

Co-Creating Community Change: Responding to Violence through Youth Media Practice

A Dissertation

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## DEDICATION:

I dedicate this study to young people who bravely examine their worlds and show us they have a lot to say and we have a lot to learn. I also dedicate this study to the tireless, soul-full and indefatigable youth workers who co-create spaces and align themselves with young people against everyday injustice.

## ABSTRACT

Young people have unprecedented access to media. They are not just “watching” media content; they are critiquing popular media and creating a variety of their own media projects to examine their lived experience (Sefton-Green & Soep, 2007; Chavez & Soep, 2005). The purpose of this critical qualitative study was to illuminate the ways youth, as active agents, address violence in their communities through producing media. The second purpose of this study was to better understand the youth work practices that support young people who examine and change their communities. The following questions guided this project: How do youth experience violence in their communities? How do youth create media to address violence? What does the process of creating media to address violence mean to them? What youth work practices support the efforts of young people in the process of creating media to address violence in their respective communities?

Constructivist, critical and participatory theories guided this study (Guba & Lincoln, 2000; Friere, 1970; Cammarota & Fine, 2008). Semi-structured in-depth interviews (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009; Patton, 2005; Madison, 2005) with 15 staff and young filmmakers, mural and spoken word artists in three different urban communities were conducted in order to better understand this phenomenon.

Findings expand upon our knowledge of young people’s experience with violence. Their experience required a multifaceted analysis of violence including: physical, structural, institutional and emotional realities. Young people in this study created media to address these forms of violence through a sustained and complex process that included personal growth, building media skills and community development. Youth workers

supported this process through creating an intentional sense of belonging attuned to young people's context, culture and community. They also co-created spaces where spiritual healing and critical hope could flourish by standing with youth to examine and speak back to injustice inspiring positive change.

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## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

The amount of time young people spend with entertainment media has risen dramatically since large-scale national data on media use began in 1999. Today, 8-18 year-olds devote an average of 7 hours and 38 minutes to using entertainment media across a typical day, totaling more than 53 hours a week. Much of that time is spent ‘media multitasking’ (using more than one medium at a time). As such, they compress a total of 10 hours and 45 minutes of media content into 7½ hours (“Generation M2”, 2010). Young people are also consumers of media, with vast amounts of energy and resources spent on marketing to them (Steinberg, 2011; Chavez & Soep, 2005). We are living in an unparalleled time where many youth have nearly unlimited access to technology and media. This situation has led to calls for media education both within and out of schools (Hobbs, 2004; Torres & Mercado, 2006; Sefton-Green & Soep 2007; Boske & McCormack, 2011; Poyntz, 2006; Keller & Share, 2007; Semali, 2003).

One popular approach in media education is titled protectionist—a view that youth need to stop spending time engaging in media. Many counter that this approach is not a viable or a realistic option (Kellner & Share, 2007b; Poyntz, 2006; Tisdell, 2008). Others point to data, which suggests positive outcomes related to media use and young people. Positive outcomes for youth emerge when they are supported to interact critically with and challenge media representations and messages (Chavez & Soep, 2005; Brown, Schaffer, Vargas & Romocki, 2004). Finally, critical media literacy is about creating spaces for young people to become more aware, engaged, and civically-minded (Kellner & Share, 2007a). Critical media literacy scholarship has illuminated how young people are becoming advocates for positive representations of themselves in media and

investigators of significant issues in their own communities (Chavez & Soep, 2005). This trend seems particularly important for urban youth, often negatively represented in media, policy and popular discourse (Haymes, 2003). Given both the rise in general media output and consumption of media by young people, healthy youth development may require that young people have spaces where they are invited to examine their everyday experiences and tell their own stories.

### **Significance of the Study**

Young people from historically marginalized groups such as urban youth, youth of color, those living in poverty and English language learners, have had to endure negative stereotypes and social oppression (Ares, 2010). When looking at marginalized youth, we tend to fall into the trap of focusing on what is wrong with them. Most scholarship however, has generally focused on interventions and individuals rather than the conditions youth experience, obscuring the view of supportive community spaces that seek to improve conditions *with* young people (Johnston-Goodstar & Sethi, 2013). This has been critiqued as damage-centered (Tuck, 2009) or deficit-based research (Camarota, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 2012; Solis, 2003); consequently, the role of youth agency is under-theorized, and how urban youth respond to social problems in their communities remains un(der)documented and often invisible (Akom, Camarota, & Ginwright, 2008; Ares, 2010). Adding to the under-theorizing of young people's capacity to create change is the general public view that anything that has to do with "youth" and "media" is often seen as alarming and frequently tied to fears about pornography, pirated music or violent video games (Chavez & Soep, 2005). These fears overshadow urban youth who are engaging with media in powerful and meaningful ways.

Daiute and Fine (2003) suggested that while much has been written about youth violence as deviance, barring a few notable exceptions, little research exists that captures young people's own critical thoughts on, and experiences with, violence. Much of the research in youth development describes the effects of socially toxic conditions on young people (Garbarino, 1999) and seeks to expand choices within these conditions, yet rarely engages young people in analysis of these or shared action to change these conditions (Weis & Fine, 2000; Checkoway & Richards-Shuster, 2004; Johnston-Goodstar & Sethi, 2013; Mahiri & Connor, 2003; Solis, 2003). We also know relatively little about how young people assess their own media projects and even less about how they specifically analyze violence in their communities using media (Soep, 2006; Chasnoff & Wheeler, 2009). We know there are caring adults—youth workers and teachers—who co-create “engaged media spaces” with young people, so what kinds of youth media practice set the stage for critical reflection, production and “different kinds of knowledge and stories to emerge?” (Johnston-Goodstar & Krebs, 2011, p. 29).

In reviewing the current literature on young people's engagement with media, Sefton-Green and Soep (2007) found very little research devoted to community-based sites compared to school-based programs. They suggested learning more about youth media production to inform theories of learning across disciplines and inform policies that affect urban youth. If we want to understand the lives and contexts of urban youth, it is time to “shift the gaze to theory and practice that views youth as resource rich, and that seeks to make sense of how they develop powerful resources and practices in the face of difficult circumstances and contexts” (Ares, 2010, p. 1). Moreover, Velure-Roholt and Baizerman (2003) suggest we do not currently have in our collective imagination many positive

images of youth activists or reformers from which to draw. The media messages urban youth receive often equate success with “white [or other dominant] notions of ethnicity” (Beltran, 2003, p. 79). Urban youth are often portrayed negatively or completely erased in commercial media, rather than seen as positive agents of change (Chavez & Soep, 2005).

Leaders in the fields of social justice youth development and critical media literacy call for research that seeks to understand the resources, strengths, and successes of urban youth (Chavez & Soep, 2005; Ginwright & James, 2002; Akom, A.A., Cammarota, & Ginwright, 2008; Ares, 2010). One response is to better understand how urban youth produce media and use media to tell their own powerful unheard stories. With the advent of affordable video recording devices, young people now have more access to the tools that create media (Goodman, 2005). Media includes mediums like spoken word poetry and mural making/graffiti, both currently popular with young people. Narratives and images created by spoken word and graffiti artists are used to critically examine topics that may have been the purview of more traditional forms of “texts” in the past (Duncan-Andrade, 2006).

The time is ripe for investigating youth, their media-making process, and their work practices that support them as a way to understand how young people are addressing critical social issues. This study focused on the youth in three sites in one Midwestern urban city and included the media forms of spoken word, mural, and video arts. In order to understand how young people address violence in their communities by creating media I have posed the following research questions:

1. How do youth experience violence in their communities?

2. How do youth create media to address violence?
3. What does the process of creating media to address violence mean to youth?
4. What youth work practices support the efforts of young people in the process of creating media to address violence in their respective communities?

### **Scope of the Study**

Three sites were chosen for this study because of their sustained work in critical youth media. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 participants in total over six months consisting of youth-work staff and young filmmakers, mural and spoken word artists addressing issues of violence. The interviews were conducted in three separate urban communities to deeply understand how young people experience and talk about violence, the media process they use to address violence, and what youth-work practices support young people in this endeavor.

### **Dissertation Overview**

This dissertation is organized into six chapters. Chapter One, the Introduction, provides an overview of the components, including the background and context for the study, the significance of the study and research questions to be addressed. Chapter Two is organized around binaries in youth development literature, conceptions of violence and four approaches to media education and youth development. Collectively, this information provides the context for this study. Chapter Three, the Research Design and Methodology, outlines the theoretical construct underlying the study, the researcher's role, data generation methods including site and participant selection, and data analysis as well as discussion of the trustworthiness of findings. Chapter Four and Five present the qualitative data findings and results. Data generated through semi-structured interviews



with staff and youth was analyzed to understand participants' experiences of violence and creating media to address that aggression. Chapter Six provides discussion, conclusions and recommendations. A summary of the purpose, methods, findings, conclusions and significance are offered with special attention given to addressing the implications of this research for relevant audiences. Finally, suggestions for future research on this topic are provided.

## CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review begins with the introduction of several common binaries that have consequences for young people. Following is a brief section on conceptions of violence. Finally, I explore the history of media education and four different approaches to media education with young people. Each approach is related to youth development theories and the changing conception of young person embedded in each framework. I end with a discussion of the literature in critical media literacy and social justice youth development theories that ground this study.

### **Binaries and Youth**

#### **Youth/becoming vs. Adult/being**

The idea of “childhood” as a separate category of human development from “adulthood” did not become popularized until right before the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Child Study societies popped up across Europe and the United States popularized by Darwin, but in reality, based on German embryologist Haekel’s theories of recapitulation—the idea that child development is a step-wise or stage-based progression based on evolution (Walkerdine, 1993, p. 453). Science was emerging as the “dominant mode of cognition” in industrial societies, the “non-political, unbiased arena of knowledge” (Lesko, 2012, p. 26). Young people are often described at this point in time as “coming of age” located “on the threshold” of adulthood, “swelling tree buds” on the verge of eminent, uncontrollable change (Lesko, 1996). Trinh (1989) suggested that ‘coming of age’ language is a way of talking about young people where they seem very important, yet the adult author of this construction holds the privileged position. Baizerman (1998) suggested the emphasis on age leads us to *reification*, where

adolescence is seen as an undisputed ‘natural reality’ where we can expect them to act in predictable ways based on their *age*. Young people become “youth,” a *thing*, rather than complex individuals or real kids in real communities. “That children have certain characteristics, that adults have others, and that it is natural to grow from one to the other, are messages we receive from all forms of mass communication” (Burman, 1994, in Morss 1996). Lesko (1996) addressed this issue by proposing multiple binaries reinforce youth and adults as separate—young people are emotional—adults are rational, young people are uncivilized—adults are civilized, young people are driven by their bodies—adults by their minds. These binaries then cement the superior position of adults and “reify age in a way that appears completely natural” (Lesko, 1996, p. 155). Gordon (2007) added that youth have often been described as “oppositional to adulthood, and in this sense it has been and continues to be an important tool in defining adulthood as much as it defines youth” (p. 634).

Adults are people who *are* and youth are people who *will be* (Castro 1992, in Morss 1996). Lesko (1996) argues we still contend with the legacies of early 20<sup>th</sup> century figures like psychologist and “father of adolescence” G. Stanley Hall when it comes to the separation of young people and adults:

The youth-as-primitive analogy constructed adolescents in the same terms that subject peoples were defined: irrational, conforming, lazy, emotional beings who were totally other from Euro-American adult men. This colonialist legacy positions youth as naturally separated by the gulf of reason and civilization from adults, a difference marked by age (p. 461)

In the recent years, neuroscientists explained that the young person’s brain doesn’t fully develop until much later than 18 years of age, possibly into the late 20s (Than, 2006), once again changing (and adding) to the amount of time young people are *not yet* adults.

Youth development literature often talks unproblematically about youth as a time of “transition” (Wyn & Dwyer, 1999) or the most important *time* to get things ‘right’, i.e. get on the right path to adulthood (Lesko, 2012). Next I explore a related binary of individuals vs. groups.

### **Individuals vs. Groups**

Another common youth-adult binary is the belief that young people prefer to be around people their own age. Youth travel in “packs” or in “flocks,” and in our popular imagination become frightening groups of strangers (Sternheimer, 1996). Using Coleman’s (1961) oft-critiqued study, *The Adolescent Society*, Lesko (1996) indicated that we have long had a ‘confident’ view of young people as peer-oriented. She indicated that this characterization is problematic for several reasons. It assumes young people’s desires to be with others of their peer group is ‘naturally occurring’ rather than related to the age-segregated schools they are placed in during adolescence. We place young people in schools and work with their peers, yet this problematic binary demeans and pathologizes them for hanging out together (Lesko, 2012). Conformity and peer pressure are also associated with drug use, gangs, or high school cliques often implying teens are dangerous groups of *others* (Lesko, 1996; Mahiri & Connor, 2003). Young people described in the literature as peer or group-oriented are placed against the privilege of autonomous, ‘rational,’ individual adults (Lesko, 2012; Wyn & White, 1997).

Kessen (1979, in Morss, 1996) focus on youth as individuals has also been essential to a Western psychology of development. He argued that an individualist ideology has shaped youth development research programs and its “objects for intervention” (p.42). The young person here is outside of culture, community and context,

“seen as a free-standing isolable being who moves through development a self-contained and complete individual” (Kessen, 1979, p. 42). Lesko (1996) also noted that this privileging of individualism has been historically connected with White middle-class males and not necessarily valued similarly by many communities of color. However, the idea of youth as individual doesn’t necessarily garner positive attention or make them synonymous with adults. Young people who fail to conform are seen as “undersocialized or rebellious” (Lesko, 1996, p. 158).

### **Problem-Based vs. Possibility Driven**

Cammarota’s (2011) research placed the majority of literature on urban youth into the binary categories of problems or possibilities. The problem-based lens assumes cultural and/or intellectual deficiencies in young people with attention to “fixing” problems of drug abuse, failure in school and violence (p. 830). The other lens perceives youth as positive asset-cultivators also assuming an “essential nature” which Cammarota revealed still falls under a “pseudo problem-based” framework (p. 831). The possibility-driven framework subtly suggested that young people again are ‘becoming’ or that they have potential if guided correctly. Both viewpoints neglect the often oppressive structures that affect young people nor do they acknowledge the often dynamic and resourceful political agency of young people (Ares, 2010; Akom, Ginwright & Cammarota, 2008; Johnston-Goodstar & Sethi, 2013).

Young people are further divided into *youth in trouble* and *youth as trouble*. The *in trouble* literature generally situates young people as incapable, in grave danger and in need of adult supervision to make it to adulthood successfully (Sternheimer, 2006). They are “at risk,” with psychological rather than social issues at the forefront (Dimitriadis,

2003). The *as trouble* literature focuses on youth-driven moral panics like teen pregnancy, juvenile delinquency and youth violence (Sternheimer, 2006; Fine & Harris, 2002). McRobbie and Thornton (1995) suggested the attitude of adults towards young people being “more unruly and more undisciplined” than the last generation is cyclical and an anxiety that plays out with “startling regularity” (p.561). McRobbie and Thornton (1995) proposed that earlier conceptions like Cohen’s (1980) study on moral panics, which suggested that panics come and go, is outdated. With a 24-hour news cycle we have become accustomed to (and media organizations know they can profit from) showing images of dangerous, reckless, out of control young people (Sternheimer, 2006).

The binary view of young people as either *in* trouble or *as* trouble is deeply embedded in American education and is connected to media. One example would be the instructional classroom films from the 1940s to the 1960s. Social guidance films dubbed “mental hygiene,” were created with the intent to adjust social behavior (Smith, 1999). Teens were expected to learn “proper” social behavior from these ten minute films with names such as *Are You Popular?* and *A Date with Your Family* in the 1940s, *The Snob*, *What About Juvenile Delinquency?* and *How to Be an American* in the 1950s and *Keep off the Grass* and *Highways of Agony* in the late 1960s. Through these films, kids were asked to consider that being “...selfish, arrogant, undemocratic, or delinquent could make them unhappy or, depending on the producer, dead” (Smith, 1999, p. 12). In the world of mental hygiene films seen in classrooms across America for decades, playing by the rules and maintaining the status quo were rewarded with popularity.

### **Loathsome Criminal vs. “Overcoming the Odds”**

In her study on urban youth, Way (1998) proposed that the public has two contrasting images. One is “a seemingly ineradicable stereotype, of pregnant, drug-addicted, violent, fatherless, welfare dependent, poor, black and uneducated...” (p.1). The second stereotyped image is one of a young person who has “risen up against the greatest of odds to become a highly successful entertainer, athlete, doctor or lawyer” (p. 1). Stories across popular culture, news and academia regularly accept these two contrasting images as a more inclusive image of the urban youth experience (Way, 1998). Consequently, the urban youth binary is simply an extension of the general problems and possibilities binary proposed earlier, but with even more confining parameters. Sternheimer (2006) warned that for youth of color, so often “demonized as illiterate, violent, and promiscuous,” the real danger is our own inability to see beyond binaries to a societal level.

Daiute and Fine (2003) contributed to the research in this area when they claimed that it appears to be far easier for educators, policy makers, researchers and youth workers to view violence as an individual problem, instead of “our social responsibility” (p. 2). Naming youth as “loathsome criminal” or “overcoming the odds” obscures the “larger economic, social, and cultural forces that bear on the actions, behaviors, experiences and choices of urban youth” (Ginwright & James, 2002, p.29). By supporting the notion that urban youth make individual choices to become violent or resist violence, we fail to understand the complex choices of urban youth who deal with multiple forms of violence and oppression every day (Powell 2003; Atkinson, 2012). Ultimately in this binary, urban youth are confined to *violent other* (Powell, 2003; Mahiri & Connor, 2003) or an “individualistic up-by-your-bootstraps hyperbole” (Duncan-Andrade, 2009). In this

meritocratic view, individuals are seen as having equal opportunities. Their success or failure is based on their own individual efforts and aspirations (Gosine & James, 2010). Little attention in the literature is given to the vast differences in opportunity for young people depending on geography, family income, race, gender, sexual orientation, immigration status, etc. (Duncan-Andrade, 2009).

The previous binaries and negative perceptions of youth are not only the purview of academic literature, but highly influential in popular culture and media (Yosso, 2002; Kelley, 1997). The consequences for young people are a narrow and often negative public perception confining youth to “always becoming,” “other than adult,” “loathsome criminal,” or “overcoming the odds.” These perceptions have real consequences for marginalized youth who face violence in their communities every day. Rios (2011) claimed that when violence and youth is an issue it’s police who become the “experts” and are the ones interviewed, and youth expertise is “rarely taken into account in public discourse” (p. 9). Ultimately, binaries are reductive and obscure young people’s own critical insights into their own lives and experiences with violence (Way, 1999).

### **Conceptions of Violence**

In their world report on violence, Krug, Mercy, Dahlberg, and Zwi (2002), concluded that defining and categorizing types of violence can be complex. The World Health Organization’s definition of violence provides a concrete starting point. Physical violence is “the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community...” (p. 5). Physical violence however, is not the only salient form of violence for urban youth. Other forms of violence



crucial to the experience of urban youth must be explained in order to fully comprehend the various conceptions of violence (Daiute & Fine, 2003).

## **Structural**

Galtung (1985) described structural violence as “the unintended harm to human beings [and]...usually this takes place as a process, working slowly as the way misery in general, and hunger in particular, erodes and finally kills human beings” (p. 12). Based on Galtung (1985) and Farmer’s (1999) work, the Peace and Justice Studies department at the University of Michigan stated:

Structural violence is often rationalized, making it controversial to label as "violence" and difficult to work against it as such. A concrete example of this: Impoverished Americans are often depicted as being poor "by choice," as a result of their own actions and faults. The structural aspects working against them (such as lack of access to education and basic resources from childhood) is not considered. (“Structural Violence,” 2013)

While physical violence is clearly visible, structural violence is often unseen. Peña (2011) contemplated and wrote that both structural and physical violence are highly correlated. Drawing on Farmer, Nizeye, Stulac, & Keshavjee’s (2006) research, Peña (2011) noted that the structural violence of poverty is the most critical factor associated with negative health outcomes, yet many scholars and practitioners across fields and disciplines are largely unfamiliar with the concept of structural violence and its effects on people. Gilligan (in Hamel, 2006, p.1) who studied prisons in the United States noted, “By ‘structural violence’ I mean the increased rates of death and disability suffered by those who occupy the bottom rungs of society, as contrasted by those who are above them.” Farmer (1996) proposed that any sincere assessment of the current state of human rights must face an analysis of structural violence. Multiple institutionalized “isms” like racism, sexism, classism, ageism etc. converge under structural violence. Structural

violence might be imagined then as socially constructed social injustice. Structural and institutional violence are sometimes conflated, but they represent two different yet interrelated kinds of violence affecting the lives of urban youth.

### **Institutional**

Institutional violence refers to violence perpetrated by institutions such as companies, universities, corporations, or organizations as opposed to individuals as noted above in the definition of structural violence (“Structural Violence”, 2013). These forms of violence emerge in more concrete experiences than the less “seen” forms of structural violence. For example, for many urban youth of color, schools have become institutions where they are viewed as potential criminals (Fine, Freudenberg, Payne, Smith & Wanzer, 2003). Zero tolerance policies have been built on “heightened reliance on discipline, suspension, and expulsion...[forcing] out large and disproportionate numbers of youth of color...” (Fine et. al, 2003, p. 144). Scholarship is just beginning to illustrate the consequences of these policies on student academic achievement and health (Gregory & Cornell, 2009; Herr & Reason, 2003; Noguera, 2003; Ginwright, Cammarota & Noguera, 2005).

### **Emotional**

Emotional violence is often directly linked to institutional violence for urban youth of color (Cammarota & Romero, 2006; Rios 2011). While emotional violence can take many forms, three patterns frequently emerge. The first is titled *aggressing* and includes behaviors such as name-calling, blaming, and threatening. *Denying* is the second form and is recognized through actions such as refusing to listen or communicate. The third type of emotional violence is referred to as *minimizing* and is demonstrated by

trivializing or invalidating someone's experience ("Emotional Abuse," 2013). Emotional violence is experienced when a person is made to feel worthless ("Defining Emotional Violence and Abuse," 2014). Garbarino (2002) suggested that emotional violence as a concept may not be as readily thought of as physical violence, but when connected with words like harassment, bullying, stalking, intimidation, humiliation and fear it is easier to gain a clearer picture. Rios (2011) found in his study that urban youth of color felt shamed, cast aside, silenced and hopeless as a result of what he called "labeling hype" which is evidenced when police, school officials, and community members refer to youth as "at risk," "delinquent" or from a "bad family" (p. 45). He uncovered a "powerful culture of punishment, that shaped the ways in which young people organized themselves" and contributed to their feelings of cumulative hopelessness, a result of multiple negative interactions with individuals representing institutions of social control (Rios, 2011, p. xv).

Violence can be understood in a variety of conceptions. The categories listed in this section are not exhaustive, but provide several important conceptions beyond physical violence. Toward that end, Stanko (2003) suggested that violence can no longer be conceptualized as fixed and broadly understood because it is dependent on context.

### **Media Education History**

This section explores a brief history of media education followed by four different approaches to media education. Each media education approach is related to salient youth development theories and the changing conception of young person embedded in each framework.

During the first half of the 20th century, media education meant “visual education” that used motion pictures to teach English composition in secondary schools. However, film as an educational tool was limited to a few school districts. Problems between business leaders who supported bringing films into classrooms and educators arose over what many educators felt was “slick propaganda” used by the film companies to sell products. In the second half of the 20th century new ideas about media literacy emerged in American universities and around the world. The work became more cross-disciplinary, with debates that spanned approaches to media education between “protecting” children and youth from the “distracting influences” of Hollywood, or helping children and youth develop abilities to understand the “language” of media (Hobbs & Jensen, 2009).

Goodman (2005) believed that, “An important shift in media education took place in the early 1960s that emphasized teaching about media instead of through the media” (p. 13). Similarly, famous cultural critics such as Marshall McLuhan echoed this thinking and called for a need to analyze media-produced messages. This debate continued into the 1970s and 1980s when educators began to acknowledge film and television as new, valid forms of expression and communication. Moreover, they also explored practical ways to promote serious inquiry and analysis in higher education, the family, and in K-12 and afterschool contexts (Hobbs, 2009). Krucsay (2008) concurred and suggested that media literacy education “dissolves the borders between the disciplines in the school and links the school and life worlds of children and young people outside school” (p. 198).

Also in the 1980s, Masterman (1985) suggested that media literacy educators needed to unravel the complex relationships between economics, media, and culture.

Questions about authors and audiences are, “always constrained by economic issues that reproduce and maintain unequal power relationships” (Hobbs & Jensen, 2009, p. 3). Being truly literate meant being able to use the dominant symbol systems of the culture for personal, aesthetic, cultural, social, and political goals (Masterman, 1985). This kind of questioning led the field to be recognized in relation to citizenship and the exercising of civic rights and responsibilities of all people (Hobbs, 1998). In the 1990s the debate over the direction of media literacy came to a head with the question, “should media literacy have a more explicit or ideological agenda?” (Hobbs & Jensen, 2009, p. 4). By the year 2000, members of the media literacy community in the United States essentially split over whether media literacy education should seek support of media industries. That split allowed two groups to emerge. The first was the Alliance Coalition for Media Education (ACME) and the second, the National Association for Media Literacy Education (NAMLE). Hobbs and Jensen (2009) noted that these tensions were an important part of meaningful discourse.

In surveying the history of media literacy education, several defining principles emerge. Much of the important literature about media, youth, and technology is not rooted in traditional educational research, but is often seen in emerging fields such as media and cultural studies. Studies have been sociological and ethnographic in nature often combining quantitative data such as media usage by youth and qualitative studies that describe media interactions and their social, political, or cultural implications (Sefton-Green, 2006). Regardless, the history of media literacy education presents an opportunity for new approaches of investigation that include more current issues and approaches. In the next section four approaches to media education will be outlined

relating youth development theories and conceptions of young people embedded in each approach.

### **Approaches to Media Education and Youth Development**

Media education in the United States commonly falls into one of four approaches—protectionist, media arts, media literacy and critical media literacy (Kellner & Share, 2007b). Each approach will be explored in relation to salient youth development theories and the conception of young person embedded in each framework

#### **Protectionism**

The protectionist approach in media education has an anti-media bias and comes out of a “fear of media and aims to protect or inoculate people against the dangers of media manipulation and addiction” (Kellner & Share, 2007b). This approach may sound familiar and echo the policies of the prevention-based youth development of the 1980s, a “just say no!” media approach. However, the protectionist stance towards young people goes back much farther than the 1980s. Whether conservative or liberal, activists on both sides blame media for a host of social ills such as teen pregnancy, the destruction of family values, rampant consumerism, or materialistic children (Kellner & Share, 2005). Bazalgette (1997) equates the protectionist approach to media education as the pedagogical equivalent of a “tetanus shot” (p. 72). This type of approach relies on a top-down model positing that there is “right way” for young people to understand media representations (Poyntz, 2006). Similarly, Kellner and Share (2007b) noted that although the media can contribute to social problems, protectionist thinking “oversimplifies the complexity of our relationship with media and takes away the potential for empowerment that critical pedagogy and alternative media production offer” (p.6). Buckingham (2008)

believed and claimed that the debates on the impact of media and technology on children and youth have also been tied to fears of social change.

Around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the United States was particularly pre-occupied with nationalism, imperialism, masculinity and economic change (Lesko, 1996). Youth organizers, scientists and popular culture figures alike became deeply concerned about boys making the transition to manhood successfully without falling prey to “delinquent pastimes (such as smoking or idling on street corners) or moral softness related to being surrounded by mothers and female teachers” (Lesko, 1996, p. 458). Psychologist and educator G. Stanley Hall responded with his theory of age-based developmental stages based on a scientific conception of adolescence and the theory of recapitulation. The theory of recapitulation proposed that each individual child’s growth metaphorically repeated the development of humankind “from primitive to savage group and finally to civilized society” (Lesko, 2012, p. 27). Recapitulation theory affirmed “the great chain of being” image so popular at the time. The great chain of being placed European males on top of the chain while women, ‘savage’ tribes, and animals ranked lower in this hierarchical image. (Lesko, 2012). Scientists of the time became hopeful they could reveal important insights into the past and future of the races by studying youth. Adolescence was seen as the decisive time where an individual (and society) could move to superior Western self-hood—rational, moral autonomous and white or stay forever trapped in a ‘savage’ state made up of “mythical others”— the poor, animals, ‘primitives’ women and young people (Lesko, 2012, p. 9). Gould (1977) noted:

[t]he ‘primitive-as-child argument stood second to none in the arsenal of racist arguments supplied by science to justify slavery and imperialism....If adults of other races are like white children, then they must be treated as such—subdued, disciplined, and managed...(p. 117).

In this excerpt one can see the power of a media image, or the great chain of being, mass-produced and combined with a developmentalist theory to support a particular view of young people in “need” of guidance and protection. Powerful media combines images and stories and as Morss (1996) claimed, “The developmental claim might itself be seen as one of the ‘great stories of our culture’” (p. 28).

Hall’s (1904) well-recognized book titled *Adolescence: Its Psychology and its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion and Education* outlines a view of adolescence as a universal stage characterized by “storm and stress.” It has also been highly influential in psychology (Cote & Allahaar, 1995). It’s worth noting the word “its” in the title. Baizerman (1998) noted that this subtle wording reinforced the reification of adolescence or youth *as* a thing. A century later Hall’s views still shape a protectionist stance towards young people. Melton (1991, in Cote & Allahaar, 1995) indicated that, “limitation of adolescents’ rights have been premised on the unsupportable assumptions about adolescents’ incompetence as decision makers, [and] vulnerability...” (p. 7).

Before this time, the concept of ‘the developing child’ did not exist. It took the “mapping of stages, the quantification and production of characterizations themselves” to create an “object of study” (Walkerdine, 1993, p. 453). Our conception of a young person was “produced for particular purposes within specific historical, social and political conditions” (p. 454). These conditions provided a developmentalism imbued with a “pathologization of Otherness.” Though this framework has been contested in youth studies outside the United States (Wyn & White 1996; 2000), critical psychology (Morss,



1996) and cultural studies (Grossberg, 2005) to name a few, many have yet to fully examine or move away from it in much of current youth development theory.

Youth development work and youth policy of the 1950s and 1960s were primarily seen as responses to “expected” adolescent crises (Erickson, 2002; Pittman 1996). Multiple authors have argued that it is problematic to essentialize age and adolescence in this way (Lesko 1996a; James & Jenks, 1996; Morss, 2002, Velure Roholt, Hildreth & Baizerman, 2009; Baizerman 1998; Johnston-Goodstar & Sethi, 2013). According to Baizerman (1998), youth, “do youth,” and perform in different ways depending on complex social conditions and cultures that surround them. Despite significant evidence of young people’s consciousness and leadership in the Civil Rights movement (Levine, 1993; Ginwright & James, 2002) and other social justice related actions (Ladson-Billings, 2012; Cohen, 2005; Gordon, 2007), the vast majority of development research continued to rely heavily on limited and limiting theoretical frameworks. Gordon (2007) recognized that regardless of the development of youth activism in the United States, there has been “notable silence in the sociological literature on adolescence and social movement activism” (p. 635). She concluded that the taken-for-granted assumption that young people are “always developing” or “just practicing” instead of being seen as capable political actors, contributes to our limited notions about young activists (Gordon, 2007, p. 635). Interventions of the 50s and 60s were often focused on reducing juvenile crime, or treating and transforming “poor character” in “troubled youth” through a vast variety of research studies from substance abuse to delinquent and anti-social behavior, to school failure and teen pregnancy (Catalano et al, 2003, p.99).

The 1970s saw a rise in preventative programs designed to address and target adolescent issues before they became problems (Atkinson, 2012). Changing health care regulations in the 1970s contributed to new adolescent mental health definitions making youth seen as ‘diseases to be cured’ (Bazierman & Erickson, 1988). Youth needed to be protected from themselves and the public needed protection from youth. The early 1980s continued these prevention-based “just say no” approaches and the predominant way of seeing young person was as “risk to be reduced” (Erikson, 2002, p. 11). The problem-based/age-stage model of youth development remained intact.

The protectionist media education approach can be seen as related to, or as a result of, the dominant paradigm of development and age (Baars, 1998). Scholars critical of a biological and/or developmental view where young people need to be guided and protected have related concerns to those who critique protectionist media education. In this critique, ‘child’ *and* ‘development’ are questioned as ‘real’ (Lesko1996a; James & Jenks, 1996; Morss, 2002, Walkerdine, 1993; Velure Roholt, Hildreth & Baizerman, 2009; Baizerman 1998; Brown, 1985; Coté & Allahar, 1995; Johnston-Goodstar & Sethi, 2013). Walkerdine (1993, p. 455) wrote:

The very idea of development is not natural and universal, but extremely specific and, in its specificity, occludes other marginalized stories, subsumed as they are within the bigger story. The big story is a European patriarchal story, a story from the centre which describes the periphery in terms of abnormal, difference as deficiency.

If young people in general are placed at the periphery of what is ‘normal,’ then poor urban youth like the participants in this study are certainly placed at the outermost ‘deviant’ fringes. More than 30 years ago Harré (1983, 1986) suggested that the accounts of childhood which rely on a sequence of natural stages unfolding are, “at best a

description of a particular way in which some person is obliged to behave” (in Morss, 1996, p. 33). Brown (1985) concurred that “history as a unilinear, necessary, and irreversible progress has been criticized...” (p. 138). Adolescence is presented as the dominant framework and value-neutral when it is actually “adult truth in the service of adult goals, primarily...it is about interests, power and legitimacy” (Velure-Roholt et. al., p. 144).

