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The Santa Ana Youth Media Project: YPAR and Media Advocacy

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Abstract

The Santa Ana Youth Media Project (SAYMP) was born during the summer of 2019 and grew from a need, expressed by youth, for more critical media literacy that could further amplify and focus on narratives that reflect how youth navigate their personal, cultural-social, and economic environments. Our media projects consist of intentional participative research and journalistic designs that document stories using tools such as narrative inquiry, Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) and video/media production to visually capture the narratives of youth and community within the city of Santa Ana and its larger Orange County context. Our goal is to develop a media platform where youth and community members can tell their own stories and advocate for their communities using media as a tool (Kellner & Share, 2005; Quijada Cerecer et al., 2013). The SAYMP website acts as the cornerstone of the project, housing all of the SAYMP initiatives.

Keywords: youth self-determination, Youth Participatory Action Research, counter storytelling, testimonio, Ethnic Studies, community pedagogy, culturally responsive, praxis, community organizing, critical media literacy

During the summer of 2019, the Santa Ana Youth Media Project (SAYMP) interviewed eight youth regarding their personal experiences and "Perspectives of their City". The youth were asked five general questions, a) What makes Santa Ana special? b) How is Santa Ana perceived? c) Does Santa Ana reflect your identity? d) Is your community changing? and, e) What do you envision for the youth of your city? These questions were developed by the SAYMP team and conducted within a narrative interview. The interviews were video and audio-recorded to produce three video essays highlighting the collated themes of self-determination, community, and expression. As our team processed at depth the content and significance of the interviews, we noticed that there were parallels and direct links between what was being shared within the interviews and what the research describing youth context within the city of Santa Ana has described.

What is important about these youth testimonies and videos is that rarely does the data emulate in parallel ways the experiences of youth. The testimonies of these youth give a personal and active account of the limitations, aspirations, and perspectives of being young within an urban Santa Ana context. Youth spoke truth to power in ways that were genuine and in line with the origin stories of the Ethnic Studies movements (Cuauhtin et al., 2019; Ehsanipour, 2020). This article will further elaborate how these interviews embody Ethnic Studies pillars for effective

teaching (Zavala, 2021). Youth from Santa Ana were able to document their own experiences as counter knowledge and resistance, in response to a deficit social cultural context. The youth testimony shared within this project echoes broader youth needs within their community and amplifies tensions experienced by youth via racism gentrification, social economic class disparities, youth marginalization, and lack of youth spaces across the Orange County context (Cuauhtin et al., 2019). The spirit of Ethnic Studies lives and resonates deeply within Santa Ana youth.

The interviews highlighted the narratives and perspectives of the youth as displayed on the SAYMP website. Such interviews[33] paired youth testimony side by side with statistics, infographics, city budgets, policy, and city landscape visuals. The interviews were conducted in several community sites significant to the youth being interviewed, and our team traveled to different parts of the city to meet our interviewees within their own environments. Many of the youth interviewed were referred to us by community organizers, and current teachers; some of the interviews were acquired by snowball sampling methodology where the participants referred other interviewees to the project. Our team set out to interview youth from 15 – 24 years of age, though ended with a sample of participants 18 and over; of the eight interviews, three identified as male of color, while five of the interviewees identified as women of color. Given the unexpected events of the pandemic we chose to focus on the testimonies of three youth and one community advocate for this project. Such project can now be seen on the SAYMP website where accessibility is strategically prioritized for community participation.

The SAYMP followed a YPAR methodology throughout the interviews. The original intention was to develop a larger documentary paired with a report of findings that could highlight youth disparities and voice. After conceptualizing the potential impact of this project and the limitations of COVID-19 with the participating youth and SAYMP team, we considered developing a smaller set of video essays, knowing they would be more adaptable to schools, communities, curriculum development, and student learning. We envisioned educators and/or youth using these video essays to further support their own students' schoolwork and/or curriculum. Given the limitations of the pandemic, the video essays were intentional and appropriate given our youth's needs. This article highlights how the SAYMP engages media advocacy, Youth Participatory Action Research, and Ethnic Studies principles to create space for youth to engage in critical reflections of their environments.

