

## **Young People Assert and Forge Cultural Identities in the Course of Their Political Activism within Alternative Spaces**

**By Fazila Bhimji**

The article examines African American, Latina/o, and White high school students' assertions of cultural and ethnic identities as they struggle for their educational rights in Los Angeles and Philadelphia. In doing so, the study illustrates the ways in which alternative spaces outside the formal context of schools facilitate expressions, understandings, and negotiation of identities among young people. In some instances, the young people attempt to bridge their differences and work towards attaining a common goal whereas at other times they may assert their ethnic and cultural identities.

The school system tends to separate White middle-class students and urban poor students of color and the state does not recognize cultural identities of many young people of immigrant families. I illustrate the ways in which the young men and women from these cities make assertions of their ethnic and cultural identities

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while contesting structural inequities in alternative spaces where there is minimum adult intervention.

White and African American students in Philadelphia in their struggles to campaign against privatization of schools not only work towards a common goal, but in the course of their activism attempt to bridge their cultural and social differences. They recognize and negotiate their differences and do not adopt a color-blind framework. However, this is achieved because White students and African American students come together regularly in an office space located in City Centre Philadelphia.

On the West Coast, in East Los Angeles, young people of Mexican and Central American heritage assert their cultural identities and fight for Ethnic Studies to be made part of the school curriculum. Once again, the young people find the opportunity to express and explore their identities because they meet in a unique setting—the staff of which is composed of socially aware young Latina/o men and women who based upon their personal experiences, socialize young men and women into becoming proud of who they are as well as gaining a critical consciousness of the issues they have to confront. Additionally, the site where much of the organizing efforts occur is located in a Mexican and Central American neighborhood which further facilitates self awareness among the high school activists.

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### Theoretical Framework

This article stresses the ways in which these young people assert their multi-layered identities such that they are civic, politicized, urban, and young while they simultaneously claim their rights to belong. In doing so, these students thus transform their positions and attempt to, as Fraser (1991) explains, “help expand a discursive space within dominant publics,” i.e., one of rights to a collective, political, and cultural identity. She defines these spaces as “subaltern counterpublics where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (p. 123). Fraser (1991) argues “that counterpublics in stratified and multicultural societies contest the exclusionary norms of the bourgeois public, elaborating alternative styles of political behaviour and alternative norms of public speech” (p. 160). Furthermore, she calls for the formulation of multiple publics, especially in socially stratified and multicultural societies, arguing that public spheres tend to serve as arenas for enactment of social identities where participation means being able to speak in one’s own voice.

Away from the formal domains of schools these alternative spaces allow marginalized young people to be in a position to enact their identities in self-empowering ways as well making them aware of larger systemic inequities. Ginwright and Cammarota (2002) formulated the Social Justice Youth Development Model to explain how youth can move from awareness of, and social action against, their own oppression to awareness of, and social action against the oppression of others. This model provides an excellent framework for understanding the ways in which

expressions of identity and activism are linked for urban youth but does not take into account the significance of space in the development process. This article illustrates that young people within “counterpublics” feel safe to express and explore their identities. Such understandings then facilitate young people’s various activism for just education and fairer laws.

The young men and women who contest their rights to education on the local level are challenging larger questions of citizenship, belonging, race, and equity while they present themselves as Latina/o, African Americans, White, or Africans worthy of recognition by state authorities, the media, and the public schools they attend. As Lipsitz (2002) comments, “social movements rarely start out by posing radical challenges to dominant social warrants...they generally focus on modest and melioristic reforms, on immediate obstacles rather than abstract enemies...but the practical activities of struggle produce new possibilities and prohibitions that compel activists to change themselves in the process of changing society.” Similarly Wexler (1983, 1988) explains how social movements no longer are conceived as large-scale socioeconomic revolutions, but rather as micro-level socio-political processes.

Much scholarship has examined the ways in which young people forge and manifest their identities in formal learning sites such as the classroom. Scholars have particularly focused on formation of subcultural styles and identities at the school site. For example, Penelope Eckert (1989) offers an ethnographic account of the ways in which adolescents in a Michigan high school adopt social categories and identities such as ‘jocks’ and ‘burnouts.’ Eckert explores the ways in which the school’s institutional environment leads to the formation of opposed class cultures. Similarly, Staiger (2006) shows how at an urban high school Black, White, Latina/o, and Asian adolescents employ discourses of differences in multiple school spaces, articulating their racial and gendered positions. Meanwhile, she argues that the school system fosters further segregation in terms of ‘gifted’ and ‘at risk’ students. Ann Arnett Ferguson (2000) portrays how teachers at a school position African-Americans pre-adolescents as “bound for jail” and the ways in which these boys then understand these stereotypical depictions where they then adopt a critical stance towards the school and their teachers. Scholars have also attended to class stratifications showing the ways in which students from working-class backgrounds (e.g., Fine, 1991; Bratlinger, 1993) resist maltreatment either by withdrawing in their classes or erupting into “periodic outbursts of anger.”

