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Art as a Transformative Practice:

A Participatory Action Research Project with Trans* Youth

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Abstract:

Given that promoting social justice is one of the central organizing principles of social work, it comes as no surprise that participatory action research (PAR) has gained much attention among social work researchers. While much has been written about promising practices of PAR with various marginalized communities, there remains a dearth of PAR literature that focuses on trans* people, a population often under attack in current socio-political climates. In this paper, we report on a PAR project in which a trans* artist worked closely with trans* youth participants (n = 5) to assist them through a creative project. Using a queer theoretical lens and drawing from the concept of “queer world-making,” the participants recast cultural representations about what it means to be trans* in their chosen artistic medium. This paper suggests that art can serve as a transformative research practice with trans* youth. Our findings suggest that the rhetorical binary of trans* vulnerability and resilience does not adequately represent lived experience. We make this argument by demonstrating the following processes through which youths engaged art in this PAR project: 1) countering normative discourses of what it means to be trans*, 2) promoting self- reflection and expression, and 3) facilitating ‘queer counterpublics.’ In so doing, we make an argument for art as a qualitative research process that holds much promise in uncovering and challenging the normative discourse and developing a much more complex and nuanced understanding of what it means to be trans* youth.

Key words: Participatory action research; Arts-based research; Trans youth, Qualitative research

Art as a transformative practice: A participatory action research project with trans* youth

This paper reports a Participatory Action Research (PAR) project we conducted with trans* youth in a mid-size Canadian city. Using various forms of art, this PAR project sought to problematize and recast pop(ular) cultural representations about what it means to be trans* for young people. We use the term *trans** as an inclusive umbrella term to refer to people whose genders “do not conform to the societal expectations for the sex they were assigned at birth,” including transgender, transsexual, gender queer, gender non-binary, gender fluid, and other gender nonconforming people” (Singh, Richmond, and Burns, 2013: p. 95). Using queer theory, we suggest that art can serve as a transformative research practice with trans* youth.

Literature Review*Risk & Resilience among Trans* Youth*

Much of literature on trans* youth in social work is focused on risks and vulnerabilities of this marginalized population. A national school-based survey in Canada (Taylor and Peter, 2011) showed highly elevated levels of social exclusion and harassment among trans* youth: verbal (74%), physical (37%), and sexual (49%) harassment, and feeling unsafe at school (78%). The *Canadian Trans Youth Health Survey* (Veale et al., 2015) provided additional data about trans* youth (n=923), such as a high prevalence of experiencing cyberbullying (44%), feeling unsafe in school washrooms (40%) and change rooms (44%), being forced to have sexual intercourse (23%), and experiencing discrimination for being trans* (60-70%). Similarly, Qualitative research by Asakura (2016a, 2017) suggested that trans* youth struggled daily because their families, schools, and service providers often failed to acknowledge gender outside the binary system. Although risk-focused research played an essential role in raising public awareness about the lived realities of trans* youth, there remains a concern that this type of

research might further perpetuate the risk-based discourse that characterizes mainstream knowledge concerning trans* youth.

In order to counter risk-focused discourse about trans* youth, a growing body of research now focuses on resilience (Asakura, 2016a, 2016b, 2017; Mustanski et al., 2011), generally defined as “the dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity” (Luthar, Cicchetti, and Becker, 2000: p. 543). Research focused on resilience is designed to counter the ‘risk and deficit’ focused discourse about trans* youth and highlight how they may navigate adversities by using internal and external resources. Several important resilience-promoting processes have been identified for trans* youth. These include parental acceptance of young peoples’ trans* identities (Simons et al., 2013; Travers et al., 2012; Veale et al., 2015), perceived social (Grossman, D’Augelli, and Frank, 2011) and peer (Veale et al., 2015) support, community activism, and the use of social media for identity affirmation (Singh, 2013). Asakura’s Canadian-based Grounded Theory study (2017) identified additional resilience-promoting resources for trans* youth, such as one’s access to safer spaces designed for trans* youth, relationship with trans* adults, and involvement with countercultural communities that affirm gender diversities, such as Cosplay and anime.