YPAR and the Santa Ana Youth Media Project

The Santa Ana Youth Media Project was developed out of a genuine love and commitment toward improving the experiences of youth within the city of Santa Ana and the larger Orange County context. The project embraces Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) and media as an effective way to combine youth-led research, and youth-led testimony/storytelling. They are tools that amplify and challenge deficit perspectives surrounding youth. Specifically, within the geographic boundaries of Santa Ana, youth have been historically viewed by the local educational and governmental institutions in deficit ways (Lacayo, 2016). Rarely do youth have space to promote and amplify their strengths and/or aspirations. Most programming that exists within the

[33] The Interviews in their full visual context con be found on the Santa Ana Youth Media Project Website: https://www.saymediaproject.org/project-19

city limits is prescripted and guided by top-down initiatives focused on what youth are missing, and/or meritocratic notions of success.

Given the historical deficit environment impacting Santa Ana Youth, the SAYMP focused on YPAR and media as a platform to visually document youth testimony in multidimensional ways. Given the deficit environments youth navigate daily, YPAR and media are powerful tools that can centralize youth as experts in their experience. Equally, YPAR and media allow for youth to sit in the driver's seat guiding how their experiences are recorded. Youth can determine the environment, tone, style, and imagining that contextualize their stories equitably. The use of media and YPAR together place agency at the hand and creativity of youth, while giving youth full control of how their stories are shared. YPAR and media can give youth the ability to share their stories in ways that can humanize their experiences.

The Santa Ana Youth Media Project is intentionally organized and guided by the belief that youth have the necessary insight to shift the deficit lens that often plagues communities. Youth should be at the forefront of all decision making within their environments; they should be included in all aspects of policy development that could affect their families and community. Youth truly have the nuanced experience and insight that can guide and help shape inclusive policy for all people within their communities. The SAYMP has set out to create a platform where youth, community, and educators can collaborate to amplify the overlooked experiences and insights of the community.

Ethnic Studies and the Santa Ana Youth Media Project

At the core of the Santa Ana Youth Media project is an initiative, a dream to elevate community and marginalized perspectives as valid, transformative, unapologetic knowledge. The work produced by the SAYMP further rests upon Ethnic Studies foundations of praxis and teaching. Embedded within the testimonies of Santa Ana youth, and the sharing of this community project are processes of knowledge creation that emphasize the following pillars of Ethnic Studies pedagogy: a) community knowledge, b) self-knowledge, c) pedagogical knowledge, d) institutional knowledge, and, e) content knowledge (Zavala, 2021). Within the "Perspectives of their City" project, youth were able to clearly point to the problems affecting their community. Youth were keen in expressing their understanding of how their communities are impacted by the choices made by city leadership. Youth chose to highlight gentrification, disproportionate budget allocation that overlooked youth initiatives, lack of green space, and scarce resources for youth concerning mental health. What was powerful about the interviews conducted within this project, was that youth narratives emulated significant data often cited in the city's political decisions (Irving 2010; Kopetman, 2020; Pho, 2020). Some of the youth gave references to statistics and figures available to the public, while some of the other youth demonstrated a deep awareness of how the inequalities experienced within the city, impacted their lives. Below are excerpts from the "Perspectives of their City" project informed by each one of the Pillars of Ethnic Studies Pedagogy[34] (Zavala, 2021).

[34] These pillars serve as a praxis framework for amplifying and validating community knowledge as crucial when addressing the limitations and inequalities of our society. The Pillars pedagogy allows for knowledge to be created based in the experiences and reflections of marginalized communities, pairing such knowledge with the strengths and critiquing the limitations of institutional knowledge.

