

## **What do you see that I cannot? Peer facilitations of difference and conflict in the collective production of independent youth media**

**Rachel Kulick**

### **Abstract**

*This paper focuses on independent youth media outlets, one sector of the broader media democracy movement. These outlets operate as non-commercial spaces for youth to challenge the norms of mainstream media through the prefigurative work of enacting an alternative media system centered on the production and distribution of activist media and content. Collective production platforms and peer education play a significant role in modeling an alternative system. The key research question is: how do peer educators manage difference and contentious conversations in the prefigurative process of collectively producing activist media.*

*This paper draws out a case study of one urban independent media outlet, Youth Media Action (YMA), in the northeastern part of the United States to trace the interactive dynamics of how peer learning platforms facilitate and impede collective identity work for a changing cast of participating youth groups. Using ethnographic and participatory action research methods, I examine the conversational strategies that peer media educators in the youth media trainings engage (interpersonal openness and legitimization of conflict) in attempts – some successful, some failed - to leverage contentious conversations as a platform for building a shared identity. I found that although the conversational strategies did not always yield the intended results of a shared sense of identity, the interactions carry rich information about how youth actively debate and sometimes transform their beliefs in these media production spaces.*

### **Keywords**

Media democracy, media activism, independent media outlets, prefiguration, intramovement conflict, social movements, youth culture

### **Introduction**

Since the start of the new millennium, there has been an increase in independent youth media outlets<sup>1</sup> within the US and around the world. These outlets are part of a larger movement that seeks to ensure communication rights and power for everyone regardless of age, social class, race, ethnicity, gender,

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<sup>1</sup> The term “outlet” is used within the media democracy movement by groups that produce independent content/media as part of their everyday work.

sexual orientation, and other social forces. Networks, groups, and individuals participating in the movement share a collective critique of the mainstream media system, including the vast corporate consolidation and commercialization of media as well as the multiple forms of racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, and other forms of discrimination embedded in mainstream media structures, practices, and content (Hackett & Carroll, 2006; Kidd & Rodriguez, 2010). Participation is grounded in the belief that these media injustices significantly undermine the open communication of diverse cultural perspectives about important social issues and concerns. The larger movement for media justice and communication rights can be understood as a dynamic, multi-organizational field that strives for media change through the deployment of multiple collective action strategies in the realms of policy, education, and culture. Though it is difficult to draw definitive boundaries between these strategic fronts, there appear to be four fairly defined areas of collective action – (1) democratization of mainstream media content and practices from within; (2) media literacy and the development of critical audiences, (3) media reform and advocacy, and (4) the cultivation of independent media outlets (Hackett and Carroll 2006).

Many independent youth media outlets engage in *prefigurative work* as they attempt to prefigure or model more democratic communications through the development of alternative media structures, practices, and content. Prefigurative work refers to individuals and groups involved in social, cultural, political, and/or economic efforts of direct action in which they are modeling or realizing an alternative vision for themselves and their communities. These spaces lend themselves to the incubation of new ideas and visions where people focus on the development of alternative structures, practices, and experiences that begin to prefigure and enact what is possible (Maeckelbergh 2011). Akin to Maeckelbergh's definition of prefiguration, independent media spaces are "actively setting up alternative structures so that people can experience for themselves what is possible and get actively involved in ensuring through practice and continuous transformation that these new structures are and will remain more inclusive" (2011:17).<sup>2</sup> The prefigurative work of modeling an alternative media relations and culture occurs through attempting to build a noncommercial media system - that is, media that are distributed without advertising dollars supporting them, framing them, or determining their value or content – with a focus on shared ownership, inclusivity, and collective production practices. A central aspect of the prefigurative work of "being the media change" for participating youth actors involves carving out time for discussions about social issues from multiple and often contradicting perspectives.

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<sup>2</sup> Francesca Polletta also uses the term "prefigurative" groups to characterize groups in which individuals with explicit oppositional ideas join together "to prefigure the society the movement is seeking to build by modeling relationships that differ from those characterizing mainstream society" (1999:11).

Yet, like many organizational principles, it is one thing to say that we value shared ownership, inclusivity, and diverse perspectives in the collective process of making independent media. But it is much more complex when we consider how youth manage and negotiate conversations that veer off in directions that do not necessarily generate agreement or comfort for everyone at the table. Charles Tilly uses the term “contentious conversations” to represent conversations that embody both mutual and contradictory claims. These conversations can impel actors to negotiate and renegotiate who they are, adjust the boundaries they inhabit, and alter their beliefs and actions based on the talk of others (1998:497). I would add that contentious conversations can be highly generative for actors to unpack assumptions that undergird differing meanings, values, and identities, which might otherwise remain implicit (Tilly 1998, Ghaziani 2008). While this term is useful in providing a general sense of how actors interact with differing views in the formation and negotiation of collective identity and action, there is very little understanding of how social movement organizations engaged in prefigurative work manage difference and conflict in the collective process of modeling an alternative system.

It is my assertion that the discussion of differing and contradicting perspectives takes on more traction in prefigurative work as these actors need to examine and deconstruct their lived experiences in order to determine and begin to model what is possible. Independent youth media spaces offer important insights in this area as the collective practice of making independent media entails continuous discussion about how to work cooperatively, how to represent an issue, and how to negotiate differing perspectives. We see through these collective processes that prefigurative work is as much about internal transformation in the form of collective struggle and negotiation as external transformation in the form of realizing an alternative model.

This paper builds on Tilly’s notion of “contentious conversations” to examine how youth negotiate difference and conflict as a means to build and negotiate a collective identity as part of the larger prefigurative work of modeling an alternative media system. There are three interrelated goals associated with this collective identity work. First, these spaces seek the involvement of youth from disenfranchised communities and underrepresented groups.<sup>3</sup> With this orientation towards inclusivity, YMA has made significant inroads with a wide network of youth groups focused on multiple social issues including LGBTQ, HIV/AIDS, teenage pregnancy, juvenile justice, civil rights, substance abuse, academic advancement, immigration, labor, policing, international issues and the list goes on. Second, most of these spaces seek to foster youth involvement in social change work through the collectively production of activist media.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> By mainstream media channels, I am referring to large distribution channels that play a significant cultural role in circulating imagery, entertainment, and political information that influences attitudes, and in many ways determining the terms of public conversation (Hesmondhalgh 2002, Schudson).

<sup>4</sup> Activist media is also often referred to as “alternative,” “socially conscious,” “oppositional,” “independent,” or “radical” media. Williams (2005) makes an important distinction between alternative and oppositional practice in that someone who possesses an “alternate point of view

Third, the focus on peer education, inclusivity, and hands-on experiences of filmmaking contributes to the formation and negotiation of a collective identity. Through participation in these practices, youth feel a sense of ownership and belonging within a larger youth community or culture. These factors also enable participating youth (to varying degrees) to prefigure or model a youth centered, do-it-yourself, experimental space to collectively make media about issues they care about from their perspectives.

