

Critical Youth Resistance: The Use of Art and Culture in Effecting Positive Social Change

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Abstract

This article examines how urban youth in California used art and culture, particularly hip hop culture, to engage in civic dialogue over the March 2000 ballot initiative, Proposition 21, also known as the “Gang Violence and Juvenile Prevention Act.” On the surface, this “tough-on-crime” initiative seemed to promise the public more protection from the rising number of young people who commit violent offenses. But opponents of Prop 21 protested that the initiative’s representations of urban youth, and of “the facts” concerning juvenile crime, were misleading. Renaming it “California’s War on Youth Initiative,” dissenters argued that the initiative ignored the root causes of juvenile crime, while further marginalizing low-income youth of color whose cultures and backgrounds fall outside of the dominant mainstream ideologies of American schools and society (Templeton, 2000, para. 2). In retaliation, youth activists from around the state used hip hop, visual art, street performance and other strategies to build community capacity, and to take up space with presence in ways that enabled them to participate as assets in the decision-making processes that were directly affecting their lives. The creation and promotion of these young people’s art and culture enabled them to construct civic identities, which not only gave them public voice and representation, but also led to a sustainable youth movement. Although California voters passed Prop 21, the conflict over the initiative served as a catalyst for young people to organize, build social capital and to redefine themselves in civic terms (Bhimji, 2004).

Proposition 21

Prop 21 was sponsored by former California Governor Pete Wilson, with the support of the California District Attorneys Association and the California State Sheriffs Association. According to the California Budget Project’s 2000 Budget Brief on Prop 21, the initiative had two main components: it changed the juvenile court system by making it easier to prosecute juveniles as adults and it increased penalties for gang related violence (p. 1). Prior to Prop 21, the focus of the juvenile court system was rehabilitation and treatment, which the juvenile justice system arranged in long-term partnerships with agencies such as schools, social service organizations, and other community-based groups. The only juveniles who faced the adult court system were those 16 or older who had committed serious offences (i.e., murder, certain types of sexual crimes, kidnapping etc.), and who had a previous felony record. Prop 21

would change this framework in the following ways:

- Young people 14 and older could be tried as adults, and prosecutors no longer would have to have their cases reviewed by a judge before filing them with the adult court system. The list of serious crimes that qualify youth for adult court would broaden to include crimes such as gang membership (regardless of any criminal activity associated with membership) and unarmed robbery.
- Penalties for youth convicted of certain crimes would increase. The juvenile justice system would no longer have discretion over sentencing of youth who committed certain crimes (discretion that enabled the system to individualize treatment programs) and youth 14 and over who were charged with a felony would no longer be given the option of informal probation which enabled them to live in their communities, get job training, and mental health and drug treatments. As a result, more youth would be sentenced to institutions, juvenile halls, or camps.
- The definition of criminal activity would be broadened and lengthier sentences would be imposed for crimes which are gang-related, even if they are minor offenses. Local enforcement officers would be required to keep a gang registry of anyone “suspected” of gang membership and the allowable use of wire taps would be broadened. Under Prop 21, provisions would also be loosened to allow juveniles who are only partially associated with a gang, or may not even belong to a gang, to be prosecuted under the state gang statutes.
- Law enforcement would be allowed to release the names of juveniles upon arrest for “serious” felonies instead of waiting to be filed by the district attorney under current law. Prop 21 would also allow the release of names of juveniles suspected of committing a violent offense if the release would protect the public (again, this would be at the discretion of the prosecutors, not the judge or the juvenile justice authorities). Also, Prop 21 would prevent the “sealing” of arrest records for juveniles less than 14 years of age or older convicted of “serious” or “violent” crimes, whereas currently these records are sealed after six years.
- Youth who are convicted of defacement (i.e. graffiti) could carry a felony charge for property damage of \$400 or more (as opposed to a charge of \$50,000 under the old law) and could be sent to jail for up to one year for a misdemeanor charge (an increase from six months). (pp. 2-4)

