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URBAN YOUTH AND THE COUNTER-NARRATION OF INEQUALITY

Recent studies of youth and the media indicate that poor students of color spend upwards of six and one-half hours per day engaged with electronic media. This intense investment in electronic media by urban youth has led the American Academy of Pediatrics to issue a policy statement encouraging schools to develop a media literacy curriculum; it has also led scholars to call for a critical media literacy pedagogy that empowers urban youth to deconstruct dominant media narratives, develop much-needed academic and critical literacies, and create their own counter-narratives to the media's largely negative depictions of urban youth and their communities. This article highlights a program that employed these pedagogical practices with urban high school students in Los Angeles. The findings of this study suggest that access to this type of literacy pedagogy can positively impact the development of critical civic literacy, civic awareness, and civic participation among urban youth.

KEYWORDS: *urban education, youth popular culture, critical pedagogy, critical media literacy*

Recent studies of youth and the media (Goodman 2003; Nielsen Media Research 2000) indicate that the hours spent with electronic media (e.g., television, movies, video games) are highest among poor students of color, exceeding six and one-half hours per day. This intense investment in electronic media by urban youth has led the American Academy of Pediatrics (2001) to issue a policy statement encouraging schools to develop a media literacy curriculum; it has also led scholars to call for a critical media literacy pedagogy that empowers urban youth to deconstruct dominant media narratives,

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develop much-needed academic and critical literacies, and create their own counter-narratives to the media's largely negative depictions of urban youth and their communities (Duncan-Andrade 2004; Duncan-Andrade and Morrell 2005; Goodman 2003; Grossberg 1994).

This article will focus primarily on the latter of these pedagogical strategies; that is, it will highlight the type of work students can do when teachers use pedagogical practices that encourage and develop urban youth as producers of media texts. Given the level of investment youth are making in media, these sites of production are potentially powerful places for them to put forth critique and analysis of urban social inequality, as well as to posit potential solutions to these problems. Access to this type of literacy pedagogy can positively impact the development of critical civic literacy, civic awareness, and civic participation among urban youth.

Drawing from an increasing body of research which suggests that schools can and should more heavily invest in media literacy and production, this article will posit the argument that this pedagogical approach presents powerful pathways to the development of student agency against conditions of urban social inequality. This argument will begin with a brief analysis of the social and educational climate facing African American, Chicana/o, and Latina/o youth in city-center Los Angeles schools and communities. Next, the article will discuss the methods and products of a Los Angeles university-based summer research seminar that uses critical media pedagogy to help urban high school students to research, analyze, and critique these conditions. The article concludes with a discussion of the implications of 21st-century media texts for educators and policy makers and a call for their strategic use in schools.

THE POLITICS OF FAILURE: DISINVESTMENT IN CALIFORNIA'S SCHOOLS

The *Sacramento Business Journal* reports that California's gross domestic product would make it the fifth-wealthiest country in the world if it were its own nation-state (Sacramento Business Journals Inc. 2001). Sadly, *Education Week's* annual report on schools has California ranked 44th nationally in K-12 per pupil spending adequacy (*Education Week* 2004). At the same time that the state's schoolchildren attend inadequately resourced educational institutions, the California prison industry is the nation's largest, the largest growth

industry in the state, and the only 2003–2004 budget line item to receive a funding increase (schools were cut by \$1.5 billion). To wit, the average annual state expenditure for a California K–12 student is \$6,822 (RAND California 2004), while the average cost of housing an inmate in the California Department of Corrections (CDC) exceeds \$30,000 (California Department of Corrections 2004). These dubious investment policies happen at a time when federal education policy (No Child Left Behind) has raised the requirements for, costs of, and obstacles to becoming a teacher. In comparison, California prison guards need a minimum of a high school equivalency diploma and have the cost of their training covered by the state. Equally troubling is 2003 state legislation that provides for the average prison guard salary to reach \$73,428 by 2006 (*Los Angeles Times* 2003), while the average teacher's salary is \$55,693 (U.S. Department of Labor 2003).

California's lack of investment in education is felt in schools statewide. Many wealthier communities have responded by passing bond measures and making significant private investments in their schools. For low-income urban schools, these "options" are virtually unavailable. These schools are also the ones most likely to exclusively serve poor and non-White children. While the California Department of Corrections does not disaggregate its data by income bracket, it is not difficult to connect the dots between racially and economically isolated African American and Chicana/o/Latina/o communities, dysfunctional urban schools, high dropout rates, and the overrepresentation of African Americans and Chicana/o/Latina/os in the CDC (Wald and Losen 2003).

