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# "From Knucklehead to Revolutionary:"

# Urban Youth Culture and Social Transformation

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**Abstract**

This ethnographic study examines the pedagogical strategies that Latina/o high school youth activists from Oakland, California use to politicize their gang involved peers. Experimental methods for theorizing and researching "with," rather than "from" or "for" marginalized urban populations are used. From participant observation and interview data I collected in 2001 and 2002, I analyze how youth activists in the inner-city act as "organic intellectuals" to generate nuanced strategies for educating, empowering and politicizing their peers by strategically and selectively utilizing popular culture in their pedagogical efforts. This "entangled approach" may provide insight to youth development workers and educators on how to best empower youth rendered as failures by society's institutions.

We went from flip floppin' sandals/ To hip hoppin'/ Gun coppin' /JuvenilesTo Revolutionary/"Too Much Love for our people" Poetic/ Beautiful/ Indigenous Eagles Red/ White/ Blue/ Yellow/ Half "Nuckleheads"/ Half intellectuals/ Plus/ Gang members remembering Ancestors/ And Thug Rebels/ Re-bell/ To the sounds of spiritual animals/ Plus Old school Hip Hop Beats…
Or stop the war in Afghanistan/ We are Rebel-lution-ized/ We are fightin'/ Marchin'/ De-colonizing/ Hip Hop Chantin'/ Freedom Hungry/ Searching/ For our land of Aztlan/ Within our hearts/ Entangle within the Ideological eye/ Or our **Rebel**lutionized minds/ We run political camps/ Under street corner store lamps/ To buildings/
That teach our children lies/ We are Messiah type/ Holding the 3rd eye/ No longer driven by/The hate that I had/ A Lost Soul/ Thus/ Re-Born…

—Victor Duarte, 18 year old youth organizer from Oakland, California

The cultural forms may not say what they know, nor know what they say, but they mean what they do—at least in the logic of their praxis.

— Paul Willis, Learning to Labour (1977)

**Youth and Social Change**

Understanding the everyday struggles and creative interventions that youth deploy in response to material and discursive processes of power, including those exercised by the state, is key for theorizing the role of youth in generating social change. In California, poor racialized youth are expected to succeed in school, find work, and evade drugs, gangs, and pregnancy with little or no preventative resources in the public schools or community to support them. When they 'fail,' the state, media, and intellectuals blame them and construct them as pathological, culturally inferior, ignorant, criminal, promiscuous, and/or ungrateful. Contradictory expectations by the nation-state, its institutions, the local community and parents to grow up as responsible and productive citizens with little or no support—in an age of deindustrialization, hyper-policing, concentrated poverty, a decline of the welfare state, and deteriorating school systems—bring about an urgency in youth to change these social constructions. Young people become award of direct attacks on them through repressive measures such as adult

criminal sentencing (i.e. state Proposition 21), removal of college affirmative action programs (i.e. state Proposition 209), and a "justified" decrease in education spending in poor communities (i.e. state Proposition 13).

In recent times, California has legalized many repressive measures aimed to control and contain racialized urban youth constructed as "thugs" and "moral panics" (Cohen, 1977). Young people of color resist and organize against social constructions of racialized/gendered youth as lazy, criminal, and ignorant, and the structural consequences that follow in formal and informal ways. In this process of formal and informal resistance they develop strategies for changing dominant hegemonic meanings of socially constructed notions of race, gender, and youth.

Lyn, a 19-year-old Latina college student born and raised in poor neighborhoods in San Francisco, is one youth who works to create this change. She has been a member of a Northern California high-school youth-led organization named Olin (meaning "movement" in Nahuatl, an indigenous language of Meso-America) for over five years and now serves as one of its main voices and leaders:

> …We [young people] know that we are not what the media and the law makes us out to be. We are better than that. Their bullshit laws are just a way of keeping us down for being poor and brown…this is why we fight.[1]

This study explores politicizing strategies applied by high-school age Latina/o youth activists in Oakland, California at the dawn of the new millennium.[2] Larger questions central to this project include, What can youth activists teach us about the transformation of political ideology at the local level in a contested terrain, such as the impoverished urban setting, where violence, state repression, consumerism, drug abuse, and lack of adequate nutrition and housing seem to have a tight grip on the minds of the

masses? What implications do subaltern epistemologies about the social world have for changing local and global social structures and discourses?

This study takes a close look at the production of discourses, knowledge, and ideologies within a local youth social movement. I insist that youth in Olin strategically deploy seemingly contradictory ideologies that comply with dominant (popular) discourses while teaching radical politicizing ideas, thereby gaining access to the minds of their peers. In order to recruit, educate and politicize fellow youth, Olin activists connect their politics to popular ideologies vis-à-vis the popular culture that their particular community is drawn to. If their peers are drawn to a certain kind of music that is "in style," the youth incorporate this media into their pedagogical strategies. For example, one of the politicizing strategies they use is to teach youth about politics through rap music by artists like Tupac Shakur.[3]

In this article I argue that youth activists speak the language that their peers relate to while "entangling" new ways of thinking about politics and culture. Emerging from this process, an alternative ideology that provides a more radical and organized political agenda for youth is shaped. It teaches youth how to take out their frustrations and anger at "the system" in more organized ways, beyond "infrapolitics" (Scott 1985). From this "entangled" approach that both adheres to popular ideas embedded in the community (to gain support from peers) while also challenging these same discourses (to politicize peers), ideologies of "race," "gender" and "youth" are transformed.