Many who question and challenge a developmental view of adolescence take a social constructionist approach described as “the interpersonal processes through which humans create the reality they experience” (Morss, 1996, p. 6), people make sense of their worlds through interaction, language and symbols. A constructionist versus a developmental stage-based world-view may not be a clear cut or transparent debate, particularly because many scholars may not (or choose not to) recognize their world view of young people is anything but natural (Morss, 1996). Gordon (2007) contributed to the debate by claiming while social constructionism has been an important force in troubling essentialized ideas about gender and race, it has been used less frequently or with less success to dismantle the ways in which adolescence is represented in popular discourse, psychological and sociological theorizing. Walkerdine (1993) declared that developmentalism has become a generalizability produced out of a ‘forgetting’ or a “fiction which functions in truth” (p. 466). Whereas, Morss (1996) acknowledged that it is “...employed as if there were no alternative. It may be said to be hegemonic” (p. 50). Supported by psychological theories, a western protectionist view of ‘the child’ has been exported, having extensive global consequences (James & Jenks, 1996). In both a protectionist media education and developmentalist framework, the young person is

passive, in need of guidance and protection, and without agency or voice. A second approach to media education that employs a more positive construction of young person follows.

### **Media Arts Education**

The second approach to teaching media literacy is rooted in media arts education. Young people are taught to appreciate the aesthetic qualities of media while using their own creativity and self-expression in creating media (Kellner & Share, 2007b). In media arts education, learning new skills in graphic design, music and video production can be employed to evoke interest in academic subjects (Peppler, 2010). Kellner and Share (2007b) raised concerns about media arts education such as high school news papers, yearbook clubs, youth journalism or educational television that focuses narrowly on individualistic self-expression over socially conscious analysis. They proposed that these programs teach the technical skills to “merely reproduce hegemonic representations with little awareness of ideological implications or any type of social critique” (Kellner & Share, 2007b, p. 61). The next section explores positive youth development, an approach that is connected to and supports a media literacy education approach to young people.

The 1990s ushered in a new and potentially transformative approach to youth development, but it did not displace the preventative approach. The (PYD) perspective has multiple roots, stemming from academic research, youth workers in the field, to funding initiatives and policies intended to promote the healthy development of youth and families (Lerner, Almerigi, Theokas & Lerner, 2005). Positive Youth Development (PYD) sought to push back against labeling young people as ‘deviant’ (Atkinson, 2012). Slogans such as “problem free is not fully prepared” and “young people grow up in

communities, not programs” emerged in the literature (Pittman, 2002, p. 20). Scholars questioned the idea that publicly funded youth services should focus solely on “fixing” young people. Drawing from Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) person-in-environment perspective among others, scholars in PYD sought to understand the interaction between the young person and their environment as well as cultural factors (Catalano, R., Berglund, L., Ryan, J., Lonczak, H., & Hawkins, D., 1999) and to develop “assets” or positive characteristics among individual youth (Search Institute, 1997; 2007; Benson, 2006). Lerner et. al (2005) suggest this strength-based positive vision of young people is beginning to replace long-held beliefs inspired by G. Stanley Hall about the inevitable “storm and stress” of adolescence with its predictable, obligatory risky or destructive behaviors. However, reading the first lines of Catalano et. al.’s (1999, p. 98) research findings on PYD programs in the United States appeared to evoke a developmentalist view:

With the twentieth century’s discovery of childhood and adolescence as special periods in which children should be given support to learn and develop, American society assumed an increased sense of responsibility for the care of its young people.

This statement demonstrated how youth development scholars may not critique the idea of ‘the child’ and see youthhood as ‘discovered’ rather than constructed. It also evoked an Eriksonian (1956) “identity moratorium” in that adolescence or youth-hood is a special suspended time for “self-discovery” or “experimentation” (Cote & Allahaar, 1994). This way of thinking about young people is not unlike the focus of media arts education as a time for “individualistic self-expression” (Kellner & Share, 2007b). Young people began to be seen as “becoming,” and “learning” not fully able to “be” and take action at present. Critics of a Positive Youth Development approach echo Kellner and Share’s

(2007b) critique of media arts education in that inequalities and structural issues were seldom mentioned, and thus, maintenance, rather than critique of the status quo is the norm (Watts & Flanagan; 2007; Johnston-Goodstar & Sethi, 2013). This kind of learning without critique evokes a Frierean “banking education” (1970, p. 257). The young person in both media arts education and positive youth development was thought of in less protective and vulnerable ways. Both media arts education and positive youth development posit the young person as exploring identity and self-expression, but they were not often thought of as an agent of social change or challenged to think about or criticize cultural societal oppressive structures.

### **Media Literacy Education**

A third approach to media education was tied to the media literacy movement in the United States. According to a definition created by the Alliance for a Media Literate America (AMLA), media literacy education was seen as a series of competencies that include the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and communicate (CML, 2010). This approach is rooted in expanding the notion of literacy to include many forms of media (music, video, internet, etc.) and popular culture, but still working in a print literacy framework (Kellner & Share 2007a). Many educators working in this tradition believe that education should be politically neutral and that their job is to expose students to media content objectively without questioning ideology or power issues (Kellner & Share, 2007a). This mainstream appeal of the media literacy movement may help to give it a broader audience and bring more weight to the study of popular culture, but Kellner and Share (2007b) argue that it “waters down the transformative potential for media

education to become a powerful tool to challenge oppression and strengthen democracy” (p. 62).

In their critique of traditional protectionist and positive youth development practices, Ginwright and James (2002) suggested that youth are often forced to navigate problems like sexism, racism, and homophobia in isolation. These problems are exacerbated by the reality that many traditional youth development programs don't often address the ways in which young people grapple with these issues and can ignore how these issues can hinder their healthy development. (Ginwright & James, 2002, p. 31).

In the media literacy education approach, the young person is building a set of skills and competencies much like a positive youth development approach might see a young person as building assets. Benson and his colleagues at Search Institute developed a list of 40 assets they believed all kids need to succeed regardless of background (Benson, 2006). Some of these assets included:

*Creative Activities* - Young person spends three or more hours per week in lessons or practice in music, theater, or other arts. *Religious Community* young person spends one hour or more per week in activities in a religious institution  
*Time at Home* - Young person is out with friends "with nothing special to do" two or fewer nights per week. *Bonding to School* Young person cares about her or his school. (“40 Developmental Assets for Adolescents”)

Protectionist media education approaches and positive youth development theory share assumptions in these assets about how young people *should* spend their time developing. In both approaches the young person is constructed in a way that he or she must develop a certain set of universal skills and assets to successfully make it to adulthood. Young people are divorced from the specifics of their life, their culture, community, context and structural realities.

## **Critical Media Literacy Education**

The fourth approach to media education embraces ideas from each of the previous approaches, but incorporates critical theory and encourages analysis of gender, race, class, and sexuality (Chavez & Soep; 2007, Duncan-Andrade, 2006; Kellner & Share, 2005; Jocson 2006). A critical media literacy approach perceives young people as active in the process of meaning-making and promotes the production of counter-hegemonic media (Kellner & Share, 2007b). Media analysis is directly linked to production and “learning about the world is directly linked to the possibility of changing it . . . it is a prerequisite for self-representation and autonomous citizenship” (Goodman, 2005, p. 3).

Critical media literacy (CML) is most closely aligned with principles of community youth development (CYD) and social justice youth development (SJYD). CYD practice eschews the idea of youth as deficit or deviant and recognizes them as partners with adults working to strengthen communities (Erickson, 2002; Astroth, Brown, Poore & Timm, 2002; Pittman, 1996; Pittman 2000; Camino & Zeldin, 2002). In Community Youth Development programs young people are seen as having agency, but the overall focus is less concerned with examining the greater structures that contribute to oppression for urban youth. SJYD literature situates youth as “being” in the present, able to take action and affect change in their communities today and generally eschews the binaries that were identified at the beginning of this chapter. Both SJYD and CML approaches consider young people as active agents of change capable of deconstructing the world around them and creating new ways to speak back (challenge) injustice and oppression. Critical media literacy enables young people to evaluate, dissect, and investigate media content and forms and to cultivate skills in analyzing ideologies and the



multiple meanings and messages embedded in media texts. CML focuses on creating media for social change (Kellner & Share, 2005). Teaching critical media literacy is participatory and collaborative where youth and adults share power as they analyze injustice in the world and challenge it together (Kellner & Share, 2005).

Both SJYD and CML draw from a Freirean critical pedagogy (1970) and notion of “praxis” that involves critical awareness, reflection and action. SJYD intentionally focused on the complex lives of urban youth of color who were largely ignored or described in deficient ways in the mainstream youth development literature (Tuck, 2009; Ginwright & James, 2002). In SJYD and CML young people were encouraged to develop critically and contextually—to think about economic, historic and social conditions as well as take action to address these issues in order to build a more equitable society. SJYD examines how urban youth “contest, challenge, respond to, and negotiate the use and misuse of power in their lives” (Ginwright & James, 2002, p. 35). CML similarly asked young people to both analyze and create new media with critical consciousness (Kellner & Share, 2007a). Both SJYD and CML frameworks went beyond the parameters of the individual to explore the forces that shaped the lives and choices of youth and sought empowering notions of collective change (Watts & Guesseous, 2006; Yosso, 2002). Watts & Guesseous (2006) suggested that we needed a better understanding of how social liberation and individual well-being were related. They contended that the standard separation of psychology, sociology, and political science hindered a more holistic view of the human condition and our conceptions of youth development. As a result, this study is based in critical media literacy and social justice youth development, and this theoretical space supports young people to be active change agents in their own

communities. Young people participating in the programs in my study were challenged to examine violence in their communities and reflectively address violence by creating media. Before summarizing, I briefly explore the five core principles foundational to critical media literacy (Kellner & Share, 2005).

**All Media Messages are “Constructed.”** The first core concept of critical media literacy examines the idea that all media messages are socially constructed. Much of the theory undergirding this principle of non-transparency comes from semiotics, the science of signs and how “meanings are socially produced from the structural relations in sign systems” (Kellner & Share, 2005 p. 374). Semiotics is also about challenging the naturalness of messages (Barthes, 1998). Giroux (1997) wrote about “demystifying” what appears ‘natural’ in media messages by looking at their structure and production. This concept is foundational to critical media literacy because it challenges media power by questioning how media messages are presented as ‘natural’ when many decisions about what to include or exclude as ‘reality’ are obscured (Kellner & Share, 2005).

**Media Messages are Constructed Using a Creative Language with its own Rules.** The second core concept of critical media literacy relates to how media messages are constructed using their own rules and creative language. Thoman and Jolls (2004) recognized that most forms of communication whether television shows, newspapers, or horror movies rely on this “‘creative language’: scary music heightens fear, camera close-ups convey intimacy, big headlines signal significance” (p. 25).

This concept also depends on semiotics to show how symbols and signs function. Hammer (2009) believed that ideological codes embedded in media texts often operated at unconscious levels through symbolic forms, and that it was imperative in critical media

pedagogy to identify these codes. Therefore, as Kellner and Share (2005) suggested, media messages are deeply coded constructions, not necessarily “windows on the world” (p. 375). Poyntz (2006) is critical too of an approach that simply teaches young people how to “read” visual codes such as lighting, editing, or camera angles because contemporary media is not deployed without irony. In other words, media already uses self-conscious irony to sell their products, making oppositional readings more difficult.

**Different People Experience the Same Media Message Differently.** The third core concept of critical media literacy is concerned with audience decoding or, in other words, how different people experience the same media message in different ways. Stuart Hall (1980) talked about this process as “encoding/decoding”—the distinction being made between the encoding of texts by the producers of media and the decoding of the same texts by consumers who “produce their own readings and meanings” (Kellner & Share, 2005, p. 375). Thoman, Jolls, and Share (2005; 2007) proposed that each audience member brings to each encounter with media “a unique set of life experiences (age, gender, education, cultural upbringing, etc.) that when applied to the text—or combined with the text—create unique interpretations” (p. 42). For youth, seeing how different people can look at the same messages differently is important to multicultural education and a democracy where citizens embrace multiple perspectives (Kellner & Share 2005).

**Media Have Embedded Values and Points of View.** The fourth core concept foundational to critical media literacy explored the idea that media has embedded values and points of view. To guide students and teachers in their lessons on media literacy, Thoman et al., (2005; 2007) posed the question: “What lifestyles, values and points of view are represented in, or omitted from, this message?” (p. 56). The “omitted” points of

view or representations may gain more of the focus when considering this concept. These authors also proposed that when media producers carelessly use generalizations they “typically reinforce, and therefore affirm, the existing social system” (Thoman et al., 2005, p.56). Questioning representations of class, race, and gender have roots in many other areas of research as well, such as cultural studies, critical pedagogy, and feminist theory. Critical pedagogue Giroux (1997) wrote, “The notion that theory, facts, and inquiry can be objectively determined and used falls prey to a set of values that are both conservative and mystifying in their political orientation” (p. 11). With the highly symbolic content of media messages, a wide range of approaches is necessary for young people to consider the multiple dimensions of a media or cultural text (Kellner & Share 2005).

**Media are Organized to Gain Profit and/or Power.** The final core concept that undergirds critical media literacy centers on the idea that media is organized to gain profit and/or power. Thoman et al., (2005, 2007) argued that many of the world’s media companies were developed to make a profit and still operate today as commercial businesses. Kellner and Share (2005) believed that this concept was important for young people to understand who may see the media’s role as informing or entertaining without the knowledge of the economic, historical, and political structure that supports it. Where there used to be numerous media outlets competing for viewers, there are now just a handful of corporations that control the US media market (Bagdikian, 2004; Jenkins, 2004). McChesney (2004) contended that the concentration of ownership of the media giants creates the possibility of global colonization of culture and is a threat to the diversity of information making media highly undemocratic and non-competitive,

resembling more of a cartel than a marketplace. This core concept emphasizes questioning “who” sent the message and “why” he/she/they sent it. Kellner & Share (2005) believed that knowing the type of corporation that produced the media message or artifact, or knowing the type of system that dominates media will help young people critically interpret and uncover biases in media texts. Overall, the main purpose of critical media literacy, Beach (2007) argued, is to foster in young people active and critical responses to media and production of media as opposed to passive participation.

### **Summary**

Overall, the protectionist, media arts and media literacy approaches and their related youth development frameworks are limited in their ability to adequately attend to the complex conditions impacting the lives of urban youth. Urban youth must contend with daily attacks to their well-being and sense of self (Garbarino, 1995; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002, Duncan-Andrade, 2009) and rarely have opportunity to influence policy that shapes their lives (Akom, 2006). They are often put into binaries, neither of which offers a positive personal image. Traditional youth development programs rarely address the ways in which oppression impedes healthy development (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Ginwright and James, 2002; Watts & Flanagan, 2007). In both Social Justice Youth Development and Critical Media Literacy young people are seen as whole and complex beings embedded in historical, cultural and community contexts. Unlike the first three approaches to media education and youth development, young people are not divorced from reality, but have real life experience, culture, sociopolitical awareness, and critical consciousness. Much of youth media practice with urban youth extends out of a critical media literacy framework and social justice approach to working with young

people (Johnston-Goodstar, Richards-Shuster, & Sethi, 2014). Young people who participate in community-based media practice examine their lived conditions and seek ways to change and resist the injustice they experience. . Giroux (1996) believed and wrote that strategic resistance is “rooted in a deliberate critique of one’s circumstances” (p. 335) and Noguera and Canella (2006) defined it as “conscious action to achieve a common good” (p. 334).

My study is grounded in the theories of critical media literacy and social justice youth development where young people and adults collaborate to examine and address difficult issues through the creation of media. Structural violence in the lived experience of young people is not ignored in favor of a “one size fits all” youth development approach. The young person that grounds this study is an active agent, examining and speaking back to the world and co-creating transformative spaces with youth workers and teachers. Sites were sampled for the attentiveness to social cultural forces and critical media literacy and social justice focus. I excluded possible study sites where self-expression, deterrence, or academic enrichment was the sole focus in favor of inclusion and a focus on young people as active agents. My four research questions—How do youth experience violence in their communities? How do youth create media to address violence? What does the process of creating media to address violence mean to them? What youth work practices support the efforts of young people in the process of creating media to address violence in their respective communities?—are grounded in this intersection of critical media literacy and social justice youth development.

### CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Geertz (1993) wrote about the blurring of genres between the social sciences and humanities beginning in the 1980s, noting that holding on to firm scholarly categories would “block from view what is really going on . . .” (p.7). This blurring has been mirrored by the interweaving of viewpoints or paradigms in the qualitative inquiry field (Lincoln, Lynham & Guba, 2011). Following this trend, this study brings together social constructivism, critical theory, and participatory paradigms. Drawing on these overlapping paradigms, this study is based on the assumption that multiple (often unjustly) constructed realities exist and seeks to highlight injustice and find ways to contend with the violence that urban youth experience. I embrace the view that multiple realities are constructed and researcher and participant co-create understandings (Lincoln, Lynham & Guba, 2011). I also recognize from critical and participatory paradigms that “the real world makes a material difference in terms of race, class and gender” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Friere, 1970; Brown, 1980; 1985). A participatory paradigm informed the way the study was done *with* instead of *on* people (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Ginwright, 2008; Torre & Fine et. al, 2008; Tuck et al, 2008; Cahill, Rios-Moore, & Threatts 2008; Canella, 2008; Morrell, 2008). Participants were part of the planning and analyzing process. In the beginning of the study I met with the directors of each site to talk about the aims and goals of the study. Through conversation we refined ways of talking about the study with participants and interview questions. At each site I showed the director, staff and youth interview questions before I began the interview process, and together we modified the questions according to their suggestions. For example, at the third site I had initially planned to ask participants about what violence looks like or how it is

experienced in their community. After having conversations with the site director, it was suggested that ‘hurt’ might be a better word to elicit responses than violence and so I altered the question upon her suggestion. I tried to seek a greater understanding of the meaning of actions and experience of my participants and sought to generate accounts of meaning from their viewpoints (Fossey et. al, 2002; Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

After the interviews were done and the initial coding process was completed I returned to each site to do what Braun and Clarke (2011) call ‘member reflections.’ These reflections involved participant validation, but were also an opportunity for “sharing and dialoguing about the study’s findings . . . providing opportunities for questions, feedback, affirmation and . . . ‘reflexive elaboration’ . . . rather than *testing* whether the researcher had ‘gotten it right’”(p. 285). It was invaluable to spend time at each site with participants after I had initially created themes talking through descriptions and expanding on conversations we had in the interviews. Using another participatory strategy, together we analyzed the themes that were generated from the interviews, strengthening the trustworthiness of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). The participatory strategies of planning, collaborating, and analyzing data together with participants support the trustworthiness and rich rigor of this study leading to high quality research.

### **Bricolage**

Many metaphors have been constructed by researchers who interweave theoretical positions such as—bricolage (Guba & Lincoln 2000; Dimitriadis, 2005; Kinchloe, McClaren & Steinberg, 2012) jazz (Thomas & Schmidt, 2012), montage (Cook, 1981 in Denzin & Lincoln 2000), portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997), and quilting (hooks, 1990). Not all researchers as *bricoleurs* agree that paradigms can be synthesized



or even moved between; however, as Lincoln and Guba (2000) noted, “there is great potential for interweaving of viewpoints . . . or *bricolage* where borrowing seems useful, richness enhancing, or theoretically heuristic” (p. 197). In summary, I have brought the theoretical paradigms of constructivism (Guba, 1990 in Lincoln et. al, 2011; Guba & Lincoln, 2000) critical theory (Friere, 1970; Bernal, 2002; Giroux, 1982; Brown, 1985; Kilgore, 2001 in Lincoln et. al, 2011, Steinberg, 2011) and participatory research (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Ginwright, 2008; Torre & Fine et. al, 2008; Tuck et al, 2008; Brown, 1985; Cahill, Rios-Moore, & Threatts 2008; Canella, 2008; Morrell, 2008; McIntyre, 2008) together because the lives of urban youth are complex. Drawing on overlapping paradigms supports a richer and fuller understanding of urban youth and their relationship with violence, media and the youth work practices that support them.

### **The Researcher’s Role**

The following provides a brief overview of the researcher’s role and data generation methods, as well as a summary table of the steps I took to conduct this research.

Smith (1999), Tuck (2009), and Braun and Clarke (2013) remind us that many marginalized groups have had negative experiences with research in the past and present. Research in social sciences has had the privilege and power of controlling the naming process while often being outsiders to marginal lives (Lincoln, 1993). Knowing this history compelled me to reflect on the problematic nature of attempting to represent the participants in my study with experiences, histories and contexts different than my own. In conversations with participants I acknowledged that I had come to the table with

power and privilege as a White<sup>1</sup> person from a research institution. I also situated myself as an ally and youth worker with questions about injustice who wants to expose power and privilege that has marginalized young people.

The role of a critical researcher is driven by a sense of responsibility to address injustice in particular lived domains and to not just look at how the world “is” but by how it “could be” (Madison, 2005, p.5). The intention, therefore, is not to preserve the status quo, but to “challenge institutions, regimes of knowledge, and social practices that limit choices, constrain meaning, and denigrate identities and communities” (Madison, 2005, p. 5).

As a White woman conducting research with primarily young people of color I tried to be fully aware, transparent, self-reflective and reflexive about my own power throughout the planning, conducting and analyzing stages of the research process (Fine & Weis, 1996). I reflected on my educational, economic and citizenship status, and English language. Patton (2002) suggested that doing qualitative research reflexively is an asset and requires a balance of understanding and depicting the experiences of participants while being self-analytical and politically aware.

### **Data Generation**

In qualitative research designs this section is often titled data collection methods. However, data for this study was generated through building relationships and dialogue not necessarily conceived of as being “discovered” or “collected” (Thomson, 2013). Research design in qualitative inquiry at its core focuses on the research question, the

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<sup>1</sup> White and Black are capitalized when referring to race in accordance with APA guidelines [http://www.sagepub.com/upm-data/27160\\_APA\\_Style.pdf](http://www.sagepub.com/upm-data/27160_APA_Style.pdf)

purpose of the study and choosing the information and strategies most appropriate to seeking better understanding of the question (Denzin & Lincoln 2000; Le Compte & Priessle, 1993). I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with fifteen youth and staff at three urban community-based sites. Along with conducting interviews, I also employed more informal strategies of generating data such as incidental observations, hanging out and casual conversations (McIntyre, 2000). In qualitative methods, the researcher is often thought of *as* the data collection instrument (Patton 2002; Maxwell 2005) who is able to employ a variety of strategies suited to understand the particular context of the study. The word informal should not indicate that these strategies were not important, but quite the opposite, often being imperative to the process of selecting the research sites and participants. I did a purposeful sample choosing sites that were “information-rich cases” (Patton, 2002, p. 46) to illuminate my four research questions:

1. How do youth experience violence in their communities?
2. How do youth create media to address violence?
3. What does the process of creating media to address violence mean to youth?
4. What youth-work practices support the efforts of young people in the process of creating media to address violence in their respective communities?

By looking for these rich sources without constraining my search to schools or community organizations I was able to connect with a diversity of organizations and participants. Table 1 outlines the steps in this research project.

Table 1. Methods

<b>Steps</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b>1</b>	<b>Establishing Relationships</b>	It took different amounts of time at each site to build rapport and ultimately mutually agree if the

		organization was a good fit for my study. Before the study began, I had numerous conversations with program directors and met some of the staff and participating young people.
<b>2</b>	<b>Site Selection</b>	Sites were chosen based on multiple conversations over time and established relationships.
<b>3</b>	<b>Participant Selection</b>	The director at each site along with staff were integral to helping recruit participants. I posted flyers requesting participants for my study at each site. Program directors and youth work staff members also helped me recruit participants based on their knowledge of young people's media projects they were working on at the time.
<b>4</b>	<b>Interviews</b>	Semi-structured individual interviews, lasting one to one and a half hours, were audio taped and transcribed. Both staff (youth workers) and young people (participants) were interviewed.
<b>5</b>	<b>Incidental Observations</b>	<p>Through hanging out at the different sites I had casual conversations about what goes on there and observed interactions and relationships. These observations happened before, during, and after interviews.</p> <p>Much of the time I spent at each site involved what Maxwell (2005, p. 79) and Madison (2005, p. 17) describe as "hanging out" or "deep hanging out." To understand more fully the lives of participants it was necessary to be part of their lived context not just on the days where I conducted interviews.</p>

<b>6</b>	<b>Data Analysis</b>	Interviews were transcribed and thematically analyzed.
<b>7</b>	<b>Community Reflections</b>	I returned to each of my sites and met with participants to talk about themes and invited them to challenge and extend my analysis.

Next, I show how the methods outlined in the table above were employed at each site followed by a discussion about interview protocol, data analysis and a discussion around the trustworthiness of the results.

### **Site #1 – The Stage, Arts-Based Community Center**

The first site I connected with for this study was an urban arts-based teen program located inside a recreation center. Their goals of this program are based on promoting personal growth, youth development, respectful relationships and diversity. It serves young people of all backgrounds, particularly urban youth of color. Organized over two years by a city Youth Commission, the space is thought of, inspired by, and created for youth. The facility features a dance studio, art room, performance stage, and lounge serving young artists of all styles and disciplines. They offer workshops, classes, special events, materials and support for young artists, as well as an open space to just hang out and create at no cost to participants. The center has offered workshops on rapping, photography, breakdancing, video-production, fiction-writing, spoken-word poetry, all led and facilitated by artist mentors.

At this site I interviewed a diverse cohort of four participants, three young people and the director of youth programs. The three young people were male, ranging in age from 18-22 including two African American young men and one Hmong young man. The director of youth programs was a woman in her mid-twenties who identifies as White.

At this particular site, I was acquainted with *Elizabeth*,<sup>2</sup> the director of youth programs and had told her about my study before I began to search for sites. She offered that young people attending the arts-based site creating spoken word projects around violence might be open to interviews about their work. We started getting to know each other, meeting over coffee (tea for her) and talking about the possibilities of collaborating. After our initial conversation, I visited the site a few weeks later to get a feel for all that goes on at the community center. This was necessary to deeply understand and describe specific contexts and people (Maxwell, 2005; Denzin & Lincoln; Patton 2002, Braun & Clarke, 2013; Fossey, Harvey, McDermott & Davidson, 2002). There were rooms dedicated to art-making, a writing circle, a space to dance, a small stage for “open mic” spoken word nights and Elizabeth’s office—a friendly and cluttered art room with fish tanks bubbling in the background.

Through my conversations with Elizabeth it became clear that this arts-based community center could be a rich resource for this study. Elizabeth, like each of the directors of the three sites selected for this study, could be considered a “gatekeeper” or person who can facilitate access to the organization and participants (Shenton, 2004). Elizabeth’s support, cooperation and enthusiasm for the study were integral to connecting with the participants that are discussed in the following section.

After Elizabeth agreed to support the study and to be interviewed, she sent several young people messages by email, Facebook, or text depending on their preferred method, something she knew offhand because she knew each of them well. She also posted flyers that I had created to explain the study and to generate interest. Within the week, several

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<sup>2</sup> Pseudonyms are used for names and sites

young people responded that they would be willing to participate in an interview, and Elizabeth connected us through email. After this initial contact I spent time talking with each potential participant about the purpose of the study, about informed consent and compensation, and explained that the interviews would be informal and conversational. Ultimately, three spoken word artists and the director of youth programs were interviewed from this site.

### **Site #2 – Northridge Community Center**

The second site for this study was located in a historically African American urban neighborhood. This neighborhood community center serves as a place where people of all ages come together to experience culturally enriching programs, access resources, and work towards building a better and safer neighborhood. They offer a wide variety of programs for young people focusing on academic enrichment; parent and family involvement; civic engagement and social action. In addition, they offer a Social Action program for youth where young people identify issues of concern to them and come up with creative ways to address those issues together through service-learning projects. Part of the ethos of the community center is that social action projects help youth realize their personal power to affect change, creating a lasting positive impact. This center also offers a college readiness program where youth and staff work together to develop plans to achieve goals like delaying parenthood, resisting drugs, contributing to the community and going to college. The community center is not dedicated in particular to media-making or arts-based endeavors like the previous site. Recently however, a group of young people in the Social Action group wanted to explore issues of violence including racism, poverty and war through creating a film. They were supported

by youth staff and over two years completed a documentary that has been shown around the country. Observing this documentary and hearing about the impact it had on the young people who made it became the inspiration for this study.

Along with constructivist and participatory strategies I used a critical paradigm to think more deeply about the questions these young people were raising with the film. This paradigm assumes we function in a world where there is a struggle for power leading to interactions of privilege and oppression that can be based on race or ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, class, mental or physical abilities or sexual preference (Bernal, 2002; Giroux, 1982; Brown, 1985; Kilgore, 2001 in Lincoln et. al, 2011). Research based on critical theory is often conducted with or on behalf of marginalized populations; it is by and large collaborative and seeks solutions to change unfair conditions (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). The methodology or principles of inquiry are based in dialogic/dialectical methods with the aim of transformation and inspiring oppressed people to examine and collectively change their lives in order to change policy and practice (Fay, 1987 in Lincoln et. al, 2011; Brown, 1985). I drew on these theories knowing the young people and youth staff at this site engaged in critical examination of their community and the structures of violence that effect their everyday lives in order to transform their community.

At this site, I interviewed four participants, three young people and the director of youth programs. The three young people were female, ranging in age from 16-20; the group included one young woman who identified as multiracial, one young woman who identified as Black and one young woman who identified as East African. The director of youth programs is a woman in her early thirties who identifies as multiracial.



After several casual conversations, I sent my first official email to the director of youth programs asking if it was possible to have a conversation about doing interviews with youth working on projects at the community center. I received a quick message back: "Stop by anytime on a Saturday morning." I arrived for the first time on a hot summer morning and walked up the outside steps past a wrought iron bench, its back fashioned into a cityscape, the seat made of colorful mosaic tiles. I brought a latte for Lila the Youth Director at the community center. When I walked in, a group of young people, Lila and two graffiti artists from the community were meeting to discuss the mural project that the youth wanted to do. They had colorful stencils spread out and many were looking up different graffiti styles and artists on their phones. The theme of the mural was about speaking back to violence in their neighborhood. They wanted it to be a powerful visual symbol to get community members to stop and think about violence. One of the young women there was Shauna, who had been part of the team who made the film about violence. Lila briefly introduced us by saying: "Hey! Shauna! This is Jenna, the lady I was talking about from the U." Shauna came and sat by me and we struck up a conversation mainly about her goals and future aspirations. She was excited about the interview so we decided to talk more very soon.

I visited several more times over the summer to hang out and chat with whomever happened to stop by Lila's office, a cozy space with couches and chairs, youth artwork on the walls and hip hop playing on the stereo. It was a rare moment when a community member or young person wasn't there to sit on one of the comfy couches and tell Lila about his or her day.

Similar to building a relationship with Elizabeth at the first site, Lila and I spent time talking about the study and how the community center could be a fruitful place to conduct interviews with young people that had worked on the film and murals. With Lila's eager support of the topic and strong relationships with the youth at the community center, we determined over time that this would be the second site for the study.

Lila agreed to post flyers I had created for the study in her office and around the community center. She then set up a meeting with several potential participants who had done work around media and violence. Similar to the first site, relying on staff knowledge of the young people at the center was enormously helpful. I talked with the three young women about the purpose of the study, informed consent and compensation. In total, three young women who worked on film and mural projects as well as the director of youth programs were interviewed at this site.

### **Site #3 – Educación Artística, Latin@ High School and Community Youth Development Center**

The final site for this study was a Latin@<sup>3</sup> focused high school chartered by a local liberal arts college. Former traditional urban high school teachers along with artists designed the school. Emphasis is on using an inter-disciplinary arts integrated approach to teaching and learning. This charter school has a diverse group of 100 students and 15 staff. Their goal is to graduate creative, culturally-grounded students who excel in bilingual and bi-cultural environments and are prepared for college, employment and community leadership. The teaching and learning of art and Latino culture is at the center

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<sup>3</sup> The term *Latin@* is used to textually shorten writing "*latina and latino*."

of the school's mission. They aim to prepare students to think critically, express themselves clearly, and see current and historical events from multiple perspectives.

Although this high school is a center for Latin@ culture, arts and education, students and families of all cultures are welcome and learn from each other through school curriculum, cultural celebrations, parent meetings and other activities. In addition, students spend time in the community doing internships, community service and creating public art.

In 2009, an after-school program was created at this high school by a group of youth leaders, its mission to expand youth voice in the after school and daytime programming. Within three years it grew into a program emphasizing youth leadership, academics, and community development during out of school hours. They have offered workshops in academic support, lyric and beat making/rapping, creative writing, Aztec dance, art/mural-making and more.

Seven participants were interviewed at this site; the director, three youth work staff, and three young people. Two of the three young people were male, age 18, one identified as Latino and one as White. The third young person was female, age 16 and identified as Latina. Two staff members were male, one in his early twenties one in his early thirties, both identified as Latino. The third staff member was female, late twenties and identified as Latina. The director was female and identified as Latina or Mexican

Unlike the first two sites I did not know the director of the school previously. In speaking to a colleague about my study early in the planning process he suggested I look into this particular Latin@ high school because of their work around violence and mural-making. I was still considering places to conduct my research and was intrigued by the

work being done by youth at the school. After being initially connected over email through a mutual acquaintance, I contacted Maria, the director of the school, directly to discuss my study. The first time I met with Maria I took a latte (and thereafter her favorite, a cappuccino).

We began our conversation talking about the history of the school. She expressed skepticism about having research conducted at the school because of some bad previous experiences. I was instantly reminded of Tuck (2009) and Smith's (1999) warnings about the many negative effects of research in past and present marginalized communities. We talked for an hour about the school and her concerns around research I was expecting the conversation to end, instead Maria said, "Now tell me about your study."

I kept it short. I told her I was coming from a research standpoint that assumes young people can, and do, create change, and that their voices matter and should be more central in research literature (Duncan-Andrade, 2006). I explained that I hoped my study would shed light on how urban youth address violence in their communities through creating media, and I had heard that students were doing this work at the school. There was a long pause.

"Well Miss Jenna. I think I'm gonna go with your study."

"Really?"

"Yes, really let's keep talking."

We kept talking, about every other week usually over a latte and a cappuccino. It became clear to me that this informal "deep hanging out" time (Madison, 2005, p. 17) was not to be rushed. The first three or four times we met in the conference room across the table from each other. After that, I was told to just go back to Maria's office where

she often had pumpkin bread or muffins to share with our coffees. Sometimes we just talked about our own kids and other times about Maria's childhood and school experiences, sitting side by side at her computer googling images of her childhood town outside of Mexico City. During this time, Maria worked to get board approval of the study.