The concept of resilience is not without limitations, however. When research focus shifted from risk to resilience one of the unintended consequences might be to view trans* youth solely from a strengths perspective (Saleebey, 1996). In doing so, there is the potential to sensationalize or trivialize trans* people as being ‘brave’ or ‘inspirational’, often for a cisgender audience (Miller, 2018). When trans* lives are sensationalized in this way we might lose sight of the nuances involved in trans* people’s lives, which often include complexities and contradictions, such as joy, strengths, struggles, and trauma. Building on this critique, our work

aligns with Dodd and Tolman (2017) and seeks to take on a more balanced approach to viewing risk and resilience as non-binary concepts in the lives of trans* youth.

Trans Representation*

Representation is defined as “the production of meaning through language” (Hall, 1997: p. 28). Through communication shared within a certain socio-cultural context, meanings are constructed and given to people, objects, or events. Hall (1997) suggests that hegemonic power often constructs meanings about marginalized people and can perpetuate the dominant-subordinate power relations. Stereotypes, for instance, are products of such constructed meanings and shape the public image of trans* people. While trans* people are often invisible in mass culture, when they are visible, their representations “reflect the biases and interests of... (mostly) white, (mostly) middle-aged, (mostly) male, (mostly) middle- and upper-middle class, and entirely heterosexual (at least in public)” (Gross, 1991: p. 190). Such problematic representations are essential in controlling the availability of resources for marginalized groups like trans* youth and maintaining the power of the ruling elites (Hall, 1997; Lull, 2011). Relatively little is known about trans* representation and its impact on trans* youth. Ryan (2010) highlights that trans* representation available in the mainstream media is quite inadequate and characterizes trans people as “othered, exoticized, fetishized and cast as deviant, bizarre, and pathological” (p. 10-11). Anecdotally, most trans* representations in popular movies and TV shows are produced or portrayed by cisgender people, which excludes trans* people from knowledge creation processes. Although there have been some recent gains in this area with increasing representations of trans* people, such as recent TV series *Pose*, diverse and complex trans* representations remain scarce (Butler B, 2019). Scholarly engagement with trans* representation

can play a critical role in disrupting the negative societal attitudes towards trans* people by shifting the discourse, service availabilities, and policies involving trans* people.

Participatory Action Research

PAR is a methodology that links research to social action. Kim (2016) suggests that PAR is theoretically rooted in Paulo Freire's work on critical consciousness (one's process of engaging in a structural analysis of a problem at hand) and praxis (one's process of engaging in learning, reflection, and action simultaneously and iteratively). Through a collaborative interaction between researchers and people from marginalized communities, PAR seeks to create a forum for knowledge production and actions that can lead to social change (Healy, 2001; Singh et al., 2013). As demonstrated in other PAR studies with marginalized communities in Canada (e.g., Ginn and Kulig, 2005; Riecken et al., 2006; Sakamoto et al., 2009), PAR researchers view marginalized people not only as research participants but as individuals who hold important knowledge and skills that offer innovative solutions to the problems they face.

A critical review of PAR projects involving youth (Kim, 2016) shows that PAR can be used for a variety of purposes: from health promotion to program evaluation. There are varying ways in which youth might be involved in PAR – ranging from heavily involved in the research design, data collection, analysis, and knowledge mobilization processes to limited involvement in PAR activities. In addition, PAR is used as a methodology to engage youth on various purposes and social problems. A recent systematic review of youth-focused PAR (Anyon, Bender, Kennedy, and Dechants, 2018) shows that researchers have used mostly qualitative methodologies to study a diversity of social issues, such as education, health, and violence. Researchers also measured various youth outcomes of PAR, such as leadership, social, emotional and interpersonal skills. Kim (2016) also suggested that one's participation in PAR has resulted

in the development of greater leadership skills and communication, critical consciousness, and a greater community network among youth.

Despite the increasing use of PAR with youth, few have engaged in PAR projects with trans* youth thus far. Several studies engaged LGBTQ youth, including trans-identified youth, in PAR projects for various purposes, such as to advocate for changes in institutional practices in schools (Wernick, Woodford, and Kulick, 2014), examine the issues of representation (Holtby, Klein, Cook, and Travers, 2015), and address bigotries within LGBTQ communities (Wagaman and Sanchez, 2017). Only a handful of studies focused on trans* youth in PAR. In a PAR study that examined trans* youths' gendered experiences in schools (Johnson, Singh, and Gonzalez, 2014), youth and the research team developed two documentary films about the school climates for trans* youth. In their critical reflection on the PAR project with trans* youth and their parents, Katz-Wise et al. (2018) discussed three key areas as lessons learned: (1) Cultivating relationships with community members is essential especially when the researchers are considered outsiders; (2) Although the power differences between the researchers and participants must be carefully attended to, this relational dynamics become complex when strict research ethics protocols must be followed; and (3) researchers might take on an advocate role for participants beyond what is normally considered as researcher responsibilities.

