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**“Se Hace Puentes al Andar”:
PODER and the Young Scholars for Justice**

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**“Se Hace Puentes al Andar”:
PODER and the Young Scholars for Justice**

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Dedication

Para mis padres, quienes me enseñaron lo que significa el valor y la importancia de luchar para el bienestar de los demás. This is also dedicated to all of the youth who struggled but never found the light within to illuminate the way forward.

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Mami y papi, siempre estaré agradecida por lo que hicieron por mí, Ana, y Carlos. Nos dieron todo lo que tenían a su alcance y hasta más. Sin su apoyo, amor, y sacrificios no hubiera sobrevivido esta batalla de vida o muerte. Siempre llevo sus enseñanzas conmigo tanto como su cariño. Gracias por darme fuerza cuando me sentía más débil y por recordarme que las lágrimas se pueden convertir en sonrisas.

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For the youth in the Young Scholars for Justice program: thank you for letting me into your lives and allowing me to be a part of an experience that I know you will always look back on and treasure. You all have so much to offer and so much that others can learn from you. I hope that you continue to see and connect with the beauty within as you follow the path that brings you to what you love and makes you happy.

Mil gracias to Dr. De Lissovoy and Dr. Foley for serving on my committee and helping me survive these past two years, which simultaneously flew by and crept along at a snail's pace. Your honesty, kindness, and mentorship allowed me to continue pushing myself and breaking through what I perceived were my limits. Your classes opened up the world of critical pedagogy to me as well as new ways to envision education that helped me further solidify the kind of educator I want to be.

Y para tod@s: Let us link hands and hearts together find a path through the dark woods step through the doorways between worlds leaving huellas for others to follow, build bridges, cross them with grace, and claim these puentes our "home" si se puede, que asi sea, so be it, estamos listas, vámonos. Now let us shift. (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 576)

Siempre en la lucha.

May 6, 2011

Abstract

“Se Hace Puentes al Andar”: PODER and the Young Scholars for Justice

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Youth of color are routinely dehumanized and treated as objects both in schools and in society. The “banking method” approach to teaching and stringent zero tolerance policies that are prevalent in low-income schools predominantly populated by youth of color serve to push youth out of school and pull them into the school-to-prison pipeline. When students do not meet their school’s standards, the institutional gaze is fixed disapprovingly on the child and the family. The history of segregation and institutionalized oppression that led to a legacy of inadequate and culturally irrelevant schooling and a poor quality of life for communities of color is erased. For the children who grow up in such environments, a historical silence makes it difficult if not impossible to make sense of their present-day conditions and the changes they are witnessing in their communities. People Organized in the Defense of Earth and her Resources (PODER) is an organization that focuses on issues of environmental, economic, and social justice, and strives to facilitate youth empowerment through their Young Scholars for Justice (YSJ) summer program. The youth of color in the program are positioned as knowledgeable researchers and historical actors in their community. The Chicana feminist epistemology of PODER’s staff members creates a nurturing and family-like environment for the youth, which has a significant impact on the females, and enables youth to utilize personal experiences to develop a structural analysis of oppression. As youth acquire a historical *conocimiento* of East Austin, they also learn about organized resistance to oppression vis-à-vis environmental justice campaigns. In doing so, a spiritual activism blossoms in the youth that is born from their wounds of oppression and rooted in a cultural and historical awareness of their community. The youth engage in a cycle of praxis as their spiritual activism mobilizes them against injustices and ushers in their transformation into subjects. Through participant observation and interviews, I weave together a critical case study of the YSJ program that is informed by the metamorphosis I experienced after participating in the program.

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Introduction

A truly critical study of education needs to deal with more than the technical issues of how we teach efficiently and effectively – too often the dominant or only questions educators ask. It must think critically about education's relationship to economic, political, and cultural power. (Apple, 2004, p. vii).

East Austin has been my home my entire life. Prior to enrolling at the University of Texas at Austin as an undergraduate student nearly ten years ago, every school I had attended was located east of the highway. A gaze that was born on the east side of Austin and longingly traveled west informs everything that I have lived, breathed, and seen. My siblings and I often rode the bus with my mother and headed to any destination that allowed us to escape across the highway. Sometimes a final destination did not exist; the only goal my mother had was to get her children out of the house and provide us with a change of scenery while my father worked at one of the two jobs that made him a stranger in our home. Now that I am older I realize that my mother's actions were courageous and provided my first lessons in bravery. In venturing outside of the home she knowingly exposed herself to condescending looks and ridicule for being *una* working-class *inmigrante* with brown skin who did not speak English.

School field trips also largely consisted of being westward bound. Although the world felt a little bit brighter and happier every time we crossed the highway and embarked on a new adventure, I could not help but feel my surroundings were inferior once I returned home, and that by extension I was also inferior. West of the highway the streets looked cleaner, the schools were nicer, there were few abandoned buildings, the stores were larger, people marched ahead confidently and with a sense of purpose, the

houses were well-kept and almost majestic, and the spirit and energy of those spaces felt much more vibrant. I safeguarded those images inside and conjured up this “American Dream” whenever I daydreamed about the life I would lead and how I would support my parents financially once I completed my education and became *una profesional*.

On occasion, acknowledging that I lived in East Austin left a sour taste in my mouth and a redness in my cheeks that was slow to fade. When I attended magnet schools located on the East side with white, middle-class students during junior high and high school, they confirmed my suspicions when they described things as “ghetto” and in a manner that ridiculed its people and dismissed the wealth of knowledge residents possessed. I refused to listen to rap or hip-hop and instead favored alternative and grunge music not only so that I would have something in common with my classmates, but also to distance myself from anything that would categorize me as ghetto. I always became embarrassed and refused to speak in Spanish when my peers learned that I was bilingual and asked me to say things in Spanish. It pains me to admit that for many years I felt ashamed of my parents for their humble appearance and tenuous grasp of English. I recognized that shame in my brother when he ignored our parents in public and refused to get into the family car until my parents had parked far away from his school and his friends’ peering eyes. The hurt we inflicted upon them and the tears my mother cried still haunt me.

Thus from an early age I intuited that East Austin was the dumping ground for all things undesirable, namely people of color. Our schools were inferior because the needs of the poor, the working class, people of color, and linguistically diverse children were

not a priority. East Austin was a victim that repeatedly turned the other cheek and took blows not out of moral superiority, but out of helplessness and hopelessness. Through my experiences and observations I learned that East Austin and its people were objects, and never subjects, that were acted upon and suffered at the hands of injustice. My schooling made me ignorant of the rich history of community activism and resistance of individuals who challenged the injustices that left a mark on my community's landscape and spirit. Rather than care for me as a human being, the schools I attended viewed me as a future member of the work force who was "worthy" of increased attention from teachers and the school administration because I scored high on tests that measured how well I had memorized and assimilated the knowledge and norms of the dominant culture. Had it not been for People Organized in the Defense of Earth and her Resources (PODER), a grassroots community-based organization that focuses on economic and environmental justice in East Austin, my attitude towards East Austin and myself might continue to be one of disappointment and shame.

Although I am now able to appreciate and take pride in the beauty of my community and its resilience because I acquired a critical historical memory of Austin, there is no denying that the residents of East Austin have much to be angry and embittered about. East Austin's communities of color haven been neglected and underserved since the area was first designated a "Negro district" in 1928 (Humphrey, 1997; Policy Research Project, 2007). Within the past two decades the relentless community activism of East Austin residents and organizations like PODER led to changes that addressed some of the long-standing effects of institutionalized racism that

persisted long after the Civil Rights Movement and the Chicano Movement. As the environmental health and the infrastructure improved in East Austin the area became more “livable” to artists, young professionals, and businesses that also began to appreciate East Austin’s proximity to downtown. The landscape soon rapidly changed as white and middle-class residents moved into neighborhoods and injected money into projects, homes, and businesses and thereby created greater interest in East Austin that attracted even more white and middle-class residents (Policy Research Project, 2007).

As the property values continue climbing steadily, native and long-time residents of these once highly segregated working-class communities are being pushed out of homes they can no longer afford. Tax-delinquent properties and tax foreclosures are over-represented in East Austin and residents constantly worry about how they will scrounge up the money to stay in their homes (Policy Research Project, 2007). When driving around East Austin it is common to see “for sale” signs posted in yards as well as signs informing community members that “We Buy Ugly Homes!” The message is clear: give us your poor, tired, and ugly homes and we will flip them for a profit. Census numbers for 2010 show that during the past decade the Black and Latin@ populations fell by 27 percent and 9.3 percent respectively while the white population ballooned by a startling 40 percent in central East Austin (Castillo, 2011). It seems that young, single, well-educated, and more affluent residents are replacing community members whose families have deep roots in East Austin (Castillo, 2011; Policy Research Project, 2007).

For the children who are growing up in this environment, a historical silence makes it difficult if not impossible to make sense of their present-day conditions and the

changes they are witnessing. Like most school districts, the Austin Independent School District (AISD) sees its goal as “[preparing] our students for a future of jobs that may not yet exist, using technologies that haven't been invented, in order to solve problems that we may not yet even know about” (2011 annual report main site). For the students of color who are mis- and under-educated in AISD, as well as those who are criminalized and pushed into the school-to-prison pipeline, AISD’s words come across as false and hypocritical. In this equation there is also no mention of preparing children to make sense of the present day by learning from the past in order to create an empowering and just future. With the focus on the child as a future worker, the value and importance of a historical memory falls by the wayside.

When students do not meet their school’s standards, the institutional gaze is fixed disapprovingly on the child and the family. The history of segregation and institutionalized oppression that led to a legacy of inadequate schooling and a poor quality of life for communities of color in East Austin is erased. In this context, East Austin’s “facelift” is regarded positively and as proof that “progress” could only come to East Austin if white and middle-class residents brought it with them. Communities of color are viewed as too “uncivilized” and “backwards” to know and begin to articulate their needs and how to address their needs. In the end, what messages do these changes send to the youth of color growing up in East Austin? How does one make sense of progress and “improvements” in your community after a history of neglect, especially when these changes come only after a greater number of white residents begin to populate your neighborhoods? How does one make sense of schooling that ignores the

conditions in your community and either praises you for memorizing and assimilating the knowledge and norms of the dominant culture, or criminalizes you and pushes you into the school-to-prison pipeline when you do not?

As a result of my participation with PODER's Young Scholars for Justice program, I acquired a historical *conocimiento* of East Austin that allowed me to see my surroundings with new eyes and begin to address the aforementioned questions. My personal experiences with PODER consequently nurtured a desire to examine how their Young Scholars for Justice program creates a space that nurtures the development of a critical consciousness that allows the youth to begin making sense of their community and transition from objects to subjects. The youth who participate in the program are deliberately positioned as historical actors in their community who are capable of envisioning and creating a more just society based on principles of love and respect for all forms of life. This positioning could have powerful implications for youth of color given that our experiences, especially in school, frequently leave us feeling and believing that we are powerless, deficient, and unequipped to participate in the public life of our community. Programs that value and nurture youth of color as human beings, help them articulate their experiences with oppression and connect those experiences to a structural analysis of inequality, and encourage them to act upon injustices have key insights to offer with respect to the philosophical underpinnings of education that schools should strive for. With that in mind, I sought to address the following questions:

- What elements of the YSJ program lead the participants to develop a greater awareness of their community?

- How does the participants' consciousness change after participating in the YSJ program?

Framework

One of the basic questions that we need to look at is how to convert merely rebellious attitudes into revolutionary ones in the process of the radical transformation of society. Merely rebellious attitudes or actions are insufficient, though they are an indispensable response to legitimate anger. It is necessary to go beyond rebellious attitudes to a more radically critical and revolutionary position, which is in fact a position not simply of denouncing injustice but of announcing a new utopia. Transformation of the world implies a dialectic between the two actions: denouncing the process of dehumanization and announcing the dream of a new society. (Freire, 1998, p. 74)

Elements of critical pedagogy, youth activism, and the influence of a Chicana feminist epistemology are the signposts on the theoretical roadmap that contextualizes the study of PODER's Young Scholars for Justice program. Critical pedagogy is regularly described as a practice that assists members of marginalized groups in naming their world. Praxis, or action informed by reflection, is an outcome of critical pedagogical practices and leads to a more complex understanding of the dialectical relationship between one's role as object and subject in society (Darder, 1991; Freire, 1970/2000, 1998). The influence on youth of active engagement in their communities has lasting effects that lead to an increased sense of agency and a greater likelihood of political participation over the years (Levine, 2007; Yates & Youniss, 1998).

PODER staff members' positioning as Chican@ feminists influenced the critical pedagogy of the YSJ program, which is characterized by unique forms of youth activism and youth participatory action research that nurture marginalized youth of color to acquire an identity as historical actors in their community. PODER's feminist, culturally rooted approach values *educación* and appears to facilitate the beginning of what Gloria Anzaldúa (2002) described as "spiritual activism." Threading all of these pieces together

is a recognition that women of color lie at the painful intersection of different forms of oppression that weigh heavily on our bodies, minds, and souls. By attacking the multiply pronged dagger that seeks to damage and kill our spirits we are better able to strengthen our voices and fight for our humanity as we practice wounded healing. Teaching our children to struggle and protect themselves and each other is the only way to ensure our physical, spiritual, emotional, and psychological survival.

CRITICAL PEDAGOGY: EXCAVATING THE ROOTS OF OPPRESSION

Critical thinking and questioning are largely absent from the curriculum in public schools and there is a constant struggle to include them as imperative elements of schooling. The lack of critical thinking and the one-sided history that most schools offer lead children to accept the information presented as fact and in doing so fail to have an accurate, historical view of society on a local, national and global level. In May 2010, conservative members of the State Board of Education in Texas waged a vicious battle against the state's Social Studies curriculum. Their reasoning? The notion of American exceptionalism was not emphasized nearly enough, they perceived that the curriculum contained unfavorable views about Western institutions and the military, and there was mention of U.S. imperialism and U.S. propaganda.

This "selective tradition" has far-reaching effects beyond Social Studies and the school (Apple, 2003) and leads to a domestication of the hearts and minds of students (Freire, 1998). The unquestioning students of today will eventually turn into the obedient adults of tomorrow who blindly support the world that is presented without ever demanding something better, something just, from themselves and from each other. Even

the students who do question and resist the injustice that is presented as fact face a behemoth that is impossible to confront in an environment that is isolating and alienating for youth of color in particular. Developing a structural analysis of injustice and inequality through critical pedagogy can help youth reinterpret their perception of the world and their place in the world, both of which have been blurred and distorted by the hegemony in schools and society.

Banking On A Cultural Invasion: The Effects Of Hegemony On Students of Color

Freire (1998) aptly and powerfully characterized traditional education, which employs a “banking” concept, as an instrument of oppression and a “deformation of the creativity of both learners and teachers” (p. 32). In the banking concept of education there is a one-way flow of information in which the all-knowing teacher “fills” students with information that is decontextualized and devoid of meaning and relevance to the students. The “narrative character” of education silences students and leads to the rote memorization that is prevalent in our schools today as the teacher engages in a monologue. The knowledge students store as deposits was deemed “worthwhile” and “valuable” by someone else and to receive this knowledge is treated as an act of benevolence on the part of the teachers to the students.

Students who were once “blank slates” and regarded as ignorant are now seen to possess valuable information. This approach to education treats students as receptacles and obscures the cloud of hegemony that protects the interests of the elite (Freire, 1970/2000), who use their power to decide and impose what is taught as “official knowledge” in schools (Apple, 2004). In the name of official knowledge students are

conditioned to be passive, accept and not question, thereby promoting blind obedience and decreasing the probability that students will start demanding, “Why? Why should I learn this? What purpose does it serve? Whose purpose does it serve? What about my interests and experiences?” (Apple, 2004). Many of the students who do resist this stultifying indoctrination are pushed out of schools and/or become fodder for the school-to-prison pipeline that criminalizes children and devours the souls of so many of our youth (Giroux, 2010; Skiba & Knesting, 2001; Valenzuela, 1999).

The banking approach to education also obscures reality by presenting information and issues of inequality uncritically. Freire (1970/2000) notes that this weapon is used in tandem with a “paternalistic social action apparatus” which blames victims for their problems. Theories of cultural deficiency function under the aforementioned framework and place the onus for a lack of academic achievement on students of color and their families (Darder, 1991). Students are told both directly and indirectly that individual characteristics, and not institutional or systemic forces, are the root cause of any “failures” or difficulties they experience in schools. If students of color internalize this message, they may believe that they are to blame and give up or strive to adopt the mainstream, white, middle-class norms prevalent across our institutions in order to become “good students” and “good members of society” (Darder, 1991; Valenzuela, 1999).

A teacher who subscribes to a banking method approach to education views teaching as transference of knowledge. Pre-selected topics are not explored in depth, but rather merely glossed over and in so doing students are denied the opportunity to develop

their “epistemological curiosity”. Students become stuck in a stage of “ingenuous curiosity” that is not self-critical, brave, or audacious and is marked by a lack of questioning and honest reflection. The teacher does not believe they can learn anything of value from students and therefore students’ experiences in no way shape what occurs in the classroom. The pre-selected topics addressed are perceived to be neutral and “the truth” by the teacher and the teacher also believes that their own actions are neutral and do not reflect any conditioning. Perhaps at the heart of the banking method is a dehumanizing lack of respect for students. Students are treated as robots, their knowledge is not valued, and the discrimination they have experienced is ignored; in effect, teachers act as agents of oppression (Freire, 1998). Exerting an increasing amount of control over students makes it easier to view them as objects to be disciplined as opposed to human beings to be cared for and nurtured.

A debilitating outcome of the teacher-student relationship within the banking concept of education is thus the gradual evisceration of the inherent curiosity that all children possess and which leads to a certain spiritual death so long as students are not encouraged to question. Some students adopt the belief that they have no control over their lives, they do not know anything unless someone deposits information in them, they should not challenge what is presented as fact, and that they have no power to intervene in the world (Freire, 1970/2000). Even students who do not belong to historically marginalized groups lose their love of learning and replace the natural joy of discovery with a hunger for knowledge for power, not knowledge as power. Freire (1970/2000)

summarizes: “banking theory and practice, as immobilizing and fixating forces, fail to acknowledge [humans] as historical beings” (p. 84).

This nation’s traditional form of education thus has especially pernicious effects on students of color and language minority students. For the most part, these students’ voices are stifled both figuratively and literally: schools ignore students’ needs as well as rip out and denigrate the very language that shapes their identity, their bonds with family, and helps them make sense of the world. To truly listen to students’ voices would involve a willingness to admit that the students’ experiences are valid, that their thoughts count, and that their voices can attest to the continued spirit-crushing effects of white supremacy in our institutions, beliefs, and norms. In schools this is reflected in the hidden curriculum and what is considered official knowledge. The emphasis of the hidden curriculum on “consensus, social conformity, and stability....permits the perpetuation of the dominant culture” (Darder, 1991, p. 20), which is white and middle-class. The values and beliefs underlying the hidden curriculum reflect those of the elites and are so deeply embedded in the ways schools function that they are imposed on all students, ultimately favoring students from the dominant culture whose values and beliefs are naturalized (Apple, 2004; McLaren, 1998).

Learning the history of the nation, and the world, from a Eurocentric perspective denies the importance of people of color and their roles as historical actors. The textbooks, films, literary materials, and other curricular artifacts contain a biased perspective that elevate the experiences of the dominant culture and situate them as “normal” (Lynn & Parker, 2006; Nieto, 1992; Smith, 1999). As Jim Cummins noted,

“the cultures, knowledge, and values of groups that have been historically subordinated by the dominant group are notably absent from the list of “facts” that the “culturally literate” Americans need to know” (Nieto, 1992, p. xvii). Nieto (1992) elaborates:

Given the vast array of knowledge available, only a tiny fraction of it finds its way into textbooks and teachers’ guides. Decisions about what is most important for students to learn are generally made by those furthest from the lives of students. These decisions let students know whether the knowledge they or their communities value is accorded prestige within the formal curriculum. (p. 74)

Accordingly, the traditional form of education is akin to a cultural assault and “cultural invasion” (Freire, 1970/2000) for students of color and language minority students because it strives to deposit the values, beliefs, standards, and conceptions of legitimate knowledge from a patriarchal, hierarchical, and white supremacist perspective. If students internalize those messages, it can have a detrimental effect on their self-esteem, identity, sense of empowerment, and agency (Anzaldúa, 1987; Lynn & Parker, 2006; Nieto, 1992; Smith, 1999).

When students internalize the negative perceptions the dominant culture holds of them, students fail to believe in the value of their voice and worth as human beings and in effect become disempowered. Silencing students of color and language minority students enables others to view them in a detached, uncompassionate manner. The fear, pain, heartache, disillusionment, hopelessness, and anger their stories would communicate would turn them into flesh and bone, living beings with a right to a truly human existence and happiness. Ending the silencing of students’ voices is a requirement to the development of dialogue, and it is only through dialogue that students will become

critical thinkers who name their world and feel empowered enough to see themselves as historical actors who are capable of intervening in the world (Freire 1970/2000).