**Local Strategies, Global Ideologies**

It is at the local level where we can gain a clear picture of how youth develop political identities, transform ideologies, and become leaders within local social movements positioned "within and against" oppressive local and globalizing forces. Young people who struggle against environmental racism, land rights, state/police repression, and the ever-expanding penal system in one part of the world understand that other people in another part of the world have similar struggles.[4] Local politics, identities, and ideologies are often connected to other struggles around the globe. Ethnographic studies are crucial for uncovering these common processes; examining everyday cultural practices in local communities can expose the common responses and coalitions formed among marginalized groups around the world.

Grounding this study ethnographically in a local context allows for an understanding of the everyday cultural manifestations at the heart of the production of youth social movements that can potentially generate global solidarity and global social change (Appadurai, 1998; Burroway et. al, 2000; Castells, 1997; Sandoval, 2000). It demonstrates how this particular social movement is generated by the everyday cultural expression and strategies that youth leaders develop in an attempt to generate social change that will impact the larger global community.

Globalization, as negative as its effects may be for poor young people in Oakland, California, provides cultural and political resources that allow agents to imagine a new world and generate social change (Appadurai, 1996; Mignolo, 2000; Sandoval, 2000). According to Arjun Appadurai, "… the *work of the imagination* [is] a constitutive feature of modern subjectivity" in the context of cultural globalization. The constant crossing of

subjects, media, ideologies and material goods across national boundaries and the creation of post-national identities, as part of "global ethnoscapes," are creating new "landscapes of group identity" that change the way in which subjects adapt to and resist global forces (1996). Of course, national and nationalist identities still exist. However, they are forced to adapt to and intersect with the lifestyle, politics, and resources created by globalization itself, tearing away and filling with contradictions the very idea of nationalism.

In the process of creating, accepting, rejecting, and coping with new and hybrid global identities, new forms of thinking are developed by subaltern groups. In the struggle against cultural and material exploitation, subaltern groups have preserved and generated new epistemologies and hermeneutics, what Gloria Anzaldua (1987) calls "border consciousness" and Walter Mignolo (2000) calls "border thinking." "Border thinking" occurs in the subalterns' "struggle for power" among colonial legacies and globalizing forces. This new epistemology formed by the subaltern has the potential to generate global coalition and global change—a new kind of globalization that unites subaltern groups at the transnational level and creates a new vision of "transmodernity" (Mignolo, 2000).

As is evident from this study of Latina/o youth activists in Oakland, California, new national and post-national identities are developed in the process of creating alternative ideologies ("border thinking") that confront global power and state-sponsored control measures. While organizing against local issues such as police brutality, under-funded schools, and draconian anti-immigrant/anti-youth state policies, post-national identities are formed that attempt to preserve, celebrate, and mobilize marginalized

ethnic/cultural identities while accepting to create ideologies that embrace difference. Such a post-nationalist group identity aspires to a global, universal, diverse, and open approach to understanding, and building solidarity with, the histories and struggles of other subalternized groups around the world.

Even though Olin focuses most of its resources on local politics, its overall goals are aimed at stopping global corporate and neo-colonial exploitation of workers, the environment, indigenous people, women, and children. Olin also organizes and/or participates in actions against the global "war on terrorism," the occupation of Palestine, the displacement of Native Americans across North and South America, and U.S. attacks on Iraq. They see a connection between these forms of global imperialism and the social obstacles they face in their own community.

**The "Community Theorizing" Method**

My attempt is to locate and integrate the ideologies, or "border thinking," developed by youth activists in the community, as organic intellectuals, into the process of developing theory about youth and globalization. My approach develops theory *from* and *with* the "subject" rather than *of* or *for* the "subject." The subaltern subject, in this case poor/racialized/gendered youth, is incorporated into the process of producing knowledge, a key ethical step to produce a "coevalness" historically denied by traditional academic disciplines (Fabian, 1982; Gordon, 1999; Kelley, 2000; Truillot, 1989; Tuhiwai Smith, 2000). In my research, youth are asked to speak about their ideas and politics while theorizing their experience collaboratively with me, the researcher. In every interview, youth are asked themselves to provide an analysis of the work they do and to

reflect critically on how strategies for ideological change are formed and deployed—on their epistemology. Questions I asked included: "how do you approach a young person who has little knowledge of local and global politics and who could not care less about your cause?", "what is the most important factor in changing a young person's 'ignorant' ideas into 'revolutionary' ideas?'' and "what do you think of the idea that poor youth of color can create new ways of thinking about the world?"