Current Study

From 2016-2018 we designed and ran an arts-based PAR study with five youth in a mid-sized Canadian city. The study was conducted in collaboration with *Youth Services Bureau*, a local youth-serving organization. We recruited self-identified trans* youth over the age of 16 to participate in this study through various agency contacts and community network. In building collaborative research processes, this PAR study aimed to provide a forum for trans* youth to (1)

critically engage trans* representations in mainstream media and (2) create representations that more accurately reflect their diverse and complex everyday lives. Table 1 shows the demographics of these participants.

Table 1. Demographics of youth participants

Participant	Age	Race/ethnicity	Gender identity & Pronoun	Art medium
Y1	20	Indigenous/White	Two-spirit (he/him)	Photography
Y2	22	White	Woman (she/her)	Illustrated zine
Y3	19	White	Gender non-binary (they/them)	Projections/photography
Y4	22	Asian	Gender fluid (they/them)	Performance arts
Y5	25	White	Man (he/him)	Specialized digital editing, photography

Sakamoto (2014) posits that art has tremendous potential to promote social justice and social change. In discussing several concrete examples, she contends that art provides a forum for the researchers or practitioners to put a spotlight on the existence or experience of people that have been systematically marginalized in society. Holtby et al. (2015), for instance, used photography as a research method to study queer and trans* youths' subjective, everyday experiences. Art can also be used as a form of knowledge mobilization vis-à-vis social media or documentary film (Johnson et. al, 2014). In our study, we used art for the purpose of the research process and knowledge mobilization. Each of the participants received one-on-one mentorship from the fourth author, a local trans* artist, for up to a year to develop artistic and technical skills to recast trans* representations using various forms of art. Youth chose a variety of artistic media such as digital and film photography, writing, book-making and performance art.

At the end of this PAR project, we worked with youth to organize and host a week-long art exhibit titled *Trans Genre* in August 2018. Two of the participants incorporated and acknowledged the importance of Sandy Stone, an early trans* activist who authored “The 'empire' strikes back: A posttranssexual manifesto” in 1992, which is celebrated as the rallying cry for self-authored trans* texts/representation. The final art exhibition that resulted from the artists’ collective works was a deliberate acknowledgment of Stone’s (1992) proposal that the body of the trans individual is a proverbial genre itself: “to map the refigured body onto conventional gender discourse and thereby disrupt it, to take advantage of the dissonances created by such a juxtaposition to fragment and reconstitute the elements of gender in new and unexpected ways” (p. 165). In fact, these artworks are reflections of this understanding that gender configures itself in unique and individual ways that are most often lost in mainstream trans discourse and representations. Over 100 local community members, including social workers and youth workers, came to the opening event of the exhibit. Following the exhibit, four of the participants also voluntarily showcased their work using social media for a year.

Youth also voluntarily participated in a semi-structured individual interview to reflect on their experiences with this PAR study. Interviews were conducted by the research assistants. We asked each participant to describe their work, the medium they chose, and the key reasons behind the creative decisions they made throughout the process. We then inquired about their experiences of producing their own forms of trans* representation via the modality of art. Each interview lasted for approximately one hour. These interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Research Ethics Boards of both Carleton University and Youth Services Bureau approved all aspects of this PAR study, including all knowledge dissemination activities.

Theoretical Framework

This study used queer theory (e.g., Berlant and Warner 1998; Butler, 1993) as an overarching theoretical framework. More specifically, we engaged the concept of *queer world-making* (Berlant and Warner 1998) in understanding the interview data. While the term ‘queer’ is often used as an identity marker (e.g., gay, bi), queer theorists view ‘queer’ as an anti-essentialist, counter-disciplinary project, committed to messiness and complexity in the research process (Hegarty, 2008). Queer theory is under the umbrella of postmodernist epistemology, in which “universal truths or structures give way to a ‘multiverse’ or plurality of ideas about the world,” and so diverse realities are recognized as valid (Lax, 1992: p. 69). This approach is critical to social work as it allows us to critique discourses and institutions that work to maintain normative structures and hierarchies (Butler and Byne, 2008).