With Maria's support as an ultimate 'gatekeeper' (Shenton, 2004), the school board approved my study. We posted flyers to create interest and explain the study and began to brainstorm potential youth and staff participants. This urban community-based Latin@ high school became the third and final site for my research.

At both the previous sites I interviewed the director of youth programs first to establish background, history and context about the program and participants. I wanted to establish a participatory way of working together, a process McIntyre (2000) described as political, collaborative, action-oriented and practical where content and method are co-created by researcher and participants and indigenous knowledge is highly valued. I also formally interviewed Maria first, although our interview stretched over four separate occasions overlapping with several of the youth and staff I would interview. When I arrived for the first interview, Maria called in the Parent and Community Outreach Director Ramon and asked if he could think of any students that were 18 who might be interested in being interviewed about their creative work. He said that Carlos, who was in the library and had been working on some poetry pieces, might be interested. Ramon went to ask Carlos if he would be interested to do an interview. Within a few minutes he returned, and I was unexpectedly walking down the hallway to do my first interview with a young person, five months after Maria and I had our first conversation. I had my

questions prepared and a consent form. Carlos and I chatted for a while about the purpose of the study and his creative work, after which he agreed to being interviewed. I walked him through the consent form, and we agreed to conduct the interview at a quiet table in the library.

Similar to the previous sites I again relied on the director and the staff's personal knowledge of young people and their work at the school to select participants. Not all the participants were chosen simultaneously, but as relationships were established over time participants—both staff and young people—agreed to be interviewed. In total, I interviewed seven participants at this site.

### **Interviews**

“If you want to know how people understand their world and their lives, why not talk to them?” (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009, p. xvii).

The purpose of interviewing is to gain understanding of another person's perspective, to hear their story (Patton, 2002). To paint a detailed depiction of participants' experiences I conducted individual interviews, lasting between sixty to ninety minutes. These interviews were semi-structured and audio taped. Separate interview guides were created for youth and staff with similar themes (see Appendix). The semi-structured approach allowed for a prepared guide, but flexibility in how questions were worded and the order they were asked. I could be responsive to the participant's developing account, creating opportunities to discuss important issues that may have been unanticipated (Braun & Clarke, 2011).

Rubin and Rubin (1995) suggested the goal of interviewing is for participants to talk about their experiences in their own language and concepts around a topic. I reflected

on Kvale and Brinkman's (2009) caution that the interview structure has asymmetrical power relations particularly because it *is* the researcher who determines the questions and begins and ends the interview. Mishler (1986) claimed that researchers need to ask themselves, "Whose interests are served by the asymmetry of power between interviewer and respondent?" (p.118). The time spent with participants before interviews began were important for me to be self-reflexive by explaining my own background and interest in the topic and acknowledging the uneven power dynamic of the interview format. I encouraged interviewees to stop me at any time if I didn't ask something clearly, and I often took pauses in the interviews to gain clarity about what was said i.e. "Here's what I'm hearing; is this what you meant? Would you like to add to these thoughts?" In this way I tried to treat the interviews as a dialogical partnership with the goal of creating meaning together and viewing participants with "agency, history, and [their] own idiosyncratic command of a story" (Madison, 2005, p. 25).

Questions were organized around themes beginning with opening questions or "tour" questions (Spradley, 1979) to build rapport and create context—"Tell me about a typical day here" moving gradually towards questions directly connected to my research questions—"Talk about the process of creating your media project." I ended each interview with open-ended closing questions—"Is there anything you would like to talk about that we haven't covered?" or "Do you have any final thoughts on some of the topics we've covered?" Some of the richest data was generated in these final moments of the interviews.

Interviews were conducted mainly at each of the three sites to make participants comfortable. However, several of the participants from the art-based community center

chose the local coffee shop and one participant asked me to meet him at his college campus center because he needed to attend class following our interview. Having the participants choose the location in these instances was helpful to building rapport during the interviews (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009).

### **Data Analysis**

Metaphors abound for the process of analyzing data: transformation and sense-making (Patton, 2002), art (Stake, 1995), storytelling (Van Maanen, 1988), portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997), and dance (Janesick, 1994). In the process of analyzing data, qualitative researchers are tasked with an exciting and difficult challenge: sifting through large amounts of raw data, identifying significant themes and communicating what the data reveal (Patton, 2012). Miles and Huberman (1984) noted that we have very few ways in qualitative analysis that are agreed upon in terms of drawing conclusions and confirming their sturdiness. As I embarked on the process of analyzing the data for this study I took Patton's (2002) words to heart, "Do your very best with your full intellect to fairly represent the data and communicate what the data reveal given the purpose of the study"(p. 433).

Along with this helpful advice I considered how I might interpret the data in ways that connect with constructivist, critical and participatory paradigms. "When we turn back, we are accountable for our own research paradigms, our own positions of authority, and our own moral responsibility relative to representation and interpretation" (Madison, 2005, p.7). In other words, interpreting data in ways that connect with our theoretical paradigms is as significant as how we go about generating the data in the first place.



## **Thematic Analysis**

Forms of thematic coding and analysis have been common in the social sciences for over 30 years; however, recently Braun and Clarke (2013) have ‘named and claimed’ thematic analysis (p. 178) as a distinct method with a clearly outlined set of procedures using a six-phase process. This method is unique in that it provides a way of doing analysis, but does not prescribe methods of data collection or specific theoretical positions. These authors suggest good qualitative analysis begins with an ‘analytic sensibility’ rather than following rules, meaning the researcher develops skill in reading/interpreting data through their particular theoretical lens and is able to create insights into the meaning of the data noticing patterns linked to these broader theoretical concerns (Braun & Clarke, 2013, pp.203-204). Thematic Analysis (TA) moves through six phases of analysis 1) Reading and Familiarization 2) Complete Coding 3) Searching for Themes 4) Reviewing Themes (thematic mapping) 5) Defining and Naming Themes and 6) Finalizing Analysis.

The first step of TA begins after interviews are fully transcribed from audio recording to written text. In the reading and familiarization stage, the aim is to become intimately familiar with the dataset with the intent of gaining overall impressions and to begin keeping a record of ‘noticings.’ This phase is not about systematic engagement with the data but rather a more ‘messy’ assemblage of ideas. However, this time is not passive, because the researcher is still reading “actively, analytically and critically” (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 205).

Complete coding follows reading and familiarization and requires distinguishing all aspects of the data that relate to the research questions in the entire dataset. The

authors suggest thinking of codes as the individual bricks that build the ‘thematic walls’ with each brick providing a label for a feature of the data that is a potentially relevant source for answering the research question(s). Again, theoretical frameworks and prior knowledge allow researchers to ‘see’ particular things in the data. “Coding is an organic and evolving process . . . ultimately you want a comprehensive set of codes that differentiates between different concepts, issues, and ideas in the data, which has been consistently applied to the dataset” (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 211).

In phase three of analysis, moving from coded data to broader patterns requires combining codes to create themes. Braun and Clarke (2013) suggested that a theme depicts something salient about the data in relationship to the research question and shows a level of meaning within the dataset. Here they advocate that themes do not “emerge” or are not “discovered” from the data which reveals a passive process of identifying something that already exists; rather the researcher creatively and actively “sculpts” the data (p. 225). The task in this phase requires becoming selective to be able to tell a particular story that answers the research question.

After generating potential themes, the fourth phase of analysis is one of review and ‘quality control’ wherein the researcher decides if these potential themes fit well with the data that has been coded. Braun and Clarke (2013) suggest a helpful way to look at it is to create a ‘thematic map’ to show relationships between the themes and subthemes. This process also includes letting go of themes if they do not work. They advise ending this process not with the goal of finding the “perfect fit” but with identifying a set of distinct and coherent set of themes that tell the overall story of the data.

The fifth stage of analysis centers on clearly defining the themes. Before writing can begin, Braun and Clarke (2011) suggest focusing the boundaries and distilling each theme down to a few sentences. Themes should be considered for their scope, purpose and focus in preparation for written analysis.

The last phase of TA is developing the final analysis. This phase requires selecting excerpts from the data to vividly illustrate features of each theme. Braun and Clarke (2011) suggest there are two broad styles in TA: *descriptive*, which aims to closely ‘tell the story’ of the data, and *interpretative*, which focuses more on latent meanings providing a more detailed analysis of particular extracts. Descriptive and interpretative approaches can be combined, usually starting with descriptive beginnings and moving into interpretive conclusions.

Analysis needs to be driven by the question, “So what?” The two important broader aspects of this final phase are to develop analysis beyond summarizing the content of data and to connect with existing scholarly literature to demonstrate how the analysis “contributes to, develops further, or challenges what we already know . . .” (Braun & Clarke, 2011, p. 257). I employed TA as a systematic process to analyze the data and to strive towards generating appropriate findings for this study. Qualitative research is deemed appropriate or often judged based on the trustworthiness of conclusions. The following section is dedicated to a discussion of trustworthiness of quality.

### **Trustworthiness**

Lincoln and Guba (1986) believed that qualitative research should be judged upon different standards using ‘trustworthiness’ as the overarching framework for quality.

Qualitative research quality is judged according to its credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. These criteria take the place of validity, external validity, reliability and objectivity (Patton, 2002). Since then, qualitative researchers working in different paradigms have created multiple criteria for judging quality from validity to “transgressive validity” or the *crystalline*, a multi-dimensional way to look at understanding instead of the two-dimensional triangle (Richardson, 1993). Tracy (2010) wrote that the variety of concepts standing in contrast to the relative consensus in the quantitative community shows the “creative complexity of the qualitative methodological landscape” (p. 837). Braun and Clarke (2013) recommended qualitative research should be assessed in relation to the theoretical assumptions taken up by the author. However, new trans-theoretical criteria are being offered up by Yardley (2008) and Tracy (2010). In the next section I will address Tracy’s (2010) trans-theoretical criteria for assessing qualitative research in relation to this study.

Tracy (2010), a teacher of qualitative methods and a self-described critical, interpretive and poststructuralist researcher created a new set of quality criteria for qualitative researchers across paradigms. She began by considering Lincoln and Guba’s (2005) question(s): are these findings sufficiently authentic to act on their implications, and would I feel secure enough about these findings to construct social policy or legislation? Tracy (2010) created this “parsimonious pedagogical tool” for assessing qualitative research and creating space for “dialogue, imagination, growth and improvisation” (p. 837). She imagined the following criteria not as a counter to the celebration of paradigm specific practices or a return to a standard of positivist criteria, but a new structure for qualitative quality “while still celebrating the complex differences

amongst various paradigms” (Tracy, 2010, p. 839). This flexible structure was helpful in assessing the lucidity of my own theoretically overlapping paradigms and methods. I specifically parse out the criteria of rich rigor, sincerity, credibility, ethics and meaningful coherence as quality criteria to guide my study.

### **Rich Rigor**

Weick (2007, cited in Tracy, 2010) used the concept of “requisite variety” borrowed from cybernetics to suggest richness is generated through an array of theoretical constructs, data sources, contexts and samples to be “at least as complex, flexible and multifaceted as the phenomena being studied” (p.841). Rich rigor is demonstrated in the careful attention to and practice of generating data from creating meaningful interview questions to transparently guiding the reader through the analysis process (Tracy, 2010). From the process of selecting diverse sites and participants to co-constructing thoughtful interview questions, I tried to keep in mind ways to generate and analyze data that reflected the complex experience of urban youth.

### **Sincerity**

Rather than referring to a single reality or truth Tracy (2010) used the term sincerity to reflect a connection with authenticity and genuineness, which she noted could be achieved by self-reflection, vulnerability, honesty and transparency on the part of the researcher. As I noted earlier in the researcher’s role, I had conversations with participants about my position as a researcher and the inherent power of that role as well as my advocacy for social justice-oriented ways of working with young people. I acknowledged that as a white woman interviewing mainly young people of color, a pre-existing hierarchical environment, thus building sincere relationships and getting to know

participants was critical. Explicitly talking about power and my background was necessary. Even though the subject of this study was serious there were moments in the interviews where we laughed, cried, and identified with one another. This strengthened rather than detracted from the study. Tracy (2010) advocated that qualitative researchers needed to be their authentic selves and show kindness, self-deprecating humor, self-awareness and empathy in their connections with participants and potential audiences.

### **Credibility**

Tracy (2010) advised that credibility could be achieved by thoroughly employing the qualitative practices of thick description, triangulation or crystallization, and multivocality. Practicing thick description in qualitative research requires detailed demonstration of meanings situated within context and culture (Geertz, 1973). It necessitates “showing” concrete details (Tracy, 2010, p. 843). Combined with interviews, informally hanging out and making incidental observations at each of the research sites assisted me in being able to create more in-depth thick descriptions.

The practice of triangulation in qualitative research assumes that using two or more sources of data or types of data, theoretical frameworks, or researchers who arrive at the same conclusions create more credible findings (Denzin, 1978). The practice assumes a singular valid truth or reality can be known. As an alternative to the fixed two dimensional shape of the triangle Richardson (2000) envisioned the idea of the crystal:

Crystals grow, change, alter, but are not amorphous. Crystals are prisms that reflect externalities *and* refract within themselves, creating different colors, patterns, and arrays, casting off in different directions. What we see depends upon our angle of repose...crystallization, without losing structure, deconstructs the traditional idea of ‘validity’ (we feel how there is no single truth, we see how texts validate themselves), and crystallization provides us with a deepened, complex, thoroughly partial,

understanding of the topic. Paradoxically, we know more and doubt what we know (p. 934).

Crystallization, rather than triangulation, is a helpful metaphor and practice for reflecting on the complex lives of urban youth. I employed informal methods along with formal interviews and drew from a variety of theoretical paradigms attempting to both gain a deeper, yet still ‘thoroughly partial’ understanding of how urban youth create media to address violence in their communities.

Multivocality ties to the idea of crystallization, using multiple voices in the analysis and research report. “Multivocality emerges, in part, from the *verstehen* practice of analyzing social action from the participants’ point of view” (Tracy, 2010, p. 844). Multivocality implies researchers are aware of cultural differences between participants and themselves and can also be achieved through participatory approaches. Finally, this practice of multivocality can include member reflections (discussed previously in the researcher’s role) which give participants space to voice reflections and elaborations enhancing the credibility of the analysis (Tracy, 2010).

## **Ethics**

The previous practices are part of ethical research as are procedural, situational and relational ethics (Tracy, 2010). Procedural ethics are actions dictated by larger governing institutions or bodies such as the Institutional Review Board (IRB), including negotiating informed consent, ensuring confidentiality, and avoiding deception and harm. To attend to these procedural ethics I thoroughly guided participants through the consent process. I aimed to make the informed consent process as Patton (2002) noted, “simple, straightforward and understandable” (p. 407). I also considered Tuck (2009) and Smith

(1999) participatory ethics of doing research with, instead of, on people. Though the interviews centered on questions about the lived-experience of urban youth which includes violence, it is still a difficult subject. Care was taken to remind participants that they could discontinue the interview at any time with no negative repercussions from the university or their own organization.

Situational ethics move beyond IRB guidelines to taking special care in assessing ethical behavior in different circumstances and contexts. Connected with self-reflexivity, situational ethics implore the researcher to consider his/her decisions in any given context. Each site I conducted research had different histories, complexities and diversity of participants requiring me to be self-reflective about my ethical decisions in the context of each place and the relationships that I had built there.

Ellis (2007) explained that a set of relational ethics “recognizes and values mutual respect, dignity, and connectedness between the researcher and researched, and between researchers and the communities in which they live and work” (p. 4)

At each of the three research sites, I endeavored to build respectful and reciprocal relationships. When I was invited with my family to attend community events at my research sites, we went and celebrated, eating, talking and laughing with community members. When one of the participants asked for my help in planning a leadership retreat, I met with a youth team member to collaboratively strategize ideas. These events and meetings were not about collecting research, but building and maintaining ethical, respectful and reciprocal relationships. I tried to follow the model Tracy (2010) advocated of keeping promises, following a moral compass and being concerned with human flourishing (p. 847).



## **Meaningful Coherence**

The final criteria for quality discussed in this section relates to how the overall study ‘hangs together.’ Tracy (2010) believed that meaningfully coherent research achieves its stated purpose, uses methods that partner well with theoretical paradigms, and thoughtfully interconnects scholarly literature with findings and methods (p. 848). Meaningful coherence doesn’t mean a study cannot make use of multiple concepts from different paradigms. Tracy (2010) wrote:

Indeed, some studies are creative or groundbreaking precisely because they borrow from various theories or frameworks to create something new...studies that are meaningfully coherent eloquently interconnect their research design, data collection, and analysis with their theoretical framework and situational goals (p. 848).

In order to better understand the complex lives of urban youth, how they create media to address violence and what practices support them, I sought to connect theory, method and analysis that would support the overall trustworthiness of this study.

## CHAPTER 4. RESULTS

### VIOLENCE AND YOUTH MEDIA

*“And that’s what creates the drug dealers and the gang bangers, because people don’t believe in them. And if people don’t believe in them, how can they believe in themselves? I think that’s why most kids are out on the streets because there’s no place for them to learn or be creative.”*

Months after I had interviewed young people at the Northridge Community center I came back to look at the completed mural they had created with the youth coordinator Lila. The once sun-baked concrete we had stood on watching young people bike around the neighborhood was now covered with patches of ice. We walked precariously through deep snow to the back of the playing field at Northridge where the mural was painted on a small garage. Over the time I had been conducting interviews at Northridge, this mural was being created to honor young people that had been killed by violence in the community. A large rendering of Tupac Shakur (1999) with the words “The rose that grew from concrete” faces the busy street. A giant red rose bursts out of the cracks drawn in the wall. The side facing the community center displayed elaborate super heroes painted against the sky line of the city with the words “Fight for Freedom” emblazoned across the top. The final side only visible from the alley depicts friends and siblings who have been killed by gun violence as ‘hip hop angels’, singing, rapping and working a turn table in the sky. Several names of young people who have been killed are stenciled on a set of ascending steps. Several steps are left blank under these names. The murals begin a dialogue and serve as reminders of the violence young people face every day in this community.

Young people at Educación Artística and The Stage also experienced violence in their communities and created media projects to address violence in multiple ways. The first part of this chapter explores how young people and youth workers talk about and experienced violence in their communities. Their experience of violence goes beyond the physical and includes other forms—emotional, structural and institutional. The second part of this chapter explores the process of how young people responded to violence through media production.

### **Violence Is Normal, but It Shouldn't Be**

*“It’s starting to become this norm, like people are accepting it. People are like, oh our friends are gonna die and that’s part of life. Like, no, it’s not part of life. People die, but they don’t die due to violence so frequently. It’s not normal.”*

Young people talked about how many of their friends “didn’t expect to live long” because of the consistent, ongoing physical violence they experienced. They did not expect the situation to ever change: “This is the way things are.” Violence is normal. Young people and youth workers most frequently talked about normal or every day violence as gang and gun related as well as aggression and self-injurious behaviors.

### **Gangs and Guns**

Gang and gun violence are often conflated in the popular imagination and in public discourse around urban youth, but were spoken about very differently by youth in this study. Young people talked about gun violence as extremely personal and devastating. However, they talked about gang violence as background noise and not always something that ruins lives.

Most young people talked about gangs in similar ways to Ayaan: “There’s a lot of crazy things that going on here like, the simple things like gang violence and shit like

that.” Gang violence was often dropped into a list of experiences with violence in the community. There are multiple ways violence is experienced in the community, but gang violence is not necessarily central, but seen as “shit” to deal with. Theo, a young person attending Educación Artística high School contemplated gangs being a distraction to education for some, but not all. He explained:

I’d say gangs are a big part of why people don’t graduate because they get wrapped up in the atmosphere and then they fall behind and it’s hard to catch up so then it becomes not worth it to try and catch up. But there are also gang members that come to school and get their work done too. I’ve see both.

Shauna, a young person who volunteered at Northridge Community Center considered how gangs have potential to be role models to their communities.

Is that not what they been doing with gangs? Trying to build a community? A sense of community that has not led them to positive things because they haven’t been organized correctly. But if we got them the right way, those gangs could be organizations, non-profits, careers.

Youth acknowledged the presence of gangs in their neighborhoods and distinguished between gangs and cliques. What outsiders often describe as gangs, insiders described as cliques. Antoine, a former gang member, talked about what he currently saw in his neighborhood:

This clique-banging thing, which is to me, total nonsense . . . it’s basically wannabe gang bangers that don’t really wanna be in gangs but still want to have their little cliques so it’s like separated from them but it’s still like the equal amount of nonsense. Like I call it kind of the hypocritical way cuz I used to be in a gang, like but I got out of that and I’m not that person anymore.

This young person talked about clique-bangin’ with frustration and annoyance. The clique is compared to a gang, but as *less* than, or “wannabe.” What Antoine makes clear is that cliques are not gangs. Cliques often refer to lifestyles or trends, something young people do for a short period of time that imitates gangs but does not raise to the level of

social deviance often attached to gangs. Antoine suggests that the experience of being in a real gang and having to get out was more difficult. Cliques, on the other hand, are made up of *other* kids caught up in something that is “nonsense.”

Gang violence was described as annoying every day background noise in the community, “shit to deal with,” and potentially also provided positive support to members. Gun violence however, was talked about as deeply personal. Most young people interviewed had lost an immediate family member or close friend to gun violence. It wasn’t talked about in terms of something “out there” rather, it was “*my* brother” or “*my* sister.” Nikki who had lost her boyfriend to gun violence talked about it as two different cautionary tales:

If you a girl and you talking and you all up in people’s business running back and forth. A dude don’t care, he will shoot you. You will die. He don’t care. You can’t just go running your mouth cuz it’s gonna get real.

She also warned:

You still could just end up dead somewhere cuz a bullet ain’t got no name on it. You could be walking and someone could just stick you up, you know? And you don’t even know them. They don’t have to be against you, they could just do it to try and do it. I done see it.

Gun violence is both preventable and inevitable. In talking with young people, they realize that some gun violence is related to how people interact. To avoid the violence, young people learn who to avoid in the neighborhood. The second warning talks about how gun violence is often random. If you live in this neighborhood, it is something that can happen to you regardless of how you behave, who you hang with, or what you do. Gangs and gun violence were two primary ways young people in this study talked about violence in their neighborhoods and were described as normal everyday life. The next

section explores how multiple kinds of aggression beyond gun and gang violence are part of the normal experience for young people in this study.

## **Aggression**

*“Some nights they be fighting all night”*

Along with gang and gun violence, youth talked about aggression in multiple forms, such as bullying, fighting, verbal abuse and theft. Young people talked about aggression as a *way of life*, as in *life is a fight* and to survive means to fight. To live in this neighborhood one had to know how to fight, and “fighting” was something they saw often, ongoing, and unending.

These forms of aggression were not talked about necessarily like the background noise of gangs nor were they as specific as young people’s experience with gun violence. Here, Antoine talked about his own experience of being an aggressor:

I would say it was the path of violence and the aggression, just because I can do it. Like suspensions from school because of all my fights and stuff and I haven’t gone too far like my father, but we kind of had the same reputations in high school.

Fighting was described as both interpersonal (school fights) or as a being bullied. Rosaria a young person at Educación Artística said “sometimes I feel like violence is like bullying. I started at [large urban public school], and I don’t know, I guess that’s a bigger school. And like, there was just *a lot* of fights.” For Rosaria, fights were a part of the normal experience of school. Lila, the youth coordinator at Northridge noted, “The most obvious is the physical aspect. Shooting, killing, fighting, robbing, and like the verbal violence of you know, threatening, bullying.” She names aggressive physical and emotional violence young people experience often as a normal part of life. Young people who participated in this study shared an expansive understanding of violence as

something more than just physical aggression against others. They also talked about violence as something a person could do to themselves.

### **Hurting Ourselves**

Young people and youth workers talked frequently about people hurting themselves through drugs, alcohol, cutting and suicide. Elizabeth a youth worker, noted, “In addition to suicide I see a lot of self-hurt like cutting that I have seen the scars from many times.” Some described these behaviors as problematic, in particular drug use and selling drugs. Nikki explained, “drugs be killing people slowly but surely.” Lila noted, “There’s things that I feel are violence, and maybe people will disagree with me, but, the drinking and chemicals, like taking pills, prescription pills that aren’t prescribed to you or smoking weed or cigarettes.” However, others noted that selling drugs is more complex and often tied to the family culture.

The decision to sell is often connected to survival. It was one of the few paying jobs available for family members. Ramon noted, “Latino kids would love to go to college and work for Target Corps. They don’t think it’s cool to sell drugs, they sell them because that’s what my dad did or grandpa or even grandma!” Urban youth and their families often marginalized by criminalization are left with very few choices in terms of resources to provide for themselves (Rios, 2011).

Youth explained gang and gun violence, aggression and self-injury to be the most prominent demonstrations of violence in their lives. Both youth and youth workers described these forms of violence as normal, even though they knew “it should not be this way.” In the next section, participants discuss their frustrations with everyday or ‘normal’ violence.

## Is it Normal?

Young people talked about how many of their friends “didn’t expect to live long” because of the consistent, ongoing physical violence they experienced. They did not expect the situation to ever change: “This is the way things are.” Violence was normal.

Nikki described a daily and normal occurrence in her neighborhood:

I see this lady who walk past my house all the time and she smoke and it’s bad to see her like that, and I know her son and her son always has seizures and I grew up with him. I asked her one time, ‘Ain’t your son Eugene?’ and she said, ‘yeah that’s my baby’ and I was like, ‘omg,’ but I wish people would just try. Just try.

Ayaan, another young person living in the same neighborhood noted, “That is just things that’s been going on for years and years and years and like it’s a cycle. And like it’s there and it’s a weakness only if you take it as a weakness I should say.” Again, this young person both acknowledges that violence in the community is cyclical, yet offers the possibility that it does not have to be this way or that there can be other ways to *see* things. She struggles with the community she loves and calls home because it is both violent *and* a place where people care deeply about each other.

Losing a close family member to violence was not uncommon, as four of the nine youth participants across sites had lost a younger sibling, close friend or boyfriend to gun violence within the last two years. Lila lamented:

Nobody seems to care, in fact it’s almost their. . . normal. It’s almost . . . it’s part of the culture that isn’t positive, but its ingrained across generations. And their parents don’t even talk to them about it. And their parents don’t understand. Like ‘Dear dad’ letters. ‘How many of you have grown up without a father?’ All hands go up. ‘How many of you have even been asked what that’s like?’ Nobody. . . it’s accepted. It’s just normal, so why would you even acknowledge it in a way that is meaningful or dialogue-based? And if it’s not discussed, how do you even begin to process it as a young person when you haven’t even developed those critical thinking skills?



Here, multiple experiences with violence intersect—the pain of fathers being incarcerated and the effect of families being torn apart, the emotional isolation that comes with not being invited to talk about the effects of violence on their lives and the *normalness* of it all. It also raises a critical question: Is this the everyday experience we would want for any young person?

### **You're Always Waiting for Something to Happen**

*“When like when people drive up and park their car and banging loud music and selling drugs and you never know if a dude come out of nowhere, demanding their money.”*

Young people and youth workers spoke about racism, immigration violence, and poverty as having a cumulative stressful effect in their lives. These forms of violence were always around for many young people, it felt like “something was always going to happen” making it difficult to have stability and peace of mind.

### **Racism**

Maria, the director at Educación Artística talked about how young people experience racism both in the community and at school. She noted, “There’s already an issue when you’re a person of color. They’ve been told that knowledge and authority and everything else is not of color.” Another youth worker, Ramon, captures much of what was expressed about racism.

It’s not an ideal situation that our students of color are in, in this country right now. We’re constantly telling the stories of the exception, and we should be telling the stories of the kid who had to work full-time, undocumented and without parents. These invisible students who are falling through the cracks every day . . . America is a racist country and if you were to try and pretend and tell these students everyone is equal and there is going to be world peace someday . . . that’s not real. Kids take that really offensively, I think. When you grow up in America, especially as a poor person in the ghetto, it’s [racism] fed to us every

day in everything we do . . . structural and institutional racism is stronger than ever.

Ramon expresses both what he and young people have experienced every day of their lives being Latino in a poor urban community. He is clear that racism is real and to tell kids that he works with every day that it isn't would undermine their knowledge and experience. He is also clear that this is not about individual choices, it's about structural and institutional racist realities. Carlos, one of the young people at Educación Artística talked about how government policies that shaped a part the city he lives in.

A lot of people who are on the North side are there because of the rules and regulations made by the government. So I'm pretty sure if politicians came down to the North side or anywhere in the middle class and actually saw what they were doing to people, they'd change their mind pretty quickly

This young person doesn't use the term structural racism like Ramon did to explain how racist policies can shape communities and turn once thriving neighborhoods into depressed areas, but it is clear he has an understanding of how government policies have adversely affected people of color. Carlos added quite candidly:

What would happen if we threw the governor in a three bedroom house and gave him \$200 in food stamps and see if he lasts the month? Let's see how long it takes for him to break down and need his hot tub and 5 million dollars.

This young person pulls no punches when it comes to talking about politics and the unfair structures that he experiences every day. He doesn't believe others actually want to see what life is like for him, yet at the same time he is hopeful that if they do truly see what their policies did to people, they might "change their mind pretty quickly." Part of how racism was also experienced by young people in this study was in insidious everyday experiences of discrimination.

## Microaggressions

Rios (2011) uses the term racial microaggressions to describe what he calls “subtle acts of racism that people of color experience on a daily basis” (p.41). These acts can include being stopped by security at a store, being pulled over by police for being a suspected gang member or even being ignored by school officials. Carlos described a recent experience with police:

Last week, a good friend of mine was walking down the street and the cops pulled him over and started harassing him badly. Like we’re gonna beat you up and all that. It was because he fit the description of a criminal that did a crime. Another time I was hanging out with a couple of my Latino friends from Chicago and we were hanging out by the bridge and the cops thought we were dealing drugs. And it’s like why you know? Can’t we just hang out? We don’t have any money, where else are we going to go?

These experiences not only tell us about the intersection of institutional racism, profiling, and microaggressions, but also about what many urban youth often experience in public spaces—getting pushed out. Drawing on Kerr and Stattin (2000) Fine et.al (2003) believed that poor urban youth of color are being “squeezed out” of public spaces, scrutinized and treated as criminals (p. 145).

Evans-Campbell (2008) called microaggressions—covert *and* overt discriminatory acts such as being called racist names or being assaulted. Moreover the belief is that these acts are often described as happening between white authority figures and people of color (Solorzano, Ceja & Yosso, 2000). However, some participants in this study also talked about the experience of being put down *by* people of color. Maria noted:

A lot of trauma between them being Mexican and Mexican-American is like, how much Mexican are you? Are you born in Mexico? Because then you’re the real thing, but if you’re born in the US, you’re not quite the real thing.

Microaggressions then can be seen as happening between young people of color, where they punish each other for not being “the real thing.” Wing Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal and Esquilin (2007) noted that racial microaggressions are not limited to White vs. Person of Color interactions and can be interethnic. They believed that, “it is clear no racial/ethnic group is immune from inheriting the racial biases of society.” (p. 284). These microaggressions relate to the different ways young people in this study organized themselves at Educación Artística. Maria noted her observations of young people building their platforms for student council:

I'm meeting this week with all the students who are running presidents for student council to see what their platforms are. It's very interesting what their platforms are and what they see is the issue. They go for punishment right away. Somebody said, that maybe if we come in late, you know, the ideas are coming in from a very missionary point of view that somebody gave them.

The student platforms regarding reprimands for tardiness echo what Rios (2011, p.xiv) called a “culture of punishment,” a way young people of color are taught to organize themselves and make sense out of their worlds based on how violent institutions have treated them over time. Young people demonstrate characteristics of a “culture of punishment” and interethnic microaggressions by asking “How Mexican are you?” or when given the opportunity to create new policies for themselves and their peers, they choose policies based on punishment. In the following section, young people and youth workers talk about another facet of violence, immigration policies and the resulting consequences for children of undocumented workers in the US.

### **Immigration Violence**

Immigration violence is deeply connected with the experience of “you’re always waiting for something to happen” for Latin@ youth in this study. Young people and

youth workers at Educación Artística High School and Community Center talked about the experience of immigration violence, which included deportation, assimilation, and loss of language. Maria explained:

We go through so much everyday as a community, like we hear, ‘Go back home, you don’t belong here!’ And these kids *are* born here. Because they’re born here you think you’re giving them all the rights in the world, but the rest of the country is asking them, ‘So where are you from?’ And forever they will ask this.

Surprisingly, this experience is true for both undocumented young Latinos/as, and for Latinos/as who were born in the US. Gonzales and Chavez (2011) interviewed many undocumented young Latino immigrants and found most felt unwanted in the only country they had ever known as home. Similar to undocumented youth, Latin@ youth born here feel rejected, yet the expectation of success is unwavering from their families.

Unlike documented and naturalized Latinos/as citizens, a very real and threat for undocumented Latin@ youth and their families live with is the specter of deportation. In the next section youth and youth workers talk about the effects of deportation in their community. This too creates violence in the community.

## **Deportation**

Ramon commented, “A lot of our students don’t go home to family. They go home to an uncle or a friend of their parent’s. We have a high percentage of students whose parents have been deported.” Another youth worker Eduardo talked about the tension of possibly being deported:

Personally when I came here I had no papers, I had nothing 'til after high school. So I went to school all 5<sup>th</sup> through high school, with no papers and you kind of want that sense of having something cause you're always scared. You see a cop on the streets and you're always aware. You might not be scared but you are aware... It's a tension. Like, you see something and then like your heart starts beating fast

and then you get it and you gotta tell yourself, "Calm down. No everything is good."

Yesenia another youth worker at Educación Artística noted:

Obviously immigration . . . has a big impact on them and their lives and the people around them. So, just knowing that you know, at any time their Mom can be deported, their Dad can be deported, their uncle, their sister, their brother, I think that's always just felt like a big setback. Whenever that happens in one of the student's lives, it feels like a big setback.

Young people who may be documented citizens still face the frightening prospect of losing a close family member at any moment. For youth who endure the ever-present stress of losing a loved one to deportation, having a *big setback* takes on a new meaning.

Yesenia added:

I mean, we have quite a few students who are kind of on their own. And so that's also another thing, the separation of families. Some of those kids actually say, "I'm going to make it through" and then at the same time, they don't have all the support systems to make sure that it happens . . . And so they have the motivation and the determination but sometimes, you know, they don't have the resources that Mom and Dad could support, even like- not even just like the physical resources but like the emotional stability of like, "I can come home to somebody and somebody is going to care. And I'm home." So we have quite a few students like that here at Educación Artística.