This article draws from a case study of the independent youth media hub, Youth Media Action (YMA), a division of a public access media center in an urban area in the US Northeast. I frame YMA as a prefigurative space as it operates as an alternative, noncommercial youth-centered media system for youth to model practices, content, and values that differ from mainstream media. YMA espouses a peer-to-peer education model as a cultural platform for political engagement as youth look to each other to collectively produce and distribute media to bring into public view their perspectives about local and global issues that concern them. YMA peer educators are youth of a similar age and background that work with a changing cast of urban youth groups to facilitate the production of socially conscious media. As a researcher, activist, and participant observer attending a wide range of peer led media trainings with differing youth groups, I was struck by the wide range of difference and controversy that emerged in youth conversations over the course of collectively producing activist media. In particular, I examine how peer media educators manage contentious conversations among youth participants as a vehicle to expose and hold opposing views, values, and goals as part of the process of modeling and enacting an alternative media system. The quality of the peer-led facilitations of these contentious conversations play a significant role in informing to what extent the YMA peer educators could form and negotiate at least a short term intermovement collective identity between the YMA peer educators and the youth groups.

Social movement spaces that value prefigurative production practices and diversity, such as YMA, are fertile sites to examine how contentious conversations can influence collective identity work for youth engaged in making activist media. First, these sites are less marked by one racial, ethnic, religious, gendered, or class-based community and more likely to be composed of diverse communities with a common value, concern, or purpose. As such, these spaces confront the added challenge of building a collective “we” amongst youth of differing social and cultural backgrounds. Second, the prefigurative work of collectively producing oppositional media is a fruitful area to expose and analyze how peer youth educators deploy differing strategies to help youth negotiate their differing, contesting perspectives and backgrounds in the

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is someone who simply finds a different way to live and wishes to be left alone,” whereas “someone [with oppositional views] finds a different way to live and wants to change the society in its light” (p. 42). While this is an interesting academic distinction, the terms for activist media are often interchanged and interchangeable in these circles. There are some more radical media groups that more explicitly identify their media as oppositional, radical, and/or activist.

process of modeling an alternative media system. To some extent, these negotiations can facilitate the formation of an intermovement collective identity but it tends to be a fairly short-lived one that waxes and wanes over the course of a 2-4 month community media training with a range of youth groups. Some participants in the community media trainings do develop a stronger sense of collective identity if they continue to work in media activist circles. Alternately, the peer educators carry a fairly strong sense of collective identity as they act as bridge leaders between the larger movement and participating community youth groups.

In this paper, I specifically examine the conversational strategies that YMA peer educators engage (*interpersonal openness* and *legitimation of conflict*) in an attempt – some successful, some failed - to leverage contentious conversations as a platform for intermovement collective identity work. This focus is directly tied to bringing into clearer view how contentious conversations surface in prefigurative work; what underlying assumptions, values, and interests inform these contentious conversations; and what role peer education models can play in utilizing conflict as a tool for collective identity work. I address an interrelated set of questions: What conversational strategies do peer media educators engage in an effort to build a shared sense of collective identity with differing constituencies of youth participating in community media trainings? Under what conditions do these strategies hinder, versus contribute, to collective identity formation for participating youth and peer educators? And more broadly, what are the implications of contentious conversations as a vehicle to engage youth in prefigurative social change work?

I assume a multidimensional approach to this analysis, which includes the conversational context from which contentious conversations emerge; the interpersonal, cultural, and political content discussed; and the strategies that peer media educators deploy to mediate multiple standpoints as they surface. I found that although the peer educators' conversational strategies did not always yield the intended results of a shared sense of identity, values, and action, the interactions carry rich information about how youth actively debate and sometimes transform their beliefs in these media making spaces.

## **Methodology**

This analysis is based on an 18-month ethnographic study and a two year participatory action research project with Youth Media Action Center (YMA). Founded in 2000, YMA has built a strong youth-centered learning environment within a larger public access center. It is a multiracial independent youth media hub comprised of staff, peer media educators, and youth participants from varying ethnic, racial, and class backgrounds. The full time staff, all in their late twenties, is comprised of 5 positions – the director, education coordinator, outreach coordinator, production coordinator, and programming coordinator. In addition, there are 6 part-time peer media educators (sometimes called peer trainers), ages 16 to 25 who facilitate the educational and production workshops

for community youth groups throughout the city. Most of the peer trainers are college students or recent college graduates that have experience as participants or interns at YMA or another independent youth media group in the area.

YMA offers peer-to-peer media trainings that teach youth in community and school settings how to produce activist media from experienced peer media educators of their own age and background. YMA seeks the involvement from youth from disenfranchised communities including, but not limited to, youth of color, youth who struggle in traditional education programs, immigrant youth, LGBTQ youth, and youth from low-income families. The youth participating in YMA range in age between 14 and 35.

The ethnographic design included participant observation<sup>5</sup> at YMA at in-house programs, community media trainings, and other related events such as media democracy conferences and public access hearings. I participated in, observed, and sometimes filmed community media trainings that were led by YMA peer media educators - Vamos, City Organizers, Urban Thinkers, and the Palestinian and Israeli Collective for Education<sup>6</sup>. The trainings ran for three to four months, and included a focus on media literacy, pre-production planning, storyboarding, filming, editing, and screening sessions. The majority of the YMA peer educators and participants were youth of African American and Latino descent between the ages of 15 and 25. Focusing on contentious conversations of production, I paid particular attention to three key themes – 1. the context of underrepresented youth groups making independent media; 2. the role of contentious conversations in prefigurative experimentation and do-it-yourself work; and 3. the role of contentious conversations in community building (i.e. facilitating and/or impeding collective identity work).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> My fieldwork amounted to 810 hours over the course of 18 months.

<sup>6</sup> I assigned pseudonyms to represent the 4 groups.

<sup>7</sup> In addition, there was a participatory action research (Cornwall and Jewkes 1995) component to this study that was funded by the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) in the United States. My colleague Amy Bach and I worked with YMA to recruit a research team comprised of YMA staff as well 5 youth researchers that worked with us to design and implement a community needs assessment to examine the media needs and interests of urban youth. The youth researchers conducted 15 semi-structured interviews and 15 focus groups with YMA participants, peer trainers, community youth groups, schools, parents, and media activists that support YMA programs. We sought to create a youth-centered research process, which meant multiple feedback loops along the way. One pivotal feedback loop was a pilot focus group with YMA alumni who provided invaluable suggestions on ways to avoid academic jargon and make the focus group questions more accessible and compelling for the participating youth. These feedback loops were critical for the team to surface the inherent messiness of collaborative research in a manner that contributed to building a sense of trust and engagement in the research process (Bach, Castellanos, and Kulick 2010).