Youth activists were interviewed formally and informally over the course of six months from September 2001 to April 2002. Five youth were interviewed for one hour on two separate occasions. About twenty youth where informally interviewed at community events, meetings, conferences, and protests I attended as a participant observer. I also combine my own reflexive memories about Olin as an active member from 1993 to 1997 and as a supporter from 1997 to the present. [5]

**Olin: A "Youth Social Movement"**

A high school student-led youth organization called "StEP" (Student Empowerment Project), now known as Olin, took the state of California by surprise in 1993 when dozens of Latino/a youth who were concerned about racism in the high schools organized political protests and high school walkouts. The actions took place in Hayward, Oakland, Berkeley, Sacramento, and other Northern California cities under the mentorship of long-time labor and Chicano/a Movement organizer Gabriel Hernandez. Over 20,000 young, primarily working-class Latinas/os were joined by hundreds of African American, Asian American, Native American, and other high school students as they walked out to demand cultural representation and better resource allocation in schools, amongst other changes. The action (except for the Sacramento walk-out) ended

with a rally at the Hayward Unified School District offices where the superintendent was forced to agree to provide funding for more Latina/o counselors and teachers at all middle schools and high schools in the city. Today, in 2002, there are at least a dozen counselors and teachers of color in the Hayward schools because of this action.

Soon after, youth organizers generated intense after-shocks, creating similar protests and student organizing through out the state: in 1994, a statewide high school student coalition, inspired and led by StEP (Olin's former name which it changed to connect students to their indigenous roots) organized walkouts to protest the anti-immigrant and racist state initiatives Propositions 187 and 184. Proposition 187 would deny state resources, including education, welfare, and healthcare, to undocumented immigrants. Proposition 184, notoriously known as the racist criminal policy "3 Strikes and You're Out," would give prisoners automatic sentences of 25 years to life after being convicted of a third felony. In 1996, the coalition fought against the state initiative Proposition 209, which would dismantle affirmative action programs throughout the state. In 1998, Olin led thousands of high school students who walked out of school and gathered in Concord, California to protest the newly built, state-of-the-art, multi-million dollar police station; they demanded "Schools Not Jails." In 1999 and 2000, the coalition fought vigorously against Proposition 21, which would give adult sentences to youth for juvenile crimes. In February 2000, the coalition organized a "Week of Rage" with tens of thousands of students attended demonstrations across the state: in San Diego, thousands of students walked-out of their high schools; in Oakland, hip-hop events and city jail protests erupted; and in Los Angeles, a youth-launched rally at the Hilton Hotel corporate offices protested Hilton's financial and political contribution to Proposition 21

(Martinez, 1999).

Olin has clearly played a central role in building strong coalitions among youth of color and organizing students against racist, anti-immigrant, anti-youth, anti-poor state initiatives in California. According to Elizabeth "Betita" Martinez (1998), a well-known and respected Chicana writer, community activist, and Civil Rights Movement veteran, Olin and its collaborators constitute the "new social movement of our time." Yet even though Olin and its collaborators have mobilized tens of thousands of youth in California, most of the recent right-wing public policies that the organization has challenged have passed.

However, while Olin may have lost these legislative battles, the organization is winning at the ideological level, for the ideas of many of those affected by these measures have become radicalized. Right-wing state policies may have passed in California, but thousands of youth have become aware of the history, culture, and struggles of marginalized groups around the world. Affirmative action programs no longer exist but many youth of color have gained a consciousness that demands better and more inclusive and democratic equal-opportunity programs. Youth are learning to understand and organize against the "prison industrial complex," "the mainstream media," "negative environmental policy," "corporate labor/environmental exploitation," and other crucial social issues.[6] Their work might fail to immediately change state policies but it has created a powerful movement that continues to transform the ideology of youth, as one youth activist, George, put it, from "knucklehead to revolutionary."

Olin's demand for ethical and progressive social change has developed what Manuel Castells calls "project identities." These transgressive identities seek to "redefine

[groups'] position in society and, by so doing, seek the transformation of the overall social structure (1997 8)." "Project identities" persistently contest and transform oppressive ideologies within the local community. They are the driving force of effective social movements that have the greatest potential for generating social change (Castells, 1998). What is clear in this "youth social movement" is that its gains or successes lie in its ability to translate ideology into power, to utilize culture for political change through a new ideology that embraces difference. As a "youth social movement," Olin does not need to bring about only structural change in order to create social change, even though this is their main goal. In the process of creating structural change, Olin accomplishes an equally important task: shaping the minds of participating youth and their peers.

**Ideological Formation**

Ideology here is defined as a "material practice" of thought and action, "a system (with its own logic and rigor) of representations (images, myths, ideas, or concepts)," that "constructs" individuals as "subjects" who consent to—willingly or by force—power relations and social stratification (Althusser, 1969). At the same time, to extend Althusserian notions of "interpellated" subjects, ideology is constantly debated, contested, and transformed. Because ideology is always political, ideological change occurs in the everyday interactions that youth have with dominant forces (see Gramsci, 1972; Hall, 1985). Olin exploits the process of ideological formation by generating new politicizing ideas that "entangle" themselves with the popular ideologies with which youth in the community are instilled. To be accepted and listened to by their peers, Olin must incorporate the ideas of their peers into its politics. Olin must accept or pretend to

accept some of the dominant sub/cultural ideas in order to successfully teach new ways of thinking about politics, youth, race, gender, history, and social change.

This process of 'resistance' and 'incorporation' is central to a definition of youth social movements that examines the process of ideological transformation. According to Antonio Gramsci, hegemony is created by the process wherein the dominant group negotiates with the subordinate group in order to maintain its own rule. Both 'resistance' and 'incorporation' occur simultaneously: subaltern subjects settle for a subordinate position, not because they are programmable machines ready to take on the discursive and material commands of the dominant group, but because they are provided with a marginally satisfactory amount of resources and representation that allow for mass consent (Gramsci, 1971).