While these studies illuminate the ways in which the school system fosters social and racial stratification and the ways in which the students make meaning of a racialized system or manifest oppositional identities, other scholars have examined the ways in which students may overcome boundaries in liminal spaces such as the playground or during detention time. For example, Rampton (1995) examines how young people in Britain from different ethnic backgrounds cross boundaries in certain social contexts through language and style appropriation and negotiate their differences. Hence, these theories and research illustrate the ways in which young people construct identities in the more formal context of school.

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Much of the research in this area has concentrated on explaining oppositional and subcultural identities. However, young people do not simply spend all their time in classrooms and their geographies can be quite extensive (Skeleton & Valentine, 1998). Young people traverse a wide range of spaces such as after school learning programs, art centers, streets, clubs, workplaces, and their own homes. In many of these sites young people may find opportunities to express their own identities and meanings which may or may not correspond with dominant discourses of underprivileged youth. Young people, especially from poor working communities, connect in a wide range of spaces such as church basements, street corners, classrooms, and underfunded storefront non-profit organizations in order to counter social inequalities (e.g., Ginwright, Noguera & Cammarota, 2006). This article traces the struggles of young men and women for the common good while using their own voice and style during their high school years in public spaces outside schools.

### **Methodology**

I began my fieldwork soon after high school students' response in California to the passage of Proposition 21—a law which required young people as young as 14 years of age to be tried as adults. I was visiting San Francisco and noted an announcement for a city council meeting where the youth were planning to meet with city representatives to discuss the city's response to the passage of this legislation. Upon attending the meeting, I was very impressed by the youth's presence and the ways in which they articulated their concerns. Following this meeting, I continued to follow young people's activism on a more formal level in Philadelphia and Los Angeles.

I would describe the principal research strategy for this study consisting of ethnographic fieldwork, including semi-structured interviews with students and adult leaders, participant observation/video-taped analyses of rallies, meetings, and hearings and review of archival data and related newspaper and television coverage over a period of two years in youth community organizations based in San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Philadelphia. During a visit to Philadelphia, I decided to contact a group called the Philadelphia Students' Union which comprised high school students campaigning for educational rights. Since I was interested in looking at the ways in which young people (especially in the inner-cities) came together in alternative spaces to strive for their own educational justice, I considered the Students' Union to be an appropriate site to pursue this study. Furthermore, the group was particularly interesting since it was comprised of both African American and White students and during the course of my research I became interested in the ways in which they participated in intercultural communication.

I interviewed twenty-five African-American and White high school students between the ages of 15 and 17 and three adult staff members who were between the ages 20 and 24. The African-American students were from disenfranchised neigh-

borhood schools whereas the White students attended magnet schools in the city. Many of these students were participating for the first time in political campaigns. Some had struggled for educational justice in the past and others had families who had a history of campaigning for issues of civil rights in Philadelphia. The large majority of these students were ambitious and aimed to attend college upon graduation. I met with my research participants regularly for five months at the time they were campaigning against the privatization of Philadelphia schools. In addition to conducting interviews, I attended weekly meetings and towards the final month of the campaign I met about three times a week with the group, attending rallies, discussions, and preparations for these events. I took detailed ethnographic notes of the meetings I attended.

Upon returning to Los Angeles, I continued to work in this area and contacted a group known as the Inner City Struggles which was comprised of Mexican American and Central American high school students and staff working together to contest some of the structural inequities in the educational system. I selected this research site mainly for the same reason as I did in Philadelphia, i.e., to explore young people from disenfranchised backgrounds campaigning for their education and their right to belong. Additionally, I was interested in the ways they asserted their right to cultural expression while they contested for educational justice. The research site offered the possibility to explore these issues as the participants assumed pride in their ethnic and cultural identities. The students who participated in the group attended two East Los Angeles high schools where the student population mainly consisted of second and 1.5 generation Latina/os of Central American and Mexican origin.