With a grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2005), I developed an analytical framework that examines the conversational strategies of peer educators: in the negotiation of difference and conflict. After coding to identify emergent themes and accompanying thick description, I engaged in a series of feedback loop sessions with YMA staff, peer educators, and participants in which I presented the themes and framework for the findings; and YMA responded with comments, corrections, and suggestions to enrich the overall analysis.

### **Locating contentious conversations**

The general discourse on social movements tends to center on movements that have an explicit opponent with attention to political opportunity structures, resource mobilization, framing and diffusion strategies, collective action and identity, cycles of protest, and so forth with limited attention to how social movements are modeling or prefiguring change from within their groups and networks. This article centers on prefigurative work occurring in social movements to better understand what social change looks like when social movement organizations are attempting to model change from within, in their structures, practices, and values (Kulick 2013). In exploring this prefigurative realm, it has become increasingly evident that contention is deeply stitched into the process of prefiguration as actors confront differing and often contradictory ideas and values as a part of the larger process of enacting and modeling change in their everyday work.

The focus on prefigurative work affords a closer view of the ways that actors manage conflicting perspectives, differing values, and diverse identities in the collective process of realizing an alternative vision. Most conceptualizations of prefiguration pull from work on “free spaces” within and between social movements. Evans and Boyte introduce the term, “free spaces” in a fairly broad way:

Particular sorts of public places in the community, what we call free spaces, are the environments in which people are able to learn a new self-respect, a deeper and more assertive group identity, public skills, and values of cooperation and civic virtue. (1986:17)

Free spaces are qualified as “free” to imply community settings where individuals are free from the bureaucracy of large-scale institutions and atomization of private life. These settings lend themselves to the incubation of new ideas and visions where people “envision alternative futures and plot strategies to realize them” (Polletta 1999:3). Within the context of social movements, “free spaces seem to provide an institutional anchor for the cultural challenge that explodes structural arrangements” (Polletta 1999:1).

Polletta contends that the commonly used term, “free spaces,” would be conceptually more valuable if these spaces were disaggregated and distinguished according to patterns of mobilization and associative structures. As such, Polletta identifies the term “prefigurative” groups to characterize free spaces in which individuals with explicit oppositional ideas join together to

model the society the movement is attempting to establish in ways that “differ from those characterizing mainstream society” (1999:11).

While this definition is useful, there has been limited research in this area primarily because scholars tend to locate prefigurative practices in the realm of radical spaces, that is, autonomous zones, counterhegemonic groups, and do it yourself collectives with overtly oppositional political ideologies. While the focus on the political and structural arrangements of these groups is helpful in highlighting radical and “nonhierarchical” contexts in which prefigurative politics are practiced, it is somewhat narrow as it obscures how these politics penetrate a wider range of social movement spaces. Futrell and Simi suggest that prefigurative politics are “not necessarily a quality constituting an autonomous free space type, but can be understood as a continuous quality” of social movement spaces that seek to facilitate a sense of collective identity (2004:217).

By expanding the boundaries of what constitutes prefigurative work beyond radical political orientations and nonhierarchical structures, we can begin to discuss and better understand what groups with differing political orientations and organizational arrangements face in realizing an alternative vision. Formally, a public access media center such as YMA probably does not square with Breine’s and Polletta’s notion of prefiguration because YMA and the changing population of participating urban youth groups are not entirely radical or anti-hierarchical. But YMA does embody the spirit of prefigurative work with a focus on the development of alternative structures, practices, and experiences that begin to enact what is possible (Maeckelbergh 2011). From this standpoint, we can begin to examine how youth manage contentious conversations in the development of an alternative media system that promotes shared ownership, inclusivity, and solidarity.

This shift allows us to bring more attention towards process-oriented strategies or what Maeckelbergh calls the “how” or the means of organizing in which movement strategies or ongoing practices serve as “a reflection” of movement goals (2011:6). Futrell and Simi note, “prefigurative politics recursively build movement goals into the members’ daily activities and movement networks in ways that symbolize who they are and what they want not just as an end, but as a daily guide to movement practice” (2004:21). Breines asserts that these politics “create and sustain within the live practice of the movement” a vision of what social change might look like (1981:6). As such, political issues of power, resources, and other social forces play a large role in enabling and hindering groups and individuals in the imagination and realization of an alternative vision (Polletta 1993, Dowling, 2001, Echols 1989, and Stoeker 1994).

Attention to collective identity affords a closer view into “how” social change occurs in terms of how actors utilize conflict as a point of entry to discuss underlying assumptions and values that might otherwise go unheard. To a large extent, these contentious conversations that operate on the micro-level of everyday talk influence how actors hold and take into account differing meanings, identities, values, and interests in the collective process of enacting



an alternative vision. This dynamic is particularly relevant for youth who enter YMA spaces with a wide range of interests that do not necessarily fit neatly into the rubric of realizing an alternative media system. Discussion of underlying assumptions that surface in contentious conversations can also help groups steer away from the common trap of deploying stylistic approaches, representational practices and organizational hierarchies that reproduce some of the asymmetries of power in mainstream media, which they are attempting to reify.

In consideration of YMA as a multiracial youth media hub that seeks to prefigure an alternative media system for a diverse network of youth groups, it is also important to look to Flesher to explore the ways in which social movements seek to define their collective identity in terms of diversity, heterogeneity and inclusivity (Flesher 2010:299). In this prefigurative context, the collective identity work of “how people actually manage acting together and becoming a ‘we’” plays a significant role in informing the extent to which YMA can effectively work with a changing population of youth groups to co-create and co-inhabit an alternative media system (Melucci 1996:15). YMA and other movements (British anti-roads movement, global justice movement, and some eco-movements) “reject ideological purity and fixed identities on principle” (Flesher 2010:399). Rather, collective identity work oriented towards diversity operates as an ongoing process that emerges and functions differently within specific contexts (Turner and Killian 1972; Rochford 1985). In other words, the conditions of collective identity or “who we are” are relational, fluid, and dependent on differing contexts of social movement activity.

