Young People Talk Back
Community Arts as a Public Pedagogy of Social Justice

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It would be worldwide the peace that I would provide/who better than I—I seen hell with these eyes. —Chuck Webster (on Change the Nation, 2006).

In the past 10 years, young people have begun utilizing community-based arts spaces to express their political views, their concerns, and hopes for the world. Against public views of young people as passive and apolitical citizens or as self-interested commercial consumers (Herbst-Bayliss, 2007; Kinder, 1999; Paterson, 2007; UNESCO & UNEP, 2000), youth from diverse backgrounds publish passionate art works that argue their desire to be engaged, activist citizens. Reading and analyzing their art works is one way of valuing young people’s agency in public spaces. For this author, young people’s stories are in their struggles and the struggles are their stories. And these struggles/stories are pedagogies that ask audiences to see the world anew through the art itself.

My research seeks to understand art works from community-based organizations that engage in social action with historically marginalized young people. These young people use the arts to struggle for access and equity, as well as ask ethical questions about (mis)representation and social and economic practices in their communities and in the world. As an arts-based educational critic, I emphasize the importance of entering young people into social and political dialogues about change through an analysis of art works. I listen to the ways young people talk back to exclusionary publics and ask readers to pose questions about their messages.

One facet of young people’s political art-making is the expression of individual experiences in the present and their constructions of the future. I focus on how young people’s art works discuss inclusions and exclusions in/through various social spaces, including peer groups, families, schools, neighborhoods, and nation/world. I draw on Youdell’s (2006) notion of the ways schools (and members of schools) include and exclude particular young people:

“who” a student is—in terms of gender, sexuality, social class, ability, disability, race, ethnicity and religion as well as popular and sub cultural belongings—is inextricably linked with the “sort” of student and learner that s/he gets to be, and the educational inclusions s/he enjoys and/or the exclusions s/he faces. (p. 2)

Participants in social spaces articulate the boundaries for who is accepted and under what circumstances, forming discourses of power that circumscribe socially acceptable ways of being.
As young people express the ways in which they are excluded and included, their concepts of a better world become clearer. In this chapter, I discuss the ways particular young artists construct (a) experiences with inclusion and exclusion, (b) their views/beliefs about those experiences, and (c) their perceptions of the people whom and institutions which they view have power to (re)produce boundaries of belonging. The art works I discuss come from QSpeak, a youth theatre group that was part of Phoenix, Arizona’s non-profit organization 1n10, a social services agency for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and questioning youth; Voices, Inc., a youth storytelling non-profit organization in Tucson, Arizona; and Youth Movement Records, a youth hip hop non-profit organization in Oakland, California.

Public Pedagogy, Arts-based Criticism, and the Subject

As a public pedagogy, the arts create epistemological and ontological openings for young people as problem solvers. Ecker (1966) and Dewey (1934) suggest that as artists and audiences work in various mediums, they are exploring qualitative problems, a process of “minding” or attending to questions through the process. The field of performance studies allows art works to be viewed not as static end products, but as social texts continually re-performed for pedagogical purposes. Schechner (2002) suggests cultural artifacts, like the young people’s art works I look at, be examined “as” performance rather than as objects or things: “the emphasis is on inquiring about the ‘behavior’ of, for example, a painting: the way it interacts with those who view it, thus evoking different reactions and meanings; and how it changes over time in different contexts” (p. 2). J. L. Austin (1962) views speech itself as a performance, an act of doing on the part of the speaker and the listener. I consider young people’s art works as speech acts that perform a pedagogical function. They teach about individual young people’s experiences and the ways that individuals and institutions (re)produce subjectivities. To realize young people’s utopic visions as some part of a public project for social change, their discursive practices must be understood from their points of view.

Someone who analyzes art works but is not the artist could be called a critic. Eisner (2002) describes the critic as someone who chooses “the difficult task of rendering [some] essential ineffable qualities constituting works of art into a language that will help others perceive the works more deeply” (p. 213). A traditional conception of the critic is that s/he works to reeducate the public about the works of art through the critic’s viewpoint and language. Yet, I am interested in ways the critic can build a “transactive space” through research so that multiple audiences can create their own readings of the art works. In this way, criticism assists audiences in experiencing worlds within the art works anew for themselves (Oliva, 2000, p. 34). To build dialogue through the art works, I utilize multiple discourses and meaning systems in order to destabilize and deprivilege a singular, authoritative reading that “tells” the audience what to think about young people. I present contexts around the art works, including community history and the published words of participants. I also include reproductions of the art works themselves so that readers can draw their own conclusions, even talk back to my interpretations.