I interviewed 15 young people between the ages 16 and 25 and attended a number of meetings on a monthly basis that were held after school hours in which students actively participated. I remained connected with this group for eighteen months. The interviews were largely semi-structured—I mainly asked the young people their reasons for participation, their campaigns, campaign strategies, their future work, and how they viewed themselves and the ways in which they were perceived by the media and other institutions. I also asked them to describe their cultural and ethnic identities and the ways in which they expressed and negotiated their cultural differences in intercultural settings. However, in the majority of the instances I had few set questions and allowed the conversations to flow freely.

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### **The Political Economy of Urban Youth in California and Pennsylvania**

In the year 1968, students at a major high school in Boyle Heights staged a walkout that called for a better education. This movement for quality education occurred in the section of Los Angeles which was home to a hundred thousand Mexican Americans. It was (and is now) completely separated from the rest of Los Angeles. Education was seen as a way to break down barriers. Only one out of four Chicanos completed high school. The drop out rate was viewed as a “push out” rate as Mexican Americans’ language and culture were not given due respect and the

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unemployment rate in the community was high. Consequently, these conditions had a dramatic effect on Mexican American's children and youth. Mexican American students called for Bilingual Education, Mexican-American history courses, the hiring of more Mexican American teachers and counselors, and the end of corporal punishment. Today many of these issues remain and on May 18, 2000, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and other civil rights groups acting on behalf of nearly 70 students in eighteen California Public Schools, filed the most comprehensive lawsuit to date ever to be brought against a state concerning the bare minimum requirements for education.

The distancing of voters, who are mostly White, from public institutions which largely serve minorities and recent immigrants from Mexico, Central America, Southeast Asia, and the Soviet Union has also resulted in the passage of propositions and reforms which serve to further cause disparities in education. Proposition 13 (see Kozol, 1991, for an excellent discussion of the ways in which schools are funded through property taxes in the United States was passed in California in 1978, which drained the public schools of their money).

In more recent times, a series of propositions have passed which affect poor urban children and youth's educational rights. These propositions included 187 (which denied undocumented children health and education), 209 (the anti-affirmative action proposition), 227 (anti-bilingual education), and 21 (where youth as young as 14 could be tried as adults). Gutiérrez et. al (2000) consider these reforms to be a "backlash pedagogy." These scholars argue that "backlash pedagogy does not harness diversity and difference as resources for learning; instead, it is characterized by its reductive notions of learning, particularly literacy and language learning, that define diversity and difference as problems to be eliminated or remediated."

While public funding for schools in California substantially declined, there was an increase in funding for correctional facilities. Furthermore, measures that gave expanded powers to prosecutors to penalize young people were voted for. In March of 2000, California's Proposition 21, the Juvenile Crime Initiative, passed with 62% of the vote. The proposition, among other things, required teenagers as young as 14 to be tried in adult court for crimes such as murder or serious sex offenses. However, these political actions did not go unheeded—instead it politicized many of the youth (largely of color, largely Latina/o).

In response to the varied social problems urban youth across California began to claim their educational rights. For example, they staged rallies, met with their city representatives, met with school board members and so forth. In San Francisco, a youth group called the 'Third Eye' was particularly active. In Boyle Heights (a predominantly Latina/o neighborhood in East Los Angeles) various groups challenged educational disparities and housing inequities. One such group which was particularly active was a community based organization called Inner-City Struggles.

This community based organization, the staff of which was predominantly second generation Mexican-American and Central American youth between the ages 17 to 25, defines itself as dedicated to promoting social and economic justice

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for youth and families of Boyle Heights and the surrounding communities of East Los Angeles. People who live in Boyle Heights are poor, low-income blue-collar workers, the vast majority of them Spanish speaking. Up until the 1940s, this section of Los Angeles included Japanese American, Jewish, and Mexican American residents. However, with the Jewish flight to suburban neighborhoods and the internment of the Japanese American residents, Boyle Heights is now primarily a Latina/o immigrant community.

Youth of color living in the city of Philadelphia experienced similar types of systemic inequities. In September 2001, Edison School Inc., the largest private operator of public schools nationwide (a for profit company) had been hired to examine Philadelphia's school district. In other words, public education was being sold to private companies that cared mostly about their own profits. This takeover of the schools by a for-profit company was more likely to affect the poorer "neighborhood schools" than the "magnet schools." The magnet schools and neighborhood schools differed in many respects. The neighborhood schools were highly racially segregated; in some schools the student body consisted of 98% African-Americans. These schools were located in low-income neighborhoods of Philadelphia. The average family income of 86% of the students who attend the neighborhood schools was reported to be less than \$15,000. I asked many of the students to describe their schools. Several of the students told me that the schools lacked resources, and that there was not much motivation on the part of teachers or students.

