The 50th anniversary of the U.S. Supreme Court’s *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling in 2004 connected two contrasting moments of ideological conflict and struggle over the meaning of race. In 1951, 16-year-old Barbara Johns and her classmates at Robert Russa Moton High School decided they could no longer tolerate conditions in their segregated rural Virginia school, where overcrowding had grown so bad that classes were held on school buses and in tarpaper shacks set up in the schoolyard. Johns hatched a plan to distract the principal while the students assembled in the auditorium; they soon voted to go on strike and walk off the campus. Their actions won the support of their parents and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, resulting in a desegregation lawsuit that became one of the five cases reviewed by the U.S. Supreme Court under the *Brown* decision. Twelve years before the March on Washington brought the civil rights crisis fully onto the national agenda, Johns and her fellow students put the experiences and struggles of young people of color at the center of a national effort to restructure long-standing policies and social norms. They confronted the prevailing framework, which justified and naturalized the idea that state and society had few obligations to educate and support black youth. Though the local district fought desegregation efforts relentlessly during the next two decades, John’s activism was to be repeated in countless communities as young people joined social movements for democracy and justice (Wormser, 2003).

Fifty-three years later, at a black-tie gala in Washington, D.C., to commemorate the *Brown* anniversary, entertainer and philanthropist Bill Cosby offered his own account of the crisis in public education that has endured in spite of...
the desegregation imperative. Against Johns’s account of an institution and society failing its young people, Cosby insisted it was “lower economic people” who were “not holding up their end in this deal.” Rehearsing the profile of black pathology in its most venomous dimensions, Cosby railed against young people “…with names like Shaniqua, Taliqua and Mohammed and all of that crap, and all of them are in jail” and those “standing on the corner [who] can’t speak English.” Despite holding a doctorate in education, Cosby remained silent on the conditions in many high schools that have improved little in the post-Brown era: armed police officers patrolling high schools plagued by overcrowding, crumbling classrooms, and a shortage of basic learning materials. Instead, Cosby proposed that hypersexed black women, violent black men, and a vapid youth culture conspire to extinguish the possibilities opened by Brown. Of today’s black youth, Cosby explains “50 percent drop out, the rest of them are in prison” (Black Commentator, 2004).1

If we take seriously the role that language and discourse play in constituting and constructing political conflicts, rather than just expressing or representing them, then Cosby has offered an exemplary recital of the most commanding discourse on the failures and defects of black youth in particular and the racialization of large groups of youth in general. That is, while it has been through specific regressive shifts in policy and legislation—such as the expansion of “zero tolerance” law enforcement and cuts in public-education funding—that the possibilities for racial justice in the post–Civil Rights period have been undermined, those shifts have been naturalized and secured through significant ideological struggles and symbolic conflicts.

Here, we must think of political discourse as more than just “language games” or the “marketing” of political issues through clever framing strategies developed by communications specialists (e.g. rechristening estate or inheritance tax as “the death tax”). To be sure, in any immediate political conflict, language, messaging, and issue framing are critical; as the linguist George Lakoff and other media strategists have demonstrated, people comprehend political issues through a repertoire of narrative frameworks, and organizers and advocates must frame their campaign demands and policy proposals to resonate within these existing schemes. But as Gilmore (2004b) notes, an emphasis on short-term issue frames alone risks reifying those narrative categories as “a-historic durables” rather than historically contingent and contested ideological concepts.

A more expansive interpretation of political discourse—and its broader ideological dimensions—includes not simply which words or slogans are used to advance political issues, but a recognition that to exercise long-term political power requires interventions into the way people formulate, imagine, and identify themselves within the social world. As mediators of experience, discourses establish the terrain on which people understand their identities, experiences and interests, constituting the “common sense” they draw upon in their negotiations and calculations of day-to-day life. Political discourses are
central to the engagement and contestation of all power relations because they provide coherent frameworks through which people view the world, understand their identities in relation to others, and make meaning from their experience (Purvis & Hunt, 1993). As the contrasting accounts of the crisis in public education provided by Johns and Cosby affirms, the ability of a discourse to structure a particular field of meaning—to regulate what constitutes its specific “truths,” common sense, and logics—matters a great deal in understanding, interpreting, and responding to social problems.2

