



Uncovering Youthspaces: Activist Voices, Productive, Materialist Methodologies, and Social Inquiry: An Introduction

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Abstract

This article expands the discussion on youth activism, arguing for a new materialist conception of youthspaces. Centering this article around the concept of youthspaces, a term that refers to the agency, relationality and resistance engendered in youthspaces, the article urges that a new materialist understanding of youthspaces and youth studies, in particular, opens up new opportunities to observe how minoritized youth are making sense of education policy and practice as well as cultivating positive identities and affinities among each other in the context of education and social justice efforts.

Keywords: youth activism; new materialism; youthspaces; qualitative inquiry

Introduction

The focus of this issue of *Critical Questions in Education (CQIE)* is on the materiality and relationality of youth-generated spaces—what I term *youthspaces*. This concept is defined as spaces that are literal, relational, or symbolic, that produce meaning for youth in regard to their experiences of education, identity, belonging and social justice. This concept of *youthspace* is influenced by new materialist notions of agency, relationality, and resistance (Fox & Alldred, 2017). To this end, this editorial introduction provides a brief explanation of new materialism, its influence on research related to youth studies, and how it provides the framework for the articles in this issue.

This special issue of *CQIE* is dedicated to new understandings of materialist, critical and participatory methodologies in educational research on youth studies with particular attention to youth from minoritized communities, or with youth that occupy marginalized identities (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003). This call defines “minoritized communities and identities” by drawing from Gutiérrez and Rogoff’s (2003) work that posits that the practice of labeling students’ cultural differences with individual traits such as being “low-income,” “at risk,” or any “othering” language is part of the institutional, ascription process of identity that allows for hierarchies in schools and society (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003). This ascription process also sets the conditions for positive and negative academic trajectories for minoritized youth and contributes to the reproduction of inequality in society. Youth identity, particularly minoritized social identities and identities related to race, class and gender and their interactions with student achievement, have been widely studied (Bettie, 2003; Cammarota, 2004; Carter, 2004, 2005; Chikkatur, 2012;

Conchas, 2006; Davidson, 1996; DeJaeghere & McCleary, 2010; Dimitriadis, 2003; Eckert, 1989; Ferguson, 2001; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ghosh, Mickelson, & Anyon, 2007; Morris, 2006, 2007, 2008; Nasir, 2004; Noguera, 2004; Pascoe, 2007; Taines, 2011; Valenzuela, 1999; Wortham, Mortimer & Allard, 2009); however, this issue offers approaches to uncover *youthspaces* that experiment outside the normative socio-cultural, dualistic paradigms of previous research.

Given the resurgence of youth activism and larger youth-generated social movements against educational injustices (Rodriguez, 2017b), this special issue expands notions of agency, identity, empowerment, and resistance within the context(s) of neoliberal ideologies that govern much of the current education policy and reform climate (Giroux, 2014, 2015; Fabricant & Fine, 2012) and globalization. As it stands, neoliberal ideologies provide the context for youth activism (Kirshner, Gaertner, & Pozzoboni, 2010), where neoliberalism is defined as a set of political ideologies and practices (Harvey, 2005). Neoliberal ideologies have been applied to educational research (Lipman, 2011) to underscore the ways in which public goods such as education are subject to privatization, changing the shape of social structures and relationships (Rodriguez, 2017b, 2017c) and negatively impacting communities of color. In this issue, for instance, Goessling calls attention to the importance of youth organizing as an act of resistance by noting how Harvey (2005) argues that neoliberalism must be dismantled by not only exposing its structural manifestations, but by examining specific local forms of resistance in a unified broad scale social movement. Goessling uncovers youth spaces of “possibility” to expose the conditions for positive social change. Further, this special issue provides insight into the interworkings of youth culture(s) and space(s) with/in social movements toward educational justice, particularly in our current racialized contexts of education policy and practice (Goessling, Craven, and Moya, this issue).

Importantly, the special issue situates its inquiry within two larger theoretical and methodological concerns. First, the special issue contributes to theoretical and conceptual discussions of youth activism or organizing, agency, subjectivity, empowerment, resistance, and space. Authors engage with and theorize such concepts in order to ponder the critical questions: how do young people—often marginalized and excluded from educational policy-making—use or claim space(s) in their efforts for social change? What constitutes youth organizing and how is it (or is it not) an articulation of youth culture(s)? In what ways are youth identities or subjectivities conceived of in local contexts, and how can re-conceptualizing youth subjectivities offer breakthroughs in our current understandings of young people's role in protesting, if not overcoming, injustices both at the structural and individual, material levels in society?