This youth worker has seen families torn apart by deportation, causing what can easily be called immigration violence, and demonstrates how it affects multiple aspects of young people's lives. How can we expect youth to thrive when their support system vanishes? Deportation of family members and friends causes physical and emotional loss and can greatly reduce tangible (stable home to live in) and intangible (love and care) resources for young people. Another loss young people and their families face related to immigration violence is the loss of language.

### **Assimilation and Loss of Language**

Youth workers talked about immigration violence as also including young people having to assimilate and lose their native language. Maria lamented the process young Latin@ youth experience in most high schools.

And the damage, that I mean, is not just the emotional but the physical and intellectual damage when you lose your native language. Your spiritual connection with your Mother is your language, and yet we ask them to give it up.

Latin@ youth who came to Educación Artística often arrived from places Valenzuela (2005) might describe as *subtractive schools*, where “no Spanish” rules and “negative messages that undermine the worth of their unique culture and history” (p. 89) created a profound sense of loss for many families. Maria, the director at Educación Artística explained:

Losing language, especially through schools has created friction between young people and their parents. The parents often yell at their kids for not knowing a word or phrase in Spanish. It’s almost bullying out of love and sadness of them losing the language, it becomes a dis-communication or disconnection through loss of language, adults say “why can’t you speak Spanish?” but no one is teaching them Spanish. It’s not meant to be hurtful, but it is.

She added:

Bilingual education is good as long it's for everybody, other programs or Native Americans going back to their languages. Good, they can celebrate, people give money for that. For us to keep Spanish is an issue . . . are we going to become Americans? It's anti-White not to speak English.

Loss of language is described as violent in multiple ways. These come together to deny and denigrate young people’s cultural identity. It creates stress in families because young people are expected to learn English in schools and cannot speak Spanish well enough to communicate with or please their parents. This loss is described as a spiritual loss because it “disconnects young people from their mothers” both their physical parent and mother tongue. Losing the language is also seen as necessary to ‘becoming’ American

because to not speak English is to be “anti-white.” The consequence is that young people often live two identities, one in public and one in private, and may not be fully accepted in either location regardless of how well they do. In the next section young people and youth workers talk about the tension of “always waiting for something to happen” when experiencing poverty.

## **Poverty**

*I know a lot of my friends that come lay they head at my house is like, I'm not welcome at my house, so can I lay my head here? It's like 'yeah' you know, poverty is a big problem.*

In the quote above, Ayaan, a young person at Northridge describes what she knows to be a central problem in her community. Young people and youth workers in this study talked about poverty as an incredible barrier to well-being. Living in poverty for many young people and their friends and family was a central tension and stress in their lives. Peña (2011) describes poverty as, “the status of living with limited resources that have been systematically and often violently denied . . .” (p. 207). Poverty was talked about by young people also as homelessness and a lack of resources and jobs. Nikki noted, “There’s people around here that are not eating or have clothes. None of that. People need shelter.” Shauna summed up much of what was talked about and experienced by participants related to the violence of poverty:

It’s like homeless also consists of being couch to couch. If you are sleeping at your friend’s house and you don’t know where you’re going to sleep tomorrow, you’re homeless. If you wake up and you don’t have a dresser to put your clothes in, you’re homeless. Even if your stuff was in someone else’s basement, you’re homeless. People don’t understand that. If you are 18 and you live with your parents but are in and out and don’t have your own roof. You’re homeless. And people don’t have the sense that that is homelessness. It is a basic need to have shelter. A sense of self and place and location and if you don’t have that, you are technically not meeting your basic needs and that messes with a lot of stuff. Like



your self-esteem, your pride, your attitude, your personality and it just leads to destruction and violence. The basic needs need to be met for people.

Shauna demonstrates how having a “sense of place” is so crucial to all other aspects of well-being. Of course you are “always waiting for something to happen” if you don’t know where you may sleep the next night or what situations you may encounter if you do not have a stable place to live. Other young people and youth workers echoed the sentiment that living in poverty is not only physically difficult, it’s emotionally draining. Lila put it this way, “There’s a desperation and there’s shame I think too. And there’s this, like, that’s why I feel like it’s so hard to fight because people don’t want to be seen as poor or struggling.” Being poor is all around, yet often unacknowledged because of the shame involved. Shauna also lamented:

We have poverty, lack of education, lack of employment, lack of job opportunities for those that even have careers or college degrees. There’s so little employment opportunity here, we have to create our own jobs and I don’t think everyone’s aware of that. We can’t blame everything on the economy but I mean, why can’t we?! You can’t take care of other people if you can’t take care of yourself.

This young person expresses a deep frustration felt by many participants about lacking the resources to live a fully flourishing life. She challenges the structures that create poverty rather than the individuals affected by it. She describes how difficult it can be for people in poor communities to help one another when they often “can’t take care of themselves.”

Racism, immigration violence, and poverty are ways participants in this study experienced violence as an ongoing tension in their lives that something bad could happen at any moment. The following section further explores how the experience of violence is embodied in the ongoing stress and tension felt by participants.

## **The Consequences of Ongoing Stress**

Ramon, a youth worker at Educación Artística, talked about the violence that tension does to the community over time. “We’re a community that’s under attack and have been for a number of years now.” The cumulative effects of stress and tension often create an experience similar to living in a war zone. Duncan-Andrade (2009) explained that for urban youth, “. . . most, sometimes all of their primary needs [are] under constant attack” (p. 185). Urban youth who are exposed repeatedly to violence in their communities can develop similar symptoms to soldiers returning from battle such as posttraumatic stress syndrome (PTSD), including a greater sense of fear, frightening dreams and hostile behavior (Burman, Silverman and Kurtines, 2000; McIntyre 2000). For urban youth there often is no respite or “post” to the stressful experiences they face.

Duncan Andrade (2009) uses the work of Garbarino (1995) to look at stress and “socially toxic environments” to show how urban youth are faced with multiple negative stressors but with very few resources available to deal with this stress contributing to poor health. In other words, they have the most chronic stress and the least resources to deal with it. Structural inequalities *literally* make urban youth sick (Duncan-Andrade, 2009; Adelman, 2008). This is often named as structural violence.

One youth worker disclosed the great difficulty with talking about structural violence with young people, not because they were incapable of understanding it, but because it’s so deeply embedded in everyday experience and life:

Lila: You can go and see for yourself if you just walk around and look at the garbage on the ground in this neighborhood. Its beer cans, liquor bottles, blunt wrappers, candy, chips. Like where are the banana peels and apple cores? Where are the water bottles you know? Like that is a real example. Anybody can observe or notice if they choose to. I’m not stereotyping or exaggerating in any way.

Jenna: No, I hear an understanding. You know there's structural realities here. Do you talk about that with young people?

Lila: When you are in that environment, your whole life is really all you know, so it's hard to understand it objectively and we do talk about in a context they can really relate to. They can understand little bits here and there. We've done the neighborhood walk before and like prep them beforehand or reflect after with like, what did you see or what did you notice? Begin to walk them through the beginning process of these things. But you have to start really small because to see the big picture is really impossible because it's your world and you don't see anything else. And I try to talk with people outside of this community who come and wanting to understand gun violence and the gangs and the cliques and for whatever reason you know. I feel like I've become one of the go-to people to get and give that information and I have taken the role responsibility like seriously as well and try to help reporters or funders understand that it's not the guns you know. If it wasn't the guns it would be something else. What it is, is post traumatic stress and rage essentially, and they will find a way to lash out however they can because they're living in these conditions where they're not okay.

This youth worker intentionally starts small so not to create a sense of hopelessness, because she's working with youth who don't have the privilege of walking away from the material effects of structural violence. She is faced with the dual role of supporting young people to understand structural violence and trying to create understanding of structural violence amongst funders and media outlets that do not (or choose not) to see violence as something beyond gangs and guns.

The following section explores young people's experiences with low expectations and how these experiences do violence to their sense of self and efficacy.

### **Nobody Tells Us We're Smart . . . Nobody**

*"It does hurt to think that people think so little of you."*

Both youth workers and young people in this study described the low expectations of young people from these neighborhoods. This they understood as violence. Maria

shared her beliefs about young people's experiences with perceptions and stereotypes of the Latin@ community being rooted in low expectations:

Nobody tells us we are smart—nobody. We're hard workers, think about everything, think Mexican—you're a hard worker, you're loyal, you're a good worker, you're very loyal person but you're not smart—you're never smart. We are labor. We're nothing else but labor . . . my students, one of my students said, "Ms. Maria that's all I'm going to be . . ." And I said, "You're very smart . . ." He said, "But that's all I'm going to be . . ." The biggest violence that these kids have endured here is other people having such low expectations of them. That is the ultimate violation.

Maria's words demonstrate how powerfully low expectations can be embedded in young people's minds. Even though she is saying, "you are very smart," this young person cannot see beyond the low expectations that have been asked of him for so long in his previous school. He has taken on the label that he is "not smart." Cahill, Rios-Moore, and Threatts (2008) have concluded that some of the most disturbing stereotypes are the ones that cause young people to blame themselves for institutions that had failed them. They begin to believe they are "not smart" rather than recognizing that the school has let them down. Shauna shared her personal experience with low expectations of all the systems in her life:

There are so many systems in place for them to fail. You're born into a family that has a criminal background with your father or your mother, you're automatically like . . . in 3rd grade if you don't pass your tests, they are building prisons for you. That is a lifetime of failure planned of you from the system.

This young person is aware of the low expectations of systems that function in concert to limit the choices for urban youth of color. In the next section, education as a site of low expectations is talked about by young people and youth workers.

## **Education**

Violence in education was described primarily as “bad schools,” “bad education,” being pushed out of school and the low expectations of teachers and school officials.

Shauna talked about her experience of teachers who didn’t believe in her finishing school on time after she had a baby. She recalled:

There were so many standards and stereotypes placed on teen mothers. When I had my baby, they were like she’s never going back to school. When I came to school, they were like, she’s never gonna go to class. When I went to class they were like, she’s never gonna pass her classes. When I got the credits they were like, she’s not gonna graduate on time. And when I passed all my classes and was on the honor role, they were like, you’re not leaving this school.

This young person’s entire senior year experience was shaped by the low expectations of her teachers and the roadblocks she faced when trying to finalize her credits and graduate on time. Young people across the three sites talked about feeling ignored and unwelcome in urban public schools:

- “Like teachers don’t take the time to sit with you and figure out what you gonna do in college you know?”
- “It does hurt to think that people think so little of you.”
- “You couldn’t really get help from the teachers.”
- “I felt like the teachers sometimes would like, support a couple types of students, you know?”
- “I just felt like not supported enough from the teachers and they wouldn’t pay attention to me.”
- “There are so many people that aren’t making it through school and maybe what we’re doing in school is not exactly working for the kids.”

Delpit (1998) explored the experiences of youth of color often silenced in public schools and found that teachers often denied access to their own personal knowledge about navigating the education system, and they did not value students as “experts” in their own

knowledge. Neither youth nor youth workers across the two community-based sites and school-based site voiced hopeful thoughts or had many positive experiences with urban public schools. Lila struggled with the decision to bring her youth group who attend urban public schools to a primarily white high income suburban school to show their recently completed film on injustice:

Like, do I dare bring these kids to tour [suburban] high school, like what will that do to them? In one sense it will broaden their scope to privileges they're not, I mean they're not offered or given, and then what is the rage they come away feeling with to their schools here. 'We don't have a gym, we don't have these things.'

She wanted to be able to give her youth group a critical education by seeing what privilege is, yet realized that part of an honest critique could be the rage young people may feel in facing these disparities. They could ask: "why don't we have these things?" and be supported to fight for them. It was also possible for them to become overwhelmed. Along with recognizing the disparities in urban public schools, several participants described being pushed out or seeing friends get pushed out of high schools.

Yesenia recalled her realization that her friends were being kicked out of school:

I was there at [her former] high school and my freshman year I was not a great student, but my sophomore year I starting becoming a straight-A student and continued that and so when my friends were getting kicked out. I was like, "What's going on?" . . . That was the same time that students were getting kicked out so that they can basically show that they have tight test scores.

Tuck (2008) concluded that many poor youth and/or youth of color are pushed out of schools in both implicit and explicit ways by schools under pressure to have high aggregate scores on federally mandated tests. One of the challenges facing Educación Artística youth workers was challenging young people who were coming from high

schools where they felt left out and were pushed out to realize their potential. Maria recalled a recent conversation with a young person:

I said, "As long as you think you are in the 'loser school' because somehow you think you failed at the big high school, you will fail. And I need you to start thinking that you did not fail but instead you were pushed out. You did not drop out." And I said, "You need to start thinking that the system failed, but that you did not fail the system and in order to succeed, you need to start thinking that this is the best place of all, the place where you are going to make it the best place of all and that you are going to change it. If you think you are just here with a bunch of losers, then nothing is going to change."

Even with the support by Educación Artística youth workers and teachers, an environment that celebrates both Spanish culture and language, many students still struggle with how their friends and peers that stayed in the larger public schools see them as going to the "loser school" or "drop out school." Maria justified her statement by claiming that:

They [the teachers at Educación Artística] don't understand why the kids are so passive and I said, "Because that is what has been expected of them for the last ten years and now we want them to be different?" No, we have to work with them and teach them.

For young people coming to Educación Artística, it is difficult to shed the standard educational experience that Cammarota & Romero (2006) describe as a torrent of standardized tests bearing little relationship with the culture or struggle of everyday life for young Latin@s. At Educación Artística, young people are asked to be engaged, speak their language and their minds. This differs from their past experience where they were often ignored. It is often not an easy transition for Latin@ youth to move from schools with such low expectations to a school where teachers expect critical thinking. Along with education, youth and youth workers talked about the low expectations they have experienced encountering the justice system.

## **The Justice System**

The violence of the justice system was talked about and experienced by both youth and youth workers as youth-police tension, profiling, police brutality and incarceration. These experiences also demonstrate the low expectations of law enforcement of youth of color. In the previous section on microaggressions, we heard from Carlos about his experiences with police being aggressive towards him and his friends. Here he shared another incident:

One example is that my friends' favorite cousin in the world got mixed up in a drug raid, and he wasn't even doing anything, it was his friends. But just as he was walking out of the door and saying, 'I'm leaving, I don't want to be a part of this', that's when the cops come in. And now they think he's part of it. So then he had to go to jail for like 10 months.

Low expectations can lead to separation. Shauna also expressed the pain of family and friends being separated by incarceration, talking specifically about losing fathers in her predominantly African American community and the violence that does to young people:

Since they start getting in trouble that brings prison and our young men have fathers taken from families and that's decreasing the family aspect... it means our mothers are working harder for their families which is good for the community, but it leaves the children at home alone or with a lack of supervision. 64% of African Americans grow up without a father. That's a large amount . . . that's a large amount. Getting rid of them is not an option and controlling them and placing them in prisons is not an option anymore. So you need to uplift them. The government needs to uplift them. The country needs to uplift them.

This young person demonstrates an institutional and structural intersection of violence.

Youth expressed great frustration with their treatment by police and experiences with the justice system. Carlos also compared profiling to bullying:

Profiling is not any different from bullying. It really isn't. I mean a kid gets bullied in school because he's homeless or a little different. And what happens next? He either commits suicide or does something dangerous. Same thing with Latino and African-American communities. If you push them hard enough, they are going to do something bad.



This young person describes how when police profile, or take action based on a young person's race they become bullies. He explains that kids who are bullied can become dangerous to themselves and others. When Way (1998) asked an auditorium full of students if they had been stopped by police, 90% of the young men of color raised their hands. The experience for many youth of color is that they will be pulled over or picked up even if they have done nothing wrong. Young people in this study felt that they were not expected to stay out of trouble, and these low expectations weighed heavily not just on their self-esteem, but also their identity. For young people in this study, both school systems and the justice system reinforced low expectations and for them became a source of violence. Youth workers in this study also added media and social services as contributing to the low expectations young people experience.

### **Media/Social Services**

Young people did not cite either the media or social services as doing violence to the community, but several youth workers described these institutions as integral to the violence their community experiences. Lila provided clarification:

I think what I've seen that I have a problem with is, nothing's changing. There's still needs everywhere. There's still people in the community, old and young, coming in for services and programs and taking what they can get and leaving relatively, in the same place they came in as. So it's this temporary, get me through today or this week, fix. But it's not necessarily about really building and solving and healing and like, saving lives. It's about, it's almost about, the program and service model is really about keeping people really in the same places they're in, just getting through temporarily. Or helping them get by for right now. It's not about social uplift and empowerment and real change.

Those working in the three sites in this study all focused on talking about injustice and empowering young people, though many of the other agencies in the community did not

value those goals. Simon (2007) pointed out that the way we regulate institutions, social welfare or social services today is modeled after the criminal justice system. In this model, teachers, social workers or other adults who work with marginalized young people are often asked to function more like police than caring adults (Simon, 2007).

Maria shared her perspective on media as a violent institution that produces positive images of White people with unattainable bodies while often ignoring or stereotyping people of color:

Because we don't have Heidi Klum's body, we fail. So how am I going to get those legs? Never! Never. Because I don't fit in her jeans then I'm a loser and ugly? So that is violent. I'm getting just, just starting to get sick of it is all the shows . . . So I had my six and seven year old nephew in the car, and they were talking about when girls are hot. And I said "who?" instead of reprimanding. My nephew said, "Only blonde girls are pretty..."

Maria's frustration with media is clear. White youth are often portrayed in media as successful while youth of color are frequently portrayed as violent or lazy (Yosso, 2002). These images are not crafted by media moguls' respect for young people or their well-being, but rather by profit margins (Steinberg, 2011). Maria also spoke specifically to the treatment of Latinos/as in media:

We are being constantly ignored by media. Good bad or indifferent. In the Latino community . . . every four years by every candidate we get discovered, by Christopher Columbus, because now they need the vote. Every four years . . . or media shows negative images of being Mexican like to be Mexican means illegal drug trafficking.

Although being two very different institutions, social services and media were talked about in ways that were not terribly different. Both could be imagined as "police" by using stereotypes to keep people "in their place." They evoke again Rios' (2011) "culture of punishment."

Young people in this study did not necessarily use the term institutional violence to describe their experiences with education and justice systems the way youth workers did. Youth did have ways of talking about violence that connected to the conception of institutional violence. Young people in this study translated being ignored by teachers or school officials who thought they could not graduate as another form of violence. Further being harassed in public places by police and having their friends or family arrested unfairly and incarcerated was also perceived as violence to the young people in this study. They believed that they have been let down by the institutions supposedly designed to educate and protect them. And, according to youth workers, media and social services also supported institutional violence by reinforcing stereotypes and low expectations. Related intimately with the low expectations young people in this study experienced with institutions was their experience with feeling distrusted, silenced and alienated.

### **Distrusted, Silenced and Alienated**

*“They can say, ‘Oh he doesn’t know anything about what’s going on in the world because he’s just a kid.’”*

Young people talked about violence as losing trust, feeling hopeless, enduring negative stereotypes, and feeling isolated. These experiences were connected deeply with aggression, racism, poverty, violent institutions and society. In this final section young people talk about how feeling distrusted and not being able to trust others as well as feeling silenced and alone shape their everyday experience with violence.

### **No Trust or Hope**

Young people equated feeling like you can't trust people or be trusted with violence. Nikki described feeling betrayed by a friend:

I don't trust nobody. I like, trust people that I grew up with to a certain extent but it's just because I grew up with them and we been through the same things but I don't trust nobody still, unless I know you got my back I'm going to have yours and we on the same level. So I really think it is the trust issues because if you feel like you don't trust somebody, they going to go behind your back and talk about you. Like, dog, really though. Like I had people that did that to me before. This girl said she was my best friend but she always talk about me. But I never say nothing about it.

When Way (1998) looked at betrayal and friendships between urban youth, she was initially surprised at the high level of distrust among peers, but then realized that every day, "they receive clear messages about not being trusted by the world outside their homes" having profound effects on their friendships (p. 141). What was talked about as low expectations previously might be another way to say that urban youth experience distrust from many people, both teachers and police, but also their friends and peers.

Young people talked about the hopelessness of living in these conditions:

You know after awhile I became numb. Like, after a while of doing the film I was just like . . . 'Why are people dying?' I started losing hope. I started like, I mean . . . the year, the summer between the video being promoted the first time and then the second time, it was hell. It was like everybody died that summer. It's a dark world, especially when people keep dying around you. I mean, it hurts.

With few exceptions, participants talked about how *other* young people they knew felt desperate or hopeless:

- "It's not that they don't want it, it's that they don't see it. They don't see a way out. They're like, this is hopeless, this is it."
- "I used to think I didn't have a future, you know, but it all depends on the person and how they're willing to change and stuff. If they are more than willing to make a difference, then they are more than capable of doing so. But some people still have that mentality that doesn't allow them to."

- “I would have friends who just get out of jail and say they were going to change their life and they did not. It was just the same lifestyle and it would be like, hopeless”

Youth saw how hopelessness overwhelmed other people they knew. Feeling hopeless and not being able to trust anyone contributed to young people’s experiences with feeling alienated. In the next section, youth talked about the violence that occurs when others negatively stereotype them.

### **Negative Stereotypes**

Many of the young people across the three sites spoke about experiences of being stereotyped or having negative assumptions made about them. These negative stereotypes made them feel unheard or silenced. Antoine explained:

I mean when you see me or just my name on paper, I’m just this ghetto Black boy, but when you actually get to know me it’s like, ‘wow, it’s not what I thought.’ But a lot of people these days don’t take the time to figure that out.

People in his world often don’t “take the time to figure out” that he is much more than what they see. They effectively silence him by putting him in a box and not taking time to know who he is. Lee, a young person who examines stereotypes in much of his spoken word poetry related his personal experience:

Stereotypes can do violence in the sense that they can prevent dialogue from happening. Often times we create assumptions because we look at someone because of their race whether that be assumptions like, where are you from? Or how much money do you make? All those kinds of things and assumptions usually are one-sided. When I grew up I got confused for being Korean a lot. People used to be like, ‘Hey I didn’t know you’re Hmong.’ They didn’t expect me to be Hmong or talk Hmong. So it’s like, ‘if you had just talked to me you would’ve understood.’ And it goes deeper than that like, ‘What are you doing in \_\_\_\_\_ suburb if you’re black?’ Those kinds of issues. So once again the idea of assumptions and how dangerous they can be and lead to violence.

Youth participants often felt that stereotypes actively erased understanding. Shauna recalled an event where she felt frustrated by a family member's negative assumption about her. She became pregnant early in high school and was celebrating her graduation after proudly completing her degree without having left school. Shauna recalled:

When I graduated from high school, my family threw me a graduation party. One of my aunts asked, 'When was she supposed to graduate? How many years is she behind?' And my family said, 'No, she's graduating on time.' And she was like, 'Oh did she?!' When she said that to me, I was offended. Why would you say that and not give me the benefit of the doubt? And my aunt said, 'It's just things like that that hold us back, and I'm sorry for saying that, but you should be proud of yourself! Use what I said to your advantage because you are the reason stereotypes shouldn't apply to everyone'

The conversation between this young person and her aunt is complicated. Does the participant's own aunt buy into the stereotypical binary that black teen moms are problems or exceptions to being problems? She says "stereotypes shouldn't apply to everyone," but many young people in this study suggest that stereotypes shouldn't apply to *anyone*. In addition to race-based stereotypes, young people also have to resist age-based stereotypes.

Carlos talked about how being a young person in general can elicit negative assumptions by others:

Youth are a lot smarter than people let them lead on. They can say, 'Oh he doesn't know anything about what's going on in the world because he's just a kid.' But he's part of the world too, and whether you like it or not he has to know what's going on in the world.

Lesko (1996) claimed that when we label young people things like "just a kid" we "erase [their] ability . . . to describe or know themselves . . . [setting] up a clear positional superiority in which adults always come out better . . ." (p. 149). This young participant and others in the study understood that "just a kid" has negative connotations.

## Isolation

*“I would say being silenced, yes. That is the worst thing you could do to any type of life. That is pretty much death because you can no longer defend yourself. That’s part of our human nature, so to be silenced is really horrible.”*

Youth and youth workers talked about their experiences of feeling isolated in many ways including feeling silenced, unseen, unheard (my voice doesn’t matter), alone, ignored, and not belonging. Kaseem, a young spoken word poet noted, “For some reason growing up I didn’t think that I was a person that was supposed to be saying things. My parents weren’t suppressing me or anything but I just didn’t feel like my voice mattered.” Kaseem also spoke about writing a spoken word piece venting his frustration when a part of the poor urban neighborhood he lived in was devastated by a storm:

You would to go to \_\_\_\_\_ to even know anything was still happening there and how people were still suffering and there’s people that still, not even now . . . like it was addressing the fact that we take things and we kind of make them cool to care about and then we move on to the next thing, because it’s not cool to care about that anymore so we’re going to go care about this new thing now. Those things still affect people.

His frustration with the needs of this community being forgotten so quickly was palpable. Farmer (1996) connects poverty and silencing by noting that often people that suffer the most from poverty also have their “suffering silenced” (p. 280). This already poor urban community of my study sites, suffered great damage and to this day has not been repaired, their suffering essentially forgotten and silenced by the wider public.

Maria talked about the violence of not belonging which urban youth, particularly Latin@ youth often experience in schools. She lamented, “Well I think our kids go through this sense of the violence of feeling different or that violence of not belonging. All of our kids have tried to go to the big school...and they don’t fit.” Almost all the young people in this study attend or attended urban public schools, but Lee who went to a

suburban school also felt isolated. Lee reflected, “Like why did I love playing football so much as a kid even though I knew I could never start?” He also said that in his suburban high school, “If you were a rapper or a dancer in the suburbs there wasn’t any place for you.” Any of the ways he wanted to express himself were not available to him and as a result he felt isolated.

If we recall the three frequent patterns of emotional violence including; *aggressing*, *denying* and *minimizing*—the experiences of being distrusted, feeling hopeless, enduring negative stereotypes, and feeling isolated are connected. The negative stereotypes and emotionally violent *aggressing* young participants endured were the form of being called names like “ghetto,” “lazy” or “loser.” Their experiences were *denied* and *minimized* by feeling silenced by adults and larger society who thought they were “just a kid” and they often felt they could not trust anyone, even those they considered friends. All of these emotionally violent experiences added up to a feeling for many participants of not belonging and feeling isolated.

## Summary

*“And that’s what creates the drug dealers and the gang bangers, because people don’t believe in them. And if people don’t believe in them, how can they believe in themselves? I think that’s why most kids are out on the streets because there’s no place for them to learn or be creative.”*

This quote was articulated by Carlos, one of the young participants at Educación Artística. This content therein serves as a fitting bridge between the two parts of this chapter. The first section of this chapter provides insights into how youth and youth workers talked about and experienced violence in their communities. Young people and youth workers demonstrated and illuminated how not just physical, but other forms of



violence such as structural, institutional and emotional are present in their lives. Violence for the young people in this study was normal and experienced and felt in the form of a tension of always waiting for something to happen and through the low expectations of the institutions around them, which made them feel distrusted, silenced and alienated by society. Youth workers had a clear understanding of each of these kinds of violence and their impact on the young people in their programs and communities. Young people varied in their understanding and explanation of these forms of violence. Some did not talk at all about the invisible forms while others understood those well— “They’re building prisons for us in 3rd grade.” Young people’s experiences show us that violence was broadly understood. In the second part of this chapter I discuss how the young people address these kinds of violence in their communities through creating media, illuminating a complex, extensive and often transformational process.

### **Youth Media**

*“It doesn’t happen from one day to the next. You’re not going to be like “Ta-Dah!”  
--- and then have all this, it’s a long process.”*

I parked my car on a busy tree-lined street and pulled out a few take out pizzas and soda. The late afternoon sunlight still had some warmth as the breeze scattered dead leaves around my feet. Almost a year to the day after I had first walked into the arts-based community center where I would get to know Antoine, Lee, Kaseem, and Elizabeth we were meeting again to reflect on and talk about my findings. We set up the food and drinks at the writing circle table and I handed out the themes I had generated for each research question. Lee had texted to say he unfortunately could not make it and Kaseem

was on his way but could be awhile, so we began. We chose this time because both Kaseem and Antoine had writing circle this afternoon. Antoine paged carefully and thoughtfully through the document I handed out uttering a few murmurs of “mmm hmm” and nodding. Elizabeth was uncharacteristically quiet while she too scanned the pages in front of her. After a long pause we began to talk and discuss the themes. Antoine talked about some of the processes like venting and healing in the personal growth section that really spoke to him. When we got to the section on community development, particularly the way young people talked about this as a collective growth process, Elizabeth sat back in her chair. She paused for a bit and said, “It’s a very special connection because of sharing personal and meaningful conversations . . . a self-acceptance and transformation of self-identity happens, people go from hopeless to hopeful . . .”

As other spoken word artists filed in, they began to sit down around us, talking and laughing. I offered up the rest of the pizza and soda, and our meeting morphed more into a spoken word pizza party. I was still hoping to catch Kaseem before the circle began, but they needed to get going with their writing. I thanked Elizabeth and Antoine and headed for the door. Just before I walked out Kaseem showed up. I knew he had taken three busses to get here and I didn’t want to keep him from the writing circle, but he happily wanted to sit down and talk. We found a quiet space in the front of the building by some sunny yellow tinted windows. He took a long time to look over the document and when he was done he remarked that it was “cool” in the personal development section how it really describes the process many young people go through when they start addressing issues like violence through their art and media. I asked him “how?” He said, “You know, you start this complex process of creating media by needing

to vent or heal and eventually move towards action as you gain confidence.” He had read the findings like a story, a complex, difficult, yet joyous and transformational story.

In this study, young people described creating media to address violence as a long, complex, and meaningful process involving personal growth, media skill building, and community development. These three processes can be described as overlapping circles as in a Venn diagram, each infused with cycles of critical reflection and action. Youth talked about the personal growth processes of reflecting, healing, revealing themselves, finding their voice, and gaining the confidence to take action in their communities. They shared new media skills they had learned to help them examine their communities and themselves. Young people also explained how their media projects created new dialogue and important conversations in the wider community and how they felt transformed through working together with other youth and caring adults.

Personal growth, media skill building and community development inform each other in young person’s experiences. If we look at the Venn diagram below, the center resembles what it might look like to look through a kaleidoscope. The young people’s experiences in this study generally take place in the kaleidoscopic center not pushed to the periphery or fringe. They did not experience *just* personal growth or *just* building media skills or *just* experience community development. Indeed they experienced all three. The youth worker in me might like to tell each story as a whole, but as a youth studies scholar I wanted to demonstrate the richness and value of each of these programs and the processes that were happening across the three sites. At the end of this chapter I will give an example of one young person’s story that demonstrates the overlapping of all three themes.

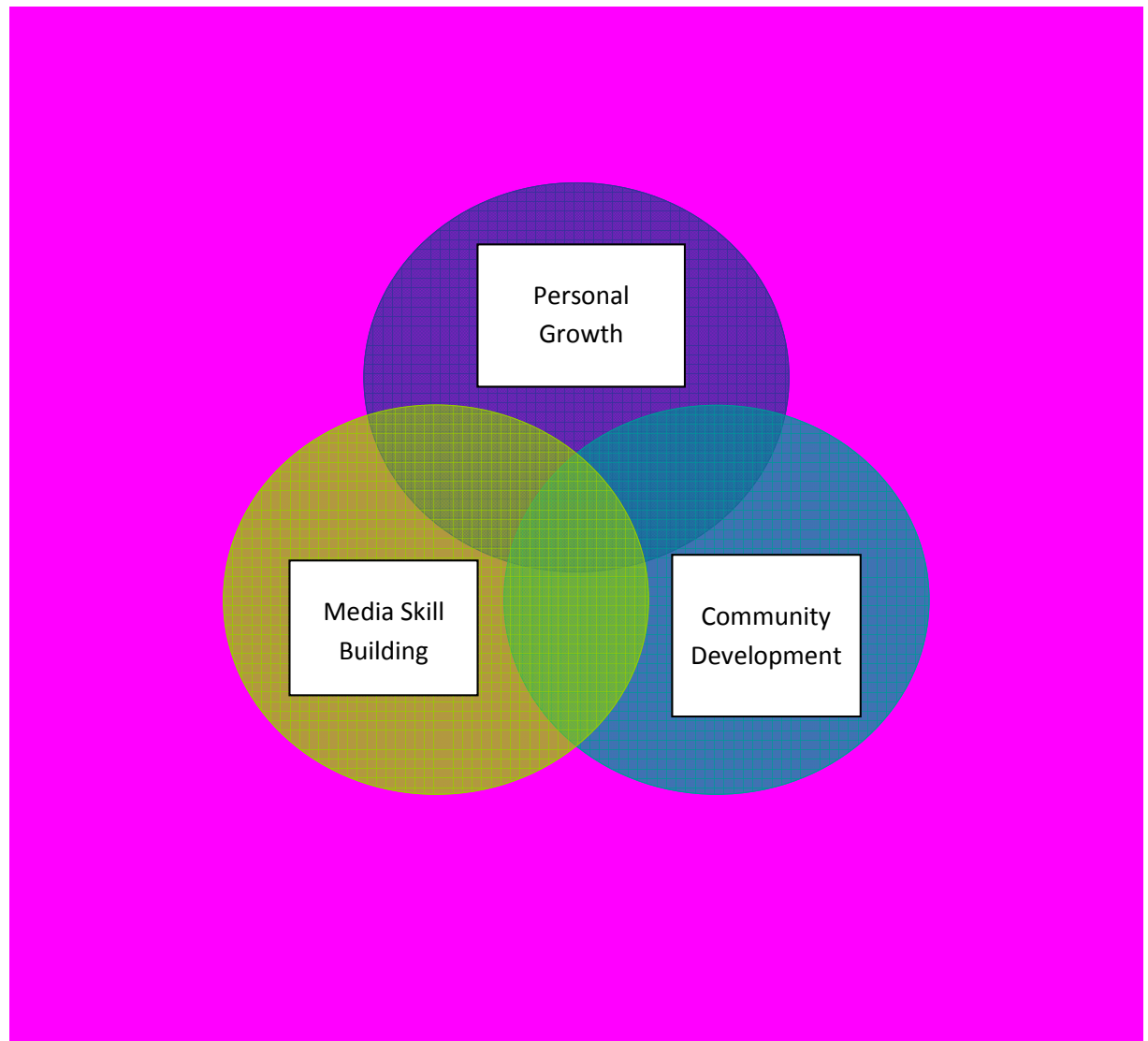


Figure 1. Personal Growth, Media Skill Building and Community Development

### **Personal Growth**

*“I have something to say that is worth listening to and worth saying.”*

Participants articulated that creating media around difficult issues like violence is a complex process that takes time. Sometimes the topic was very personal, such as the loss of a sibling or close friend to gun violence, and part of the process meant reflecting

on this experience and the lasting pain it left in their lives. Young people often talked about this process as venting and healing or helping them regain balance. Many young people talked about how meaningful it was to be able to express themselves by telling their story or examining hard questions about injustice in their communities. Through this process, whether it was creating a spoken word poem to perform, writing rap lyrics, painting a mural or creating a film, all of the young people said they gained self-confidence. Young people also talked about finding their voice and coming to the realization that they have meaningful things to say to a broader audience. For many of the youth, examining injustice and finding their voice inspired them to take action in their communities. This process pushed back against the emotional violence done to young people described earlier – feeling silenced and experiencing negative stereotypes.