Fortunately, for the millions of youth of color whose prospects for happiness and life remain tenuous, the legacy of Barbara Johns rather than the punditry of Bill Cosby still holds promise. This article discusses the contributions of contemporary youth-led organizing in refashioning the ideological landscape through which particular racialized representations of “youth” are constructed and naturalized. Focusing on what theorist Stuart Hall (1988b) describes as the “political-ideological” dimensions of social change and transformation, I pay particular attention to the role youth organizing can play in challenging the dominant or hegemonic political discourse that has explained the abandonment of large portions of the youth population as not only justifiable but both natural and inevitable. I suggest that community organizing, which is rooted in directly challenging relations of power, exposing contradictions within existing social relations, and collectivizing the experiences of exploited and oppressed groups so that they can organize on their own behalf is uniquely situated for this type of ideological struggle because of its potential to transform the day-to-day experiences and practices that shape and validate competing ideological frameworks.

Using case studies of organizations in Los Angeles and New York City in particular, I examine how these youth-led activist groups use community organizing campaigns to contest the discourses used to define and explain social problems and crises and to reimagine the world through alternative logics, ideas, and frameworks. I begin with a brief review of the shifting ideological terrain that has governed the racialization of many groups of youth during the last 30 years and describe the emergence of youth-led social justice organizations as a response.

**Historicizing Youth Activism**

The 1950 walkout led by Barbara Johns unfolded amid a rich postwar legacy of young people leading direct-action social change movements. Four years before Martin Luther King Jr.’s 1963 March on Washington, civil rights leader Baynard Rustin (himself a product of the Young Communist League) led a youth march for integrated schools in the nation’s capitol. Soon after, teenage college students initiated the first successful challenges to lunch-counter segregation. And in 1963, a thousand children as young as six years old emptied the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, singing freedom songs as they were blasted with fire hoses and attacked by police dogs.
Hundreds spent the night in police commissioner Bull Connor’s jail (Blumberg, 1991).

The faces of the leading antiracist formations of the era such as the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, the Black Panthers, the Young Lords, the American Indian Movement and the Brown Berets were the faces of youth. All of the notable U.S. social movements of the 1960s and 1970s—antiwar, feminist, gay rights, and free speech—drew their leadership and base in part from politically committed youth activists. Together with earlier generations of political strategists, organizers and leaders, they proved critical in provoking the crisis in political authority in full view by 1968. This groundswell of youth protest led Congress to extend the franchise to 18- to 20-year-olds in 1971, implicitly acknowledging that youth old enough to be drafted should not be barred from the voting booth. In short, young people played a central role in securing the (downward) redistribution of material resources and social status and recognition achieved by the early 1970s. These shifts benefited social groups within every generation, from first generation college students, to blue collar workers and their families, to senior citizens living on fixed incomes (Duggan, 2003).

Not coincidentally then, the conservative counterattack epitomized and escalated by Ronald Reagan’s capture of the presidency in 1980 turned in many ways on profiling and constructing young people of color as threats toward, rather than allies of, national hopes for peace and prosperity. The narratives mobilized by conservative opinion leaders to arrest the growth of the welfare state and the leveling of economic and civic hierarchies—the breakdown of the family, the primacy of individual responsibility over government intervention, the intergenerational “culture of poverty”—almost required an antagonistic stance toward youth raised outside the sanctity of white middle- and upper-class life. For example, California’s dramatic turn from setting the global standard for a public education system in the 1970s toward its dismal record on teaching, learning, and access today, secured in large part through conservative antitax initiatives, became politically acceptable only by profiling the growing numbers young black and brown Californians as both menacing and undeserving (Schrag, 1998). From this perspective, “youth” itself became a pejorative identity, emblematic of the failure of family, values, and nation.

Predictably, while recreation centers and youth jobs programs shut their doors, racially charged profiles of “wilding” youth offenders and remorseless teen moms increasingly found their way into political speeches and evening news sound bites. By the 1990s, any winning political script seemed to require some heavy-handed gesture toward young people—and black and brown youth in particular. Suggesting the offspring of the “failed family” had come home to roost, conservative academics warned that an upswing in the teenage population would spawn a wave of violent youth crime. Curfew laws and antigang taskforces proliferated. President Bill Clinton’s 1994 crime bill allowed more juveniles to be tried as adults, and 41 states followed suit with their own
versions of this policy. A 1996 *Newsweek* headline story titled “Superpredators Arrive” posed the policy question of the day: “Should we cage the new breed of vicious kids?” (Annin, 1996). From 1984 to 1997 the arrests of juveniles nationally jumped 30 percent. By 1998, polls showed that two-thirds of Americans believed youth under the age of 13 accused of murder should be tried as adults (Ginwright, 2001; HoSang, 2003; Males, 1996).