Youth activists utilize this process of "resisting while incorporating" dominant ideologies as a means for transforming local "knucklehead" ideologies into more politicized forms of what Chela Sandoval (2000) calls "oppositional consciousness." Oppositional consciousness is a type of ideological remapping in which subordinated subjects attempt to build a new way of thinking that liberates their minds and bodies from oppressive forces: "This cultural topography delineates a set of critical points within which individuals and groups seeking to transform dominant and oppressive powers can constitute themselves as resistant and oppositional citizen-subjects (2000: 54)." This oppositionality is born within the most contradictory and ambiguous spaces that the subaltern inhabits.

As in Sandoval's approach, youth activists read the contradictory location and interstitial spaces that subaltern subjects inhabit not as hopelessly scattered or

"fragmented" subjectivities but as potential sites for revolutionary activity. This "third differential consciousness" or "border thinking"—the ideology caught between the hegemonic geoculture (dominant global culture of capitalism, racism and sexism) and subaltern 'common sense'—is the "entangled" thinking that is derived from dominant discourse and subaltern discourse. It is from this location that youth generate strategies for transforming the minds of their peers "from knucklehead to revolutionary."

**Knucklehead Ideologies**

One of the tasks that youth activists find central to their work is that of changing what they refer to as "knucklehead thinking" into "revolutionary thinking."[7] Olinsters (the nickname members of Olin give each other) view "knucklehead thinking" (a term developed by the youth themselves) as the everyday ideas, positive and negative, that are embedded in young people's lives. These ideas can be raced, classed or gendered and the goal is to bring out the transformative aspects of these social processes and get rid of damaging ideas. Youth in Olin strategically incorporate these ideas into their recruitment and pedagogy strategies in order to convince their peers to join "the struggle." Lyn comments on the meaning of "knucklehead" ideology:

> You know, out in the 'hood, Raza learns to survive by talking the talk and walking the walk that they learn in the streets. If they hear music that teaches them how to survive…If they know they have to act like 'thugs,' or 'pimps,' or all that other hardcore shit that makes our people fight each other and oppress women, then they will act like that, like knuckleheads, to make it…sometimes these ideas harm our people more than they help us to survive…[8]

According to George, a 16 year old, working-class, public high school junior in Oakland who has been an Olin member for approximately one year, "A knucklehead is

someone that just talks and thinks stupid shit that is taught to him by the radio, movies, and teachers that are trying to make him stupid. He don't know that he is repeating every stereotype and way of acting that the system wants him to be like." "Knucklehead" ideas are those everyday thoughts and behaviors embedded in local communities and derived from local community ideologies (the "parent culture") and popular culture. Some resistance occurs within this form of thinking but not enough to generate a social movement. Similar to the notion of "common sense" ideology, this way of thinking does not "constitute an intellectual order, because [it] cannot be reduced to unity and coherence even with an individual consciousness, let alone a collective one (Gramsci, 1971)." According to Stuart Hall, this kind of common sense is "a historical, not a natural or universal or spontaneous form of popular thinking, [that] is necessarily, fragmentary, disjointed and episodic (Hall, 1996a)."

This liminal, "knucklehead" thinking then, as much as it may initially appear to be a form of "false consciousness," has the potential for generating social change if manipulated correctly. Olin draws on "knucklehead" ideology's most resistant angles in order to attract youth. George explains, "It makes youngsters think they are being real…but in reality they are just acting out what the oppressor wants them to do…at the same time, youngsters also add their own way of saying 'fuck you' to the oppressor."[9]

According to youth in Olin, racialized, working-class, urban youth in Oakland constantly resist police brutality, educational oppression, and labor exploitation by acts such as stealing from work, vandalizing Eurocentric history books at school, "tagging up" the schools, or placing barriers in the street so that police cannot enter the neighborhood. All the young people I interviewed reported knowing youth who committed these acts of

resistance on an everyday basis. These everyday 'knucklehead' ideas and actions generate, what Robin Kelley (citing James C. Scott) calls 'infrapolitics.' 'Infrapolitics' consist of invisible "tactical" subjectivities among oppressed groups that seem to follow the status quo, but in reality are evading power relations (Kelley, 1994; Scott, 1985). Olin aims to organize these and other forms of resistance into full-blown political strategies to develop a social movement that is both formal and informal, and that addresses both structural and cultural processes.

The everyday language and actions used by youth to "make do," to "be cool," to "survive the streets," are indeed resistant and creative; however, within these "infrapolitics", power relations such as gender oppression can be reproduced and perpetuated. According to Kelley, "…The creation of an alternative culture can simultaneously challenge and reinforce existing power relations (1994)." Therefore, 'infrapolitics' have their limits.

Olinsters understand the limits of "infrapolitics." Their peers are already politicized in many ways but need a more consistent and organized politics in order to create profound change in the system. Yoli explains:

> …Cholos and cholas [gang members] are already organizers. They organize their crew against other gangs, against the police, and against the schools. Our job is just to help them use this in a positive way all the time…they gotta' learn to use that energy they put out in the streets in organizing and helping their people…[10]

Here Yoli is able to articulate the process by which Olin takes the ideology of "infrapolitics" and merges it with a more coherent and organized strategy in order to formally mobilize youth.