In this chapter, young people talk back to society’s constructions of inclusion and exclusion based on identity markers and group memberships. They work from knowledge of historical oppression and incorporate that knowledge into their political actions in the present. The art works are extensions of that knowledge, functioning to re-perform both struggle and hope, specifically related to the ways they want their individual perspectives to be heard. In the art works, young people are concerned with ideas of sameness and difference, naming themselves both to set themselves apart and to seek belonging. They express tension in their desire to be treated the same as other people even when they feel different and their desire to delineate a
boundary around their identity/experiences as being different and even separate from others. They are concerned with building connectedness as they develop personal identities and form or interact with group memberships. They express reflection and reflexivity as they ponder experiences with exclusion and form subversive or alternative communities. The art works become an expressive public space for developing knowledge of personal-social identities that can form the foundations for better future worlds.

Naming: Shades of Gray

Naming oneself and struggling with identity groups and labels are important to the young artists here. For example, Q-Speak’s 2006 show, Steppin’ Out (Beck, 2006), was devised by young people over a series of Saturday workshops and then performed at Arizona State University for a diverse audience of high school students; university students, faculty and staff, and community members from cities in the East Valley area. All of the characters in the show are based on real life stories although the youth did not necessarily play themselves.

The narrative follows an ensemble of characters exploring their identities as they form a Gay-Straight-Alliance (GSA) club at their high school. The show uses “I am” statements throughout. It opens with, “I am charismatic. I am confident and unique. I am afraid and curious. I am special.” Then the voices become too layered and overlapping to distinguish any one statement. Later the characters play a game at one of their GSA meetings in which they have to state agreement or disagreement with the following statements: “I am privileged.” “I identify with an oppressed group.” “I do not believe you are born gay, but that it is a choice.” “I am comfortable with my identity.” In debriefing about the game, a character steps toward the audience and says in direct address:

It’s difficult for me to truly express who I am. People judge me based on what I do, what causes I support. I don’t think even I know who I am. My life is filled with so many shades of gray, it would be impossible for me to identify with any one thing…. I—like many others—have a strong desire to define myself in simple black and white. My entire life I spend digging into myself. I learned today that I don’t have to do as such. Now I have to just respond, I am me.

Throughout the show, characters struggle for acceptance, both from themselves and from others, without having to compromise what they believe, think, or feel. The show ends with another series of “I am…” “I am the football player who committed suicide because I am gay. I am the male-to-female transsexual who gets kicked out of public bathrooms. I am the 84 year old woman who died alone in her hospital room because her partner was not allowed in….”

Then the characters take turns talking about their ideas for social change:

I’d like to have a public GSA like the one we have in Tucson. I want to start 1n10 in the East Valley. I plan to be a spokesperson for trans rights issues. I will come out on National Coming Out Day. I made a pact with myself awhile ago to never hide who I am. But I have an incredibly hard time identifying myself. Using one word to sum up how I feel is not something I take lightly. I guess I will label myself questioning, but the truth is I know exactly how I feel. No label can say it all. I suppose in the end I will step out and say, Hello world, here I am!

In this devised theater piece, the young people focus consistently on sharing their perceptions of themselves through naming, using “I.” These expressions demonstrate the ways that the
young artists hold complicated, even conflicting identities and perspectives. This is reflected in
the language devices they use such as contrasting descriptive adjectives (being afraid and curious),
group membership labels (being transsexual or a football player), comparisons of self to
other (the young woman talking to the protesting man with a placard), and relationships of self
to event or place (participating in National Coming Out Day). Yet in two different moments of
the show, characters state “Here I am” and “I am me.” The young people want to participate in
group memberships and at the same time be viewed as individuals. They want to draw attention
to the ways particular group memberships exclude and oppress, and they want to utilize other
group memberships for their own empowerment. They want to have the power or agency to
make decisions about who they are and with whom they identify, and they do not want others
to have the power to take away this capacity—or right—to name themselves. This complexity of
subjectivity is compounded by the ways that personal/group labels invoke historical trajectories
and accompanying ideologies. When exploring themselves, these young people invoke an “I”
that references, as Judith Butler (1997) suggests, “an inherited set of voices, an echo of others
who speak as the ‘I’” (p. 25). Yet they are also contributing to a widening set of perspectives
included in their own “I” as they perform personal experiences.