Community Knowledge: *Community Cultural Wealth; Indigenous Knowledge; Community Organizing; YPAR; Convivencia, Comunalidad*

Youth are truly experts in their own experience, they carry in their consciousness the vivid stories and accounts of their community. Youth cherish and defend the community cultural wealth that, in many ways, raised them (Yosso, 2005). The youth within "Perspectives of their City" described their community as home. They point toward taco trucks, streets, community grocery stores and landmarks as cultural grounding for how they view their community. An emphasis on the"*Comunalidad*" and "*Convivencia*" [35] that is felt within the parameters of their community, points to a bond and a set of relationships often overlooked by the deficit narratives cast upon these communities. The following quotes by Karen, and Adrian, participants within project, further highlight community knowledge:

> ***Karen****: There are…streets and neighborhoods in Santa Ana where you just know everyone… and everybody's willing to help each other out, like if you need some food, go to a troquita, you don't have to go out ten minutes, get your stuff and drive, everything is walking distance. That's what makes it community, you know? You feel that love, like in that street…definitely I would say that those are what most neighborhoods in Santa Ana [are].*
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> ***Adrian****: Because regardless of where you're from culturally, Hispanic culture, it's very much about family, about community, and there is an overarching, overwhelming sense of culture and community in all parts of Santa Ana.*

The previous reflections paint an embodied picture of community that symbolize home in nuanced ways for the youth, nonetheless, they are also aware and understand how their community is being portrayed. The overall context of Santa Ana given here is to understand the hurdles and challenges youth face within the city. What is powerful about this juxtaposition in perspective is that youth navigate these realities in generative empowering ways. The data referenced below is demonstrated within the "Perspectives of their City" project youth testimony. Santa Ana is a low income, immigrant, youth-based city with over 25% of the population being 18 years of age and younger (U.S. Census, 2022). Within the context of Orange County, Santa Ana is judged as an undesirable place to live. Much of this perception is racially and or class premised, though for those that live within the city limits Santa Ana is home (Lacayo, 2016). Of the city's ethnic population 76% of the population is of Hispanic and/or Latinx background with a majority is of Mexican origin (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). The cost of living within Orange County is extremely high; rent, gas, food, and health care are unaffordable or unattainable for a minimum wage income. Families often depend on multifamily living arrangements per household to make ends meet. Multifamily living within the city creates a densely populated urban context with lack of resources for everyone (Gonzalez, & Sarmiento, 2017). Youth often share a household with two or three families and share common rooms such as living rooms and or garages as sleeping quarters (Gonzalez, & Sarmiento, 2017).

[35] Comunalidad – the embodiment of an environment that reflects relationships, cultural expressions, and knowledge systems that affirm home and flourishing. Convivencia – the nourish expression of fellowship-based relationship building that gives life, joy, reflection, and love. To convivir is to live with.

Self Knowledge: *Critical Self Reflection; Culturally Rooted; Transformative Stance; Organic Intellectualism*

The same youth interviewed within this project were asked the following question, "What do you envision for the youth of your city?" This question asked youth to be self-reflective considering other youth within their community. The quotes below demonstrate youth as empathetic and solidaristic with their peers within the context of a larger community need. Youth express a desire to better their communities so that all youth have opportunities and spaces to thrive. Santa Ana youth have a heightened sense of how their communities are perceived, they understand that with such perceptions come judgments. Santa Ana youth aspire for more arts, less gang violence, and better resources within schools. It is powerful to see how youth hold each other up, envisioning better communities and futures for everyone. The quotes below demonstrate how youth care for each other and wish for a community that benefits all people. Within the quotes, youth reference the inequalities they faced and emphasize how such experiences are markers for how they don't want their futures to be. Youth were able to envision better communities for their peers and community. Below are quotes from Adrian, Anahi, and Karen visualizing change in caring ways.