According to Fazila Bhimji (2004), the main argument in support of Prop 21 was that many juvenile offenders do not respond well to prevention and rehabilitation strategies of a juvenile justice system that is simply not equipped to protect the public from repeat offenders (p. 40). Proponents felt that, rather than waste funds on these incorrigible youth (i.e. “hardened gang members” whom they felt were beyond reform), juvenile court resources should be reserved to help “typical teenagers who make mistakes” (p. 40). In the end, they claimed that money would be saved and the public would be better protected from rising numbers of potential juvenile offenders.

Resistance to Prop 21

But opponents of Prop 21--mostly made up of members of Critical Resistance Youth Force, a Bay-area coalition of nearly 40 youth-driven activist organizations working in partnership with the American Civil Liberties Union, the California Teacher's Association, The Youth Law Center, and Californians for Justice--argued that this rhetoric was not only anti-youth, it also diverted attention away from the systemic and root causes of juvenile crime. Those opposed to Prop 21 felt that it played off of negative stereotypes of urban youth perpetuated by mass media, and served to further reinscribe a binary which divided "gang members," associated with these negative stereotypes, and "normal kids." By calling for a segregation of "violent youth," Fazila Bjimji (2004) notes, "Proposition 21 affirm[ed] the depiction of urban as being inherently deficient and minimize[d] the role of structural issues that may lead young people to assume oppositional identities" (p. 55).

While media hype surrounding the vote on Prop 21 suggested that juvenile crime was on the rise, statistics from the state's Department of Justice indicated the opposite. According to reports, felony juvenile arrests declined by 15 percent between 1989 and 1998, juvenile homicide arrests dropped by 42 percent, and the rate of juvenile misdemeanor arrests stayed the same during this period (California Budget Project, 2000, pp. 4-5). Despite these statistics, California still ranked highest in youth incarceration rates in the country (p. 5). According to Vincent Schiraldi of the Justice Policy Institute, "Part of the problem [is] the public's misperception that youth crime is increasing when it's really falling--even as kids behave better, we treat them worse" (as cited in Geiser, 2001, *Escaping the Box*, para. 4). This misperception is fueled by a media industry driven by stories and images that will attract viewers, and consequently, attract advertising dollars. According to A. Clay Thompson (2005), despite years of dropping youth crime, "'if it bleeds, it leads' remains the mainstream media mantra." He writes: "Publishers, editors, and reporters know that carnage grabs readers and viewers immediately; bureaucratic statistical reports on the declining amount of violence don't" (para. 2). Teen activist, Nell Geiser, concurs. In her article, "Youth Storm the Media" (2001), Geiser cites a 1996 research study, which examined how *The New York Times* was framing youth over a three month period. During that period, researchers found that 54 percent of *The New York Times'* articles involving youth and crime portrayed youth primarily as perpetrators, whereas in reality, youth had been *victims* of violent crime 12.5 times more than they had been perpetrators that year (para. 6). Geiser argues there is a "prevailing picture of [urban] youth as super predators and gangsters" which is hindering their ability to engage civically (para. 4).

In their fight against Prop 21, youth activists focused on discrepancies between their own lived experience of being an urban youth and the media's representation of that experience, as well as drew particular attention to the ways in which under-funded urban schools--and tradition school structures that favor white, upper class cultures and discourses--systematically marginalize, misrepresent, and/or silence low-income, young people of color, discouraging them from active participation in society and civic discourse. Many argued that the media's reliance on negative stereotypes of urban youth to "sell" stories leads to the construction of a culture of fear, which in turn leads to the justification of provisions like those under Prop 21 and to increased spending on incarceration, even when it means fewer dollars will go towards education, rehabilitation, and job development opportunities. In the case of Prop 21, legal analysts estimated that provisions could cost California upwards of \$330 million in yearly operating costs (due to the costs of using adult courts to try juvenile

