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## **“From Where I Sit”: Filipino Youth, Sexuality and Immigration in Participatory Action Research**

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## “From Where I Sit”

### Filipino Youth, Sexuality and Immigration in Participatory Action Research

Valerie Francisco

**Abstract** Studies of young people’s experiences of sexuality rarely discuss how immigration and settlement impact youths’ understanding of their bodies, sexual identities, and knowledge. In this paper, Filipino youth in collaboration with adult allies, conducted a New York City-based participatory action research project and found that young people’s experiences and understanding of sexuality are narrated by silences, solidarity and paradoxical spaces. This study explores the contradictory experiences of passivity and subjectivity in the sexual lives of young people. Lastly, as an adult collaborator on the project I assess how “participation” as a logic of inquiry allows for youth and adult collaborators to talk through and negotiate their positions in a research project.

We own Friday nights at the community center in Queens.<sup>1</sup> People who come to the community center everyday expect that the youth in Project YEHEY (Young Educators for Health and Empowerment of the Youth) will swarm the tables in the basement at around 5pm every Friday. Around the table, during the time we all have together, we often pull together the different seats in our community space to make room for the young people that come to participate in the activities. Some chairs are rickety, wooden, fold-up chairs. Others are newer, IKEA-brand, stationary chairs. And still others are more comfortable, rolling, cushioned computer chairs. The latter chairs are the ones most vied for, usually, the policy is first-come, first-serve.

These chairs and this research space on Friday nights serve as a guiding metaphor for this paper. Where we sat, how we shared our seats, when we chose to switch places, what conversations erupted because we sat together, and how many seats stayed around the table—the answers to these questions are pivotal to the mechanics and findings of this participatory action research (PAR) project. In a two-year-long process, some 20 to 25 Filipino youth and 4 adult allies participated in a research team that aimed to explore sexuality in the lives of immigrant and American-born Filipinos in Queens, New York. Not surprisingly, we found more—many young people were strug-

gling with family issues, relationships, education and its intersections with sexuality. But often, in the same moment of intense hardship we also found that many youth were fighting to survive and thrive. Filipino youth, both immigrant and American-born, experience inequality in often contradictory ways, in what Gillian Rose calls “paradoxical space,” wherein young people surrender to ageist, racialized, gendered and sexist codes about youth, and still create meaning and unity through those tropes (1993). When the seats were being pulled from under us, we found painful stories of falling, but we also found strategies for standing back up.

In this paper, I provide a brief history of Filipino immigration and communities in the US that sets the context for the objectives and methodology of this study. I then trace Project YEHEY’s PAR process, discussing the two waves and three phases of the project. I discuss at length our findings about how young people’s sexuality and migration stories affect one another dialectically. Together with my research collective, this project asserts that sexuality, as a common denominator among young people, gives youth an optimal moment to begin to talk about other issues of social inequality in their lives. In our research, we found that sexuality is embedded in the lives of young people, occupying much of their lives, talk and experiences through different institutions like schools, neighborhoods and families. The pervasive character of sexuality, whether through discipline or exploration, allowed young people to find common ground. And because understanding of sexuality was grounded in our everyday lives, talking *through* experiences of repression and guilt gave way to talking about other constructs of oppression (Rogow and Haberland, 2005). Starting with sexuality led us to talk about issues in our community and family and then, our discussion came right back again to talking about relationships, sexual health and sexuality.

Further, I look at how the politics of participation in Project YEHEY allowed for, and sometimes stifled, discussions and action around young people’s everyday obstacles. I will interrogate the kinds of “chairs” researchers are asked to sit in as participants, initiators, and collaborators. Does one type of chair, for example, isolate our co-researchers — the young people — thus making their story an objectified narrative of victimhood? Or, perhaps, is there a chair that rolls, moving towards a table that has other rolling chairs so that other young people can join in, back up, speak up, and link their experiences together? What kind of chairs are adult co-researchers sitting in? Are theirs static chairs with four legs and lacking movement, guaranteeing their permanent position as supervisory? Or is it just like the young people’s chairs, with wheels and the ability to move, participatory? Do we ask youth co-researchers to sit in pivot chairs where they are able to move back and forth from victim to expert and back again? In asking these questions, I aim to break open the messiness

of participation to highlight the complexities of what is considered participating in a PAR project.

The participatory element of PAR must challenge what past projects have called "animators" — people responsible for starting or facilitating the process of research (Rahman, 2008). In other words, a central argument in this paper is that participation in PAR projects cannot merely be an invitation for "researched" communities to work on projects. Rather, participation must also demand that adults and academics who are conventionally regarded as "researchers" be diligent in examining their privileges and insist on collaborative researching, teaching, learning, and participating from all researchers on board.

### **Born and Raised in Queens . . . and the Philippines: Filipinos in New York City**

Ten percent of the overall Filipino population lives outside of the Philippines.<sup>2</sup> 3,000 Filipinos leave their country daily to try their luck in the global labor market (Rodriguez 2010). Their top destination is the United States. Within the United States (US), San Francisco, Los Angeles, and New York City are the top three destinations for Filipino immigrants. These historic immigrant ports have seen a long trajectory of Filipino immigrants dating back to the early 20th century, and the continuous flow of immigrants has manifested itself in ethnic communities and economies.