Meanwhile, nearly every state’s reformed welfare laws placed draconian restrictions on benefits to teen parents while mandating that schools adopt an “abstinence-only” approach to sex education, drawing upon racialized pronouncements of irresponsible and immoral young mothers draining taxpayers of their hard-earned dollars. Parental consent laws limiting abortion access for young women proliferated. The effort to ban undocumented immigrants from public schools in California and to eliminate bilingual education programs in many states raised the specter of hoards of immigrant children running public schools into the ground. Higher education costs soared while earnings for workers with no college degree declined. Liberal and conservative policymakers alike eagerly stripped the affirmative action and antidiscrimination protections that afforded young people of color limited opportunities in education and the marketplace.

That the apocalyptic prophecies proved wrong ultimately mattered little to opinion leaders. Demography was not destiny for teen crime, pregnancy, or any other of the imagined youth-fueled crisis: 60,000 fewer young people were arrested for homicide, rape, robbery and assault in 2001 than in 1994, despite a large increase in the teen population. According to the FBI, young people in 2001 accounted for just 5 percent of the nation’s homicides and 12 percent of violent crimes—both historic lows (Males, 1996). But the 20-year project of racializing youth of color through a profile emphasizing depleted morality, indolence, and violence had taken its toll (Ginwright, 2001). From 1980 to 2000, California built 21 new prisons but did not open a single new University of California campus; nationally the population of the nation’s prisons, jails, juvenile facilities, and detention centers has quadrupled to more than two million people during this time (Krisberg, Wolf, & Marchionna, 2005).

As sociologist Amy Ansell (1997) explains, these racializing “political spectacles” or conflicts crafted by the conservatives in the United States in the last decade around affirmative action, immigration policy, crime and other issues have sought to not only amend particular laws but also “to rearticulate and contest the ‘truths’ dominant in . . . society for strategic and partisan advantage.” That is, the discourses they mobilize through these conflicts seek to naturalize a particular vision of the social world—one in which inequality is normal, inevitable, and beyond the ambit of state intervention. By regulating the frameworks through which people understand issues in public life and the identity positions they claim for themselves and ascribe to others, a hegemonic discourse stakes out in advance the limits of legitimate debate (Giroux, 1997; Howarth, 1995). It is through the work of this dominant discourse, for
example, that in California during the last two decades it has become com-
monsensical to build a prison complex unmatched in human history for its
reach and cost but is regarded as absurd to devote similar efforts toward
constructing the hundreds of new schools the current generation of California
youth require. Similarly, California’s once vaulted 1960 Master Plan for Higher
Education guaranteeing a tuition-free college education for all in-state high
school graduates sounds absurd within the prevalent political discourse, yet
the practice of literally caging (on occasion, in four-square-foot holding pens)
thousands of youth in California Youth Authority “warehouses” seems both
necessary and inexorable. Producing this “truth”—that prisons for brown,
black, and poor bodies are a “required” expenditure but schools for those
same bodies “throw money at the problem”—is not just the work of powerful
lobbyists or the sensational coverage of big money media. It results from the
active public contests over the discourses society will use to establish such
truths in the first place.

In the case studies that follow, I explore the ways in which the issue-based
organizing campaigns of two youth groups might play a role in disrupting and
reorganizing the larger ideological terrain which we currently confront. To be
sure, no individual organization or advocacy project can transform the broad
contours of this terrain single-handedly or over a short period of time; such
renovations are better measured in decades than years, and by their nature
grow well beyond the impact and influence of social justice organizations
alone. But as I suggest below, the efforts of groups such as InnerCity Struggle
in Los Angeles and FIERCE! in New York City might gesture toward the role
that organized groups of young activists can play in facilitating or contribut-
ing toward such a transformation, and stand in sharp contrast to policy advo-
cacy or litigation efforts which actually endorse, rather than disrupt,
dominant ideological frameworks.