For YMA and perhaps most social movement organizations engaged in prefigurative work, a collective identity is necessary in enacting an alternative vision as actors continuously negotiate a shared sense of who they are, what they are attempting to build, how they are going to build it, and why they are doing what they are doing. It is only through the conversational transactions of actors examining their existing assumptions about a particular issue that they can begin to model something that attempts to address the inadequacies, injustices, or other shortcomings of the current system (Tilly 2002). With a constructionist view, the process of creating and negotiating a collective identity occurs within these media making spaces “as an emergent property of collective action and as an interactional accomplishment that is negotiated by members of the collective” (Reger, Myers, and Einwohner 2008:4). In other words, the prefigurative work of modeling an alternative system and making activist media operates as a mutually reinforcing process in which actors have a platform to discuss differing ideas, identities, and values. Under certain conditions, these conversational transactions can generate and create shared understandings, goals and a sense of cohesion (i.e. collective identity) amongst participants which can in turn influence the extent to which participants are engaged in the production process (Snow 2001; Tilly 2002).

Along with the focus on process-oriented or ongoing identity work, we also need to consider how these processes set the stage for the negotiation of difference

and conflict as activists seek to prefigure an alternative vision. Scholarly attention to intra and inter movement contention, while fairly understudied, points to some important cultural dimensions in everyday social movement work (Ghaziani 2008). While contention within social movements tends to be marked as a destabilizing and even a factionalizing force for structural arrangements, it can also be understood as a generative force in collective identity and action work (Gamson 1995, Balser 1997, Tilly and Wood 2002).

Amin Ghaziani self-identifies as perhaps one of the few scholars that frames “infighting” as a key social movement resource for cultural and political work in which actors actively debate everyday tasks as a way to uncover and debate underlying beliefs and assumptions. These interactions often occur within a small group framework that allows for the examination of the “contested nature of how culture emerges and is negotiated” (Ghaziani and Fine 2008:1). Paul Lichterman (1999) notes that building a sense of cohesion across identities depends on the willingness of activists to openly discuss their differing identities. This “identity talk” is culturally constructed in movement circles through interactive practices that can either increase or decrease tension between identity groups.

In the case of media activism, Carroll and Hackett assert that it is “characteristically embedded in other activist causes, so much so that it seems to be constantly transgressing political boundaries” and lacking a clear collective identity (2006:100). In clarifying this absence, they look to Melucci’s concept of an action system:

With media activism the action system, rather than being interiorized in a way that fosters collective identity, is exteriorized through constant engagement with other movements and progressive communities. However, if this form of activism is more about constructing a ‘politics of connections’ than it is about constructing its own composite action system, the lack of clear, regularized collective identity among activists may indicate their success in constructing the intersecting social circles that radical coalition politics requires (2006:100).

Mische also explores the “cross talk” between social movements noting, “social networks are seen not merely as locations for, or conduits of cultural formation, but rather as *composed* of culturally constituted processes of communicative interaction”(2003:258). We see these “cross talks” and “politics of connection” between YMA and partnering community youth groups. YMA operates as an alternative media hub or system that works with youth groups to make activist media about social issues. But these YMA community media trainings can also act as a conduit for raising controversial issues and discussions as youth decide how to collectively represent difficult issues such as urban violence, gentrification, teen relations, and so forth.

Amin Ghaziani asserts, “no analysis of social change can neglect the role of conflict” (2008:11). Building from scholarship on prefiguration, collective identity work and infighting, this study looks to independent media outlets to expand our understanding of how peer educators attempt to leverage contentious conversations as a potential site for intermovement collective

identity formation and negotiation in the prefigurative work of realizing an alternative media system. However, these conversational conflicts can be somewhat different from “infighting” in that they do not always carry across a number of interactional situations. Nevertheless, these exchanges can be particularly charged as youth invest and pool (to varying degrees) their differing experiences, values, and social locations into the collective process of producing an activist media piece. They can also be, as Ghaziani points out, critical sites for political and cultural work as these types of exchanges “bring to the fore cultural assumptions that may otherwise remain implicit” (2008:20).

I emphasize the “collective” nature of this cultural work of media making because it gets to the crux of this project, the role of conflict in prefiguring change. Since independent media groups both celebrate, and contend, with the challenge of turning complex social issues that they care about into oppositional media, it is an important site to examine how group dynamics of race, gender, class, and other power differentials inform the production of oppositional media. Precisely which social issues these groups choose to represent, how they negotiate difference and conflict in the process, and how their media pieces challenge the mainstream media landscape depends upon a number of intersecting factors including the social backgrounds of participants, the negotiating processes of collective production, the organizational arrangements of participating groups, the availability of resources, and other forces.

The following section details two YMA community media trainings with youth groups, *Vamos* and *Urban Thinkers*. In my analysis, I pay particular attention to the interactions between youth peer educators and youth as they relate to the larger context of urban disenfranchisement and resistance. The focus on the collective production of oppositional culture allows us to see not only the how the peer educators mediate difference and controversy but also how the context - the specific settings of the trainings, the social backgrounds and accumulated experiences of media educators and participants - play into the formation and negotiation of an inter-movement collective identity.

I also attempt to present the contentious conversations of the youth on a fairly wide scale. I do this with the aim of dispelling assumptions that some conflicts are more worthy of attention than others. Rather, I bring a wide angle to this paper with the hopes of highlighting the contours of how youth attempt to build a sense of collective identity through the negotiation of contentious conversations about interpersonal, cultural, and political struggles at the intersection of their accumulated experiences and social backgrounds.

The YMA peer media educators play a primary role in this identity work from which they seek to prefigure spaces for youth from various social change groups to engage media making practices as a conversational site to surface and discuss multiple standpoints and the underlying values and assumptions that inform their perspectives. The formation of collective identity in these media trainings signals a more transitory experience of collective identity as compared to what is typically represented in the literature. This more liminal experience is particularly relevant for social movements working with other movements, as a

sense of common ground between movements cannot simply be assumed. Building even a transitory collective experiences between movements require values similar to those used to characterize a collective identity – “a shared allegiance to a set of beliefs, practices, and ways of identifying oneself” (Whittier 1995:24). We see the potential for these qualities of connection to develop when peer educators and participants actively negotiate difference and conflict as part of the collective production process. As youth raise controversial issues, we see the relevance of praxis as participants reflect on their personal experiences and social locations to actively produce media that represent their differing perspectives (Freire 1994).

### **Interpersonal openness, keeping it real: Vamos youth collectively produce a PSA on “Experiences with Street Violence”**

I begin this section with a summary of a community media training with the group, Vamos, to bring into relief the context of underrepresented youth groups making independent media; the conversational strategies that peer educators utilize to manage contentious conversations; and the possibilities and limitations of contention in building a collective identity.