Although Filipinos can be found in every borough in New York City, especially around hospitals, Queens boasts the highest concentration of Filipinos, a whopping 54% of the whole Filipino population in the city.<sup>3</sup> Filipino businesses are mainly sprinkled throughout the neighborhoods of Woodside, Jackson Heights, and Elmhurst. As a result of the increasing numbers of Filipinos, community-based organizations, hometown associations, and regional and traditional organizations have sprung up to serve their needs. Issues such as labor exploitation, housing, lack of documentation and violence (both domestic and institutional), as well as social issues in the Philippines, have both united and divided the Filipino community in Queens. Sustained migration makes for a variegated composition of different generations of immigrants and native-born Filipinos in the community. In other words, there is frequent interaction between native-born Filipino Americans and Filipinos who have immigrated anywhere from 30 years to 3 weeks ago, a scenario that complicates the assimilatory and transnational issues that arise for members in the community, especially youth. As a result, the issues facing Filipino immigrants continue to grow exponentially, paralleling the steady flow of migration to New York City.

## **Not Sitting at the Kid's Table: Making Academic Room for Filipino Youth in the US**

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Studies of immigrant Filipino families center on the incorporation processes of Filipino immigrant parents and youth into their new destinations (see for example Mangiafico, 1988; Min, 1995; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Portes, 2006). On the other hand, Robert Smith (1999) urges researchers to use a collection of different lenses in studying immigrant communities and include transnationalism as a part of immigrant incorporation. In this vein, this project focuses on the everyday understandings of immigrant youth about their own experiences of immigration to study the salience of transnational practices and behaviors in their lives. As a Filipino immigrant youth who grew up in the US, I have come to understand the lifetime process of adjustment as a balancing act. It is a constant negotiation of trying to fit in, not wanting to, never being able to, and then finding a niche where this dynamism can live. This project was, in part, designed as a PAR project to speak to this very issue. The participatory aspect of the project prioritized Filipino American and Filipino immigrant youth narratives in order to understand the domestic and transnational character of the "assimilation" process (see Goodman in this volume for more discussion on challenging assimilation models). The narratives come from generations of young people, whose backs carry the weight and hopes of assimilation, and still, offer a perspective that complicates the ideas of immigrant integration in the US.

In prioritizing young people's voices, the structural analysis of this project heeds Weis, Fine, and Dimitriadis' (forthcoming) challenge for researchers to move "towards a critical theory" of how historical, colonial, and global conditions of neoliberalism manifests in the local, embodied experiences and narratives of Filipino American and Filipino immigrant youth. Project YEHEY's approach examines how local struggles of Filipino youth in Queens resonate with the political and economic climate. The historical, colonial, and global economic conditions that bring Filipino youth and their families to neighborhoods in Queens, San Francisco, Bahrain, Hong Kong, Dubai and elsewhere, put them in the best position to narrate the experience under those particular conditions. Adapting what Weis and Fine (2004) call "dynamism," or in other words the relationship between the local and global structural institutions in the context of power, privilege and oppression, the objective of the PAR method in this project is to study how global structural forces and young people's agency often mediate and negotiate the local processes of settlement. The movement of bodies across borders is key to the transnational

character of global capital; immigrants and their children bear these experiences in their daily lives. This method intends to focus on the lives of young people to understand how historical and structural forces are reflected in young people's everyday lives (see Krueger in this volume for the refraction of global processes reflected in young people's lives).

Scholars also urge a deeper examination of the sexual lives of young people to include how power relations of gender, class, race, and sexuality inform the sexuality of youth (Tolman, 2002; Fine and McLelland, 2006; Bay-Cheng, Forthcoming). This project was aimed to extend the discourse around young people's sexual subjectivities by examining how the specificities of their social context (i.e. immigration) complicated this aspect of their lives. The project's focus on sexual health of Filipino youth in Queens, NY was central in beginning discussions about the silencing of sexuality in the largely conservative, Roman Catholic Filipino community in the Philippines and Queens. Filipino immigrant parents of the youth in YEHEY were nervous about American ideas of sexuality; they code conversations and discussions of sexuality within the common conception of young people's sexuality as "risk-taking" or dangerous (Bay-Cheng & Zucker, forthcoming). At the same time, Filipino youth were exploring their sexual freedoms by negotiating American and Filipino standards, often experiencing sexual selves that erupt and lead to chasms within families and the community. Sexuality became a site of exploration and unity for young people whose sexual subjectivities were complicated by immigration, migrant culture and acculturation to the US. Our contribution to the literature on sexual subjectivity emerges from how our experiences as immigrants and children of immigrants color our expression, interpretation and negotiation of sexuality.

The objective of this participatory action research project was to learn about how immigration shapes the sexual subjectivities of Filipino immigrant youth. The research questions that guided Project YEHEY unfolded throughout our data collection and analysis process. As we sifted through our data, immigration became a chief factor in interpreting the sexual lives of Filipino youth. Collectively, we asked: What are the issues that affect the sexual lives of Filipino American and Filipino immigrant youth? How does the transnational character of Filipino immigrant culture inform the experiences of Filipino youth? How does immigration shape the sexual subjectivities of Filipino youth? Because we committed to studying the dynamism between global process, local-level assimilation strategies and individual agencies, we moved towards a critical theory of young people's sexual subjectivity that considered larger structural forces as a key player in formation of sexual identities, lives and health.