What type of pedagogy and curriculum is appropriate and effective given these conditions? How should groups disproportionately impacted by these conditions (African Americans, Chicana/os, Latina/os, indigenous groups, Southeast Asians, poor Whites) use education to respond? How might they draw from their shared histories of marginalization to collectively address inequality? Educational approaches to these questions cannot deny the unique elements of each group's respective cultural politics and histories. However, the quest for educational justice must be coordinated as a collaborative mission that identifies core inequalities across communities. Anything short of this collective effort will ensure that these groups continue to fall victim to partisan politics in communities where they are the overwhelming majority.

The possibilities of historically marginalized groups working together to resist oppressive conditions in the Americas is not without historical precedent (see Acuña 1998 for accounts of Mexican nationals housing runaway slaves as one of many examples). The fact of the matter is that these groups have long shared communities, failing public institutions, and histories of marginalization. The

modern rationale for these social conditions is typically delivered by hyperconservative media conglomerates that define the residents of urban communities (particularly youth) as menaces from the margins and threats to our national character and safety (Malkin 2004). Absent from the dominant narrative is a critical analysis of the material conditions that isolate and promulgate high rates of social, economic, and political marginalization in our nation's poorest communities. Also missing from mainstream reporting are critical counter-narratives of resistance to these deplorable conditions.

The disparate conditions facing many poor and non-White communities can be a battle cry to collective action. Teachers who employ critical pedagogical practices uniting young people around issues of inequality in schools and their broader communities can provide hope and agency. These transformative pedagogies are most effective when they tap into urban youths' heavy investment in media culture. This combination of critical pedagogy, critical media literacy, and issues central to poor and non-White youth can provide the community-based foundation and structure for a future of expanded sociopolitical organization and transformative action in urban communities.

The conditions in urban schools and communities also provide rich opportunities for anthropologists, particularly those scholars whose work is deeply committed to social justice for African American and Latino communities. Historically, work by anthropologists in poor and non-White communities has produced conclusions of social dysfunction that have been used to justify repressive social, political, and economic agendas. Our work must combat such efforts, counter-narrating racist conclusions with the stories of struggle, dignity, and resistance that occur on a daily basis. The scholarship of anthropologists working in urban communities should expose the long-standing inequities there and the people's efforts to transform those conditions. As an example, educational anthropologists can document transformative and liberating pedagogical practices in urban schools such as those discussed in this article. If we are deliberate about doing this type of research and distributing it to other people involved in similar struggles, our work can be used to build critical hope and a bank of counter-narratives about what is possible in our communities. These efforts might actually impact the material conditions of the lives of people outside the academy.

SUMMER SEMINAR: PUTTING CRITICAL PEDAGOGY INTO PRACTICE

Grounded in critical and liberatory pedagogy (Woodson 1933; Freire 1970) that aims to confront and transform the material inequalities discussed above, this section examines ethnographic data from a university-based

summer seminar where principles of social justice pedagogy were employed with urban high school students. Examination of video, field notes, and student work products, collected over six weeks of participant-observation in the seminar, will be used to guide the discussion.

Role of the Researcher

I have played an active role in this summer research seminar over the last three years. This year, I was an adviser for the South Central¹ area research group, which was led by a teacher whom I have worked closely with over the last two years. I regularly observed the group's meetings, advised students as they developed their interview protocols and research methodologies, and accompanied the group in the field. I also acted as an adviser and mentor as students analyzed their research data and developed the video documentary of their research.

As a researcher, I employ a methodology that my colleagues and I call "socially engaged scholarship."² This approach has been referred to as *action research* (Kincheloe and McLaren 1998) and described as an intervention for "emancipatory change":

In stark contrast to "policy studies," whose aim is to provide "useful," expert knowledge for institutional planning, the core of critical action research involves its participatory and communally discursive structure and the cycle of action and reflection it initiates. The knowledge enabled through such reflexive and shared study leads not to bureaucratic directives, but, more important, to the possibility for emancipatory change. [McLaren and Giarelli 1995]

This critical research method empowers individuals as agents of meaningful, sustainable change, positively impacting the material conditions of those involved with the study. It is an approach to research that gives more than it receives. By focusing on improving the immediate circumstances, this approach de-emphasizes the traditional generalized, broad-based search for empirical truths and democratizes research tools and knowledge creation (Nader 1999). In this way, when researchers conclude their research, they leave a sense of hope and promise, an end directly tied to the individuals' sense of self as capable change agents. This way of engaging in research also leaves participants with reusable tools, in contrast to traditional research methods that leave the tools in the hands of university researchers—so that when the university researcher leaves, so do the tools to do research, and, to a large extent, so does the sense of agency. Perhaps most importantly, this research method recognizes the complexity of each individual set of conditions and encourages a sensibility of local agency and control for developing solutions for local problems.