The “Disappeared Students:” Re-imagining public education
in East Los Angeles

In the East Los Angeles offices of the 11-year-old community group Inner-
City Struggle (ICS), a large chart titled “The Disappeared Students” hangs
above a modest meeting room packed with student organizers from several
nearby high schools. The chart tells us that every year at neighboring
Roosevelt High School, an average of 68 percent of the students “disappear,”
leaving school before graduation. Though Roosevelt’s official enrollment of
more than 5,100 students makes it one of the largest high schools in the
nation, only a fraction of entering 9th graders earn their diplomas; only 1 in
15 members of a student body that is 99 percent Latino goes on to a four-year
college (Brenes, 2003; Vasquez, 2004).
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problem through the volition and decisions of individual students. In this
discourse, the students reject the opportunity afforded them because they lack
some combination of motivation, self-discipline, or intellectual ability (Giroux,
1997). Both heavy-handed zero-tolerance policies that expel students perma-
nently for technical violations of school code and more sympathetic interven-
tions such as mentoring programs still take the individual student to be the
object of change. Though budget-starved Roosevelt crams as many as 65
students in classrooms built for 30, provides one college guidance counselor
for the entire student body and only a handful of college preparatory courses,
the students are understood as the primary authors of the school’s failure
(Brenes, 2003). Drawing on long-standing narratives of people of color as
unable or uninterested in learning and intellectual development, the crises of
student dropouts, failure on standardized tests, and school violence are pro-
duced and rationalized through thinly veiled references to the students’
myriad deficiencies.

The “disappeared students” information sheets, signs, and chants that
student leaders from ICS carry to their meetings with their school principals,
to press conferences before the school board, and to statewide mobilizations at
the capitol in Sacramento represents more than a clever campaign slogan.
Coined by an allied group of student organizers affiliated with the South Los
Angeles-based Community Coalition for Substance Abuse Prevention and
Treatment, the “disappeared students” framework emphasizes the burdens
and loss borne by the youth and suggests that the failures of their schools and
the decision makers who regulate them is not accidental. The shift away from
student “dropouts” embodies the oppositional discourse both organizations
use to analyze and explain the conditions facing students and to craft alterna-
tive explanations and courses of action.6

ICS, which organizes students and parents in three East Los Angeles high
schools and several middle schools, demonstrates the ways in which issue-based
organizing campaigns can seek short-term policy reform while contesting the
broader ideological terrain. Organizing by ICS to win additional guidance
counselors, college preparation classes, and a new high school to serve the
neighborhood understands that progressive social change is realized in part
through specific policy reforms, increased political power, and expanded rela-
tions of accountability. But for poor Latino students from East Los Angeles,
profiled as intellectually apathetic and unworthy of significant public invest-
ment, modest policy ameliorations alone will not transform their security in a
racially structured polity. Following scholar-activist Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s
(2004a) formulation, this profile “extinguishes” their innocence; that is,
because of their ascribed status as dangerous, undeserving, and thus “guilty,”
they relinquish their standing to demand social equity and make claims for
public resources. Moreover, within the logics of the broad culture of neoliberal-
ism, in which competition, social hierarchy, and insecurity are valorized, the
students’ “failure” to graduate from high school and attend college represents
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a naturalization and rationalization of these inevitable inequalities rather than a consequence of them. Only by contesting and disrupting the racialized discourses and the commonly understood “truths” that constitute them as guilty (and other groups, by contrast, as innocent) can they secure more enduring transformations.

The organization’s leadership understands clearly the contours of this struggle over ideology and representation—it chooses organizing issues and campaigns that will allow it to challenge and destabilize prevailing narratives about students of color. ICS director Luis Sanchez explains these dominant assumptions:

First [there is] the assumption that only some kids can learn. The idea that only some kids should go to college is rooted in both ideas about a learned versus a laboring class, and racist ideas about people of color not being capable of learning; second, the assumption that because people of color are criminals, schools have to be run like prisons. . . . In all of our campaigns, we ask, “What kind of world views do we want to change?” (Sanchez, personal communication, 2005)

ICS meets this imperative at multiple scales. Through United Students (US), its campus-based organizing component, an activist core of 75 to 100 students at Roosevelt and two other neighborhood high schools conducts weekly lunchtime meetings to discuss the issues students confront in their everyday lives. But US student organizers address these issues through alternative frameworks and language that challenges rather than naturalizes existing inequalities and norms. For example, their analysis of the pervasive presence of military recruiters at their school (a US survey reported that three of every four Roosevelt students had heard a military recruitment presentation in their classroom by their senior year) contested the popular rhetoric about the singular opportunities for personal and career fulfillment awaiting those who enlisted. Instead, through their Students Not Soldiers educational campaign, the group focused on the ways recruiters target students in failing schools who may feel they have few other opportunities; the campaign promotes non-military options in support of a vision of nonviolence (Brenes, 2003). All of the organizing campaigns and discussions implicitly ask students to conjure their own positive visions for their schools and communities. Thus, in these local and immediate settings, among students, teachers, and even some school administrators, the organization mobilizes a discourse based on the students’ own aspirations and their power to “organize against their abandonment” by state and society (Gilmore, 2002).