## Getting the Seats Together: A Collaborative PAR Method and Deep Participation

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This research project was a collaborative effort between young people and adult allies through a community-based organization, Philippine Forum in Woodside, Queens. The distinction between youth and adults in the program is porous. Most of the adult allies considered themselves youth as well, since they were in their early twenties. Still, older participants (or adult allies as they will be referred to in this paper) acknowledge that their age changed the dynamic in the group when they participated in analysis or data collection. The youth program at the Philippine Forum has been in existence for 7 years with young adults coordinating and planning the activities and events. It has been a mainstay in the Filipino community in New York and has served hundreds of Filipino youth in the area focusing on issues of education, immigration, violence, and incarceration. Project YEHEY was a response to the lack of sexual health resources for Filipino youth, our plan was to gather the young people's stories with the aim of setting up organizational programs to answer youth's culturally-specific sexual health needs. Therefore, the goals of the PAR project were bifurcated. First, there was a need to learn about the conditions of Filipino youth that produced the dominant, often negative, ideas about their sexual lives. We wanted to look at immigration, settlement, racism, patriarchy and homophobia as aspects that shaped tropes about young people's sexuality. Second, we were all committed to the political urgency to change the lack under which our youth community lived, into substantive service for young people.

In the first wave of the project, there was a core of eight young people as co-researchers and who participated in setting up a foundation for the project. Our sample of youth participants relied on a snowball strategy; we recruited participants in the network of the core researchers. The core group of youth researchers consists of four males and four females, three of which were born and raised in Queens and five who immigrated three to seven years ago. Their ages range from twelve to seventeen, and all of them are in either public or private schools. The class background of the youth researchers is lower to middle class. Parents of immigrant youth often work deskilled or manual jobs: although most of their parents are college educated, some youth's parents are domestic workers, janitors, restaurant workers, or undocumented workers. American-born youth have parents who work as nurses, thereby determining their ability to go to private school. One of the youth identifies as bisexual, one identifies as questioning, and the rest identify as straight.

There were four adult researchers who participated in the core team, all of whom immigrated to the US when they were younger and one who identified as Filipino-

American. Three of them were female and one male; three identified as straight, one as mostly straight, and all worked for the community center. Three of the four adult allies received college degrees but identified their class background as lower to middle class. In this first wave of researchers, the twelve of us comprised the core research team for YEHEY.

The first phase of the project began with education modules we called "Droppin' Knowledge," was a research camp with trainings, workshops, and discussion groups about interviewing skills and critical theories of oppression. Our discussions coupled with individual reflections through writing and drawing, generated themes and guiding questions for the interviews youth co-researchers would collect shortly thereafter. Collaboratively creating and revising our interview guide engaged the lay wisdom of the young people. Trying to understand the everyday issues of youth around sexuality assisted us recognizing the centrality of immigration to the lives of young people.

Our "indigenous knowledge" about the diaspora and moving through it pushed us to include questions on how immigration stories shaped youths' conceptions of sexuality (Smith, 2006). In learning about political economy of migration and the disciplining apparatuses that keep sexuality at bay, young people challenged adults to chime in and share their stories of immigration and injustice. At times, when adult researchers thought they were taking up too much space as facilitators or logistics coordinators, youth researchers asked us to do more, "Everyone's story gotta be in this," Kent insisted. The collaborative process of designing and framing our research design brought about a critical consciousness around culture of migration all of us had in common. In this particular moment at the early stages of the research, youth researchers brought *deep participation* to the foreground, they insisted that participation meant everyone, not just them. We all talked about sexuality and we all experienced oppression. Therefore, it gave way for us to talk about sexuality in our everyday located in our neighborhoods, parks, families, etc. and this common ground held the potential to uncover hierarchies that are both implicit and explicit in our lives (Lykes & Coquillion, 2007). Our daily experiences with injustice fueled the continuing educational components throughout the project.

The second phase of the project was called, "Don't Hate, Participate!" and it consisted of data collection through interviews and interactive data analysis. For the interviews, youth researchers would bring in their friends and other youth in the organization. The growing sample of participants relied on the networks of the young people in the group. The demographic of the 20 interview participants reflected the age group, class, and sexual orientation of the youth researchers. The 20 youth interviewees in the project are from the ages of 13 to 19 years old, 13 of whom are male and seven female.

Only four out of the 20 participants attended private high schools and one attended a nearby community college. The rest attended public high schools in Queens. Eight of them were Filipino-Americans and twelve were Filipino immigrants. The youth researchers and participants knew each other before interviews took place and had a comfort level with one another based upon common language and common youth and Filipino cultures.

The interviews were held at a community center in Queens. Youth researchers gathered friends, acquaintances, and other young people with a recruitment script and invited them to the meeting room for an interview that lasted from half an hour to one hour. Before the interviews began, youth researchers briefed their participants about consent and confidentiality. The young people mostly deviated from the script and translated suggested words to their own slang in order to alleviate the often stigmatized ideas of “research.” Translations consistently took place as the young people utilized their cultural commonalities to turn the interviews into “*talumbuhay*,” meaning telling one’s life story in Tagalog<sup>4</sup>. We approached “interviews as conversations” to help respondents feel comfortable with the interview process (Kvale, 1991). The languages and dialects used in recruitment and interviews crossed different linguistic lines from English to English slang to Tagalog to Tagalog slang to Tag-lish. The dexterity of the young people in using and switching languages was quite amazing:

Mark: Tol marami ka na bang ... since 2005 diba? Marami ka na bang mga friendship mo, marami ka na bang barkada dito? (*Bro, do you have a lot of ... you got here 2005 right? Do you have lots of friendships, do you have a big crew?*)

Tim: The first time, na-depress ako. You know I have no friends, I have no ... ano yon sa Ingles? I have this weird feeling of magisa lang ako. (*The first time, I felt depressed. You know I have no friends, I have no ... what is it in English? I have this weird feeling of loneliness.*)

Mark: Loner type son?! Nagdaan din tayo diyan man. (*Like a loner, huh? I went through that, too, man.*)

In this short excerpt, Mark and Tim are conversing in and out of Tagalog and English and then sometimes together. At times when feelings arise and can’t be communicated in English, they use Tagalog to fill in the blanks. The use of the language switching also serves to build trust and rapport in the interview. In this phase, adult allies and youth negotiated our levels of participation here. Youth researchers were very explicit about who gets to recruit and interview but they were clear about calling us in if there services needed to help a young person through school or an immigration issue.