> ***Adrian****: So I think the vision I have for the city and its youth would be incorporating cultural heritage and artistic development into just everyday life from infancy to adulthood because, at least in my interpretation and my view, Mexican culture specifically… art, music, dance, is so fundamentally ingrained into the DNA of our culture, and it extends into how we interact with our community, how we interact with one another.*
>
> ***Anahi****: I know it [gangs] has targeted a lot of people…I think if that were to be taken away, there would be a significant increase in joy, happiness, and just safety overall, and not just physical safety of walking down the street and being afraid. But for the youth, it's important for them not to be involved in that and fall into this system…*
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> ***Karen****: We gotta go to our schools and see who is teaching these students, like I wanna go to the root of it all and actually would want to know what the youth would like…As children, as youth, we do need guidance, and if teachers and counselors aren't helping us, we're gonna be struggling in succeeding in the future.*

In my continual work with youth, I am always inspired at the level of insight youth have when understanding our society and the responsibility we as humans have toward one another. Youth embody the meaning of an organic intellectual; they live in genuinely reflective ways, consistently questioning, proposing, and creating. Striving and caring selfishly to better our world. The youth interviewed within this project are grounded, and rooted in self-awareness, understanding that to improve their communities, they must advocate in a collective sense for their peers. The self-awareness youth hold connected to community responsibility are great examples for how youth carry insight for how to transform communities for the better.

Pedagogical Knowledge: *Culturally Relevant/Rooting/Sustaining Pedagogies; Sociocultural Framework for Understanding Learning; Decolonial Pedagogies; Teaching Process (Planning, Enacting, Interpreting, Translating)*

For this specific pillar I would like to pivot inward to the overall purpose of the Santa Ana Youth Media Project. Our vision is to create a media platform that houses youth and community stories in ways that speak truth to power. We truly see the cultural wealth of our youth and communities as beacons for a more inclusive and equitable future. We rest upon the rich tradition of community organizing within Santa Ana, as we continue to build and nourish relationships, collaborations, and stand in solidarity with all causes fighting for justice and equity.

The goal of the SAYMP was to create a media platform that pulled in community, youth, and college students to form an alliance that leveraged community knowledge, critical educational perspectives, and creative media skills and resources. Our task was to create a multi-directional bridge of resources, creativity, knowledge, and long-lasting partnerships between the university and community. Our project is influenced intellectually by Ethnic Studies scholarship, critical media literacy, critical educational studies, Freirean philosophies, and the DIY (*Do it yourself*) punk movement. All these formative traditions center knowledge in non-elite ways, creating space for knowledge to emerge from a bottom-up perspective. Marginalized communities embody a set of experiences and context that have the potential to dismantle power and oppression. Our group is composed of a college professor interested in community power and advocacy, film, and music, English literature students passionate about social justice and stories, and community youth organizers navigating and strategically pushing back within their communities in meaningful ways.

The SAYMP knows that the city of Santa Ana houses a wealth of stories and testimonies that need to be looked at in more intentional ways. The SAYMP has an opportunity to amplify youth stories, by asking questions pertinent to the needs of the community, pairing youth and community voice to scholarship, and visually offering these stories to be seen via film by everyone. Our goals are to influence policy, create spaces for teaching and learning, transform normative forms of perception and transform the realities of youth in ways that are beneficial to them. Youth within Santa Ana have stories that are important for the larger community, these stories house lessons, reflections, and insights that can teach our world in powerful ways. The SAYMP wishes to capture these stories as textbooks that can be referenced visually by our society (Freire, 2000).

***Institutional Knowledge*:** Histories of schools; Interlocking Institutions (School-to-Prison, School-to-Labor); Political and Economic Institutions (Racial Capitalism)

As organic intellectuals who are concerned with the members of their community as a whole, the youth of Santa Ana are aware and point to interlocking institutions affecting their communities. Youth understand that the systems they navigate daily are faulty and unjust. The youth quotes below point toward witnessing youth getting involved in gangs and then eventually getting kicked out of school and into prison systems. Youth see how their schools (i.e., administrators and teachers) perceive youth and their communities as dangerous, and then shift their perspectives after processes of gentrification transform the environment. Youth are conscious and aware of such deficit positioning on behalf of their school officials and are able to identify such behavior in critical ways (Rodriguez et al., 2020). They are keen in noticing genuine and/or false intentions of support. The quotes below illustrate how youth express and evidence institutional knowledge impacting their communities.