In sharp contrast to these under-resourced schools, the magnet schools have a very diverse student body and are highly focused in preparing students for college. For example, the racial makeup of Central High School (a magnet school) include 40% Whites, 32.8% African-Americans, 5.2% Latinos, 21.7% Asians, and 0.2% of the total student population fall in the other category. Besides the racial composition, the magnet schools also differed from the neighborhood schools in terms of its educational philosophy. The students described their magnet schools as being very "open." Students could take their lunch outside and be anywhere on campus. In contrast, the students from the non-magnet schools told me that their schools had a restricted atmosphere and in certain cases the vice-principal would come by each class period to check on the classes. The students described the White magnet students as being affluent and college bound. The majority of the magnet high school students who participated in the Philadelphia Students Union were White, from relatively affluent backgrounds, living in relatively diverse sections of the city; whereas, the African-American students who participated in the Student Union lived in racially segregated, low-income neighborhoods of Philadelphia.

However, there were exceptions to this rule. In talking to one African-American high school student, I found out that she had grown up in a poorer section of the city, attended a magnet school and actually took great pride in the fact that she could comfortably switch between both worlds and wished that more students would and could do so. What is significant is that she perceived the students from the two types of schools as being very different. Thus, young people of color in poor inner

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city spaces encounter insurmountable challenges such as unequal education, racial divisions, and propositions and laws that further contribute to the widening gap between Whites and young people of color.

### **Claiming Educational Rights in Philadelphia, Los Angeles, and San Francisco**

When in March of 2000, California's Proposition 21, the Juvenile Crime Initiative, passed, several youth groups rallied against it while calling for increases in school funding. On June 29, 2000, local youth groups held a hearing with the Board of Supervisors to discuss how local city departments were dealing with Proposition 21 and to urge city officials to declare the city of San Francisco a "Proposition 21-free zone." During the meeting several of the fifty teens present stepped up to the podium to present their arguments against the local implementation of this measure. The purpose of the San Francisco Youth Commission was to bridge the gap between youth and government and ensure that young people have a voice in decisions and policies that affect young people.

In Los Angeles, I observed similar struggles among many of the young people attending inner city high schools. The struggles for education rights continued post Proposition 21. Young people in inner city high schools campaigned for increased funding, certified teachers, elimination of certain types of detention policies, and inclusion of ethnic studies in the official high school curriculum. Similarly, in Philadelphia, the young people campaigned actively against privatization of disenfranchised schools and segregationist policies.

The young men and women encountered several challenges in their quest for educational rights. In order to make themselves heard, the youth participated in the public sphere attempting in many ways to bridge the divide between themselves and adults and various types of authorities. Benhabib (1992) defines the public sphere as a "political space of discursivity in which contested issues are addressed and viewing it to be a permeable arena continuously responsive to new issues, moral challenges, and new modes of discourse." This is especially evident in youth movements which start out with very local concerns, eventually making their struggles heard in the public arena. The following paragraphs examine these struggles, challenges, and the young people's response to these challenges as they contest for their rights in public spaces while they simultaneously articulate their diverse, fluid, and flexible identities.

### **Negotiating Cultural and Racial Divides at the Student Union in Philadelphia**

When, in the fall of 2001, Philadelphia Schools were under threat of privatization, the high school students actively campaigned against this takeover. They protested, engaged in civil disobedience, went to the state capitol, talked to city



representatives, met with the mayor, went to school reform commission meetings, petitioned, walked out of schools, held rallies at city hall, and tried to get the media to listen to them. However, as the young people protested against the threat of the takeover they asserted their youthful, urban, and cultural identities. In many of their meetings, they discussed the use of their language and dress in the public sphere. Should they or should they not use slang? What does it mean for an African American to be arrested versus a White person? Moreover, much of the time both White and African American students were conscious of their respective identities. These differences were acknowledged by White high school students as well as African-American students. The following interview excerpts show ways in which a white student discusses her viewpoint:

FB: *So the student union includes students from neighbourhood schools and magnet schools. Do you encounter any difficulties?*

This is like one of the difficult things. It really is. We have been separated. We are friends but we are a kind of different cultures but I think in the end we form a kind of a "student union culture" where we can't identify that these are good schools or magnet schools. When people come to the student union it is kind of a mix of the two cultures sort of like the intellectuals and the thugged out (laughs) and everything we do together is kind of mixed together and everything has that kind of side of urban but it is also backed up by intelligence.