**The "Entangled Approach"**

"Infrapolitics," in and of themselves, cannot produce effective social movements, though they might create day-to-day acts of resistance that generate long-term social change and influence organized social movements in important ways (see, for example, Kelley, 1998). The work of Olin is to find a balance between creating a social movement that generates large-scale social change and staying organically connected to the community's ideology and culture. Samuel, a 22 year old who has been an Olin member for over six years, grew up in the San Francisco Mission District in a working poor family and credits Olin for saving him from gang-life and helping him graduate from high school. He now serves as a mentor and facilitator for the high school students involved in Oakland's Olin chapter. He explains that Olin is one of the few youth organizations where the organizers grow up in the communities in which they are active. "They are not rich college kids or people from another community trying to tell youngsters what to do, they are from the community. That makes them effective."[11]

Because they already have a tie to the community and are part of the local culture and are institutionalized (schooled) in the local community, Olinsters are able to effectively politicize other community members through their everyday interactions and organized teaching strategies. Samuel explains, "These youngsters build consciousness and then go out to the hood and spit it back out…we rely on them to bring back other youth because they know where and how to get them."[12] As part of this strategy of "reaching kids on their level," Olin focuses a large amount of its time and resources on developing workshops and talks aimed at appealing to youth in the community who are

surrounded by "knucklehead" ideologies. The workshops, which teach, for example, about the history of "racial labels," "environmental racism," "prison building," and "the war on communities of color", function as vehicles to politicize and recruit youth to the organization.

**The Entangled Approach: "Tupac Strategy"**

Popular culture production, particularly popular music, is one medium through which Olin recruits and transforms the ideology of youth. Leticia is a 15-year-old Oakland public high school sophomore and Olin member for approximately one year. She is on the recruitment committee and participates in the production of "Radio Olin," a weekly 30-minute long talk show that is broadcast on KPFA, the local community radio station, and affiliated with the nation-wide progressive news network Pacifica Radio. The show features youth activists speaking about social issues and political protest, and, of course, popular music.

For Leticia, one of the most important ways to recruit other youth into the organization is by "knowing the kind of music and style that young people like. That way we [Olin] can relate to other kids on their level. If we know what they like, we can figure out how to approach them about organizing in the community…."[13]

Popular music that addresses at least some of the issues that youth of color face is utilized by Olin as a medium for gripping the minds of their peers. The "Hip-Hop Workshop" is an example of how popular music serves as a powerful tool for changing "knucklehead" ideologies into "revolutionary" ways of understanding the world. George explains, "Man. Other kids at school where trippin' when I did that Hip-hop workshop,

they where like 'I didn't know this shit was in the songs! How can we learn more?'" The 'shit' that George's classmate was referring to was a political statement made in "Keep Ya' Head Up," a song by Tupac Shakur ("2-Pac") about the oppressive system in which racialized urban youth live in:

…You know it's funny when it rains it pours/

They got money for wars, but can't feed the poor/

Sad there ain't no hope for the youth and the truth is there ain't no hope for the future…

We ain't meant to survive, cause it's a setup/

And even though ya' fed up/

You go to keep ya' head up.[14]

In this excerpt, Tupac entangles "oppositional consciousness" into his "knucklehead" album by speaking directly to youth in language they can understand, about the "setup." Olinsters interpret this as a critique of national spending on expanding the military industrial complex at the expense of social welfare and education and as a critique of the criminalization of urban youth throughout the country.

An example of the resistance to *and* complicity with dominant or stereotypical notions of how urban youth deal with personal problems and leisure is Tupac's references to drinking alcohol and marijuana use, a constant theme in his rap lyrics. For example, in "Lord Knows," Tupac talks about drinking "Tangaray" (a popular gin and orange juice beverage) to "conquer [his] insanity."[15] In many of his songs he speaks about drinking alcohol and even suggests it is a means to deal with everyday problems. However, within this same song, Tupac talks about his desire to change his negative lifestyle of drugs and violence, to resist damaging social obstacles:

…Lord knows I've tried, been a witness to homicide/
Drive-bys taking lives, little kids die/
Wonder why as I walk by/
Broken-hearted as I glance at the chalk line, getting' high/
This ain't the life for me/
I wanna change…[16]

In "Me Against the World," Tupac entangles ideas that address the plight of youth and call for social change within his lyrics:

…Got me worried, stressin, my vision's blurried/
The question is will I live?/
No one in the world loves me/
I'm headed for danger, don't trust strangers/
Put one in the chamber whenever I'm feelin' this anger/
Don't wanna' make excuses, cause this is how it is/
What's the use unless we're shootin' no one notices the youth…
…Through this suppression they punish the people that's askin' questions/
And those that possess, steal from the ones without possessions/
The message I stress: to make it stop study your lessons/
Don't settle for less - even the genius asks questions/
Be grateful for blessings/
Don't ever change, keep your essence/
the power is in the people and the politics we address/
always do your best…"[17]

Olinsters apply this "Tupac Strategy" in many of their interactions with peers that have not become formally polticized. Many youth feel that Tupac knew that he needed to talk like a "knucklehead" in order to become a popular rapper. But within many of his songs, Tupac entangled political messages that would hopefully shape the ideologies of his listeners. In the eyes of Olin, Tupac, then, was part of the youth social movement waged at the ideological level. He strategically applied political messages to his popular "knucklehead" lyrics in order to develop political subjectivities in his listeners. Olin's role is to highlight these positive aspects and challenge and evade Tupac's negative messages as well.