A Problem-Posing Education: Love, Healing, and Revolution

While a banking concept of education has long infected classrooms across the nation, Freire (1970/2000, 1998) underscores that there is room for a positive and transformative resistance. Our innate desire to be fully human compels us to struggle and rip off the veil of oppression. The first step in re-imagining education begins with reconceptualizing the relationship between the students and the teacher. The role that teachers perceive themselves to have in a classroom will determine the manner in which they view their students and thus the roles students are encouraged to play (Freire, 1970/2000, 1998). The banking method prefers the “transfer of knowledge” from teacher to student that prohibits the development of a critical epistemological curiosity. In order to embark on the journey toward humanization and “authentic liberation,” the students and the teacher must act in partnership. This voyage can only happen when the teacher realizes that “whoever teaches learns in the act of teaching, and whoever learns teaches in the act of learning” (Freire, 1998, p. 31). In light of this realization, the classroom must have a “teacher-student” with “students-teachers” (Freire, 1970/2000). The presence of a teacher-student with students-teachers allows for a community of learners to sprout and blossom together as they construct and re-construct knowledge.

Such a partnership between individuals illustrates the respect a teacher must have for students as human beings. When the teacher respects what students know, the teacher acknowledges the significance of students’ experiences by making them the foundation

of what is discussed and learned. Teachers must also demonstrate a respect for the autonomy of the students. When a student's autonomy is disregarded, they are turned into nothing more than robots that lack the capacity to articulate thoughts, questions, and feelings. The classroom must be a safe space where students feel free and comfortable to take risks as they construct knowledge. A respect for students accordingly implies a willingness and eagerness to listen to them and engage in dialogue because they have something important to contribute. Once a climate that promotes dialogue is nurtured, the teacher-student and the students-teachers can begin to problematize the "reality" they know and question its nature and veracity (Freire, 1970/2000, 1998).

As Freire (1970/2000, 1998) repeatedly emphasizes, dialogue is a powerful tool with the potential to help people realize their purpose: their ontological vocation to be human and intervene in the world. An openness to dialogue implies an awareness of one's "unfinishedness" as well as their curiosity, which are essential characteristics of the teacher-student. By opening yourself to dialogue and helping others do the same, you admit that there is a lot you do not know, you allow yourself to interrupt your assumptions, identify contradictions in the world, and thus develop an awareness of the injustices perpetrated against you and other human beings, including ways in which your conditioning caused you to act as an oppressor. It is through this dialogue that students can begin the act of naming the world. "Once named, the world in its turn reappears to the namers as a problem and requires of them a new *naming*. Human beings are not built in silence, but in word, in work, in action-reflection" (Freire, 1970/2000, p. 88). Encouraging students to re-examine the world they live in through dialogue and

reflection leads to conscientization, a “critical awareness” of the root causes of structural inequality and oppression (Freire, 1970/2000, 1998).

Problem-posing education is a form of intervention in the world that can lead to unmasking the hegemonic ideology of the dominant culture. Instead of viewing the world as a static place in which there is no possibility or hope for change, students begin to question and learn why the world exists in its present state and in so doing begin to imagine how it can be different (Freire, 1970/2000, 1998). As Freire (1970/2000) clarifies, “the task of the dialogical teacher...is to “re-present” that universe to the people from whom she or he first received it – and “re-present” it not as a lecture, but as a problem” (p. 109). Interrupting students’ construction of their world by challenging their assumptions and how they acquired those assumptions permits the particular ideologies underlying naturalized beliefs, practices, and institutions to break through to the surface. Once those ideologies have emerged, students will be better able to comprehend how our governing institutions reflect the interests of the elites and therefore work to their benefit. As the world is uncovered students-teachers can begin to insert themselves into the world’s stage with the guidance of teachers-students.

To Freire (1970/2000), conscientization is a painful childbirth in that the human who emerges is “no longer oppressor nor longer oppressed, but human in the process of achieving freedom” (p. 49). The path of conscientization is one we must take if we are to truly know the world and discover our place in the universe. Most importantly, conscientization rejects the soul-emptying cultural invasion that results from the banking concept of education. A critical awareness of our surroundings and of ourselves as

human beings awakens our mind, spirit, and heart as we work in solidarity with others who also struggle for justice. We must acknowledge our wounds of oppression and open our ears to others' shouts of pain. By tending to our wounds and realizing the extent of our conditioning, we can begin the healing process that will make us stronger and more prepared to stand up for each other and ourselves as we challenge the many masks of oppression.

Some critics disparage critical theory and critical pedagogy for a perceived inability to invoke a sense of hope. Viewing the world from a critical lens purportedly leads to a lack of faith and trust in everything and everyone and a worldview that is grim and pessimistic. On the contrary, critical pedagogy can be at the heart of revolution and love is at the heart of critical pedagogy. What is grim and pessimistic about love? Engaging in dialogue will allow for the process of wounded healing to occur, thereby facilitating an acceptance of our unfinishedness while driving our ontological vocation to be human. A critical lens permits us to see the systems of oppression that wound us as well as the existing spaces for healing and resistance. Thus, education and teaching for social justice should be about “[teaching] so that the young may be awakened to the joy of working for transformation in the smallest places, so that they may become healers and change their worlds” (Greene, 1998, p. xlv). There is no formula and there are no rules to follow in critical pedagogy, there is only a constant renegotiation of spaces and situations into sites of healing and questioning where risk-taking is encouraged.

YOUTH ACTIVISM AND RESEARCH AS A TRANSFORMATIVE PROCESS

Youth of color are routinely regarded as objects to be acted upon and “fixed” in light of their “cultural deficiencies,” which are allegedly to blame for students’ failure to survive and thrive within existing structures and institutions. In schools and in society, youth are deemed to be ill equipped and/or incapable of participating in decision-making processes. Within these settings, (white) adults hold the power in relationships and ultimately decide what is “best” for youth; they decide the official knowledge that is worth knowing as well as how, or even if, youth should participate. Youth activism that utilizes youth participatory action research (YPAR) to promote social change is a powerful way to challenge the dominant discourse that seeks to dictate what youth of color in particular can and cannot do. Rather than remain tucked away backstage, the experiences of youth take center stage and inform both research and community organizing efforts while imparting the knowledge and the skills that youth need to effect and sustain change in their community.

Community service and youth programs have the potential to create critical pedagogical environments that help youth begin to actively interrogate the root causes of inequity and become cognizant of their agency. Studies suggest that people who engage in community service and participate in youth programs at an early age are more likely to demonstrate continued civic engagement in adulthood and that such participation shapes their sense of identity (Yates & Youniss, 1998). However, sustained community service alone will not foster a “critical civic engagement” that helps youth name their world and see beyond the symptoms of structural inequality that most community service programs

address (Kirshner, 2007; Yates & Youniss, 1998). Programs that promote a greater awareness and understanding of society also seem to provide the first step for youth to become more active in their communities and address the injustices they experience and witness (Akom, Cammarota, & Ginwright, 2008; Ginwright, 2010).

Studies show that when youth have the opportunity and skills to challenge social problems, they recognize their power as individuals to improve their community and develop a sense of responsibility to enact social change (Delgado & Staples, 2008; Gordon, 2010; Guajardo & Guajardo, 2008). Throughout this process the guidance and support of adults and other youth is crucial in order for individual youth to begin making connections between the different causes and forms of oppression in their lives and those experienced by others (Akom et al., 2008; Gordon, 2010; Kwon, 2008; O'Donoghue & Strobel, 2007). Being involved in community and political activities is also beneficial for youth in that it fosters a greater sense of optimism, self-esteem, and social support than youth who are not similarly involved (Pancer et al., 2007). These positive outcomes are especially important for marginalized youth, such as youth of color, whose experiences with discrimination in and out of school can lead them to feel apathetic and disempowered. This kind of community involvement often represents the first time youth have felt their voices mattered and that they were capable of doing something beneficial for their community. Having a space in which youth feel free to vent and act on the problems that plague their community can subsequently lead to a sense of empowerment and hope (Akom et al., 2008; Borden & Serido, 2009; Delgado & Staples, 2008; Gordon, 2010; Kwon, 2008).

In a climate in which schools seem to be more preoccupied with doling out discipline and domestication rather than serving as avenues for liberation and civic participation, community-based organizations (CBOs) and settings that position youth as leaders and agents of change are promising sites for education and youth activism. Asian and Pacific Islander Youth Promoting Advocacy and Leadership (AYPAL) is one CBO based in Oakland, CA that prides itself in being youth-led. Through the support of mentors “AYPAL fosters, trains, and supports young people’s efforts to move from complaints to action by equipping them with knowledge and community-organizing principles and strategies to enact those principles” (Kwon, 2008, p. 61). A collective recognition and analysis of the structural causes of inequality, or conscientization, leads youth to an awareness that they do not have to struggle against injustice alone. A “panethnic youth of color identity” strengthened these youth organizers’ efforts as they engaged in workshops, cultural art classes, and rallies, among other activities (Kwon, 2006).

In AYPAL adult allies also reinforce the notion of collective action and support by acting as mentors who build participants’ self-esteem and leadership skills. AYPAL adult staff members reflect the cultural backgrounds of the youth, which allowed the organization to offer a safe, culturally affirming space for these youth of color who were routinely targeted and criminalized in the public arena. Dialogue and networks of support offered the scaffolding that the youth needed to wage campaigns on issues such as unfair school policies and instituting an ethnic studies curriculum in area high schools. For these youth, collective organizing as a physical act nurtured a political agency;

through collective action the youth gained a greater sense of power as they developed a critical analysis of inequality. In doing so, the youth transformed the complaints that arose from lived experiences with injustice into well-defined structural critiques that fueled and informed their roles as political actors (Kwon, 2006, 2008).

Through a process of “radical healing,” Ginwright (2010) and members of another Oakland-based CBO called Leadership Excellence (LE) built caring relationships with youth that affirmed their cultural identity and nurtured a political awareness of their community. Ginwright (2010) argues that healing and hope have a significant political importance for black youth in urban America who must contend with internalized oppression, criminalization, and violence both in and out of school. Transforming blackness into a rich cultural reserve from which youth could draw courage, inspiration, and self-love was paramount in this process, as many of the youth had internalized the white supremacist discourse about the inherent value of the black community. Weaving together “issues of power, history, self-identity, and the possibility of collective agency and struggle, radical healing rebuilds communities, to foster hope and political possibilities for young people” (Ginwright, 2010, p. 12).

LE consciously provided youth with opportunities to make their voices heard and valued in their community in order to encourage both youth and the public to view youth as legitimate political actors. As LE challenged youth to participate in a public arena, youth began to meet that challenge and LE’s expectations; in time, the youth demanded more from themselves as agents of change. LE also nurtured a sense of unity and a collective identity by encouraging dialogue between youth in order to identify the forms

of oppression and injustices they each experienced. LE's practices evidence the importance of dialogue that Freire (1970/2000) emphasized: the process of conscientization was an essential component of radical healing and participants' mobilization against injustices. As the youth saw themselves as political actors, they started to believe that their actions were contributions to their community and that they could have a lasting positive impact (Ginwright, 2010).

Gordon (2010) powerfully contributes to the conversation on youth activism in her comparative study of young people's social movement activism in Oakland and Portland. Gordon contends that ageism as an axis of oppression must be included in the discussion on youth political participation in order to acquire a more profound understanding of their engagement or lack thereof. Furthermore, she uses the multiracial feminist notion of intersectionality to illustrate how gender, race, and class impact participants' engagement within youth movements. Students Rise Up (SRU), based in Portland, was comprised of white, middle-class youth who prided themselves in being a youth-only movement. Oakland's Youth Power (YP), on the other hand, consisted of poor and working-class youth of color who recognized the importance of having adult allies in order to strengthen their efforts and build a long-term vision for social justice. Both groups were successful in orchestrating campaigns and creating a youth-led space, but in the end YP's organizing structure and the resulting perspectives, conversations, and issues that emerged and that they addressed allowed them to sustain their efforts whereas SRU eventually disbanded.

Youth are routinely constructed as “citizens-in-the-making” thereby delegitimizing their potential political participation and severing opportunities for civic engagement until they assume their role as “official” adults (Gordon, 2010). In looking at the intersection of race, class, and gender, Gordon also notes that while white, middle-class youth are typically depicted as being in need of protection, poor and working-class youth of color (males in particular) are depicted as threats. The youth in the study actively resisted this “adult gaze” that infantilized or criminalized them, showcasing youth agency in the face of apathy, internalized hopelessness, and “processes by which adolescents are actually *diverted* from political action and are socially constructed as nonpolitical beings” (Gordon, 2010, p. 10). Active participation proved to be more difficult for females in general and females of color more specifically due to parental worry, mobility, and the privileging of the male voice in both youth movements. However, YP adult allies’ recognition of ageism as oppression and the subordination of women of color led to ongoing conversations about how to interrupt those practices in YP. Having an adult presence in YP activities also facilitated girls’ participation in that it provided assurance to parents about their children’s safety.

While SRU activists generally focused on political action, YP activists emphasized political action and political transformation of the self and the larger community in order to combat deep-seated hopelessness and cynicism and advance their long-term goals. YP youth politicized everything in their lives from family relationships to academic achievement as they acquired a structural understanding of present-day conditions in their community. In having an intergenerational structure, the youth did not

“age out” of YP in the way that SRU activists were eventually forced to and could therefore build a movement. Most significantly, YP adult allies helped the youth acquire a historical and culturally rooted memory of resistance. In doing so, YP youth could hear the shouts of a centuries-old struggle and perceived their efforts as a continuation of that legacy of activism and resistance. In the end, Youth Power adult allies offered “organizing tools, political action frameworks, material resources, and alternative political educations” (Gordon, 2010, p. 210) that nurtured a more cohesive movement with longevity that Students Rise Up was not similarly able to benefit from.

Given the positive benefits associated with early and ongoing civic engagement for youth it is imperative to provide avenues in which youth can participate starting at an early age. While youth are capable of mobilizing themselves, it is important to acknowledge the ways in which adult allies can facilitate access to information and tools, particularly because youth are not viewed as an essential component of civic life in raced, classed, and gendered ways. Youth not only gain a sense of empowerment and agency through political action, they also develop valuable life-long skills in areas such as public speaking and community organizing. Furthermore, as the case studies of Asian and Pacific Islander Youth Promoting Advocacy and Leadership, Leadership Excellence, and Youth Power demonstrate, youth organizing efforts that are nourished by a historical and cultural memory of community struggle are uniquely powerful in their capacity to create transformative spaces and sites of healing. Healing and transformation are necessary steps toward self-actualization and a just, loving way of being in the world with others.

The stories of AYPAL and LE are also a testament to the power of youth participatory action research (YPAR), which strategically mobilizes youth to address issues present in their community through critical inquiry. YPAR is rooted in critical pedagogical approaches that:

...[represent] a systematic approach for engaging young people in transformational resistance, educational praxis, and critical epistemologies. By attaining knowledge for resistance and transformation, young people create their own sense of efficacy in the world and address the social conditions that impede liberation and positive, healthy development. Learning to act upon and address oppressive social conditions leads to the acknowledgment of one's ability to reshape the context of one's life and thus determine a proactive and empowered sense of self. (Cammarota & Fine, 2008, p. 9-10)

YPAR is thus a form of critical pedagogy that enables youth to name their world in order to transform it by interrogating their experiences. Shor (1992) wisely stated that “literacy and awareness by themselves do not change oppressive conditions in school and society. Knowledge is power only for those who can use it to change their conditions” (p. 6). YPAR offers concrete ways for youth to act upon the knowledge they acquire by collaborating with community elders, teachers, researchers, policy makers, and other adults who can scaffold the efforts of the youth (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Rodríguez & Brown, 2009). This form of intergenerational support is highly valuable for youth of color who have been denied access to the skills required to succeed academically and change the prevalent discourse about their community. However, as Ginwright (2008, 2010) argues, this research should also nurture a “critical radical imagination” that allows youth to practice democratic problem solving and work towards a new way of being in the world.

Spaces that encourage a radical re-imagining of society push youth to explore their existing understanding of reality and creatively work toward a vision of justice that they constantly renegotiate. Breaking free from the hegemony that denies the possibility of horizontal, non-exploitative relationships and a meaningful existence is life-altering for poor and working-class youth of color who are routinely dehumanized, criminalized, and discarded. Environments that affirm the cultural identity of youth thus allow them to develop a greater sense of self-worth and self-love and draw strength from the very thing that schools and society largely regard as a deficit and a threat to the status quo and therefore attempt to obliterate from their souls and consciousness. A culturally rooted intergenerational approach to youth organizing that combines political action and healing from the wounds of oppression has great potential to strengthen social movements by creating an ongoing cycle of individual and community healing as youth breathe new life into the struggle for justice.

A CHICANA FEMINIST APPROACH TO YOUTH POLITICAL

PARTICIPATION: MUJERES LUCHADORAS HACIENDO PUENTES

An understanding of the knowledge and worldviews of Chicanas/Latinas is the last signpost along this winding path that offers deeper insight into the unique dimensions of culturally affirming and empowering spaces for youth political participation. As previous scholars have skillfully addressed, a Chicana/multiracial feminist lens emphasizes the ways in which multiple axes of oppression – race, class, gender, sexual orientation – intersect to constrain and shape the minds, bodies, souls, and dreams of women of color (Anzaldúa, 1980; Castillo, 1994; hooks, 1994; Rincón, 1997). These

crossings not only create deep wounds and lead to great loss, they can also awaken a ravenous hunger for justice and a steadfast determination to survive in the face of oppression. Our mothers and caretakers serve as strong role models in how we see the world, how we react to injustice, how we see ourselves, and how we see ourselves as actors in a world in which injustice is normalized. Their lessons in resistance give birth to *mujeres luchadoras*.

Women's common gendered role as caretakers sensitize us to how the health of the environment and of the children in our families and communities are connected and are therefore the driving forces behind our other role as *luchadoras*. If our struggles are to continue our children and future generations must be able to live in an environment that is safe and nurturing and where our needs are met in order to be happy, healthy, and whole human beings. However, Chicanas' typical social location among the poor and working class in the U.S. practically ensures that our families will live in segregated neighborhoods with crime, violence, environmental hazards, and poor schools, among other social ills. Within these demoralizing conditions the importance of the intergenerational support of family and friends becomes all the more critical and can serve as a buffer to hopelessness and despair. As our mothers and other caretakers work long hours in low-paying jobs that keep them away from their family, exploit them, and dehumanize them, their determination strengthens and when we are reunited they pass along nuggets of wisdom as a form of resistance that allow us to see the world more clearly from under the veil. And as they kiss us goodnight, they whisper in our ears that our cinnamon-colored skin is beautiful, that the languages/dialects/accents with which we

speak are a tool to connect to more people, and that as human beings we are treasures to be valued.

The embodied experiences that generate a Chicana feminist epistemology are useful in discussing Chicanas' leadership and resistance to oppression. As noted, Chicanas have historically been simultaneously responsible for child rearing and joining the paid labor force in order to make ends meet. Although our culture is a source of strength, it has also been turned against us and used as a tool for subordination, denigration, and control within and outside of our own communities (Anzaldúa, 1987; Neimann, 2002; Vasquez, 1997). We are typically viewed as ignorant, inferior, and less than human depending on how dark our skin and eye color are. The fortitude that is required to survive as a Chicana in a patriarchal, capitalist, and white supremacist society is often overlooked as well as the ways in which Chicanas refuse to be victimized (Castillo, 1994; Rincón, 1997). Despite all odds, Chicanas continue stoking the embers of the fire of resistance that lie within us, “[spurring us] to fight for [our] own skin and a piece of ground to stand on...a perspective, a homeground where [we] can plumb the rich ancestral roots into [our] own ample *mestiza* heart” (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 23).

Ana Castillo (1994) posits that the seeds of activism are present, but perhaps dormant, in Chicanas due to our lived experiences with multiple forms of oppression:

...a woman without conscientización nevertheless perceives certain societal discrimination directed *at her*. With conscientización, she begins a deliberate process of questioning this discrimination, but she may not yet know how to grapple with its effects. With deliberate orientation toward conscientización – which may come by way of higher education, the unusual experience of some social/political catalyst...or through a personal deliberate effort to seek help from

other women – she may find she has no recourse but to finally take radical action.
(p. 46-47)

Growing up we see our mothers and other relatives and women of color struggle to survive on a daily basis. Soon we begin to live that same struggle in the flesh as we get older and grasp tightly to our humanity while schools and society both sweetly and viciously try to strip it from us. While some Chicanas are more easily able to use those battles as a catalyst for action, there are many other Chicanas who internalize the insidious effects of oppression and subsequently become depressed, hopeless, and cynical about the possibility of a happier and more human existence. Sometimes the “pedagogies of the home” (Villenas, 2006) and nuggets of wisdom and love our mothers pass along to us are not enough to counter the obliterating forces of oppression that assault us from multiple directions. As Castillo (1994) argues, however, through deliberate acts it is possible to expunge the immobilizing hopelessness and self-blame festering within. By exploring our mothers’ experiences as well as those that caused individual and community-wide trauma, we can begin to heal from those wounds and attack the causes of that pain. Our familiar role as caretakers then compels us to care for the younger generations so that they may be more resilient than we were and so that their wounds may not run as deep.