I think there is a little difference because it is two different atmospheres. Like the atmosphere of the magnet school is not the same as the neighbourhood schools because their schools look better than ours inside. And um it is a different atmosphere totally from the teachers down to the gyms and the bathrooms whatever it is different completely. But we pull together in the student union. When there are conflicts it is usually personality clashes.

The students within the context of the Student Union acknowledge their identities and thus realize that there are differences between the students who attend these two types of schools. However, it is also within the safety of the Student Union that the young urban activists are willing to challenge these state-imposed racial and class differences and "pull together." It is noteworthy that the students mention that the differences are mainly because of the nature of schools that they attend where one is a magnet school where students are socialized to be intellectuals and the urban school is perceived as where the 'thugs' attend.

Hence, the divisions are perceived as state imposed and having to do with structural issues rather than any inherent causes. However, the students manage to defy these differences when they come together in a space designed to bring African Americans and White young people together who otherwise would never have the opportunity to work together. It is also noteworthy that the students perceive their differences to occur on an individual level: 'when there are conflicts it is usually personality clashes.' This implies that group divides which may occur because of unequal forms of school or cultural and ethnic differences do not take place in the

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space of the Student Union but rather differences occur on account of differing personalities. Hence, not only cultural identities are acknowledged but also individual personalities are recognized. An African-American student attending West Philadelphia High School voiced a similar opinion:

I get along with everybody here. I feel closer to some of the students here than to some of the students in my own neighborhood. You have kids like Rachel (magnet student). She is one of the most wonderful people I have ever met. She is very interesting and she can keep a good conversation going and it is strictly friendly. By her being White and me being Black you would not think kids from different cultures could have such a close relationship. But, she can always get inside my brain and make me laugh.

*What brings that closeness?*

I think we have a lot in common. Well we don't like the same music but I can say we have the same thoughts about the same issues and we can always agree on things that's not related to student union and we can always agree on things that have to do with the student union.

It can be readily observed from the above interview excerpts that once outside their segregated school spaces students recognize their differences, but at the same time bond together because of their shared ideologies and communitarian values. The group works toward the common goal of creating improved educational opportunities for everybody. As Boyte and Evans (1992) point out that often poor and working-class men and women often flee from sites of historical pain and struggle and reconstitute new identities. Such intersections along race, class and gender lines contrast sharply with practices among students in many desegregated high schools and middle schools where students form cliques (e.g., Fine, Weiss, & Powell, 1997; Goto, 1997; Hemmings, 2000) and discourses of difference (Staiger, 1999). Even though much of the time, the students discovered a common culture (in this very nonprofit loosely structured space) which transcended gender, race, and class lines, this is not to say that there was no room for occasional conflicts, tensions, and displays of difference. One of the White staff members stated his opinion to me:

Eric: Well that's been a big deal of having students from such different backgrounds. One of the things that we do every year is once or twice year we go on a student retreat and we bring students from all the chapters. It is a pretty amazing experience because it is not too often that students from such diverse groups get together. And there is a conflict there usually. There are lots of stuff between the neighborhood schools and magnet students as to who talks funny and who is that way, who is smart and who is not. You know all kinds of assumptions are made. Territorial things between the neighborhood schools. And you know all kinds of things. But we need to value that conflict—to address it and not to hide from it. And try to become stronger from that. One of the things that happens here and the students will tell you that one of the favorite things about the student union is that they get to have real relationships with people who are so different from themselves.

These comments show that the Student Union did serve as a space to build relationships as students gather together with a common goal. What is significant in this extract is the fact that within the Student Union differences are accepted and valued when Eric says: “But we need to value that conflict—to address it and not to hide from it.” Thus within the safe space of the Student Union where there is little adult intervention, the high school students from very different neighborhoods are encouraged to explore their identities and then negotiate these differences.

I noted that when differences did arise, students worked hard at resolving them. For example, at the end of the year when the high school students planned a victory party, many of the White students did not express much interest in attending the party. One of the White magnet students explained to me that White people and Black people’s parties are different. She told me that the student union parties were culturally similar to Black people’s parties because the parties were mainly “music and dancing” and “dollar” parties—parties where you paid a dollar to attend. She further explained to me that the White students mainly attend “house parties” or “Sam’s parties” which involved smoking and drinking and which were a little bit crazier.