When George talked to his friend Sal about being respectful to women, he kept in mind that his friend had a "knucklehead mentality." George then decided to take an "entangled approach," or "Tupac strategy," where he used music that used the word "bitch" to educate Sal about why one should not use that label for women. He explains:

> It's hard sometimes, like I had to think kind'a fast when my homeboy called this girl I knew a "bitch." That's when I used the Tupac strategy. I talked to him on his level and told him that even Tupac taught fools to respect women. You know that song where he talks about apologizing to women for calling them 'bitch'…he talked shit about women but he also recognized that they must be respected…then he [George's friend] had to decide what part of Tupac he needed to listen to…[18]

Olinsters acknowledge that Tupac was extremely chauvinist and sexist. They see this as a lesson to learn of what not to incorporate in their politics. They utilize what they consider to be positive aspects of his lyrics and method, such as his "entangled approach". However, a critical question arises in this process: does the end justify the means? That is, is it ethical to use a sexist rapper to politicize youth? According to the youth, youngsters are already swamped with these sexist messages. The trick is to eliminate them from their everyday thoughts and practices. Olinsters argue the practical way to do this is to subvert these lyrics, to flip Tupac on his head in order to eliminate destructive practices from youth culture and politics.

A contradiction remains. Because Tupac is more "mainstream" than "revolutionary," more "knucklehead" than "oppositional," his lyrics still perpetuate power relations that oppress women by generating sexist ideology about them in the community. "…He still messes up in his music and teaches youngsters [sic] disrespecting women…we try to make sure to go past his ignorant messages and just use the positive ones."[19] Olinsters have selectively salvaged the positive aspects of an artist

considered a sexist in order to attempt to break away from sexist structures in the community.

**Gang Members: Knuckleheads to Revolutionaries**

Many Olinsters have shifted from being gang members attracted to violence and drugs to political activists committed to changing their communities and society through radical politics. Yoli, for example, led a notorious gang life in Oakland prior to joining Olin. I asked her, "what was your day-to-day life like before you joined Olin?" After reminding me that I should know because I knew her from my own gang involvement during the same time period in Oakland, she explained:

> Shit, you should know, I used to be crazy. I used to drink all the time, go look for girls to fight with everyday, and not go to school. Man I was known by hella' people in Oakland. They knew that if girls, even guys, talked shit about me I would be there to kick their ass.[20]

Yoli stated that if her lifestyle had not changed she would have ended up dead, in prison, or a drug addict like many of her old friends. "I was going at the speed of light without any brakes, you know!?" When I asked how she managed to change, Yoli replied:

> I just needed to learn my history. I needed to find out who I was in order to know where I was going…I didn't even know what was going on around the world and all the evil bullshit that the U.S. does to people.[21]

Today, Yoli is a well-known youth activist in the San Francisco Bay Area and has become a strong leader and role model. Whenever high school youth organize a political event, she is called on for advice. She mentors new members, describing her past and advising gang-involved youth about how to avoid that lifestyle. She estimates that more than two-thirds of Olinsters have been gang-involved or have had family members or close friends that where gang-involved. George asserts that this "thug life" that most

youth in Oakland are exposed to "is all over the place. There is no way to avoid it most of the time." All Olinsters I interviewed confirmed this observation, and suggested that the only way to avoid the pressure of "having to act tough all the time" and join a gang to be protected was to join another "family" (such as Olin) and use their leadership in a positive way.

**Race, Gender, and "Youth" Transformation**

Because race, gender, and "youth" are socially constructed processes (see Omi and Winant, 1987 for race; Nakano Glenn, 1996 for gender; and Austin and Willard, 1998 for youth), they are contested terrains where dominant and subaltern agents attempt to maneuver their meanings in order to create material and discursive change. "Ideological projects," borrowing from Omi and Winant's concept of "racial projects" (1987), are deployed by youth to change the meanings of race, gender, and "youth" itself. Ideological projects are the discourses produced by youth in the everyday struggle to change dominant hegemonic structures and representations. They function as tools for recruiting, educating, and politicizing peers and community and for creating an alternative ideology that seeks ethical and democratic social change.

The new discourses produced through Olin's "ideological project," such as the workshops that educate youth about the struggles of people of color by using popular culture, "work with and through difference, which [are] able to build those forms of solidarity and identification which make common struggle and resistance possible but without suppressing the real heterogeneity of interests and identities…" (Hall, 1996b: 444). Instead of accepting "common sense," "knucklehead," or popular notions of race

and gender—that often exclude, marginalize, and hinder inter-ethnic coalitions—Olinsters develop new discourse that changes meanings of race in order to develop strong ties with other ethnic and "racial" groups. Olinsters are adopting non-essentialist definitions of race/ethnicity that allow for radical strategic identities that embrace difference.