offenders, to administer a gang registration program, and to pay for an increased number of inmates with extended sentences), and upwards of one billion dollars to cover costs of new prison construction (Martinez, 2000, para. 2). While voters agreed to this high level of increased spending towards incarceration, they seemed to ignore the fact that California ranked 41st in educational spending nationally in 2000 (para. 2). Opponents of Prop 21 argued that lack of educational resources was where the real problem with juvenile crime resided. According to critical theorist Henry Giroux, these causes are the “violence of mind, body, and spirit of crumbling schools, low teacher expectations, unemployment and housing discrimination, racist dragnets and everyday looks of hate by people who find [urban youth] guilty by suspicion” (as cited in Bjimji, 2004, p. 43).

The Construction of “At-Risk” Youth in American Society

At present, if students do not succeed in school, or in other institutional structures (i.e. the foster care system, rehabilitation centers, the juvenile justice system, job programs etc.), they are generally “considered failures, stereotypically labeled, deliberately alienated, and discarded” (Mitchell, 2003, p. 8). But many researchers (Blake 2004; Fine 1990; Giroux 1984; Mitchell 2003) argue that these young people are not failures by nature, but rather are constructed by a rigid paradigm of what it means to succeed, and by a school system and media culture that holds them accountable to the cultural and economic values and beliefs of the dominant middle-class. According to Peter McLaren, “schools have always functioned to reproduce inequality, racism and sexism while they fragment democratic social relations emphasizing competitiveness and cultural ethnocentrism” (as cited in Fine, p. 5), generally at the expense of women, minorities and other students from less privileged backgrounds. This favoring of certain kinds of knowledge over others is what many theorists refer to as the “hidden curriculum” of traditional schooling (Corrigan 1987; Giroux 1984). Henry Giroux asserts that “the dominant school culture functions not only to legitimate the interests and values of specific groups, it also functions to marginalize and disconfirm forms of knowledge and experience that are extremely important to subordinate groups” (as cited in Fine, p. 5). Researcher Brett Elizabeth Blake has studied what happens to these adolescents once their schools, covertly or overtly, label them culturally, educationally, or socially disadvantaged, and therefore, “at-risk.” According to her, these young people, desperate to find a place of their own, ultimately resist, reject, and refuse “the scraps of mainstream society that they [are] thrown,” creating and retreating to a safe space, which Blake defines as “the culture of refusal” (p. 105)--a culture most closely associated with “drop-outs,” gang members, and juvenile offenders.

When school and civic institutions label youth “at-risk,” policy makers fail to see how they can enhance a community and, as a result, design programs as interventions, rather than as opportunities meant to enable their potential (Heath and Smyth, 1999, p. 27). But a systematic, top-down approach to problem-solving and development, more often than not, seeks to restrain, rather than to foster, positive social change, and as a result usually has failed to build community capacity in ways that meet its economic and social needs (Stivers, 2002). Within this paradigm of governance, youth are typically “positioned as objects onto which educative, acculturative, and legislative practices are performed,” denied self-representation in the public realm and critical engagement in the decision-making processes that directly

affect their lives and their communities (Woodson). Shirley Brice Heath and Laura Smyth write that without “repeated and consistent immersion in activities framed within and around pro-social and pro-civic value orientations, [young people] miss out on opportunities to see themselves as agents capable of working for the creation of ‘good’ for fellow humans, their community, or the society at large” (p. 24). And communities miss out on opportunities “to benefit from the energy, creativity, and commitment of young people” (p. 24).

History of Youth Organizing in California

By calling for “books, not bars,” youth activists urged the government and the public to seek alternatives to Prop 21 that would address the systemic causes of poverty and juvenile crime and to create opportunities that would nurture their growth as individuals and as members of the broader community. This call made its way through a network of nearly 40 youth organizations across the state, largely fostered by a thriving hip hop culture which served as an invitation and a catalyst for the movement, as well as a space for young people to take up presence and begin reframing their identities in civic terms.