However, this issue of different types of parties among White and African-American students was not easily overlooked. Many of the students—both African-Americans and White students—wished to make the party more inclusive and attempted to figure out ways to encourage the magnet students to attend the party. Hence, a committee was set up and it was decided that two representations from each school would be on that committee. When the party committee did meet, the students discussed ways to get White students involved. One of the African-American students suggested that perhaps they should have White people’s food such as “macaroni and cheese.” Finally, at the party, though the overall turnout of the students was low, there were a number of students from the magnet schools who attended the party. Hence, it was in this way that student union continued to resolve differences between the magnet students and students from the neighborhood schools. However, significantly there was sufficient space provided to understand and acknowledge varying identities and it was only then efforts were made to resolve potential tensions.

The Student Union served as a space not only where students strove to fight larger and more visible campaigns such as inequities in the school system but also as a place where perhaps less obvious battles were negotiated. As Fine et al. (2000) point out in their study of young people doing art in alternative art spaces, the management of difference among a diverse group of young people is facilitated by the young people’s striving towards a common ground. In a similar vein, the Student Union served as a space for students where they could express their own identities and at the same time resist segregationist identities.

Fraser argues that in a multicultural society members of different publics may talk across cultural lines in such a way that it promotes intercultural communication. In this context, African-American students from poor neighborhood schools and White students from more privileged backgrounds form counterpublics for

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the common good, transcend some of the cultural boundaries they encounter, yet at the same time allow themselves the leeway to express views in their own style.

### **Asserting Ethnic Identities at United Students in East Los Angeles**

Whereas African American and White high school students affirmed and negotiated cultural identities and differences in Philadelphia over the course of their political activism, young people of Central American and Mexican origin in East Los Angeles affirmed their ethnic identity. When I first went to their office in East L.A. I was immediately struck by the bright colors of the walls: the bright blues, greens, and oranges lent a cheerful ambience to this space. Adding to this colorful atmosphere was a beautiful, brightly colored mural which was painted at the entrance to the building. The sun, an Aztec pyramid, and cacti decorate the façade. Thus, the very front of the building reflected the cultural and political identity of this youth group. As one of the staff members explained to me “this mural shows that we want to reclaim our culture—it represents a certain world-view.”

Morgan (1994) argues that stigmatization leads to contestation of dominant discourses and a high degree of solidarity in groups. Thus, it is not completely surprising that the young people living in East Los Angeles (an historically disenfranchised Latina/o neighborhood) and attending under-funded schools express solidarity with their community. But what is particularly interesting here is that as the young people fight for educational justice they do so as *Mexicans, Hispanics, Latina/os*, and as *young people of color residing in Boyle Heights* rather than simply as teenagers attending public high schools in Los Angeles. Furthermore, expressions of ethnic identity were not always considered separate from the quest for structural changes that the group Inner City Struggles campaigned for, but rather were integrated into their struggles and way of being. Consider the following excerpt:

Lester: One thing I'll do is draft like an agenda for the meeting. One thing I wanted you to remind you all is that next Saturday is we have the regional meeting which is basically all the groups that are meeting around our campaign around ethnic studies and all that other stuff doing work in L.A. are coming together to talk about the campaign itself and that's a really really important meeting. Oh and one other thing I wanted to put out to you all was that and this is optional they are having the *Dia de Los Muertos* (Day of the Dead) they are having workshops like every Saturday in October and they going to talk about what is *Dia De Los Muertos* and making sugar skulls and so a couple of staff members are going to be going. So let me know if you want to go. And if y'all want to bring your family too it's cool. I invited my sister and my nephew so they are coming down too.

Student: Are the sugar skulls edible? Can we eat 'em?

Lester: They are edible. You can eat em but they are more for decoration. I don't know too much about it myself. It's a learning experience for me as well. And this also goes with putting together an altar at the office and we would all make it together and then bring it down and stuff like that.

This extract shows that before bringing the meeting to a close Lester raises issues of cultural expressions such that the *Dia de los muertos*—a Mexican celebration, gains significance. Furthermore, Lester points out that the group intends on making an ‘altar’ for the office, another form of cultural expression. Hence, this illustrates the ways in which the sites young people work within facilitate interlinking of critical consciousness, activism, and expressions of cultural identities. As Flores-González, Rodríguez, and Rodríguez-Muñiz (2006) comment, boundaries among self-awareness, social awareness, and global awareness need not be finely defined and young people can easily move along a continuum. In this context, the space outside their schools offers young people opportunities to assert and recognize their rights in multiple ways

The following interview demonstrates the way in which Monica, a young staff member, expresses pride in her cultural identity and recognizes the growing pride among Latina/o youth in East Los Angeles.