Concrete issues like gentrification and eviction from our community center became a formidable roadblock for our research as some of the first-wave youth researchers left the group when our center was closed down. We pushed some chairs in as folks left our circle and our center as we fought against eviction. And we asked new folks to sit in with us when we opened a new community center. Ultimately, our research crew and the table we sat around conformed to how many of us were left, especially as a second-wave of youth researchers overlapped with the first wave's core youth researchers. This second wave was mainly responsible for the data analysis portion of the project. We saw four youth co-researchers leave and welcomed six additional youth, four boys and two girls between the ages of 13 to 19. This community struggle for space allowed us to engage in a discussion about the politics of gentrification and economic restructuring in the city, but it also put us in a position to garner more voices. Invariably, these political struggles outside of the project's dynamics affected our sample — we would meet and interview young people we hadn't known before — and what kinds of interview questions and discussions came up thereafter.

In the second wave, co-researchers, both youth and adult allies, assumed various roles at different points of the project. The adults in the program had more access to organize logistics, so we often reserved rooms, ordered food, and made sure supplies were in the room. When we began to transition into a new space, young people from the first phases of the project mentored the incoming co-researchers on PAR principles and methods. For example, co-researchers from the first wave took on different responsibilities, everything from teaching second-wave youth researchers interview methods to creating ways to "analyze" our collected narratives. And the second-wave researchers were instrumental in unpacking the many themes and ideas in our collected data.

After combing through the transcripts and themes that stemmed from the interview data, we "operationalized" the broad term of sexuality as our researchable concept. We did so by talking through the different ways sexuality infiltrates our everyday lives. In our venture into sexuality we looked at the different spaces in young people's lives that concretized ideas of youth sexuality as deviant, pathological, or invisible. Focusing in on sexuality and everyday spaces, the youth researchers analyzed the stories they collected, paying particular attention to the ways in which their sexuality was read in different spaces and how they maintained or acquiesced to those roles. They also analyzed how their compliance to such roles further allowed for detrimental ideas about youth sexualities to be imposed onto youth's sexual identities.

In the process of developing the most important moments in the transcripts into three-minute skits, we broke up the spaces young folks talked about into categories:

'sexuality in schools,' 'sexuality at home' (which means both family and people who frequent their homes), 'sexuality in the streets,' 'sexuality talk with friends,' 'sexuality in our community,' and 'sexuality in the media.' As these themes were combed out of our transcripts, new discussions, poems, and analysis were posted up on butcher paper on a wall, where they could be consulted or revised at any point in our analysis and discussions. In discussing the themes of our findings, adult allies were careful not to "influence" any of the young people's analysis, "I don't want to tell them what they should think when they look at the findings," said Melissa when we started the process, "But I think it's important for them to connect up our interviews to what we learned in camp." At this point, adult allies were no longer shy about sharing their opinions; we asked the young people if we could join that dialogue-based analysis sessions so we could have group conversations about our transcripts.

The third and last component of the YEHEY project was the action part called, "Show and Prove." Our forms of action sprung out of our results. We decided that we would take multiple forms of action in order to speak back to the variegated spaces we uncovered in our analysis. First, rooted in our commitment to our community center, youth researchers started a zine project that would be available to all youth at the center to produce an alternative, youth-led media about sexuality about the plethora of issues that we found to be affecting young people in our research. Second, to reach out to a broader youth community and to schools in particular, we organized a Filipino high school summit for Filipino students with workshops that reflected the themes and patterns we found in our stories. Our aim was to begin a larger conversation about sexuality and sexuality education in our Filipino community based on the needs and ideas of Filipino youth. Adult allies played a lead role in this summit, using connections from our non-profit organization to speak with school administrators. Lastly, to give our findings back to our community and families, both young people, researchers and respondent, with adult allies came together to produce a play called, "Playin' It Safe." This show presented our findings through song, rap, poetry, dance and rock to an audience of 150 community and family members.

In our research, we found that Filipino youth, immigrant or American-born, came to realize that their sexual subjectivities are informed by experiences of immigration. Therefore, education and reproductive health services must pay attention to this particular angle in immigrant youth's lives. To be able to engage immigrant youth in a comprehensive sexual education curriculum, schools and organizations must understand the context of the community, the family, and how young people who belong to these groups navigate through immigrant transitions (Rogow and Haberland, 2005).

## Sitting Down and Waiting to Stand

In this section of the paper, I, mainly, record our collective analysis on the project's findings and collective process where the subjectivities of the young people emerged through both painful and hopeful stories. I explore how a participatory space sometimes led to the normalization and objectification of young people's struggles. I present some of these moments and argue that the PAR process allowed us to unearth important findings but also challenge the idea of participation in our research.