RESEARCH SITE: SUMMER SEMINAR 2004

Hosted by UCLA's Institute for Democracy, Education and Access (IDEA), the seminar engaged Los Angeles 11th-graders in a qualitative research study of youth critical civic participation in local high schools. Four Los Angeles teachers who had a reputation for being committed to issues of educational justice were asked to invite students and acted as group leaders. The six-week seminar split 26 participants into four teams, each focused on a local geographic area. All of the students selected were either African American or Latino and had grade point averages ranging from 1.5 to 3.8 on a 4.0 scale. Groups researched critical civic participation among youth in their respective areas, with a particular emphasis on the role of schools and community in the development of civically engaged youth.

The seminar met five days per week for six hours each day. Students engaged in a variety of activity systems that included expansive readings and discussions on social theory (MacLeod 1987; Oakes and Lipton 2001), civic participation (Westheimer and Kahne 2002), critical literacy (Finn 1999; Freire and Macedo 1987), and qualitative research methods (Berg 2004). Each student was assigned a laptop computer with Internet access. Students had the option to check out their laptops to continue their work at home. As well, students who did not have a working e-mail address were assisted in setting one up for file-sharing purposes.

SEMINAR ACTIVITIES: AN OVERVIEW

The first week of the seminar drew from several of the aforementioned readings to drive discussions about social inequality in Los Angeles. Particular attention was paid to the role that schools play in perpetuating inequality in urban settings. The fact that 85 percent of the participants attend severely underperforming schools—the other 15 percent attend racially mixed schools with high failure rates for African Americans and Latinos—fueled intense discussions. Each morning, students were given a writing prompt to share and explore their own experiences with social inequality, as a staging ground for researching those inequalities in the weeks to come. These prompts were e-mailed to the writing instructor for feedback and were ultimately used by students to compile a final reflective paper on the seminar experience.

We knew that many of the issues raised during our discussions of inequality could be disheartening for students. To confront this challenge, we encouraged students to respond from the position of agents of social change. One strategy to inculcate these feelings of agency was the use of narratives about youth organizing and youth activism against oppressive conditions in urban Los Angeles. These came in the form of a video

documentary (*Chicano!*), readings (Freire and Macedo 1987; Sólorzano and Delgado-Bernal 2001), and panels of community activists. These counter-narratives were used to engender feelings of possibility that were then acted upon in the form of community case studies in four Los Angeles communities (Santa Monica, Watts, South Central, and East Los Angeles). In these studies, the youth researchers examined three central questions: (1) What does it mean for L.A. youth to participate powerfully in civic life? (2) How can L.A. youth learn to participate in such ways? and (3) What civic lessons do young people currently learn in and outside of Los Angeles-area schools?

During the first two weeks, these reading and writing activities were generally done in a large group setting and lasted for the first couple of hours each morning. Afterward, students would break up into smaller groups based on the communities where they would be doing their fieldwork. In these small group meetings, there were generally two teachers for each five to six students. During this time, the focus was on preparing them to collect data in the field. We developed and practiced interview protocols, practiced using a video camera to capture interviews and to gather visual data, and took and reviewed sample field notes from brief excursions around the UCLA campus.

Students spent a minimum of two days a week for the middle four weeks of the seminar in their respective focal communities. These days were used to conduct interviews with students, administrators, teachers, and community members, to take observational field notes, and to collect video footage of these activities. The sixth and final week was spent compiling these data into a written research report and a presentation. On the final day of the seminar, each research team used PowerPoint to represent the findings of their report at a forum attended by university faculty, state and local officials, community members, media, school officials, and teachers. At the conclusion of their PowerPoint presentation, each group showed their video documentary.

There are many stories of discovery emerging from the seminar over its six years of existence (Morrell 2004). The 2004 summer seminar space is no exception to that rule. Undoubtedly, the readings and activity systems are deserving of more study, as they laid an important foundation for the community research that students did in weeks two through five. However, the remainder of this article will focus on perhaps the most impactful activity system—the use of digital video equipment to capture and render critical narratives about the conditions of the schools, communities, and lives that were being studied. As one student in the South Central research group explained:

Miguel: If a picture is worth a thousand words, then one minute of footage with 1,800 frames is worth eighteen hundred thousand words. The use of the camera was invaluable. It allowed us to capture images that could only be expressed through live footage. These images not only helped supplement our data with concrete evidence, but allowed us to bring forth a world most people are blind to.

To more completely understand Miguel's sentiments and the potential of media texts to develop and represent youth critical civic literacy, this article turns now to an examination of the video product of the group studying the South Central district of Los Angeles.

SOUTH CENTRAL GROUP: USING MEDIA TO STUDY A COMMUNITY IN DISTRESS

The first time the South Central group stepped foot in the community, it was clear that there was a moving story waiting to be told. The area high school and surrounding community had been in the city's headlines with relative frequency leading up to the group's visit. In late February, just over four months before the seminar students arrived with their video cameras and notepads filled with questions, a police officer was killed by a local resident fewer than ten blocks from the school. Within minutes of the shooting, the community was flooded with over 100 police officers, a command center was set up in the middle of a major street, and house-to-house searches for the suspect began.³ Eight helicopters hovered overhead for hours, providing live television coverage of the event on all major networks. The high school was locked down, preventing students from leaving their classrooms. The manhunt and the community lockdown continued into the evening, when the suspect was finally apprehended while hiding in the trunk of his own car. He died 48 hours later after "hanging himself" in the custody of the Los Angeles County Corrections Department.

