAR. That is to say that, while significant in their own right, and excellent examples of promising pedagogical practice, the interactions between Sam and Cristina are not examples of the type of research that is essential to the practice of YPAR.

To a similar extent, while the authors attempted to ground their research in a CWS framework, their application fell short in three key ways. First, while they referenced several prominent CWS scholars (Lensmire et al., 2013; Leonardo, 2013; Morrison, 1992), Tanner and Corrie (2016) didn't focus in on a theory within CWS as a central frame for their research. In contrast to fields like CRT, where most scholars within the discipline subscribe to a similar set of core tenets, CWS is more disparate and decentralized in that there are no central principles that are consistent across all CWS analyses (Cabrera, 2014). As such, it is important, when using CWS, to identify a theory or theories to use in framing the study. Though they referenced studies conducted by Leonardo (2013), Lensmire et al. (2013), and others, it was done more in the form of a literature review than in highlighting the specific components of each theory that they planned to utilize in their research study.

Second, Tanner and Corrie's (2016) analysis suffered from poor theorization and historicizing of whiteness as an identity and a system of racial oppression. In the first full paragraph of the text, the authors claimed that whiteness "was never meant to refer to an intentional community grouping in the United States" (p. 1), yet historians of whiteness have clearly demonstrated how whiteness was created specifically to be an intentional community grouping that would divide poor light-skinned Europeans from Indigenous people and free and enslaved Africans in U.S. colonies in order to stave off populist rebellion (Battalora, 2013; Painter, 2010; Roediger, 2007; Thandeka, 2001). Further, though whiteness has changed and evolved considerably since its creation in the mid-to-late 1600s, each evolution has reflected an intentional community grouping designed to maintain white dominance and the oppression of people of Color (Painter, 2010). After its invention as a tool of social and economic control, whiteness evolved (often quite intentionally) as race became the primary tool of oppression and control in the United States, simultaneously connected to class but wholly separate from it (Bonilla-Silva, 2010). In addition to this lack of proper historicizing, the authors never clearly articulated how they defined or operationalized notions of whiteness or race (Leonardo, 2009), which in turn made it hard to theorize the commoditization of people of Color upon which their argument rested.

Finally, while they provided a strong overview of theories related to the commoditization of Blackness (Lensmire & Snaza, 2010) and the false representation of Blackness (Morrison, 1992), they didn't actually apply them at any other point in the study. This is not to say that they could not have incorporated these theories into the analysis and discussion of the dialogues between Sam and Cristina. In fact, both of these theories would have been excellent frames to draw on throughout the paper. However, in their absence, the analysis became slightly anecdotal and focused much more on a self-reflection of how he (Tanner) as a white scholar and educator was complicit in the same appropriation of Black students and Black culture that the authors critiqued throughout the piece. Had Tanner and Corrie (2016) used Lensmire and Snaza (2010) or Morrison (1992) more directly and thoroughly in the initial framing of their study, they may have also carried this focus through to their analysis and discussion in a way that would have more seamlessly grounded their work in the CWS tradition. An additional area in this study that would have benefited from more intentional description was the nature of the teacher/student relationship.

The Teacher/Student Relationship

YPAR at its core is supposed to be a more democratic form of scholarly inquiry that requires a more collaborative approach to research that decenters the "official knowledge" power of academics (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Dentith, Measor, & O'Malley, 2009). Democratic, collective inquiry is both the antithesis of oppression and the practice of freedom (Freire, 2005). Tanner and Corrie (2016) shared this theoretical and philosophical orientation in their applications of YPAR as they expressed, "YPAR is a democratic approach to education designed to facilitate the sharing of power between teachers and students around investigating topics that usually concern social justice" (p. 4). Important to this definition is the sharing of power and explicitly taking account of competing power dynamics. It is specifically these mechanisms and strategies for taking account of competing power dynamics where we found the current manuscript in need of the most development.

As we articulated in the previous section, there was a need for the authors to be more self-critical and self-reflective in the process of conducting this form of inquiry. At the same time, we were hoping that they would have been more critical of the nature of their own relationship. That is, there were existing power dynamics that had to be taken into account in order for YPAR to realize its democratic potential as a collaborative form of scholarly inquiry (Nygreen, 2009). As Cabrera (2014) argued, "Democracy derives from the roots demos—meaning people and—cracy meaning rule. It is not possible to have a rule by the people if certain racial groups, with deference to George Orwell, are 'more equal than others'" (p. 22). Within this paradigm, we argue that the authors needed a deeper analysis regarding the power dynamics that contextualized their interactions, friendship, and collaboration, including but not limited to:

- white person vs. person of Color
- man vs. woman
- teacher vs. student
- adult vs. adolescent
- PhD student vs. high school student

Each of these represents a power imbalance in the relationship that favors Sam over Cristina. Taking account of these is central to creating a truly collaborative YPAR project, and part of the reason why executing YPAR studies is so difficult. As Chabot, Shoveller, Spencer, and Johnson (2012) argued, "Power differentials between young people and adults are particularly pronounced when the substantive research topic is deemed by decision makers (and society in general) to be controversial" (p. 22). Thus, YPAR done properly requires not only the decentering of the power of the trained researcher but also the challenging of the power dynamics in the larger society (Cammarota & Fine, 2008).