## **Venting**

Young people in this study talked about venting in different ways, including having time to examine personal pain, de-stress, reflect, release anger positively to stay out of trouble. Antoine, a young spoken word artist at The Stage explained one of his poems about gun violence and the personal pain of losing his younger brother:

The reason I wrote it was about my little brother that was killed about three years ago. He was twelve. But it's like, I wrote it for him, but I when I finished it, the thing with Trayvon Martin happened so it was just sad. It was like a set of coincidences and people thought that's what I was talking about, but I wasn't. But then I was like, well let me switch up some things address both things so now it talks about my little brother and Trayvon Martin.

When we talked about what that process was like for him and why he needed to face that pain, he said:

Yeah because that's one of the ways you have to deal with it. In some form or way it has to be addressed because it's not going to go away because you want it

to. So you have to talk about it in some way. You don't necessarily have to talk about it but you need to find another way to show you know what's going on and hopefully that can help you.

Antoine demonstrates how creating and performing spoken word poetry can be valuable to examine pain, especially if the person may not want to talk about it. He also connected his personal tragedy to larger social injustice—the murder of Trayvon Martin. In the process, he recognized how personal tragedy also connected to institutional and structural violence young black men in America face. Like Antoine, Carlos, a young person at Educación Artística, talked about creating his poems as a way to vent:

So when I'm feeling angry or aggressive, I start writing about why I'm feeling that way. Or more like a poem about feeling mad. And when I'm done I feel a lot better about getting my aggression out on the paper instead of on somebody. There is this really powerful quote that I heard, I forgot who said it, it says, "Pick up a brush; don't pick up a gun." That really stuck out to me.

Carlos demonstrates how powerful having poetry as an outlet can be. It keeps him from being violent towards others and makes him feel better about himself. Yessenia, a youth worker at Educación Artística noted:

Once students start to like get interested in something whether that's art, or boxing or beauty, they also start to learn like I can do this as a career, I can do this as *pasatiempo*, as a stress relief, whatever may help the student in that stage. I used to use it [danza] in high school as a way for me, whenever I was angry to get my emotions out and once I was done, I felt accomplished.

Youth workers like Yesenia also understand the power of artistic expression for venting frustrations in meaningful ways. Rosaria, young person at Educación Artística added:

I feel like without art, dancing, rapping, music, you know—graffiti, drumming—I would be a totally different person, I'd rather spend my day drawing, listening to music and MMA [mixed martial arts] practice, and Aztec dancing than being out on the street doing other things. I feel like art, like art helps me use my time wisely. And, yeah. I feel happy with it, I feel like when I'm stressed out like I can listen to music and I can blast it out really loud. Or I can come to Aztec dance practice or I can you know, just get my notebook out, get all my markers and just you know draw? Draw what I'm feeling or I can come to MMA and practice and

release my stress. Or I can use drumming to just like, to like, to calm myself down sometimes I guess I can say, I don't know when I'm feeling I also use the same things like drawing, I listen to music, I write poetry, sometimes when I'm not feeling so good. I use poetry to express myself towards other people. I don't know, I guess just without art I wouldn't be the person I am.

Rosaria demonstrates multiple ways artistic expression is a way for her to vent. She is able to de-stress, keep out of trouble, and examine painful feelings. Creative activities also supported healing.

## **Healing**

Young people talked about healing, regaining their balance and finding peace as part of the personal process of creating media. Kaseem, a young spoken word poet connected his process of writing poetry with healing. He related a powerful story about his mom and how their relationship changed when he wrote her a poem:

My mom got cancer and I wrote a poem for her on her birthday and that was one of the deepest connections where my voice impacted her and we had a really great moment. There was a big gap between me and her and it kind of filled it up. That was one of the most concrete images that I could find where my poetry after healed something and it made something better. I feel like it is definitely a healing process.

Although he often enjoyed performing for the community, sometimes his most powerful and healing experiences happened when he wrote and performed for just one person.

Antoine also talked about the personal process of creating media through healing, which was also described as regaining balance. He said:

I'm a very loveable person, but I'm also very dark at the same time and people think that's weird. Most people think I'm a Gemini but I'm not so it's like I just have these two sides to me that are balanced out by this art.

Antoine shows how writing and performing poetry serves as a place where he can both express his dark and loving sides. He has experienced being *in* and getting *out* of a gang

and losing his younger brother. Spoken word is a way for him to address this darkness but also for him to be “who you see now, which is a loving, caring person who is very sensitive at times.”

Rosaria, who (also) raps and performs poetry talked about the personal process of writing and how it has changed her:

I would always think to myself, "Why am I in this? Why do I do this? Is it, you know, because I find it fun?" I guess I always and still do this to myself, ask those questions and sometimes it's hard for me to come up with the answer. But I found out that it brings peace into me when I'm feeling like very down or depressed.

When Rosaria thought deeply about the reasons why she writes and performs, she recognized the process has an important purpose in her life, that it brings peace to her when she is unhappy. Ramon recalled another student who had been able to heal through creating her mural at Educación Artística:

We had a student that graduated last year and part of her senior project was about his grandfather who was killed in Mexico where literally thousands of people have been murdered over the last four years. Nothing happens there when someone is murdered. Here you actually get closure because of how law enforcement works here. But in Mexico I think, two out of every hundred homicides are solved. So it was a difficult situation for the family and this was the youngest granddaughter of a whole family that I've worked with over the years. So it was a difficult situation and she was working on her senior project and she painted a big picture of her grandfather on his horse when she was a little girl walking off into a forest and she's walking right next to him. That was her most beautiful memory of her Grandfather. I saw it and the hairs on my arms were standing up right away. I was just really in awe of this painting and her work and the therapy she received from working on that art project.

Ramon demonstrates the healing power of creating art to examine pain and loss for young people.

## **Expressing Myself**



Young people talked about being able to express themselves through creating media. Antoine explained how the personal process of creating media gave him the ability to express himself:

I mean there are times that I don't get to finish because I'm off the stage crying. I have a poem about my Uncle Tim who passed away and the first time I performed it I started crying and ended up having to stop for a couple of minutes before I could continue.

For Antoine, being open and vulnerable, although difficult, has been an essential part of the process of both creating and performing his spoken word poetry. He has been able to get up in front of audiences and break down and get back up again. Rosaria described performing her poetry and rapping as another way to express herself. She explained:

I can express myself like differently than from dancing when I'm rapping, I can tell them what I'm feeling. I can tell them my pain. I can tell them my happiness, what I've been through and what the struggles are and stuff. I can express to like the community, to my family, to my parents, to my brothers, to my sister- to the teachers, to the whole school and it's, it's different than dancing.

Rosaria could explore pain that comes from broken or struggling relationships in her life through rapping and spoken word. Personal growth and community development overlap when she can express herself and connect with the community. Ayaan, a young person at Northridge who worked on a film about war, poverty and racism said, "you're just expressing your words and expressing yourself on the thing that you been wanting to express yourself on." Lee also talked about spoken word being an avenue for self expression:

Storytelling is something that I've always loved but never been able to express myself until I found spoken word. The ability of art is the ability to express whatever is on your mind that can be anger or frustration with the institutions around us.

Eduardo, a youth worker at Educación Artística supported the idea of creating a space for young people to express themselves in the way he set up his after-school rap group:

The idea was for the students come in and like just express how they feel and just let whatever they have inside—out. And, this is what I think: when you rap, when you write your stuff down. You write it down and you analyze it and then once it's written down you have a better understanding of who you are. You know what I mean? So you have better control of your emotions. It's like you are studying yourself.

This intentional and welcoming space Eduardo created provides an opportunity for young people at Educación Artística to come in and vent, examine their lives and positively express themselves while being reflective. These programs also supported participants to explore their identity.

### **Exploring Identity**

When I met Nikki she was new to muraling and graffiti. She loved to write poetry and sketch, which drew her to the mural project she and others at the community center were working on incorporating both poetry and graffiti. The project was named “Stop the Violence.” As part of the mural they wanted to paint a rose and use a quote from Tupac Shakur (1999) about roses growing in concrete. They planned to paint the mural on a small building on the back of the property at Northridge Community Center. Murals like the one Nikki described are created in relation to their physical setting and surroundings and often have something provocative to say about the community they are created in (Rainer, 2003). One way Nikki and other participants described the personal process of creating media was through exploring identity, which was described as telling my/our story. Referring to the mural, Nikki said, “It’s an opportunity to tell your stories. Cuz everybody got a story to tell. I think it would be better for them just let it out and tell

them to do better. I think it's a good release." Nikki wanted to be able to both tell a story about and to the neighborhood.

Yesenia, a youth worker at Educación Artística also related a powerful moment about a young person who had explored their identity/story and immigration through creating a film:

They did one on immigration and he told the story of . . . they write the paper, they do the presentation and they do a product. And his product was a video. There is a presentation and then you just look back and you saw all the tears because of the community members and how that has been their story. And it's like, the student gets to understand, this isn't only something that is important to me or has been part of my life, this is a bigger issue that, you know isn't just happening . . . yeah, it's the story of the community.

Shauna also talked about the idea of telling *our story* when she described the process of creating media:

We make our voices heard, we make sure that the world doesn't create our own history for us and so we're trying to keep that legacy alive by doing this video. We are trying to tell the world that we are the people that make the change and if we don't like it then we have to step up. And who better than the youth who it [violence] affects directly?

Shauna claims the right to tell her own history with her fellow film-makers as well as demonstrate the desire to take action and create change.

### **Asking Hard Questions about Injustice**

Carlos and other young people and youth workers talked about how part of the personal process of creating media included asking hard questions about injustice. He described a poem he had written that had challenged him to think about violence and injustice:

There was one called, "Let's Hold Hands" and it was on Martin Luther King Day and it was about not discriminating. It's about us all holding hands with each

other. The first part goes, “I have a dream . . . these were the words that inspired us to be a team. But yet we still fight . . . why do we battle? Who knows wrong from right?” It’s a lot more powerful because I had been listening to the song, ‘Where is the Love?’ when I wrote it. I had to rewrite it though because I got some of my tears on the paper.

Carlos was also able to connect his personal experience with history. Ramon, a youth worker at Educación Artística described another student who had spent the previous year creating a mural about violence. Ramon recalled how this student was able to ask hard questions:

There was a student who graduated a month and a half ago and did his senior project was on how the Virgin of Guadalupe was used to murder our indigenous spirituality pre-Columbian. He is a very Christian, religious student but also rebellious and revolutionary in a good way. A graffiti artist and other things. He has a really eloquent way of explaining what he wants to do and as Latinos we carry this baggage of the violence. In Mexico we call it Hijos de la Chingada as a synonym for violada or ‘children of the raped’, is like our war cry of our battles of 1810 and 1910 and you still hear that in a lot of Mexican music. We say this almost with pride because we’re Catholic and believe in the stories that were probably not true stories and that they were used as a pre-text for Europeans to rape my great grandmothers and I hate that, but it’s the cultural baggage that we carry as Latinos. And he dealt with that in his painting.

Ramon added, “We talk in youth work a lot about resilience. But resilience only happens when you address the trauma, when you address what has happened.” Ramon was aware of how difficult it could be for this young person to ask hard questions, but was also deeply impressed with this young person’s ability to “eloquently explain” the violent cultural baggage many Latinos/as carry through the painting of this mural. Lila, a youth worker at Northridge Community Center also talked about the process young people went through when they asked hard questions about injustice while making their film about war, poverty and racism:

It was very personal to them and it was the issues that the discussion were about directly related to their lives which was the three evils of war, poverty, and racism

and how that prevents them from seeing peace. Or, those are the root causes of the violence that affects their lives here.

Lila and Ramon demonstrate how facing hard questions about violence in the community can be deeply personal, but also connect young people's experience with a greater understanding of structural inequities and histories.

### **Gaining Confidence**

Young people talked about how they gained confidence through creating media, which was also described as the process of developing high expectations of self and being motivated to do more in life. Nikki noted, "It made me brighter and more independent and more confident in myself." Nikki also talked about how this confidence connected with her new sense of motivation. She said, "I think the young people should help out the community while they're young and the older people need to motivate them to do it. I'm motivated, I'm ready to do it. I just want help." The confidence she was gaining being part of the mural project was extending into other areas of her life inspiring her to get involved in her community. Kaseem noted, "I feel like at this point I'm learning to be confident in myself" and Theo connected his new found skills in camera work, writing and editing with a sense of confidence and accomplishment:

I mean, I'll feel good about it just because it's something I've spent a lot of time on and worked pretty hard on, but really I'm just excited to kind of see what it's going to turn out like in the end after it's all edited. I have become a lot more motivated to go out and do the things I want to do because now I know it can happen if I put some effort into it.

We can hear in Theo's response, a desire or motivation to do more because of the confidence he gained over time seeing the project through and working through daily obstacles. Through the long and complex process of working an entire year on his senior

project and acquiring new media skills, Theo gained the confidence to “do the things I want to do now.”

### **Finding My Voice**

Young people in this study talked about personal process of creating media as ‘finding my voice,’ which was described as realizing I have something important/meaningful to say. Shauna emphatically (and humorously) demonstrates her commitment to having her voice heard and the voice of other youth:

I’m going to be there making it clear that the voice of the youth needs to be heard. I’m going to come out and make sure everyone around me feels the same way. They are going to be really tired of seeing my face and hearing my voice because it’s annoying when it echoes! People are going to need to hear me, so look for me.

Lila, the youth coordinator at Shauna’s community center added about the youth that worked on the film, “I think they learned that their voices are very powerful and they can be part of the solution and they can make a difference and they can dream big.”

Kaseem said, “Being in the spoken [word] community helped understand that I have something to say that is worth listening to and worth saying” and Rosaria noted confidently about her rapping and poetry “I’ve learned I’m very creative sometimes.” Lee added, “When I was able to step on a stage and say things that mattered to me, I was surprised by people’s reactions. I thought it was just me but they were like, ‘Yeah, I get what you mean.’” Lee and other young people in this study realized that through creative expression they had important things to say and that their voices mattered. Much of what they worked on was challenging stereotypes.

### **Breaking Down Stereotypes**

Young people talked about how they hoped their work was able to break down stereotypes. Antoine explained his frustration with how young people are seen. He argued, “They need to break the clichés. Teenagers are not all bad people. We are a lot of things.” Antoine calls for a much wider range of how we see young people. Antoine’s spoken word poetry challenges stereotypes, especially those directed at young people in general. Kaseem had a different take on breaking down stereotypes, he said, “I guess it’s because I’ve tried to break the stereotypes. I feel like it’s kind of expected for me to get up there and talk about that [racism], and talk about my race and how it affected me growing up.” Rather than talk about race he chooses to look at relationships, violence and other topics. He feels that if he focuses on race, he will be thought of as a stereotypical Black spoken word artist. Lee also tries to challenge stereotypes through his poetry by creating a space where people of all ages and backgrounds could begin important conversations about difficult subjects like violence:

Hopefully my art form is able to destroy those stereotypes by directly bringing people from all over into the same room whether it’s the economics professor or the 13 year-old. Letting them share an experience, you know what I mean? Letting them talk about an issue in a way that they wouldn’t anywhere else.

He not only works to dispel stereotypes about himself in his performances, but to challenge the audience to see that understanding can happen and conversations can begin between people of different ages and backgrounds. In doing so, they all talked about how this motivated them to act on these issues.

### **Inspired to Take Action**

Youth in this study talked about how the personal process of creating media inspired them to take action, which was also described as creating change or being political. Nikki explained:

It's not even just the mural . . . it's more. The mural was cool but we should go out there and do something. Not just sit on the corner and yell a speech, nothing like that. Just invite people to join. Come with us. Come with us. We finna' stop all this and you going to get something out of it in the long run if you help us.

Nikki's powerful call to action is also an invitation to build relationships and community.

When I asked how she envisioned people coming together in her neighborhood she said:

Life is too short, you see this world going down . . . I think it's time to bring it up! Like come on let's all do this . . . walk, do a march, pick up garbage then go to a Barbeque. You can still have fun.

Nikki's story illustrates how social justice action can be a way of life. It can be both what a person does to fight for better living conditions as well as a time for community celebration.

At Northridge, they found support to act from a variety of sources. The original impetus for creating the film came after Shauna's youth group had a discussion about Martin Luther King Jr.'s Nobel Prize acceptance speech. In that speech he talked about poverty, racism and war as being the three evils that prevent peace in the world. Shauna and her fellow youth group members decided to examine those three evils in their own local context. Shauna's younger sister had helped Lila, the youth coordinator, to secure grant money to create and produce the film though none of them had any prior experience making a movie. The group completed a short version, but then left it on the shelf for a couple months. They took it back up and completed a second and final version by adding footage and going through several rounds of editing. Part way through the making of the first draft of the film, Shauna's sister was killed by gang violence. In the following quote



Shauna talked about the complex process of creating the film, what it meant to her after her sister died and how in the end the process inspired her to take action:

I mean it meant to me that there was still hope and that this was still an issue like, yeah we did this video before and it was because we wanted to send a message out that we needed help and that we knew that and that we were aware of that and that people needed to help us. But the second video meant to me that there is still hope. This video isn't going to solve things, but it's going to help bring awareness and we are going to solve things that we need to keep pushing for. Because after I did the video the first time, I don't know if I thought that was the answer but there was something inside of me that knew that it was gonna help. The second video showed me that this is an on-going process, that it's never gonna end unless we do everything we can. So that's what it brought to me. That's the thought that I had, that's how I felt, it's an on-going process. And in the second video confirms that this is what I want to do with my life . . . it was like I worked on it [the film] the first year because it affected me directly. Like, I lost my sister and I needed to do something to stay alive and aware and a person, a human, and something positive so that I didn't become a cruel person or a monster. So that's what I got, that idea, that gift to help people from, and then pretty soon it was consuming my life and this is what I'm gonna do.

Working on the film, even though it was difficult to examine violence in her community and face her sister's death became a positive and transforming experience for Shauna.

The process allowed her to vent and examine her pain, to be constructive and “not become a cruel person or a monster,” but also see herself as an agent of change, someone who could help the community. Shauna not only found her voice through the process of creating the film, but also developed a passion for community organizing and politics.

She explained how her goals have changed as a result of working on the film:

I want to do community development and community organizing. I would rather be in policy and development because, I wanna organize what already exists . . . I'm really ready. I'm really into politics and government right now. I started doing organizing with foreclosure properties. My first lobbying experience was about houses so then I started to talk to Occupy Minnesota and now I'm trying to volunteer with them more to learn more about the lobbying and policy makers.

The complex process Shauna experienced while creating the film inspired her to want to take action in her community. Lee was also inspired to take action as a result of being involved with The Stage and the spoken word poetry scene. He said:

People work really hard politically to make ourselves known. Work hard for things like, equality in GLBT issues, class and racism issues. Like when you're able to bring something out of people, then you are more willing to do more and it impacts all the different walks of life. You are more willing to be an activist or go out there and fight.

Lee was inspired by how people reacted to his performances and gained confidence to become an activist to fight for issues he saw as deeply important in the community.

### **Summary**

Personal growth was an important part of the complex process young people experienced when creating media addressing violence in their communities. Young people described personal growth as venting and healing or helping them regain balance. Many young people talked about how meaningful it was to be able to express themselves by telling their story or examining hard questions about injustice in their communities. Through this process, whether it was creating a spoken word poem to perform, writing rap lyrics, painting a mural or creating a film, all of the young people said they gained self-confidence. Many found their voice through creating media and art and coming to the realization that they have meaningful things to say to a broader audience. For many of the youth in this study, their new-found confidence inspired them to want to take action in their communities and create change. Next we explore what media skills young people developed through these projects.

### **Media Skill Building**

*“It’s not something you have to just sit there and read out of a text book and try to memorize, it’s something that you can engage your mind in because it’s in your life”*

Participants gained a wide range of media skills. For spoken word artists, the process of writing and re-writing, performing and re-writing was a regular practice vital to their work. The young artists all participated in a weekly writing circle at The Stage arts-based community center where they were able to bounce ideas off each other and benefit from the advice and critique of a local spoken word mentor. The youth spoken word poets I interviewed re-worked poems depending on audience reaction making it an ongoing process in gaining skills both in writing and performing. Young people who created a film talked about examining media images as part of their process and researching community issues particularly racism and poverty. Through the process of creating a film for the first time, the young people I spoke with gained skills in researching, using storyboards, filming (camera work) interviewing and editing. Young mural artists also researched community violence as well as the styles of different graffiti or aerosol artists and learned aerosol-painting techniques. Through participating in these media projects to address issues of community violence, young people further developed their artistic talents and learned skills in media project management. All of these they used to foster positive changes their communities.

### **Writing and Performing**

When we first met, Kaseem immediately grabbed his poetry notebooks out of a tattered backpack and set them between us. We talked for a while about his process when creating a new poem. Kaseem talked about how dedicated he was to improving his writing and performing of the spoken word pieces he creates. He illustrates how media

skills are built over time, especially when performing regularly on the spoken word scene:

If I could give any process I think it would be, I start by venting and getting out all of my feelings that I need to get out. Then I get into a structured kind of theme to each piece. From there, it actually is a very long process because while I am doing this I am actually performing this piece as well and seeing the reactions that it gets so I make sure to add. Being a spoken word artist, I need to take in what the audience is taking from my piece and if they aren't getting what I want from it. I have to adjust it or even adapt my piece to how they're taking it and say this is how people view this topic or how they think about it so maybe I should go a different way about it or stick to the way I'm going. So it's a process of trial and error.

Kaseem's process shows the three overlapping circles of personal development, media skill building, and community development. He begins with getting his "feelings out" and venting and from there begins to build a structure that he can revisit again and again based on audience reactions to his performance. The community is integral to his process since he uses their reactions to tweak his work. He continued to share more about his process:

In this community it is more typical to change and revise their poems. When I get up on stage and I perform, I make try to make sure that people are getting something from me. If I don't, that's also part of the process. If they don't get that, I feel like I need to work on that piece again because I'm not getting across what I need to get across.

Writing, performing, reflecting, changing, a circle of praxis embodies Kaseem's process of writing and performing spoken word poetry. Myhre (2009) believed and wrote that spoken-word is meant to be performed and not just written and it takes elements of "page poetry, theater, oratory, stand-up comedy, preaching and other vocal forms and mashes them up into something new and incredibly engaging." When we talked, Antoine had also been performing spoken word poetry for a number of years, which according to him made him an 'old timer.' Antoine talked about not only crafting his writing skills,

but what it meant to perform. He said, “It means a lot. I mean I still get nervous even though I’ve been doing this for seven years. I’m an old timer. But it still means a lot to me now.” Even after seven years Antoine is still dedicated to the craft of writing and performing and even “gets nervous” when performing. The young people who created a mural developed other artistic skills.

### **Mural Techniques**

When the group of youth at Northridge wanted to create a mural about violence in the community, Lila, the youth coordinator brought in a local mural and graffiti artist to help with planning what the youth wanted to do and teach techniques. One of the skills Nikki and other youth acquired was researching other mural artists and their work. Nikki explained:

Yeah we looked at people in California who did like a whole wall and how they sketched it. And they were like, I guarantee if you feel like you can’t do it by the end of the mural, you are gonna know how to do it!” I was like, “I’m gonna take your word for it.” He taught us how to do it.

Nikki and others learned about murals and graffiti history in places like California and they also learned aerosol painting techniques to prepare them to create the mural. They learned to do research before they made final decisions about what pieces they wanted to put up on the wall. I asked Nikki if she thought she had learned some new techniques and what they were. Nikki got up and demonstrated:

Yeah cuz once I do something, I wanna learn how to do it so just in case I wanna do it again. Like this solid wall you gotta to go soft, but if there is a brick wall, you know how there are lines in between them?, if you wanna do a line you go straight down and like, “shhhhhh” and use like a faster speed and keep on going to shade it in. Then shake up the bottle and clean the tops before you wanna finish.

Nikki added enthusiastically:

I tell people I'm on my way every Saturday morning that I am going to work on the mural. I love art so this is real cool to me. I'm going to do what I'm into, you know, plus I'm helping the community center and the community, trying to get a message.

Media skill building and community development overlap in Nikki's experience where she gets to do something she loves, learn new skills and get an important message out to her community. The groups that created videos also described the skills they developed.

### **Making Videos: interviewing, editing, camera work**

Several youth in this study worked on creating videos examining violence. Theo, a senior at Educación Artística had been working on a critical analysis of the local hip hop scene which he was making into a documentary. Theo talked about the overall vision for the film he was working on and how he addressed violence:

It's about hip-hop and how it impacts the community and how it affects the people that are in the community. I'm interviewing different artists and getting their opinions on it. Then I'm going to take that footage and put it into a sort of documentary for the end project. I mean like there's a lot of things in my project that kind of reflect on that [violence]. It talks a lot about positive and negative things and people in hip-hop and it's kind of like hip-hop...like them kind of magnifying society's problems . . .

Theo was building media skills by doing research about the history of hip hop as well as local history and interviewing local artists to get their opinions about how violence is portrayed through rap and how rappers speak about violence. When I asked if he had gained new skills through the project he noted, "I've done some film as well as interviewed some local hip-hop artists from the area and gone to shows and gotten footage. I guess writing too." Ayaan also talked about interviewing for her film project. She noted, "We talked to some of the community members to see who we could interview and like the perfect peoples to interview." Ayaan and the youth she worked

with in the film learned to go into the community and be able to explain the topic of their film and ask who might be “perfect” to interview. They were able to rely on the expertise and local knowledge of community members to enhance their project. It was important to Ayaan and her fellow film-makers to share the voices of people in the community.

For young people and youth workers in this study who had relatively little or no experience working on editing films, it was both an arduous and rewarding process. When a group at The Stage wanted to learn to make and edit films Elizabeth said, “We didn’t have any people with a lot of film editing experience and were new to our film editing program so . . . [laughing] . . . it was quite the process.” Ayaan noted, “And man, editing the videos was a hassle man, but at the same time it was like something, you know, you learning something new, and picking up some skills.” For young people and youth workers who took on making a film in their programs the learning curve was steep, but also gave them a sense of accomplishment as they built new media skills.

## **Research**

Young people in this study talked about gaining research skills by exploring and examining different sources to support their media projects. Lee explained how he looked at popular culture and media to create topics for his spoken word poems:

The main reason I write my poetry or my main motivation is, I almost take a sociological stance when I write. A lot of people take a personal approach or write about their life but I love writing about phenomenon that I see, whether it’s on TV or in the media. It can be something simple like watching Superman. Like why do we worship heroes?

Deconstructing issues Lee sees as important help him construct new poems. Yesenia also described deconstructing images from popular films with Latin@ youth at Educación Artística.

Like last year we had one where we were watching videos, videos that students knew that like, that had a lot of issues involved Blood in Blood Out [film about poet Jimmy Santiago Baca and East LA Gang Los Vatos Locos], and they had to see different videos they knew growing up. They also had to write on them and so like they'll pick the issues that, that were in the video and also write you know, what they thought about it, you know how it's portrayed.

The young people who participated in this group examined films that were popular among Latin@ youth in the community paying attention to the portrayal of issues in the films. They gained skills in both critical deconstruction of media images and writing.

Ayaan talked about researching the particular topic of racism for the film she worked on with young people at Northridge. She said:

We looked around the community and seen what was bothering us the most. And it was like, we kinda knick-knack picked which ones [problems] that was really bothering us you know, and we did our research behind that and got our sources and stuff like that. We did internet work, and reading the newspapers and stuff for about a week before we even got to like start on the movie.

Jenna: So even beyond the movie-making skills, you learned research skills?

Ayaan: Yeah! And we was looking up a bunch of stuff, like looking up racism in different countries and [here] and how it works out and like all the research with the internet and the newspaper. Like we learned all about that stuff first before we even talked about the situation and like, we knew the real-life experiences ourselves. Along with our resources from the computer and stuff, like . . . that made it perfect for us to make a movie because we had all of our resources right there.

For Ayaan and other young people who worked on the film project, research on the broader topic of racism was one of the first steps in their process. We can hear the enthusiasm she has for leaning these new research skills. Doing research on the topic



gave Ayaan and other young people working on the film a sense of confidence that they had “their resources” set up before making the film.

## **Summary**

Learning new media skills was an integral part of young people’s experiences in the programs I studied. These new skills ranged from writing and performing spoken word poetry to learning muraling techniques to all the technical skills needed to make a film. Even though some skills were difficult to embrace like editing, young people felt excited when they saw the final product of their work. If we look again at the center of our venn diagram we can see that building media skills overlaps with personal growth, especially the confidence young people gained. Lila also connects these new media skills with personal growth:

Well I think media is a really nice tool for the younger generations because they like hands on and they like playing with things and creating things. They are really into digital technology and social media. That’s kind of the world we’re in right now but it’s very much learning as well. I mean, they learn skills they can use. I mean filming, editing, recording, performing, and its healthy ways of self expression and instead of that lashing out and resorting to violence or self prescriptions you know it’s an outlet. I think it’s an outlet where they can actually be seen and heard in very powerful ways.

Media skills are talked about as real skills young people can use. In learning these skills and using them to examine violence in their communities Lila described young people feeling “seen and heard in very powerful ways.” Being seen and heard for young people in this study was also connected with community development. In the next section young people and youth workers talk about the importance of the community they built with each other within their programs as well as sharing their media addressing violence and creating a dialogue with the wider community.

## **Community Development**

*“We finna’ to stop all this and you going to get something out of it in the long run if you help us.”*

Along with personal growth and media skill building, participants spoke of creating a dialogue with the community through their media. For spoken word artists, they spoke of the feeling of “having a conversation” with the audience and talked about wanting to make difficult topics like violence accessible to a diverse audience. They also sought to raise awareness among audience members and inspire them to create change around issues of community violence. Youth mural artists and film-makers also saw themselves as creating a dialogue on the issue of community violence. Youth talked about being part of a collective and how much they had changed over the process of creating media with others. Community development for the young people then worked in two ways: one, as developing dialogue and relationships in the wider community through sharing their media; and two, building relationships and a collective within their programs.

### **Creating a Dialogue**

Young people in this study talked about sharing their media and creating a dialogue with the wider community as having a conversation, relating to, connecting with, and creating bonds. Some also adapted their work based on community reaction to their projects.

Lee had grown up in a northern suburb where he was too short and “too Hmong” to play football and not good enough to be a b-boy dancer. He struggled to find a place to

express himself until he found The Stage and began performing regularly. For participants like Lee, performing and connecting with the community—both as audience and spoken word artists was integral to his work. Lee talked about the experience of performing and creating a dialogue:

I go up there and if they want to respond by hooting and hollering or snapping their fingers, it's like we're talking to each other. We can respond to one another. It's like a conversation. I've always been a quiet kid and didn't like having personal conversations with people. I loved public speaking and when I'm up on stage having a conversation with the entire audience as if it's one person.

Lee and other participants talked about how often in their private lives they could be shy and struggle with one on one conversation, but performing for the community provided them with a deep connection. Kaseem another young poet added:

The first time I saw somebody get up on stage and pour their heart out to me through a poem, I was like, Wow! People can do this and actually share their feelings. And I realized I was actually reciprocating those feelings by listening and understanding and having conversations with that person about what they're going through and connecting to myself. Like I said, it's all about connecting and making sure that people know that they're not alone because when you're alone, it's not good.

Kaseem shows how personal growth and community development overlap demonstrating how spoken word poetry allows people to express themselves and create deep connections with the community. Kaseem experienced listening to spoken word poets as “having a conversation with that person” and “connecting it to myself.” The whole purpose is to build a space where no one feels alone. This space speaks back to the violence of feeling isolated that we heard from young people earlier in this chapter because “it's all about connecting.”

For Nikki, a young person who worked on the mural project at Northridge, she hoped the mural she and other young people created would ask others to stop and reflect on violence:

The mural was all about stopping the violence and like, rest in peace about people that died in the community. And just trying to show people love . . . cause people are dying every day and people need to sit down and think about it. I hope they really do that because I had to sit down and think about it. Look at the mural and then look at yourself. Like look at the people on the street and then look at yourself.

Nikki's powerful message includes commemorating those they had lost, but also asking hard questions about injustice. She implores people in the community to self-reflect and stand in front of the mural as a mirror. We might imagine too that the mural publicly performs, posing hard questions and inviting those who stop to begin a dialogue about violence in the community.

**Making Difficult Issues Accessible.** Part of creating a dialogue for Lee and other young people in this study was the importance of making difficult issues accessible to a wider audience. He explained:

We can't just assume that everyone is a racist. We have to assume that some people are ignorant some are educated and just need more. It's about whatever we're willing to do to meet them there. I'm telling them about issues that they're hearing for the first time and I'm trying my best to introduce it in a way that they're familiar with. They say that all knowledge is built upon other knowledge so I'm always trying to do that to help them build on something that they don't know anything about by helping them understand it's something they *do* know something about. I try to take that approach every time I write a poem.