*Race*

Race is strategically transformed by Olinsters to fit the political needs of the moment; they are careful not to exclude other groups from the struggle for social change (i.e. the struggles of other racialized youth, women, workers, and gays and lesbians/queers). This "elasticity" of race was very apparent at a recent ethnic studies conference for high school students that Olin organized at San Francisco State University in February, 2002. Over 800 high school students from all over California attended the event, at which Asian American or African American youth facilitated over half of the workshops, and where close to half of the participants appeared to be non-Latino/a. The feeling and the rhetoric of the event was about unity, and the discussions focused on the need for ethnic history and the common fight against educational inequalities in the school system, the prison industrial complex, and the so-called "war on terrorism" (even though very few of the youth at the conference were of Middle Eastern or South Asian descent). Olin's commitment is to "…not lead but facilitate the political mobilization of *all* youth of color."[22]

Even though Olinsters identify with "Xicana/o"[23] as a "racial" label, they have shifted the meaning of this term to embrace "all those people who have origins in indigenous struggles."[24] Through this perspective, those people who choose to self-

identify with common struggles against colonization and imperialism around the world can consider themselves "Xicana/o." Xicana/o, a "racial" label from a subaltern indigenous language and philosophy, changes the way in which race is understood by youth. They don't see race as a biologically determined factor, but as a "state of mind." However, Olin does not impose this identity on anyone. Instead, they learn about and acknowledge the indigenous traditions of other peoples around the globe. By learning the common histories of experiences of colonization and imperial expansion, youth in Oakland are able to empathize with people from around the world who have been grappling with, and still experience, the symptoms of colonization. These symptoms include, for example, "colonial structures without colonial administrations (Quijano 1997)." In Oakland, youth see these neo-colonial structures manifested in community policing and police brutality, a "eurocentric" educational system, and in the residential segregation that exists between people of color and white people in the Bay Area.

One of the first steps for colonized subjects, Lyn argues, is to redefine who they are, to reclaim their subalternized history and defy dominant representations:

> Xicana is how we have chosen to define ourselves. Not no president Nixon [referring to the Nixon administration's coining of the term "Hispanic"], not no Spanish invaders, not no census. We have reclaimed an identity for ourselves that recognizes our indigenous past.

When asked if the label Xicana excluded other non-Nahuatl groups, Lyn replied:

> Xicana means 'people of the earth' which can include anyone that have had struggles against foreign colonizers. Most people of the world have experienced some sort of oppression from European oppressors, so Xicana can be used by people who feel this struggle. At the same time we know that people from around the earth have their own way of defining themselves and that is cool with us too.[25]

In her early high school years, Lyn started off as a "nationalist Salvadorian" who

"thought that people from El Salvador where better than others."[26] After joining Olin and learning about the struggles of other people from Latin American and the rest of the world, she shifted her thinking and began to identify with these struggles as well.

> Because each culture has their own way of seeing race and meanings of being man or woman, we choose to use the ideas of our ancestors—the indigenous people of this earth. The term Xicana is a state of mind. For example, I am Salvadorian but I know I am Xicana because I am from this earth, I relate to indigenous struggles, and am committed to helping my people. We have had black folks and Asian folks say 'I'm Xicana'…when someone comes along and lets us know they are feeling excluded, we check ourselves and remember that this term is open for all peoples who acknowledge themselves to be indigenous people of the earth but we don't impose it on anyone.[27]

Though obviously not perfect, Olin's attempt to generate a racial label that is open and embracing of a subaltern culture, language, and epistemology is indicative of the organization's efforts to redefine race for multi-racial solidarity. Creating a non-essentialist identity that embraces difference has allowed Olin to build coalitions with other youth and subaltern struggles. Without these coalitions the organization would not have been able to mobilize and educate thousands of youth.

*Gender*

"Knucklehead" ideas of "male" and "female" changed within the minds of youth as well. Youth who enter Olin are quickly taught about the many struggles that women of color have endured. New recruits are immediately taught to respect women and male gang members who enter the organization with conceptions of women as inferior are quickly "checked" by the young women in the organization. Leticia explains:

> Anytime a guy comes in from the street to check out Olin, if he slips and says bitch or something we [male and female members] turn and stare at him all at once and all of us go off.[28]

"Going off", for this young woman, means transforming the gender constructs of the dominant "knucklehead" mindset of the ignorant young man in order to educate him. New ideas of gender are instilled in him by what he thinks is a "socially subordinate" peer. The young women's frustration, anger, compassion, and politicized consciousness are all involved in this process. Even though he may think about women in a sexist way, they teach him rather than ostracize him, "…unless he gets out of line again." Leticia explains, "Whenever a guy is disrespectful we teach him to respect women by asking him things like about if he would call his mom or sisters bitches and about how he has been taught over time to disrespect women."[29]

Lyn makes a similar point:

> "Yeah we try to work with youngsters on their own level. Like if a young male cholo [gang member] comes in disrespecting women we educate them on their level. We check them. We let them know that it is not right and then we show them the right way to address women. The next time, they come in they are humble and learn to respect women.[30]

It is important to note that there is a complex gender dynamic at play here: young women in Olin forcefully assert a feminist politics that most of the young men eventually accept. Initially the males refute and refuse these politics, but ultimately they must comply or vanish from the organization. Gender politics, in discourse and practice, are always complex and can provoke resistance, ambivalence, or tension, even for progressive organizations that attempt to change sexist (and homophobic) ideologies; this is a project that Olin constantly works on.