Queer world-making, a queer theoretical concept coined by Berlant and Warner (1998), suggests that non-heteronormative social groups structure and cultivate their own spaces of existence. A queer world is one that makes queerness, and/or gender non-conformity, desirable in its “unsystematised lines of acquaintance, projected horizons, typifying examples, alternative routes, blockages, [and] incommensurate geographies” (Berlant and Warner, 1998: p. 558). For example, Rawson (2014) compares the “collaborative channels of cyberspace” to proverbial queer worlds for trans* activists using the web to preserve trans* narratives that are not traditionally captured within the scope of documented contemporary LGBTQ histories (p. 38). This research suggests that queer worlds come in a multitude of forms and are replete with creative interventions into what Berlant and Warner (1998) call ‘queer counterpublics’. Following Warner (2002) and early scholarship such as D’Emilio (1983), Cohen (1997), and Muñoz (1999), we believe that the term ‘community’ can suggest that all community members

share commonalities and fail to acknowledge diversities and intersectionalities among queer and trans* people. Instead, we will use the language of ‘queer counterpublic’ (Warner, 2002) to dispel the myth of a monolithic trans* community that has collective goals and unitary strategies of resistance. In this context, the term counterpublic departs from ‘community’ in that a counterpublic includes social actors both known and unknown to the participant. Within this counterpublic, however, even strangers are “socially marked” as having some sort of non-heteronormative label and exist “through a conflictual relation to the dominant public (Warner, 2002: p. 423-424).

Art as a Transformative Practice

We engaged queer theory to analyze the interview data gathered in this PAR project. We seek to problematize the narrowly defined and binary-structured notions of vulnerability and resilience in discussing the following processes through which youths engaged art: 1) countering normative discourses of what it means to be trans*, 2) promoting self-reflection and expression, and 3) facilitating queer counterpublics. In so doing, we suggest that art can serve as a qualitative research process that can uncover and challenge normative discourses, while fostering more complex and nuanced understandings of everyday experiences of trans* youth today. Youth excerpts are identified by ‘Y’ as well as a number assigned to each youth participant (e.g., Y2).

Countering normative discourses

Trans* youth face realities that cannot be adequately captured within the reductive ‘resilient’ versus ‘victim’ narrative. The restrictive narrative that currently pervades trans* youth representation requires attention because of the problematic and essentializing discourses created by its false dichotomy. As stated by Y2, “mainstream depictions of trans folks are... usually sensationalistic... and patronizing a lot of the time.” In her autobiographical zine, Y2 wrote

about trans* women throughout history, both well and lesser known, who have “laid the foundation for (her) present happiness” and challenged the myth that ‘transness’ was something to fear. When interviewed about her artistic intentions for the zine, she explained: “I was responding to negative depictions [of trans* people] in pop culture...not to make a false narrative that seems really nice and just to pull directly from my experiences... messy experiences of... figuring out and navigating my identity.” Y2 used the zine to produce and deploy a counter-narrative that authentically communicated her, at times painful, experience of being trans*. What moves her contribution beyond the simplistic resilience narrative is her ability to relate the cause of oppression-based pain back onto larger social structures that sustain trans* disenfranchisement. The clarity of vision with which she conveys the structural nature of trans* oppression provides the missing element of mainstream resilience discourse which failed to recognize the way larger systems work to perpetuate trans* stereotypes and social marginalization (Asakura, 2016a). This re-articulation of a perceived flawed narrative provides a strong example of queer world-making because the zine’s creation and circulation in public space is a deliberate move to amend or supplant the inadequacies of mainstream discourse.

A similar sentiment was shared by Y1, who posed as a fictional character and created a sequential storyboard of three photographs marking his transition: from “hiding behind a mask, to making tentative ventures into the public, then finally to full acceptance.” His work urges viewers, presumably gender conforming or cis-gender audiences to “(not) push us away. We have a lot to offer the world.” This is his storytelling of both vulnerabilities and resilience as a trans* youth and declaration of ones’ potential and place in the world. Similarly, gender non-binary Y3 recognized the limitations of monolithic depictions of trans identity: “In terms of trans representation, I think it just needs to be more normalized and it needs to stop being so

demoniz[ing].” To challenge this demonization, Y3 held a photoshoot of themselves and another trans* friend. With the use of a projector in a photography studio, glitched digital images of TV static, sound waves, distorted VHS tapes, and photo stills of meaningful text were projected onto these two youths flattening their figures into dynamic silhouettes that melded into the projections. Y3 explained this artwork:

To capture the experience of constantly negotiating the projection of society’s views onto our bodies and what it is they deem acceptable versus the reality of our bodies and desires... [This work] is a counter-projection that refuses complacency and pushes back... on dominant [gender] ideologies.