I guess after reading the literature that our professors would give to us during class time and being able to learn about where I came from where I got that culture and history and being Chicana and living here in Boyle Heights and East LA. I think that was very very important for me. Just to finally kind of structure myself and find my identity that I longed for—if someone told me you had beautiful skin I would say my skin is too dark. And now I feel I have the tools to accept everything about me from my skin to my hair... Go to school and hang out and do the prom. Those were my priorities. Those were the things that were concerning me at the time. And then I was looking for something else. Something I didn't know about. It was me. Learning about who I was who I am. About Mexico. Because I had never visited Mexico. And I never knew my cousins till last year when I took a trip to Mexico and that was something I needed to do. To finally meet my cousin and to meet my grandma. Go to places where my parents used to live at and just everything but this is where my family background comes from. I can now walk up and down Whittier Blvd or somebody that has a sticker logo or an emblem or a T Shirt that is related or connected to like their roots like their culture. And I see that more and more now than ever before. So it seems that people have finally taken the blind fold off their eyes and now are really seeing the connection and taking more pride about themselves.

In the above account, Monica asserts pride in her Mexican identity. Moreover, she notes a shift in her identity where at one point she was simply interested in ‘doing the prom’ whereas now she wanted to learn more about her Mexican heritage and to actually visit Mexico. She also notes that there are other young people who are overt in expressing their cultural and ethnic identity. Hence, this narrative shows that while Monica questions and fights for educational justice she at the same time recognizes and embraces her Mexican identity. In doing so, she acknowledges her right to belong as well as to her full citizenship rights, while also recognizing the right to engage with her cultural and ethnic heritage.

As Fraser argues, “public spheres themselves are not spaces of zero-degree culture, equally hospitable to any form of cultural expression but rather these institu-

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tions may be understood as culturally specific rhetorical lenses that filter and alter the utterances they frame.” (p.126). In this manner, the accounts of the students who form part of the group illustrate that young people do not fight for educational justice devoid of specific cultural expressions and forms but rather acknowledge and value their own social identities within the space of political activism.

Similarly, Erica and Edgar articulate their Mexican as well as their geographical identities. In the following excerpt, Erica expresses solidarity with the people living in East Los Angeles.

Erica: The way I got involved in United Students was like I always stayed after school but I wouldn't do anything. Just my friend told me “come to this meeting come to this meeting” And I'm like Oh yeah. What is that? Oh yeah. United Students. So I just started coming. And they just started talking about the change in the community. It got me real interested. It's pretty interesting because we should have a change in our community. Especially people of color. Like us in East LA, Mexicans, Hispanics. And I think we all need it.

Erica illustrates that she was interested in change in her community and thus began to attend meetings on a regular basis. What is interesting here is that she acknowledges her heritage as “Mexicans” rather than the hyphenated identity “Mexican-Americans.” Thus she shows that she wishes the right to full citizenship as a Mexican young woman. Moreover, she self-identifies with her neighborhood and asserts that people living in East L.A. are just as worthy of equal education. However, these expressions of identity do not occur in a vacuum but rather within sites which allow for such affirmations to flourish.

Similarly, Edgar demonstrates his interest in his ethnic identity:

Edgar: By us making our school better. Students do get involved. They probably want to be here more to learn something. Instead of being in the streets. And then Lester says he wants to put Ethnic Studies. Him and the other group of people were saying. Well I was like that's good. Because I was learning of my culture on my own. I was like why isn't this shown to me at school? Why am I having to learn of my own people somewhere else? It helped to encourage me to change more of my community. Because Lester helps us a lot too. He puts in a lot of time to do workshops.

Edgar questions why learning about his culture should be a private affair when he says “Because I was learning of my culture on my own. I was like why isn't this shown to me at school?” As Flores-González, Rodríguez & Rodríguez-Muñoz (2006) point out in their study of a Puerto Rican/Latina/o youth organization, alternative spaces can serve as “additive spaces where youth actually can find their voice and a way of communicating with others without having to subscribe to conventional standards” (p.184). It is in this very context of counterpublics that Edgar gains an awareness that Ethnic Studies needs to be made part of the official school curriculum. In doing so, he shows that he is self-aware of the fact that culture and ethnicity need not be understood in one's private time and space as much of the

mainstream discourse would perceive it to be. Instead, he believes that it needs to be made part of the official school curriculum and that ethnic identity needs to be better understood in a more in-depth and systematic manner.