Second, the special issue engages with methodologies that offer insight into youth culture, utilizing materialist methodologies as well as critical and participatory frameworks to reveal youth experiences. To build upon the previous scholarship on youth culture(s), organizing, and activism, however, the authors develop and provide nuanced methodological approaches and risks as they disrupt knowledge production in their respective communities by focusing on critical issues related to minoritized young people. For instance, authors utilize new materialist frameworks, photovoice and mapping methods to uncover the production of youth sense making in material spaces for minoritized youth in global contexts, e.g. undocumented youth in California and Nashville, TN, migrant youth in the Hudson Valley of New York, Māori youth in New Zealand, girlhood in Australia, and rural youth in Alabama (Gildersleeve & Sifuentez, Del Vecchio, Toomey & Tuck, Linville, Berryman, Eley & Copeland, Duggan, Baggett and Andrezejew-

ski, this issue). The authors showcase multiple complexities and the unevenness of youth experiences, pushing boundaries of possible action for young people and for researchers alike. Framing the special issue with this orientation offers a nuanced portrait of interactions between youth and their social contexts and how the contexts are shaped/shape expressions of power, disruption, and justice-embodied resistance on the part of youth. Finally, the articles here privilege productive analyses of youth identity and space in hopes of excavating narratives that challenge our understanding of progress, and human agency in constrained educational and societal contexts.

Notes on New Materialism and Social Inquiry about Minoritized Youth

I have argued previously that we might think about youth experiences productively (Rodriguez, 2016, 2017a) to uncover the relationality and materiality of *youthspaces*. This issue was initiated by and broadly grounded in an interest in studying the materiality, or the “matter of things,” and the plural, complex and unevenness of human experience (Fox & Alldred, 2017, p. 2; Barad, 1997) as it relates to the study of young people, particularly from minoritized backgrounds. Such youth are characterized from deficit models of thinking about identity and their voices are often unheard in educational policy-making to be sure. In the context of social theory’s commonplace dualisms of structure/agency, cited earlier in the sociological and anthropological literature in the U.S., youth identity and experiences are often conceived through dualistic paradigms that produce notions of the Other and in that process reify young peoples’ positioning in society and educational contexts as nondominant and lacking agency. Instead of reifying the societal positioning as one of non-dominant, the articles in this issue not only privilege *youthspace*, conceived as emergent, relational, and spatial, but include detailed accounts of how youth produced, disrupted, and made sense of space and the relations therein.

A second consideration both in the conception of this issue and in how the articles are arranged relates to new materialist philosophy’s focus on power, specifically how power operates and is/can be disrupted in the social production of space (Fox & Alldred, 2015). Scholars have extended this overarching focus on power to empirical research (Fox & Alldred, 2015) by seeking to address the “desires, feelings, and meanings” that engender social reproduction processes (Braidotti, 2000, p. 159). These materially, relationally, socially, and spatially produced desires comprise the articles in this issue as an experiment in demystifying and further rejecting social structures such as neoliberalism, racism or heteronormativity, for instance, as the repetitive “reason” for why things are the way they are, i.e. how societies function (Fox & Alldred, 2015; Latour, 2005). Taking these two considerations, this special issue examines how youth and space coalesces to contribute a more fruitful, nuanced, and disruptive understanding of educational sites.

Imaginings of Youthspaces

The first three articles (papers 1-3) comprise intentionally disruptive analyses that uncover *youthspaces*. First, Gildersleeve and Sifuentez’s study entangles Latino/a youth activism with ritual culture in U.S. higher education. These authors ethnographically examine Latino/a graduation ceremonies, emplacing our analyses within new materialist philosophy, and theorizing the ceremonies as *assemblage*. These authors contribute to the knowledge-base around how Latino/a youth use/claim space in their efforts for social change as well as the burgeoning literature utilizing new materialist philosophies to develop methods that uncover socially produced

spaces by minoritized youth. Second, Del Vecchio, Toomey & Tuck's youth participatory action research (yPAR) study of undocumented migrant youth in the Hudson Valley of New York uniquely introduces what the authors name, "placing photovoice," to examine the experiences of young people. Their yPAR study, combined with critical place inquiry (Tuck & McKenzie, 2015) utilizes photovoice to understand how experiences of setting and place shape how youth who are facing the dilemma of precarious legal status while living in rural areas envision and plan for their futures. With guidance from Indigenous theorizations of refusal, the project explores the potential of embedding refusal into image-based methodologies to involve participants more deliberately in the collection, generation and sharing of data. Third, Linville's study of sexuality and gender in schools utilizes a participatory action research approach alongside the methodological tool of mapping. In her study, she illustrates how youth researchers understand discourses of sexuality and gender manifest in their school setting and the ways they resisted the limitations of dominant gender and sexuality identities. Linville discusses themes related to how school spaces are sexualized and gendered for students. This author uncovers material, relational, and spatial circulations of discourses on sexuality to allow young people, educators and researchers access to new understandings of LGBTQ+ youth experiences in schools, focusing on how embodied and discursive resources are used to create spaces in schools in which to explore their identities and pleasures.

The next set of articles (papers 4-7) expand the literature on yPAR and PAR in two ways. First, authors study marginalized groups in unique contexts and attempt to make meaning of *youthspaces* in rural Alabama, Nashville, Tennessee, Vancouver, BC, and southern California. Each of these authors offer intricate descriptions and *youthspaces*, including in alternative high schools, community organizing sites, and classrooms. Second, authors pay close attention to methodological uses and limitations of yPAR in their respective settings.