When we awaken the embers of the fire burning within, a new consciousness emerges that cries for healing and for the strength of our mothers and their mothers. The “mestiza consciousness” that Anzaldúa (1987) articulated beautifully captures the psychological armor and survival mechanisms Chicanas and other women of color

develop in order to maintain our balance on hostile and uncertain grounds. This Borderlands consciousness is ardently fought for as it represents a space that exists “beyond survival,” brimming with “creativity, agency, movement, and coalition building” (Villenas, Godinez, Bernal, & Elenes, 2006, p. 5). In this space we closely examine the roots of our self-hatred so that we may replace it with self-love. The parts of our self that may have once caused us shame become a source of pride and strength. The Chicana embarks on this journey of healing because she knows that a better world is possible where she can thrive and not merely survive; however, it can only be accomplished when she is whole and at peace with herself. Once she nears a peaceful and loving state she is able to extend her hand and help others build the struggle for justice.

As we journey deep within ourselves and tend to the wounds of oppression that long separated our body, mind, and spirit, an empowering spirituality emerges. It is not corralled and controlled by the same kind of organized religion that punishes the feminine. It does not come from outside of our bodies and demand that we worship a Holy Trinity nor demand blind obedience. This spirituality emanates from our newly acquired historical consciousness that connects us to the struggles of our ancestors and those of other communities in resistance. We are able to travel psychologically and spiritually as we summon their courage and resilience and access their once-suppressed histories in the present day to use them as a source of inspiration for the future. We unite their fortitude and the strength we learned from our mothers to create a way of being in the world and with the world that speaks of love, compassion, indignation, and justice.

The notion of “spiritual activism” that was voiced in the work of U.S. third-world feminists (Anzaldúa, 2002; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981) can serve as a framework used to decipher those inner whispers that turn into roars as we first experience conscientization and a budding spirituality that guides us toward mobilization. Our spiritual activism springs into action as our newfound consciousness and spirituality fertilize our vibrant dreams and utopian visions for a better tomorrow. An awareness of where we are today and the painful and joyous steps that we took along our journey intertwine with the wisdom and guidance of our mothers and ancestors to help us decide what brush we want to clear as we forge new paths. To practice spiritual activism we must be willing to tap into the wounds that have maimed our souls and use our experiences to continue making sense of ever-changing conditions as well as to help others on their personal journeys. The courage and resilience we find within and with others lead us to believe that change is possible and so we engage in an ongoing cycle of action and reflection as we work to make our dreams a reality.

Given that the emotional, spiritual, and psychological well-being of our children and their futures are at stake, I echo the call to nourish a mestiza consciousness in our youth at an early age (Delgado Bernal, 2006). This consciousness can help Chicanas in particular cope with the ambivalence they experience in society as we intuit that we are not wanted or valued. In the absence of schooling environments that care for children holistically as human beings, community-based organizations are in a unique position to nurture that consciousness and offer both the protections of family and a political education that helps Chican@s make historical and structural sense of their experiences.

This protective role is especially important for the youth whose families have been ravaged by the very social ills resulting from systemic oppression that threaten to cripple their hope. In this setting teachers must be willing to act not only as educators but also as healers who likely have fragile spirits in their care. As healers, we must break down the existing oppressive structures that define “teacher” and “student” as passive and fragmented in order to be present as human beings who also suffer and are full of doubts and questions. Through wounded healing we can humanize education as we struggle together and embody spiritual activism (Ginwright, 2010; hooks, 1994).

Although studies have examined culturally affirming approaches undertaken by CBOs (Ginwright, 2010; Gordon, 2010; Kwon, 2006, 2008), few studies have centered the efforts of Chicana feminist-led organizations within the Chican@ community. The literature on youth political participation regularly focuses on mainstream avenues for involvement, such as school clubs and organization, volunteering, and service learning (Kirshner, 2007; Yates & Youniss, 1998). These white, middle-class notions of civic engagement ignore the life and death struggles for justice that communities of color have been waging for centuries. A Chicana feminist epistemology can be highly useful in comprehending a new critical pedagogical approach to youth political participation and the special care that must be taken with young Chicanas who must overcome multiple traumas in their journey to reconnect with their humanity and acquire a sense of wholeness. Chicanas’ lived experiences offer tremendous insight into the conditions that must be present in order to battle the internalized hopelessness and oppression that can paralyze Chican@s.

The examples set by *mujeres luchadoras* can be the very salvation for young Chican@s who are struggling to find hope and happiness. In serving as bridges who connect two worlds, *mujeres luchadoras* can help our youth cross into the land of healing and spiritual activism and leave behind the painful veil of oppression that would have us blame ourselves for the suffering that has marked our existence. On the other side of the bridge we can then begin the process of learning how to heal ourselves and our communities.

Methodology

By redeeming your most painful experiences you transform them into something valuable, algo para compartir or share with others so they too may be empowered. You stop in the middle of the field and, under your breath, ask the spirits – animals, plants, y tus muertos – to help you string together a bridge of words. What follows is your attempt to give back to nature, los espíritus, and others a gift wrested from the events in your life, a bridge home to self. (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 540)

EPISTEMOLOGICAL ORIENTATION

The desire to build a stronger and more diverse base of people fighting against systemic oppression led Gloria Anzaldúa (1981, 2002) to dream of El Mundo Zurdo, where alliances are formed across differences as we connect with one another on a human level. She also envisioned a community in which all of us who suffer from (internalized) oppression and have borne witness to atrocities against humankind and the destruction of the planet can become “the healing of the wound” (Anzaldúa, 2009a). To be a healer in this context requires an openness and vulnerability that allows us to lay bare the broken pieces of ourselves in order to begin mending our souls and subsequently our communities. Although we may need to closely calculate how much we share and in what context as a strategy for self-preservation, we must begin breaking down the barriers that continue to divide peoples and our individual body, mind, and spirit. Our vulnerability can shine a light on the path toward our empowerment.

We must struggle to achieve a greater closeness and intimacy with ourselves and with others in a world intent on alienating us from ourselves and from each other. A more thorough introspectiveness and self-awareness is a precursor to recognizing our agency and efficacy as social actors; we must be able to name what limits us and why.

For this reason I draw from my own experiences as I theorize about the experiences of the females of color in this study. In doing so, I echo the shouts of other women of color who call for us to listen to our bones and let them speak our truth as “theory in the flesh” (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981), “*autohistoria-teoría*” (Anzaldúa, 2002; Anzaldúa in Keating, 2005), and “*papelitos guardados*” (The Latina Feminist Group, 2001), for there is great wisdom in the “epistemology of a brown body” (Cruz, 2006). Like Moraga and Anzaldúa (1981), I dream of “a society that uses flesh and blood experiences to concretize a vision that can begin to heal” (p. 23) individual and collective wounds.

Cruz (2006) argues that “reason, and the methodologies of research that result from an uncritical and unmediated use of it, fragment the brown body” (p. 64). As Smith (1999) similarly illustrates, academia’s emphasis on “objective knowledge” fragments our bodies by denying the history of asymmetrical relations of power that elevate specific (Western) ways of knowing and forms of knowledge production. I reject any claims to objectivity because to do so would symbolize a regression in the strides I have taken towards finding and connecting with my inner voice. Translating the experiences and emotions that swirled around and inside of me as I conducted my research onto paper is my effort to “write back” and “research back” (Smith, 1999) as a means to further decolonize myself and the academy. As women (of color) we are criticized for being too emotional because a display of emotions indicates that we are irrational and weak and not to be taken seriously. I refuse to erase and detach my emotions and therefore myself from my research because to do so would aid the systematic and institutionalized project of dehumanization in (higher) education. I will not be erased. I will be one of the

“Trojan mulas” and “new mestizas” (Anzaldúa, 2009b) who challenges the hegemonic status quo.

Sharing my *testimonio* and braiding it into the *testimonios* of the youth and adults who participated in this critical case study is also an extension of previous efforts to use our stories, our “*papelitos guardados*” (The Latina Feminist Group, 2001), to challenge the dominant discourse about Chican@s/Latin@s (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008b). Recording these *testimonios* and sharing them with others is a difficult and rather grueling process. By making myself vulnerable in this manner I am chipping away at the brick walls that I carefully constructed to protect myself. Each honest word and emotion removes one of the *ladrillos* that hid me from view and is therefore a strategy for spiritual activism that I employ to bring me closer to myself and to you.

Spiritual activism is a process of looking deep within myself and acknowledging the pieces I have hated so that I can begin to love them. To love myself I must be able to name my world and understand why I hated myself in the first place. In being able to love myself I recognize my strengths so that I may use those strengths in the service of others. Transforming self-hate into self-love necessitates forging connections with other *luchadoras del pasado y del presente* and learning from their struggles in order to summon the courage and fortitude of spirit to persevere and believe in myself, especially when I feel as though I am losing the battle. As a spiritual activist I let my guard down, cross boundaries, and forge alliances in the name of individual and collective healing. In helping others to heal, I heal myself. I serve as a bridge between people and worlds to honor my belief of our interconnectedness and because I acknowledge the necessity of

collective action and solidarity in the pursuit of justice. Using the lessons I have learned, I reach out to the youth so that they may also realize what unites rather than separates us and begin to heal themselves. As an essential component of spiritual activism, wounded healing thus becomes a form of praxis when I act upon the world using my strengths. This is a methodology for freedom.

OVERVIEW AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Qualitative research emphasizes “the qualities of entities and...processes and meanings that are not experimentally examined or measured” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 8). As such, a qualitative approach offers the opportunity to capture the perspectives and experiences of the study participants in an intimate manner that acknowledges that reality is socially constructed and shaped by historical and situational conditions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). In highlighting the need to connect spirituality, healing, and activism in our struggles to eradicate (internalized) oppression, the qualitative research presented in this study reflects a critical perspective that speaks of “liberatory, emancipatory commitments” with “explicit political, utopian purposes” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008a, p. x). Furthermore, it is also a “decolonizing project” in that I, as an insider from the community, am the one producing an account and a *testimonio* that interrupts the dominant discourse about both a specific community in Texas and Chican@/Latin@ youth in general.

As a critical intrinsic case study of the Young Scholars for Justice program this study also seeks to shed light on what is unique and potentially significant and relevant to others about this particular program (Stake, 2000). Incorporating participant observation

into the case study design allowed me to immerse myself in the program's everyday activities and the interactions between the different participants in order to see the program through their eyes as closely as possible and "listen in" on how they immediately processed and reacted to particular activities and conversations. Furthermore, utilizing participant observation allowed me to build trust with the youth in the YSJ program while simultaneously offering my skills as a resource to both PODER staff and the youth as they carried out various workshops and activities. Conducting interviews with the youth and PODER staff members in addition to the participant observation gave me the opportunity to explore how they made sense of their experiences in the program as well as in their community as raced, classed, and gendered individuals (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). I was subsequently able to begin constructing a richer and more nuanced image of the youth and the program given the participants' individual positioning.

The underlying conceptualization of spiritual activism present in this critical case study of the Young Scholars for Justice (YSJ) program follows in the tradition of activist research with critical emancipatory goals that includes the transformation of society as we know it (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008a). By closely examining the experiences of the youth who participated in YSJ program, my goals were to comprehend the program's effects on the participants as well as the characteristics of the program that were responsible for those changes. It is my hope that this work will "have legs" (Weis & Fine, 2004) and be useful for others who work with youth and seek to understand and position them as historical actors. As an educator who is deeply involved in my

community in a multitude of ways, this research has already sprouted legs and taken off running as I envision ways to become a more effective and loving educator as well as strategies to nurture sties of resistance and healing in my community. Because I worked with a small group of youth and adults in a unique context, my research findings are not intended to be generalizable. Rather, this study is an in-depth look at how a particular community-based organization engaged Chican@/Latin@ youth and I sought to address the following research questions:

- What elements of the program lead youth to develop a greater awareness of their community?
- How does youth's consciousness change after participating in the YSJ program?

SETTING

People Organized in the Defense of Earth and her Resources (PODER) is a grassroots, community-based organization in Austin, TX that emerged from the reverberations emanating from the clashes of the civil rights era and the spread of the Chicano Movement's influence from San Antonio to Austin. The founding members of PODER were all involved in social justice issues and influenced by the massive mobilization of the Chican@ community in Texas during the 1960s and 1970s. PODER's members witnessed the partial gains of the Chicano Movement, which led to a departure of Chican@s from their communities as they gained entry into institutions of higher learning and pursued jobs that were often far removed from their original sites of struggle (Montejano, 2010). As a result, the youth who came of age in the Austin metro area following the heyday of the Chicano Movement lacked the mentorship and

opportunities to develop leadership skills that more readily existed for the Chican@s whose presence was noticeably absent (Lushan, interview, 07/20/2010).

This subsequent gap in Chican@ leadership underscored the need to create a program that focused on developing the next generation of Chican@ leaders in order to avoid similar problems in the future. The Chican@s who eventually returned to the Austin area recognized the existing opportunity gap for Chican@ youth when compared to the rich environment of community organizing and mobilization that previously existed only a short time before. The diminished momentum around organizing and effecting social change led the individuals who would become PODER's founding members to concentrate a portion of the organization's energy on preparing the next generation of Chican@ youth who would be the "organic intellectuals" leading their community and carrying out PODER's mission to:

[redefine] environmental issues as social and economic justice issues, and collectively [set] our own agenda to address these concerns as basic human rights. We seek to empower our communities through education, advocacy and action. Our aim is to increase the participation of communities of color in corporate and government decision making related to toxic pollution, economic development and their impact on our neighborhoods. (PODER, n.d.b)

PODER has operated the Young Scholars for Justice (YSJ) program for the past 16 years with the stated goal of "[preparing] students of color to articulate their needs and concerns in order to make significant institutional changes [regarding issues] that negatively impact their communities" (PODER, n.d.c). Founded by "Chicana/o East Austin activists and community leaders" (PODER, n.d.a), the YSJ program

acknowledges from the outset that students of color are mostly underprivileged and historically marginalized in schools and society and thus rarely positioned as leaders. PODER strives to help youth of color reframe themselves as agents of change by “[increasing] their knowledge and skills in program development, implementation and evaluation” (PODER, n.d.a). In doing so, PODER endeavors to communicate to students of color that they have the capacity and the right to demand and effect change in their community. As a female-led organization, PODER staff members are cognizant of the general lack of leadership development opportunities for females and therefore actively recruit female students of color for this paid summer internship program.

The Young Scholars for Justice (YSJ) program seeks to facilitate youth empowerment by informing youth of the issues that have plagued communities of color in East Austin. The youth learn about the history of the forced relocation and concentration of people of color to East Austin, instances of environmental racism, the mis/under-education of youth of color, and the criminalization of people of color. At the same time the youth also learn some of the history of organized resistance and activism in response to systemic oppression as well as current campaigns targeting pressing issues such as gentrification, affordable housing, and access to transportation. Once youth have an understanding of the past, connections are drawn to the present in order to help crystallize how the past molded the present. PODER staff members lovingly work to create a safe space where the youth are encouraged to express themselves freely and share their experiences as each individual strengthens their voice and begins to comprehend their personal histories against the historical backdrop of East Austin.

The Young Scholars for Justice program values praxis in its recognition that helping the youth value their voice and name their world is not enough; their stories and firsthand experiences must be converted into action in order to change existing structural inequality. During the five-week duration of the program, the youth participated in a range of activities such as workshops on immigration and the school-to-prison pipeline as well as viewed documentaries on capitalism and Palestine. Their hands, minds, and hearts entered into a deeper and more complex conversation as they engaged in activities that took them outside of their meeting space and into the community. The YSJ participants conducted community health surveys and juvenile justice surveys about zero tolerance policies in their schools, they assisted in a clean-up to beautify their community, and they presented some of their survey findings before the Austin City Council. At the end of the summer program, we emerged with a (renewed) sense of faith in individual and collective action that is intergenerational and rooted in the past struggles of our community.

PARTICIPANTS

When I first approached PODER with my idea for the study they welcomed the idea without hesitation and readily agreed to be of service in whatever way possible. My personal background as a native resident of East Austin, my prior involvement with the Young Scholars for Justice program specifically, and my recurring role as a volunteer with PODER more generally greatly facilitated my access to PODER and potential study participants. The ability to include youth under the age of 18 in the study would not have been possible without the assistance of PODER, which is a very trusted organization in

East Austin. An interest in having multiple perspectives that could represent and give voice to East Austin and the YSJ program led me to conceptualize the study as a conversation between current YSJ participants, previous YSJ participants, and PODER staff members.

Current YSJ Participants

The youth who participate in the Young Scholars for Justice program typically learn about this opportunity through word of mouth and subsequently submit an application to the organization. The size of the group of youth who participate every summer is dependent upon the amount of funding PODER receives and fluctuates annually. PODER's commitment to promoting female leadership means that there are always slightly more females than males who participate in the program.

The summer that I conducted research with PODER the organization only had sufficient funds to offer employment to 10 youth and it is from this pool of 10 youth that I drew upon to conduct both participant observation and interviews. In this study, "current YSJ participants" thus refers to the 10 youth participating in the program that summer. To recruit current YSJ participants specifically for my study I introduced myself to the youth as a volunteer/researcher/East-Austin-native on the first day of the summer program and asked all of them to participate in my observations and interviews. I decided to ask all 10 youth to participate in both portions of my study in order to improve my chances of having a sufficient number of the youth to observe and interview.

The 10 current YSJ participants consisted of six females and four males ranging in ages from 13 to 17. Of the 10 youth, seven are Latin@/Chican@ and three are biracial

(Black and Latin@/Chican@). Nine of the 10 youth in the program were born and raised in East Austin and come from working-class families, although one of the youth now lives in a coastal Texas city and was only visiting for the summer. The only youth who is not originally from East Austin but presently lives in the community comes from a middle-class family that relocated from a large, Midwestern city. Although all 10 of the youth and their parents gave their consent to be observed and interviewed, only three of the 10 current YSJ participants followed through with the interview.

Previous YSJ Participants

In this study “previous YSJ participants” refers to individuals who were not a part of the YSJ program during the summer I conducted my research but had been previously involved. I was interested in speaking with them in order to get a sense of the YSJ program’s potential long-term impact on participants. PODER staff members recommended previous YSJ participants for me to interview based on the staff members’ perceptions that those previous YSJ participants had powerful stories to contribute. The staff members sensed a transformation in behavior and way of thinking in those individuals that they believed would be useful for my study.

The staff members provided the phone numbers and e-mail addresses of those previous YSJ participants they had identified and I contacted them by phone to ask for their participation. I reached out to two males and one female and asked to interview them individually but the female was the only one who consented to participating. This previous YSJ participant is a 20-year-old Chicana from a working-class family in East Austin who now resides just outside of Austin’s city limits.

PODER Staff Members

Given my history of involvement with PODER, it was easy to reach out to all four of the PODER staff members and obtain their consent to being observed and interviewed. The staff members, who range in ages from mid-20s to mid-50s, are all Chican@s and consist of three females and one male. Three of the four staff members are originally from East Austin and all four staff members lived in East Austin at the time. The PODER staff members have formed a part of the organization since at least 2005 and the founding member that remains has been there since the organization's genesis in 1994. I was thus compelled to include their voices in the conversation because I believed they each had valuable insight to offer in terms of the YSJ program's impact over the years in addition to its significance to a historically marginalized community like East Austin. My previous experiences with the organization also led me to perceive the value of the relationships between the youth and the staff members. To exclude the staff members from my study would have thus ultimately prevented me from comprehending the extent to which these relationships contribute to the YSJ program's overall impact.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

To acquire a richer understanding of the Young Scholars for Justice program, I conducted interviews with current YSJ participants, a previous YSJ participant, and the PODER staff members. I also utilized participant observation in order to be able to compare individuals' statements with actual observations of the summer youth program. Through the interviews I was able to learn about the participants' personal histories beyond what they might have alluded to during my participant observation. I was also

able to dig beneath the surface level of my observations by posing questions that more directly addressed the questions guiding my research. Doing so enabled me to better comprehend how the participants made sense of the YSJ program and its impact based on their raced, classed, and gendered experiences.

Participant Observation

My insider status with PODER and long-standing experience with and interest in working with youth made participant observation a natural choice for me. It was personally important for me to be directly involved with the youth not only to get a clearer understanding of their perspectives, but also to give back to PODER and offer logistical and programmatic support. Accordingly, there was never an equal balance between my role as participant and observer, and I assumed additional overlapping roles as a tutor, volunteer, translator, and transportation provider. For example, because I am presently involved in community organizing efforts around immigration detention, I offered to lead a workshop on immigration with a colleague. I also guided the youth and facilitated small group discussions concerning the different topics that we addressed in the other workshops. On the days in which I was more active, I set aside extra time after the day's programming had ended to write my field notes and reflect upon my observations and experiences to avoid forgetting important details.

The participant observation took place throughout the entire five-week summer program, from the first week of June through the first week of July. However, I was only able to observe four of the five weeks of the YSJ program due to my attendance at the U.S. Social Forum in Detroit that summer. The program typically met from 8:00 am to

12:00 pm, Monday through Thursday, however there were a few times when the program participants got together for activities during the evenings and weekends. For instance, to conduct the youth surveys on zero tolerance policies the youth had to have access to a large pool of youth. The YSJ participants consequently conducted the youth surveys on a Saturday morning during Austin's Juneteenth parade when there were bound to be plenty of youth in one area that they could talk to.