It is also important to note that this campus-based organizing seeks to counter the hierarchies and divisions often at work among students themselves. If the organization’s work exclusively focused on increasing college access opportunities, it would risk implicitly marginalizing and excluding
those students not placed in the existing “high achievement” tracks—simply repositioning the “extinguished innocence” status onto another portion of the student body. But ICS presses for college access opportunities while simultaneously addressing such issues as suspension and truancy policy, school construction, and military recruitment, all within the broader “disappeared students” framework. This approach intentionally confronts divisions around language, immigration status, and experience, and the academic labels imposed on all students (e.g. “college-bound” versus “troublemaker”).

Because many of the most important policy debates and the related discourses shaping the conditions at individual high schools are produced at higher levels of decision making, ICS also focuses its attention beyond the local campuses. In addressing Los Angeles Unified School District decisions over school funding, curriculum and school construction in particular, it deploys the same student-centered discourse before this broader public, often through mobilizations targeting the school board and meetings with district officials. In one of its most successful efforts to date, ICS joined with the Community Coalition and other local parent and student activist groups to compel the school board to make a rigorous college preparatory curriculum the standard for all high school students. If implemented by 2008 (as the board has pledged it will be), the policy will open up the “college track” to many students customarily denied access to such rigorous courses because of overcrowding, traditional tracking, or mistakes in course programming. Notably, the campaign has shifted the local debate over student achievement to questions of educational adequacy, resources, opportunity and student self-determination; when more than five hundred students and parents rallied in support of the policy at a May 2005 board meeting, they wore shirts emblazoned with the declaration Let Me Choose My Future—an assertion retold in dozens of subsequent media accounts (Hayasaki, 2005).

Indeed, in the last two years, four Los Angeles Times feature stories have profiled the group’s activities and analysis, and dozens of local radio, television, community, and Spanish-language press accounts have done the same. Staff organizers and student leaders run regular media advocacy trainings and workshops to better frame and project their account of “disappeared students” and to contest the frameworks typically employed to deliberate problems within public education (Sanchez, personal communication, 2005).

Likewise, parents and residents in the surrounding East Los Angeles neighborhoods are challenged to rethink their assumptions about the students, their capacity to learn, and their right to participate in defining the needs of the neighborhood. In their two-year quest to win funding for a new high school and elementary school, student leaders talked with hundreds of residents in their homes, in schools, and in churches to redefine the problem and build support for the school construction project. In spite of the vocal resistance of a small group of local homeowners, the students successfully realigned a significant number of residents to support the project, and initiated
a parents’ organizing group to build on this collaborative approach (Sanchez, personal communication, 2005). The community organizing strategies utilized by ICS, which emphasize collective participation, confrontation, and the exposure of contradictions in relations of power, give participants (including the student organizers as well as the residents, policy makers, and journalists they engage) new experiences and frameworks with which to understand and interpret existing social problems.

Finally, ICS actively joins and organizes regional and statewide coalitions with organizations and advocates that share its ambitions and analysis. In 2000, its Schools Not Jails network mobilized to raise public awareness against a successful statewide ballot initiative that would try more juvenile offenders as adults and increase sentencing penalties. More recently, the groups have focused on federal legislation to expand police powers and prosecutions in the name of fighting “gang violence.” Campaigns for statewide legislation to increase access to public universities for undocumented high school graduates and to standardize college preparation curriculums in all high schools capture the proactive racial justice visions of these same groups. Though exercising significant influence on statewide policy can be limited because of California’s size and political geography, legislative victories are not the only objectives. By refusing to cede the debate exclusively to the norms, logics, and frameworks of their opposition, the group and its allies can gain some ground through the strategic use of the media, even in moments of short-term defeat.