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### **Concluding Comments**

The above paragraphs discussed young people's affirmation of their identities in the course of their struggles for their citizenship during their high school years in East Los Angeles and Philadelphia. As public schools in the United States become increasingly privatized, the youth who are most likely to be affected by such government policies work towards reclaiming their space. By demonstrating their physical presence in the public arena, the youth groups do not only aim to reach a wide audience but also strive to assert their cultural and geographic identities. The White and African American students who work together towards a common goal of reclaiming their education demonstrate that they can overcome their cultural, class, and racial differences. In doing so, they contest state policies which segregates them in magnet and neighbourhood schools. But equally importantly, they employ their own distinct cultural expressions and modes.

Whites and African American students recognize when they organize together they may have varied cultural values and negotiate around these issues. In East Los Angeles, Mexican and Central American students begin to embrace their cultural and ethnic heritage in their struggle for educational rights. Thus, they contest their right to belong not only as assimilated citizens but on the grounds who they actually are thus refusing to be dominated by mainstream cultural norms. Hence, the young people's struggles become more complex and multilayered since they do not fight for educational justice in culturally neutral ways but additionally struggle for their cultural rights and recognition.

I argue that these assertions of identities do not occur in a vacuum, but rather that they are facilitated by the very nature of spaces in which the young people cross to contest unfair policies. The alternative spaces serve to link activism and expressions of identities. For instance, it is in the uniquely desegregated space such as the Student Union, where African American students living in some of the most disenfranchised neighborhoods in the country and White students who attend schools for gifted children work together and learn to acknowledge and negotiate cultural differences. Furthermore, the Student Union was viewed as a space where the young men and women felt free to express their views. Expressions of self, identity, difference were highly encouraged at the Students' Union. Similarly, in Boyle Heights marginalized young people learn to value and appreciate their ethnic heritage in the context of organizing for better education. As they sought official recognition for courses such as Ethnic Studies, painted the front of their organization in Aztec colors and styles, and celebrated cultural holidays such as *Dia de los muertos*, the young people came to value themselves.

Furthermore, it could be argued that the very location of these sites of contes-

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tation became significant to such self-affirmations among the young people. The office space stands on a main boulevard in the heart of East Los Angeles amongst beautiful brightly colored murals, *panederias* (bakeries), *carnecerias*, and street vendors selling fresh mangoes with chile and *elote con todo* (corn with everything on it). Furthermore, varying dialects of Spanish can be heard everywhere in the vicinity. In this very lively and colorful geographical setting and in the spirit of activism it would be difficult for young people not to affirm their Mexican and Central American identities. However, very importantly, the young people at the same time are critical of the disenfranchisement of their community, schools, and their neighborhoods and continue to resist racist policies.

There needs to be an increased recognition of these spaces by mainstream media and relevant institutions. Although the young people in this study demonstrated much agency and independence in the ways in which they organized themselves, they still need to be supported. Much of the dominant paradigm continues to undervalue student activism and young people's involvement in politics. For example, following the immigrant rights demonstration, the vice president of the L.A.-based human relations organization wrote in an op-ed in the *Los Angeles Times* that "the participation of students, some as young as 13 and 14, is especially troubling given that all too many seemed clueless about the issues."

Many of the students I spoke with expressed sentiments stating that all too often they remained unacknowledged, particularly by the media. Hence, the young people that I met were well aware of these forms of disparaging portrayals and thus made increased efforts to arm themselves with relevant facts each time they met with the media and public officials. Often enough, they appointed a spokesperson to talk to the media and other relevant institutions who would then spend much time in deliberating about what to say. The negative press seemed not to discourage the youth and they continued to persevere in their efforts.

In addition to being supported by favorable press, young people need to find allies within their communities who would support their social actions. Noguera and Cannella (2006) state that "in many communities there are veteran activists who serve as formal and informal mentors, counselors, and supporters of youth organizers" (p. 337). There are also nonprofit organizations, churches, and universities that provide resources and support to young people so that they in turn are able to play a more active role in influencing policy decisions that affect them and the communities where they live. In a similar vein, the above described sites of struggle need to work towards finding such allies who may help them gain favorable media coverage, obtain grants, and devise effective campaign strategies.

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