Another photo-based project that deliberately challenged our desire to see reality in photographic images was Y5’s mockumentary book that features a series of photoshopped images of himself as participating in key moments of trans* history. The work responded to dominant trans representations, confounding gender and temporality with each turn of a page. When asked about his perception of popular trans* representation, Y5 noted that he has a “very pessimistic perspective about trans* representations.” Photoshopping himself alongside historic figures such as famous queer theorists Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, Y5 freely, unrestrainedly and multipliciously transitioned his image and gender, confounding any easy [gender] categorization and explaining that the project was “a counter-narrative and my book is suggesting to unshackle ourselves from [cis and hetero-normativity, the assumption that heterosexuality and gender conformity are privileged].”

Promoting self-reflection & self-expression

Many of the participants spoke about how artistic creation allowed them to engage and document the process of self-reflection. It also allowed youth to express who they are beyond the

silo of (trans)gender identity, which is often reductively filtered through an exchange of language. For these participants, art provided a forum for others to see them in expanded form, not strictly contained within the bounds of verbal conversation and its attendant identity category of trans* youth. For instance, Y3 described the liberating impact of their photography project: “it was eye-opening going through it [the photoshoot] and putting it [the photos] out there as an art form. . . it was almost kind of liberating to be able to. . . show people that this is my reality.” Significantly, this youth, who invited their parents to come see the show, experienced art as an avenue to express and celebrate the complexities of their identity. Similarly, through the sharing of her zine with her parents, Y2 was able to communicate volumes about herself – existence and identity – through art beyond everyday verbal forms of communication. Y2 shared:

I really liked (sharing) this personal work with people in my life. . . like my parents, my partner’s parents, [they] read it and liked it. I was so nervous about that because it’s very personal. . . . but it’s nice to feel open like that. Taking sort of challenging things from my life without thinking I’m having an awkward conversation.

In her artwork, Y2 also demonstrated that individual-level identity was not a sufficient stopping point; rather, she noted that she owes her current sense of self-worth partly to “those who came before” her (i.e. known historical trans* figures). Referencing important trans* history to narrate her own identity in her artwork, her understanding of the self-expanded from being a dynamic individual to also being a part of a wider assemblage of trans* and queer counterpublics:

. . . no matter how they try to define us, pathologize us, insult us, hurt us, we have the power to define ourselves. Without their example I would not know I had any option besides to continue living in the coercive gender role that I was born into. The stress of [gender conformity] would definitely have destroyed my life.

Furthermore, self-configuration does not occur in a vacuum. Relational experience with the trans* artist mentor (fourth author) appears to have further facilitated youths' self-reflection and expression. Y2 spoke of her relationship with the trans* artist mentor: "I got to work with an established trans* artist in the community, which is a really valuable connection for me." In another example, Y3 explained their relationship with the artist mentor: "I'm very comfortable with (the artist mentor). If there are any issues you could just openly talk to them about it. . . they made the experience incredibly comfortable. . . and we shared a ton together." Y4, who has past performance arts experience in the city, found it encouraging to work with another trans* artist on a project focused on transness. Y4 recalled "there's not much of that going on [with trans* art locally] and I wanted to do that. So it was good to have that connection. It was a lot (of) fun brainstorming and talking and stuff, and it all worked out really great." In addition to comfort and shared identity, working with the artist mentor offered one participant a sounding board for knowledge sharing. Y5 noted: "we have kind of the same knowledge and interests in what my project is about which I think was really helpful because [the artist] could help fill in any gaps." As demonstrated, having a trans* artist mentor to guide the art-making process proved to be helpful in myriad ways. Unlike some traditional teacher-student hierarchical dynamics, the artist mentor engaged their own lived experience as a trans* person and supported these youths' agency in deciding how they might express their own representation through art. Here, through open discussion with the art mentor, trans* youth participants were able to create counter discourses that "formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (Fraser, 1990: p. 81). Although the production of art provided youth with an opportunity to better contextualize and understand their identity and existence, it appears that the relationship with the trans* artist mentor further contributed to this process of self- reflection and expression.