### Bound to be free

Filipino youths' understanding of inequality and resilience was multi-dimensional, informed by their knowledge of the transnationalism and immigration. For example, young women in YEHEY frequently juxtaposed their ideas of sexuality with the sexual ideologies framing women's sexuality in the Philippines, an example that I will come back to later on. For young people in this project, migration was bound up in what Gillian Rose (1993) calls "paradoxical space," the contradiction and potential in the harsh conditions they live in as immigrants or children of immigrants. Rose calls this dynamic the paradoxical geography of the "subject(s) of feminism." She writes:

Black feminism has spoken of segregated communities, of immigration, of exile, of the diaspora, of a 'third world' now found on the streets of New York and London as well as in the Southern hemisphere, and speaks of these spaces not as 'natural' units which divide social groups but as part of a political consciousness of shared oppression and potential coalition. (Rose, 1993, p. 154)

The paradoxical space Filipino young women in Project YEHEY talked about was an acknowledgement of communities exploded over the world, and also, an political imaginary of shared oppression and possible connections, even if they are in disparate locations. They understood this shared diasporic imaginary through the ingrained culture of migration of the Filipino family in the undercurrents of neoliberalism. Currents that push the middle-class and professionals in the Philippines to seek out a "better future" elsewhere. Yet, in these moments of liberation, in the 'escape' out of a Third World country and Third World conditions, immigrants and migrants voluntarily submit to certain types of captivity in their host countries, as second-class citizens, as an exploitable labor pool, as diasporic subjects in a foreign land. Immigrant parents and their children transform from visible subjects filled with potential and promise for a

better future to invisible objects whose only worth is their labor. In the post-1965 immigration wave of Filipinos in the US, Filipino immigrants and migrants have come as nurses, teachers, and domestic workers. The varied character of Filipino labor in the US sets the context in which immigrant youth navigate through processes of settlement, understanding that whether in Los Angeles or New York, Filipinos are separated only by geography and not so much by inequality.

The narratives of immigration in the lives of immigrant youth in Queens reflected this paradoxical space. The paradoxical dreams of Filipino parents to find better futures for their children manifest themselves in the triumphs and failures of their children. Unbeknownst to immigrant parents, their escape from their Third World homes often creates First World prisons for their children. Due to under-funded classrooms, heavily policed streets, and inaccessible social services, the opportunities for immigrant and American-born Filipinos look bleak. The conditions are simultaneously potent moments heavy with hope and dead ends.

In no way am I arguing that the worst conditions in the US compare to Third World conditions. I am asserting here that the lives of immigrant youth in the US are rife with institutional constraint and discrimination, almost paralyzing their opportunities to realize the American dreams their parents so wished for them. Stories of young Filipinos narrated the restraints found in the corners of their lives. At times, the agitated rants carried a deeply political analysis of police brutality and of disengaged and divested education. They emerged as the experts on these subjects because it is they who live through these inequalities everyday. And at other times, they appeared as if they were victims, waiting for rescue or intervention, hopeless and angry. They became the very objects that the institutions predict they are, hypersexual, uncontrollable, violent, dumb, crazy, lost.

Nevertheless, in that paradoxical context participants in the project gained consciousness in recognizing each other as victims, and further as allies. In our project, moments where young folks collectivized their narratives of struggle or hardship were always caught up in stories of “flippin it.” In other words, immigrant youths’ narration of the systems of inequality in their lives often came with testimonies of resilience. They were not always necessarily talking about transforming institutions and waging a revolution but when, in our PAR process, their seats changed from passive observer to active storyteller the conversation ‘flipped’ too.

Immigrant youth in the project were always looking to interrupt the currents of ‘Otherness’ to understand how they lived through the violence in our lives. In our work, excavating our stories in search of a collective resistance was sometimes fruitful and other times empty. Sometimes, young people would be willing to take the front seat and lead. And other times they didn’t have enough energy. In another form, this

was the "paradoxical space" in which our methodology continued.

### Sexualities in everyday spaces

From the young people's stories, we found that the silencing of their sexuality, by their families in their homes and by community members in public spaces, played a key part in objectifying their sexualities. Silence around sexuality and other issues served as a preferred alternative to discussing often difficult aspects of immigrant transitions within the family and in the community. In their homes, youth felt that their sexualities were often crystallized, stiffened, and hardened into objects of either desire or shame by their parents. Angelica talked about this binary between shame and desire evident in her mom's words: "like she always uses this quote with guys, like 'oh she's like easiest to get easiest to forget.'" In a discussion between Angelica and her mother, she internalized that sexuality never exists in the gray areas; it is either girls are easy targets for sex or their sexuality is invisible and forgotten. This is key to the discussions of sexuality between immigrant parents and daughters, where parents see their daughters as either over-sexual or asexual. As a result of never being addressed as open for negotiation, discussion, expansion, or extension, sexuality transforms into two rigid categories. This renders the constant active realization of sexual subjecthood for girls inaudible. For Angelica, her sexuality lives in that paradoxical space between never being acknowledged and acknowledgement through silencing.

Moving back and forth between two poles, the silence around sexuality and Filipino girls characterizes immigrant families. During our analysis, we came to a consensus about how parents have internalized the notion that immigration to the US opens up the possibilities for immigrant or American-born children to be catapulted into the irreverent abyss of American sexuality. Parents project an image of a pure, asexual Philippines of the past has a stark contrast to their idea of their current location and the sexuality coded with a hypersexual and loose America. A production of place as sexually coded informs how parents and young people produce the sexuality that is up for contention in their homes. This process ultimately contributes to calcification of their daughters' sexualities as deviant or invisible.

Elaine: I met my dad, my real dad two years ago, he came in from the Philippines. And he just kept telling me my dresses are too short and my makeup is too thick. And I'm dressing like too American. I didn't do anything.

Tina: I probably would be like that like I wouldn't know what to do. My stepdad here sometimes we don't get along because I'm not his daughter.