This shooting served as further justification for a 2003 gang injunction issued for that area of South Central Los Angeles. The injunction legalizes the use of racial profiling techniques in the area and has dramatically heightened tensions between young men and the police. These tensions exploded again in late June 2004, when the police department used clubs and Mace to subdue a local community activist and South Central High School parent at a birthday party. The beating of the parent was captured on home video and broadcast on major news stations around the country.

With these events still fresh in the minds of community members, we brought the students to begin their research at South Central High on July 6. We arrived just in time for the end of the summer-school day. The

plan was to roll out the interview protocols students had been working on for the last two weeks to interview students and teachers regarding their thoughts about youth civic participation in the community. While researchers were conducting their first interview with students on the school steps, three police cars sped past and screeched to a halt at the corner of the school. Officers jumped out of their cars and chased down two students, apprehending them and placing them in handcuffs. The summer seminar students stopped the interview to capture the police activity on tape.

For Miguel, a Latino student from a more affluent high school, the events were both distressing and eye-opening:

Miguel: I never knew stuff like that happened. I mean I did, I mean I've heard about it and seen stuff like that on TV, but to have it happening right before me and to watch it all through the lens of the camera . . . that made me feel like I was doing something important, like I had a responsibility to let other people know what is happening in communities like this one.

For Tanya, a student at South Central High, her sense of responsibility was narrated a bit differently:

Tanya: Man, people just don't know, that's everyday around here. You just get to thinking that that's normal, even though inside you know it's not right. But, the more I think about it, I know it's not right . . . maybe I'm supposed to do something about that.

Although Miguel and Tanya come from different parts of the city, they both understood the significance of the events they witnessed and the importance of having captured them with their research. At the end of the four weeks in the field, they volunteered to produce the group's final video. The visual text they produced represents the best of the civic capacities among our urban youth; it is simultaneously filled with an optimism of the possibilities of change while critiquing the circumstances they witness and endure on a regular basis. It is also a vivid example of the largely untapped collaborative potential that exists among African American and Chicano youth and their communities.

“POWER AND PEDAGOGY FOR THE PEOPLE”⁴

The video begins with the title “Power and Pedagogy for the People” superimposed on top of the image of a community mural. The mural is of several members of the Black Panther movement, each clad in all black, holding up a clenched fist. The member in the center of the mural is a woman wearing dark glasses and holding a shotgun. In the background, “Why? (What's Goin' On?)”—a track from rap group The Roots' latest album

(2004)—plays, repeating the title of the song to the beat of heavy bass and cymbals. As the soundtrack rolls, the images on the screen switch to establishing shots of the community surrounding the high school. These images present their own critiques, which are made even more dramatic by the driving bass and a woman's melodic voice repeating the question “Why?”

The establishing shots begin with running footage of a street sign of the renowned, and sometimes infamous, South Central Boulevard and of high school students sitting in front of a boarded-up house covered with graffiti. From there, different still images of billboards in the community appear with each beat of the bass drum: “The Liquor Bank,” “888-Get-Money,” “Housewives 98 cent store,” “Hustler Casino.” The still shots give way to images of the front of the high school as students pour out at the end of a school day.

As the camera moves to footage of students inside of the school, the lyrics make a poignant critique of the sociopolitical climate in urban centers:

I'm kinda gettin' a little tired of always hittin'
That's the reason I'm gonna speak my mind
To keep from goin' insane . . .
We in the last innin'
The world keeps spinnin'
My people steady losin'
While the rich keep winnin'
It's like we never smilin'
And the devil steady grinnin'
Killin' what we representin'
Even our children and women [video cuts to
images of students leaving school]
. . . young teens join the Marines
so they can die for the cause
inducted up into the government's war
as if the land full of money ain't funny how none of
it's yours [The Roots 2004]

As the song's lyrics die away, the beat continues as a black title screen appears with the words “September 1998,” and then a second screen with the words “817 9th Graders enroll at South Central High School.” These titles transition into a poem performed by Xzavion, a 2004 South Central High graduate, who raps:

Being a brother every day is a struggle
That's why we hustle
And pack heat instead of muscle
And blast instead of tussle
Keep your head up
Because one day the storm will let up
And we'll finally all be able to get up
But you must pray upon the cross
Because most of our souls is lost

As Xzavion's voice and image fade out, they are replaced by a new series of title screens that read "June 2003"; then, "Out of the 817 9th graders only 445 students graduate"; then, "Student Disappearance Rate = 46%"; and finally, "WHY?"