In the fall of 2007, I attended the community media training in which the YMA peer educator, Soledad worked with the group, Vamos over the course of two months to produce a public service announcement (PSA). Vamos is a national not for profit organization, founded in 1961 to foster a “Latino consciousness” that supports Puerto Rican and Latino youth to better their lives through educational excellence and an ongoing commitment to leadership that advances the goals and cultural interests of Latino communities. The first day, I took the subway to the Duncan Avenue stop in the southern part of the city and walked a few blocks passing a handful of bodegas, a 99-cent store, some vacant storefronts, and McDonalds to arrive at the vocational high school where the after-school group Vamos convenes. Pedro, the Vamos youth coordinator, greeted me with a warm welcome directing me down the locker-lined hallway to the teacher’s lounge for the YMA media training. The students participating were four young men of Latino descent coming from different high schools in the neighborhood. Soledad grew up in this neighborhood, which served as a point in common between the participants and her. During the first few sessions, Soledad led the students through a number of team building and free write exercises to help the group shape a topic for the PSA based on an issue that mattered to them. The group decided on street violence and how they are surrounded by it.

Soledad’s approach to utilizing contention as a tool for collective identity work in many ways echoed her overall facilitation style that I am calling *interpersonal openness*. For example, during the second session Soledad distributed blue paper notebooks – the ones that are frequently used for in-class exams – and

asked the participants to free write about street violence. She encouraged them to write whatever comes to mind even if does not entirely fit with the topic:

Yeah, you can write about a fight you've seen, a fight you've been in, write about why you were fighting or how did you feel while you were fighting, why did you fight, why did you feel the need to fight. Whether it was a brother, sister, friend, enemy. And if you have a new thought in your head while you're writing, out of nowhere, you don't have to finish the sentence, just continue on the thought that you have in your head, you know?

After the participants finished doing the free-write, Keldrin, a fifteen-year old, read aloud his response to the group. He started by defining "fighting:"

Fighting is a form of violence due to anger or aggression at another person. People fight in my opinion for 3 major reasons. One is to impress others, second is because of self-hatred and third is because of anger towards another person. Well, as a matter of fact, people fight for a numerous amount of reasons, who am I to say why people fight? I've been in and watched plenty of fights. One fight, I was in about 8 months ago.... He stood about six feet, two inches tall with a slick black hair with the masculinity to take out four guys my size. However, this was not going to stop me... I approached him wondering if I was going to win or not. I know he was telling people how I was a coward.

Soledad probed further asking him how he felt when he was fighting. Keldrin responded, "I felt nothing. I was a different person inside." Soledad understood this and said, "yeah, you just become numb. The crazy comes out."

We see here how interpersonal openness yields some rich ideas as the peer facilitator and participants reflect on and dig into personal experiences and examples that relate to the larger topic for the PSA, street violence. Soledad shared about her experience with fighting as a young girl:

I fought in elementary school a lot, I was picked on. But my thoughts changed when I was in kindergarten, in the Dominican Republic, I got into my first fight, and I got kicked out of school because of it. Apparently, I started throwing rocks or something, got into a fight and then I threw a rock and then I got in trouble and I got kicked out. [The Duncan Avenue neighborhood] it's worse now than before when I was growing up there... growing up there, I felt the need to fight, with boys more than with girls. I guess I was more afraid of girls than boys. Because it was like even, if they did more damage to me, I felt bad. But if I fought with a boy, and he did more damage to me, I would have been like, oh, it was a boy.

The approach opens the door for youth to bring their personal experiences to the center of the media making experience in a manner that they might otherwise withhold in other situations. With this conversational strategy, we see the potential for the educators and participants to connect with each other and build a collective identity based on emotional connections that emanate from differing experiences of fighting.

The conversation between the participating youth and Soledad started to get contentious when the students interviewed each other on camera about their

experiences with violence and fighting. At one point, Keldrin interviewed another participant, Dominique. He set the stage with the first question:

Keldrin: “Dominique, do you feel like you're a violent person?”

Dominique: “I don't feel like I'm a violent person, but I mean, in some situations, when there's a fight, I am going to defend myself.”

Keldrin: “So, how do you feel after you've had a fight?”

Dominique: “I feel pumped, I want to fight again.”

Keldrin: “What do you mean?”

Dominique: “If I won a fight? A lot of people saw you so you are already pumped and you have the adrenaline, you can fight again.”

Keldrin: “But I thought you do not consider yourself a fighter why do you get pumped if you are not a fighter?”

Dominique responded with ambivalence that he did not know and proceeded to describe a fight that occurred when he was playing baseball last summer: “Well, this summer, I had a fight in baseball, I was batting in the first inning up and then the pitcher was throwing pitches, the first pitch, it almost hit me. Second pitch, it almost hit my leg. Third pitch, you know, actually hit me on my head. You know in baseball you don't do that, it's disrespectful...Then I started walking to first base, he [the pitcher] said something he started running his mouth, and we got into a fight there, after the game, there was a big team fight I don't actually know who won that fight, but we were still fighting.”

Soledad continued the interview with Dominique.

Soledad: “How did you feel afterwards?”

Dominique: “Afterwards, I felt even better that I beat his ass.”

Soledad: “You think your parents would be proud of you?”

Dominique: “Oh yeah.”

Soledad: “For fighting?”

Dominique: “Well, they were not happy about the fact that I was being suspended but they asked me, did you win? Did you hit him at least? I told them, yah. They were mad at everything except for the fact that I won the fight.”

Soledad: “Where do you think they learned to fight? Have they ever gotten into fights at school?”

Dominique: “I don't know.”

Soledad: “Maybe you should go home and ask your parents about any fights that they have gotten into since they're so proud of you.”

The tension was fairly thick in the room when Soledad encouraged Dominique to ask his parents about their experience with street fights. The conversation fizzled from there and it had an ensuing effect on the overall training as Soledad was left frustrated feeling a lack of cohesion and shared motivation for the media project amongst the participants.

A few months after the *Vamos* training, Soledad reflected on this interaction with her fellow peer educators and me. Soledad said to us, “I sounded a little mean...You know, I feel like I was being a little rude but it was so shocking to me that the parents were like great job, you fought and you beat his ass, you did great - kind of supporting his violent actions.” Her comments pointed to a tension that a number of the peer trainers confront. On the one hand, the trainers strive to cultivate spaces where youth feel comfortable expressing their perspectives even if they do not agree with them. On the other hand, the peer trainers expressed concern that they do not want to encourage street violence by letting statements - such as, “I beat his ass and it felt good” – go unexamined.

We see in this training a number of dynamics and contextual forces that influenced how collective identity was both facilitated and undermined through their contentious conversation about street violence. First of all, what makes this conversation contentious? Contention arose as the youth exchanged personal stories about a charged issue, the street violence that surrounds and sometimes envelops them. The contention builds when Dominique contradicts himself, saying that he is not a violent person but feels pumped when he wins a fight and, his parents are proud of him when he wins.