Again, while it is premature to suggest that ICS and its Los Angeles allies alone stand poised to reverse the decades-long exclusion and subordination of large sectors of the youth population, their efforts are aligned with a growing number of similar projects around the country which similarly emphasize the politicoideological dimensions of their advocacy efforts around public education. In Denver, youth organizers with the groups Padres Unidos/Jovenes Unidos (Parents United/Youth United) and Students 4 Justice issued reports on several high schools documenting dramatic racial disparities in the uses of discipline and the availability of college-track classes and other resources for students. As in Los Angeles, the student-researched and -written reports have received significant media attention and have begun influencing the terms of the local debate. In Mississippi, affiliates of the Jackson-based organizing network Southern Echo are challenging the Schoolhouse 2 Jailhouse pipeline that confines growing numbers of black youth. Led by groups such as Citizens for Quality Education in Lexington, the coalition focuses the attention of elected officials, the media, and the public on the relationships among resource-starved schools, austere classroom disciplinary policies (which still include corporal punishment in many schools), and the state’s Orwellian juvenile “training schools” that institutionalize and detain students expelled from public schools. Generation Y, a multiracial group of student activists has successfully organized against zero-tolerance policies in
the Chicago school system, replacing them with “peer courts” as an alternative dispute resolution system. Again, the organizing group both secured important policy reforms to benefit youth of color in particular while contesting the logics that discourses of punishment and reprisal offered the only framework to respond to conflicts between youth. Youth groups in Philadelphia, New York, and the San Francisco Bay Area, among other communities, have developed equally generative and compelling interventions into the discourses and ideologies which construct and racialize particular groups of youth.7

Whose Quality of Life? Living FIERCE! in Greenwich Village

While ICS and its allies have used the crisis in public education to challenge one form of exclusion faced by youth whose innocence has been “extinguished,” along the Hudson River on the western edge of Manhattan’s Greenwich Village, another group of youth activists contest a different set of racialized narratives in their struggle for recognition in public discourse and public space.8 The Christopher Street Pier has traditionally provided one of the few safe spaces of kinship and community for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth of color and homeless youth from across New York City. By one estimate, LGBT youth constitute one-third to one-half of the City’s estimated 22,000 homeless youth, though transitional housing and service programs specifically serving queer youth provide less than 100 beds (Karp, 2002). The pier has historically provided an important, if tenuous, respite to the harassment and violence such youth face in most other public spaces and a place where youth could find one another and create their own networks of support and sustenance. Service providers conducting outreach on the pier connected youth to important medical, mental health, housing, and employment services.

But as the area became the focus of a $330 million community redevelopment plan to develop the pier into a “green and blue oasis for all New Yorkers to enjoy,” powerful interests sought to ensure that “all New Yorkers” did not include the pier’s most steadfast users. Though police statistics showed major crime decreasing in the area, high-profile sweeps resulted in the arrests of hundreds of youth of color for violating myriad “quality of life” statutes. Residents and merchants in the surrounding neighborhoods, city politicians, elite developers, and police spokespersons agreed that the principle “threat” to the peace and security of the community was the violence and turmoil young people inevitably brought to “their” neighborhood. A New York Times article titled “Tolerance in Village Wears Thin” portrayed a place besieged by “noisy visitors” turning the area into a “sinkhole of vice” (Worth, 2002). An ad hoc group calling themselves Residents in Distress (RID) sponsored a Take Back our Streets rally while the local precinct brought in 23 rookie officers to carry out its zero-tolerance initiative, which included a 1:00 A.M. curfew near the river and new “security” cameras on public streets. Absent from nearly all
these discussions were any studied references to the stories, challenges and interests of the youth themselves (Goldstein, 2002; Lee, 2002). In 2000 a group of youth activists founded Fabulous Independent Educated Radicals for Community Empowerment! (FIERCE!) to organize, educate and support LGBT youth of color and homeless youth in the area struggling against both growing police harassment and their general abandonment by the polity. FIERCE! launched a Save Our Space organizing campaign to deliberately shift the terms of the “quality of life” debate to focus on the experiences, needs, and struggles of the young people drawn to the West Village, and their “quality of life” concerns. Conducting outreach near the pier and to nonprofit organizations serving LGBT youth of color, FIERCE! has mobilized hundreds of youth to attend various community meetings on police and safety issues to confront those who view surveillance and arrest as the only viable solution to the conflict. Youth in the group produced Fenced OUT, a documentary about the issue that connects the struggle to “past generations of queer peoples’ fight for use of public spaces at Christopher Street and the piers.” Community awareness activities such as the daylong public celebration Reclaim Our Space: A Festival of Resistance highlight the race- and gender-based profiling stemming from neighborhood gentrification efforts (Amateau, 2002). FIERCE! leaders have met with police representatives, leaders of the neighborhood community board, and local politicians in an unswerving effort to counter the prevailing discourse on “youth deviance” marking the early debates.