One particular inclusion/exclusion central to this show is the construct of sexuality. The
young people trouble the idea that there is a coherence of sexual identity based on heterosexuality.
Their “I am” statements expose “gender discontinuities” that they experience in their daily
lives (Butler, 1999, pp. 172–173). These identities are ignored, marginalized, or erased through
the social reproduction/reperformance of heteronormativity. As people exclude GLBTQ identities
from the realm of acceptable ways of being, the young people here show the dire conse-
quences for their loss of self, intimate relationships, and participation in public spaces such as
their own schooling.

Through the search for and labeling of self, they trouble even labels existing in the margins,
like being queer or questioning. As the director of QSpeak, Beck, said when introducing their
2007 show, “What you will see tonight is a new piece written and performed...by lesbian, gay,
bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning youth, and whatever other label they choose to use that
particular day.” Perhaps it is not the identity labels themselves that are central to subjectivity, but
the personal application or rejection of those labels that allows young people to build a sense of
self and belonging in a larger world that excludes them.

**Connectedness/Belonging**

Whereas the previous examples demonstrate how subjectivity develops through specific use of
naming and identity labels, the following art works focus on how individuals build belonging
and inclusion through interpersonal relationships and alliances. Ross (2002) suggests that relational
theorizing is vital to understanding the ways people employ power and utilize knowledge
for individual and group benefit. She calls it “theorizing the spaces between us,” that is “first and
foremost one of partial and negotiated meaning. The space between us is never transparent or
completely knowable and is inevitably subject to conflict and misunderstanding” (p. 411). In the
art works, such spaces function pedagogically as they utilize various arts techniques in order
to build relationships between the work and the audience, as well as raise questions about the
purposes and ethics of constructing group membership.

For example, Voices, Inc. is a non-profit multi-media organization in Tucson, Arizona,
that mentors low-income young people to produce community newspapers and special ethno-
graphic projects. A team of young researchers created the book *Don’t Look at Me Different/*No
Me Veas Diferente (Voices Inc., 2000), about the history of housing projects in Tucson. Through
interviews and photographs they gathered from 20 current and past residents, the young people hoped to dispel negative stereotypes about living in the projects. In the book’s preface, Carolina, one of the researchers, states:

The reason I stayed writing the book was because I thought that it was my opportunity to tell people that the projects are not a place where you pass by and get killed. I want all you people to read this book and learn and see how life in the projects was…. Voices is also a good opportunity for people who live in hoods that are considered a bad place to stand up for their neighborhood and take all of the bad talking away. (p. 11)

During its history, Tucson developed two housing projects—La Reforma, built in 1942 and Connie Chambers, an extension of La Reforma built in 1962. This book directly responds to a history of controversy surrounding housing projects in the United States, such as class and race-based stigmas that have created social inclusions and exclusions.

In Don’t Look at Me Different/No Me Veas Diferente, the front cover and several inside photographs reflect the question of what it means to belong or be connected to others, particularly in response to negative stereotypes. In the cover photo, there is a small girl looking out to distance from behind slightly open door. She is smiling, as if she is either leaving or coming out to greet someone who has arrived. A window behind her has a grate over it. There is a mural of a face whose eye directly stares at the viewer. This picture feels warm and inviting, yet the juxtaposition of the girl looking off and the background face making eye contact is confrontational and unsettling. Who is gazing at whom? And for what purpose? (see Figure 35.1).

In another photograph (opposite the introduction to the Connie Chambers projects), there are many young men standing in the open courtyard. Some are looking at the camera, others off in the distance. Two have their arms open wide and are looking at the camera. One of the men has his other arm around another young man. Many of the men are smiling. The caption reads, “Chico Figueroa, center, welcomes you to the project. He embraces his brother David” (p. 76; see Figure 35.2).
These photos problematize negative stereotypes that mass media communicates about people of color and those in poverty (Entman, 2006). Taking and displaying the photographs reconstruct social space and communicate relationships of belonging and inclusion, such as through the presence of a child or the embrace of brothers. These welcoming gestures demonstrate the importance of a politics of location in these young people’s social visions (Rich, 1984). Rich suggests, “in creating our centers and our own locales, we tend to forget that our centers displace others into the peripheries of our making” (p. 176). These young people have emphasized relocating the center of identity construction and group membership to themselves. Publishing such moments of interaction and relationship extends that politics of location by performing resistance through authorship, as publics view these moments over time and space. The art works create “dynamic dissonance” (Ross, 2002, p. 413), shifting power toward their own perspectives and emphasizing the importance of indigenous or local knowledge as the center of relationship building.