> ***Anahi**: A lot of stories have been heard about school-to-prison pipelines: You start in a gang…and eventually you get put in prison, and it's just a whole system; if you were just to take away the gangs…and we could create happy youth, happy communities, basically.*
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> ***Anahi**: When I went to OCSA for the first time in seventh grade, it was a couple years before the 4th St Market was set up, so before that, the school kind of advertised that Santa Ana was very dangerous…It was kind of just spit out to you…It was always sent out in parent emails, don't let your kids walk this way, don't pick your kids up in this area or across the street, and it wasn't until the 4th St. Market was kind of brought up and more gentrification started to happen that, you know what, maybe we can let our kids hang out there, it's run by white people; go ahead and let them walk to this coffee house.*
>
> ***Karen**: Most of the city budget goes to the police department, I don't really see them investing too much in youth, or even the community. We don't have that many parks here, so I don't really think they do invest in that, cause if they would, it would show.*

Youth are aware of the policies, programs, and resources the city allocates to the youth. Youth understand that such resources are deficit-based and pre-scripted with the intent of creating assimilating platforms for youth engagement. Youth are aware of critical news outlets holding the city policies and budgets accountable; and equally, youth are aware of critical youth briefs and reports conducted by local community organizations contextualizing youth and community conditions. Their interest toward staying aware, prepares them in understanding how interlocking institutions affect them. Youth are aware of the trappings of institutions and gravitate to the community initiatives that promote knowledge, education, culture, and the expressive arts. These spaces allow youth to question, reflect, and express themselves in transformative ways.

***Content Knowledge*:** Black Studies; Asian-American Studies; Chicanx/Latinx Studies; Native & Indigenous Studies

The "Perspectives of their City" project is rooted in the content knowledge of Ethnic Studies narratives. Youth within the project build identity formations and ideological alignment given the historical legacies left behind by Chicanx/Latinx activists and scholars. The streets of Santa Ana are filled with historic Chicanx murals and historical landmarks that reconnect the past with our present and future. Teachers, organizers, and youth have searched out the histories/herstories and began to build curriculum, art, and content given this rich geographical history. Youth have been active in understanding and promoting the history of their community as alive and not just something of the past (Lewinnek et al., 2022; Kopetman, 2020). The Santa Ana Youth Media Project has done its part in documenting youth voice embedded in historical content knowledge. The SAYMP works with youth via YPAR to uncover new stories, data, histories, and research, so that they both validate and personalize the body of literature. The quotes below by Adrian, Anahi, Karen demonstrate their awareness regarding the arts as entry ways for a larger content set of knowledge concerning their identities.

> ***Adrian**: More ease of access to the arts… it's not as heavily pushed or emphasized in our community. So, if I had the opportunity and the ability to do so, I would push for easier access to arts education and arts in general.*

> ***Anahi**: I started doing Ballet Folklorico at OCSA [Orange County School of the Arts] and that's the smallest program that's available at that school; there's like 50 of us, and those 50 obviously knew that Santa Ana was like, okay, so we started doing performances and getting together with admin to show them there's good things to this bad Latino culture that you're trying to say, basically. I think we did make an impact on certain teachers, and people that didn't otherwise know. At least those that accepted our comments towards them.*
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> ***Karen**: Little by little, Santa Ana is being displaced, due to gentrification. Little by little, I see my city changing in that way, like there's not as many murals here, I see more people coming from different cities investing here. So, I do see that shift coming... I fear that if most of us here in Santa Ana don't do something about it, it'll just be completely different.*

Youth have shown interest in exploring their histories/herstories, though unfortunately such knowledge is often hidden or not part of the mainstream curriculum. Even more, surrounding communities around Orange County have begun to express anti-Ethnic Studies[36] rhetoric convoluting the importance of such resources. The SAYMP strives to link youth with knowledge access, and a media platform to take action. Our project becomes an educational and community organizing initiative tasked with building content knowledge accessible to youth for youth.