In the first 90 seconds of the video, students have drawn from popular music, still images, establishing shots, live interview footage, poetry, rap, and school demographic data to make a statement about the larger social context of urban schools and also about the local context of South Central High School. This multilayered use of media texts to engage in social commentary is a profoundly literate activity. It is also a powerful example of the capacity of young people to speak critically about the conditions in their communities.

Having drawn from the canvas of the South Central community to establish the need for critical inquiry and analysis, the students then split the video into a series of sections. Each section begins with a topic title and is used to expand on the critical commentary, as well as to provide solutions for improving conditions in schools and the community.

"CITIZENSHIP AND AUTHORITY"

The first of these sections addresses youth and community perspectives on the relationship between citizenship and authority. The section begins with an interview with South Central High's assistant principal, Mr. Nathan. As Nathan makes the claim that "we have our citizenship, we just don't know how to use it," the film cuts away from him to the live footage of the police arresting students and taking them away in handcuffs—this was the previously discussed footage from the research group's first day on campus. As one handcuffed African American male is led away by a police officer, Nathan's voice is replaced by rap group Dead Prez's "They Schools":

. . . I got my diploma from a school called Rickers
Full of teenage mothers and drug dealin' niggas
In the hallways the popo [police] was always present
Search through niggas' possessions for dope and
weapons [Dead Prez 2000]

With these lyrics in the background, the image transitions from the student being taken away to footage the researchers collected while inside the school. This footage is of two police officers walking through the breezeways of the school twirling their clubs and striking plastic garbage cans with them.

From the images of the police presence on campus, the video jumps to a lengthy interview piece with Aida, a Latina and South Central senior. Aida, having witnessed the police wandering through the breezeways, opens her interview by saying, "You have just witnessed what we go through every day." Her testimonial is convincing as

she stares straight at the camera, hands on her hips, head bobbing for attitude affect, lecturing the camera about the conditions South Central students endure: "We have to go to class with cops behind us. . . . sometimes we're on lockdown. Do you know what a lockdown is? A lockdown is when you're afraid you're gonna get shot if you get outside your classroom. They keep you in a classroom for four and a half hours. They don't let you out, not even to go to the restroom, unless you're escorted."

Again, this section represents a composite of various data sources to construct a critical commentary about the increasing militarization of urban school campuses. The blending of interviews with a student and an administrator with live footage of the overbearing police presence on the school campus paints a disturbing, but poignant, picture of the conditions of the urban school climate.

"WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?"

Having painted a somewhat bleak picture of the conditions facing youth in the South Central community, the next section of the documentary brings forth the students' sense of hope. The section begins with the question "Where do we go from here?" This suggests that while the students are critically aware that the conditions heretofore discussed are not socially just, they also understand that the response to these conditions remains an open-ended question. As a response to their question, they spend the remainder of the documentary discussing potential forms of individual and institutional agency that are available to enact social change.

"EDUCATE YOURSELF: WHERE SHOULD WE START?"

This section of the documentary returns to Aida, whose earlier critique of the militarized conditions at South Central is replaced by a more subdued stance and tone. Aida suggests that students and parents can turn to the school board to address school conditions: "The school board is there for students to voice their opinions . . . that's basically the best you can do. Go out to these meetings . . . go out with your group of supporters. Go out and petition. Basically, become an activist." Aida's position here is reflective of the double bind facing urban youth. She is highly critical of the unjust conditions at her school but trapped in the logic of turning to the very system she critiques for answers. The students respond to Aida's suggestions by inserting footage from their visit to the school board.

During the second week of the seminar, all of the research teams attended a group interview session with the representatives of several school board members. At the interview, one student asked what the school board planned to do about the low college-going rates at most city-center schools in Los Angeles. The representative

for the South Central District responded, “We definitely have to do a better job with the secondary curriculum, so we’ve been focusing on the secondary literacy program.” As a response to both Aida and the representative, the video fades out of the representative’s promise of an improved secondary literacy program to images of *Language!*, the six-million-dollar literacy program that the Los Angeles Unified School District recently purchased for its secondary schools.

While running images of *Language!*, the video plays a segment of rap group Dead Prez’s song “They Schools” in the background. On this portion of the audio track, Dead Prez has sampled a scolding man’s voice that asks, “Why haven’t you learned anything?” Following the man’s question is the voice of M-1, a member of Dead Prez, speaking over an eerie synthetic beat, mixed with acoustic piano: “Man, that school shit is a joke. The same people that control the school system, control the prison system, and the whole social system, ever since slavery” (Dead Prez 2000).