Their identities include “experiences of interconnection, that is, the notion of self-in-relation” (Ross, p. 420). Individual perspectives are shaped by immediate interpersonal relationships and the communities they form. In this way, the photographs are “negotiating the multiple spaces between us, which is a way of being in relation and working against a politics of certainty” (Ross, p. 414). In the ethnography, the young people acknowledge that building interconnectedness means confronting the impact that publics have on their identities and experiences, and inserting themselves into conversations had about them. Building relationships means both acting in personal, local solidarity, and through wider social resistance conveyed through authorship.

**Young People’s Utopianizing and Public Pedagogy**

The act of naming in young people’s art works, whether of oneself or others with whom the young people feel solidarity, builds an idea of what social spaces are possible. The young people suggest, as they name themselves in their art works, that better worlds might emerge from one’s ability/power to choose identity labels, appropriate or recast them. (Such as the recasting of the term “queer” from a pejorative to a celebratory term.) They also suggest that better worlds be built on the critique of historical marginalization by new generations who infuse the strength of critique into their own identities. In this way, the young people ask that participation in public acts of social change be concrete (Hansot, 1974) and contextualized through their individual stories. They also explore the public purpose of being in relation to others when thinking about the ways communities form, and the ways that inclusion is possible (or not) in a world where identities like race, class, and gender are institutionalized markers of exclusion.

It seems easy to say that young people, with their many identities, do not want to be excluded from resources or experiences because of who they are. They want others—who are “different” than themselves—to accept their power to label themselves and celebrate the names they have chosen. They want to extend relationships across difference. Yet, this chapter does not list all of the social exclusions that the particular artists in this chapter experience. Instead, it emphasizes the processes through which art works communicate experiences of inclusion and exclusion.

It is through these processes that audiences can better understand the kinds of social and political knowledge with which young people are concerned. This knowledge includes their awareness of self-representation, the functions of social and cultural institutions, and personal participation in public spaces. While young people’s resistance to marginalization operates on the periphery of state power, there is power in the margins. The young people in this research talk back in public ways that insist on an audience (Ardizzone, 2007). In this way, they can determine the degree of personal inclusion or exclusion from socially-constructed identities, group memberships, and institutions.
An example of public participation is the song “Change the Nation” (Tha Faculty, 2006) created through Youth Movement Records in Oakland, California. Young hip hop artists wrote and recorded the album *Change the Nation* (2006). Its title song by Tha Faculty elucidates young people’s consideration of participation in social change as well as the importance of viewing their art-making as public pedagogy. In one verse, Chuck Webster from Tha Faculty says:

“This the land of milk & honey
the land of spliffs and money
they aint wanting to change, clap pistols while tears runnin
yeah my house got busted at, better days id love that
i admit i do dirt, almost above that
everybody would be breaded, thats my new world order
go to the store & never be short two quarters
& no borders cause all races deserve the raw earth
& people wouldn’t get murdered 4 being on the wrong turf
in this nation of mine it would get better with time
cold nights writing rhymes sippin Carlo Rossi wine
no AIDS epidemic, no clinics & little dying
& tha nations capital would be top of Mount Zion
it would be worldwide the peace that I would provide
who better than I, I’ve seen hell with these eyes
tryin to change rearrange have this world, customize
my only wish is pursing my lips and kiss this nation goodbye
[a kiss smack ends the verse]

In chorus, Tha Faculty finish the song:

truthfully theres nothing to live for these days
just a bunch of youngsters in the group tryin to get paid
theres so many blacks laying up in the pen
wasting their life away
damn when does it all end
If I could change the nation/if we could change the nation
Change the nation/change the nation

The verse of “Change the Nation” uses rhyme and rhythm to carry the listener through the experience with the singer, Chuck Webster. The listener can feel emotion in the forward momentum of the song as well as the intensity of his views. He discusses social issues relevant to his personal experience and the wider hip hop movement—lack of safety, resources, and access; the criminalization of poverty; and urban blight (Hoch, 2006, pp. 354–355).