When I asked Lee to tell me more about how this process of being accessible worked, he replied:

I only write poems for slams where if I was in front of a bunch of high schoolers that I've never met, would they be able to listen to and understand my poem? As opposed to going to a stage full of seasoned poetry veterans where they

understand all the clichés of poetry or a bunch of activists. It's just preaching to the choir. I think it's about getting out there and finding people you can affect.

Antoine noted, "I would like to think that as a performer and an artist, I am relatable to people." For Lee and others like Kaseem and Antoine, building a connection and making their poetry accessible to their friends, family and community was in many ways more important to them than impressing fellow spoken word artists. They strove to make their messages clear whether to first-time audience members or seasoned veterans of the spoken word scene. Lila recalled a discussion with the group of young people who had been working on the film about poverty, racism and war. She said, "But it was like that moment of enlightenment where it was like, 'wow, we can use media to help on my end and enlighten other people the same way we've been enlightened.'" Her group had grown in their own knowledge through creating the film and came to realize how this medium could be successful in making the difficult issue of violence and their message accessible to the wider community.

**Creating new Understanding.** Creating new understanding was another way young people and youth workers in this study talked about community development and public performance. Eduardo talked about his after school rap group and said:

I want the kids to notice that through rap you can do a lot of things, like you can teach people with it, tell the people how you feel. You can change minds and the way people think, or at least you know at least make them think for a bit.

Personal growth and community development overlap where Eduardo shows how rapping can be a way not only for young people to express themselves, but create new understanding by making people think or even change their minds. Antoine noted,

I mean I want them to walk away with something whether it be understanding or guilt, or whatever. Just something for them hold onto and to remember me by. I

go to different place like the Artist's Quarter or something and they don't really know my name but it's like 'hey you're that one guy who did that poem'.

For Antoine it's important that his poetry resonates strongly enough with people to make them feel or think in a different way. He shows how he is *known* by his poems, that people may not remember his name, but they remember him because of the experience they had listening and responding to his spoken word performance.

Lee talked about wanting "the economics professor" and "the 13 year old" at his spoken word shows to understand his messages. He said, "So when I talk about these issues I want to make *both* people understand. That's always been my goal and specifically issues that we don't always want to talk about like racism, sexism, violence, those kinds of things." He added, "It's not going out there and saying, 'racism is wrong'. That's not what poetry is about. It's about making you think *why* racism is wrong and how can we combat this?" Lee's desire to make people understand is also connected to his ability to be accessible and make difficult issues like violence resonate with the community across age and background.

Ayaan was moved when there was a public screening of the film she and other young people had worked on at Northridge for so long. She said, "I got some positive feedback, but also just looking at the people's faces while they watching the movie was the surprising impact for me you know? Like for you to just sit there and understand the meaning of it." For Ayaan, having others in the community understand the meaning and message of the film was powerful and unexpected. The process personally changed Ayaan, but now she could see the potential impact on others in the community.

Nikki talked about how she hoped the poetry piece she wanted to incorporate into the mural would make people think deeply about challenging violence in the community:

I hope they get: ‘Stop the violence.’ Cause people are dying every day and people need to sit down and think about it. I hope they really do that because I had to sit down and think about it. Look at the mural and then look at yourself . . . people should stop and read it and they should read it and really feel, you know? If you’re walking past and read the poem you should get something out of it and be opened up to it.

Through personal growth and her own examination of violence Nikki tells us she needed to “sit down and think about it” and she hopes the mural will challenge everyone in the community that sees it to do the same.

### **Inspiring Action**

Young people in this study hoped their projects would inspire others to take action. Lee explained:

The thing for me is that, you’re willing to see . . . it’s great going up there and reading your poem but it is just the first step . . . but you’re willing to see the effect of poetry and the idea of accessibility. You are able to see how much people care about something and if they don’t care about something you’re able to hopefully make them understand how important it is, and that’s a powerful act. It motivates yourself to understand that it’s so much more than words. People actually care about this more than you think so you’re more willing to go out there and change things. I want you to understand that it’s not about pretty words at the end of the day, but it’s about what we do. How we act on our words about what we hear.

For Lee, the most inspiring spoken word poets left him wanting to take action in the community, and that is what he aspired to do himself in his performances. He talked about his mentor from the writing circle at The Stage:

He talks about things that really matter. We all have poems that we love to say but when I hear his poetry I really want to go out there and change things. His poetry fundamentally changes how you see things. It brings out the best in you and that is a good sign of good poetry.

Good poetry for Lee does not stop with dialogue or new understanding, but if done well, inspires action.

Inspiring action was also part of the community development aspect of working on the film for youth at Northridge. Beyond the personal choices of individual youth who worked on the film to create change was a desire to inspire the whole community to “wake up” and take part. Shauna recalled the feeling after they showed the film at a local theater for the first time to the community:

So this video just brought this sense of awareness, like people have... This has been an issue for awhile in the world. This is not new. A norm. Like it's unacceptable, and people have made that clear and set new standards and new norms and so that video was just to wake us up. Like, we have been here before and we will overcome this and we, as the youth, are the people who should let you know that it's affecting us and you as adults with the power of choice should support us.

Shauna references the idea of *violence as normal*, but immediately pushes back to say it's not acceptable and can be overcome (violence is normal, but it shouldn't be). She also suggests a firm call for youth and adults to work together and be in honest relationship with one another if things are going to change—“we should let you know it's affecting us” and “you should support us.” We recall Nikki's call for everyone to join her:

It's not even just the mural . . . it's more. The mural was cool but we should go out there and do something. Not just sit on the corner and yell a speech, nothing like that. Just invite people to join. Come with us. Come with us. We finna' to stop all this and you going to get something out of it in the long run if you help us.

Not only was Nikki personally inspired to take action after working on the mural, she wanted the community to take action with her. “We should go out there and do something.” The mural invites dialogue, reflection and new understanding, but for Nikki it's also a call to action.

### **Performing as Catharsis, Transcendence and Being Me**

Young people in this study talked about having a dialogue with the community, creating new understanding and inspiring action by sharing their media. Some also talked



about their experiences performing which they described as catharsis, transcendence or giving the community something of me/being myself. Eduardo explained:

I think it's really powerful just the—just to have the guts to do it, that's really powerful. Cause that's just, it's building that sense of saying, you can just be yourself and just come out. And just expressing how you feel to like, how you feel, what you're thinking about, maybe the way you think, the way you want things to be.

Eduardo demonstrates how performing can be a place for young people to show great courage in saying what they want to say. Performance becomes an opportunity for young people to reveal and be their real selves and express their true feelings. Lee explained the feeling of catharsis in his performances:

And then when you hit it or are getting in there or slamming, you forget where you are and I think it's one of the most beautiful things in the world because you feel like . . . you. You understand who you are at that moment and everyone in the room understands who you are at that moment. It's like a catharsis.

Lee also explained that performing can also have a transcendent quality, “When I’m up there I forget who I am. I forget what clothes I’m wearing, what I look like.” In a sense, Lee is completely engaged and “there” yet “beyond there” when a performance is going well. Antoine also noted, “I mean but by the time I get through the second or third line, if I’m feeling it, then everything just goes away.” Rosaria also talked about her experience dancing in the community like Kaseem had about performing his poetry—giving something of me. She explained by giving an example about a recent performance in the community:

When we perform, when Aztec dancing, when we're performing that- I guess I feel I give out to the community. I feel like, you know, they, they're amazed at what they see and I feel like-. It's like, I'm showing you my tradition, I'm showing you my culture, I'm showing where I come from or where my family comes from or what my ancestors did and what still goes on in the community.

Not only is the performance about giving something to the community, it is also about telling my/our story. Like Lee, Rosaria also talked about the experience of dancing and drumming for and with the community as being transcendent:

When I'm in dance I feel like I'm in a whole different world like- and dance, I also drum. And when I dance it's something else, I can, I can like you know be myself and just dance the way I want to and just flow with the beat of the drum. And when I am drumming, it's a whole different world. Drumming is my life. I love to drum. I have been drumming for like 6 years, maybe 5. And, when I'm, when I drum it's like . . . like-they hear me. I speak to them by drumming, I speak to the rest of the dancers by drumming. They feel my love for Aztec dancing and they flow to my beats and I, they have control of me in the way they dance and stuff. And I feel, I feel like it brings peace to my inner body, to my soul.

Rosaria is creating a dialogue through drumming with her fellow dancers as well as telling the story of the community and connecting with the audience. Personal growth also overlaps in this moment and story where she tells us the experience of drumming and dancing “brings peace to my inner body, to my soul.”

### **Collective Transformation**

Youth in this study were not only transformed personally through performance but they also talked about growing through their work together in a collective and transformative process/journey with other media artists. Lee noted, “My artist community, they understand the process and the way I see the world and paint pictures with my words and it’s important because they can respond in a way that fulfills my creative needs.” He also noted, “Sometimes when I go on stage I’ll be the only person of color, which is difficult and why I love my spoken word collective that is so supportive. “ For Lee, his collective of fellow spoken word artists is there for him when he needed support and felt alone. Other young people like Carlos saw themselves as part of a collective community of fellow artists. At Educación Artística Carlos said:

Everyone here is really an artist and I'm in this community. It really is an artist community here. There's murals that have been made by students around here and if you didn't know better, you'd think it was done by a professional artist, but no! This is everyone here.

Kaseem talked about the positive experience he has had coming to see himself as part of the spoken word community:

I feel like every time I go to open mic or a slam I just get this energy where it's like, I'm doing this and I'm a part of this community and it fuels me to keep on doing it and not give up on it. Especially being the person I am, I'm quick to find myself alone and thinking, maybe I shouldn't be doing this. Or maybe my art isn't appreciated and going to places like that and know that people appreciate it and that there are others doing it gives me inspiration and it's just amazing.

For all of the spoken artist youth participants in this study, building relationships with each other, fellow artists and the wider community was integral to their work and own transformation as artists. Being part of their community center's writing circle, crafting and re-crafting their work, and sharing their ideas through performance all contributed to community development.

Shauna, like many other participants felt supported by being part of a group. The young people that worked on the film together at Northridge went through losses together. Each person had their own way of examining loss and violence, but they could rely on each other and "do something together."

If you're the only one going through your situation and I'm the only one going through my situation, then we're going through it together. We are the only ones but still together we are doing something together. There's always a sense of togetherness . . . just having the support of the group, it made it easy.

With the constant support of the group, Shauna was able to face her grief about her sister's death and slowly find her voice and become determined to create change in her community. Ayaan added, "So like all together, we was working together as a group and that was one of the good things about it cuz everybody was on the same page." Elizabeth

at The Stage said, “It’s a very special connection because of sharing personal and meaningful conversations . . . a self-acceptance and transformation of self-identity happens, people go from hopeless to hopeful . . . ” This special connection with other young people and caring adults provided the space for transformation to happen for young people in this study.

We now understand the components of personal growth, media skill building and community development more in-depth for young people in this study, but it is important to note that each young person had a complex whole story to tell. They are real people with real lives and histories. Pulling several previous and new quotes into the context of Ayaan’s story, I illuminate how the circles of personal growth, media skill building and community development overlap in her experience.

### **Ayaan’s Story**

*“And it was a hassle, but like, we all was in it.”*

Ayaan grew up directly behind the community center where she has spent many days volunteering at the center’s day care. She was part of the group with Shauna and Lila that created the film about war, poverty and racism. Ayaan experienced personal growth, built media skills and experienced community development over the two-year process of creating the film. Her story embodies the central overlapping space in our venn diagram.

Like Shauna, finding her voice was an integral part of Ayaan’s personal development throughout the process of creating the film. “It really was like a moment where I could say and speak upon everything that I’ve been thinking about or feeling and really just put my words into it.” Ayaan, like Shauna, had lost a sibling to gun violence.

“My brother had passed away in 2010, before that actually. October 2009, it was like before the movie, yes before the movie. So of course I really wanted to speak upon a lot of these things that’s going on.” She echoed Shauna’s sentiment that having the project to work on, examining feelings about the violence she experienced, and having a way to talk about it was important to her.

Ayaan talked about the process of developing a whole new set of media skills throughout the project. Here, she talks about setting up interviews and doing background research on society issues and connecting local lived experience with historical context:

We looked around the community and seen what was bothering us the most. And it was like, we kinda knick-knack picked which ones [problems] that was really bothering us you know, and it was like, and we did our research behind that and got our sources and stuff like that so. We did internet work, and reading the newspapers and stuff like that for about a week before we even got to like start on the movie. We talked to some of the community members, and members in our community to see who we could interview and like the perfect peoples to interview. Like one’s that been through what we been through and it just made the whole movie perfect.

She and other youth working on the film had multiple ways of doing research—print, online and community member interviews. You can hear the care and respect for the project in Ayaan’s voice and also the joy and excitement, “it made the whole movie perfect.” This joy may seem startling at first glance when considering the subject of the film, but perfect for Ayaan didn’t necessarily mean happy. Perfect was more about the experience of learning with and from her peers and community and feeling heard and supported. She also recalled not only interviewing, but also learning to edit:

And then we found out we needed to interview people you know, and then we gotta edit the videos. And man, editing the videos was a hassle man, but at the same time it was like something, you know, you learning something new, and picking up some skills.

Ayaan was honest about the tedious nature of editing, but she also recognized the positive skills she was picking up along the way. A local film-maker and community member volunteered countless hours in the basement of a near-by church to help teach the young people working on the film how to edit. Lila, the youth coordinator at Northridge explained the group's process:

We kind of divided the group up into teams. A team of people who wanted to do video diaries and team that wanted to do interviews, or research, or the storyboard and so each week we would meet and divide into our teams and they would take on little pieces of this big puzzle that we would eventually fit together.

I think media is a really nice tool for the younger generations because they like hands on and they like playing with things and creating things. They are really into digital technology and social media. That's kind of the world we're in right now, but it's very much learning as well. I mean, they learn skills they can use. I mean filming, editing, recording, performing, and its healthy ways of self expression and instead of that lashing out and resorting to violence or self prescriptions, you know it's an outlet. I think it's an outlet where they can actually be seen and heard in very powerful ways.

Here all three circles of personal growth, media skill building and community development overlap. The experience young people had working on the film was a positive outlet for youth to examine their feelings about violence, a way to build important skills, and work in complex ways as a community to complete the project.

For Ayaan too, the experience of making the film not only included a space to personally find her voice and gain technical media skills, but was rich because of the community that developed around the project. She talked about the idea of creating new understanding. Ayaan recalled her reaction observing the audience after the youth group screened the film at a local community theater:

Like I got some positive feedback but also just looking at the people's faces while they watching the movie was the surprising impact for me you know, like for you to just sit there and understand the meaning of it, like that was the main part you know.

Ayaan along with other youth who had worked on the film were not only proud of their hard work, but hopeful that their message would get across and inspire people to think deeply about violence. It was meaningful for them to create the film and they wanted it to have a meaningful impact on the community. Lila also recalled about showing the film:

It was like that moment of enlightenment where it was like, 'wow, we can use media to help on my end enlighten other people the same way we've been enlightened.' And through our own voices and our own testimonies and people in our community and faces we know and relate it to one of the greatest leaders of all time and tie in his voice through his speeches.

Lila makes the link not only with the development of the youth group as a community themselves and their impact on the wider community, but also the skills they learned through research that connected their local lived experience with Martin Luther King Jr.'s legacy and a greater sense of history.

Finally, Ayaan like many other youth and youth workers talked about their growth through working together and being part of a collective and transformative process with others. Here Ayaan talks about her experience being part of the group and what it meant to her:

It's like all the stuff I was holding, I finally got to speak my mind and talk about it and have really to express myself with a group of people that knew what I was talking about cuz they going through the same thing too. Like that's the best thing about it like, that's what I learned about it, like caring about more people first. And I became more of a people person and I got to express myself like, and people will listen if you really got something to say.

Jenna: So it was important to do it as a group together?

Ayaan: Yeah, it felt so much better. I mean like, yeah. For a whole week straight we were coming out of school running with Lila, running to the community center, 3:00 or 3:30 p.m., we all here. We go fix the movie and we stay here til like 9:00 or 10:00, fixing the movie. And it was a hassle, but like, we all was in it. It was a good experience. I loved that experience. I love that movie.

Ayaan's description brings together all the overlapping circles again of personal growth, media skill building and community development. She was able to express herself, vent, find her voice/have something to say, learn new skills and be supported by a group of people who knew intimately what she was going through because they were going through it too. They could face violence and loss together. Ayaan became dedicated enough to the project to want to work until 10:00pm every night of the week despite the hassles of editing. Being part of the group with other young people and caring adults was vital to the transformational process that Ayaan experienced inspiring her to become connected with and care more for those around her, to become "more of a people person." If one of the main goals young people have when presenting their work on violence to the community is to change people, it is clear that the process also changes them.

### **Summary – From Hopeless to Hopeful**

Of the nine young people interviewed for this study, four had younger siblings or close friends who had died due to violence. All the young people in this study have experienced and endured multiple kinds of violence and trauma. The community-based programs in this study did not ignore the young people's trauma nor did they blame them for the conditions they live in or ask them to turn away from their lived experience. The young people in this study were invited and encouraged to ask tough questions about the violence in their lives and were supported by their peers and caring adult youth workers. "It's a very special connection because of sharing personal and meaningful conversations . . . a self-acceptance and transformation of self-identity happens, people go from hopeless to hopeful . . ."



For the young people in this study, becoming committed agents of change didn't happen overnight. Their transformation was born out of a process where personal experience, new knowledge and skills and building community overlap. Their experience shows us how community issues such as violence are grounded in the personal and can be taken up and acted upon in groups. Young people in this study did not do this work in isolation, but in the presence of peers and youth workers willing to process pain, anger and healing. It was through this long and trusting process with each other and other caring adults that young people gained the confidence to take action and see new possibilities for themselves and their communities.

Opportunities to create media don't happen in a vacuum or unintentionally. A space to cultivate creative and intellectual skills and a sense of social justice awareness is not a given for most urban youth (Cammarota, 2011). What can we learn from youth workers who support and encourage young people to examine injustice by creating media? What is their role in the overlapping spaces? The next chapter explores the practices that support the personal growth, media skill building and community development experienced by young people in this study.

## CHAPTER 5. YOUTH MEDIA PRACTICE

Youth media practice can be done in the context of an intentional art-based program, but it can also happen when a group of committed young people and caring adults choose to create media together. The themes in this chapter complement and enhance what we learned from youth about the complex process of creating media by adding layers of “what goes on” and “what people do” in practice. The five major themes in this chapter invite the reader to “come in” and in the end “come back,” in the same way youth workers and young people talked about their experience in these programs. We move from an invitation to join and start a conversation to learning more about what opportunities are available in these programs for young people to create media. From there we explore how urban youth media practitioners act as allies and advocates supporting young people in tangible and intangible ways. Finally, we explore what it means to create a sense of belonging, to get to know young people and work with them to create change.

### **Come in: I’m Here, I’m Listening, Let’s Talk**

Youth participants and youth workers talked about effective practice as being welcoming, accessible, approachable and present in the community as well as being ready to listen and talk with young people and their families:

- “I work out of my office, which is on-site so I’m much more accessible . . . I’m the person that’s approached all the time.”
- “I think our families just really like to know that they can just walk through the door and talk to me or the principal. We are very accessible for them.”

- “He’s very intentional. He always been very approachable and he’s such an important figure in my growth.”

Ramon, a youth worker and parent/community liaison, talked about the intentional welcoming atmosphere at Educación Artística. He noted, “None of our teachers have offices, it’s an open air room where students can go and work on homework and communicate with the teachers right there.” He also added, “Many of our students and family look at Educación Artística as a real refuge in the difficult times. If you see the murals on the walls, it takes them back to their country of origin.” Youth participants Ayaan, Nikki and Shauna who all live by Northridge Community Center talked about how Lila the youth coordinator was accessible and “kept the door open.” Nikki added, “If I was just walking by and I wanted to see Lila and catch up, I could let her know what I’m doing,” and Ayaan said, “If you need to talk to Lila about resumes or job searches or anything or help with school, you come talk to Lila.” Lila was available when they wanted to stop by and just have someone to talk to, as well as when they need more formal guidance for job searching and school work. She was also accessible to young people when she was not at work. Shauna described Lila’s attitude about keeping open lines of communication with youth:

She never forces you on anything. If you don’t want to do something she wants you to do, she understands. She’ll be like, ‘okay, I’m gonna go and if you change your mind you’re always welcome.’ I remember seeing Lila say stuff, like I’ve seen someone completely say no to something she said, and she’s like, ‘Alright well, the doors still open.’ Like with no harsh feelings, nothing.

Lila explained how she thinks about the space when youth arrive:

It’s that space that’s created and they can come in here, they will be heard. I don’t care what the topic of the conversation is, I’m going to be listening and I’m going to give them my undivided attention.

She shows how being prepared to be present and engaged starts with an invitation to listen. There is no pre-set idea about what the discussion needs to be about. Maria, the director of Educación Artística and a seasoned youth worker added, “You have to listen to what the kids want. I don’t know, because otherwise I wouldn’t have my skateboarders in here.” Ramon talked about the power of listening to youth, not only at Educación Artística, but as a philosophy about youth work. He argued:

We need to quit creating structures and concentrate on resources and listening to youth and allowing them to create what it is they want because I don’t think adults have the credibility any more in this country to say that we’re right and that young people are crazy and rebellious. We need to let them do what they think is right.

Ramon expressed frustration with bureaucratic red tape that often separates young people and caring adults that want to support them. Ramon does not buy into the popular imagination that young people are just “rebellious” rather, he wants to create a space where their ideas can become reality. Elizabeth, the youth coordinator at The Stage arts-based community program said:

If you can talk to people and be genuine and sincere and not create empty promises, then you’re good. A lot of the people that come here are awesome and just want to talk about life, so a willingness to do that is great. Some people get scared to talk to teenagers about legitimate things that are going on in their life, not wanting to go too deep.

Youth workers in this study not only made themselves present by listening and talking with youth every day, but they did not shy away from the deep conversations. They were not afraid to talk with youth about difficult issues, indeed, the youth workers saw it as integral to their work.

### **Inviting and Welcoming Families and Communities**

The youth workers in this study also saw communicating with young people's families and communities as essential to their work. They reached out to families in hopes of getting to know young people better, but to also say "we're here" and invite any young people that want to explore making media and art to stop by. Sometimes this job wasn't easy. Maria described approaching a parent who had come to drop off their child one morning at school. Maria explained that most of the young people who had come to Educación Artística came from bigger public schools where the only call home from the principal meant your child was in trouble. It was clear this parent was concerned that their child was in trouble as Maria approached them. Maria recalled:

This morning a parent couldn't believe that I was talking to them. I was like, 'You're a parent. You are one of the most important people in the community. If I don't know you, how am I supposed to know your kid?'

One of Maria's goals at Educación Artística was to get to know all the families and find ways to invite them to visit. Yesenia also talked about her intentional connections that went beyond her relationships with young people:

I have a lot of connections with the community and families and that's so important in working with youth. Just making sure they are, they have the support all the way around from family, from community, and from you know the youth worker themselves and the programs.

Lila added:

I really try hard to connect with families and parents as much as I do young people because I know that, I have the time and need them to get the kids here. Introducing myself and building trust with them is very important.

Finally, like other youth workers Elizabeth talked about how she regularly goes out into the community to talk about the programs at The Stage in hopes of connecting with more young people. She noted, "We're trying to make sure that the immediate community knows who we are and we're trying to get our name out as a free something

that they can do.” For many urban youth, paid programs can be cost prohibitive so for Elizabeth it was important to get the message out that all were welcome at The Stage and cost would not be a factor in joining their programs.

Youth workers in this study were intentional about welcoming young people in their programs by being accessible, listening to and talking with youth. The next section explores in more detail the “what goes on” in youth media practice.

### **Setting the Stage for Making Media: Opportunity, Balance and Celebration**

Each of the sites in this study provided multiple creative opportunities for youth to explore media-making. Youth workers encouraged young people to take risks, learn new skills, perform, and critically think about community issues.

#### **Creative Opportunities**

Each organization—The Stage, Educación Artística, and Northridge Community Center offered a wide variety of opportunities for young people to get engaged with media. All of these programs built their schedule of activities around youth interest. Ramon talked about some of the creative opportunities at Educación Artística:

If they want to do mosaic or paint with oils or do pottery/ceramics or anything else, we have people here to guide them here. We have community gardens for people who are interested in that or a skate-boarding club. A lot of opportunities for kids to express themselves.

Rosaria, a young person, talked about the diversities of opportunities at Educación Artística she participated in with great enthusiasm:

I used to do just Aztec dancing, like that was it. Like Aztec dancing and drumming and that's it. And then I came here and like, I got more, way way more into drawing. Now I like to graffiti, I started going to MMA [mixed martial arts] poetry, spoken word and I started rapping and like I wanna do more!

Rosaria who “wouldn’t be who I am without my art” shows how having a wide variety of opportunities is important to her personal growth as an artist. Yesenia talked about creating these opportunities for youth:

It varies but most of the time there's some kind of dance, there's art, there's writing, and usually we try to do some cooking component and we try to do that during the winter when kids have to stay in. They're really dedicated to writing lyrics and making beats. Some of them are like, “We don't get to do that kind of art at our school.” So this is our opportunity for them to do art. We wanted to focus on them so that they got empowered and knew that this was a program they can really use their voice and do things that they like. And so, my goal is to just set up some kind of system that can catch interests and to guide programming around their interest.

Young people are invited to try many creative endeavors and become empowered around the choices they make. Yesenia was dedicated to building the program around the interests of Educación Artística students as well as young people who came from other schools who didn't “get that kind of art.”

All of these activities were part of the after school programming at Educación Artística, but Yesenia also talked about the senior capstone projects, which are part of the school curriculum and graduation requirements. Each senior at Educación Artística creates a project focusing on an issue in the community. Many seniors choose to create murals, mosaics, or documentary films. Yesenia explained:

They do a senior project and so they have to pick an issue that's important to them, write about it. They write a few essays and also they make a project that they present to community. A lot of them have been really inspiring and that's super exciting that you get the opportunity to do a project of this size because I think you don't get to do that until you're in college . . . And they usually have a supportive adult who is going to check in, in regards to that project with and how's it going and what resources do you need and how can I help you?

Yesenia noted, “There have been lots of issues that have come up: immigration, racism, dropping out, teen pregnancy, like you name it, eating organic or grass fed cows,” and

Maria added, “This year all our senior projects will have a social justice focus. We claim social justice.” The Educación Artística staff intentionally provides a space for young people to critically examine community issues as well as provides resources and connections in the community to help get the work done.

At The Stage the focus is on arts and media, although The Stage is part of a larger community center, which also has sports and recreation. Elizabeth talked about what need

The Stage sought to address:

There was a need for stuff that wasn’t athletically focused and so we wanted to use an existing rec center that had a lot of assets in the arts world. There’s a dark room and kiln and potter’s wheel and a dance room as well as a lot of open rooms in general. We’ve done everything from a writer’s circle with a strong spoken word scene to monthly open mics and are about to have a video projection for skateboarder’s workshops.

Like Educación Artística, the opportunities offered at The Stage are built around young people’s interest in media and the arts. Elizabeth noted, “We’ve done everything” to explain how young people help to plan their activities every month. Antoine, one of the youth participants, a spoken word artist, and co-facilitator of the writer’s circle added:

What goes on is like just a whole bunch of arts. It’s very community-based, like a lot of people from different areas but they all have a mutual respect for art that brings us together, you know what I’m saying, so there’s spoken word, which is how I started, there’s rapping workshops, and painting and textiles. So there’s a whole lot of different mediums of art all put together in one place.

Like Educación Artística, The Stage is also a place where youth are supported in addressing issues in their communities and discussing social justice issues. Elizabeth talked about how “spoken word always tends to be about political stuff and so I think I hear it every time they’re performing so they are always addressing violence in their community. So it’s almost like, when do they not?” Examining violence for young people



who hung out at The Stage was supported by youth work staff and not thought of as doing something extraordinary, but necessary and reasonable.

A wide variety of youth and family activities take place at Northridge Community Center. For middle school young people there is a program that focuses on creativity, empowerment, respect and wisdom. Lila, the youth coordinator, described the program as “a civic engagement service learning program” that is “really about giving young people voices and playing big parts in being solutions to a lot of problems that they experience.” They also have a program for high school age youth focusing on preparing for college and careers, violence prevention and civic engagement. Some youth in this group also are engaged in Northridge’s Youth Council. Lila described the council:

They’re young people, mostly young black males who have been either in gangs or cliques or somehow caught up in that street lifestyle where it’s not safe. They don’t have a lot of options as far as surviving and eating and have resorted to those things. So, they’re on the council basically to start pushing agendas that will keep them off the streets, and safe, and alive, and positive and engaged. And that’s youth driven as well. They came up with their own mission and vision and I just kind of work as a support to whatever they decide they want to do.

Born out of the civic engagement aspect of the high school program, youth at Northridge had an event where they watched a documentary about Martin Luther King Jr.s’ Nobel Prize speech. Youth participant Ayaan recalled:

Watching that Martin Luther King documentary, we were like dang, that was a cool movie! We want to make our own movie. It started out as an old kind of a joke and she stuck through it like, ‘If this is what you guys really want to do, we can do it,’ you know and really struck through it with us throughout the whole thing.

Lila added:

I had no experience or background knowledge prior to taking on the project with them. It was like one of those ‘Ah-ha!’ moments where a discussion lead into the

idea where it was like, okay, this is really interesting to us and how can we um, how can we use this to educate others?

At Northridge, the youth media-making opportunities arose out of an ethos of youth engagement. Even though Northridge was not solely focused on youth media, it was a place where youth could propose creating a film or a mural to examine injustice.

Common across all three sites is a commitment by staff to work with youth.

### **Balance**

*“I’m more free to develop artist skills. I know in typical schools in art class they give you an assignment to paint an object or build this sculpture. Not here. They give you guidelines but they also give you freedom . . . balance is key.”*

Youth and youth workers in this study talked about how each program provided semi-structured space for young people to develop their artistic talents and take risks.

Being able to try new things and also being provided with some structure created a balance. Kaseem talked about the importance of having a regular meeting with fellow spoken word artists at The Stage:

So when you have the writing circle there every Monday that tells me that I have to write; I have that in the back of my mind so I’m always trying to get something down and out of my head so I have something.

Lee added:

We would bring pieces that we were working on and we would read them to each other. It was a very casual atmosphere. It wasn’t crazy, we could just sit there and read and we could all bring our different perspectives into it. I’ve never had so many different perspectives from people who really think outside the box and want to hone their craft. Having all that expertise in one room. I loved having that. It was important to hear criticism from people that I respect as artist, to have expertise of people like Kevin, to have criticism from my own peers

For both Kaseem and Lee, having a space to explore their writing and performing with each other and a mentor like Kevin (also a popular spoken word poet and artist in residence) was valuable. We learned from young people in the previous chapter that

creating media is a long, complex, and often transformational process when tackled with fellow artists in a community. Here, we see part of the everyday or every week practice that goes into the process.

Ayaan, a youth participant at Northridge described her experience while working on the film at the community center:

When you have a place to come to once a week and meet with other students that are doing the same things you're doing. Positive things, of course why not, you know?! Like all of the space and time and all the things they gave us here at Northridge was like, that's what was worth it all like, place, space and time.

Again, Ayaan's description of what "goes on" at the community center supports the long and complex process of creating media. "Place, space, and time" are necessary components for her to work through examining issues in the community like violence, to learn new skills and to work together as a group.

Eduardo, one of the youth workers at Educación Artística talked about the structure of his after-school lyric and beat-making class. This class, which he developed at the request of youth at Educación Artística, was also born out of his passion for rap. He described a typical meeting:

So Tuesdays, we come in—our check in is: "How was your weekend, 1-10 and why?" After that, we move on to free writing. So we just play a beat and then we just, we might pick a theme or not or sometimes just whatever they feel like writing down. And after that, it's free styling. So we, gather together and we freestyle and most of them freestyle about what's going on, like in their minds and in their lives and stuff like that. The idea was for the students come in and like just express how they feel and just let whatever they have inside—out. And, this is what I think: when you rap, when you write your stuff down. You write it down and you analyze it and then once it's written down you have a better understanding of who you are. You know what I mean? So you have better control of your emotions. It's like you are studying yourself.

Eduardo describes the overlapping circles from the previous chapter in action: young people are personally expressing themselves, building multiple skills and supporting each

other as a group. There is a balance of structure and freedom that sets the tone for their exploration together.

Carlos, another young person at Educación Artística talked about his experience during the school day with his art classes:

I'm more free to develop artist skills. I know in typical schools in art class they give you an assignment to paint an object or build this sculpture. Not here. They give you guidelines but they also give you freedom . . . balance is key.

Carlos, like other youth in this study expressed an appreciation for having a balance, essentially knowing what to expect and what was expected of them, yet with plenty of room for creativity. Part of that “room” also invited young people to take risks with their creativity, growth and learning.

### **Taking Risks**

Both youth and youth workers in this study talked about their programs as places to try new things or take risks with creating media. Kaseem gave an example of how he had been working on a poem that originally was meant to be about a funny encounter between a man and woman. However, as he talked about it with his fellow spoken word artists, things changed:

At first it was an attempt to be funny and it turned into a poem about . . . like it was funny and then I kind of worked with people and found out it could be about domestic violence.

Through working with others, the poem was transformed into a complex exploration of domestic violence. His story of creating this poem, illustrates how the group supported him to take a risk that he might not have done otherwise.

Having the support of peers and a mentor was also important for Lee, also a young spoken word artist at The Stage. Risk taking for Lee included not only taking risks

in creating media, but also taking risks in performing his work. A combination of having a place to perform along with the writing circle was vital to developing his artistic talent:

The Stage was an enormous part of my growth as an artist. The second time I performed was at The Stage. It has always been a place for me to try new stuff out. It has been a laboratory for spoken word for me and a safe space for anyone who wants to try it out. It has given me a stage to try things that I've never thought I would try to do.

Lee, who got his start at The Stage, now performs and competes across the country at the college level. He talked about how important it is to have a place like The Stage for new young artists:

There's something really great about youth poetry that you can't find anywhere else, in the sense that they're not bound around these conceptions of poetry that slams often have at the college or adult level. They're just saying what's on their mind. It might not sound as beautiful at the end of the day, but it's more honest and truthful. I remember myself as a 16 year-old performer. It's extremely scary. Seeing that range of emotion is beautiful. Seeing both fear and excitement on their faces is beautiful.