But the force of this youth coalition did not simply develop overnight; in fact, it took over ten years to foster. Elizabeth Martinez (2000) explains that as early as 1991, youth were beginning to organize in California around the Gulf War. In 1993, some Latino youth in Northern California started to demand La Raza studies in the public school curriculum. In 1994, the youth organization, Olin (formerly called StEP, Student Empowerment Project), organized wide-scale school walkouts, protesting cuts in school funding and the proliferation of prison industrial complexes throughout the state. This organization is also credited for coming up with the “Schools not Jails” slogan, used frequently during protests against Prop 21. California’s youth movement continued to pick up steam when young activists campaigned against Proposition 187, which denied undocumented citizens access to health and education services, and Proposition 227, which put an end to bilingual education in the public schools. But still, these efforts were fairly temporal, disparate, and unorganized. It wasn’t until 1998, with the organization of the Critical Youth Resistance Conference, that youth activist organizations across the state of California came together for the first time. Nearly 3,000 people convened at this event to discuss issues related to California’s growing Prison Industrial Complex and to articulate organizing strategies. As a result of this meeting, adolescents, college-aged organizers, and adult academics and civic leaders gained skills and shared knowledge, but also created an opportunity to bridge social capital and articulate a common struggle against the California prison system. According to youth activist, Desiree Evans (2002), the Critical Resistance Conference enabled dozens of youth--many of them fitting the profile of the majority of incarcerated youth--to realize themselves as fresh voices in the debate over juvenile justice.

The Youth Coalition and Prop 21

With the campaign against Prop 21, California’s growing youth movement reached its zenith. Seeing themselves as assets, and as civic participants--perhaps for the first time--young people who were opposed to Prop 21 began using what they knew best to mobilize

others and get their message across –the language, style, and methods of the hip hop culture. Evans writes

[These youth took] their cues from the Civil Rights Movement, holding rallies, protests, sit-ins, and door-to-door campaigning –all with a ‘hip-hop flavor.’ Many [youth organizations] developed a theory of organizing that goes from local to global, using hip hop culture to educate, empower, politick and allow young people to address their problems in their own language and in a method that is familiar to them. (2002, *Generation Hip Hop Wakes*, para. 2)

Underground Railroad, a collective of young artists or “raptivists” (hip hop activists) and one of the principle organizations involved with Critical Resistance, defines hip hop as “a positive, life affirming culture featuring lyrical battles without violence” and sees its own events as “conscious attempts to create liberated zones,” against systemic oppression (as cited in Shuman, 2000, *Anti-Corporate* section, para. 4). This notion of free space complies with the critical theory of Henry Giroux and others (e.g. Augusto Boal 1985; Paulo Freire 1970; and bell hooks 1994) who have developed methodologies of resistance which promote education and civic participation as liberatory practices. The main goal of critical (or emancipatory) pedagogy and practice is to accommodate “the language forms, types of presentation, modes of reasoning, and cultural practices that have meaning for students” (Fitzclarence & Giroux as cited in Fine, 1991, p. 6) and “to elicit interrogation, expression, and the exchange of discourse and stories” (p. 81). These theorists argue against the “banking method of education,” and instead favor education based on dialogue, critical reflection, and problem-posing. Within this context, adults are no longer the privileged possessors of knowledge, but rather co-learners and facilitators; and young people are no longer passive receptacles for information and civic policies, but rather active participants in the process of cultural production and community development. Instruction and learning are no longer seen as neutral processes, but ones deeply rooted, and determined by, “contexts of history, power, and ideology” (Giroux & McLaren as cited in Goodman, 1999, p. 24).