Webster’s use of metaphor is central to the song’s pedagogy. He places the capital of this new world on “top of Mount Zion,” a reference to the area of Old Jerusalem in Israel. Mount Zion is a synecdoche, or a single aspect of a whole that comes to represent that whole. It becomes a symbol for the kind of world that Webster hopes for, a vision that stands in stark contrast to the “hell” he has seen with these eyes. Yet, this place of hope and change seems almost out of reach, as it does not resemble the current nation, one that he wants to kiss goodbye. The kiss smack at the end of the verse echoes, invoking sadness or dismay. Yet, it is an unexpected personal touch, adding humor to the prospect of change. The kiss also passes the song over to the chorus, a call and response of multiple singers echoing each other’s line: “If I could change the nation...If we
could change the nation.” Aesthetically and analytically, this call and response is a spatial and temporal construction suggesting that change needs multiple voices and collaborative effort.

This sense of solidarity and struggle is also communicated by the album cover collage (see Figure 35.3). The overlap of the young people singing into the microphones echoes the song’s emphasis on working collectively toward change. The young woman raises her fist as she sings, an image that is collaged in multiple, as are all of the young people’s portraits. This fist suggests a confident desire to struggle, a gesture reminding the audience of other civil rights movements (such as Chavez’ farm workers strike or the Black Panthers). The young man on the left leans forward, calling to the audience. The collective of young people and a set of music speakers surrounds the image of a government building, emphasizing that this art is made with the intention of confronting social institutions.

In this way, young people’s civic participation may not always be initially harmonizing or unifying. Youth Movement Records demonstrates the importance of confrontation as an element of political art making. hooks (1991) refers to such work as a narrative of struggle or critical fiction that “speaks about the way the individuals in repressive, dehumanizing situations use imagination to sustain life and maintain critical awareness” (p. 55). Rather than rest in escapist, comfortable imaginaries, such art works make visible the personal importance of creativity and political struggle. For example, the song reflects a certain despair about change, yet the presence of the album problematizes resting in hopelessness. Young people produced and distributed Change the Nation, offering tangible evidence of their desire to affect change as well as their need to reach out to others who may be affected by the music. Their action, and the hope the music embodies, makes struggle aesthetically compelling. The artists have utilized the album’s space to express their frustration and pessimism as the basis for new work to begin.

Looking at struggle and hope from the perspectives of young people teaches about the importance of ambiguity and complexity in affecting social change, as well as the necessity of problematizing the norms and centers of that change. Many young people utilize the arts to promote their power and authority, expanding inclusions and raising awareness of unjust exclusions. The tools, resources, and discourses that young people utilize may share particular elements or be in conflict with each other, so that as they speak and act from different cultural spaces or communities, their standpoints may also differ (Harding, 2004). These standpoints are historically specific, social locations that shift, overlap, and contradict one another depending on the matrices of power and authority at work in the situation. The young people’s understandings of their own inclusions and exclusions are also contingent on such contexts.

Young people’s perspectives come from multiple childhoods (Lee, 2001) that vary by culture, time, and place. In these childhoods, young people extend their agency and supplement their knowledge and resources through temporary, ordered assemblages of artifacts and relationships (Lee, 2000). They construct these assemblages in order to realize specific social justice goals, such as coming out as queer, debunking stereotypes, and resisting racism. A public pedagogy
based in young people’s community arts considers how art making communicates the qualities and contexts of their assemblages and supplementations. What are the relationships that young people assemble, and how do they use the knowledge and resources they gather?

These art works reflect young people’s values of community belonging and group membership, as well as resistance to marginalization and oppression. They utilized community-based arts organizations to facilitate personal expressions as a means of responding to injustice. They also utilized membership in these organizations to express the importance of being in relation to others as a part of the struggle. Working together, these young people created art works that function as a disruption or dissonance in a public often closed to them. They not only embraced pluralism in an abstract sense, but also encouraged concrete, historical analysis of the kinds of pluralism society needs. These art works ask us to desire the opening of public spaces and to question how accessible and equitable opportunities are, or are not, in our futures.

References


Voices, Inc. (2000). *Don’t look at me different/No me veas diferente*. Tucson, AZ: Voices, Inc.