Working with an underage population made it ethically imperative for me to be candid with the youth about my role as a volunteer and a researcher and the nature of my study. The youth in the YSJ program and the PODER staff were thus cognizant that I was observing them and taking notes whenever I was not participating alongside them in the activities. My observation techniques were semi-structured in that I did not utilize checklists or observation schedules detailing specific information I wanted to systematically collect. Instead, I kept a journal where I recorded observations when I was not participating that centered on pedagogical practices, topics, and activities that seemed to engage and animate the youth (O'Leary, 2010). In doing so I made a conscious effort to be as present with the youth as possible rather than assume the role of a detached observer.

Interviews

I conducted four one-on-one interviews: one with each PODER co-director, one with a current YSJ participant, and one with a previous YSJ participant. All of the interviews took place within two months of the program's end to ensure that the participants' recollections were as fresh and rich in detail as possible. Each tape-recorded

interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes. I used a series of guiding questions and probes during the interview to direct the conversation but still allowed the participants to lead the interview in directions that seemed particularly relevant and interesting (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Of these four one-on-one interviews, I only followed up with one of the PODER staff members for clarifications via e-mail. All of the interviews were informal and semi-structured and took place in the PODER office in order to make the environment as relaxed as possible. My relationships to the staff members made an informal approach to the interviews relatively instinctual; to do otherwise would have felt unnatural and implied a false objective stance (O’Leary, 2010).

Conducting the interviews in an informal manner was even more significant when I spoke with the youth. Because all of the interviews took place after the YSJ program had ended, I had gotten a chance to build rapport with the youth and there were many shared experiences we could draw from. A formal interview approach would have only unsettled the youth and interrupted the flow of conversation as they tried to comprehend the change in my behavior. Similarly, a semi-structured approach to the interviews with both the staff members and the YSJ participants allowed me to explore issues I was specifically interested in while allowing room for the conversation to shift when interesting tangents emerged (O’Leary, 2010).

I also conducted two small group interviews: one with the other two PODER staff members and one with two current YSJ participants. These small group interviews were also informal and semi-structured for the aforementioned reasons. The small group interviews were also tape-recorded in the PODER office once the summer program

finished and lasted approximately 60 to 75 minutes each. I used a series of guiding questions and probes during the interviews but still allowed the participants to lead the conversation in directions that seemed particularly relevant and interesting. Of these two small group interviews, I only followed up with one of the current YSJ participants for clarifications regarding their individual comments. Please refer to Appendix A, B, and C for examples of the interview questions I used with the YSJ participants and the PODER staff members.

Data Analysis

My status as an insider led me to instinctively follow an approach that Smith (1999) characterizes as constantly reflexive as well as ethical, respectful, critical, and above all, humble. In doing so, I was prepared to continue challenging my perceptions about East Austin as well as my existing values, relationships, and beliefs as I began the process of data analysis. At the same time, knowledge of the distorted images that the local media produce about East Austin and that the mainstream media perpetuate about people of color as a whole compelled me to analyze my data in a critically sensitive and considerate manner. In using a feminist critical pedagogical lens that I believed would assist me in answering my research questions, I was drawn to data that portrayed the youth as raced, classed, and gendered subjects who were struggling to make sense of their experiences and their community (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008b).

Upon completing the participant observation and interviews, I reviewed my field notes and transcripts and began coding the data. I focused my energy on my field notes first and generated a large number of specific themes that I also used to guide the coding

of my interview transcripts. When I first started conducting the interviews I noticed similarities across different participants' responses and began writing memos to myself about the possible links between those responses. The memos were highly useful in terms of generating additional themes to organize the construction of the larger narrative about the Young Scholars for Justice program from multiple perspectives. However, I soon found that I had too many specific themes, some of which did not help me answer my research questions. I thus consolidated the themes into a more manageable quantity and re-focused my attention onto my research questions while making a note of other points of interest that I might consider pursuing in a separate study. I continued re-reading and arranging my coded data until I felt the different pieces were engaged in a thoughtful and critical conversation concerning PODER's pedagogical approach and the effects of the YSJ program on the youth.

POSITIONALITY

As previously noted, my study follows a critical research tradition in that it is overtly political in nature and speaks of a desire to use research to advance social change. My interest in conducting research about the YSJ is informed by my perspective as a working-class, Spanish-speaking woman of color who experienced firsthand the immobilizing and hurtful effects of (internalized) racism and discrimination in traditional schooling and in society in general. Engaging in this research was a particularly meaningful experience for me because I participated in the YSJ program as a 19-year-old college student. Although my role was that of a program assistant and a group leader for middle school and high school students, the experience was life altering and steered me

toward what I intend to be a life-long *lucha* against the many masks of oppression and for social justice. My experiences in and out of school left deep wounds in my mind and soul that were expertly concealed behind a record of good grades in advanced courses and a good resume. It was only after I got involved with PODER that I began to examine and question the causes and consequences of those wounds, thereby propelling me to begin the gradual and painful process of reframing myself as a historical actor in my community.

While the experiences that led to internalized oppression and feelings of marginalization were the source of a tremendous amount of grief, I recognize that they are what caused PODER's mission to strongly resonate with me. The connection I felt to PODER's work in East Austin and with the youth organically developed into a vested interest in supporting the organization's work over roughly seven years. During this span of time my relationships with the staff members have grown as friendships and trusted partnerships. Those relationships thus granted me a high degree of access to the organization and an existing familiarity with the way the organization and the youth program function that would have otherwise been impossible to develop over the brief duration of my study. Trust and respect are particularly difficult to build within historically marginalized communities therefore the value and meaning that I assign to my connection with PODER is very important to me.

My status as an East Austin Chicana was also instrumental in developing relationships with the youth in the program and obtaining the parents' consent for their children to participate in my study. I was relatable to the youth and their parents as a

Chicana, as a former YSJ participant, and as an East side native. Although there was an existing power imbalance between myself and the youth due to my level of educational attainment and (to a lesser degree) my age, this imbalance would have been more pronounced had I been older, white, middle-class, male, and/or not from East Austin. For the most part I was able to blend into my surroundings when I wanted to simply observe or take notes. I never had the sense that either the staff members or the youth were behaving in a guarded manner because of my presence. Some of the *testimonios* I shared with the youth affirmed the critique they were beginning to develop about social injustice and reassured them that they could be open about their own experiences without necessarily fearing that they would be judged or dismissed.

Some scholars believe that “there is ample evidence that simply telling [a subordinated group’s] story will not lead to any substantive change” (Pulido, 2008, p. 352) because stories alone do not alter the existing power relations that caused that group’s subordination in the first place. Instead, the emphasis should be on accountability and reciprocity with the community in which a scholar activist works. While I agree with the latter statement, I disagree with the opinion that storytelling is ineffectual and politically useless. My positioning as an insider in the community in which I conducted my research complicates the aforementioned perspective because the act of storytelling is highly personal for me and critiques the power relations that led to the (psychological) subordination of my community and myself. Through storytelling I am able to recount my experiences, the experiences of my community, and our responses to instances of injustice.

It is similarly important for me to acknowledge that my insider status also posed as a challenge for me at times. I pieced my observations, the interviews with the youth, and the interviews with the staff members into a discussion about the YSJ program that showcased “a quilt of stories” as well as “a cacophony of voices” speaking to each other (Fine, Weis, Weseen, & Wong, 2000). I was not looking for conflict; rather, I began my research with an underlying notion that the program “worked” and had the potential to shape others in the way that the YSJ program affected me. Furthermore, the staff members’ own biases in favor of their work with the youth may have caused them to over-generalize and emphasize their perception of the program’s impact. It is also possible that I spent more time interacting with the female participants because it was easier for me to relate to them and for them to identify with me. Considering the aforementioned drawbacks to my insider status, being able to draw from three different data sources to paint a picture of the YSJ program limited the extent to which biases prevented me from digging beneath the surface to produce a vivid and candid portrayal of the program based on information that was triangulated.

LIMITATIONS

Unfortunately, the short duration of the YSJ program and my one-week absence during the program limited the amount of data I was able to collect through participant observation. Furthermore, although I originally wanted to conduct a greater number of interviews with current YSJ participants and previous YSJ participants, it was difficult to obtain their consent to being interviewed. Securing the participation of the PODER staff members in the conversation was thus highly beneficial in that they were able to supply

some of the missing pieces of the puzzle. The staff members' consistent presence throughout the YSJ program that summer as well as their history of involvement with the program made them rich sources of information that I could turn to as I constructed the narrative of the YSJ program and contemplated the experiences of the youth in the program.

Additionally, the data collection and data analysis were both filtered through a particular lens and informed by my experiences, therefore it is possible that a different person conducting the same study will arrive at different conclusions. While this case study focuses on one program housed within a unique community-based organization, it does offer valuable insights into the power and transformative effects of youth activism and political participation within historically marginalized and criminalized communities of color. PODER and the YSJ program addressed issues such as gentrification, environmental racism, and poor schooling that are not unique to this community, but rather seemingly commonplace among communities of color across the United States. Rather than pathologize and point fingers at specific individuals, this study seeks to comprehend how youth acquire a particular consciousness that recognizes their agency. In doing so, this study pushes for an expanded conceptualization of critical pedagogy that is based on a Chicana feminist epistemology.

Analysis

For Chicanas, learning about the land risks dredging up at least 500 years of colonial and indigenous knowledges in conflict, of hurtful understandings of ourselves in the world. Learning about the land could save the land, could strengthen our bodies, could sustain our political struggles, and could nurture our imaginations. (Jiménez, 2006, p. 220)

The degree of community awareness of the youth who participated in PODER's Young Scholars for Justice program reflected my own segregated upbringing in many ways. During conversations with the youth many of them expressed that they had not explored areas of the city that existed beyond the east-west divide. Participants' knowledge of Austin mostly consisted of the landscapes they saw as they went to school, rode the bus, walked to friends' houses, and stayed within the general vicinity of their neighborhood. Regardless of whether the youth viewed East Austin in a positive or negative light, they were unaware of the contested battles that led to the creation, permanence, and removal of spaces and structures. Participants' lack of a historical memory naturalized injustice while simultaneously muting the voices of opposition and resistance to systemic oppression.

Despite the brief duration of the summer youth program, my findings suggest that the youth who participated in the program began or continued a personal transformation that PODER nurtured. Participants' comments suggest their consciousness changed in the sense that they began to develop a deeper understanding of East Austin and a growing awareness of their ability to participate in local to global human rights struggles. The YSJ program brought the East Austin community to life by exposing youth to previous instances of community mobilization as well as by engaging them in current efforts for

justice. In doing so, PODER treated youth as historical beings who were capable of acting now rather than as passive bystanders or future citizens who could shape the city only after reaching a certain age. PODER staff members used an engaged pedagogy that acknowledged youth's everyday experiences within the context of their cultural background and their community. This PODERista pedagogy facilitated participants' ability to make sense of the topics they discussed and enabled the youth to establish connections between their lived realities and the systemic forces that strive to naturalize and depoliticize oppression. Although the majority of the youth walked through PODER's doors as strangers, they exited as a *familia* bound together by their experiences that summer.

A PODERISTA PEDAGOGY

We would always be looking at what we'd always get calls from the community [about]. People would say that their recreation centers are all messed up and they're not able to use it, or they don't have these supplies. There would always be something that the community was telling us was wrong, but that we could use and work with the youth to say we think this is a focus because we've gotten so much input. And it really is a youth issue; it's a community issue, but it basically was impacting youth. (Lushan, interview, 07/20/2010)

The scope and breadth of topics and activities that are planned for the Young Scholars for Justice program every summer can best be described as ambitious and impressive. On any given day during the program, participants may watch a short film, conduct surveys, and participate in workshops. The main room in which the summer youth program convened was rarely quiet and one could always count on hearing excited voices and the sound of laughter. The youth typically arrived at the PODER house as early as 7:30 am to enjoy breakfast and conversation with friends. Participants' desire to

linger around the PODER home well after their “work day” ended at noon is a testament to the bonds they created with one another and with the staff members that made spending time together so enjoyable and meaningful.

One of my favorite memories of stepping into the PODER home every morning was the delicious smell of cinnamon bagels that wafted through the air and commingled with the carefree laughs of the youth. Vibrant and colorful pictures, paintings, and posters that honor the organization’s Chicana@ heritage hang on the walls alongside framed news articles that attest to PODER’s work in the community. The participants’ characterization of PODER as a family is easily distinguishable in the warmth that fills the house. Although it was difficult for some of the youth to switch gears and let down their guard, the PODER staff members repeatedly demonstrated with their actions that there was no need for the youth to wear masks or put up a protective shield. The YSJ program and the PODER home created an environment that nurtured a sense of community for the youth to draw strength and comfort from as they learned to re-interpret their surroundings.

Spiritual Activism: Making the Personal Political

In the seventh state, the critical turning point of transformation, you shift realities, develop an ethical, compassionate strategy with which to negotiate conflict and difference within self and between others, and find common ground by forming holistic alliances. You include these practices in your daily life, act on your vision – enacting spiritual activism. (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 545)

Poder, or power, is at the heart of PODER as an organization and the staff members’ efforts to re-define what power looks like and in whose hands it should rest. PODER’s mission statement for the YSJ program locates power within the youth and

asserts their important role in addressing the needs and concerns of East Austin. Although the youth in the YSJ program were familiar with the concepts they focused on during the summer, the YSJ program problematized and deepened their present understanding of those concepts. While some terms such as “gentrification” that describe ongoing processes in East Austin may have been new, the youth possessed an experiential knowledge of their surroundings that is inscribed in their bones and in their memories that allowed them to easily assimilate those new terms. By drawing from the participants’ experiences in the community and coupling them with a structural analysis, the YSJ program affected how the youth made sense of their community. The configuration of spiritual activism that seemed to infuse the YSJ program encouraged the youth to “begin with the individual” (Keating, 2005, p. 244) so as to find the links between their individual everyday experiences and institutional forces of domination that are disguised and obscured.

Each individual’s understanding of their experiences in their community was constructed using a “theory of the flesh” (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981) that gradually began to be altered and refined as the YSJ program helped them to “name their world” (Freire, 1970/2000). A few of the themes that describe the expanse of the YSJ program include the criminalization of youth, environmental racism, immigration and immigration detention, food justice, capitalism, and inequitable education. When we discussed these topics all of the participants had stories to share. For instance, at least half of the youth in the YSJ program had experienced criminalization vis-à-vis their school’s zero tolerance policies or racial profiling. By nature of living in East Austin, they suffered the effects of

environmental racism in that they are disproportionately exposed to environmental toxins because of a 1928 city plan that allowed residential and industrial zoning in East Austin while prohibiting this mixed-use development in the more affluent West Austin (Humphrey, 1997; Policy Research Project, 2007). The youth recognized their criminalization and pollution as unjust, but lacked the vocabulary and an awareness of the history behind those practices to be able to critique them as forms of systemic oppression in communities of color. Structuring the curriculum for the YSJ program in a way that invited participants' lived realities into the program thus resulted in opportunities for meaningful engagement that prompted the youth to look at their community with new eyes.

The suffocating and demoralizing grip of the criminal justice system on communities of color led the PODER staff members to dedicate a significant amount of time to discussing the criminalization of people of color, schools' zero tolerance policies, and their role in perpetuating the school-to-prison pipeline. The degree to which the youth comprehended the unequal enforcement of the law and zero tolerance policies and their disproportionate impact on communities of color was discernible from their demeanor during discussions and activities. The youth attentively listened to one another when they broke out into smaller groups, actively participated in conversations, and struggled collaboratively to make sense of the policies and practices that paved the way for the current state of youth in the criminal justice system. This group of youth did not need to be convinced that people of color were often simultaneously pushed out of school and pulled into prisons.

During large group discussions, all of the youth in the program indicated that either they or a friend had been personally affected by zero tolerance policies and were sent to In School Suspension (ISS) or a juvenile detention center. Monica, an eighth grade student, had a sharp criticism of the punishments doled out to youth and provided some insight into her experiences at a juvenile detention center.

I honestly don't like it because it takes away your freedom and it's not even fun there. You can't go outside when you want to, you have to be [inside] at a certain time, you can't not walk on this side and then everybody else walk on the other side, you have to walk straight. It just takes away a lot of your freedom...It's a lot of freedom taken away from you...I didn't like it...I just didn't want to go back. (Monica, interview, 08/05/2010)

Monica believed some of her teachers were racist because they repeatedly picked on her and other students of color and sent them to ISS. She also described that they were regularly sent outside to stand in a corner indefinitely for misbehaving, which resulted in falling behind in class and sometimes enduring nasty weather. The stigma of spending time in ISS and a juvenile detention center was not lost on Monica.

I'm the same person who I was before, and they look at me, they just – some people look at me way different. Like I have teachers that look at me that are like, "You're still gonna do what you do. I'm not gonna treat you any better." (Monica, interview, 08/05/2010)

Raquel shared Monica's perspective; her school's strict dress code led to a stint in ISS after she did not change clothes for sports practice. At the time Raquel had tendonitis and thus would have been unable to play sports, with or without the proper attire. Jaime, Raquel's brother, also spoke of being treated rudely by his school's police officers, who would stop him in the hallways and demand to see his school ID card to confirm that he was in fact a student at the school.

As the youth went around the room trading stories about time spent in ISS, it was clear they viewed it as a punitive punishment that did not match their “transgressions” and led them to miss out on classroom instruction. Michael in particular found ISS to be challenging because he was unable to sit still for very long. As a result of fidgeting and standing up to walk around, the length of his stay in ISS was extended and he spent additional time outside of the classroom. Raquel shared that on one occasion her “ISS sentence” was extended by a day after laughing at a friend’s comment. To Jaime, ISS was boring due to the tedious worksheets his teachers sent with him as well as being in a non-stimulating and intellectually unchallenging environment. Sadly enough, Jaime had an equally negative perception of his regular classrooms and likened them to being in ISS because students primarily worked out of textbooks and failed to engage in meaningful dialogue about topics relevant to students’ lives. The YSJ participants’ comments reflect a powerful critique of how they are closely surveilled in a school system that treats them as both “suspects” (Giroux, 2010) and “blank slates” (Freire, 1970/2000, 1998). Whether suspect or blank slate, the message is clear: they can be easily disposed of or punished until they conform to a pre-defined mold.

Rather than cut the youth off when they wanted to contribute an opinion or a story, the staff members encouraged them to offer their perspectives and experiences in school. The practice of sharing these *testimonios* assisted the youth in recognizing that some of their experiences as students of color were not unique to them as individuals. It was also an eye-opening activity for the few youth who had not experienced criminalization personally but were still critical of the incongruence between the

perceived transgression and the punishment. Framing their stories in the context of youth and the U.S. justice system also helped the youth begin drawing connections between their everyday experiences in schools, school dropout rates, and the over-representation of people of color in the criminal justice system. Without establishing those connections, it is much easier for the youth to continue internalizing the mainstream rhetoric that urges them to think of individuals and perhaps even themselves as “bad” and therefore inherently prone to getting into trouble and being deserving of some form of punishment.

Some of the youth did in fact speak of individuals as “good” or “bad” and indicated that perhaps people deserved to be in a state of confinement based on their actions. In a conversation that Marlén facilitated, she attempted to shift the participants’ way of looking at these issues by focusing on the concept of restorative justice and connecting restorative justice to finding alternatives to zero tolerance policies that share power with the students. Marlén explained that people are unjustly removed from society as a punishment for any wrongdoings and they are labeled as bad. Restorative measures, on the other hand, seek to make the community and those involved whole again by including the people who were harmed in deciding the form that reparations take. This is potentially more healing and therefore more beneficial to all parties because the person who was hurt has a direct say in the process. The discussion on restorative justice demonstrated that there are a lot of things the youth must unlearn in order to redirect the blame from individual characteristics to institutional factors that disproportionately inflict harm on people of color. Without the centrality of dialogue to help the youth fight the struggle within, eliminating the hateful internalized voice of the

oppressor that easily labels and punishes people of color becomes a rather insurmountable task (Freire, 1970/2000, 1998). Hearing one another's *testimonios* is an important first step in this process.

Within the context of the YSJ program, parents' experiences also became a part of the curriculum. Esperanza is a Chicana high school senior who experienced a tremendous amount of emotional turmoil and instability after her father, an undocumented Mexican immigrant, was detained and sent to prison over a year ago. At the time, Esperanza's family sought help from Grassroots Leadership, an organization that shares office space with PODER and focuses on the private prison industry and immigration detention. I had personally been involved with Grassroots Leadership for nearly six months when the YSJ program began and was thus asked to co-facilitate a workshop on immigration with Grassroots Leadership's Texas-based community organizer. Upon learning about Esperanza's story I invited her to help us present the workshop and share as much or as little about her story with the other YSJ participants. In the end, Esperanza broadly discussed what it felt like to have a loved one imprisoned and awaiting deportation. She later explained to me that when the moment came to open up about her father, the wounds were still too fresh for her to do so. Even so, the looks on her peers' faces and their comments about the injustice of immigration detention and deportations indicated that what Esperanza shared had left a mark on them.