By using hip hop as a vehicle for organizing, youth activists working against Prop 21 were able to find their own political voice, as well as to engage others in an already existing cultural network to wake up and pay attention. Hip hop was both a spark for civic dialogue and a space for people to come together, suspend judgment, and listen to multiple points of view. According to Jay Imani, youth activist and member of Third Eye, hip hop culture was central to young people’s fight against Prop 21. He notes: “On a march, if the chants have a hip hop flavor, young people will join. It’s also...crucial for drawing together youth of all colors because hip hop is multi-ethnic from the get” (as cited in Martinez, 2000, *From Hip-Hop to Hilton*, para. 2). During the youth campaign against Prop 21, arts and culture became an invitation for youth, and other social groups often left out of public discourse, to gather and to talk about a particular civic issue of consequence to their lives. If you simply “use[d] the word dialogue” to get people to come and talk about a civic issue, “nobody would go,” argues Abel Lopez (as cited in Assaf, Korza & Bacon, 2002, *Art as an Invitation to Participate*, para. 4). This lack of participation is mainly because people have been silenced by public discourses in the past, or habituated to think that they have nothing to say or no power to make a difference. On the other hand, if you tell people that they are going to see a show, they are often compelled to join you. Youth activists relied on young people’s familiarity and enthusiasm for hip hop, or “raptivist,” events, to get a large, diverse group of youth to gather

in one place. Once these events were underway, organizers then took advantage of the space to educate the crowd about issues related to Prop 21, as well as to register them to vote. As one “raptivist” put it: “We perform, then organizations follow us with outreach and people get involved. People listen more to art than they will to a speech or pamphlet” (Shuman, 2000, *This is How We Do It*, para. 4).

Early in the youth campaign against Prop 21, hip hop events were organized at high schools known for their neglect by the state, as well as sponsored at larger venues that combined an evening of music, poetry, and political messaging about juvenile justice and the prison system (Martinez, 2000). But new permit procedures that assess higher safety costs were soon leveraged against these events, making it difficult for organizers to secure spaces. As a result, the youth activists had to adapt their strategies, holding what they called “Guerrilla Hip Hop Concerts.” One example of this tactic involved putting artists on trucks which were then driven to area schools and parks. Another example involved organizing MCs, poets, and other “raptivists” to perform on public buses. Other groups sponsored hip hop clubs with an activist message in their schools (Shuman, 2000). According to youth organizer, Anita DeAsis, membership in the Youth Force Coalition tripled in the school year preceding the vote on Prop 21, “but the number that seem[ed] more important . . . [was] the number of people who turn[ed] out at events, who [got] turned on by a quarter-page flyer or anti-21 song, who [then] turn[ed] their peers or parents on in turn” (Shuman, 2000, *This Is How We Do It*, para. 10). Aaron Shuman, a member of the Bad Subjects Collective (another youth activist organization) writes: “What No on 21 advocates [were] building out of hip hop, they hop[ed], was a grassroots communication infrastructure, capable of inspiring and mobilizing enough people to the polls” (para. 10).

This grassroots approach of working through an existing infrastructure to organize and mobilize people to action has traces of Saul Alinsky’s use of faith-based organizations to build a sustainable movement. It also shows how bonding social capital worked as a counter strategy to racialized images of youth as threatening and as a way of enabling youth to take up space with presence. A kind of strategic essentialism was fostered not only by the movement’s association with hip hop and an energetic urban youth identity, but also with young people’s representation of themselves as civic participants dedicated to long-term solutions, versus short-term punitive measures. “Whereas the language of Proposition 21 supporters works to segregate ‘bad’ from ‘good’ young people, youth activists form[ed] a collective identity,” argues Bjimji, “identifying with the criminalized as common victims of society that accepts dramatic inequalities in children’s health, education, and welfare” (pg. 44). Bjimji notes that during speak-outs, concerts, and meeting with public officials, youth activists always deployed the rhetoric of ‘we’ and ‘us,’ thereby displaying a solidarity with all youth and breaking down the binary between “criminals” and “citizens” (pg. 44). He writes: “The language of Proposition 21 constructs youth as irresponsible but the youth very explicitly point[ed] out that it is ‘you guys’ who need to show responsibility, whereas ‘we’ kids are the ones who are being deprived of good education” (pg. 53). By contextualizing their arguments within the broader context of civic issues, such as education, family, and concerns for the future, youth activists also found a discursive space in which to construct a collective civic identity and to challenge (and work within) the system as caring citizens interested in their futures, not as marginal or oppositional youth upset about the here and now. This “new” civic identity helped the youth leverage resources and support from the