Reflections and Conclusions

Santa Ana youth are overcoming systemic hurdles through sheer tenacity and exhaustive endeavors, and in the process, youth are burning out, giving up, and disengaging in discouraging ways. Their ability to overcome hardship should not be understood through false notions of meritocratic idealism especially when the hard work they put forth rarely works in their favor. Youth of Santa Ana need to be seen as experts in their own experiences and should be consulted when trying to improve our educational systems at hand. The combination of YPAR with media advocacy and the pillars of ethnic studies pedagogy create a platform that asserts their knowledge and experiences as expertise. Youth carry in their experiences the knowledge base often lacking within official youth programming (Apple, 2000). YPAR allows for youth to identify and problem solve via research the societal issues affecting their communities. The Ethnic Studies pillars validate their experiences as true knowledge and media advocacy amplifies this knowledge in communal accessible ways.

Youth within Santa Ana need to be seen as vital resources, the missing element or key toward building and sustaining a healthy and equitable system. Every morning as I make my way to work, I see youth skateboarding to school, they maneuver an urban terrain, jump curves, and swerve around potholes. I am impressed by their ability to move with such style and swag, and as I observe their grace and skill, I reflect upon the additive challenges they face, such as, school-to-prison pipelines, banking education, and deficit approaches to youth development. These systemic terrains figuratively (but also literally) speaking are hurdles holding our youth and their families back. As adult educators we must learn from the youth's finesse and swag as they glide through

[36] Ethnic Studies movements and policies have been receiving increasing backlash by conservative fronts that are pushing back on AB101, Ab1460, and established Ethnic Studies Programs with California. This issue is not pertinent to only California. Arizona, Florida, Texas and Iowa, to name a few have all shown initiatives and policies that are anti-CRT and Ethnic Studies.

the streets. Can we, as educators, learn to skate these systemic terrains, metaphorically, in solidarity with our youth? As educators we need to learn how to think creatively when expected to reproduce mainstream expectations for measuring youth, educators need to learn to push back alongside youth and for youth to avoid the potholes and curbs of mainstream education. A shift in perspective is needed when understanding the agency, resilience, and self-determination of Santa Ana youth and all youth.

Lastly, I want to acknowledge the participants who were involved in the development of this project. Our SAYMP team is a testament to the brilliance of youth as we experience within the parameters of Orange County. These individuals were a mix of both local Orange County community organizers, and local college students of whom I had the honor to collaborate and share space with. I want to acknowledge Avery Tang, Marissa Brugger, Elena Marquez, Karen Garcia, and Yenni Diaz for the many days of videoing, editing, research, planning, strategizing, and dreaming we did with the Santa Ana Youth: Perspectives of Their City project. Our goal as a collective was to amplify youth voice in ways where youth could see themselves reflected, this project accomplishes this and more. This project is a critically reflective resource for all youth, youth advocates, teachers, policy makers, and educators when wanting to understand youth context within the city of Santa Ana.

Thanks to all the hard work this team did, youth within the city of Santa Ana and beyond can now point to their context in ways that can influence policy and transform how youth are perceived. When reflecting upon our process for completing this project and considering the timeline we navigated, we literally made the impossible, possible. Considering the pandemic lockdown from March of 2020 – August of 2020, and eventually finishing our video essays in October of 2020, we still met on a regular basis and jumped all the hurdles the pandemic threw at us. What we produce and the purpose for why we produced this project is so much more meaningful, and transformative. There are no words to demonstrate the energy and power our team represents. Not even a pandemic could curtail the purpose and commitment we demonstrated to this project and Santa Ana youth.

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