Delia also had the opportunity to bring in her mother's experiences related to one of many instances of environmental racism in East Austin. Pure Casting is a facility that creates parts for military planes and therefore a lot of hammering, grinding, and the

pouring of hot metals occurs at the facility. The facility sits next to a neighborhood elementary school and is surrounded by many homes. Children of all ages and their parents walk by Pure Casting on their way to school and during everyday activities that take them outside of the home without knowing how toxic their environment is.

I never thought about what [Pure Casting] was. I went to school, when I was in elementary, it's like oh okay, it's just this big building. I didn't know what it actually was. When I found out what it was, I was like wow, I went to school right next to that?...[I thought it's] not bothering me...well, I didn't think it was bothering me. (Delia, interview, 08/07/2010)

Before participating in the YSJ program, Delia did not question Pure Casting's presence and only thought of it as her mother's workplace.

Community members such as Delia's mother who were employed by the facility worked in conditions that were hazardous to their health. This type of employment is one of few job opportunities in the community therefore Delia's mother endured this dangerous environment in order to support her family. Delia proudly shared that once she learned about Pure Casting's environmental impact, she was able to convince her mother to seek employment elsewhere by emphasizing how much she cared about her mother and her desire to keep her mother safe. The fact that PODER's YSJ curriculum is shaped by conditions in East Austin opens the door for youth like Delia to participate and contribute in a personal and meaningful way.

The testimonios shared by the youth in the YSJ program exemplify the necessity and the importance of bridging their home life to the issues the youth address during the summer. To assume that a student's home life does not or should not have a bearing on how a student behaves or what is discussed in an educational setting or context in effect

denies their humanity. Youth in particular are going through a lot of developmental changes that influence how they react in the moment and how they cope in the long term to circumstances that are challenging, and in the case of the YSJ participants, also a result of state-sanctioned injustice. Developmental changes, compounded by home stressors and school stressors, take a toll on the youth. Denied opportunities to discuss what they are going through and how they interact to mitigate or exacerbate trying situations, the youth may end up internalizing a lot of their emotions and feel hopeless or blame themselves for what they are going through.

By encouraging participants in the YSJ program to share their stories, the PODER staff members enact a Freirean pedagogy with the power to heal that validates participants' experiences and acknowledges how their worldview was shaped by discrimination. Welcoming these testimonios into the discussions also facilitates spiritual activism, which “combines self-reflection and self-growth with outward-directed, compassionate acts designed to bring about material change” (Keating, 2005, p. 244). As Anzaldúa (2002) explained:

Wounds cause you to shift consciousness – they either open you to the greater reality normally blocked by your habitual point of view or else shut you down, pushing you out of your body and into desconocimiento. Like love, pain might trigger compassion – if you're tender with yourself, you can be tender to others. Using wounds as openings to become vulnerable and available (present) to others means staying in your body. Excessive dwelling on your wounds means leaving your body to live in your thoughts, where you re-enact your past hurts, a form of desconocimiento that gives energy to the past, where it's held ransom. (p. 571-572)

As the youth begin to situate their experiences within a historical framework that names zero tolerance policies, the criminalization of youth, immigration detention,

environmental racism, and other dehumanizing practices as forms of institutionalized and systemic oppression, they can start tending to their wounded spirits. These wounds of oppression must be addressed and begin to heal by making the personal political before the youth are strong enough to commit themselves to a lifetime of fighting for social justice.

Democratic Teachers: Speaking With

As educators we are politicians; we engage in politics when we educate. And if we dream about democracy, let us fight, day and night, for a school in which we talk to and with the learners so that, hearing them, we can be heard by them as well. (Freire, 2005, p. 121)

The YSJ program's emphasis on making the personal political was facilitated by the PODER staff members' pursuit of democratic relationships with the youth. Much like Freire (1970/2000; 2005) emphasized, each staff member consistently endeavored to be a teacher-student while supporting the development of each youth as a student-teacher. As democratic teachers, the underlying message that the staff members communicated to the youth was that they valued their opinions and believed that they had something worthwhile to learn from the youth. This belief in the youth as teachers was readily apparent on any given day in the PODER home. On the first day of the YSJ program the youth and the staff co-created guidelines for dialogue to encourage equitable participation. A policy of "step up and step back" called on the youth who were normally quiet to be more vocal, and on the youth who frequently spoke to sit back and allow for silence so as to enable others' participation. In doing so, the staff eagerly sought the buzz of dialogue and active engagement.

The PODER staff members also tried to draw the quieter youth into the conversations by directly asking them questions and thereby reminding them that their input was valued and desired. A related agreed-upon policy of “one mic” asked everyone to actively and thoughtfully listen to one another. These policies were not always followed, but both the youth and the staff referred to them when they noticed an imbalance in participation and wanted to include more of the youth in the conversation. I frequently observed the staff members silence themselves and yield the floor to the youth if they started speaking at the same time. The staff also apologized to the youth if they unwittingly cut them off. Throughout all of these interactions, the message to the youth was the same: “I value and want to hear what you have to say.”

Every morning the PODER staff opened the “work day” by checking in with the youth and asking them to share what was on their minds. Considering the large issues that the organization and the program tackles, this may seem like a minor aspect of the program, but it is rooted in genuine care and love for the youth. This practice also evidences the staff members’ recognition of the humanity of the youth. In asking them to share aspects of their home life, the staff members acknowledge that individuals are shaped by society and that we carry the residue of our encounters with us. Marlén eloquently reflected on the importance of democratic dialogue with the youth:

We’re dealing with really heavy issues and there’s a lot of stuff that people shy away from talking about but the truth is that some of these youth are going through really heavy things in their community, whether it be within their family, whether it be related to poverty or violence or drug abuse around them that’s out of their control but they still see it. So they should still be allowed to talk about it and be allowed to get honesty in that exchange with adults or with [whomever] they’re dialoging with. (Marlén, interview, 07/23/2010)

The things that happen at home, on the street, in the store, and any other public or private space, leave their mark and shape our perspectives. In getting to learn about the participants' experiences, the staff members are better able to connect with the youth and recognize them as complex human beings. This is in stark contrast to the participants' experiences in school where individuals are swiftly sorted and labeled as either "good" or "bad" and by extension "worthwhile" or "worthless" without a second thought as to why they behave or respond in a certain manner.

Inviting the youth to open up and share their personal lives challenges the dichotomy that schools reinforce concerning students' life at home and what occurs in the classroom. Whereas PODER's brand of spiritual activism blurs the lines between the public and the private, schools demand students to compartmentalize their experiences and figuratively dissect their humanity from their experiences in the classroom. One can see the pedagogical implications of this dichotomy in teachers who feel pressured to follow scripted, "teacher-proof" curricula and "teach to the test." As a result, youth such as Liliana, a previous YSJ participant, graduate from school with the belief that "in school they teach you basically what they have to teach you; it's the same thing every year that they teach you" and that "school [only helps] you a little bit in life" (Liliana, interview, 09/12/2010). Students internalize the message that the teachers and the schools do not care about them as human beings and ultimately do not have an interest in helping them achieve happiness and self-actualization. The youth in the YSJ program are further dehumanized through their experiences with criminalization as students of color.

In such toxic school environments there are few, if any, opportunities for teachers to genuinely hear the students and get to know them outside of imposed hierarchical relationships that reinforce unequal relations of power. Teachers must be willing and feel empowered enough to create those spaces within a context that is designed to elevate a few and subjugate many. In implementing the “step up and step back” and “one mic” policies, the PODER staff members consciously struggle to hear the youth and speak with them rather than solely talk to them in a manner that is reminiscent of the banking method the majority of teachers are presently trained to rely on (Freire, 1970/2000). The youth consistently referred to the staff as “family,” “leaders,” and “mentors” who are “strong,” “amazing,” and “caring,” which is a far cry from many of the participants’ descriptions of schools as “boring” and teachers as “rude” and “racist.”

The honest concern and interest that the PODER staff members demonstrated towards the youth allowed the youth to reveal both their passions and their problems. Yoly explained that “as a person, I just like talking to youth. I like getting to know them. I like seeing them grow” (Yoly, interview, 07/22/2010). I witnessed Jaime bond with Marlén and one of the volunteers, who was a radio DJ, over their love of music. Esperanza asked Audre, the summer intern, for advice about tattoos and piercings because Audre visibly had many of both. Michael asked Audre, who is also bicultural/biracial, to help him care for his dreadlocked hair. Another youth had a lot of questions and doubts about religion and the role it played in her life and turned to Aaren for advice. In previous years, participants have also come forward with serious problems that they felt they could not divulge to anyone else.

Sometimes we might not agree with the things [the youth] do. I've had some experiences with youth where they tell me they've done some bad things and they regretted it. At that point they felt they really needed to do those things and I tell them we all make mistakes. It's not always about the mistake, it's about how you fix and correct it. What I was trying to teach them from my beliefs is that we all make mistakes but it counts on how you help people and how you fix the mistake or how you solve a problem or help somebody solve their problem... You need to look out for other people because one day somebody will look out for you when you need them. (Aaren, interview, 07/23/2010)

By not being asked to compromise their humanity – which encompasses their triumphs, passions, and mistakes – as a prerequisite to learning, the youth do in fact step forward to engage with others and reveal themselves as the complex human beings that they are.

Although the PODER staff attempted to be as egalitarian as possible, there is no denying that as an organization PODER is culturally rooted in the Chican@/Latin@ culture where honor and respect for elders is highly emphasized. It was thus natural for the youth to behave in a way that indicated a degree of deference to elders and anyone who is older. Even so, the staff members were careful and deliberate in their role as democratic teachers to reinforce their view of themselves as teachers-students and their view of the youth as students-teachers. As Monica described, “[The PODER staff members] treat me like I'm one of them, like I'm not a kid” (Monica, interview, 08/05/2010). Yoly spoke of wanting to transfer more of the decision-making power and responsibilities to the youth, which would build their self-confidence as they re-imagine themselves as subjects.

I would definitely like to see the youth take on more leadership positions within the YSJ and help structure the program, help facilitate the majority of the program. I would like to see a transition from them coming in and being participants to actually mentoring new incoming YSJ [participants]. (Yoly, interview, 07/22/2010)

That is perhaps the greatest example of a democratic teacher: one who recognizes unequal relations of power and actively works against those dehumanizing systems of domination to create and sustain a more egalitarian and nurturing environment.

Educación Para la Liberación

Though inclusive of formal academic training, [for Latino students] *educación* additionally refers to competence in the social world, wherein one respects the dignity and individuality of others...when teachers deny their students the opportunity to engage in reciprocal relationships, they simultaneously invalidate the definition of education that most of these young people embrace. And, since that definition is thoroughly grounded in Mexican culture, its rejection constitutes a dismissal of their culture as well. (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 23)

PODER and the Young Scholars for Justice Program seek to enable the empowerment of people of color through education, advocacy, and action. The Young Scholars for Justice program in particular operates within an educational framework that greatly differs from the one schools buy and sell. The philosophical underpinnings of the program's vision of *educación* stretch far beyond the school and encompass how one should live in the world with other human beings. This vision is thus a complete departure from what we see in schools, where the purpose of education is essentially to dominate and subjugate as it rejects and denies the existence of one's humanity. Adopting the characteristics required to be a "good student" and achieve academically thus demands the gradual depletion of the human spirit rather than nurturing a sense of empowerment.

The guiding principle that informs the content and the character of the YSJ program is love and respect: for one another and for Mother Earth. As an organization,

PODER asks individuals to push the boundaries and envision how we can live sustainably so that we protect our environment and so that we create communities in which people are able to lead happy, healthful, and meaningful lives. As Aaren explains:

We teach a lot about equality and what we try to get through to the youth is that they deserve to live in a place that's healthy, that's clean, and that is conducive to learning and equality and community. We want them to understand that they deserve better than what may be offered to them. They don't need to make tons and tons of money to be able to want to live in a healthy community and know that it should just be standard. You shouldn't have to have a super high education in order to have a job that you love. You shouldn't have to conform to buying things all the time, or always tempting people with material items. We want to teach them about the happiness within. People that come back, they have a different understanding about....I guess they understand more what it's like to care for other people. (Aaren, 07/23/2010)

This message is especially important for the youth to hear at an age when they are beginning to make sense of the world and it ultimately serves to lay the foundation for what they perceive their role to be in shaping the world and their responsibilities as human beings. Delia's comment, for example, reflects a budding awareness and appreciation of the interconnectedness of all forms of life: "[Being in the YSJ] made me appreciate the environment and want to help it...just protecting Mother Earth and everything that's on her and in her" (Delia, interview, 08/07/2010).

Instead of dictating what kind of world we must live in and assigning youth to pre-determined roles in society, the YSJ program asks the youth to break with their conditioning and develop a "critical radical imagination" (Ginwright, 2008) as they conjure up a world predicated on justice and human rights. In doing so, the YSJ program also advances an understanding of solidarity that crosses city limits, man-made borders, and bodies of water. Lushan expressed a notion of interconnectedness that guided the

founding of PODER and currently leads them to frame issues in terms of human rights and the responsibilities we have to one another as human beings.

We're all community and it's not about individualism, but it's about community. And positive changes can only be brought about through working together, organizing, advocating, and taking actions together. If we really want to change our communities and society and the world, we have to be active in it; we have to participate. That means participating from local to global. We have to stay involved. (Lushan, interview, 07/20/2010)

By blurring the lines between what are considered public and private or individual and collective matters as well as through the development of loving and democratic relationships guided by the implementation of an emancipatory education, the YSJ program waters the seeds of a spiritual activism that serves as a tool for the self-affirmation of the humanity of the youth in the face of institutional forms of domination that work effortlessly to subjugate them. The youth consequently walk away with a sense of individual and collective agency that has the potential to open up their imagination to limitless possibilities.

Creative self-expression played a key role during the course of the program as a mechanism for liberation to help the youth process existing wounds and explore new understandings. These activities fed spiritual activism by calling for participants to use their experiences as Chican@s and students of color in East Austin. The capoeira workshop conducted by members of Austin's Orun Cultural Center was one activity that deeply resonated with the youth. The instructor leading the workshop described capoeira's history as a non-contact martial art that slaves developed to build up their strength and disguise their resistance as horseplay. Ultimately, capoeira is about self-

awareness and awareness of others' movements in order to predict your sparring partner's next move and shift your body accordingly. In practicing self-awareness, one will be able to think positively and learn about the many things that one has to offer the world.

The youth deeply connected with the instructor's statement that "everybody is running around with a mask on their face." His message was that practicing capoeira, including other forms of creative self-expression, offers an opportunity to rid oneself of that mask by channeling the strength and power we each possess and learning what to do with our "warrior energy." Monica initially shied away from participating and even went so far as to hide behind the refrigerator that was in the room to avoid doing capoeira. However, once Monica saw the other youth having fun and laughing she dropped her inhibitions and decided to lose herself in the free movement of her body. Monica recalled that "it was pretty interesting, though, to see all those...like if you were fighting...but you're just dancing and being your own self when you were doing it" (Monica, interview, 08/05/2010). The notion of being free to be yourself and of stripping away the masks one wears as a form of self-defense was something many of the youth identified with.

Writing and poetry were also strongly valued as tools for self-expression and self-exploration. When describing the power of poetry to the youth, Marlén underscored its potential to heal, educate, and empower. The transformative effects of creating poetry were evident in the way two members of the YSJ program, Delia and Liliana, spoke about writing and their eagerness to share their writing with others. After Delia participated in the YSJ for the first time during the summer of 2009, she frequently read

her poetry at events hosted by PODER and at the local Chican@ bookstore, Resistencia Books. When I first heard Delia read her poetry, long before I had even conceived of conducting research with the YSJ program, I clearly remember being struck by how happy she appeared to be to have the chance to share her words.

Liliana's experiences with writing poetry during her time with PODER were life altering and helped her clarify what she wanted to achieve during her time on this planet. Prior to her involvement with PODER, Liliana viewed writing as an onerous task that she was forced to do in school.

In school you write because you have to. It's something that if you don't do it, you won't pass. If you don't do it "right," you won't pass. At PODER there's no right or wrong answer when you write. You write because you want to, you write out of your soul, out of your heart, and you can just never put a grade on that. (Liliana, interview, 09/12/2010)

For Liliana it all started with PODER staff members asking her to share her writing with the world. In time, Liliana "started feeling more comfortable about reading my poetry and just the [positive] reaction from people that I got when I read my poetry" (Liliana, interview, 09/12/2010) encouraged her to share her writing. Liliana not only discovered that she was passionate about writing, she also came to the realization that she wanted to pursue a career as a writer because it filled her with so much joy.

Before, I used to always have this thing of, "Oh I'm gonna go to college because I have to get a job to get more money to be able to support myself." Even though it wasn't something that I was going to love to do...it'll pay the bills and I'll have a comfortable life. After joining PODER I started learning more and developing a political view and that's when I realized I wanted to be a writer. Why am I gonna go to school, why am I gonna throw away so many years and so much time of my life to end up doing something that I don't love to do or something that I'm not passionate about...[I want to] start on my career on being a writer, which is what I

love to do. Whether or not it pays me that much, it's just a passion of mine and it's something I love to do, so why not? (Liliana, interview, 09/12/2010)

Once Liliana started “writing out of her soul,” there was no going back. The new vision she had for the world and for her place in the world was brimming with excitement and possibilities.

As their fleeting time together came to a close, the youth all worked on “Where I Come From” poems, created artwork, and collaborated to produce a frozen image that described their experiences that summer. Just as Liliana explained, there were no “right” or “wrong” answers to what they envisioned and crafted. The PODER staff members simply encouraged them to create from within; that is, to put themselves and their experiences in their work in order to make it an honest reflection of them. There was a palpable sense of community and support as they laughed, talked, and worked that grew exponentially in those five short weeks together. Witnessing the participants’ excitement about poetry, art, and performance reinforced my understanding of the power that Paulo Freire (2005) identified in cultural production and the role of teachers as cultural workers. By unleashing their creativity, the youth experienced themselves as artists, as producers of something beautiful and original. Art subsequently represented a form of resistance for the youth in that it encouraged the recognition of one’s ability to envision something and then create a physical representation of that vision.

The spiritual activism of the youth grew and developed as a result of making the personal political, caring relationships that encouraged dialogue and healing, creative self-expression, and collective action in the community – all of which were guided by the

PODER staff members' understanding of *educación* and our interconnectedness. Ultimately, the cultural wealth of East Austin and of the youth is the glue that binds the different program elements together. Whereas schools tout a colorblind ideology while employing curricula that perpetuate white supremacy or curricula that promote sanitized versions of multiculturalism in the name of tolerance, the YSJ program acknowledges and affirms the participants' identities as black and brown youth and finds strengths where schools see deficiencies. When schools negate or belittle students' culture they simultaneously denigrate students' humanity and therefore deny them the opportunity to experience *una educación* that is meaningful and teaches them how to live in and with the world.

Supporting the YSJ participants' ability to dream of a more just and humane world thus flies in sharp contrast to schools' treatment of students as objects who are always acted upon and incapable of an original thought. As Liliana's critique demonstrates, the cultural wealth that students of color bring to the schools is viewed as a collection of histories that must be silenced and obstacles to be overcome.

When you go to school they teach you about American history. That's what they teach you about, that's what the books are about in history class. It's American history. I didn't know really much about my culture or my roots just going to school until I joined PODER and it helped me learn more about where I'm from, where my family comes from, where my roots are from. (Liliana, interview, 09/12/2010)

Rather than function as democratic public spheres, schools launch an attack on the very tools that the youth need to make sense of their world (Giroux, 2010).

Liliana's *testimonio* about the passion she discovered for writing is about more than just writing. Liliana's participation in the YSJ program enabled her to realize that she deserved more from life than to merely survive. To be fully present in this world as a human being, she needed to be in an environment that allowed her to thrive. Over the years the *educación* that the YSJ program provided enabled Liliana to realize that she not only deserved to be happy and to live in a way that made her existence meaningful, but also that she was capable of creating that world. Her empowerment resulted in a *liberación* from a way of living in and being with the world that denied her humanity and agency. With this new PODERista consciousness, Yvette thus developed a mindset "beyond survival" (Villenas et al., 2006). This change in consciousness that Liliana and other youth in the program experienced is also a reflection of a growing sense of solidarity and the recognition of an interconnectedness between all forms of life. The spiritual activism that blossomed within the youth as a result of the view of *educación* that the YSJ program promulgated thus facilitated the participants' eventual transformation into historical actors.

MUJERES EN LA LUCHA: THE IMPACT OF PODER'S CHICANA FEMINIST EPISTEMOLOGY ON PARTICIPANTS

As I will discuss in further detail, PODER's Chicana feminist framework is the organization's most significant and influential characteristic that informs the implementation of the Young Scholars for Justice program. Notions of love, respect, and community create a safe and nurturing environment that encourages the youth to take risks and see one another as family members. The underlying philosophy guiding

PODER staff members' actions is one born of struggle as Chicana@s who are aware of the urgency of preparing the future generations, especially females of color, to continue *en la lucha*. The value PODER explicitly places on Mother Earth and protecting and advocating for the community cause the youth to re-examine their relationship with the soil beneath their feet and to redefine themselves as caretakers of the world. The youth also begin to develop a PODERista identity through which they view themselves as historical actors in their community. The young females in particular that I interviewed shared passionate and heartfelt testimonios about the degree to which the YSJ program had an impact on them.