Elaine: Exactly. That's what we have in common. We ain't know each other.

Tina: I know he always tells me to do stuff like they do in the Philippines. Like he's right there and he wants me to work hard and stuff. But I see girls in the Philippines too, and some of them dress like me too.

Both Elaine and Tina explicate a common narrative between daughters and fathers and, more broadly, between the Philippines and the US. The story of sexuality for Filipino daughters is guided by an idyllic comparison to a homeland that parents were forced to leave. Thus, those ideal types that may or may not exist in the Philippines are hoisted onto the bodies and complex sexualities of their daughters in the US. So even if Filipino girls in the US are getting to know their bodies and sexualities differently from both the 'loose' American way and the 'rigid' Filipino way, their sexual subjectivities are invisible because the two categories are the only standards to which to compare.

Within our discussion space, Angelica reproduced this moment of silence for the group in order to speak out. In contrast to home, where her parents continue to criticize her sexuality as loose or Americanized, telling this story in the group allowed her to make connections with the other girls who might have experienced the same silencing, the same objectification. And although talking about silence sounds oxymoronic, in actuality, when silence was the point of unity the girls in the group were able to realize that their sexual subjectivities were not as isolated as their experience made it seem. Talking about experiences of sexual suppression became the moment for subjectivity. As parents rendered their daughters' sexuality as deviant from a traditional conception of sexuality, young women chose to hold on to that objectification but also use it as fuel to express solidarity.

In another form, the invisibility of sexuality transformed the young people's sexual subjecthoods into objects that remain either static and immutable or dangerously pen- sive, awaiting an avenue of escape or realization. Sarah talks about how she experiences her parents' conception of her sexuality:

So I was in the dining room and I bent over and I was wearing a thong and my mom started screaming, "Oh my god what are you wearing?" Yada yada, I was like, "What?! Oh my God. It's underwear." All of a sudden my dad was like, "You're such a prostitute, you're a slut!" And I was like, "WHAT??" I mean, I had a plate and I was getting ready to go to school and I didn't even know what to say to that.

Sarah talked about how she experienced her parents' conception of her sexuality. For her immigrant parents, underwear triggered their fears about her sexuality. In this

moment, Sarah's sexuality was synonymous with an object of clothing she chooses to wear to school. Throughout the project, Sarah talked about the different altercations she has with her parents around her choices to express sexuality through fashion and boyfriends. During some of these contentious moments, immigrant parents were protecting their children from what they know and what they are taught about sexuality in the US: a sinful, dirty deviation from an otherwise blossoming life. Taking into consideration the sacrifices that their parents have made, it's quite easy to buy into a punitive and authoritarian approach to sexuality. However, these moments also pointed to an antagonistic topic that youth used to provoke silence and anger. When sexuality is not on the table or in the room, Sarah's parents are happy to sit with its absence. Sarah, then, is fine not to engage her parents either. Sexuality is a defining factor of silence at home because Sarah or her parents chose not to engage in it. They respect the silence as absence, and only deal with sexuality in the times when it's too loud to ignore.

To contextualize these tensions, young people repeatedly pointed to the physical absence of their parents as a characteristic of their immigrant lives:

Tina: She is never here, so how can she know what I'm doing between me and my boyfriend? What if, *wala kaming ginagawa?* (What if we're not doing anything?) How will she know? So... I just don't tell her.

Sarah: Yea, that's right. So I just don't.

The absence of parents because of work or separation became a central feature of upholding youth's ideas of sexuality as an unspoken subject, like so many other things. The diasporic community is chock full of these absences. Such silences can be attributed to the fact that both time and presence are necessary to establish a relationship or discussion around sexuality. The contradicting ideas of parents and children about sexuality are agreed upon through silences and the unspoken.

It is not my intent to blame parents' silences or children's acquiescence. Rather, these are the conditions under which sexuality intersects with the diaspora and migration, both experiences rife with political, economic, social, and cultural hierarchies of domination. Parents have to work, sometimes double shifts, and their children understood the necessity. Talking to each other about sexuality helped young people acknowledge how issues of inequality and hardship related to the omnipresent topic of sexuality in their family lives. Silences were not necessarily choices their parents made but were products of the systems of power they encountered as immigrants. For the young people in this project the silences gave way to solidarity between them that allowed them to deconstruct the structures of power that cornered them into stillness,

as objects. They were able to tell and hear stories about how they create and maintain the silences. But they also talked about their optimal position to interrupt the silences.

The interwoven nature of immigration, class, sexuality, and gender in the lives of Filipino immigrant youth and American-born Filipino youth was the contour line, as Cindi Katz (2001) would call it that connects the stories our PAR team collected. The silence in which young women found their subjectivity in the project sometimes condoned a way of pushing their family away. At certain moments, the subjectivity that emerged for immigrant youth is disengagement with their immigrant families and communities. They all took part in talking about their sexuality as objects that were rejected by their family and rendered invisible by the community. Thus, the girls' response to the objectification of their sexualities in the family and the community was a subjectivity based on detachment. Tina and Sarah's option to just not talk about it turned their individual subjectivities, their seats around the PAR table, into a bench endorsing a detachment from Filipino families when it comes to sexuality. This was a moment of rupture in the project, a reality that when youth's subjectivity emerged in our PAR process, it did not guarantee a unity that bridged disparate generations together. Like in the example above, we found that young people allowed for a certain sameness in the silencing of sexuality which allowed youth to express solidarity with one another.