The group does form a boundary marker around their common background and their direct experience with street violence but is this sufficient for collective identity to form? On the one hand, Soledad’s use of interpersonal openness in the training is particularly effective in cultivating a safe space of belonging and community from which students feel comfortable exchanging stories from their lives and linking them to the larger context of their communities. Throughout the course of the training, Soledad repeatedly posed the question, “Why do you think people feel the need to fight? Especially being in...low-income communities?” The cultivation of a sense of solidarity is further bolstered as Keldrin and Soledad team together to challenge Dominique to unpack his multiple views of street violence. It is almost as if Dominique’s unwillingness to relent from his views operates as additional incentive for Keldrin and Soledad to probe further. Soledad faced a number of challenges during this discussion as she has to restrain herself from assuming, what she calls, the “Dr. Phil” position of advising participants on how they could approach a situation differently or more constructively.

At the same time, interpersonal openness can only go so far in facilitating collective identity. Given the vacillating views of the young men, it was challenging for Soledad to facilitate a space where the participants could begin to develop a collective oppositional consciousness about street violence. First, interpersonal issues such as “street violence” are a fairly charged terrain. Moreover, one could easily claim that the renunciation of fighting is a fairly

mainstream perspective so what makes their perspectives oppositional? How do their perspectives begin to challenge the dominant order? The fact that these young men are openly discussing their experiences and contradictory perspectives about fighting is oppositional in the sense that these young men grapple with the grey area that lies somewhere between a blanket renunciation of fighting and an unrelenting desire to fight. As they discuss their relationship to fighting and openly acknowledge the contradictions of not considering themselves fighters but also feeling exhilarated after a fight, they begin to dwell in this grey area that challenges the dominant order that street fighting is inherently wrong or bad.

While the peer approach of interpersonal openness can open a safe space for the youth to engage this grey area, it does not necessarily mean that groups know how to act or manage the ensuing conversations. Polletta (2002) contends that collective identity is not just the act of defining “who are you,” it is also a response to “how do we act?” Soledad’s line of questioning about how Dominique’s parents learned to fight points in part to an enactment of facilitation as she is encouraging these youth to explore how we are socialized to engage in violence. At the same time, her frustration and waning patience also affects her capacity to continue the conversation from a space of interpersonal openness.

While *Vamos* briefly participated by way of Soledad’s facilitation in the prefigurative work of making independent media within an alternative youth media system from which they could represent their own perspectives of street violence, their involvement was fairly short lived. Although the participants did begin to question and unravel their assumptions, the group did not reach a shared sense of understanding about street violence but they did begin trust each other enough to interview each other and gather footage for the public service announcement. In the end, Soledad edited the individual interviews into a coherent piece, which speaks to the lack of shared identity that can occur when participants collectively engage in the contested space of editing.

In addition, the context of a fairly stark, under-resourced room in a high school was not particularly conducive to the prefigurative work of participating in the enactment of alternative youth media system as most of these students spent most of their day in a classroom environment where their freedom of movement and communication was somewhat restricted. Some YMA staff and peer educators have noted that it is particularly challenging to conduct media trainings in school settings. Students become easily disenchanted with any form of teaching, even innovative ones, when they occur during school time or within classroom walls. Andrea, YMA director explained, “a lot of times our kids just shut down because they're still in school and are being asked to learn about media.” Unlike the *Vamos* training, most YMA trainings occur in community youth group spaces or at YMA where there are multiple activities simultaneously occurring and youth have more freedom to simply move around and embody the space however they see fit.



The next section shifts the discussion to a community YMA training with participants from the Urban Thinkers after-school program. The peer educator, Ina, employs strategies that legitimize debate and conflict, which in turn encourage participants to engage in a controversial discussion about the impact of video games on teen relationships.

### **Legitimizing conflict, inviting engagement: Urban thinkers collectively produce a live studio show on “Relationship Problems”**

YMA participants frequently unpack the impact of popular culture, mainstream media, and underlying hegemonic messages in the collective process of producing their own videos. Debates tend to center on how a particular social force such as gender, race, or nationality gets played out in culture. In this section, I summarize a contentious conversation about the impact of video games on teen relationships that YMA peer educators facilitated during a community media training. Similar to the *Vamos* case, I present this case with a focus on the context, the peer education strategy of legitimizing conflict, and the role of contention in facilitating a sense of collective identity amongst the participants.

In January of 2008, I attended the youth media training that peer trainers, Ina and Majida facilitated with the group, Urban Thinkers. Urban Thinkers is part of a larger not for profit organization that acts as a conduit to support the quality, accessibility, and sustainability of comprehensive after-school programs in urban areas. These past few years, YMA has partnered with Urban Thinker high school students from disenfranchised neighborhoods that convene on Saturdays at YMA to collectively produce a live show about an issue of interest.

In the decision-making phase of selecting a topic for the show, the peer educators take an inclusive approach deploying a “deliberative process” that allows for diverse input and contributes to the overall strategic capacity of the project (Ganz 2000:1029). The Urban Thinkers devoted the first two three-hour sessions to brainstorming and defining a topic for the show. At the beginning of the second session, Ina walked over to the large newsprint that included a long litany of possible topics for the live show that she read aloud - relationship problems, mental and physical abuse, gang violence, drunk driving, arranged marriages, child brides, school conditions, Iraq war, global warming, poverty, pedophilia, materialistic society, alienation and friendship, sex education, racism, stereotyping, gossiping and self-esteem. There was no shortage of ideas. After reading the list, Ina reiterated what she had said the first day:

As I said, we can go as controversial as we want, we can express our own opinions, we can do it, basically, we don't have any censorship here at all, so we can do whatever we want.

To which Lee, a student of Chinese descent responded, “so we can curse?” Ina said, “we can curse” and proceeded to share examples of live shows in which

youth curse and choose to discuss controversial issues such as the War in Iraq, gentrification, and teen pregnancy from a youth perspective. After much back and forth, the students decided to focus their production efforts on “relationship problems” as it links to gender, culture, and media.

A contentious conversation erupted in the third YMA media training session about the impact of young men’s excessive use of video games on teen relationships. Aiesha, a female participant, remarked, “there are some guys who would rather play video games than talk to their girls.” Maeve and Savita, the two other female participants in the group, nodded their heads in agreement as the male participants, Lee and Mike crouched into defense mode. Mike replied, “there are a lot of causes of breakups.” And Lee argued, “I don't think video games can break up a relationship.” Savita disagreed, “No, I think, it could.” From there, Lee attempted to further explain his position, “That's because he's not interested in her in the first place, right?” He went on to personalize the issue by saying, “it's not like we [all young men] play video games all day and not talk to them [our girlfriends].” The students proceeded to analyze the situation proposing that sometimes people start dating to as Lee put it, “look cool or something” when they are actually not all that interested. Maeve noted, “there is a difference between how guys act around their girlfriends and how they act around their friends.”