I readily identified with the female youth's *testimonios* because of the ways in which PODER's Chicana feminist framework had a powerful influence on my identity development and self-esteem. In many ways the story of the Young Scholars for Justice is also my story. Through my observations and interviews I attempted to make sense of not only what the youth experienced, but also the internal upheaval and transformation that I began several years before as a 19-year-old undergraduate student. Knowledge of the land upon which our soles rest has the potential to connect our spirits to the struggles that were waged in the name of the people living on that land. When the history of the roots that underlie and support the foundation of our communities nourishes our soul and consciousness, our imagination is able to flourish as we embark on a psychological metamorphosis. The *testimonios* that follow will provide a clearer visualization of PODER's efforts to plant and water the seeds of change and coax those seedlings that emerge into blossoms.

“Power to the women”

It was definitely about giving young females the tools so that they too can become leaders, so that they too can be the advocates for our community. That’s always been very important to PODER...to make sure that we’re also grooming females to take on those leadership roles and to bring changes. And not have to just be constantly behind the male figure...we have no problems with us being equal with males, but not behind. It’s important for the female to take that leadership role. (Lushan, interview, 07/20/2010)

Although PODER initially only targeted high-school-aged females for the YSJ program when it first started in 1995, the organization expanded the program to include male youth as well as younger members of the East Austin community who are in middle school. Even so, PODER continues to emphasize the leadership development of female youth. Since the YSJ program began, at least half of the participants every summer have been females. From each class of the YSJ program, one female is selected for an internship with the Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice (SNEEJ). Liliana and Delia were both SNEEJ interns and therefore had the opportunity to attend conferences throughout the U.S. and participate in trainings for youth organizers.

The PODER staff members are cognizant that at their core, these conferences are about more than simply helping the females acquire skills; they are also about connecting the youth to a larger family and community.

I think conferences are especially good because they take...people of any age out of an environment where they might be the minority in terms of doing social justice organizing...When we take them to a conference in Houston, or the Social Forum, or wherever it is, then they see a whole bunch more people who are into social justice organizing and they’re talking about it the same way and addressing the same issues in other cities, in other places. It’s actually a very strong, large community. It’s not just this tiny marginalized group, even though sometimes we

feel that way... There's thousands of other people doing this work, it's not just us. That's always empowering and it kind of gives you momentum to keep addressing every issue through that lens. (Marlén, 07/23/2010)

Delia strongly echoed Marlén's sentiments about the power in attending conferences and the messages she walked away with.

[As] a youth intern... [I went] to Tennessee to the Seeds of Fire camp. Just being there taught me so much more and showed me that all over the United States [there] are organizations like PODER. Then a few weeks later I got to go to New Mexico to YOTI, Youth Organizer Training Institute, and learn once again about other struggles other organizations have gone [through] and how [they're] dealing and surviving it. It just made me realize that if all the oppressed organizations came together... we could probably truly change the country. (Delia, personal communication, 03/06/2011)

Actively creating opportunities that allow the youth to step outside of their immediate communities and circle of friends is all the more significant for the females in the YSJ program because of their gender. Female youth organizers are often forced to contend with increased parental worry and the privileging of the male voice when they want to get involved in more active and visible ways (Gordon, 2010). Forging a pathway that is sensitive to the additional obstacles that young females must confront is thus invaluable.

PODER's female leadership itself also has a lasting influence on the young women who become involved with the organization. As Lushan noted, "If you have a woman-led organization, you're going to attract women... we want to make sure that we say it's okay for a woman to be in the leadership role" (Lushan, interview, 07/20/2010). Seeing Chicanas in a leadership position was empowering and inspiring to the female YSJ participants. Having Chicana role models compelled Liliana and Delia to continue their involvement with PODER over the years because the organization offered a space in

which women's voices guided decision-making processes.

During the seven years that Liliana was closely involved with PODER, she transitioned from being a participant in the summer youth program to being a youth coordinator. For Liliana, the experience was “really, really cool. I had been in it so long, so it was my turn to try and help somebody else out just like the college interns tried to help me out before” (Liliana, interview, 09/12/2010). The shift in responsibilities allowed Liliana to give back to the organization and to provide the kind of support for other youth that she had found helpful and led her to become more self-reflective. Liliana didn't see her job as “telling [youth] what to do or anything,” but rather as one of “guiding them into what they needed...I wouldn't give them answers; I'd just make them think about stuff” (Liliana, interview, 09/12/2010).

The gradual change that Liliana underwent in the course of working with PODER expanded her conception of what women were capable of and led her to re-evaluate her priorities. Liliana's grandmother and aunt, who own and operate a successful tailor shop that sits across the street from the PODER home, were responsible for raising Liliana. Despite this strong female presence in her upbringing and the fact that her family members had established a well-known business as seamstresses, Liliana did not see herself as a strong or powerful female who potentially had something to contribute to her community. Before coming to PODER Liliana “was just doing my own thing, what a 13-year-old does. Going to school and staying at home watching TV or being on the phone all day” (Liliana, interview, 09/12/2010). Liliana also felt that she was “never really a

part of anything big and important before. I always thought that there was nothing really out there for me to do” (Liliana, interview, 09/12/2010).

The support and example set by PODER’s Chicana leadership led to a paradigm shift with respect to what Liliana thought women in general could accomplish, and more specifically changed what Liliana thought she could accomplish.

It felt good to know that I was a Chicana, that I was a Latina making a difference. Step by step, but I was making a difference...[I thought] power to the women. Power to the Latina women. You don’t hear much about Latina women that are appreciated for what they do, for the impact that they make in this world. I think Lushan and Yoly and this whole organization run by strong women is an amazing thing to see. It’s just...you look at them and you hope to God that you one day will be somewhere, anywhere, near how they are. They’re strong; they have the potential to do so many things. It’s amazing because I’ve never seen so many women...with such tough skin...it’s like they’re pulling the weight of the world on their shoulders. And they’re trying to spread it. They’re trying to spread it among these other Chicana, Latina women. (Liliana, interview, 09/12/2010)

Liliana first came to the organization as a 13-year-old at the urging of her grandmother, whom Liliana described as an activist who had worked alongside Lushan in the past. Watching the PODER women in action and having the chance to work with and learn from them pushed the limits as to what Liliana believed were the existing possibilities. Her admiration for PODER’s female leadership also encouraged Liliana to redefine the role of Chicanas in society: *la Chicana* did not have to follow men; she could lead and walk with men, shoulder-to-shoulder, *en la lucha*. Being around women who were politically active and highly vocal and visible in the community was thus a departure from what Liliana was used to.

Delia expressed a change similar to Liliana’s with respect to her priorities after participating in the Young Scholars for Justice program.

[Before working with PODER] all I really cared about was money and buying stuff. When I found out what's going on in my community I started to think more like, maybe I should stop spending so much money and start using it for good things, and saving it. (Delia, interview, 08/07/2010)

Delia landed on PODER's doorstep after one of her teachers suggested that she should apply for the YSJ program. At the time Delia was in the eighth grade and in search of a summer job. She decided to submit an application for the summer youth program due to her teacher's words of encouragement. Prior to the YSJ program Delia already believed that women were strong and capable and she also had a positive sense of self. However, women's lack of visibility led Delia to assume that women as a whole did not see themselves as empowered.

I've always thought that women were strong and just remembering Rosa Parks I knew that women could make a difference. But we never really hear about women making a difference in the textbooks and in history. So I've always thought maybe women thought they couldn't. But sure indeed they can, I mean just look at PODER's women, they're strong and always no matter how small or how grand speak their voice out and well make a difference. Just knowing that Lushan shut down the Holly Power Plant makes me so proud to be a woman. (Delia, personal communication, 03/06/2011)

PODER connected Delia to an existing network of women who were actively working towards the creation of a more humane world where women are valued and all are encouraged to become Mother Earth's caretakers. Like Liliana, seeing Chicanas in leadership positions was a catalyst for a paradigm shift in Delia's perception of who the decision makers and agents of change in the community could be.

The significance and influence on PODER staff members and college interns of being around strong-willed women of color who demanded justice for their community is also key to understanding the scope of the impact of PODER and the YSJ program.

Yoly, PODER's current co-director, was awe-struck and inspired when she first met Lushan and Dolores, two of PODER's founding members.

I can't even describe it. I guess [they had a big impact] because I'm a little older and I'm coming from [Eagle Pass on] the border of Texas and Mexico, where Chicanas are not in leadership positions...[Dolores and Lushan] made an amazing team together, an amazing, amazing team. When I came in I just learned, I soaked it all in, I learned from both of them...Dolores, she will sit down with you and talk to you for hours and she will explain in detail and she will use her social work background to make sure you're okay...And Lushan on the other hand, Lushan is more throw you into the fire and making you a leader without you even realizing it. (Yoly, interview, 07/22/2010)

Even though Chicanas do not occupy very many leadership positions in Austin, Yoly felt that Chicanas' presence as leaders was stronger in Austin than in Eagle Pass. Being in a new environment where women's voices were valued and strengthened began to transform how Yoly made sense of the world.

Soon after meeting Lushan and Dolores while she was an undergraduate student, they became Yoly's "other mothers" and "mentors in the social justice field." For Yoly, PODER "changed my course...my life path." Working with Lushan, a former Brown Beret, and Dolores, the first Chicana from East Austin to obtain a doctorate, pushed Yoly to re-imagine herself as a historical actor. Yoly was often caught off guard during meetings when Lushan would ask her to speak about a campaign PODER was working on and in effect serve as an advocate for the community. "Before I knew it, there I was, standing up talking about things that I didn't think I was capable of doing" (Yoly, interview, 07/22/2010). The influence of PODER's "abuelitas" on Yoly led her to unconsciously take a similar approach with the youth in the YSJ program. "I've caught myself doing that too because sometimes you have so much on your mind that you forget

to say [what you wanted to say]” (Yoly, interview, 07/22/2010). Much like Lushan did with her, Yoly now positions youth to speak up during meetings even when the youth themselves are unaware that they will be asked to speak. In doing so PODER creates new standards and expectations for participation that shine the spotlight on female youth.

PODER created a sort of continuum of change in the sense that the very actions and topics that changed Yoly when she first came to PODER are now a part of the YSJ program. And indeed, that is one of the YSJ program’s stated goals: to integrate youth into PODER’s program work. Yoly’s awareness of the organization’s effect on her empowerment as a woman of color motivates her to facilitate the same process in the youth. By valuing *la Chicana* and the role she plays in the community and in the family, PODER created a family-like environment in which the youth found support and love. Such an environment appeared to have the greatest effect on the spiritual activism of the young females in the program, who lacked sufficient examples of Chicana leaders that they could identify with and draw inspiration from.

Although I do not share Yoly’s frame of reference regarding Chicanas in leadership positions because I grew up in Austin, I can attest to the absence of Chicanas in decision-making bodies even in a “progressive” and “liberal” city such as Austin. Like Liliana, Delia, and Yoly, I found the environment that PODER and the YSJ created to be transformative. Our experiences attest to findings from studies that indicate that political involvement can be a boon to participants’ self-concept and self-esteem (Ginwright, 2010; Pancer et al., 2007). Furthermore, PODER created opportunities and helped us acquire skills to challenge social problems, which studies have also shown to be

instrumental in assisting youth to recognize their power as individuals to improve their community and develop a sense of responsibility to enact social change (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Delgado & Staples, 2008; Gordon, 2010; Guajardo & Guajardo, 2008). Our positioning as working-class women of color made the effects of our involvement in PODER's YSJ program even more pronounced: whereas we initially thought of others as leaders, we came to perceive Chicanas, and therefore potentially ourselves, as leaders and agents of change.

PODER as Family: Beyond Bloodlines

To see that PODER had kind of become this haven for [youth] is really rewarding and also really what it comes down to is that there's a lot of love in this space. It's not just respect and truth, we treat [youth] with love and they feel that. I think that positivity makes such a big impact and sometimes if they're not able to get that at home, because everybody's at work or because there's whatever negativity, they're finding it here and it's influencing them in a positive way and that's incredibly rewarding to me. (Marlén, interview, 07/23/2010)

There is quite possibly no better place than the kitchen at PODER headquarters to begin to understand how the organization works. The kitchen in the PODER home seems to have a powerful way of bringing people together and allows for *convivencia*, or the act of spending time together, to occur. Even when the PODER home was located on a quiet corner on Garden Street several years ago, I recall that the kitchen was also a focal point and the unofficial gathering place that people appeared to naturally gravitate towards. The kitchen's magnetic pull has a history of setting people at ease as they sit down to talk and laugh over a cup of coffee or discuss the details of a current campaign. For Yoly, PODER is her second home; a place "where you can come in and put up your feet if you wanted to work in the kitchen. Or eat breakfast and have coffee and have a meeting. It's

been a very warm environment, but it's also been a learning experience" (Yoly, interview, 07/22/2010).

Marlén powerfully described her understanding of the importance of the tight-knit environment PODER has constructed. Marlén characterized PODER's organizing style as "matriarchal", which provided space for the staff members to take care of themselves in order to invest time and energy into the community: "We're working for community, but community starts at home...You're only going to be productive if your [needs] are being met" (Marlén, interview, 07/23/2010). While PODER's structure enables its staff members to practice self-nurturing by spending time away from the office when needed, it also enables *convivencia*. PODER practices *convivencia* by nurturing a sense of family and unity in struggle where both bonding and hard work can occur around a kitchen table. Because staff members are able to take time for themselves when it is necessary, the strength and spirit they bring to the kitchen table is all the more potent. Consequently, PODER staff members are able to become more than co-workers whose identities are limited to their official title within the organization. They develop deep and meaningful relationships as human beings and the honesty of those ties that unite them implicitly create a warm home that welcomes and envelops the youth when they step inside the PODER house.

Although the existing bonds between the YSJ participants themselves and between some of the youth and the PODER staff members can be intimidating for the youth who are new to the program, the youth quickly find that those bonds are permeable and flexible and therefore capable of expanding to embrace them. Monica, for example,

felt nervous and scared on the first day of the YSJ program. While the rest of the youth had gathered in the back room in the PODER home waiting for the program orientation to start, I noticed that Monica opted to stay in the living room with the PODER staff members and volunteers. She had a worried look on her face and alternated between running her fingers through her long, curly hair and using her hair to shield her face, as though she wanted to hide. This soon changed; the same girl who said that she was unsure about being in the YSJ program was laughing away and talking to the other youth in just a few days.

Reflecting on her initial impressions of the program, Monica shared that, “being around different people that I did not know, it was kind of scary at first but you get used to them. It’s like your own little family here” (Monica, interview, 08/05/2010). Given her initial apprehension about being around so many new and unfamiliar people, I assumed that it would be difficult for Monica to open up to the rest of the group. On the contrary, Monica shared a sad and personal story about her grandmother on the very first day after the youth worked in groups to create colorful and vibrant maps of East Austin as seen through their eyes. The fact that PODER is headquartered in an actual house took Monica by surprise and was instrumental in chipping away at her defenses. In a short amount of time Monica viewed the PODER home as a space that felt freeing.

I just thought it was a real laid-back place and it wasn’t somewhere where you would be told what to do, but it’s like you’re free. Not like you’re at home where somebody’s always telling you what to do and clean your room. And at school, sit down and don’t get up, or something like that. Here it’s just relaxing and it’s not a place for, not violence, but freedom. [To] be yourself. Especially when you’re here cuz you can’t be yourself anywhere else. (Monica, interview, 08/05/2010)

Despite Monica's young age, she had already spent time in juvenile detention centers on multiple occasions and lost loved ones to violence and the prison machine. The notion of feeling free enough to be herself in this new family was thus highly meaningful for Monica.

Other youth echoed Monica's sentiments about the environment that PODER created. Delia thought that, "the environment here is very like you're at home, that's what I like...it's very relaxing and not stressful, which is how maybe some jobs can be" (Delia, interview, 08/07/2010). Delia also participated in the YSJ program the previous summer and observed that the small size of the group made a difference in creating a sense of closeness that allowed them to "just kind of [mesh] and kind of [become] a little PODER family" (Delia, interview, 08/07/2010). Now into her second year of involvement with PODER, Delia also had a better understanding of how the organization functioned. She perceived that "the whole team kind of has this family quality and...knowledge that's really, really good" (Delia, interview, 08/07/2010), which allowed them to work together in a way that complemented each staff member's roles. As she thought of how she would describe PODER staff members, a big smile spread over Delia's face, she tilted her head to the side and answered simply with, "They're caring. I love them" (Delia, interview, 08/07/2010).

The feeling of being surrounded by family members came naturally to Roberto, whose grandmother and uncle (Lushan and Aaren) are both PODER staff members. Roberto's cousin Emiliano, who was visiting Austin during the summer, was also a part of the YSJ program. Emiliano was born in Austin and was involved with the YSJ

program before his family moved to Corpus Christi. Both Roberto and Emiliano participated in PODER campaigns even before they began to understand the significance of their actions. Roberto indicated that “at first it was just like, my grandma would say, “Here, hold a sign,” and I would say okay, whatever” (Roberto, interview, 08/07/2010). In fact, there is a rather adorable framed picture of Roberto and Emiliano that was taken when they were six or seven years old, holding up a sign that states “Protect Our Children.” More than just family members, Roberto also came to think of the PODER staff members as “my mentors and my leaders...they’re all great...they have so much more experience and they can teach me so much. And they’re a joy to be around, too, even out of work” (Roberto, interview, 08/07/2010). What began for Roberto “as any other job just to make money” took on a different meaning over time, “and now we’re pretty much like a little family and it’s just great” (Roberto, interview, 08/07/2010).

Like Monica, Liliana discovered a sense of freedom and family with PODER that led her to discover that she was a “poet.” Liliana now considers writing to be “one of my biggest passions and PODER helped me see that and find myself...[now I] lose myself in that experience, in writing” (Liliana, interview, 09/12/2010). After being a part of PODER for so long, Liliana finds it difficult to imagine the path her life might have taken without PODER’s guidance.

I’m glad my family got me involved in that program. I wouldn’t be the person that I am today if I didn’t. My life wouldn’t have been changed and impacted if I hadn’t joined that program, if I hadn’t met Lushan, if I hadn’t met Yoly. I remember at the beginning when we were crammed in that small office off of Garden Street next to the Holly Power Plant...It’s just always felt like a really big family, being in the PODER organization. It just always felt like that’s my second family. I can always count on my PODER family to be there when I need them to

be there to support me in whatever decision I made. That is my second family and every chance I do try, I try and visit and try and see what everybody's up to. (Liliana, interview, 09/12/2010)

The honesty and love with which Liliana spoke about PODER was palpable and moving. I attended the graduation ceremony for the YSJ summer class of 2009, which was Liliana's final summer with the organization after she graduated high school and moved from East Austin to a suburb just outside of Austin. Liliana shared a poem about the impact PODER had on her and she sobbed as she read the lines, crying tears of gratitude that touched me and everyone else in attendance. After seven years, Liliana began a new stage in her life, knowing that she was a stronger person with a sense of purpose and the *apoyo* of two loving families.

Marlén's commentary in the beginning of this section alludes to the underlying reasons why the youth quoted above developed familial bonds with one another and with the PODER staff members. The matriarchal style of the organization allowed the staff members to nurture themselves and their families and therefore they were able to be mentally and emotionally present and invested in PODER's campaigns. As a result, the youth in the YSJ program benefited from a family environment that felt loving and had the potential to empower the youth. Monica and Michael both expressed being rejected by family members and consequently grateful for the joy and sense of connectedness they perceived when they were with PODER. Liliana essentially discovered herself and what she was passionate about and dreamed of never-ending possibilities, knowing that she had not one but two families to help her through whatever obstacles she might encounter in the future. And every year that Roberto participated with PODER and the YSJ he was

able to add new members to a family that was initially only related by blood. PODER created a community, a family, which encouraged the YSJ participants to envision a better life despite living in a world that often treated them unjustly.

Building Confianza

I think a lot of times, particularly when we're looking at the Young Scholars for Justice, we're looking at a group of youth who come from communities where they're often not treated with respect and they're often criticized for being disrespectful. There are a lot of stereotypes I think when you look at school discipline and you look at the criminalization of youth, a lot of times people talk about a lack of respect and a lot of times I see youth disrespected kind of before they even get a chance to prove themselves...I think this kind of mutual respect thing is one of the biggest values and principles...that I see as a very strong foundation at PODER and then with the Young Scholars. (Marlén, interview, 07/23/2010)

PODER's offices, symbolically located on a street named after famed Chicano civil rights leader César Chávez, transformed into a home and a haven in the hearts and the imaginations of the youth in the summer program. The *confianza*, or trust, that blossomed between the youth and the PODER staff members and volunteers developed quickly with the assistance of the caring and familial environment that already existed. The youth then took it upon themselves to co-create a safe space in partnership with each other and with the adults. Within a few days of the start of the YSJ program, echoes of laughter constantly bounced off of the dark crimson walls and filled the house with warmth and a lighthearted spirit. Meeting a group of people for the first time can be difficult due to awkwardness and shyness, especially during adolescence. It becomes an even greater challenge when one's experiences in school cause one to distrust peers and

“authority figures.” The strong bond that united the youth when the program came to a close was therefore all the more remarkable and moving to witness and experience.