### **Sitting Back Is Participation**

The repressive objectification of youth's sexuality in schools presented us with another paradoxical space; whereas objectification assisted in youth understanding each other in the research process, simultaneously their schools demonizing treatment of young people's sexuality quickly negated their subjectivity (Fields, 2008). For Lisa, a thirteen-year old, bisexual youth researcher in YEHEY, this paradoxical space materialized when her schoolteacher, guidance counselor and principal read her private diary, which was filled with her thoughts about our project and her own feelings and crushes. Administrators committed her to the psych ward at a nearby hospital, citing she was having a "mental health crisis." Her overnight "sentence" in the psych ward taught Lisa that the act of writing or feeling these thoughts, even if it was for our research project, is an act of being "crazy." She understands now that even if she says out loud "I AM NOT CRAZY!" that there are people who will still label and objectify her, and ship her out as such if she is honest about her sexuality.

As Lisa told her story during our Friday night session, everyone who heard was shocked and angry at what she had to go through. Lisa confessed to the group that

maybe she shouldn't have written so many entries about her sexual desires about a girl at school or that she shouldn't have written down the times when she felt powerless as the only bi girl in her group of friends. In response one of the adult allies of YEHEY responded to Lisa and offered to organize a campaign against this injustice. In the midst of her tears, Lisa said to all of us:

I don't need you to do that right now. I just need to tell you what it's like to be hauled away. And from where I sit I know, that shit was wrong and I'll tell you why, because they can't just do that to anyone and they did it to me. Let me just talk.

At this moment, the adults in the space realized that the PAR space was about more than collecting the data to prove that there are patterns of systemic injustice enacted on youth. Although Lisa's story was a prime example of a crisis in the education system, the very act of freezing that moment of pain and victimization to prove a point is an exercise in objectifying a young person's experience of discrimination. That moment in our project could very well have replicated Lisa's experience of objectification at school in her out-of-school, community space. The tension in this moment of PAR is that the space offered a possibility for Lisa to tell her story but also for her story to be used again and again as the catalytic incident to show the explicit prejudice of structures of power like educational systems. It allowed for that story to become verbalized but, if frozen as just an objective, concrete example of systemic injustice, it could've also hindered the group from being able to talk about similar stories.

Lisa said it right, "I just need to tell you . . ." This was Lisa's move to switch seats. Usually, during our interview process, our participants would sit in the "hot seat" where they would have to be the ones that would answer questions. Sitting in that seat gave us permission to ask away and collect our interview data. But Lisa's hot seat no longer became an invitation for people to come in, prod, poke and get answers out of her. In those simple words, she moved her seat from the "hot seat" to the head of the table, where she was the one who needed the space to speak to her experience of victimhood, so that others might do the same. All of the adult allies in the room also had to switch seats. Their access to logistics and outside resources weren't as applicable at this moment as in others. Lisa didn't ask, but stated that she didn't need advice or fixing. All she needed was a space to decompress. The adults had to become learners as Lisa and other youth like her taught us how to turn the tables. As the so-called "animators" in the project, the adults who had access to resources were challenged to rethink our participation and politicization.

For YEHEY, adult participation in our PAR project always revolved around mak-

ing sure that there were spaces wherein young folks were genuinely participating in molding, shaping, and guiding the project. We were committed to prioritizing youths' seats around the research table. But the politics of participation transformed into having everyone — especially adults — give up their seats as teachers and organizers. The practice of sharing seats with young folks, Michelle Billies (this volume) calls it “pedagogy of dialogue,” ultimately meant that we would not take part in a double objectification of their experiences. This dynamic is complicated. There is still the need to provide evidence that systemic inequality affects our community in particular ways, to hold school administrators or the department of education accountable to Lisa. However, what the PAR process allowed us to think about was when experiences are available to deploy and when they are not.

In moments like these in our project, we had to assess what participation meant for all of us. Adult allies were challenged to take a step back when Lisa and other youth asserted their narrator seats at the point when they had enough of the victim seat. The adult allies in the project also had to insist on addressing the narratives of injustice that was relentlessly hammered into the lives of the young folks we worked with:

I want to respect her stepping up. But I want to tell Lisa that that was straight up an infringement of her rights. That she didn't deserve being treated like she was some crazy girl for expressing her honest thoughts in her *own* journal. All the Philippine Forum staff are asking how we engage Lisa and the rest of the folks in a conversation about knowing your rights and when their rights are getting messed with without imposing my ideas of right and wrong and silencing Lisa?

These are from my field notes a couple of days after Lisa's encounter. Most of the adult staff wanted to wage a campaign against the school or begin a community forum about these brash incidents (Lisa's story not being an isolated one) happening to our youth in the community. The coordinators, mostly adults, wanted to do something about it but we felt that the decision for action could not be made without Lisa and the youth researchers.

The youth researchers taught the adult researchers that the policing and surveillance in schools made it difficult to bring up prospects of change in their campuses. Our PAR collective decided that our action against these violences could only be produced through consensus building with the different players in our project, youth and adult co-researchers. Everyone had to participate in thinking about what felt right, what justice meant for Lisa and for the rest of us in the project. These lines about Lisa's experience were only possible because of our collaborative writing sessions. Since protesting the school administration and bringing a ruckus to school didn't sit well with

Lisa but exposing this deep injustice was still important to her, we collectively decided to write through this section together. Here, together, we've decided that this is one way we can act and speak out.

More importantly, both adults and youth had to engage in a deeper participation in order to construct a space where young people's testimonies came from a place of subjectivity, whether it was an experience of struggle or triumph. The dialectic of hope here is in the paradoxical space where Lisa talked about her experiences in the "psych ward" while also re-telling the story on her terms.