Through these activities and others, the oppositional discourse FIERCE! draws upon and mobilizes includes three critical dimensions. First, the organization has used the public outcry on youth congregating in the West Village to focus attention on the myriad forms of prohibition and exploitation LGBT youth of color face in their own efforts to survive in a climate of shrinking economic opportunities and public services. FIERCE! situates the concerns over prostitution in residential neighborhoods within a larger analysis of the overwhelming discrimination and exclusion queer youth of color face in realizing any economic security—sex work is often the only viable alternative. The group has also joined other progressive formations in linking the city’s “quality of life” campaigns to the tremendous growth in the numbers of young people of color brought under the supervision of the criminal justice system: young gay black men who come to the Village to socialize face arrest for the mildest transgression while rowdy middle-class whites spilling out of neighborhood bars will rarely know the enduring pain of spending hours in handcuffs. Extending the important work to advance public awareness of racial profiling, it exposes the contradictions and duplicity behind the “quality of life” discourse. Quite notably, FIERCE! calls attention to the specific ways in which such profiling is experienced and enforced with regard to gender and sexuality (Block, 2003; Goldstein, 2002).
In addition, the group has fashioned proactive alternative solutions to discredit the claims that police sweeps, “resident patrols,” curfews, and surveillance cameras represent the only possible response to conflicts between residents and the LGBT youth in the neighborhood (Martinez, 2002). In particular, FIERCE! has called for the city and state to fund a late-night drop-in center for LGBT youth in the area, demanding the reallocation of funds intended for an expanded juvenile detention center. At neighborhood meetings, they constantly address the lack of services and support available to homeless youth and LGBT youth of color, and insist that such resources be included in any comprehensive “quality of life” campaigns.

Finally, the youth leadership of the organization, struggling with issues of harassment, abuse, and profiling in their own lives, invest substantial time in understanding and identifying the root social, political, and economic dimensions of the issue. The organization conducts a wide range of workshops and training sessions devoted to understanding the historical dimensions of struggle and control over public space in the West Village and how developer-fueled gentrification has intensified those conflicts. Before neighborhood meetings, press conferences, meetings with city officials and their own peers, they have become authoritative commentators on the rapid transformations besetting the area (J. Ehrensaft-Hawley, personal communication, 2005). Their nuanced analysis implicitly discredits the regressive efforts to profile the youth who gather near the pier as infantile, rebellious and self-absorbed.

Thus, FIERCE! organizes both to secure concrete policy reforms that will benefit its constituents and to transform the broader public discourses in which such policies are understood and debated. FIERCE! demonstrates the particular ways that racialized discourses are inflected and expressed through the modalities of gender, class, and sexuality because their members experience these hierarchies all together. While the city continues to prioritize law enforcement solutions for conflicts in the West Village, FIERCE! has won the support of many local residents, preventing relatively small groups such as RID from speaking for the neighborhood as a whole. It is important to note that FIERCE! has ensured that local debates now at least consider the needs, interests, and lives of the LGBT youth who gather in the neighborhood, thwarting those groups who treat queer youth as loathsome and disposable.

Like ICS and other youth organizing groups, FIERCE!’s emphasis on collective action, confrontation, and disruption provides the groundwork for new frameworks and experiences. The organization’s long-term political strategy seeks to restructure the ideological terrain that constructs LGBT youth of color as “problems” by demanding their consideration as important, vital subjects. Again, while enormous work remains to be done to transform this terrain more significantly, FIERCE!’s organizing demonstrates how issue campaigns focused on policy reform can contribute to long-term renovations.

Youth organizing groups in other parts of the country echo FIERCE!’s groundbreaking work at the interstices of race, class, gender, and sexuality.
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In Portland, Oregon, the youth-led community group Sisters in Action for Power waged an impressive organizing campaign to force the school district to address sexual harassment in the public schools. The group has now turned its attention to an analysis of the racial and gender justice dimensions of the gentrification and public housing crisis besetting the city. In Albuquerque, New Mexico, Young Women United has launched a student-led campaign to challenge restrictive “abstinence-only” sex education programs in local high schools, responding in part to the ways traditional discourses of “teen pregnancy” construct and represent young women of color. In Long Beach, California, Khmer Girls in Action organizes young working-class Cambodian American women, and also secured a new school district policy around sexual harassment.11