Every morning during the YSJ program the PODER staff members and volunteers encouraged the youth to go around the room and share what was going on in their lives if they felt comfortable doing so. We shared laughs and told stories as we ate breakfast together while still respecting the silence of those who did not want to speak that day. During the program orientation, we collectively developed *acuerdos* to guide our daily interactions and encourage mutual respect. The youth who previously participated in the program offered words of advice to the new members of the family and helped one another carry out tasks such as conducting the surveys. When the youth expressed concern or insecurity before a presentation or after doing something the youth perceived as a mistake, the staff members and volunteers reassured them that people make mistakes and that mistakes allow personal growth to occur. Most telling of all was that the youth began to seek each other out outside of the YSJ program, they enjoyed sticking around the PODER home once the “work day” ended, and they also turned to the adults for advice.

[It’s rewarding] when youth come to us for advice about something and you can tell that they really want a helpful opinion. In some cases they felt like they couldn’t get it somewhere else. So when they come to us with a dilemma, whether it’s what kind of car they should buy, or whether it’s something they’ve done, like Aaren says and they’re not proud of and don’t want to tell anybody about, but to know that they feel comfortable and that there’s a trust there is incredibly rewarding. (Marlén, interview, 07/23/2010)

Developing trusting relationships felt gratifying for the youth and adults, both of whom co-construct a safe space that focuses on personal development and mutual respect for one another rather than discipline and mistrust.

A lot of the youth described school as a place of discontent and animosity where the lessons were boring, the teachers were rude and disrespectful, and one needed to be on the defensive in order to make it through the day. In an effort to protect oneself from hurtful comments and actions at school, some of the youth learned to construct barriers in an effort to maintain a sense of dignity and self-worth. This was the case for Monica, who received a lot of negative attention from teachers and other students. Due to tensions at home Monica began getting into trouble at school. She eventually also refused to come home for days and even weeks at a time to avoid conflict at home. Monica's mother and stepfather subsequently called the police in an effort to get Monica to come home. Monica was twelve years old the first time she was sent to a local juvenile detention center after accumulating curfew tickets and acting out at school.

Although at the time of the interview nearly a year and a half had passed since she was last "locked up," Monica continues to suffer from the repercussions of being criminalized and labeled as someone who was bad.

[Being locked up] affected me a lot. Cuz now I'm, you know, people look at me and they're like, "Oh, I don't know, I don't trust her." Like people move their purse away from me. Like, I'm not gonna take anything. I'm me. I'm the same person who I was before, and they look at me, they just – some people look at me way different. Like I have teachers that look at me that are like, "You're still gonna do what you do. I'm not gonna treat you any better." (Monica, interview, 08/05/2010)

At fourteen, Monica's encounters with the police, probation officers, and the juvenile justice system caused her to be wary of others and feel frustrated by the ease with which she is frequently labeled and seemingly dismissed. Being embraced by PODER with open arms was thus quite a surprise and allowed Monica to experience a kind of freedom and a positive environment that was new to her.

At PODER it's like you're yourself, you don't have to put up that wall. At school you have to put up that wall that's like, I'm not gonna let nobody be mean to me, but here nobody's gonna be mean to you. Everyone is going to be nice and have that nice attitude...[PODER] is a place where I can trust these people, and you know, trust them with what I tell them and not be judged about it or anything...Here it's serious. Serious, but you can always come back to the conversation again and be like the way you were with a big old smile, walking through and ready to come into the PODER office. (Monica, interview, 08/05/2010)

The trust Monica felt with PODER was especially meaningful and important in light of the internal barricades she viewed as necessary for survival. Monica had also witnessed how loved ones who were previously incarcerated were later shunned and had a difficult time finding support after their release, which mirrored her own experiences once she was categorized as a "juvenile delinquent."

PODER's ethos of respect profoundly affected Monica after the suspicion and contempt she experienced at school and at the juvenile detention center where she was held. She had a great degree of self-awareness and recognized that after participating in the YSJ program, "I'm a lot more open, but there are still things that I keep inside. I can talk to just about anybody here in the office" (Monica, interview, 08/05/2010). Monica felt comfortable opening up to the PODER staff members because she thought, "They're just fun to be around; they don't have that [negative] sense around them. It's all positive"

(Monica, interview, 08/05/2010). When Monica joined the YSJ program, she had already decided that she was going to make a concerted effort to not let others' opinions negatively affect her self-perception: "[Their negative comments are] just gonna go through one ear and out the other...it's not like it hurts me. That's what they have to say and I know I changed" (Monica, interview, 08/05/2010). Monica had set a personal goal that she would never be sent to a juvenile detention center again and she was determined to meet her goal. The openness with which the PODER staff members and the other youth embraced Monica, and one another, affirmed the new positive identity she was in the process of crafting for herself and allowed Monica to begin removing the internal barricades before they began doing more harm than good.

Unfortunately, Monica was not the only member of the YSJ who had experienced criminalization. Michael, a biracial high school senior, recalled being handcuffed and slammed on the ground by police in front of a large crowd. At the time Michael had just finished playing a live show with his band at Emo's, a historic punk rock venue located on Austin's infamous 6th Street, and was in violation of his curfew as a minor. Any pride and joy this aspiring Juilliard student may have felt that evening about his gifts as a young and talented guitar player were quickly eclipsed the moment his face met the asphalt. In the eyes of onlookers, Michael was immediately transformed into just another black male who had had a run-in with police. Jaime, a Chicano high school sophomore, was also handcuffed and dragged away by police in front of his classmates. One of his friends had carried a gun to school, given it to Jaime to hold, and then "snitched" on him

to the cops. Both Michael and Jaime relayed these stories matter-of-factly, but one can only imagine the anger and hurt these incidents engendered.

The stories of the Young Scholars for Justice are not unique to this group of students. Youth of color, black males especially, are disproportionately criminalized and fed into the school-to-prison pipeline (Giroux, 2010; Heiner & Mangual, 2002). As Marlén elaborated in the opening quote, PODER works hard to disrupt this pattern by creating a space that values youth of color and treats them as being worthy and deserving of respect. As long-time or native residents of East Austin, PODER's staff members possess a unique insight into the injustices that youth of color face in East Austin. The organization accordingly emphasizes respect in their interactions with all communities, including youth. That respect is also guided by love for the youth and love of working with youth. We did not keep one another at arm's length and instead took the time to hug each other, exchange phone numbers, and connect outside of the PODER home to make ourselves accessible to one another outside of the parameters of the YSJ program. Exhibiting *cariño para el prójimo* was seen as commonplace and these caring relationships extended from the adults to the youth thereby normalizing a familial environment strengthened by trust, respect, and love.

COMING TO KNOW EAST AUSTIN: HISTORY ALIVE

One thing that makes the YSJ so unique is that it's not just a general source of activity and education and employment for youth, it's a source of those things with a direct focus on East Austin, on their community. Which means it invites their perspective on their community, it allows them to express themselves artistically in how they see themselves and how they see East Austin. And it gives them a source of information and answers to why East Austin is the way it is. And that's tremendous because it's very hard to find stuff like that that's so tailor-

made to address issues of...your own community. (Marlén, interview, 07/23/2010)

In addition to validating their experiences, the YSJ program asks the youth to look at the existing conditions in their community through a historical lens as they partake in a form of youth participatory action research (YPAR). In doing so, the youth make the personal political as they begin to establish clearer connections between their current lived reality and the layers of history that produced the community of which they are a part. Because the curriculum for the YSJ program draws upon youth's experiential knowledge as East Austin residents and East Austin itself serves as the classroom, YSJ participants develop an increased awareness of their community. Through discussions and community surveys the youth become more knowledgeable about both the structural causes of inequality that led to the present state of East Austin, and the history of organized resistance in East Austin. Yoly aptly described participants' increased community awareness as the planting of a seed that allows youth to "flourish," "grow," and "do something" about the inequality that became normalized in their backyards (Yoly, interview, 07/22/2010).

Historical Conocimiento

We always had surveys because we knew we always had to have an instrument that would put the youth out into the community. That was a given. It was like okay, what is the action? What is the action and [what is] the advocacy that we're going to do? We've always [used] some kind of survey because we figured that [using the survey is a] way they can go out and talk to somebody and be able to ask questions...and with that they were gonna get more information than they really asked for. We knew that once you talk to people, people will tell you about other problems and issues. That begins the dialogue and that's how you begin to know what people are feeling or thinking out in the community. (Lushan, interview, 07/20/2010)

A unique combination of dialogue and interaction with community members that reflects YPAR is a key element of the YSJ program that propels the youth toward a deeper *conocimiento*, or understanding, of their community. The landscape of East Austin is transformed as the youth learn that the particular placement pattern of buildings and people was a direct result of local policy decisions made by individuals who used their belief in the inherent inferiority of people of color to justify de jure segregation. These decisions shaped the lives of generations of people who grew up in East Austin and their quality of life. Before participating in the YSJ program, Delia assumed that the black and brown communities that populate East Austin had willingly planted their roots in the area.

I just thought that I would see Mexicans and African Americans here because we just wanted to be here, I didn't know we were put here. Or like Pure Casting; I never thought about what it was...when I was in elementary [school], it's like oh okay, it's just this big building. I didn't know what it actually was. When I found out what it was, I was like wow, I went to school right next to that? I never really thought about the Holly Power Plant either. I never thought about that either. (Delia, interview, 08/07/2010)

Delia's comment also references how the presence of toxic industries next to communities of color in East Austin was condoned through zoning practices. Structures such as the Holly Power Plant and the Pure Casting facility were perceived as a natural part of the landscape by the youth and they never thought to challenge their presence.

Roberto described a similar awakening that caused him to look at his neighborhood through different eyes.

All these things, to me they were just buildings that people went in and out of. I didn't know anything about them. When I finally started learning about all of

these things that are in East Austin, like it's just not right. Why are you putting them in East Austin? They could put them anywhere else but they decided to put them in East Austin. (Roberto, interview, 08/07/2010)

Both Roberto and Delia are referring to the 1928 city plan that the city council adopted in order to designate East Austin as a "Negro district." At the time, the city of Austin also enforced deed restrictions and offered access to a number of limited public and municipal services only in East Austin in order to secure the settlement of African Americans, Mexican immigrants, and Mexican Americans in the area (Humphrey, 1997). Austin's black and brown communities thus grew up surrounded by environmental hazards that appeared benign and were even sources of employment, as was the case for Delia's mother with the Pure Casting facility.

Learning the history of East Austin set the stage for the youth to examine current environmental threats to community members. One of the YSJ program's big campaigns that summer was to research the impact of the Pure Casting facility on the residents who live in the area. Students from the Nursing School at the University of Texas partnered with PODER and the YSJ participants to develop and conduct door-to-door surveys that assessed the community's health. The youth worked in groups comprised of nursing students and PODER staff members or volunteers and walked the streets surrounding the Pure Casting facility to speak with residents. Speaking with community members proved to be highly revelatory for Monica in that it shed light not only on residents' health, but also on their general living conditions.

[What had the biggest impact on me was] when we went to go survey people because I found out...how old the houses are and how long people have been living here. It's like, bad...All [the chemicals] from that [facility] right there is

causing a lot of people to be sick...they shouldn't even be getting sick and they should be living their lives healthy. That put a stop to me. Like, whoa. I don't take what I have for granted and complain about a lot of stuff, because different people don't have that stuff. There's a lot of houses that I've seen that are really broken down, and I complain all the time about my house being small, and now I'm like, you know, look at that, that's all they have...And [conducting the surveys] made me realize that. (Monica, interview, 08/05/2010)

As Monica's comment suggests, the youth learned a lot more about East Austin than just the subject matter related to the questions raised by the health surveys. While it is imperative for the youth to have the chance to share their experiences and listen to one another, it is just as important for them to be connected to other members in their community and develop an awareness of what other people are living through.

When we conducted the surveys in small groups we were often invited inside of residents' homes to sit down and talk with them as they filled out the form. In those moments we learned about residents' health and simultaneously observed a more intimate aspect of their everyday life. We saw the gross disparities as we walked from an eco-friendly, two-story home valued at several hundred thousand dollars right next door to a sad, tired home with peeling paint that appeared ready to cave in on itself. After completing the surveys on those scorching summer days we often bought popsicles from *el paletero* before heading back to the office. While the youth savored their *paletas* they joked around and reflected on the experience as what they had heard and seen sunk in. Once we were sitting down at the PODER home, the youth traded stories and learned the word "gentrification" in the process of describing their observations. Although the word was new to many of the youth, they were familiar with gentrification as a practice and its

role in changing the face of East Austin through displacement in the name of “urban renewal” and “progress.”

The youth also took to the streets during Austin’s Juneteenth celebration to survey other youth about their experiences in school with zero tolerance policies. The opportunity to speak with fellow students about In-School Suspension (ISS) further validated the participants’ experiences and emphasized that youth of color across East Austin are criminalized and forced out of the classroom. Delia expressed that she “didn’t know that some kids got suspended for [stupid] stuff. And that there was a bunch of kids that got suspended or expelled...and the majority of them are people of color” (Delia, interview, 08/07/2010). Roberto was also incredulous that students were punished for “something stupid like chewing gum in class or whatever...that’s not right...you go to ISS and miss four days of work and be all left out when you come back” (Roberto, interview, 08/07/2010). Through the community health surveys and the youth juvenile justice surveys, the YSJ program called upon East Austin to serve as the classroom while the youth engaged in critical inquiry. Community members of all ages also became teachers that reinforced the concepts the youth and the PODER staff members previously discussed.

In addition to learning about the history of oppression in East Austin and some of its current manifestations, the youth also learned about some of the rich history of recent organized resistance in the face of discrimination. Lushan gave the youth a firsthand account of the struggle to relocate the oil tank farm that was situated a few blocks away from some of their homes. Through videos and discussions, the youth learned that

PODER took action on behalf of East Austin after conducting community health surveys that revealed high incidences of cancer and chronic illnesses among community members living near the oil tank farm. East Austin achieved a great victory after the oil tank farm was eventually shut down due to PODER's ability to mobilize residents and conduct participatory action research with the help of community members. Although the history of PODER's advocacy involves many other efforts, the staff members highlighted the oil tank farm because it was a seminal issue that gave the organization the momentum it needed to sustain its presence over the years.

YSJ program participants also learned about more recent efforts that PODER undertook to safeguard the health of East Austin residents. There is a small stretch of land nestled near the busy intersection of Oak Springs Road and Airport Boulevard in East Austin, tucked away behind a Church's Chicken drive-thru location. The Oak Springs Preserve is easy to miss and yet a lot of community organizing and partnerships were required in order to prevent that piece of land from being razed and covered in concrete to pave the way for yet another dollar store. PODER and the Rosewood-Glen Oaks Neighborhood Association teamed up to prevent the dollar store's construction and created alliances with West Austin environmental groups to increase the likelihood of their success. In teaching the youth the history of the Oak Springs Preserve, that piece of land became more than just a pocket of green space. In effect, the land became a site of resistance that East Austin and West Austin community members fought to preserve.

In connecting the history of East Austin to environmental justice campaigns, members of the YSJ program developed an environmental awareness rooted in the

struggles of communities of color. The need to preserve and care for our environment took on a different meaning for the youth as they began to reframe the effects of pollution under the lens of environmental racism. The pollution that the youth originally associated as the result of individual actions became connected to institutional practices that communicated and emphasized the lack of valuation of the lives of people of color. Due to this nascent awareness the youth became more invested in wanting to protect the environment. Liliana spoke with great indignation as she described the transformation she underwent as a result of her new environmental consciousness.

Before I would see trash on the streets and I'd ignore it because I didn't know. But after that, I would be like, how can these people do this? Just pollute the world? Mother Earth, she provides so much for us...it opened up my eyes big time about how people treated [East Austin]. How people treated the streets, the water, the air. It just made me pay more attention to those types of things when before I didn't really want to pay attention. (Liliana, interview, 09/12/2010)

Roberto communicated a similar change and the spark of an environmental consciousness.

Before I'd be walking or whatever and if I tried to throw something in the trash and if it misses and I'm really far away from it, I would think oh I don't care and I would keep walking. But now I'll be walking and if I see something near the trash can but it's on the floor, even if it's not mine I'll still pick it up and throw it away. I never did that before. I didn't care if it made it into the trash before I came to the YSJ. It's definitely opened my eyes big time about the environment. (Roberto, interview, 08/07/2010)

Comprehending the interconnectedness of the health of the environment and the health of residents in East Austin now compels Liliana, Delia, and Roberto to actively care for Mother Earth.

Participants' knowledge of PODER's struggles and victories in the name of humanity and the environment serves as a source of inspiration and reinforces the notion that East Austin residents deserve a healthy community where they are able to thrive. The youth also begin to acquire a historical *conocimiento* of their community that schools systematically obscure and ignore vis-à-vis the banking method (Freire, 1970/2000). A recurring theme in my interviews with the youth was that the topics they addressed during the YSJ program were not subjects that they would ever get a chance to grapple with in school. As several of the youth previously mentioned, there is a disconnect between the content of their schools' curricula and their everyday lives that leads them to think of school as a boring place.

The YSJ program, on the other hand, offers a problem-posing *educación* that questions normalized injustice and favors a unique approach to YPAR as it places the participants' experiential knowledge at the forefront of discussions and the issues that the youth address (Freire, 1970/2000; Valenzuela, 1999). Most forms of YPAR involve the participation of the affected community members as well as "outsiders" from a university setting or policy makers who can lend their expertise (Cammarota & Fine, 2008). The Young Scholars for Justice program employs a unique form of YPAR in that PODER's staff members themselves prepare the youth to conduct research rather than rely on outside sources. Although the Nursing students from UT helped PODER refine the community health survey, the PODER staff members were able to draw from their own previous experiences with participatory action research to develop the juvenile justice

survey and to train the youth to conduct research that summer without the help of “outside experts.”

PODER’s efforts thus seem to resemble the community action research that Smith (1999) describes as a tool for decolonization within historically marginalized communities that allows them to “write back” and “research back.” The information that the youth collected is a way for them to begin challenging the injustice of zoning practices that are detrimental to community members’ health and zero tolerance policies that criminalize youth of color, both of which are depoliticized and neutralized. In doing so, the youth begin to believe that they can effect change in their community by improving conditions in East Austin and thereby add to the beauty and justice that other community members previously protected in East Austin.

The Awakening of Historical Actors

I came back to Austin from Chicago the day after Daniel Rocha had been killed by the Austin Police Department (APD), or I guess I should say by APD officer Julie Schroeder. Our whole summer was kind of revolving around responding to that crisis and to that killing and organizing the community to vent the anger and hurt that was felt around it, but to also channel the energy of the black and brown communities saying “Enough is enough.” All of that led to the police chief stepping down and getting a new police officer...That’s definitely when I learned how powerful youth organizing is...I was starting to see how much you can do by involving teenagers and by getting their perspective, certainly, but also by giving them something to do with a foundation that lets them know they’re on the side of justice. (Marlén, interview, 07/23/2010)

In the YSJ program the humanity of the youth is not called into question and therefore their capacity to envision a just society founded on principles of solidarity with all forms of life is acknowledged and encouraged. The PODER staff members recognize that the youth are capable of producing the solutions to the problems that afflict their

community and therefore involve them in direct actions that address those problems. Throughout the summer the youth conducted research, presented before the Austin City Council, and met with the director of the Alternative Learning Center (ALC). The PODERista pedagogy that emphasized *educación* in the YSJ program helped the youth to recognize the power in their voice and their ability to positively shape and add to the beauty they saw in their community. Armed with a historical *conocimiento* of East Austin and fueled by their individual and personal awareness of injustice, the youth demonstrated a passionate spiritual activism that guided their efforts.

As a first-time participant in the YSJ program, giving public testimony and entering City Hall were brand new and eye-opening experiences for Monica.

I'd never been to that part of downtown. I'd never stepped foot inside of City Hall, so it was pretty, pretty awesome to see what it looked like. When I was listening to everybody talk, I was like, wow. I didn't know those people were doing that together and that's what this is all about, and trying to get them to move Pure Casting to another place. And even if they didn't listen, still, we got to do what we wanted to do and have them hear what we have to say. (Monica, interview, 08/05/2010)

For many of the youth who grow up in East Austin, it is common for them to stay within the general vicinity of their neighborhood and not explore other parts of the city. This can be attributed to both a matter of access to transportation as well as feelings of not belonging in that part of town and in those types of “public” spaces specifically. As youth, and particularly as youth of color, they receive both direct and subtle messages about their ability and their right to participate in public affairs. The PODER staff members sought to redefine these imposed albeit unwritten limits on participation by

positioning the youth as historical actors who had something to contribute to their community and the dialogue about East Austin.

Monica saw her participation in the YSJ program as a wake-up call with respect to her individual agency as she simultaneously developed a sense of collective agency.

[The PODER staff] really did treat us like we were grown, like we're not kids anymore. It made me realize, wow, I'm growing up. They treat me like I'm one of them, like I'm not a kid. They still keep an eye on me, but they treat me like if I'm an adult... And even though I'm just a teenager, I can still do what I want. Not do what I want, but do what I accomplish: my goals. And it makes me feel like I can do it, like "Sí se puede," I can do it. I don't put myself down just because I'm a teenager. (Monica, interview, 08/05/2010)

During the five weeks of the summer youth program, Monica blossomed into someone who grew more confident in her own voice as well as in the voice of her community.