In response to these comments, the peer educators relied on the conversation strategy, *legitimizing conflict*, as an invitation to continue the discussion. The females in the small group reported that they were having, “not an argument but like a...debate.” Ina, the peer educator responded, “I love debates...arguing, yeah, let’s go.” By saying “I love debates,” Ina legitimized contention as an important part of the media training experience. Savita recounted their discussion explaining that the young men in the group thought that video games do not affect relationships but she disagreed based on her observations of boyfriends that are “too busy” with their games and friends to talk to their girlfriends.

Lee was convinced that video game playing was a sidebar to a larger problem – “obviously, he doesn't like her! It's not the video game that's affecting the relationship, it's the fact that he doesn't like her in the first place....So he is like not interested in her so [he] like plays his video games or whatever.” Ina probed, “So why would he go out with a girl if he wouldn't be interested in her?” Maeve started to slightly shift her perspective on the matter, “so when you go out with a girl, do you stop everything that you love to do?” Mike, the only white person aside from me in the room, took a middle stance explaining that he would not stop everything but “I'm not going to spend ten hours playing video games.” Maeve remarked that it is not necessarily how much a guy plays video games but how he responds, “if I want to talk to you in that moment when you're playing the games.” Savita finished Maeve’s sentence explaining that the guy would probably respond, “no, I'll talk to you when I'm finished.” Mike and Lee questioned how ignoring calls from a girlfriend while playing video games actually affects the overall relationship. To which Maeve explained, “yes, it can,

because a girl can really get offended by it” and choose to end the relationship. Lee turned to his original argument that the video game playing operates as essentially a symptom for “bigger problems.”

Ina let the debate ensue for a few more moments. She affirmed the group’s differing standpoints by saying:

Okay I love that argument, let's go ask people [on the street] from different perspectives, one perspective of a guy that plays video games and [one] from the perspective of a girl who gets annoyed by that?

From there, the group started to think more broadly about questions that would encourage people in the street interviews to consider how gender roles affect relationships. Ina summarized their discussion by proposing the following line of questions:

Like, what are the roles for the men and what are the roles for the women?  
Like, do we still have that dichotomy where the woman has to go to the kitchen, cook, and like, you know, look after the child or whatever and the man has to go work? Or have we broken that?

Maeve responded to her questions indicating that some people still embody those traditional ideals, “but I don't.” Ina encouraged the group to continue discussing gender roles but Majida, the other peer educator, a high school senior who is originally from Pakistan, took a different view, “I feel like this is a little bit too much.” Majida was aware of the time and concerned that if the students continued to unpack gender roles in relationships, there would not be enough time for them to go outside and conduct street interviews on camera. Maeve started to observe that the specific examples of gender roles, as she put it, “opened up more things to discuss, so this is like, a really, really big thing.” Ina gently urged them to go over the rest of the questions for the street interviews.

But the students had a difficult time surrendering the topic and the debate. Lee started another round:

If a person is in a relationship, right, and both persons have hobbies and things, right? And if they truly love each other, wouldn't they give each other, like, space, once in a while? I mean, the person, if you love someone, you would let them do what they would do for like a little enjoyment. You wouldn't like have a leash on them, would you? Cause you're not, nobody is controlling each other, right?

Lee’s take on the video games stemmed from the perspective that people should not have to relinquish their hobbies and overall independence for a relationship. Savita responded by posing the question, but what if the girlfriend experiences some kind of crisis, is it still okay for the boyfriend to focus on playing his video games? Lee agreed with Savita, “if something happened, then obviously, that would be so wrong, but like in your normal day.” Ina interjected here to suggest the question, “How much is too much? What are the limits?”

Ina proceeded to legitimize the conflict by summarizing the different stances that the youth were presenting. She explained,

I mean, from this side, I'm hearing that we're not talking about general hobbies and independence and stuff. Like, obviously, no one would come to you and be like, no, you can't go and play basketball with your friends, you've gotta chill with me every single second of your life. It's not about that, it's more about... instead of like, chilling with me ever, you're going to go watch TV all day or go play video games. It's more about obsessions, right? Is that what you're talking about?

Savita agreed and added that it also relates to our materialistic society and how people can get obsessed with an object to the extent that it undermines a relationship. Lee began to understand her vantage point, “okay, I get it, obsessions, you're talking about obsessions, okay. That's different. I wasn't thinking about obsessions, I was just thinking about every day.” Ina again encouraged the students to take these questions outside and Lee responded, “I am going to write this one down, how do video games affect relationships?” And Ina added, “Do you think it's normal to ignore your girlfriend's calls [when you are playing video games]?” Everybody laughed and moved onto another fairly heated topic, people's experiences with intercultural relationships.

In this contentious conversation, we see a number of enabling and impeding forces that influenced how Ina, Majida, and the youth participants collectively negotiated the gendered implications of gaming. First, the context of the conversation is important to mention. Unlike the *Vamos* participants that met in a fairly run-down school environment, the *Urban Thinkers* convened at YMA, a space that exudes youth centered culture with do it yourself signs and symbols of youth making independent media. These cultural aspects set a tone where youth can begin to see themselves engaging in social change work. The participants chose to attend this training on Saturday afternoon because of an interest in filmmaking or acting. While the *Vamos* participants were easily distracted and not particularly engaged in the YMA training, the *Urban Thinkers* almost immediately gelled as a group as they were eager to brainstorm and create the different parts of the show. In fact, most Saturdays the participants asked to stay longer to either watch another video or continue working on their show. The youth centered space and their already existing interest in media making contributed to their capacity to engage in conversations about controversial issues.

Second, the quotidian quality or everyday talk quality of the debate facilitates boundary markers for the formation of a collective identity. As a result of this shared familiarity, more of the participants have something to contribute to the conversation.

The *Urban Thinkers* unpack their use of video games as a “life politic” dilemma as they unravel a range of personal perspectives and experiences. Giddens (1991) notes that as social routines and practices activity such as food production, leisure activity, monetary transactions, and other forms of

consumerism are increasingly computerized and distanced across a wide scope of space, and disembodied from face to face encounters, they are increasingly tied to expert systems. Many social routines run by expert systems function devoid of ethical analysis, which can lead to consumer ambivalence and suspicion. As such, moral and existential questions arise such as the ones that the Urban Thinkers pose about video games, and we see the youth engaged in the “life politic”, or the politic of self-actualization, as they collectively uncover a renewed sense of awareness in attempting to link their everyday selves, bodies, and activities to the global stage of expert systems (1991:224).