Lee demonstrates how essential it is for beginning spoken word artists to name a performance space, a stage to try new things. At The Stage, this exploration is wholly encouraged. Elizabeth created programming based on youth interest even if that meant taking risks young people wanted to take that didn't always work out. She noted:

That's the really cool thing about working here is there's just such big, beautiful, bright ideas and they often never happen the first try, but I think it's a really cool learning process for people to go through.

Lila, like Elizabeth, was not afraid to take risks with and on behalf of youth, even if these efforts failed. The youth workers in this study didn't see their job as protector. Shauna, a young person at Northridge explained Lila's philosophy on taking risks and failing:

As far as her with failure, she's like, 'failure *is* an option' because it's a milestone or stepping stone for success. 'Fail if you want to fail but I'm sure you'll succeed one day.' Of course she want you to succeed, but she knows every failure will

help you. When you move through things easily without difficulty, it's not a changing moment. But when you do something hard, it's something you really learn. And she's taught us that sure it's hard, but I bet you learn a lot from it.

Inevitably, taking risks invites some degree of failure. Rather than try to prevent it, youth workers in these programs chose to look at failure as learning moments.

### **Celebrates Youth Media**

We learned that multiple creative opportunities and a semi-structured space to develop artistically is important to youth and youth workers. The last part of setting the stage for youth media practice explores how youth media is celebrated at these organizations.

In the previous chapter, Carlos talked about how at Educación Artística “everyone is an artist.” Visitors who come into the building might think that adults created the murals decorating all the walls, but in fact, these represent student's work over several years. He explained, “We have people come in and we give tours and show what the students do. It's very encouraging here.” Many of the large, brightly colored murals on the walls explore difficult subjects like immigration violence. Ramon, a youth worker exclaimed:

Well if you look at the mural back there, it's like, wow this is crazy, I'm surprised people fund this school. You know it has a big ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) sign and a helicopter, but we let students do what they want . . . it's totally acceptable to let the students express themselves. So coming from a youth work perspective I had trouble at first, thinking some things were inappropriate but realizing it's a way for the students to learn and grow from their own experiences.

The mural Ramon talked about is painted on an entire wall towards the back of the school. It shows a Mexican man with a jet pack flying to destroy an ICE helicopter. A Mexican family sits next to the United States flag with their arms around each other

looking down. A large eye is painted in the center of a map of the United States with a teardrop falling from it. A hand held up says, “Stop Racism.” The mural poses deep questions about the experience of young people and their families coming to the United States from Mexico. Even with some amount of discomfort, Ramon could see the value in celebrating the projects young people wanted to do, no matter how controversial.

Elizabeth also talked about how important it was to young people to have their work celebrated in public ways whether spoken word, film, or painting. She recalled an event where a group of youth had created a short film at The Stage:

We made a really big reception atmosphere so we were open all day. We asked all the artists to come in at a certain time so the kids showing their film had an audience, which was awesome. It was just great, really great. We had food and drinks and energy!

Elizabeth firmly believed that youth media should be celebrated and shared with the wider community. Lila also talked about how the youth groups at Northridge were planning a celebration, which would include unveiling the “Stop the Violence” mural they had created. Lila explained:

It’s not done yet, but it will be done at the end of October. And then we’re going to do our unveiling as part of our fall festival here. So we’re gonna actually be here grilling burgers and hot dogs and stuff for the community.

At Northridge, like Educación Artística and The Stage, youth media was celebrated often and publicly. Celebrating young people’s accomplishments was integral to their work.

We learned that creating opportunities, having balanced spaces to take risks, and celebrating youth media are essential components of effective youth media practice. However, participants in this study agreed that there is more that goes into creating a positive environment and relationships with urban youth. The following sections explore

what participants say is necessary and vital to supporting urban youth so they can fully engage in examining and responding to violence in their communities.

### **They Know I Won't Judge Them, and Will Do Anything in My Power for Them**

*“I think I lived a similar life to these students and I still live here and run into these students wherever I go in the neighborhood. So I think a lot of the students look to me because they know that I'm never going to judge them and that I would do absolutely anything within my power for them.”*

Many of the youth talked about how important it was for adults not to judge them. The quote above from Ramon demonstrates a deep understanding of what young people in his community have gone through. Not only does he understand what they are going through, but demonstrates through daily intentional actions that he supports them. Several youth talked about what it meant to them not to be judged by youth workers:

- “They understand people and situations regardless of if they've gone through it or not. They are very accepting.”
- “I was always accepted and it's a great place when you know you can just go in and not be judged I guess.”
- “It doesn't matter if you're a misfit in the past you should come try. Like I tried. Northridge is a good place for people.”
- “They certainly don't discriminate about anybody here because people know where these kids are coming from . . . I've seen a lot of people here that were pregnant and this school seemed very supportive in wanting to help them graduate.”

These comments come from young people across all three sites, demonstrating how important it is for adults to treat them with respect and not to have fixed notions about who they are. Shauna, a young person at Northridge Community Center explained quite



pointedly that being negative or biased about urban youth is not going to be effective. She exclaimed:

If you are a negative youth worker, don't nobody want to be around you! Who wants to be around a negative youth worker who's always doubting the kids and applies their own stereotypes and biases on people? Like no one cares about your issues, you supposed to be helping us!

She makes it clear that youth workers who doubt young people and do not start with an accepting and welcoming (and positive!) attitude are going to fail fast. If a youth worker has biases and stereotypes, those are "their issues" to work out, not something young people should have to put up with. Ramon explained his youth work philosophy:

Whenever I talk to people about youth work, it's so hard for people to understand that you can't judge the youth. It's really hard not to because we come into situations with so many preconceived ideas, but you can't do that as a youth worker. You have to learn how to clear those prejudices that we have against people. It's impossible to be effective when you compare or stereotype kids.

Ramon's ideas about how to be effective as a youth worker with urban youth of color directly pushes against the models of youth development that assume young people need to be "fixed," and it is the youth worker's job to assess and fix them. He acknowledges that we all have biases and stereotypes, but it is the job of an effective youth worker to "clear those prejudices." Yesenia added:

So it isn't, I'm gonna help this kid, I'm going to make sure that he gets through his, like, I don't know, I just think a lot of people are always like, "Oh pobrecito, I want to help him." And you know, I think that mentality is probably the wrong perception. If you are going to work, you have to already believe that they are capable and that they are awesome. I think, you know if you think anything less than that, then you're in the wrong place.

Yesenia does not pathologize young people or put them into simple binaries of deficient kid and exceptional kid, she starts with the stance that young people are both "capable" and "awesome." Like Ramon, she understands their lives and what they go through.

Yesenia, like other youth workers in this study, sees the effects of structural violence and chooses to work *with* youth against these structures creatively rather than blame young people for the conditions in which they live. In the next section, we move beyond how youth workers engage young people to the ways they show their commitment to them.

Youth and youth workers alike talked about the idea that good youth work or teaching goes “above and beyond” expectations. Youth workers who supported young people in creating media in these programs talked about being there for young people in both tangible and intangible ways. As one youth worker said, “If a student comes to us and says they want to do something, we will never tell them no, and we will find a way to support them in anything they want to do.” Young people developed their artistic talent in part because of the intangible and tangible resources youth workers provided.

### **Tangible Resources**

At The Stage, Elizabeth worked hard to build tangible resources for youth by making connections in the community. She explained how she was trying to make stronger connections with the Rec program in her building:

We’re trying to build a bridge between our rec program and the The Stage by bringing in volunteers once a week to lead art activities and tutor the kids. A youth worker has to be connected enough to the outside world in order to create those opportunities.

At each site, youth workers found multiple outside resources, from volunteers in the community to help with editing, to small grants and artist mentors. Lila described how she felt overwhelmed in the beginning when she and her group at Northridge decided they wanted to create a film:

The biggest media project was the film. That was my first time taking on a film project before. So I was very, I was questioning how I was going to support it

enough to actually see through because I don't know a thing about video making or editing. But the universe always brings you what you need and it did for me and them in that project. We got connected with a couple of great people who helped out with the tech. stuff and provided the resources. We also got a little money from a proposal that I worked on with some kids. We had Sam who—bless his heart—took on weekends to meet out of Kwanzaa church spending his whole afternoons and into the nights supporting that process of editing because it is so tedious and takes so much time.

For Lila, “anything in my power” meant recruiting community members to help with the project. She added:

My biggest role was the connector. Like, how do I not crash their dreams and say ‘we can't do this,’ instead finding a way to make it possible without money, technology or equipment. Honestly, you have to know who to go to with stuff and who genuinely cares and who are down for the cause. This work always feels like you're making something out of nothing and it takes a lot of creativity and resourcefulness. If I didn't know those people and hadn't made the connections and networks and relationships in the wider community outside of Northridge and outside of the youth that come here, it wouldn't have been possible. And that goes for almost everything else that I've done here.

Lila demonstrated that urban youth media practice is not about having resources, it's about *being* resourceful. Bolstered by the confidence in her youth group and their vision, she was able to make connections that would ultimately support the completion of the film. For the “Stop the Violence” mural project, she also created resources through securing a city violence prevention grant. Lila used the grant to contract with several local mural artists to work with the youth and ensure their vision became a reality.

At Educación Artística, a more established arts community, finding resources for youth to create media was easier and often came in the form of caring adults already working in the building. Ramon explained:

We are blessed to have an amazing staff that have a lot of connections in the community. Someone who works here is assigned to the same record label as two [popular local hip hop artists] and he was able to hook Theo up with someone to interview with at the label. It's an excellent opportunity for him. Almost all of our

teachers are artists, instrumentalists or video, editing, or production, so we have a lot of connections for the youth.

Youth workers and teachers at Educación Artística were committed to supporting young media projects in multiple ways. They were also committed to supporting young people beyond their media-making endeavors. Ramon laughed:

We try to go above and beyond at Educación Artística. I mean in what other school would the principal lend you their cell phone so you can call your mom in Mexico right?! Those are the amazing things we are able to do at Educación Artística.

The director, teachers and youth workers at Educación Artística work hard to support youth beyond media projects. Theo noted, “I would say that the teachers are really motivated toward helping the kids graduate so they go above and beyond. I don’t think all schools are like this.”

Securing grant money, volunteers, artist mentors, and equipment/supplies are just some of the tangible ways youth workers supported youth in their media-making projects. They also supported young people by doing anything they could to support them, even letting a young person use their cell phone to call their mother in Mexico. Sometimes, “doing anything in my power” for young people was talked about in less tangible ways.

### **Intangible Resources**

*“That is a very strong thing to give us hope.”*

Antoine talked about how Kevin, who ran writing circle at The Stage, had been integral for his artistic growth by teaching him writing and performing skills. However, he talked about how Elizabeth helped him in less tangible ways. He noted, “She’s helped me *as a human being*, just being very supportive and genuine.” The tangible and

intangible resources created by Kevin and Elizabeth encouraged Antoine's growth as artist and human being.

Ayaan, a youth participant at Northridge described Lila's role in supporting their work on the film:

She really kept us pushing you know, and believing in us. She was like, 'we got the resources for it, and I will help you out with the movie.' And we really did it, and like that was the best part about it, that was the best thing like, the best role of Lila, cuz she really pushed us.

These more intangible ways of being supportive played a big role in the young people's motivation to complete the project. Shauna added:

You can say anything to Lila and she'll always tell you the positive thing in that situation. Like, 'well at least you didn't die!' Or like, 'what can we use from this situation to better us?' That is a very strong thing to give us hope. That's the hope I wanna give to everybody and that's the hope Lila gives to us. That you will overcome your obstacles. She is so spiritually connected to positivity and karma and auras and she's always doing or saying something about that. She's always been...I know I'm overreacting but I always felt like she was an angel. My angel. I couldn't have gotten through my sister's death without her. And I mean that from the bottom of my heart. It was so hard . . . it was so hard.

For Shauna, Lila's commitment to her as a mentor and friend went beyond the parameters of creating the film.

Not being judged by youth workers who would do anything in their power to support them, had positive and lasting impressions on young people in these programs.

Youth workers talked about their work very seriously and regarded building strong relationships with youth as big responsibility. They were committed to the work, enthusiastic and honest about how hard it could be at times. Yesenia explained:

I think, a lot of the times, people think that it's easy work and it's not. And if you think it's easy, it's probably because you're not working hard enough or as much as you should be, because this is important.

The way Yesenia and other youth workers described their commitment to urban youth and media practice went far beyond a 9 to 5 job. They were aware of the everyday violence young people faced in their communities and provided tangible and intangible support so they could examine and address it.

### **You Gotta Be Real, Be on Your Feet, and Stick with It**

*“A youth worker need confidence and just like, you supposed to have confidence here. And motivation in order to get where you wanna be. If you doing a job, you supposed to do it 100% so like you gotta be real, and be on your feet and stick with it.”*

‘Being real,’ ‘being on your feet.’ and ‘sticking with it’ provided a vivid and succinct description of effective youth media practice from Ayaan. She captured much of what was said by youth in this study about effective youth work practice. In the following section, I explore the ways youth and youth workers talked about ‘being real,’ reflecting on their practice and relationships with young people. From there I examine what it means to ‘be on your feet,’ looking at how youth workers employ flexibility, and finally I explore sustained commitment in youth work practice or ‘sticking with it.’

### **Being Real: Self-Reflection, Vulnerability and Humility**

*“There are days that they show you how not important you are.”*

Youth workers in this study described ‘being real’ in multiple ways. Young people in this study used the phrase frequently to describe good youth work practice. Lila, the youth coordinator at Northridge spoke about the challenge of work itself and being able to describe how important and powerful it is to others:

It’s very difficult, it’s not the easy way to do the work. It takes a lot of time and sometimes you get into these patterns of circles where you’re not sure where it’s heading or going or getting done. I think people really just have to understand the benefit of this type of work and I don’t think that’s the case. I don’t think that we’ve found ways to show that there are outcomes that are positive and that are

more powerful than any outcomes that you can see in a formal education setting. And I think that we need to figure out how to measure that and in very different unique creative ways that haven't been done yet. And I think that's our responsibility unfortunately while we're juggling all these other things. Because only we can because only we ARE the ones who understand and it's our responsibility to somehow get others to understand that aren't directly involved or experiencing it or seeing it for themselves.

Being real for Lila included having sobering conversations with herself about what was possible in her own work as well as finding ways to "show" the work. She and other youth workers also expressed doubts about standard evaluation and assessment tools to get at the essence of their work.

Maria, the director at Educación Artística spent time each day reflecting on her vision for the school and after school programs. She explained:

The teachers are not quite in the youth work that I want my high school to be. I want my teachers to be married to their inner youth worker, and my youth workers married to their inner teacher.

For Maria, a long time youth worker in the community, building relationships is the essence of good youth work. Maria wanted her teachers to know young people and build trust. However, she also wanted her youth work staff to embrace supporting the young people's education and academic goals. Ramon, explained how part of his practice with young people compelled him to be vulnerable even if it was difficult. He explained:

I'm a horrible speller and I was embarrassed for years about that with students, and I was told once that it is important to use my insecurities in front of students so I can go through it with them and show them the process of how to spell words by using Google or subtitles while watching movies. I'm still embarrassed but I can totally talk with them about it. Be honest with them instead of being defensive. It doesn't make you look weak necessarily. Youth are battling with those insecurities and they need to see some best practices modeled by adults. It's about respect at the end of the day with youth. They just want to be respected, so you show them that and you show them honesty and a little bit of vulnerability at times.

Being real for Ramon did not mean being seen as an all-knowing guide, but as a person who struggles with insecurities that students may have as well. Being vulnerable was not about “weakness,” but a sign of strength and an important part of Ramon’s practice in connecting with and supporting young people. Antoine explained how he appreciated this kind of vulnerability in Elizabeth, the youth worker at The Stage. He recalled, “There are moments when I can tell she’s sad because she doesn’t have the answers and that’s what I love and respect about Elizabeth.” Antoine makes clear the when youth workers are willing to be vulnerable and real, young people have great respect for them.

Finally, youth workers also talked about humility as a key part of *being real* in their practice with young people. Ramon explained how he thinks about humility in his work:

In certain youth who have had negative relationships with adults they are going to try and hit you with stuff out of left field just to see how you react. So you have to let it hit you and roll over you. You might think that they love you and you’ve been so effective, and there are days that they show you how not important you are, and if you let that get to you, you will not remain effective.

You need to see their house and their life and stay quiet through the situations where they start yelling and cussing at each other and the mom cries with you and so on. You have to go through all that. We have people here willing to go through all of that and mess up and apologize. Some people can’t do that. They don’t know how to say ‘I’m sorry, or I don’t know.’ But you gotta have that humility.

Ramon gives insight into multiple facets of working with young people in this quote, but several pieces stand out. First, he demonstrates how taking things personally from young people who have had difficult relationships with adults can derail and compromise building trust. To be effective, you have to be okay with “not being important” and sometimes you just have “stay quiet” when young people need to vent. Connecting with



and building upon what youth workers and young people talked about as reflective practice, the next section explores 'being real' as a caring and challenging practice.

### **Being Real: Challenging and Caring**

*"We are very blunt and it comes from the heart."*

Youth workers and young people in this study talked about 'being real' as a caring and challenging practice that honors honesty and transparency with young people. If a young person was failing a class, or struggling with an issue at home or with friends, youth workers did not ignore the problem. If a young person's spoken word poem needed work or a film needed more editing, youth workers in this study engaged in a caring critique. The following three extended quotes from Maria and Yesenia demonstrate a deep commitment to 'being real' with young people at Educación Artística. Maria explained:

So everybody walks in and goes, 'The vibe feels really good and the energy is really good.' Everybody talks about the energy and the zen. And I just think, there's no tension! We've had issues and I have put them out there. This is our home. We have economic issues, whatever! This is our home. I tell the principal and the board that they are my husbands and we are going to get this family up and running. And yes, I do need more than one husband. There's no secrets, there's no tension around what is going to happen with the budget. There's a lot of transparency and now we are moving into being transparent and honest with the kids. We are very blunt and it comes from the heart.

She added:

I told the principal and the staff and teachers, I'm going to be the one to tell the kids how bad they are doing, how bad they need afterschool help, how much they need to do their credit recovery. But you need to have your shit together in order for me to have that speech with them. So that's why I need youth workers that are going to come in. And more than anything they need to inspire the kids, but inspire them to get an education.

Yesenia added to Maria's comments:

I think more than any year, it's just being real. You know for me what is really important is that we need assuring this is not just for students to have fun, be engaged and learn about themselves, but also to get through school. That's just so important because there's been too many times that our students are just not graduating. You know like, I hear students saying like, "Oh I failed a class." It's like it's nothing, it's really . . . we have to really focus on the importance of getting a high school diploma in order to make it around here. I think . . . it's like when I say true investment, they're really looking at these kids, like they're not just "these kids", they're **your** kids. What would you do for your child? Would you sell them out for less? Would you expect anything less?

Carlos, a young person at Educación Artística talked about when teachers were 'being real' with him, they often gave an honest critique of his work. He explained:

So there is criticism and then there's haters. *Haters* is an FDA approved term. Criticism is healthy and it makes you better, and haters just wanna bring you down and tell you everything you're doing is wrong. So to be a good teacher you have to be good at critique.

Carlos adds his sense of humor to the idea, but says healthy criticism "makes you better," so it's imperative for teachers and youth workers to practice giving honest critique.

Ramon added:

Being honest and real with the students is like the most important thing. The students will sense through their own subconscious intuition if you aren't, and they will lose their trust in you. It's hard for youth to trust adults and that is a lot of responsibility on us to allow them to. Young people in general have an amazing intuitive ability to detect fakeness from realness.

America is a racist country and if you were to try and pretend and tell these students everyone is equal and there is going to be world peace some day...that's not real. Kids take that really offensively, I think. So I don't want somebody to treat me in a racist way but I want them to be honest. I want them to say, 'I used to be really racist, I used to tell jokes, and now I don't anymore because I have friends that are Mexican and I respect them.' . . . As youth we grow up rough and hard and vulgar and dirty and sometime these "hands across America" strategies we want to use with youth is just NOT relevant to us.

For Ramon and other youth workers in this study, ‘being real’ meant facing the violence and injustice youth in their programs experienced in their communities. They were not in the business of selling what Duncan-Andrade (2009) might call “hokey hope.” They saw ‘being real’ as a deeply caring practice that included healthy critique and a willingness to face difficult issues with young people.

### **On your feet**

*“It has to be individualized, situational . . . creative.”*

Youth workers described ‘on your feet’ as a desire to always learn more about young people, their interests, and their families, as well as a need to be flexible.

Elizabeth, the youth coordinator at The Stage explained how when faced with a tough situation with a young person she tried to remain flexible:

I think in terms of how we’ve dealt with theft stuff, we’ve really tried not to kick people out here. We have to try hard. No one wants to kick a kid out but in the moment it is really difficult. You have to still do what’s in the best interest of their growth and understanding of the subject. Helping them find new ways to problem solve.

Elizabeth is ‘being real’ by both challenging the young person and caring about keeping them in the program. Lila, at Northridge described ‘on your feet’ youth work as something that needed to be seen outside a non-profit model that “gives hand outs” but doesn’t “empower.” She talked about youth work as being “individualized, situational and creative.” This situational and creative ethos is what allowed Lila to say yes to her youth group when they wanted to make a film to examine injustice and violence in their community. Being ‘on her feet’ allowed Lila to “. . . not crash their dreams and say ‘we can’t do this’” but instead work to find the resources to make the project possible.

Eduardo, a youth worker at Educación Artística said, to be ‘on your feet,’ a youth worker

needed to “be fun, have some structure, follow through, be responsible and just always be willing to learn something new.” Ramon talked about paying attention to youth culture and in particular, Latin@ culture in his community to ‘stay on his feet’ and connected. He explained:

I learned to engage with the young guys, I had to know either what’s going on in rap music or soccer. With the young girls I needed to know about what was going on in Novella’s or music like rap and R&B or Mexican music. What I learned with the mom’s was Novella’s or news. I learned that fathers like to talk a lot about cars and sports and work. So every day I would make myself learn something about all of those things and it became a very successful way of building relationships with people. What I’ve realized is that it is so important to be authentically interested in people. It really matters when you can relate to what’s going on in their lives. I am extremely interested, personally and it helps when doing this work.

He added:

When I get here in the morning, the first thing I do is I meditate for about ten minutes just to clear my mind from everything else that’s going on, then I read the news and I read Star Tribune online, City Pages, New York Times, L.A. Times, Democracy Now, and then I go to a bunch of the Mexican equivalent to those sites, and I look for anything that has to do with young people and I read the first few lines and then I copy those articles down and email them to others in the building if I think it will help them.

Ramon was able to ‘stay on his feet’ by genuinely seeking out what was meaningful to young people and their families in the community and relating to them. If ‘being real’ and ‘staying on your feet’ are supportive practices youth workers employ with urban youth who create media to examine violence in their communities, what does it take to sustain this practice?

### **Stick with it**

*“You look for that in people that you know are going to be in it for the long haul. There are a lot of people that are passionate. My mom used to tell me, “Don’t be a fire ball, be the little flame on the candle that stays lit.”*

For youth workers and young people in this study, effective youth work practice that supported young people making media took time. For youth who took on projects that addressed violence in their communities, a sustained and solid commitment from youth workers is necessary. The transformation that many young people and youth workers talked about that happened when they created media together didn't "happen overnight." Elizabeth at The Stage noted that to have a successful program to support young people doing this kind of work required both "a willingness to try new things" and a commitment to "long term planning." Youth workers found ways to be simultaneously grounded and on their toes. Lila, the youth coordinator at Northridge explained what a sustained commitment looked like for her work:

I can say it's transformative, I can say its meaningful, I can say it's love and compassion and problem solving and all of those things, but you have to experience it to know the truth about it and you have to almost do that repeatedly in different settings over time.

Lila, as in her reflection about the difficulty of explaining her practice to those outside of youth work, laments how difficult it is to "tell" what it means to 'stick with it.' In the following quote Lila does, however, capture what it meant to her and to the youth she worked with to complete their film:

Like the process was so meticulous. I think it was like, they didn't know how tedious it was going to be and how painful those meetings were going to be. Because it was a lot of work and it was figuring out how we are going to work together and share this vision. Every week it was the same topic for our meetings. Nothing has changed, we're still on this project. I mean, just to keep that momentum going was difficult. It wasn't as exciting for awhile. At the end of the screening after we finally finished, it was a very proud moment. Like we stuck with this, we didn't know if we were going to finish it or how we were going to do it. We've been heartbroken several times through this process and put it down and picked it back up and found the courage to talk about really difficult things. And at the end of the day we are all sitting on the stage of this theater together in front of an audience who are applauding our efforts. It was a surreal moment. And

all the adults who saw us through the whole way. If you could feel the energy at that moment, it was a pretty amazing sense of accomplishment and pride.

We can see the complex process unfold in Lila's recollection of what it meant to examine violence and create a film with young people. Youth and caring adults came together to accomplish something they were, at times, unsure they could do, yet their commitment to 'stick with it' contributed to the transformative experience. Lila described the moment as "surreal" when they were finally able to present the completed project to the community. It is easy to imagine the "energy, accomplishment and pride" these young people felt, standing on that stage after two years of hard work.

The last section of this chapter explores what it meant to young people and youth workers in this study to build a sense of belonging, something they talked about as fundamental to youth media practice and creating community change.

### **Co-Creating Community Change: Come Back, You Belong Here**

Youth and youth workers in this study talked about co-creating spaces where young people felt they belonged and could examine their lives and communities. In this study, youth workers practiced being inclusive by getting to know young people, having a sophisticated knowledge of their interests and deep understanding of their culture, community and context. They challenged young people to think about and take action to change their communities. Youth workers in this study saw themselves as 'working with' young people, standing next to them to face injustice and violence, and co-creating spaces where change was possible.

### **Belonging**

*"I loved everybody here and everybody liked me here too. I like, fit in."*

Yesenia, a youth worker at Educación Artística described how she tried to make all the youth welcome and create a sense of belonging, “I try to get to know every student and their interest, because my idea is that even if they don't want to stay after school, they get supported in the way that they need to.” Eduardo, a youth worker at Educación Artística talked about both how he wanted his lyric and beat-making class to be “like a family” and how the overall feeling at Educación Artística is about a sense of belonging. He explained:

I want to create a sense of a crew—like you know, like a family and I told them that. Like, this is your class; this is your class whatever happens here is because you guys wanna do it and because you guys are doing it. If you go to a bigger school, you see a bunch of cliques and a bunch of groupies. Like I don't know like some Hispanics here and some Whites here, and the most popular here. And over here it's like just a union, it's one thing.

The way he invited young people into his group emulated the overall ethos of creating a sense belonging in the school. Maria, the director at Educación Artística gave a powerful example of a dance students had planned:

I've never been to a dance where everyone was dancing. They were dancing Spanish, Rock, British Rock, music from Mexico and here and everything! They were dancing to everything! The next day the student council was meeting and I came in and said, ‘You know, I just want to congratulate you on that dance because in 20 years that I've been working with youth, I've never seen such an inclusive dance.’ Nobody was being excluded because of cliques. It reminded me of a birthday party, like everybody was celebrating everybody or somebody or themselves. And one of the students said. ‘Yes Ms. Maria! That is how it felt.’

Let me tell you that the dance not only included the students from EC but they also brought friends! So one student who left because he didn't think the school was cool enough and went back to [a different] high school was there. At the dance he said he didn't think I would remember him or welcome him back. He didn't say goodbye when he left and I had personally recruited him. When he came back to the dance he said, ‘Ms. Maria I should have never left.’ Yeah, the door is always open.

Youth workers in this study kept doors open, both literally and metaphorically in their communication with young people. Nikki, a young person at Northridge said that the youth coordinator Lila always said “come back” every time she went to visit. It was this genuine call to “come back” that prompted Nikki to want to volunteer at Northridge.

I was like, I wanna volunteer. So I filled out a volunteer paper and I got to volunteer here then I was like, ‘I hope I can get a job here’! I like being here, I like to work with them. Everybody was outgoing. I love the kids. I loved everybody here and everybody liked me here too. I like, fit in.

Lila’s invitation to ‘come back’ prompted Nikki to take on more and more levels of responsibility and commitment to Northridge. She says she “fit in,” but on a deeper level, she kept coming back because she *belonged*. Shauna also explained that spending time with Lila and other youth on the film project, “opened up a network and support system in a community which I never knew I had.” Lila noted, “hopefully they know you’re there with open arms no matter what the situation is.” She also explained that it’s sometimes hard for those not doing direct youth work, but trying to assess its value, to understand that creating a sense of belonging is central to effective practice:

A lot of it isn’t about even what they value here, which sadly is numbers and outcomes and measurements and I mean frankly, programs and services. Which I think takes away the essence of what it is that I do, which is relationships. And they just don’t understand that and they don’t understand why it takes that, to get to the outcomes and measurements and numbers and you know . . . engagement essentially.

Lee, a young spoken word artist at The Stage also voiced the importance of finding a community where he belonged:

I’ve been to a lot of shows and open mics and slams, but my favorite show I’ve even done was at the The Stage. That is a testament to the kind of atmosphere they try to create. There was a community that I could not find anywhere else and The Stage did a great job bringing it all together.



Yesenia and other youth workers in this study added that being able to create a sense of belonging includes a deep respect for and understanding of a young person's culture, community, and family. Being able to listen, learn, relate to a young person's culture is essential to being effective. Yesenia explained:

I think with the population that we work with here specifically you have to have a real understanding of where the students come from . . . And so, really understanding their community, their family, their culture, their traditions, all those things just because it's such a big part of who they are that if you don't understand that, then you probably will spend most of your job trying to figure out that part . . . So I think, that's super important because students want to have somebody that they identify with, regardless of whether they speak Spanish or not. And I think, it doesn't mean you have to be Latino or Latina, it just means you have to have an understanding of the culture and their experiences.

Maria described how important it was to create an atmosphere where an expansive definition of belonging was rooted in being Latino or Mexican. She explained:

That's my old anger that drives every Latino person in here that has gone through shit in school or some kind of injustice and that is what is driving this place now. A healing of, 'Not one more of us, Ms. Maria.' And while they're here, the more we see kids bouncing back to be culturally grounded and well-established in their community. Whatever that community is. A skateboarding community. If you are Mexican with piercings and skateboarding it's okay. You are an artistic dancer and other kids make fun of you because of how you do it, but here it's okay. It's part of what it is to be Mexican. You're not white and that doesn't make you any better or less than. You are the kid who's struggling because you have a speech problem and everyone makes fun of you because your English is bad and your Spanish is even worse. But we still love you. This place is going to give these kids that sense of belonging.

Maria also believed that young people at Educación Artística should be able to express their spiritual selves connected with their cultural heritage. She wanted to create an environment where teachers respected young people's experiences and beliefs. To Maria, belonging was connected with the spiritual, she explained:

The underlying attitude of white teachers is, "Teachers don't believe in ghosts! Teachers need to believe in ghosts!" If a young person talks to them about a ghost they see it as "cute" but not real like "you can't possibly believe in this stuff." The

spiritual is sucked out of school. We are trying to embrace the combination of Mexican, Catholic and Indigenous beliefs because the institutional can crush the spiritual.

She added:

Never mind that all the best practices say the better you speak your native language, the better you're going to speak your second language. You're going to keep your Spanish because you're going to get spiritually connected and you're going to stay culturally grounded and that's what is going to get you higher.

Maria wanted to create a space where young people's most sacred beliefs were not made fun of and keeping their Spanish language and culture would support their success. She was fully aware of how the 'subtractive schools' her students had come from had subtracted more than their self-esteem. They had subtracted their spiritual sense of self, the beliefs that connected them to their families and cultures, and she did not want that to happen at Educación Artística.

### **Co-Creating and Inspiring Change**

*"You got to cry with them and laugh with them."*

*"It's that sense of belonging more than anything that gives you the sense that it's important to give back and help change your community."*

This final section explores how effective youth media practice invites urban youth to co-create spaces with caring youth workers to examine injustice and create real change in the community. Lila voiced her thoughts by claiming:

I think a youth worker's role to do everything to set up that space and co-create it but it's definitely a concept that takes some learning and adjustments because I don't think young people are necessarily given that typically. So it does have to be the will of all to be open to it.

Co-creating, as the name suggests cannot be implemented as a way of doing youth work without the will of young people. Working with young people is both about meaningful interaction and supporting their goals. Ayaan, a young person at Northridge explained:

Like every kid has a creative mind. The youth worker's spot for that is like, if you have your own mind and the kid has their own mind or his heart set onto one thing, it's your job to push them and motivate them you know?

Both adults and youth in a co-creative environment have “their own mind” and youth workers need to be cognizant of when to push and motivate young people. Lila talked about what it meant to have adults in the community also participate in a co-creative environment during the film project:

It was really meaningful for the adults involved. A lot of people through my own networking would hear about the project and be very moved and inspired and sit in and help however they could because they thought it was such an important message and were really impressed that teenagers from Northridge were actually speaking out against the violence that seems to be so perpetuated by that same demographic. I was really lucky because the adults who did come on board were very authentically committed and passionate and selfless about the time they gave and the expertise that they shared and the resources that they shared. None of them were on board for money or credit or recognition. I mean they were just genuinely really touched by this group of young people who were taking on such a big project and a lot of the young people taught . . . I mean it was definitely two ways, like both old and young shared power and it was very much driven by the young people's ideas. The adults didn't come in and say 'this is what we should do,' if anything, they asked those questions like, 'Where do you want to go with this?'

Part of co-creating then, means “sharing power” and often is a space where adults ask young people questions rather than take control of the process. Finally, young people and youth workers talk about creating change.

### **Inspiring Community Change**

*“I mean the work is ever growing and the appreciation is never there and the recognition is never there. But you don't do it for those reasons; you do it because you believe in changing the world.”*

Youth workers talked about the connection between belonging and inspiring change. They reflected that it often took a strong sense of belonging before youth could see themselves as working to change their communities. Maria voiced her beliefs about Educación Artística:

This is the place that you get lost a little bit and get off the track but you can always come back and say, 'these are my people.' It's that sense of belonging more than anything that gives you the sense that it's important to give back and help change your community. To change your community for a better place.