Facilitating queer counterpublics

Queer worlds come in a multitude of forms and are replete with creative interventions into *queer counterpublics* (Warner, 2002). For these youth, art as a research practice provided a forum to create new queer counterpublics, re-work existing queer counterpublics, and develop spaces for activism. When speaking about her own trans* personal networks, Y2 stated that she “sometimes find(s) it hard to connect and meet people so having a reason to connect with someone was good. [Having] a platform (art exhibit) to disseminate my work... gave me the self-confidence to make connections in the [wider trans*] community.” When asked to describe her work, the medium she chose, and the key reasons she decided on her creative project, Y2 explained that she “... picked [zines] because that sort of medium (has) a historical connection which sort of reflects the content, this idea of ancestry and of having a past and reclaiming a past.” As Bly and Wooten (2012) suggest, zines are often an instrumental, subversive ‘do-it-yourself’ communicative tool in documenting queer history in the digital age. Reflecting this, Y2 spoke of sharing her zine with others: “[sharing zines] gave me this feeling of connection also to that, you know, this is something that people had been doing for decades.” As an unintended impact of her participation in the project, Y2 applied for an external filmmaking workshop for trans* filmmakers “trying to encourage more diversity within the narrative in the industry.”

In a collaborative project with the artist mentor, Y4 performed satirical live drag at a local art gallery to critique gender-segregated public washrooms and demystify gender-neutral washrooms. In a critical bid to elucidate how gender segregated spaces are experienced by trans* people, this youth and art practitioner comedically ‘policed’ the washrooms of the art gallery to ensure various patrons understood the rules of engagement for washroom politics and etiquette. When asked about why they chose this mode of art production, Y4 answered, “...because I’ve

been through... little bathroom things, ignorant comments and stuff like that... And it's a super important [issue] so it feels good, and it's different because it's no longer that I'm being represented or seen as a sad trans* story." In this instance, Y4 was able to use art as the catalyst for social change while challenging the assumption that all young trans* people are passive victims without any recourse to gender discrimination. Holtby and colleagues (2015) mention the heteronormative "hostile gaze. . . [which] refers to a feeling of being on display for straight and cis people. . ." (p. 327). To the participant, reversing the hostile gaze onto predominantly "old(er)...white... and rich" audience was a liberating act of educating the public about the consequences of highly gendered-segregated spaces. This youth shared that "thinking of people's lack of knowledge towards gender-neutral bathrooms. . . maybe we can talk about them in a comedic way and then it becomes easier for people to use them and feel like it's not a big deal." This 'policing the bathroom' performance not only allowed them to inhabit the role of authority in a space where they are traditionally marginalized, but provided a clear view of how trans* activism need not follow a prescriptive, formal model. Rather, trans* youth can use levity and creativity to provoke a trans-positive public spectacle that redefines change as accessible and enjoyable. In the space of the predominantly heteronormative, white, and upper-class art gallery, the participant exercised their gender autonomy, ironically through the cloak of drag, in a counter-performative engagement in the political practice of (gender) queer world-making (Muñoz, 1999).

Using art as a way to expand the borders of knowledge and representation demonstrates how trans* activism can be achieved in many forms and on many fronts. The productive force of queer world making does not just take place when activists lobby for legislative reform but is the

everyday work of artists who send their work out into the public to challenge dominant and normative ideologies. This is highlighted in the following words from Y3:

We can take smaller steps towards [trans* activism]. You do need to go out there and advocate for yourself and others. . . [but] there also needs to be some subtlety to it because the reality is [that] if you're screaming the entire time, chances are people aren't going to listen. . . I think we need more approachable ways to talk about the subject.

As shown in these youths' work, art can provide a form of effective, everyday activism alternative to advocating for a macro-level policy change. This constitutes a queer world-making process as queer worlds involve “. . . all kinds of people who work towards creating a different world. It is not a strategic plan, organized by anyone, but a bottom-up engagement with the everyday” (Nakayama and Morris, 2015: p. v.). Whether it was a paper-based zine, digital photos, or live performance, arts-based representations about their *everyday* lives as trans* provided these youth with an important platform of activism. In these ways, the art production processes was a novel way to create queer counterpublics, re-work existing queer counterpublics, and develop additional spaces for everyday activism.