Conclusion
To be sure, groups like ICS, FIERCE! and their contemporaries face a long haul to substantively transform the ideological terrain on which key youth policy debates unfold: limited access to funding; frequent turnover in leadership, membership, and staff; and the complexity and endurance of the dominant discourses linking youth and race renders their short-term impact uneven and incomplete. But at a time when approaches to youth development focus almost entirely on pragmatic and piecemeal legislative reforms, policy triage, and “innovative practices,” the struggles waged by the youth organizing groups discussed here are all the more important.12 They remind us of the centrality of ideological conflict and struggle in transformative social justice movements. Moreover, if we conceptualize these formations as contemporary (albeit underdeveloped) forms of political parties for large numbers of young people of color not represented in the formal party system, then we can consider Antonio Gramsci’s prescient explanation of the roles such groups must play in modern politics. Gramsci asserts the imperative of such formations lies “in the elaboration and diffusion of conceptions of the world” because “what they do is to work out the ethics and the politics corresponding to these conceptions and act, as it were, as their historical ‘laboratory’” Cited in (cited in Hall, 1988a, p. 188) that is, groups such as ICS and FIERCE! provide structured, strategic spaces and experiences through which young people and their allies can make sense of the vexing and contradictory forces that shape their lives, and allow them to test new avenues of struggle and resistance.

If we take the political ideological dimensions of youth organizing work seriously, three opportunities for youth-led organizing groups, intermediaries, funders, and scholars and for public policy strategies seem promising.

First, funders and intermediaries in particular should consider giving youth organizing groups more resources and opportunities to further develop their already rich work in this area. Resources for documentation of existing approaches and convenings to discuss this dimension of their organizing could be particularly important.
Second, scholars, training intermediaries, and funders could devote resources and attention toward understanding how to better expand and strengthen this work, how it might be documented and evaluated, and how promising practices and approaches might be proliferated.

Third, while a renewed interest among progressive activists in general has emerged over the centrality of issue framing and strategic communications in a divisive political moment (the well-known “How do we talk to the red states?” conundrum), this attention has generally turned on narrower questions of crafting persuasive “messages” and sound bites. Such pragmatic concerns are clearly important to winning short-term policy debates, but they risk leaving the broader frameworks and ideological underpinnings that define those debates undisturbed.13

This danger looms particularly large over debates surrounding the “problems” posed by young people of color. Too often, liberal policy advocates rehearse the dominant logics of these debates in support of modest policy reforms—“Yes, our youth are troubled and dysfunctional, but that’s why we need more job training programs”—rather than challenging and contextualizing their underlying assumptions. The experiences of FIERCE! and ICS challenge us to remain vigilant about the imperative to contest, rather than reproduce, such narratives.

Notes
1. For a more extended discussion of the Cosby controversy, see Dyson, 2005.
2. For more of the rich theoretical literature on this point, see, especially, Edelman, 1998; Hall, 1988b; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985.
4. For an excellent account of the ongoing organizing against the California Youth Authority’s warehousing of youth offenders see the work of Books Not Bars (http://ellabakercenter.org/bnb.html).
5. This case study is built in part on a set of organizational publications in the author’s possession. See also Hayasaki, 2003 and the group’s website (http://www.innercitystruggle.org).
6. For more on the Community Coalition for Substance Abuse Prevention and Treatment and its youth organization South Central Youth Empowered Thru Action (SC-YEA), see its website (http://www.ccsapt.org).
7. See, as examples of this work, Browne, 2003; Mitchell, 2004.
8. This section is based in part on several organizational publications in the author’s possession.
9. See Goldstein, 2002; Lee, 2002. RID tended to articulate the most reactionary and sensationalist accounts of the dispute, and attracted much of the initial media attention. RID had much less influence on the negotiations and debates that followed, which involved local politicians, resident councils, the police, and FIERCE! and its allies (J. Ehrensaft-Hawley, personal communication, 2005).
10. See the organization’s website (http://www.fierceny.org). FIERCE! specifically describes itself as “a community organizing project for Transgender, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Two Spirit, Queer, and Questioning (TLGBTSQQ) youth of color in New York City.” The more familiar abbreviation LGBT is used here, though the organization’s careful attention to expansive language in their description is instructive.
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11. See the Funders’ Collaborative on Youth Organizing website (http://www.fcyo.org) for information on these organizations.
12. As one among many examples of this type of approach, see Kelotra, 2004.
13. See for example, the work of the Frameworks Institute (http://www.frameworksinstitute.org) and the Rockridge Institute (http://www.rockridgeinstitute.org), and the work of linguist George Lakoff (especially Lakoff, 2004).

References