This change was not lost on Monica's mother:

Even my mom told me, "Since you started this, you've changed." She was like, "I don't know if it's a good thing or if it's a bad thing, but to me for now it seems like it's a good thing." (Monica, interview, 08/05/2010)

The YSJ program created a community of youth of color who began to collectively participate in East Austin matters. This sense of community grew to include other Austin residents when Monica and the other youth gave public testimony at City Hall alongside other community members in order to protect East Austin from the environmental hazards wrought by the Pure Casting facility. Monica thus perceived that being a Young Scholar for Justice was about getting "one step closer to getting something done" (Monica, interview, 08/05/2010)

The development of individual and collective agency was even more pronounced for Liliana, Roberto, and Delia, all of who had participated in the YSJ program for at

least two years at the time of their interviews. Liliana felt transformed by the fact that the YSJ program brought her into direct contact with the community and allowed her to publicly share her grievances with city officials.

You don't just sit in a classroom and you don't just sit there and take notes or listen...most of the time you go out...in the community and you protest, do marches, speak in public, go to city hall and speak to the city council. It's just a lot of things that you do that you learn from...I've always been able to speak publicly, but never...about anything so important. I thought it was a wonderful opportunity to be able to go and actually let the city council know, hey, these are my thoughts about this, it's wrong. This is what you should help do; you are the city council. It makes you feel like you're doing something so good at the end of the day. It just makes you feel really, really good. You learn to appreciate things a lot more and so I think I've really grown from this experience with PODER. (Liliana, interview, 09/12/2010)

As an intergenerational organization that values family and the participation of both the youth and elders, PODER allowed Liliana to grow in the roles that she took on in the organization. She began as a volunteer and eventually became paid staff when she started working as a youth coordinator. This sustained involvement drove Liliana's conscientization: a personal awakening and self-identification as a historical actor.

It's a really, really amazing experience. You get to take in a lot, you learn a lot. Things that you never really wanted to pay attention to before, you know. You see stuff on the news. Kids nowadays are going to see stuff on the news, but the news doesn't really worry them. After you're in this program you start paying attention to details and you start really knowing what the news is talking about. You just get a better understanding of things and it makes you be more aware and more conscious of the actions that you do and how they impact the community...I never thought I'd walk out of there with the knowledge that I have now and the passion that I have now. (Liliana, interview, 09/12/2010)

Even though Liliana is no longer as involved with PODER since her move, she now has a new understanding and an appreciation of the qualities she has to offer and how she can

find strength in those qualities to bring about change. This is the essence of spiritual activism in the YSJ program.

While the PODER staff members may view the youth as inherently powerful and capable of contributing to transformative change, not everyone shares this perspective of them. The previous summer, Roberto, Delia and the other youth had a demoralizing encounter with city officials that left them upset and angry.

Just going to City Council to talk to them just makes me wanna kind of yell at them to listen. Sometimes they just...like last year. It was a serious case because we were talking to them about Pure Casting and to not cut back recreational stuff and their faces were just bored and blank. And that's when I just like, I got really serious when I went. I want them to feel what we feel and go through what we go through. I just want to yell at them and say, "What if you and your family lived where we live and all your family had asthma or something happened to one of your little kids?" It makes me angry. But I like going in front of them because to them it's like, there are these young kids coming to us and talking to us, and most of the time it's adults that go and confront them. For youth to go and confront them and give them all these statistics, it would blow my mind, so it obviously has to blow their minds. (Delia, interview, 08/07/2010)

The city officials' disregard of the youth felt like even more of a slap in the face because they entered City Hall with hope only to find that the experience was yet another situation from which the youth walked away feeling disrespected. Fortunately, they had the support of the PODER staff members who helped them process the pain of being made to feel invisible. When the youth returned to City Hall this summer they were prepared for some of the council members' non-responsiveness and did not internalize their rejection.

The "tipping point" for Delia with respect to her involvement in the YSJ program occurred precisely because of the council members' dismissive attitude the previous

summer. That encounter unleashed a force within Delia that accelerated her spiritual activism and she has not slowed down since.

[Their negative reaction] doesn't discourage me, it makes me want to push more and tell them that if you're tired of us telling you about this over and over and over again, then do something about it or we're gonna keep coming to you. It makes me angry. It makes me angry. (Delia, interview, 08/07/2010)

The historical *conocimiento* of East Austin that the YSJ program helped Delia develop also fuels her passion for protecting and advocating for her community.

I didn't really think anything about East Austin. Now that I know stuff and I'm just like, wow...now that there's a lot of gentrification going on here. If they put us here because they wanted us here, then why are they trying to take back the land that they placed us on? I guess if they want it back it's because we made it beautiful. We made East Austin beautiful. We made [East Austin] how it is now. The past generations that have been here made it beautiful. Now that the rest of Austin has seen that oh, East Austin, it's right next to the lake, it has all this green, and there's a trail, and there are all these houses. I guess they just want it back now even though they put us here. I mean, they put us here, so why do they want to take it away from us? (Delia, interview, 08/07/2010)

Delia's comments indeed indicate that she sees herself as "a strong independent woman, an educated woman" (Delia, personal communication, 03/06/2011) who can leave her mark on her community:

Just learning more about everything and it kind of makes me feel like I can organize something too and do something. I guess the YSJ has influenced me to be something better – to be something better. (Delia, interview, 08/07/2010)

Roberto's involvement in the YSJ program also became more meaningful as he dedicated more time to learning about the issues that PODER tackled and increasingly participated in PODER's actions. He expressed that "[being in the YSJ] means a lot to me. It means a lot that I could actually do something and have power even though I'm 14" (Roberto, interview, 08/07/2010). Although he originally participated in the YSJ

program at Lushan's urging, Roberto came to deeply believe in the values and the vision for a community built on respect and solidarity that PODER advances.

When I first got involved I didn't really know anything about my community at all. That [first] little month really opened my eyes...After that I really wanted to participate in every single thing PODER was having, any little protest, meeting, whatever, I really wanted to be a part of it. (Roberto, interview, 08/07/2010)

Upon his conscientization, Roberto looked forward to learning more and sharing this knowledge with others in order to get more people involved *en la lucha*.

We're really trying to help. The more people that know, the more that will get involved, and the bigger chance we have to make things change in East Austin. We also do a lot of door-knockings, like door-to-door knocking, and letting people know...We told the people why we were doing the health surveys, because of Pure Casting. Cleaning [our community] up helps a lot and more things will get accomplished. (Roberto, interview, 08/07/2010)

However, contrary to Liliana and Delia who felt empowered as young Chicanas, Roberto developed a sense of agency centered on his identity as a youth.

The YSJ has shown me that it doesn't matter how old you are, you can make a change at any age. At the age of 12 – I'm 14 now – I would've thought, oh I can't do anything. But the YSJ has shown me all these things I can do and all of these things I did. If it wasn't for the YSJ, I still wouldn't really care much. I mean, I would probably care about things like litter and stop and pick it up. But if it wasn't for the YSJ, I wouldn't be going to all these things and programs. I think it's made me into a better person. (Roberto, interview, 08/07/2010)

Ultimately, at the end of the summer program the youth emerged as stronger and more confident individuals who believed in their ability to not only participate but to also set the agenda for the direction in which their community should head.

Monica, Liliana, Delia, and Roberto offer powerful and inspiring *testimonios* that illustrate the transformative effects of a PODERista pedagogy. The YSJ program's underlying philosophy of *educación* guides the youth to recognize their strength and

develop a spiritual activism in an environment suffused with love. This notion of *educación* also speaks of the sacredness of all forms of life and of the need to love our neighbors near and far, and especially Mother Earth who makes our existence possible. Another important lesson that the youth walk away with is that living people produce history. History does not belong in the realm of the dead and ages past nor is it the sole property of old textbooks and dusty bookshelves. Their feet walk upon the ground of history and can create history while changing present conditions and blazing a path for the future. Furthermore, the footsteps we have left behind do not necessarily determine the footsteps we create nor must those footsteps belong to one person alone. To transform this world we must develop an understanding of solidarity that connects all living things and a consciousness of ourselves as historical actors.

Conclusion

We are ready for change. Let us link hands and hearts together find a path through the dark woods step through the doorways between worlds leaving huellas for others to follow, build bridges, cross them with grace, and claim these puentes our “home” si se puede, que asi sea, so be it, estamos listas, vámonos. Now let us shift. (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 576)

It is a tremendous challenge to make sense of the world we live in, particularly if we lack a historical understanding of how the present day came to be and are denied the skills required to engage in a process of critical inquiry. When we first step inside a classroom as children, we learn powerful lessons in who commands and who obeys. We are lined up like soldiers; told what knowledge is most important; discouraged from asking questions; disciplined for not controlling our bodies; told what is right and what is wrong; and conditioned to follow the rules through a system of reward and punishment that singles students out. Children are regularly discouraged from asking critical questions and are taught to view knowledge as something the teacher bestows upon them. When a child does not display the desired characteristics of a “good student” and does not succeed academically according to the norms established by the dominant culture, a disapproving eye is cast on the child and their family. This child must be fixed or disposed of.

Ultimately, students who have trouble fitting the desired description of the good student tend to be students of color. Students of color disproportionately receive the message that they are deficient, they have (and deserve) no power, and that their knowledge and experiences are inconsequential to what goes on in the classroom. When students internalize that message, they experience a sense of disempowerment and

increased alienation from their schooling as well as society. As their voices are silenced and their spirits are crushed, many youth lack the opportunity to recognize their agency and develop their ability to participate as historical actors. An empowering approach to education that utilizes a problem-posing pedagogy such as the one Freire (1970/2000, 1998) envisioned, based on the language of possibility and hope, is crucial in order to foster and sustain the agency and spirit of resistance in individuals that are vital to the creation of a more equitable society in which we work to uplift, and not tear down, one another.

People Organized in the Defense of Earth and her Resources (PODER) and their Young Scholars for Justice (YSJ) program offers powerful insights into the transformative effects of critical educational approaches that place the experiences of youth of color at the center of their program and prioritize the community as a source of cultural wealth and as a site of resistance to systemic and institutionalized oppression. In drawing from the experiences of the youth to guide the course of the summer program, PODER acknowledges that what occurs at home and in the community shapes the way we see the world and our place in the world. So long as the youth lack a deep understanding of their surroundings that is informed by a structural analysis of inequality, they will be unable to envision themselves as knowledgeable participants in the life of their community. From this disempowered perspective, someone else will always be in charge of decision-making processes that direct events in the community. The YSJ program attempts to break that tradition by positioning East Austin's youth of color as

subjects whose experiential knowledge holds important lessons that should influence the vision of justice for the community and society.

The PODERista pedagogy that I observed in the YSJ program nurtured a sense of community that facilitated critical inquiry by creating a safe space where the youth could begin to challenge and re-interpret their understanding of their surroundings. This pedagogy spurred a process of spiritual activism within the youth that was made possible by a vision of *educación* that emphasized our interconnectedness to all forms of life and valued the importance of democratic relationships as a means to work against dehumanizing systems of domination. PODER's *educación* valued dialogue not only to support the development of the youth into students-teachers, but also as a necessary component in the process of healing from the effects of internalized oppression. Through dialogue and *testimonios* the youth began to frame their individual experiences with injustice as the result of the disease of systemic oppression. As a result, the youth could individually and collectively tend to and mend their wounded spirits as they worked hard to expunge the negative messages they had internalized about their inherent self-worth. The YSJ program thereby enabled the process of spiritual activism wherein youth looked deep within to address their wounds of oppression and started to heal them by making the personal political. As they strengthen their spirit through action, the youth will continue to use their experiences to guide their efforts for social justice in their community.

The underlying philosophy guiding the PODER staff members' efforts with the youth are ultimately informed by their experiences as Chican@s. As a female-led organization, the perspectives and lived realities of these *mujeres luchadoras* made them

especially sensitive to the urgency of developing the next generation of Chicana leaders and ensuring their resilience so that their wounds of oppression, as well as those of future generations, will not run as deep. After participating in the program the Chicana youth broadened their conception of what women could accomplish and therefore what they could individually accomplish, which led female youth such as Delia and Liliana to re-evaluate their priorities. By connecting the females to the larger social justice community through internships that funded their participation at conferences, the YSJ program consciously positioned Chicanas as leaders and communicated that women's voices should guide decision-making processes. The intersectionality of oppression that Chicanas have experienced allows them to use their "flesh and blood experiences" as they conjure up a just world with the potential to heal individual and collective wounds (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981).

PODER's Chicana epistemology also created a sense of family that was shaped by a matriarchal style of organizing that allowed staff members to care for themselves and their families in order to be able to invest time and energy into the community. Being able to take care of their needs allowed the PODER staff members to bring a potent strength and spirit to the kitchen table as well as to be emotionally present with the youth. Staff members are also consequently able to practice *convivencia* and develop meaningful relationships as more than just co-workers due to their belief in loving and non-hierarchical relationships. The youth easily picked up on the ways in which the staff members interacted and observed that the PODER staff worked as a team in ways that complemented one another's roles. This sense of family adds meaning to the larger

purpose of social change because the youth view fighting for social justice as fighting with and for family. It also allowed *confianza* to blossom between the youth and the adults, which encouraged the youth to remove the internal barricades they had constructed as a form of survival and self-preservation. Being embraced so openly by the PODER family served to disrupt the pattern of criminalization that youth of color experience in East Austin.

By helping the youth look at their community through a historical lens as the youth engage in a form of youth participatory action research, the YSJ program helps bring East Austin to life for the youth. As they acquire a historical *conocimiento* of their community, the youth awaken as historical actors who envision themselves as agents of change within East Austin. Utilizing East Austin as the classroom for the lessons the youth learn sends a strong message to the youth that their community and their experiences are worthy of exploration and sustained engagement. Conducting survey research in East Austin allowed the youth to learn above and beyond what the questions on the surveys addressed. Learning their community's history thus transformed neutralized spaces into sites of resistance that explain how East Austin was shaped. Connecting East Austin's history to environmental justice campaigns also helped the youth form an environmental consciousness that was rooted in the struggles of communities of color. The realization that people in East Austin have tirelessly struggled to protect their community elevated the importance of caring for Mother Earth in the eyes of the youth. Knowledge of PODER's campaigns reinforced the notion that East Austin

residents should be able to live in healthy communities and that bringing positive changes to East Austin is possible through community mobilization.

PODER's Young Scholars for Justice program brings to mind an important point that Freire (1970/2000) raised concerning people's skepticism about the ability to implement a liberating education so long as the dominant culture is still in a position of oppressive political power. He emphasized that a space for resistance could be created through educational projects rather than by relying on a systematic education to spur change, which can only be controlled through political power (Freire, 1970/2000). The YSJ program embodies the spirit of educational projects that Freire (1970/2000) envisioned in that it seeks to "unveil the world of oppression and through the praxis commit themselves to its transformation" (p. 54). It is a model of education that seeks to empower students by problematizing notions of participation and knowledge: Who can participate? Who sets the guidelines for "legitimate" participation? How can we negotiate our own terms for participation? What is "official" knowledge? Who produces official knowledge? Rather than using a banking approach to education and thereby ensuring the spiritual death of the youth, the YSJ program utilizes *una educación para la liberación* that awakens their spiritual activism.

PODER's efforts also mirror Freire's conviction that we cannot wait for change to happen. By repeatedly engaging in a cycle of praxis we can lift the veil and assume our responsibility to confront the injustices before us in order to prevent our continued dehumanization. Beane and Apple (2007) assert that "democracy is not something out there waiting to be reached. Rather it is in the work itself as we create ways to promote

human dignity, equity, justice, and critical action” (p. 25). The Chican@s of PODER assume that challenge as they continue to struggle for justice in East Austin and create conditions that allow youth to spread the wings of their imagination and believe that change is possible in their community and in society as a whole. The concept of “*haciendo puentes al andar,*” or making bridges as one walks, is about helping our future generations blaze new paths for themselves through those dark woods that Anzaldúa (2002) describes. With their new understanding of the world, the youth acquire a sense of agency and a conviction that they can play a role in creating a just world. The youth will eventually leave their own *huellas* for others to follow, just as they walked in the shadows of those who came before them.

The *mujeres luchadoras* of PODER – Lushan, Dolores, Yoly, and Marlén – as well as the *hombre luchador*, Aaren, set an inspiring example for other teachers-students. They courageously and tirelessly create a culturally affirming space for the youth of East Austin and scaffold their political participation through dialogue and networks of support that connect the youth to a global community that is fighting for social justice and human rights. The historical and culturally rooted memory of resistance that they pass on to the youth asserts “brownness” and “blackness” as rich cultural reserves to find beauty in and draw strength from. The *luchadores* of PODER consequently help the youth increase their sense of self-worth, which is no small feat in a world that regards the cultural identity of the youth as deficits and threats to the status quo that must be obliterated from their souls and consciousness. That type of hate and misguided fear is now more present than ever as evidenced by the attacks on Ethnic Studies in Arizona and area studies

nationwide. That battle is cleverly obfuscated within institutions of higher learning through rhetoric that condones budget cuts to area studies for the sake of fiscal austerity. Although the beast wears a different mask and more expensive business suits while artfully using language to conceal, the effects of this monstrous cultural assault and cultural invasion are still the same.

I look to programs such as the Young Scholars for Justice as a source of motivation and hope when dreaming of what education should symbolize for students, especially historically marginalized students. The sacredness of humanizing spaces that speak of possibility, love and resistance is of the utmost importance given the frightening surge in anti-immigrant sentiment throughout the nation and the ongoing cuts to public education. Our world is in turmoil and undergoing dramatic changes, as evidenced by the uprisings in Africa and the Middle East, the human-influenced “natural disasters” in Japan, and the attacks on teachers and unions here at home. We have an obligation to enter into honest dialogue with youth so that they may understand the rapidly changing conditions in their backyards and how they are connected to struggles worldwide. We must teach them to question and challenge information that is presented as fact so that they do not fall prey to blind patriotism. Democracy should not be viewed as a final state, but rather as a constant process that youth deserve to have a say in and be a part of. In the face of hateful rhetoric and actions that are intended to wound our souls and denigrate our very existence, we must help one another shift our consciousness in order to find the individual and collective strength to practice a spiritual activism that affirms our humanity as we build bridges of solidarity to one another’s struggles. *“Caminante, no*

hay puentes, se hace puentes al andar” (Anzaldúa, 1981, n.p.). Voyager, there are no bridges, one makes them as one walks. Let us find ways to walk together, shoulder-to-shoulder.

Appendix A: Current YSJ Interview Questions

1. How did you hear about PODER and the Young Scholars for Justice and what made you want to be a part of the YSJ?
2. How would you describe the YSJ program to your friends?
3. What did you think or feel about the YSJ program on the first day and the activities you were going to do?
4. How much did you know beforehand about the issues you had workshops on this summer, like the history of the juvenile justice system, environmental racism, and Palestine?
5. Which activities and experiences from this summer were the most meaningful to you?
6. How is the YSJ different from what you might learn about and do in school?
7. Did any workshops or activities this summer affect the way you think about yourself and the environment? (i.e. community health surveys, workshops on cosmetic safety, Oak Springs cleanup)
8. Did any workshops or activities affect the way you think about yourself and your community? (i.e. becoming advocates, fighting for social justice)
9. Do you see yourself differently as a result of being in the YSJ?
10. How would you describe the PODER staff members and the way they run the YSJ program? (i.e. their teaching style, the way they treat youth)
11. What does being a Young Scholar for Justice mean to you?
12. Is there anything else that you feel is important about your experiences this summer that you would like to share?

Appendix B: PODER Staff Member Interview Questions

1. How did you first get involved in fighting for social justice and what effect has that had on you (in terms of your life in general and in the way you see yourself)?
2. How are your values and beliefs connected to your work with youth in the YSJ?
3. What are some of the most challenging and rewarding moments you've experienced with youth in the YSJ program over the years?
4. What activities and conversations with the youth from this summer stand out to you? What makes them stand out?
5. What kind of an impact do you think the YSJ program has on youth, especially youth who participate for several years?
6. What do you think leads some, but not all, youth to become active in issues of social justice in their communities after the YSJ program ends?
7. As an organization headed by Chicanas, what kind of an influence does the leadership of PODER have on youth in the YSJ program?
8. What would you like the future of the YSJ program to look like?
9. What message or lessons do you want youth in the program to walk away with?

Appendix C: Previous YSJ Interview Questions

1. How did you first hear about PODER and the Young Scholars for Justice? What made you want to get involved?
2. How would you describe the Young Scholars for Justice to someone who's never heard of it before?
3. What are some of the most meaningful experiences you had with PODER and the YSJ?
4. How has your involvement with PODER and the YSJ changed over the years? (i.e. did you become an intern at some point? Did you take on different responsibilities? Do you often go out to support PODER's events?)
5. What did you learn from the other youth in the YSJ?
6. What did being in the YSJ mean to you as a Chicana/Latina?
7. Did PODER and the YSJ affect the way you think about yourself and your relationship to the environment and community?
8. How would you compare your experiences in the YSJ program to your experiences in school?
9. Did the YSJ program affect your plans for the future?
10. Is there anything else you'd like to add about PODER or the YSJ that I didn't ask about?

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