As this commentary plays, the documentary runs footage of the *Language!* textbooks being used to remediate Los Angeles’s lowest-achieving students. This footage begins with establishing shots of the books themselves, showing the books stacked on a desk and revealing the title of the literacy program splayed across all the primers. The camera then moves to a tight shot of an open textbook, revealing early-elementary-level text featuring oversized cartoon pictures of a cat next to the sentence “A fat cat.” Gliding across the desk, the shot moves to the next textbook, which uses an entire page to display an image of a boy swinging a bat over comically large and bold font that reads: “Thad is at bat. Wham! Bam! Thin Thad can hit it to the rim! Thad can dash. Thad has a big win!”

The images of the secondary literacy program end with a shot of another textbook chapter, entitled “The Hat.” On the chapter’s title page, there is a cartoon image of a boy wearing a sombrero. Pages of the book are turned to reveal another oversized cartoon image of this same boy asleep under a tree with the sombrero pulled over his face. The text next to the image reads, “Al can nap. The pal can nap.” This segment ends with the camera moving in for a tight shot of this deeply disturbing image, which evokes racist popularized images of the lazy Mexican. Dead Prez’s music is replaced by the school board representative’s voice echoing, “Literacy program, literacy program, literacy program” while an all-black title screen with the question “WHY?” appears.

This portion of the documentary reveals a variety of creatively critical responses to the conditions in schools. The seamlessness of the multilayered critique in this segment of the video is profound. The students are able to move through three (or more) layers of

critique, from Aida’s suggestion of turning to the school board, to actual footage of commentary by the school board on their most recent major curriculum policy, to footage of some of the material consequences of that policy. Even more could be made of the students’ use of sound and image to critique the implementation of a dumbed-down and culturally irrelevant literacy program and its latent racialized images in the lowest-performing secondary schools districtwide.

From the school board, the video moves to an interview with Khalil, the South Central community member and parent involved in the police beating mentioned earlier in this article. Khalil, answering questions about what young people can do to become more civically engaged, speaks almost as though he is responding directly to the school board:

You’re dealing with folks who are not like-minded and that don’t appreciate your values, or your understanding of what it is that you’re trying to deal with . . . You know people just make remarks without thinking. That just goes to show you that people are not taking the time out to think before they act or say. So, that’s where you know, you have to sit back and learn, well, OK, I’m not gonna do that.

Khalil’s comments are used by the students to accomplish two things: first, they act as a response to the school board’s track record of insensitive and misguided policies for increased policing and an uncaring curriculum; second, they act as impetus for urban youth and communities to look inward for answers. This second use makes room for transition from a largely critical analysis of the conditions in schools and the community to the second portion of the video, which explores the possibilities for change.

“TURNING TO SELF AND COMMUNITY FOR ANSWERS”

The students use this section of the video to represent the voices of the community as they speak out about what they want and need from elected officials and teachers. This begins with an extended interview with two recent South Central High School graduates, Josh and Mia:

Josh: They need to come make a visit instead of just being way up in Sacramento, talking about it on the news, talking about what they gonna do. They need to actually come down here and take some action. They need to come down here—

Mia (interjecting): —and see what we need.

J: . . . and walk down the street with me. Walk around, talk to people. Talk to some of these crackheads that’s out here. ‘Cause they have stuff to say too; they done been through a whole lot.

M: Arnold Schwarzenegger went to everywhere else but here. I don't understand how . . .

J (interjecting): Yeah. They go to all the nice neighborhoods.

M: I was just sayin' last night, 'cause of this Democratic Convention thing, and they travelin' around and campaigning. They should do that throughout the whole course of their time as president, or whatever their position is, they should come and talk to the people. If we vote for you guys, then they just sell us all these lies. I can't vote yet, but they sell all these people that vote all these lies and they don't live up to any of the stuff they 'sposed to be doin'. And now we have this major budget crisis and that's affecting my education.

These two voices challenge notions of civically disinterested urban youth. What is captured here are voices of urban young people who are aware of the politics of campaigning, current political events, and the disinvestment of elected officials in the interests of urban communities. Both Josh and Mia are calling for an accountability from their elected officials that requires those officials to experience the lived conditions and voices of all the walks of urban life—from crackheads to gangbangers to college students.

From elected officials, the discussion turns to the role of educators for improving conditions in urban communities. For answers about what young people want out of the curriculum and teachers more generally, the video returns to the interview with Josh and Mia:

Josh: You'll be in a zone thinkin' about your own problems and stuff that's happenin' out in the streets and stuff . . .

Mia (over Josh): Uh-huh . . . that doesn't matter . . .

J: . . . that doesn't really concern you. But when the teacher hops on your level then you can really open up, like, dang, and get stuff off your chest. It might help solve problems that you're goin' through.

M (referring to Mr. Cam, her favorite teacher): He asks questions.

J (over Mia): Yeah, he asks questions.

M: He asks like what's goin' on in you guys's lives, and do you have any experiences that relate to our lesson.

J: Most of these teachers they livin' way out here in Beverly Hills and the Valley, North Hollywood . . .

M: . . . and they teachin' us through their stereotypes.