Third, the peer educators play a significant role in deploying conversational strategies that legitimize and encourage the discussion among youth from underrepresented groups. Given that many of the youth view the peer educators as a mentor or role model, the peer educator’s positive response to dialogue about controversy greatly influences the overall tone of how the participants engage in contentious conversation. At the same time, the peer educators often find themselves on a tightrope negotiating the balance between friendship and leadership that they invoke in their interactions with participants. One peer educator, Vianka put it this way:

I flip flop. I be like, be quiet [and then], okay you want to hang out tomorrow. Yah I really flip flop because I understand that I am not that much older than them but it's kind of like a big sister, big brother role. It's much easier if you put it that way...because I am a big sister. I know that even though I still like to hang out and talk to my sister but I am still the big sister and there is still a level of respect that she has to have for me but at the same time I have to have it for her. So that's how I kind of see it, I put myself in a big sister role with the young people (Kulick 2013:245).

While the peer educators are peers in their desire to seek common ground and cultivate a shared identity between themselves and the participants, they are also educators with a particular ideology about who YMA is, how YMA acts, and why youth from marginalized communities play a particularly important role in the movement for independent media. These underlying agendas might prevent them from being entirely peers (Wood 2013). However, this flip flop and the overall peer to peer education model facilitates the possibility for youth-centered spaces from which youth can debate one another in the collective process of producing media that at least attempts to challenge the status quo.

However, the *legitimation* of controversial dialogue can backfire when it subsumes the conversation to the extent that the participants are unable to focus on anything beyond the debate at hand. The discussion can also turn tautological as we see a few times here when the participants use different words to say the same thing. The peer educator, Majida tuned into these tendencies as she encouraged the group to move on to the next topic.

The group was successful in building at least a short-term sense of collective identity, partially because of the conversational strategies that Ina and Majida employed but we also have to consider the collective process of producing a live show. The participants took on a fairly large production job with the live show

as they worked together to compile footage on a number of fronts including street interviews and a series of skits that they performed about relationship problems.

Interestingly, contentious conversations do not always translate into content for a media piece. In this case, the Urban Thinkers did not end up including the video games controversy in their live show but their conversation did contribute to their general capacity to engage other controversial issues such as interracial and gender dynamics in relationships which were key topics in the final live show.

## **Conclusion**

Akin to recent works that privilege more youth centered experiences of activism and social change work (Akom et al. 2008, Bennett 2008, Coleman 2008, Chavez and Soep 2010, Gordon 2010), this article moves our attention to how youth engage difference and conflict through the prefigurative work of making media within an alternative media system. This case reveals that conflict and contentious conversations among youth do not necessarily reflect imminent danger, they can also represent the contested nature of collective action. Contention is a close relative to prefigurative work especially for youth who are already negotiating multiple, evolving and often contradicting perspectives. Ghaziani asserts that activists “use practical tasks to contest and clarify meanings of strategy and identity” (2008:314).

In the case of YMA, these practical tasks center on prefiguring an alternative system for youth to collectively produce independent, noncommercial media. The peer education model operates as a critical dimension of this collective identity work as YMA peer educators attempt to cultivate inclusive, egalitarian, and oppositional spaces for a changing population of youth groups. This process can be highly contentious for those participating. As such, YMA peer educators employ process-oriented conversational strategies – including interpersonal openness and the legitimation of conflict that are discussed in this article - in an effort to facilitate a space from which participants can at least begin to question their existing beliefs and potentially apply these shifts in consciousness towards their production practices and final media products. As the peer educators engage these strategies, they are also modeling ways for the participating youth to negotiate conflict as it does operate as a fairly prominent force for many youth as they transition from childhood to adulthood and confront the plentiful challenges that accompany this cultural transition.

The deployment of interpersonal openness can facilitate a safe space for participants to exchange experiences about difficult issues such as street fighting that might otherwise go unheard. This sensibility is particularly effective for peer educators working with groups that are reluctant to participate or connect the material at hand to personal experiences. The peer educator’s willingness to relate a given topic to his or her life sets the stage for others to contribute and begin to unravel existing beliefs and assumptions about a

particularly charged issue. This strategy can also backfire when interpersonal openness leads to an emotional conflict such as the one that Soledad experienced as she lost her patience with one of the participants who openly admitted that his parents congratulated him when he won a fight. This altercation points to a larger range of collective identity dilemmas about how to manage emotional conflicts that can surface across movement organizers/facilitators and participants as well between participants, and how do groups cultivate enough common footing, solidarity, or motivation to weather and endure everyday conflict. It also reveals the fine line that the peer educators walk in their desire to create a safe space that also challenges youth to uncover and probe their existing beliefs and assumptions.

The legitimation of conflict goes hand in hand with interpersonal openness as organizers attempt to affirm debates and conflict as a vehicle for understanding what might otherwise go unexamined. Encouraging the discussion of conflicting views also allows participants to engage multiple standpoints that interrogate and politicize issues related to lived experiences in ways that foreground underlying power dynamics and struggles associated with gender, race, social class, sexuality, and other social forces. We see this in the Urban Thinkers debate as gender and consumerism surface as factors undergirding the problems that participants have with excessive video gaming among young men. This strategy can also down spiral when the discussion gets tautological and participants become so consumed in the topic that it subsumes the other items on the agenda.

The examples of conversational strategies are by no means exhaustive but by highlighting the ways that power and difference are managed, they do provide an analytical lens for examining the ways that peer educators attempt to build collective identity when group conflicts arise. These strategies, when successful, contribute to a short-term sense of “we” that ebbs and flows over the course of a community training.

The focus on prefigurative practices also affords a closer view of the ways that today’s youth engage in activism and social change work. We see a changing citizenship in the digital age in which youth are moving away from notions of “dutiful citizenship” of civic obligation - based on voting and partisan, professional, and religious participation in formal politics - to an ethos of “actualizing citizenship” in which “citizenship is not merely inherited as found, but made through creative experience” (Coleman 2007:204-205, Bennett 2007). Peer education models facilitate the development of youth-centered spaces from which youth can begin to prefigure alternative media systems, practices, and content on their own terms. The focus on informal training and mentoring in youth media outlets allows youth to see one another as resources, which in turn facilitates connection, common footing, and difficult conversations between peer educators and participants (Kulick 2013). Contention is part of the creative experience of media making and other do it yourself practices as youth begin to render visibility to differing and often conflicting ideas, perspectives, and values that might otherwise go unseen. It is

my hope that the focus of this article on how youth negotiate contention and difference will open the door for more visibility and conversations about the many complexities and strategic dilemmas that groups face in finding ways to bridge difference in political objectives, cultural practices, and structural arrangements within and across social movement spaces.

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### **About the author:**

Rachel Kulick is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at University of Massachusetts Dartmouth. Her research focuses on how social movements attempt to prefigure or "be the change" in their organizational structures, practices, and values. She is specifically interested in the political, social, and cultural dilemmas that groups face as they seek to model social change within the realities and constraints of everyday work. Email at rkulick AT umassd.edu.