entertainment industry, labor, teachers, gay and faith communities, and citizens in the four-county Bay Area (Templeton, 2000). While continuing to attract youth supporters and train them as organizers, young Californians sought critical engagement with the public, with adults, and with various cross-section groups in order to address misperceptions, look at root causes of juvenile crime, and focus on how these root causes not only affect youth, but the broader civic society of which they were part.

In addition to hip hop concerts, youth organizers staged sit-ins and protests at the Hilton Hotel, Pacific Gas & Electric and Chevron buildings throughout the state (all companies that gave significant amounts of money, at former Governor Wilson's request, to get Prop 21 on the ballot), organized statewide conferences to continue building a sense of unity among organizers and activists, held candlelight vigils to symbolically remember imprisoned youth and those to be imprisoned after Prop 21, staged school walk outs and massive parades through city arteries, and organized simultaneous state-wide banner drops from interstate bridges. "We don't have money to buy billboards and air commercials to inform the public about this repressive measure," noted one youth activist, "So we're combating Prop 21 with our art skills" (as cited in Martinez, 2000, *Coordinating the Power*, para. 2). Because the media has been so conditioned to ignore, discount, and/or demonize youth, youth activists had trouble getting the media to publicize their actions and ideas. So instead of relying on the media, they created a holistic and integrated approach to organizing, hoping to get the word out to the public by occupying public space and by representing themselves as creative citizens willing to work together to effect positive social change.

After Prop 21

As mentioned in the beginning of this article, Prop 21 passed in March 2000. And while disappointed, many activists were not surprised that the California electorate would vote the bill into law. According to Elisabeth Gerber, an associate professor at the University of California at San Diego and expert on ballot initiatives: "Tough-on-crime measures tend to pass overwhelmingly" (as cited in Beiser & Solheim, 2000, para. 10). In fact, California is the 43rd state since 1993 to pass a law making it easier to try young people as adults, despite declining juvenile crime rates (para. 11). The youth movement that developed in resistance to Prop 21 was bigger than the issue itself; it was about "training politically conscious youth for a new movement" a movement focused on long-term civic engagement (Favianna Rodriguez as cited in Martinez, 2000, para. 4). "That's why you didn't see people sitting around mourning the day after Prop. 21 passed," notes youth activist Jay Imani, "We are in a much stronger position now . . . We were able to organize people not just to defeat Prop 21 but for bigger goals, to educate youth to see the idea of building a larger, long-term movement for changing the political economic realities of California" (para. 4).

For some, this growing movement is redefining what it means "to win." Since the 2000 ballot initiative, multiple youth organizations have continued to work to raise awareness of systemic issues which exploit youth, as well as compromise the overall health of their communities. They have also continued to hold political education and organizer training sessions for young people. The youth-based organization, SOUL (School of Unity and Liberation), holds training sessions for youth activists every summer. The Critical Resistance Youth Force Coalition has been collaborating with the Books Not Bars campaign, a project of

the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights, to oppose the expansion of Alameda County's Juvenile hall, and the building of Superjails in California. Youth Making A Change (YMAC) in San Francisco is working to reform the policies and practices of the Youth Guidance Center, the city's official name for its juvenile hall facility. In the past few years, YMAC's efforts have created a space for a young person to sit on an official board that oversees policy development at the hall, as well as helped organize speak-outs to pressure city officials to listen to their demands (Fernandez, 2002). All over the state, youth continue to focus on educational and legal reform, as well as on building partnerships with other groups, such as labor and teacher's unions. The steam has not been let out of this growing youth movement. "We were determined to come out of this fight with something we could hold on to," argues one youth organizer, "and that's the movement...We got momentum. So we can't lose" (as cited in Templeton, 2000, para. 9).