Social change begins with the importance of feeling rooted in somewhere enough that you care about changing it for the better. However, Maria pushes beyond the idea of just changing the community. She also wants Educación Artística to be a place where young people are challenged far beyond what they thought they could achieve and hopes to have a national impact some day. She supports those beliefs with:

Our job in here is to inspire you to be whatever it is that you wanna be, but not just . . . settle. And I think all my staff has that. They don't like people who just settle. We want the energy of people who want to keep going and keep going.

Every day I remind myself not to give up because if we make a change, we will turn hope at a national level. Because there is nothing around us that is reminding us that we can make it, and that we are who we are and that we're going to be okay.

Her hopes for the young people at Educación Artística are that they begin to see beyond the stereotypes others have put on them, to see beyond the low expectations and not settle for what has been expected of them. She and the youth work staff aspire to continue building and expanding sustainable social justice practices that not only creates change in the community, but nationally. They would like to see more spaces where it's okay to Mexican/and, to be artistic, critical and prepared for multiple opportunities. As Yesenia

explained, “This year we trying to make that more okay, to ask What are the things that bother you? What is privilege? What is power?” The youth work staff at Educación Artística along with youth workers at Northridge and The Stage felt that exploring power with kids was imperative to their job and necessary along with creating a sense of belonging to inspire change. I end this section with a quote from Lila who explains how belonging and co-creating are truly connected to inspire change:

We should all have some sort of power and I think, it’s about that and I think it’s about the opportunities that shared power and co-creating give that allow young people . . . like I don’t like the word empower, because I am giving you that power, but that’s not the case. You already have the power but you just sometimes, you don’t know it so I feel like in that environment and space it’s possible to really actualize that and believe in your own true power to create positive change and change the world for the better, starting with right here, right now. *You. Your* friends and *your* community and growing from there . . .

### **Summary**

At first glance, a lot of what goes into youth media practice seemingly has nothing to do with media skills. Youth workers who took on media projects with young people did not call it critical media literacy or necessarily use a formal language around media. However, when we look at how youth workers and young people practiced examining issues of violence in their communities and created projects to “speak back,” we can see the fundamental theories of critical media literacy *and* social justice youth development in action. Youth workers did provide multiple creative opportunities, a balanced space and a commitment to celebrate young people’s media projects. Participants also described the kind of environment that supports young people and their media projects especially if they take on deeply difficult subjects like violence. A welcoming, non-judgmental attitude by youth workers was needed to create a safe space for youth to come into. Youth workers needed to demonstrate their commitment to being

flexible, interested in and committed to the project to keep young people coming back. They also needed to demonstrate what many youth called “being real” both in their reflective practice and challenging/caring practice with youth. And finally youth workers needed to co-create spaces of belonging with young people so that they could feel supported in examining violence and be challenged to create change in their communities. The final chapter discusses conclusions and recommendations in relation to the findings in this study.

## CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

We know young people from historically marginalized groups—urban youth, youth of color, those living in poverty and English language learners, endure negative stereotypes and social oppression (Ares, 2010). When we look at marginalized youth we tend to fall into the trap of focusing on what is wrong with them. Most scholarship has generally focused on interventions and individuals rather than the conditions urban youth experience, obscuring the view of supportive community spaces that seek to improve conditions *with* young people (McIntyre, 2000; Mahiri & Connor, 2003; Watts & Guessous, 2006; Johnston-Goodstar & Sethi, 2013). This has been critiqued as damage-centered (Tuck, 2009) or deficit-based research (Cammarota, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 2012; Solis, 2003), and consequently the role of youth agency is under-theorized and how urban youth respond to social problems in their communities remains un(der)documented and often invisible (Akom, Cammarota, & Ginwright, 2008; Ares, 2010).

The purpose of this critical qualitative study was to illuminate the ways urban youth as active agents meaningfully address violence in their communities through producing media. The second purpose of this study was to better understand the youth work practices that support young people who examine and change their communities. A bricolage of constructivist, critical and participatory theories guided this study compelling me to be fully aware, transparent, self-reflective and reflexive about my own power throughout the planning, conducting, and analyzing stages of the research process (Fine & Weis, 1996; Ellis, 2007). Semi-structured in-depth interviews with staff and young filmmakers, mural and spoken word artists in three different urban communities in one Midwestern city were conducted in order to better understand this phenomenon.

For the young people in this study, becoming committed agents of change didn't happen overnight. Their transformation was born out of a process where personal experience, new knowledge and skills and building community overlap. Their experience shows us how community issues like violence are grounded in the personal and can be taken up and acted upon in groups. Young people in this study did not do this work in isolation, but in the presence of peers and youth workers willing to process pain, anger and healing. It was through this long and trusting process with each other and other caring adults that young people gained the confidence to take action and see new possibilities for themselves and their communities.

### **Significance of the Findings**

#### **It's More Than Gangs and Guns**

The findings of this study suggest young people and youth workers experienced and recognized complex multiple forms of violence. They understood physical violence— “a bullet ain't got no name on it.” They experienced and talked about structural violence—“they're building prisons for us in third grade.” Or as Shauna said, “We have poverty, lack of education, lack of employment, lack of job opportunities for those that even have careers or college degrees.” They recognized and talked about institutional violence including the justice system—“profiling is really just bullying” and education— “I just felt like not supported enough from the teachers and they wouldn't pay attention to me.” As Maria said, “The biggest violence that these kids have endured here is other people having such low expectations of them. That is the ultimate violation.” Multiple young people in this study echoed this sentiment. They identified with and



experienced the emotional violence of feeling distrusted, silenced and alienated—“Oh he doesn’t know anything about what’s going on in the world because he’s just a kid” or as Lee said, “Stereotypes can do violence.”

Duncan-Andrade (2009) believes that many scholars and the general public don’t see the suffering of urban youth as the result of an unequal society. He explained that we are fed (and often believe) the “hokey hope” that they can easily obtain a middle-class existence coming from poverty (Duncan-Andrade, 2009, p. 3). We don’t see socially toxic environments as our fault or problem so we find ways to make it more plausible to escape them.

This study illuminates that the physical, structural, institutional and emotional violence participants talked about in this study all contribute to what Garbarino (1995) named a “socially toxic environment” (p. 4). These multiple kinds of violence are the social equivalents of “lead and smoke in the air,” and “all the things that demoralize families” (p. 5). Data from juvenile justice (Rios, 2011; Males & Macallair, 2000), public health (Molnar, Gortmaker, Bull, & Buka, 2004), education (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008, Way, 1998, Porfilio & Carr; Au, 2008) and youth development (Akom, Cammarota, & Ginwright, 2008; Giwright, Cammarota & Noguera, 2005; Checkoway, 2005) show the disparate conditions marginalized youth face. The experiences of youth in this study bear out the reality of an era where “punitive social control is embedded in the everyday lives of marginalized young males” and where “the state has not abandoned the poor but instead has punitively asserted itself into various institutions in the community” (Rios, 2011, p.35). This study evokes the ‘culture of punishment’ experienced by young people extends to their treatment of peers as well. Young people

across the sites talked in ways that distanced themselves or sometimes punished peers. For example, young people at Educación Artística when given the opportunity to create new policies at their school chose to create ways to punish their peers for tardiness. Part of the complexity of violence in the lives of young people is how physical, structural, institutional and emotional violence perpetrated on them from society influences their relationships with one another and how they choose to organize themselves. These complex interpretations enhance our knowledge of how youth experience violence and suggest theories of individual violence divorced from context are inadequate.

### **Kaleidoscopes and Bricolage: Seeing Beyond Binaries**

*Kaleidoscope* is derived from the ancient Greek word *Kalos*, which means beautiful and “that which is seen.” This study indicates how scholars and practitioners working with urban youth eschew the binary of two lenses—one of urban youth as pathological and problem, the other as “exception to the rule” and create more kaleidoscopic theories to “see” the multiple facets and complexity of their worlds. Partly this means challenging narrow theories that are often used to mark urban youth as deviant. Although scholars across a variety of disciplines have critiqued and raised concerns about the idea of ‘the child’ and developmentalism (Lesko1996a; James & Jenks, 1996; Morss, 2002, Walkerdine, 1993; Velure Roholt, Hildreth & Baizerman, 2009; Baizerman 1998; Coté & Allahar, 1995; Johnston-Goodstar & Sethi, 2013; Wyn & White, 1997), these ideas have not yet become central to youth development scholarship and certainly not media and public imagination.

Popular media often portrays urban youth as criminals, drop-outs and problems for society to deal with (Mahiri & Connor, 2003). Social scientists reinforce these views

and fears with studies on single parent families, violent youth and the general decline of social conditions (Checkoway, 2005). If urban youth are not portrayed as “loathsome criminals,” they may fall into a rare category of “overcoming the odds” based on false meritocracy (Way, 1995). Unfortunately some educators base their curriculum on the assumption that youth are problems to be managed, and many youth work practitioners also respond to this construction by trying to “save” and “protect” young people (Checkoway, 2005). Policy is also connected to these prevailing images. Noguera and Cannella (2008) found that despite volumes of research pointing to clear approaches for equitable youth development and education, policy makers continue to rely on punitive measures and consistently deny opportunities to the most vulnerable urban youth. This study illustrates how critical media practice can address the “multidimensionality of violence” (McIntyre, 2000, p. 127) that urban youth experience.

There are benefits to understanding different evolving perspectives like adolescent development, positive youth development, youth civic engagement, community youth development, and social justice youth development. To truly hope to shed light on “what’s going on?” and “what should we do?” requires a theoretical and practical bricolage. For example, Richardson’s (2000) alternative to validity—the *crystalline* challenges us to imagine our new understanding as “deepened, complex, [and] thoroughly partial . . . paradoxically, we know more and doubt what we know” (p. 934). Ellis’ (2007) relational ethics reminds us to be reflective and reflexive, to act from “our hearts and minds” in our practice and values mutual respect between researchers and participants and community (p.4). Tuck’s (2008) watercolor box envisions methods as the colors best suited to paint pictures of what we are trying to see. Primary colors might

be interviews while memoirs and mapping could serve as secondary colors, they “can be blended . . . to create light and shadow, depth and complexity in our work” (Tuck et. al., 2008, p. 55). Extending the metaphor, Tuck (2008) describes participation as the *water* needed to move “pigment from box to brush to page” (p. 55). Bringing together data across the three sites, this study advocated for this type of bricolage approach. These efforts did not rely on one theory or framework to make sense of the complex lives of urban youth and advocates for a complex theory of violence, a complex theory of youth development and participatory ways of doing youth research.

### **Seeing Myself Differently through Facing Violence Together**

All three youth programs in this study simultaneously addressed youth development, community development *and* violence reduction. By involving youth in discussions about violence and the creation of media they supported youth development, but they didn’t imagine their work ending there. This reciprocal relationship is well-established between youth work and community work (Pittman, 1996). This idea is expanded through the work of scholars showing that local, state, and federal policy can have a negative and direct impact on urban youth of color (Noguera & Canella, 2008; Ginwright, Cammarota and Noguera, 2005; Johnston-Goodstar & Krebs, 2011).

The conclusions in this study suggest we cannot understand urban youth and the violence they face apart from their communities, cultures, contexts and structural realities. Scholarship that focuses on individual interventions alone obfuscates greater structural realities. All three programs in this study were effective with young people because they did not shy away from talking about the violence young people face every day. Duncan-Andrade (2009, p. 9) explained that:

This is the inescapable challenge before us as urban educators, and it is often misunderstood. Too many of us try to create classroom spaces that are safe from righteous rage, or, worse, we design plans to weed out children who display it. The question we should be grappling with is not how to manage students with these emotions, but how to help students channel them.

As we heard from multiple youth participants in the last two chapters, having a space to vent their frustrations about violence through media was positive and helped them gain a fuller sense of self. Carlos, the young poet at Educación Artística, talked about when he got angry he used his poetry to vent and calm down, redirecting his energy into something artistic rather than violent. Antoine, a participant at The Stage arts-based community center who used to be in a gang and a self-described aggressor, talked about how creating spoken word poetry had given him a way to “balance out” and not “be that person anymore.” Shauna, a participant at Northridge said the experience of creating media with a collective caring group helped her “not become a monster” after her sister died. Rosaria said she would rather “be doing my art than getting in trouble on the streets.” Theo left a bigger urban school because “there was too much drama” he didn’t want to get involved in, and Educación Artística was “a better environment” for him to take care of himself and grow creatively.

We know that boldly examining violence and the structures behind it transform young people in myriad positive ways (Tuck et. al. 2008; Watts & Guessous, 2008; Akom, Cammarota, & Ginwright, 2008). Ginwright & James (2002) shared that programs that help young people understand the root causes of violence and other social problems have the greatest possibility of facilitating long-term institutional change. All three programs in this study took seriously the need to face injustice with young people and look deeply at the causes behind it and transformational results occurred for young

people. Youth workers intentionally created spaces for young people's rage to have voice and purpose, and provided ways for young people to channel their emotions in positive ways and to engage structural realities.

### **Youth Media Practice and Spiritual Well-being**

Many education scholars stress the necessity of gaining critical media literacy skills—the ability to analyze and produce media to be civically engaged (Kellner & Share, 2005; 2007a; 2007b; Hobbs, 2004; Semali 2003; Torres & Mercado, 2006; Tisdell, 2008; Boske & McCormack, 2001). Sefton-Green and Soep (2007) claimed that we often think of critical media skills connected with either academic achievement or marketable skills for the workforce. Clearly participants in this study grew in their ability to examine and analyze their communities and gained real media production skills from researching to interviewing, writing, editing, and more. In addition, how young people talked about their experience in these programs suggest a connection between youth media practice and spiritual well-being.

Current literature offers many different definitions of spirituality including “. . . pursuing meaning, purpose, belonging, relatedness, awareness, transcendence, existential questions, one's passions, and service” (King, Clardy, & Sánchez Ramos, 2013, p. 189). Participants in this study used similar, and sometimes, exactly these terms to describe their experience in these programs. They often talked about the process of creating media as healing, bringing peace, being a transformational, making connections and even a ‘transcendent’ experience. They talked about a sense of belonging and wanting to give back to their communities.

Antoine recalled that Elizabeth “helped me as a human being.” Shauna talked about Lila as “so spiritually connected to positivity and karma” and described youth in the community as “powerful and wonderful and magnificent, you just have to be able to help them see that light in themselves because it’s a dark tunnel.” Kaseem said that writing spoken word poetry for him was “definitely a healing process.” Participants talked about how the transformational process of creating media with others took place over time. They also talked about becoming more active in different ways in their communities after understanding more about the root causes of violence.

Little empirical research has explored conceptualizations of spirituality and spiritual development among youth (King, Clardy & Sánchez Ramos 2013). Tolliver and Tisdell (2002) believed that spirituality is critical to transformational sociopolitical development and sets the stage for critical consciousness about political issues related to self and community. Atkinson (2007) uses the word wellness, but also ties this to healing as a central component of social justice activism, which she suggested “remains an under-utilized, under-explored and under-theorized phenomenon” (p. 248). Prilleltensky and Fox (2007) thought and wrote that an enhanced sense of wellness and justice can serve as powerful remedy to the “. . . distortions perpetuated by the media, authority figures, and even professional helpers . . .” (p. 799). Ginwright (2011) believed that wellness or well-being involves a “sense of purpose, optimism, hope, agency . . . and action” (p. 3). This list is remarkably similar to the list of elements in spiritual development. Participants in this study spoke to elements of wellness and spirituality often when describing the transformative experiences they had examining violence and creating media with others. Is there something more than literacy, empowerment, or skill building if we look

carefully enough? Is it possible there is a deep spiritual element to this work?

Prilleltensky and Fox (2007) wrote, “. . . very few educational and youth interventions attempt to show the connections between wellness and justice” (p.794).’ This study would suggest there are powerful connections between youth media practice and spiritual well-being.

### **Community Change Requires Belonging and Hope**

**Belonging.** This study supports and advocates for creating a space where young people don’t just “fit in,” but *belong*; *this* is crucial for young people who experience violence in their daily lives. Youth and youth workers talked about co-creating spaces where young people felt they belonged and could examine their lives and communities. This study suggests a deep sense of belonging and inclusiveness is built by getting to know young people, having a sophisticated knowledge of their interests and deep understanding of their culture, community and context. As Yesenia said, “You have to have a real understanding of where the students come from, understanding their community, their family, their culture, their traditions.” They went beyond just collaborating with young people to reaching out to their families and communities to know them better. Youth workers also challenged young people to think about and take action to change their communities.

They saw themselves as ‘working with’ young people, standing next to them to face injustice and violence, and co-creating spaces where change was possible. When young people wanted to talk about their frustrations with violence in the community, youth workers in this study said, “Yes, this sucks; what can *we* do about it together?” As



Lila explained, part of co-creating was about “sharing power” in a space where adults ask young people questions rather than take control of the process, a key aspect of community building (Camino, 2000; Zeldin, Petrokubi, & MacNeil; 2008). This study supports a sustained intentional practice by youth workers who are reflective, authentic and supportive, creating a meaningful sense of belonging for young people setting the stage for transformation and hope.

*“that is a very strong thing to give us hope.”*

**Critical Hope.** Duncan-Andrade (2009) defined critical hope as an “ontological need” for urban youth who suffer from the effects of violence every day. He outlined and differentiated between three kinds of false hope most often sold to urban youth; 1) *hokey hope*, which suggests young people can attain the American dream as easily as anyone else and ignores “the laundry list of inequities” that impact urban youth; 2) *mythical hope*, which imagines having a black president has ensured a color-blind society and race does not matter anymore, and 3) *hope deferred*, which critiques society and structures, but does not manifest in any kind of transformative project. However, there is a different kind of hope that “demands a critical and active struggle” (p. 186). In this final section I explore Duncan-Andrade’s *critical hope* and its three related elements of *material*, *Socratic* and *audacious hope* and the ways these kinds of hope manifested through youth work practice in this study.

*Material hope* is evoked when young people have the resources to face the forces that affect their lives. Effective adults do not avoid violence and tragedy in the lives of young people, but work with young people to face them head on. They provide both tangible resources such as “housing, food, car rides and links to medical services” and

intangible resources where the youth worker is, “an indispensable person” able to connect the person’s real life experience to new learning (Duncan-Andrade, 2009, p. 187). Youth workers in this study certainly provided material hope across all three sites.

All three programs also supported a *Socratic hope* that requires youth and adults to “painfully examine our lives and actions within an unjust society and to share the sensibility that pain may pave the path to justice” (Duncan-Andrade, 2009, p. 188). Rage and despair are not ignored in *Socratic hope*, but as West (2004) described, are seen as an “appropriate response to an absurd situation” (p. 295). Youth workers in this study evoked *Socratic hope* through ‘being real’ with youth both in their reflective practice and caring critique. They were honest about their own struggles. Antoine said, “There are moments when I can tell she’s sad because she doesn’t have the answers, and that’s what I love and respect about Elizabeth.” If a young person was failing a class, or struggling with an issue at home or with friends, youth workers did not ignore the problem. If a young person’s spoken word poem needed work or a film needed more editing, youth workers in this study engaged in a caring critique. Youth workers in this study reminded us that the conditions urban youth face every day are “not okay.” They stood with young people.

Each of the three sites also supported a sense of *audacious hope*. Youth workers who evoke audacious critical hope do not pretend they can control the toxic conditions urban youth face, but they control their response. When a young person was overwhelmed by grief like Shauna when she lost her sister, Lila was a stable source of strength. “Where you at? I’ll pick you up” was the response when Shauna called crying. When young people at Educación Artística felt shamed by previous responses from their

teachers, Maria pushed back and said, “Teachers need to believe in ghosts! . . . We are trying to embrace the combination of Mexican, Catholic and Indigenous beliefs because the institutional can crush the spiritual.” She wanted to create a space where young people at Educación Artística where young people could express their spiritual selves, to be “Mexican/and.”

Youth workers in this study co-created spaces where all young people felt welcomed, their beliefs embraced, and could express the rage they experienced living with injustice every day. As Ramon alleged, “We talk in youth work a lot about resilience. But resilience only happens when you address the trauma, when you address what has happened.” Across all three sites, youth workers created a sense of belonging and evoked new critical hope in young people providing pathways for healing and community change.

### **Implications for Practice**

#### **Expanding Definitions of Violence**

Problems described by participants in this study were localized in many ways even though a few did talk about systemic forms of violence. Several young people at Northridge were able to examine violence around the world to connect with their film about poverty racism and war. We might ask—can this work allow for young people to see beyond their own communities and connect their experience with larger frames of violence? Can youth workers take on expanding definitions of violence with young people? This work would require practitioners to have intentional conversations about multiple kinds of violence with young people. Youth workers might design activities like Lila did with the young people at Northridge, walking around the neighborhood and

having discussions about what they saw and connecting their experience to definitions of violence. Youth workers may need to explicitly point out that the conditions marginalized youth face that are “not okay” and name not only the physical, but structural, institutional and emotional realities as part of their practice with young people.

### **An Alternative to Youth Development Models of Practice**

There has been movement towards professionalizing the youth development field, requiring competencies based on youth development theory and principles in the past decade (Astroth, Garza & Taylor, 2004; Fusco, 2012; Johnston-Goodstar, 2013). Stuart (2003) alleged that understanding developmental theory is “essential to supporting children, youth, and families” (p. 243) and youth workers should “apply recent research in patterns and trajectories of child and adolescent development to observation and assessment of children and youth . . .”(p. 133). Lerner et al. (2005) believed that research-based policies should take a strength-based, developmental focus to ensure positive outcomes for young people. Catalano et al (2004) advocated for models of healthy development which they noted “hold the key to both health promotion and health prevention of problem behaviors” (p. 101). Based on the findings of the National Collaboration for Youth’s 2003 report, Astroth, Garza, and Taylor (2004) described ten core competencies youth workers need for their practice with youth. The first core competency for youth workers included, “Understands and applies basic child and adolescent development principles, understands ages and stages of child development, and applies fundamentals of positive youth development” (p.31).

These authors contend that quality practice and outcomes for youth depend on an understanding of psychological and developmental frameworks, yet youth workers in my

study did not talk about youth development principles to guide their work. Youth workers talked about cultural and political ways of understanding and practicing with young people. They spoke of healing, co-creative spaces where youth and adults share power, but did not talk about “age appropriate activities.” Young people flourished in the programs in this study. They felt supported, cared for and positive outcomes occurred, including; gaining confidence, finding their voice, taking action in their communities, and healing. What do we make of a practice that does not focus on the theories and competencies many argue are necessary for positive youth development outcomes? Do we have a broad understanding of youth, their families and communities, or are we replicating a history of practice and asserting a dominant framework without truly exploring alternative frameworks? This study would suggest that a flourishing healthy youth work practice that co-creates spaces with young people can be done without knowing or employing a psychological or youth development framework.

### **A Commitment to Critical Hope and Belonging**

Youth workers and young people rarely used explicit critical media literacy terms, yet they embodied the theories and approaches by deconstructing their worlds, examining violence and creating new media projects to speak back. We know that a critical media literacy approach to youth media practice (Kellner & Share, 2007a; 2007b):

- enables young people to evaluate, dissect, and investigate media content and forms;
- cultivates skills in analyzing ideologies and the multiple meanings and messages embedded in media texts as well as create media for social change;
- is participatory and collaborative; youth and adults share power as they analyze injustice in the world and challenge it together;
- draws from a Freirean critical pedagogy and notion of “praxis” which involves critical awareness, reflection and action

This model was seen again and again as an effective way to engage young people across all three sites in this study. It is recommended that youth media practitioners take up this model through simultaneously cultivating personal growth, media skill building and community development. It is also recommended youth media practitioners take up creating an intentional sense of belonging and building critical hope as central goals to their practice.

Experience and large amounts of funding are not needed to dream and begin media projects, but youth workers must be resourceful and committed to finding connections in the community to make this work happen. We learned that media projects that address difficult subjects such as violence are complex and take time. There may be stops and starts if the work gets too emotionally draining and youth workers who take on this practice will need to “stick with it” through these ups and downs showing young people they can step away and come back. Beyond creating the space for personal growth and skill building, practitioners might foster connections between young people and the wider community to disseminate findings, advance social dialogue, and intentionally celebrate youth media projects through community gatherings, film-showings, open-mic nights and other creative opportunities to showcase the endeavors of young people in their programs.

Smith (1982) believed we should view young people as creators rather than consumers. Creating a sense of belonging and critical hope may require seeing young people not as problems to fix (a intervention model) or possibilities to be guided in stages by expert adults (a positive youth development model), but as artistic agents of change capable of transforming their communities, themselves and enriching the lives of

everyone around them. This kind of practice invites youth workers to stand with youth against violence and injustice.

On the list of 40 Developmental Assets, #24, called “bonding to school” requires the young person to “care about her or his school” (“40 Developmental Assets for Adolescents”). We heard from youth workers in this study that they understood how violent schools could be for the youth in their programs. They knew that teachers had treated them poorly and the system had, as Maria said, “failed *them*.” Encouraging young people to care about schools and/or other institutions that betrayed them would not have made sense for their practice. In other words, youth work practice that creates belonging and critical (ontological) hope may require standing with youth against the very institutions and structures most youth development frameworks advocate creating healthy relationships with.

### **Implications for Theory**

If developmental frameworks/theories were not necessary for positive outcomes in this study, what are the implications for theory? These implications might extend to our theoretical knowledge of youth development, challenging us to consider the necessity of centering development theories as the dominant way of understanding young people and working with them. Brown (1985) believed that scholars and practitioners should critically question their own field of inquiry. She saw critical self-reflection as a “practical-intellectual endeavor” where scholars in any field should “point up the contradictions, the distortions, and self-delusions . . . or the questionable morality of norms inherent in practices” (p. 87). When we continue to rely on age-stage development

as central to theorizing about young people, we are not taking a politically neutral position. Wyn & White (1997) claimed that the youth development model:

imposes a highly ethnocentric and masculine model of human development which does ultimately reveal more about the practices of professionals and experts than it does about the young people whose lives it is intended to address. The assumptions underlying the youth development model have been especially detrimental to young people of color and some non-English-speaking backgrounds (p. 63).

How might we take seriously the call from certain scholars to question the developmental age-stage view of young people in our theories? Connell (1994) referred to the lack of success for young poor people in schools as the ‘mystery in broad daylight.’ When individual interventions based on developmental models obscure poverty and other structural inequalities, we are mystified why poor youth of color continue to do badly. Have you ever heard a young person refer to another young person as ‘adolescent’? In other words, is the ‘mystery in broad daylight’ eluding us? Does the developmental point of view, and the naming of young person as ‘adolescent,’ signal an eminent judging and categorizing of young person (Wyn & White, 1997) rendering us unable to see them in different ways? Brown (1985) claimed, “when we act unreflectively according to popularly established concepts, our perceptions of the situation and modes of conduct available to us are limited in subtle ways that we do not recognize” (p. 47) It is recommended that scholars both recognize and challenge popular binaries and existing theories that mark youth as deviant. Embracing more kaleidoscopic theories and paradigms may garner a deeper understanding of young people’s experiences and responses to their worlds.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**



Given what I've found in this study, three areas of research are recommended. First, further research might focus on young people's expansive experiences with and definitions of violence placing them as experts about their own lives. This research agenda could provide an alternative to the standard violence as "intrinsic to the individual" protocol and may reveal a much deeper understanding of the multiple ways violence affects young people's lives. Participatory and creative ways of doing research where participants' indigenous knowledge is valued are recommended.

Second, future research might explore models of youth work practice that do not rely on a developmental framework. What might we learn from practices that are not grounded in a youth development model, but in the political, cultural or holistic understandings of young people? This study would suggest not all youth work practice is grounded in developmental frames compelling us to revisit the general consensus that development is foundational to ground effective practice.

Finally, given what I've found it is recommended that youth media practice become a site to study the "less known dimensions" of engagement such as healing, hope and spiritual transformation. Ginwright (2011) believed that community organizations could offer pathways to healing by providing spaces to build critical consciousness, take action, and promote well-being. Prilleltensky, Nelson and Peirson (2001) claimed well-being is a direct result of "power and control over internal and external forms of oppression" (p. 143). Across the three sites in this study, these pathways to healing and well-being were provided, yet we still know very little about how these impact young people in youth media programs. Further research might unpack the connections between spiritual well-being and youth media practice.

## Summary

Young people today are not just watching and critiquing media content, but they are creating a variety of their own media projects to examine their lived experience (Sefton-Green & Soep, 2007; Chavez & Soep, 2005). Part of the lived experience they examine is violence that happens in their communities. The purpose of this critical qualitative study was to illuminate the ways youth as active agents meaningfully address violence in their communities through producing media. The second purpose of this study was to better understand the youth work practices that support young people who examine and change their communities.

The findings in the study indicate that young people in media programs create their work through overlapping circles of personal growth, media skill building and community development. These rich spaces inform each other in myriad ways as young people take on the long and complex process of creating media to address violence. They do not do this alone, but collaborate in co-creative spaces with youth workers who support and challenge them in caring and critical ways to examine their communities and create change.

This study reveals that youth media practice is ripe with opportunity to understand more about how young people's understanding of self and current and future purpose change as a result of their participation. We know from this study that young people experienced violence in complex ways, thereby challenging the common binaries and images created in scholarship and popular media. It is incumbent upon us as scholars, educators, and youth work practitioners to continue to challenge these negative and false images of young people and create more kaleidoscopic modes of truly "seeing" the

complex ways youth experience and respond to their worlds. It is also vital that we understand more about the practices that evoke a critical hope in young people, which inspires them to co-create positive change in their communities.

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## APPENDIX A: STAFF INTERVIEW GUIDE

### **Co-Creating Community Change: Responding to Violence through Youth Media Practice**

#### **Community/Organization:**

What happens at \_\_\_\_\_? What do you do?

What do people think you do vs. what you actually do?

What do most people NOT KNOW about what you do that's critical to \_\_\_\_\_?

If you were to describe what happens at \_\_\_\_\_ to a grantee, your family or your best friend would the three descriptions be the same? If not how would they differ?

Why did you choose to work here?

What are your goals for \_\_\_\_\_?

What did you do to get kids interested in coming to your programs?

Where does funding come from?

If you were going to hire someone what would the essential criteria be?

What makes a good youth worker?

When you meet with a group of young people what do you do in the first 5 minutes?  
After that?

Talk about a time when you collaborated with youth here.

What does the community around \_\_\_\_\_ look like? What are the strengths?

#### **Violence:**

What hurts the \_\_\_\_\_ community?

What does violence look like in your community or what hurts young people in the community?

How does community violence affect your organization/work?

#### **Media:**

How does your organization provide ways for young people to create media?

What are some examples of the ways young people use media to address community issues?

**Addressing Community Violence through Media:**

What are some of the ways young people in your organization are addressing violence in their community through media?

How do you support young people who choose to take on addressing issues in the community like violence?

What can educators, researchers, policy-makers, and youth workers do to support youth in your community?

## APPENDIX B: YOUTH INTERVIEW GUIDE

### **Co-Creating Community Change: Responding to Violence through Youth Media Practice**

#### **Community:**

What happens at \_\_\_\_\_? What do you do here?

What does it mean to you having this place in the community?

How would you describe your community?

What are the strengths of your community?

#### **Violence:**

What does violence look like in your community or what hurts your community?

#### **Media:**

Talk about the process of creating your media project. What did it mean to you? What did you learn? What does it mean now?

What does it mean to you to publicly show your media project? What impact has it had on your community and others who have seen it?

Did creating the project change you? If so, in what way?

#### **Addressing Community Violence through Violence:**

How does your project address violence in your community?

#### **Youth Media Practice:**

What about being in this place helped you create your project?

How do the programs at \_\_\_\_\_ support you?

What does \_\_\_\_\_ do to support you and your goals?

What makes a good youth worker?

What can educators, researchers, policy-makers, and youth workers do to support you and your community? What does your community need?

## APPENDIX C: YOUTH CONSENT FORM

### CONSENT FORM

#### **Co-Creating Community Change: Responding to Violence through Youth Media Practice**

You/Your child are invited to be in a research study looking at how young people address issues of violence in their communities through creating media. They were selected as a participant because they have been working on a media project related to this study. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by: Jenna Sethi from the department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Minnesota.

#### **Background Information**

The purpose of this study is to understand the creative ways in which young people are addressing violence in their communities through creating media – film, murals, and spoken word poetry. In interviewing young urban media artists I hope to expand understanding of how educators, researchers, youth workers, and policy-makers can join and support young people trying to create positive change their communities.

#### **Procedures:**

If you/your child agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:

Participate in a 1 hour and 30 minute interview which will be audio taped.

Participate in a 1 hour follow up interview several months after the first interview which will be audio taped.

#### **Risks and Benefits of being in the Study**

The study has limited risks. There are no known physical risks. You have been asked to participate in this study because you have been exploring the topic of violence in your own media project, however this is a sensitive subject. There is no direct benefit to subjects who participate in this study.

#### **Compensation:**

If you/ your child choose to participate, they will receive compensation for their time and willingness. They will be given a \$20 gift card.

#### **Confidentiality:**

The records of this study will be kept private. Research records (tape recorded interviews) will be stored securely and only the researcher will have access to these records. Interviews will be transcribed onto a computer and will use pseudonyms (fake names). In any sort of report I might publish, I will also use pseudonyms (fake names) for the participants and personal thoughts/data on the process will not be linked to a particular participant.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or to withdraw at any time. If you decide that you do not want your child to participate, you/they will NOT be penalized. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University of Minnesota, or your organization.

**Contacts and Questions:**

The researcher conducting this study is: Jenna Sethi. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at the University of Minnesota, 651-329-4236, sethi007@umn.edu.

Researcher’s Advisor: Yvonne Gentzler, 612-625-6624, [gentzler@umn.edu](mailto:gentzler@umn.edu)

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), **you are encouraged** to contact the Research Subjects’ Advocate Line, D528 Mayo, 420 Delaware St. Southeast, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55455; (612) 625-1650.

*You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.*

**Statement of Consent:**

I have read the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Signature of parent or guardian: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

*(If minors are involved)*  
Signature of Investigator: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_