First, Baggett and Andrzejewski, for instance, implemented a yPAR project at a rural, alternative high school in Alabama. Youth at the school were atypical from those usually described in the yPAR literature in that they were predominantly white, working and middle class, and lived in rural neighborhoods that were geographically removed from their school. The authors provide findings in two domains, focusing on youth perspectives about community, including the ways these perspectives did not foster a sense of collective action and how youths felt (dis)empowered and cynical about community involvement and offer methodological reflections and implications for yPAR, including how their project was (mis)aligned with the extant literature on yPAR. Second, Goessling examines how young people were learning to be activists in Vancouver, British Columbia through a youth-driven organization, "Think Again" (TA). Goessling's work hones-in on creative action projects of youth and the emergent methodologies employed in this study that generated the conditions for "places of possibility." Goessling contributes to current literature by utilizing a narrative framework to examine the ways the social relationships and practices at TA enabled some of the young people to take up an activist identity and by conceptualizing "places of possibility" as literal and metaphorical spaces where people are afforded the tools and resources necessary to imagine alternative realities, identities, and systems than what currently exist.

Third, Craven, Montero, Ramirez, Robles & Robles focus on how undocumented immigrant youth in Nashville, Tennessee confront and challenge educational inequities, particularly that of affordable access to higher education. To contribute to the extant literature on yPAR, the authors demonstrate how undocumented youth engaged in both individual and collective forms of resistance can overcome educational barriers, a process we refer to as *boundary politics*. This

article draws on data from 24 oral histories from a multi-year participatory action research project with members of a youth-led undocumented-immigrant organizing group. This participatory methodology was used to complement the collective action and individual forms of resistance employed by undocumented youth in this study. Uniquely, this paper includes undocumented youth authors who engaged in various forms of resistance and activism, influencing the social and political landscape of Tennessee, laying the groundwork for educational equity to become a more plausible reality within the state.

Fourth, Moya examines how youth take on critical civic identities across classroom and organizing spaces. By examining two structurally unique learning sites from a situated perspective, this paper highlights how youth critical civic identity processes are negotiated within figured worlds over time. In particular, the goals and membership expectations of the two sites positioned the study participants on different identity trajectories, with classroom students more likely to adopt an *aspirational* critical civic identity, while youth participating in community-based organizing took on more *practice-linked* identities as critical civic activists. More specifically, positioning youth as valuable contributors to critical civic action was a key resource for youth to take on these practice-linked identities as individuals with agency to address social injustices.

The final set of articles in this issue (papers 8-10) expand the conversation about studying *youthspaces*, specifically from reflective and conceptual perspectives. First, Berryman, Eley & Copeland take us into the world of marginalized Māori youth in New Zealand. The authors present three stories-over-time of the secondary schooling experiences of New Zealand's *rangatahi Māori*—or Māori youth. The stories span fifteen years of New Zealand schooling and are told from three perspectives: the experiences of the students as told in their own words; the voices of youth within the prevailing political contexts of government policy; and, the reframing and repositioning of researchers listening to the experiences of rangatahi Māori who believe they have *succeeded as Māori*. In reality, the stories are interwoven; however, in an effort to make sense of the various methodological dilemmas, risks, and entanglements across the three points of learning, the authors disentangle these different threads from the whole and follow these independent of each other. Finally, these authors offer implications for educators, policy makers, and researchers.

Duggan's article uniquely theorizes young people's aspirations through the notion of "willfulness" to consider how young people anticipate, plan for, and orient toward the future as a real and imagined space that is embedded within their relationship to everyday social, cultural, and economic practices. To do this, Duggan draws upon digital blog and interview narratives collected across a seventeen-month period from three young women in their final year of secondary school in Victoria, Australia. These narratives take up the notion of "willed" space(s) to consider the capacities, energies, and projects that these young women tell about the future over time. Throughout, this paper argues that a willful lens is particularly productive for its capacity to move beyond an understanding of educational participation as a fixed site for realizing aspirations to one that highlights multiple processes of becoming within novel spaces of identification and belonging. Finally, Thompson and Hardee engage in a duologue to explore the pedagogical and poetic openings experienced during two individual youth empowerment school-based research projects in two southern states—one a middle school poetry project, the other a high-school mentoring project. The projects engage minoritized youth with undergraduate students in colleges of education utilizing a methodology grounded in a theory of physical and metaphorical borderlands and border pedagogy for agentic participation. The authors assert that

intentional formation of border spaces of participation and care within the silencing spaces of school serves as a foundation from which youth may build capacity, through coming to voice and collaborative action that speaks to their experiences, for future actions for social activism and change.

Taken together, these articles offer insight into a new materialist understanding of *youth-space* along with interrogating and building upon critical and participatory frameworks by emphasizing the activist voices within the material, relational, and spatial dimensions of *youth-space*. To this end, these articles advance our understanding of justice-oriented social inquiry from the perspectives and innovations of youth.

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