Youth Organizing: Challenges and Lessons Learned

But that momentum doesn't mean that this growing youth and social movement is without its challenges. Some argue, for example, that the movement's reliance on the infrastructure and symbols of an urban youth hip hop culture marginalizes or silences other youth experience. One youth organizer explains: "... when we talk about youth, it's not just English-speaking youth or hip hop listening youth. Organizers that are using hip hop as a tool should ... understand that by using hip hop, you can't organize all youth. You're really targeting certain communities, certain populations" (as cited in LISTEN, Inc., 2004, p. 12). This danger of forming a "collective" identity around a particular interest or culture that ignores the diversity of the youth community and experience is what Robert Putnam (2000) describes as the "dark side of social capital" (p. 350). In his book, *Bowling Alone*, Putnam writes

Norms and networks that serve some groups may obstruct others, particularly if the norms are discriminatory or the networks socially segregated. A recognition of the importance of social capital [i.e. relationships of trust and reciprocity] in sustaining community life does not exempt us from the need to worry about how that 'community' is defined –who is inside and thus benefits from social capital and who is outside and does not. (p. 358)

With a continued focus on intergenerational partnerships and cross-sector alliances, the Coalition of youth-driven activist organizations currently at work in California seems to be conscious of this critical risk, and to be actively pursuing strategies to broaden the scope of their campaigns.

The youth movement in California is also learning how to speak across discourses to negotiate differences with those in power –which was a challenge for them during their campaign against Prop 21. As one youth activist noted:

With PG&E [one of Prop 21's corporate backers and the site of numerous protests by youth groups], I think we were surprised and a little scared to be in the same room with them. It was hard to define exactly what our power was and how to use it –it had been grown in the street. [Since Prop 21,] we [have] learned that we have to do things like tape discussions and get promises in writing. (as cited in Martinez, 2000, Lessons Learned, para. 1)

Researchers Brett Elizabeth Blake (2004) and Christopher Worthman (2002) argue that one of the reasons why teenagers of minority or low socioeconomic backgrounds have difficulty adapting to school and institutional practices, even when they see this type of literacy as valuable, is because their primary discourses, or “local literacies,” are at odds with the secondary discourses of their schools and civic institutions. This belief is founded on the work of literary theorist James Gee, who views discourse as a way of interacting and doing, defined by and definitive of a particular social context (Worthman, p. 59). Gee contends that individuals are born into a primary discourse, a home environment, which shapes their ways of being in and understanding the world. Secondary discourse, in turn, involves social institutions beyond the family and requires individuals to communicate with those who are “non intimates” (p. 59). For Gee, a person’s primary discourse serves as a framework or base for the acquisition of secondary discourses later in life (p. 59). These secondary discourses are, in part, the discourses of our public school education system and public administration. They are the discourses of the intellectual elite whose values, norms, and beliefs often do not reflect the self-interests, and class-interests, of the educationally at-risk adolescent (p. 11). Learning how to mediate across discourses, without diminishing the power of one’s own primary discourse (and the energy and spirit that it brings to civic engagement, democratic decision-making, and social change movements), is a difficult task, but one which can enable youth “to communicate in particular contexts and across contexts, [and thereby] develop a communicative voice” (p. 63) capable of gaining legitimacy and strength in partnerships with adults, businesses, and policy makers.