*Youth*

The notion of "youth" is also shifted by Olin's ideological strategies. Olin is producing a new culture that develops youth—criminalized by the state and constructed

through "moral panics" by the media—to lead their peers and community into political action. Youth defy the imposed identity of criminal and irresponsible and instead take on a leadership role in their community. They become 'organic intellectuals,' representing the interests of their communities and developing ideas to represent and fight for their needs (Gramsci, 1972). In the case of Olin, young people are determining the role of youth in society: educate and mobilize their communities to achieve social change. The ideological struggle here is to determine who shapes the role of youth in society. In this case, Olin is beginning to win the battle at a community level. Even though the state and dominant culture continues to construct negative representations of "youth," Olinsters are also defining who youth are, what they should learn, and how they should be treated at a local ideological level. As Lyn puts it, "la lucha sigue" (The battle continues)…

**Youth Culture: Implications for Rethinking "Social Movements"**

In their struggle against hegemonic structures and representations, youth activists develop new forms of thinking about the social world. On the one hand, Olinsters are attempting to develop a new way of thinking about and organizing their social world, on the other, they are limited by the already engrained ideologies that their peers and communities possess. To bridge this divide, youth develop "entangled" strategies that incorporate "revolutionary" ideas into "knucklehead" thinking in order to attract other youth and develop an alternative epistemology that is connected to the everyday needs, desires, and politics of the community—a "border thinking" or "oppositional consciousness."

Olin is beginning to take this ideological entanglement a step further, allowing for constant redefining and correcting of the discourses produced in order to develop an egalitarian organization and ideology that embraces difference in the process of mobilizing the community. This new ideology produced from working within the system *and* against it, has the potential to "decolonize" the minds of youth and provide an alternative epistemology that counters dominant global colonial ideologies and structures.

Notes

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[1] Lynn, Personal Interview, 12 December, 2001.
[2] Here I use the word Latina/o as a label for youth with "ancestry" in Latin America and were born or raised in the United States. However, most youth in the organization consider themselves Xicana or Xicano. Read below for an in depth discussion on this.
[3] Tupac Shakur, a notorious rapper murdered in September of 1996, is still one of the most popular rappers among the "hip-hop generation" of youth in Oakland. On any given day the two most popular hip-hop stations in the bay area, KYLD 94.9 and KMEL 106.1, play a few Tupac songs. All of the youth I interviewed made reference to Tupac when asked what was some the most popular music in ther area.
[4] See, for example, Castells (1997) and Appadurai (1998) for a discussion on how the proliferation of new communication technologies, the media, constant exchange of material goods and human bodies has brought about these global identities of struggle.
[5] As an "active member," I attended weekly meetings at least once a month, participated in the everyday tasks of organizing events, and developed and taught workshops to other youth on a regular basis.
[6] See www.schoolsnotjails for a list of workshops, summaries, and events sponsored by Olin, YOC, and their collaborators.
[7] George, Personal Interview, 20 November 2001.
[8] Raza is commonly used to refer to other Latina/o people in the U.S. However, I also noted that Olinsters commonly refer to all subaltern groups as Raza. Anyone struggling against racism, sexism, and class exploitation can be considered "Raza" because of its tie to struggle. For example, Lyn referred to Palestinian people in the refugee camps of Palestine as "Raza" at one point in our conversations.
[9] George, Personal Interview, 20 November 2001.
[10] Yoli, Personal interview, 20 January 2002.
[11] Samuel, Personal Interview, 10 January 2002.
[12] Samuel, Personal Interview, 10 January, 2002.
[13] Leticia, Personal Interview, 8 December, 2001.
[14] Tupac Shakur, "Strictly 4 My N.I.G.G.A.Z," (1993), Interscope Records.
[15] Tupac Shakur, "Me Against the World," (1995) Death Row Records.

[16] Tupac Shakur, "Me Against the World," (1995) Death Row Records.
[17] Tupac Shakur, "Me Against the World," (1995) Death Row Records.
[18] George, Personal Interview, 10 March, 2002.
[19] George, personal interview, 10 March, 2002.
[20] Yoli, Personal Interview, 20 January, 2002.
[21] Yoli, Personal Interview, 20 January, 2002.
[22] Lyn, Personal Interview, 15 Novemeber, 2001.
[23] Xicano/a is a label adopted by Chicanas/os during and after the Chicano/a movement that attempted to further recognize and reagain a marginalized indigenous ancestry. The term is in Nahuatl. According to the youth, this term means "People of the Earth."
[24] Lyn, Personal Interview, 20 January, 2002.
[25] Lyn, Personal Interview, 20 January, 2002.
[26] Lyn, personal interview, 10 November 2001.
[27] Lyn, personal interview, 10 November 2001.
[28] Leticia, Personal Interview, 12 December, 2001.
[29] Leticia, personal interview, 8 December, 2001.
[30] Lyn, Personal Interview, 21 November, 2001.

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