Discussion & Conclusion

Through this PAR study with trans* youth, we learned that art can be a transformative research process in several ways. In analyzing the interview data through the lens of queer theory, we suggested that the art-making process might help trans* youth to problematize and re-conceptualize the normative discourse about trans* people – either being a fetishized, sensationalized subject or a solely dependent, passive victim. Art also provided youth with an opportunity to engage in self-reflection and re-work trans* identity and existence. This was done especially within the context of their relationship with the trans* artist mentor. Finally, youth

participants engaged the artistic process as a dynamic strategy for developing queer counterpublics and everyday trans* activism.

The current study adds to problematizing the normative discourse of resilience prevalent in social work research. Although some scholars have written about resilience from a much more nuanced and holistic view (e.g., Asakura, 2016b, 2017; Ungar, 2011), social work appears to uncritically embrace a strengths perspective (Saleebey, 1996). Often used interchangeably with resilience, the strengths perspective signals social workers' attention to one's existing internal capacities, traits, and resources (e.g., communication skills, artistic skills) for individual-level coping. While we recognize immense contributions of the strengths perspective to engaging communities that can be otherwise seen as victims of societal-level problems (e.g., transphobia, poverty, racism), when used from a positivist stance, this theory can also obscure the very struggles many trans* youth experience when we view resilience and vulnerabilities/victimhood as binary states.

Our project further supports the work of other researchers' use of art in engaging youth in qualitative research (e.g., Holtby et al., 2015; Johnson et al., 2014). In this study, art was used as a medium for trans* youth to discuss the complexities of representation and recast representations reflective of their everyday lives. Unlike conventional research methods, such as surveys or focus groups, these youth participants were given, at least to some extent, control and agency over how they chose to express their identity and experiences through art. Jack (2012) and Nguyen (2018) suggest that art often provokes emotional and visceral reactions through which youth might more readily express complex and ambiguous feelings and thoughts. Unlike conventional research methods that rely on youths' verbal report alone, art provides a space where youth can more freely express complexities and ambiguities inherent in everyday life

(Nguyen, 2018). Using queer theory, an anti-essentialist position that embraces messiness and complexity (Hegarty, 2008), art served as a ‘queer space’ where youth and researchers interrogated the simplistic and binary victim-resilience discourse and contributed to a thickened, nuanced and complex understanding of what it means to be trans*. The use of art might be valuable when doing research with trans* youth and other marginalized youth populations, especially when the purpose is to de-center conventional (e.g., cis-normative, heteronormative) knowledge and put a spotlight on the perspective of those who have been historically and presently marginalized (Sakamoto, 2014).

Furthermore, from a data collection perspective the use of art helped facilitate an otherwise abstract and theoretical concept of representation and allowed youth to project their thoughts and feelings about their own experiences in interpreting their individual artworks. Here, as Nguyen (2018) suggested, art fostered youths’ engagement with reflexivity, a process of critically reflecting one’s relationship with the topic (Lincoln, Lynham, and Guba, 2011), and contributed to the concrete and rich interview data presented in the paper. We also used art as a form of knowledge dissemination (Nguyen, 2018). Youth worked with the trans* artist mentor to organize an art exhibit accessible to the public. Unlike traditional research dissemination activities, such as journal publication, art facilitated an avenue where youths’ deeply personal stories and understanding of trans* representation could be viscerally and emotionally experienced by the audience.

There are several limitations to note in this PAR study. Given the extensive and prolonged involvement required for participation, we worked with a very small number of trans* youth in this study. Our findings are also grounded in the small, predominantly white youth sample and are not meant to speak to the wider populations of trans* youth that may face

different life circumstances and barriers. The study also took place in a mid-sized Canadian city with relatively small LGBTQ communities and limited resources available for trans* youth. Therefore, our main arguments represent our research experience in this particular community context with these five youth. Additionally, we understand that most of those who chose to participate in this study were already artistically inclined and comfortable with the use of art as a research methodology. When transferability of these results is considered, readers are encouraged to carefully examine how and to what extent our argument (i.e., art as a transformative practice for trans* youth) might apply to working with trans* youth in their particular community contexts, including engaging youths in PAR who might not be comfortable with creative methodologies. Our argument for the use of art should not be seen as an exclusion of conventional or positivist research approaches with trans* youth, such as survey and focus group. In fact, a choice of methodology should be dependent upon the research question and purpose (Marshall and Rossman, 2011). Rather, we suggest that social work researchers consider engaging arts-based methodologies to supplement conventional research methods whenever relevant.

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