J: Keep it real. Mr. Cam is the only teacher that I know that stay in the 'hood. Where I done been walkin' down the street and just seen Mr. Cam. "Oh, what's up?" So, he knows what goes on around here.

M: A lot of teachers, they teach us about out here through their stereotypes. So, it's hard for us to

respect them because they lookin' at it negatively, and we lookin' like (**pretending a dialogue between her and a teacher**), "Well, I live here and it's not as bad as you think. Where do you stay?"

M: And once we find out they don't live out here, or they live in a better area, it's like, I can't honor the things that you sayin'. Because number one, you're down-talking me. You're down-talking my environment, which means you're basically disrespecting my whole history because everybody that I know has been livin' out here. So, that causes a problem as well.

It should not be surprising that in their effort to raise the critical voices of the community, the students draw most heavily from other young people. They seem keenly in tune with the fact that these voices can best represent the critical perspectives and agency for healing urban communities like South Central. By drawing so heavily upon those voices in the video, they also issue a not-so-subtle critique of the fact that these voices are all but absent in the mainstream discourse about what is needed in urban communities. In keeping with this pattern of giving voice to the margins, the video concludes with a series of recommendations about proactive steps that can be taken by urban community members.

“KNOW YOUR HISTORY: CLAIM CONTROL OF (Y)OUR FUTURE”

The title of this final section reflects the students' sense of the interconnectedness of the past with the present and the individual with the collective. By emphasizing the importance of knowing your history, the video insists that these conditions did not come to pass by accident, and neither should it be forgotten that there is a long and proud history of resistance among marginalized groups. The second part of the title reflects their sense that the word *your* cannot be spelled without including *our*, showing the connection between the individual and the collective. The video allows these ideas to be narrated in much the way the video began—that is, laying multiple mediums over one another to represent a complex idea.

The image moves quickly from footage of the interview with Khalil to footage of the South Central mural that began the video. Initially, Khalil is speaking in the background as the video scrolls through the mural's time line of African American history.

Khalil: History is our greatest teacher.

[Camera cuts away to image of Malcolm X]

K: And I think even right now, we need to start incorporating more of our histories.

[Camera cuts to image of Native Africans with drums]

K: You know Black . . .

[Camera scrolls onto image of Mayan civilization]

K: . . . and Brown. One, to get an understanding of where we come from and where we can go with our potential.

[Camera scrolls to images of slave ships, graphic lettering of the word “STOLEN,” and images of African slaves in chains landing on Western shores.]

K: And two, to give ourselves a base, an understanding of faith, something to believe in. So that when there are disappointing times, or we have setbacks, it’s not so devastating, we don’t give up.

As Khalil finishes speaking, rapper/poet Tupac’s “Thugz Mansion” (Shakur 2002) emerges as the soundtrack for the mural:

[Camera scrolls across mural image of slaves being led in chains by a slave master to the auction block.]

Tupac: I hear the gunshots. Nobody cares, see the politicians ban us. They’d rather see us locked in chains. Please explain why they can’t stand us.

[Camera cuts to mural image of a slave with a hammer breaking his chains off.]

T: Is there a way for me to change, or am I just a victim of things I did to maintain?

[Camera cuts to mural image of Frederick Douglass, African American Civil War soldier, and African American Vietnam War soldier, and then scrolls to image of Sojourner Truth holding a scroll that reads “All Men Are Created Equal.”]

T: I need a place to rest my head with the little bit of homeboys that remain ‘cause all the rest dead. Is there a spot for us to grow? If ya find it, I’ll be right behind ya, show me and I’ll go. [Shakur 2002]

With Tupac’s beat fading out, the video cuts to an interview with Gerard, a South Central community member in his early 20s, who says, “If we can just get together, and establish something, it can happen.” Gerard’s comments here extend the video’s challenge to stereotypes of the apathetic and hopeless young African American male, presenting another piece of the group’s critical counter-narrative.

The tapestry woven by the video gets its final threads from Chisom, a 2004 South Central High graduate, who reads a poem she wrote:

While there’s hope
We still have no clue
What they system’s lies is doin’ to you
Keepin’ you from the most important thing you need . . . school
How many boys and girls don’t graduate each year?
How many mothers’ high hopes turn to fear?
If learning the truth is a battle

And this simplicity has you rattled

Then your life has chose its path

To conclude, the video cuts away from Chisom and back to the image of the Black Panthers from the video’s opening title screen. Here, the students added an echo effect to Chisom’s reading of her final lines, resulting in each line overlapping with the next line. The echoing of her voice becomes the backdrop for the still image of the Panthers with their fists raised in the air:

One thought

(echoing . . . One thought) Turns into one fist

(echoing . . . Turns into one fist) Multiplied by millions

(echoing . . . Multiplied by millions) Who choose to rise and resist

(echoing . . . Who choose to rise and resist)

That’s what’s real

That’s real

And, that’s how we feel

Chisom’s voice fades into a Tupac rap as the credits scroll against a black title screen. His widely recognizable voice allows the video to make one last statement to its viewers. Against the melody of an acoustic piano and a driving bass drum, Tupac raps on a remixed version of his song “Me Against the World”:

. . . scared of revolution

But I ain’t givin’ up on the hood

’Cuz I’d rather die . . .