The tensions inherent in participation harken back to the questions about where we sat as co-researchers, how we as adults and youth shared our seats, and when the seats changed. I think about the moments when we all became aware that at different points of the project we could lead and learn. Adult allies followed the young people's lead when they claimed the space to push their everyday issues with sexuality to think about what the connections with, between and across their transnational lives. Lisa connects her experiences of censorship to a global process:

My Mom picked me up from the hospital and she couldn't say shit to me. Like, I think she thought I was crazy too. I know though that even if you grew up in the Philippines, that you would have the same thoughts about sex as me. Everyone has it. I bet you she had it too. It's just that they keep their secrets better there. Um, I couldn't do that.

In her interaction with her immigrant mother, Lisa references the Philippines and the possibility that, perhaps, girls in the Philippines are like her too. It is important to note here, that this moment is not one of liberation in realizing a commonality across the bounds of the nation-state. Lisa is languishing at the fact that the whole world is probably objectifying, labeling, and shipping out girls as crazy, hypersexual, and pathological. Lisa's realization here is an acknowledgement of some global lid being screwed on top of young people's sexuality around the world. She teaches and we learn this from our knowledge of migration and diaspora. What this realization also contains is the potential for unscrewing that which institutions like schools, patriarchy, heteronormativity, and imperialism screwed up.

This is the paradoxical space in which immigrant youth are negotiating their sexuality and pushing their diasporic membership. Lisa asserts this global knowledge in the context where her family, friends, and community live diaspora not as a mere location, but as a relational process. Diaspora as a condition relies on the exchange and conversation of diasporic subjects and communities across time and geography, that meant both youth researchers, adult allies in the project and of course, community and family

members (see Spataro in this volume for a deeper discussion on PAR and geographic scales). Diasporic understanding can be talked and written through PAR as immigrant youth realize their subjectivities, still, young people beckoned all of us to pull up a seat and participate.

## Lessons Learned

In this project, PAR is not just a methodology it is also epistemology (Krueger, this volume) and a pedagogy. Invoking PAR as a methodology, we learned about the nature of the paradoxical spaces in which young people negotiate their sexual subjectivities. The paradox of institutions, like family and schools, rendering youth sexuality deviant yet, young people needing to hold on to those repressive currents to recognize one another's struggle, then forge solidarity through those stories of injustice.

Our epistemology emerged through PAR teaching us that we all needed to participate to understand how our immigration stories organized the way we learn, influence and act on the world. Transnational practices for young people in their everyday life aren't indicated by the typical remittances or traveling back to the home country. PAR gave us a chance to talk, act, sing, dance and rap how we understood transnationality and its bearings on our identities and sexualities. We learned that immigration is not an event; it is produced over and again through the transnational conceptions and practices in our everyday interaction with our community, family and friends. PAR allowed for all of us to contribute our own experiences to learn that migration is a frame in which we understand sexuality, race, class and gender in the US and in the Philippines. For immigration scholars and transnationalists, this study offers a perspective in researching how transnationalism is produced as an embodied understanding of everyday life. Through this PAR project, narratives of young people urge us to study the implications of migration and transnationalism in how they come to understand themselves and the world.

Lastly, PAR as pedagogy lay bare how participation is not a given in PAR research processes. Action and participation in this project were, at times, dangerously assumed and inscribed on youths' bodies and we taught each other that participation is a process of making visible every single body that conducted research and produced knowledge. Young people and adult allies constantly consulted and conferred with one another to define and blur the boundaries of who participates in what processes when. We taught one another that research is a process in which sitting back and standing up has to be done in turns. All of it is participation, as long as it is explicit and understood by all that is involved.

In social science research, there is the possibility that life stories and experiences of young people become crystallized into objects of study. PAR is not safe from this danger. There are possibilities of both objectification and subjecthood in this methodology, too. However, I maintain that a politics of participation, where all seats around the research table are equally accountable to such participation, pulls out threads of subjectivity through stories of objectification.

Telling this story in what Caitlin Cahill calls a "contextualized understanding" must always be an iterative, uncomfortable, and interruptive process. And here, although the ends of the stories are falling off of the ends of our research table, the point was not to always pick up the stories and wrangle them neatly together at the same table all the time. Rather, it was to have the young people sit at the same table alongside adults in order to interlock and tangle, because this is the most accurate reflection of these young people's experience of sexuality and immigration.

Often, as seats are pulled away from under us or stacked on top of us, PAR allowed us to stand. In the nowhere-ness between the local and the global, we were able to carve out our elsewhere. We were carving in and through our diasporic knowledge of local inequality embedded in the global capital currents of displacement and migration. Our eyes, our bodies, and our hearts are the living, breathing, beating witnesses of the abuses and negligence of neoliberalism and therefore it was we, who needed to put a table together, arrange the seating so that everyone has a chair and start the conversation from there.

## Notes

1. This participatory action research project was based mainly out of the Bayanihan Community Center in Woodside, Queens that sits at the center of the Filipino ethnic enclave in New York City. Our work would not be possible without the young people whose resilience, strength, and work are the basis of this paper and non-profit, community-based organization, Philippine Forum in Queens, New York City which housed our project and supported our work. The knowledge contained in this paper, from the block to the schools to our community neighborhood and back again, belongs to the Filipino community in Queens.
2. Data derived from the Migrant Initiatives 2009 written by the International Organization for Migration in the Philippines.
3. Data derived from analysis by the Asian American Federation Census Information Center.
4. Tagalog is one of many dialects spoken in the Philippines, a common language spoken in the YEHEY program.

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