The biggest challenge facing youth activists today is learning how to build sustainable organizations that do not rise and fall around short-term, issue-oriented, conflicts, but rather keep attracting supporters and developing strategies to meet changing needs and demographics. According to one youth trainer, typically

...Youth organizers come in and they fight this little fight and they leave, and then another year’s crop comes in...So it just stays in that year of development as opposed to building on itself and building power year to year...I think we need a clearer vision of how young people’s work fits into social change work. We need a serious plan for power that we don’t have right now, and I think [is] difficult to get on the real agenda for discussion. I think there’s high turnover and burnout. (LISTEN, Inc., 2004, p. 13)

Some youth organizers argue that more political education, training in organizing techniques, partnerships with adults and cross-sector groups, and mentoring in positive youth development are needed to sustain and keep developing the movement (p. 13). As one youth put it: “Lots of students we work with are facing very difficult life situations and it’s hard to keep being an organizer when you’ve got major problems at home” (p. 11). Other youth organizers stress the importance of being reflexive and flexible: “...It’s about keeping our eyes and ears open to opportunities that come, not holding ourselves to one approach –but to change, have multiple approaches, but also see what our strengths and limitations are and constantly bringing in what we don’t have” (p. 10). But in order to be able to adapt and change, youth organizers also argue that long-term social movements, like the one that gained footing during the conflict over Prop 21, also need to convince foundations that positive youth development strategies are not simply “the flavor of the month” (p. 12). According to the Critical Youth Force Coalition director, Khadine Bennett: “Lots of foundations are pushing juvenile justice work right now, [but they also] have a responsibility to not just see it as the

hot new thing to fund” (as cited in Fernandez, 2002, Looking Forward, para. 2). On the one hand, foundations need to make long-term commitments to the cause, but on the other hand, organizers are working to make youth less reliant on foundations. “So it’s kind of like a double sided coin,” notes one youth, “more foundations need to give and more organizations need skills to . . . do grassroots fundraising” (as cited in LISTEN, Inc., 2004, p. 12).

Conclusion

Even with these challenges, the mobilization and organization of nearly 40 youth-driven activist organizations during the campaign against Proposition 21, and the creation of partnerships between these groups and other social justice organizations, is likely to guarantee a foundation for young people’s continued struggle for systemic change in California. These young people not only have a unique relationship to public space –through their participation in school institutions –they also make up a large percentage of communities throughout the state. As a result, their struggle is not simply about positive youth development or juvenile justice system reform, it is also about articulating a vision of community development committed to participatory government, social justice, and diversity . A Bay Area organizer explains

[Our city] has 400,000 people, 100,000 of these are under 17. So if you’re talking about transforming your schools and communities, you have to talk about it from transforming the hearts and minds of the people that are there. And if a quarter of your population is under 17, you know, that’s your future in many ways, that’s your present. So how are we going to...create opportunities within schools, within any institution that young people are a part of for youth to have the skills they need to be life-long change agents? (as cited in LISTEN, Inc., 2004, p. 8).

During the campaign against Prop 21 in 2000, youth art and culture were both the invitations and the sparks for renewed participation in civic dialogue. The process of engaging youth through cultural networks and giving them voice through their art helped these young people assume ownership of their experiences, engage critically in the process of meaning-making and self-definition, and become active participants in social/cultural change. Through art, youth activists began to take up presence in the public realm, break down the hegemonic power structures that control youth representation, and engage civically. They also began to realize themselves as assets, and to redefine themselves in civic terms. As evidenced by this case, the energy and creativity of youth activism can be a powerful force – powerful enough, perhaps, to overcome this generation’s lack of faith and participation in the democratic process, as well as to inspire the participation of older citizens, many of whom have grown cynical of politics and governance (Frishberg , 1998, p. 21). As one youth organizer boldly claims:

The whole [youth] generation is going to change what the whole social justice movement does...I think there is a new spirit...that’s going to rejuvenate and revitalize the social justice movement in this country, and some of the tactics [of youth activists] –the lack of fear, the use of hip hop and culture –is [sic] incredible and beautiful. (as cited in LISTEN, Inc., 2004, p. 4)

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