Tanner and Corrie (2016) were aware of the difficulties of YPAR as they articulated, "Ultimately, we agreed that YPAR *was* an effective means of conducting whiteness work but that it was an extremely difficult process" (p. 5, italics original). However, they insufficiently detailed their means to this end. That is, the description of discussions between the two authors detailed the airing of Corrie's frustration about the Whiteness Project, but what made the interactions unique? What made them dialogic in nature, as the authors repeatedly stated? How were these interactions more aligned with the principles of YPAR than a traditional teacher/student dialogue? More importantly, what were the mechanisms the authors put in place to ensure that the dialogues did not reinforce the existing social hierarchies? The authors were troublingly silent on these issues. Rather than explaining how they specifically addressed the issues resulting from the hierarchies listed above, they instead offered, "We talked, we thought, and we wrote" (p. 4). However, there were some problematic dynamics embedded in these descriptions.

For example, Corrie offered frustration that the Whiteness Project was ineffective. Their exchange was as follows:

"This project isn't working. The white kids don't get it," Cristina told Sam about her white peers during the winter of 2013.

"They don't get what you get," Sam responded, "but they get something else." (Tanner & Corrie, 2016, p. 4)

This exchange was offered as evidence of the dialogical method the two engaged in, but in the absence of taking account of social power dynamics, this interaction can be interpreted in a strongly antidemocratic way. For example, Tanner was not really engaging in problem-posing as Freire (2005) would suggest as a preferred means of engaging in dialogical methods. Instead, he was directly contradicting Corrie's interpretation of her lived reality. What gave him the authority to do this? Was it him as a teacher? A man? A white person? A PhD student? If these power dynamics were not at play, what did the two do prior to this interaction to address them? If we start from the perspective that oppression is omnipresent and informs interpersonal interactions (Cammarota & Fine, 2008), then scholars must proactively work to create inclusive and

anti-oppressive space. What was the mechanism that the authors used to create this space? How did they do it? What was the method?

For the authors, the lack of specificity on these issues was glossed over as they offered, "The conversations that began in our YPAR collective continued over the next two years in organic ways" (p. 5). The framing of these discussions and their relationship is problematic because they see it as "organic" without explicit consideration of the power dynamics that contextualized this relationship. They frequently discussed engaging in dialogues outside of school time, and while there is nothing inherently wrong with this, there are still the power dynamics at play that we previously listed. Please be clear, we are not in any way suggesting that the relationship between Tanner and Corrie was inappropriate. Rather, what we are saying is that to appropriately ground their interactions within the context of YPAR critical inquiry, a stronger description of their methodology for accounting for competing power dynamics was needed for this manuscript to reach its potential.

Discussion and Conclusion

The intersection of YPAR and CWS has been sorely lacking in the empirical and theoretical literature, and for charting this new territory, Tanner and Corrie (2016) deserve a great deal of credit. That said, the literature needs more than just doing CWS and YPAR, but examples are needed of applying both of these frameworks in a way that allows readers to develop their own similar research projects. To this end, the piece did not realize its potential for two key reasons. First, it is a description of YPAR in the absence of the depth of description necessary to understand how it was "participatory." This is particularly important given the power dynamics that contextualize the Tanner-Corrie relationship (see previous section). Second, the use of Corrie's reflections was interesting, but more is needed to demonstrate how this was "research" instead of interpersonal interactions and class assignments. What elevated Corrie's contribution to the level of research? More specific description is needed to detail this approach, and without it, we are left with YPAR in the absence of *P* and *R*.

Despite these limitations, it is our hope that Tanner and Corrie's (2016) work will inspire more researchers to take up careful and critical YPAR as a methodology within the field of CWS. While there are clear flaws that limit the applications and implications of their study, the collaborative relationship across the difference that was created between Tanner and Corrie is an important one. After all, white researchers are frequently limited in their ability to speak to the impacts of racism and oppression (Freire, 2005; Helms, 1993; Matsuda, 1995). When white researchers who strive for racial justice praxis collaborate in truly democratic and participatory research that centers the voices of students and people of Color, there is tremendous potential for "transformational resistance" (Solórzano & Delgado-Bernal, 2001).

As scholars utilize CWS frameworks and YPAR methodologies in conjunction, we must take careful steps to address the dynamics of power and oppression at play in our work (Nygreen, 2009). Torre (2009) reminded researchers who utilize YPAR in critical race-framed studies:

> The production of knowledge is a social political process, steeped in history. In other words, that we as a collective of researchers come from particular communities with our own relationships to research and power; that each of us carry particular interests and social justice agendas; that we are each differently situated and that we each have varying relationships power and privilege. (p. 117)

Truly democratic education is not simply participatory—it is subversive to systems and relationships of power and oppression that inhibit democracy. Tanner and Corrie (2016) offered a model of subversive, democratic education, and despite the flaws laid out above, their model can help others expand our imaginations in research and teaching to include more cross-difference collaboration that can challenge oppression while inspiring progressive change. Researchers, then, must learn from their contribution to the literature, improve on the limitations of their study, and offer more participatory research in the field of CWS in education toward the goal of building more democratic, less oppressive educational environments.

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