I’m losin’ my homies in a hurry

They relocatin’ to the cemetery

. . . don’t wanna make excuses

’cause this is how it is

What’s the use

Unless we shootin’

No one notices the youth

It’s just me against the world. [DJ Green Lantern et al. 2003]

IMPLICATIONS

The summer seminar experience was transformative for participants in several ways. It allowed them to develop and represent critical literacy through examinations of Los Angeles schools and communities. It also allowed them to engage in multiple forms of social action. The act of doing socially responsible research in their communities is the most obvious form of their social action. However, their research findings have also been used in teacher education programs (some of which serve the communities studied) and educational research conferences around the nation. Finally, their documentation of the conditions

in their communities and their proposed solutions to these conditions (in short: “rise and resist”) are also forms of social action.

As this article has suggested, the students’ video is a powerful example of social action on multiple levels. It is powerful as an example of the critical capacity and agency of urban youth. It is powerful as a counter-narrative to stories of apathetic and disengaged urban communities. It is powerful as a critique of the conditions of urban schools and communities. It is powerful as a tool that gives voice to a community that screams every day but is seldom heard. It is powerful because it represents the expansive and wonderful abilities of urban students to contribute to the dialogue about social justice in ways that no standardized test could purport to measure. It is powerful because it exemplifies the types of complex and critical literacy skills made possible by giving students access to a postcolonial pedagogy—an “empowering education.” It is powerful because, as Miguel put it, “Having the cameras . . . forced [us] to open our eyes to the inequities that we had not taken notice of before; we effectively became aware citizens.”

The South Central group was not unique in their production of a powerful video documentary. The other three research groups also worked tirelessly to create moving videos based on their research. One group brought overnight wear and sleeping bags, staying all night on the university campus to finish their video in time for the final presentation. Another group stayed until 3:00 a.m. before rushing home to change clothes in time for the presentation. Tanya, a South Central High School student and member of the South Central research group, commented on the dramatic change she witnessed in one of her schoolmates that worked on the video for the East Los Angeles research group: “I’ve never seen Keith this excited about doing work. Never. For him to stay up here till all hours of the morning to do some work on a project? Nope. Never.” Keith agreed, adding: “Man, school should be like this. If school was like this, students would be way more willing to work. I mean, it’s like it’s not even really work. You can’t even really call it that because it’s fun and it’s important.”

The majority of the summer seminar participants were like Tanya and Keith. Tanya and Keith are like most students in urban schools. They are not considered college material by their schools, and their low grades and frequent disinvestment in school reflect those expectations. However, what Tanya’s and Keith’s comments make clear is the potential of the right pedagogical approach to recapture the interest and commitment of America’s most disenfranchised young people.

Urban youth bring unique and important insight to the dialogue about social justice. They experience the material conditions of urban poverty in visceral ways that cannot be captured through adult lenses. Sadly, schools and the larger society have failed to create avenues for youth to discuss their understandings of the problems and conditions facing urban centers. The absence of these narratives not only has meant the increasing marginalization of urban youth but also has meant that insight into solutions to these problems has been overlooked.

The challenge facing schools is to make use of pedagogical approaches that link literacy to social action and civic participation. If urban school leaders and teachers can muster the courage to be responsive to the sharp and critical insights of the students they serve, these kinds of educational endeavors can help schools connect more deeply with the communities they are serving. By allowing for pedagogy that uses literacy development to address the most immediate concerns in the lives of young people, schools will also have access to commissioned self-studies. The feedback made available in these studies can provide schools with valuable insights into how to more effectively serve their students.

The implications of this study are clear for anyone seeking to tap into the potential of urban youth as partners in addressing the educational opportunity gap. Administrators, teachers, teacher educators, and policy makers should pay heed, not only to the critique presented in the students’ video but also to their comments about the process of building that critique. Student work-products like this send a clear message to all of us in the business of improving urban schools: it is the adults that are failing, not the kids. It is the 21st century, and it is high time that pedagogy and curriculum catch up with that fact by tapping into new-century literacies and the capacity of urban youth to critically read and respond to their world.

NOTES

1. The name “South Central” as used throughout is a pseudonym for a smaller community section in the South Los Angeles area.

2. I was first introduced to this term by my colleague and mentor, Dr. Rafael Diaz, the director of the Cesar Chavez Institute at San Francisco State University.

3. The author lived in the South Central community during this period and was witness to this series of events.

4. Subsequent section titles in quotation marks are the subsection titles used in the documentary.

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