PERFORMANCE AS A MEANS OF YOUTH EMPOWERMENT

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis documents the work of several groups in the Boston area that empower youth through the use of video, theatre, dance or rap. My hypothesis was that performance and media art would provide fertile ground for positive change on both the individual and collective levels. In particular, those who learned to articulate feelings and ideas would inevitably be more in control of their lives. And an environment that promoted creative expression in group form and in group forums would lead to positive change and the development of community.

Thesis Supervisor: Professor Mel King

Title: Performance as a Means of Youth Empowerment

Performance as a Means of Youth Empowerment

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Photos by Barry Robin

acknowledgements

first and foremost i must thank my mother, for giving me all her love and caring always

then the rest of my family, for their constant support during one of the most trying years of my life. my brother barry, who took all the pictures and stuck by me during all of my ranting and ravings, and helped me move to various different rooms throughout the boston area during my tumultuous summer, deserves special mention. and my cousin monique jarvis, and my aunt meisha kreisburg, who let me descend upon their homes when boston got too rough.

then there was the gang of five, chillin' at the brookline lunch, cookin' up new schemes, or hosting dinners and coffee breaks.

then their where the m.i.t. types like mel king, who always kept the faith, antonia darder, with unending patience, and frank jones, who saved the day at a moment's notice

and finally to all the youth of boston, for sharing with me their time, and for caring

preface

will we ever truly understand the magic that takes place during a live performance? the power of the human spirit ennobled on the stage, the almost other worldly quality of communication that takes place between jazz musician and spectator. who can say who is further transformed: the performer, use to playing many a gig and yet feeling in each crowd a new and somehow different energy, or the innocent "by-stander" who merely bought a ticket to kill another friday night, only to find herself elevated out of the hum drum, into a hyper-awareness of reality?

none of this can be documented, and so i learned early on i was bound to fail at my original task, which was to come to a deeper understanding of the "empowering" effects performers can have on an audience, particularly the oppressed. so it goes.

it all began almost two years ago, at one of ol' mel's conferences. or maybe it was really before that, but i remember distinctly watching weatoc reenacting at the m.i.t. student center the whole ritual of drug addiction an death that currently plagues many of america's cities. so najma, one of the group's sharpest, breaks out into a rap, singing of the evils where the bodies lay, coming at us like a searing siren at the end of an aesop's fable. i was enthralled. i had seen nothing like it after already five months at the mighty institute. here was art, telling us about the problems that are putting us in the ground too soon, and the artists living on the same block as those who are dying.

it all went by too fast. i didn't have the script, but i new that what i had just witnessed was truth. just as a toles comic will give us a glimpse of a larger political reality in one frame the way no harvard dossier ever can, so too did these youngsters from the other side of the river possess an ability to convey a message that the average salaried professor couldn't deliver after taking two years of our time.

soon after that performance i got heavy into a student taught course that explored indigenous ways of developing community. my own contribution was a series of studies in the oratorical tradition, particularly in the black community. my contention was that public speaking was an effective means of mobilizing groups of people in unity into action. a good speaker had a power to speak to and for a group's inner soul, letting unspoken truths ring out, like king on washington.

but what is a public speaking if not a type of performance? the student course took place during the spring of '90. by the following fall i rambled my way back to researching teen performing groups. i started first with the group that had first inspired the idea, but weatoc was just not having it. i soon learned that i was traveling in the wake of many an irresponsible researcher or journalist, who had heard a story, transmogrified it into a sometimes unrecognizable new shape, made a few bucks, then hit the road.

so a lot of these groups just weren't happening for me. so i had to adopt a new approach -- which was to call every group under the sun i heard about in the boston area that had ever done a play with teenagers in it, and then keep calling until i got an interview.

some how i ended up talking to eliot kaplan at the boston film and video foundation (a fellow new yorker at last!) and he told me about some video groups he was familiar with. well it wasn't quite performance, but the video groups did seem to fit some of my initial criteria for a good teen organization; and besides that thesis proposal was coming due real soon and ol' mary said she was tired of playing games.

after much persistence, i ended up with dozens of interviews with two video groups, a performance/video group, one full fledged performance group which did everything from rap to dance to theatre, and a one woman show.

if the poor reader finds my study somewhat eclectic, so much the better. i learned more in the process than i'll ever be able to set down on the pad, or into the keyboard. my only hope is that this work will provide those already in the field

with a broader context for their struggle, and that those sitting behind their desks will soon get cracking.

Sean Robin
Wally's
Summer of '91

table of contents

introduction

part one

This effort began first as a means of identifying, understanding and theorizing on indigenous organizations and institutions. So I begin with an explanation of the origin of these terms in the department of urban studies and planning at MIT.

indigenous planning

In the colonial period in world history, the term 'indigenous peoples' came to refer to the native population of a land, in contrast with a settling or colonizing population. In a strict sense, the indigenous populations in North America are the Native Peoples, the American Indians, since they had settled here long before the arrival of the first Africans and Europeans.

This relationship of a dominating to a subordinated population that prevailed during the European settlement of Africa, Asia and the Americas for several centuries, has come

to be a metaphor for relationships between racial minorities here in the United States and the dominant culture. Even in the post civil rights nineties, African American, Native, Latino and Asian American communities in this country by and large experience a cultural and economic oppression that recall the plight of colonized peoples.

Much to our surprise, a group of graduate students entering the Department of Urban Studies and Planning (D.U.S.P.) two years ago discovered that the current planning paradigms being taught today still reflected primarily Eurocentric, middle class ways of thinking, and as such were suspect as applicable to communities of color in the United States. We also learned that many of the recent practices of the planning profession could in fact be characterized as oppressive. The people to be planned <u>for</u> were assumed to have no valid opinions about their own futures that planners needed to take seriously. Missing was a sense that all peoples have distinct histories and traditions that must be respected by any professional coming from the outside.

Here again was the same theme of the missionary or colonizer, professing to know what was best for the people and then acting according to their personal or employer's sense of a public good. We saw many versions. According to one paradigm what was 'good' could be quantified, and decisions that would effect many people could be made 'objectively' by people working in offices who in fact lived <u>elsewhere</u>. According to another paradigm, the name of the

game was power and influence. Once you amassed it, you could do what you liked. According to another paradigm, even beauty was hopelessly abstracted and universalized from ancient European origins, and assumed to be aesthetically pleasing for all.

A group of five students organized a seminar to address areas we felt were lacking in the curriculum. We called the seminar 'issues in communities of color,' and set out to study cases we thought were exemplary of the kind of work we wished to engage in. We called the type of work we aspired to engage in 'indigenous planning' because we believed the main impulses for change in a community must emanate from within. The people to be effected by planning decisions would be the primary source of new ideas. In short, we believed people had a right to determine their own future. Our paradigm would explicitly be about a struggle for liberation, social equity and human development.

What we have been calling indigenous planning is (strange as it may seem) 'new' as a formal paradigm to be discussed, debated and researched in an academic setting. But the kind of liberation struggles we have begun to identify as 'planning efforts' are by no means new to the United States, or indeed the rest of the world. For the seminar we drew examples from the Civil Rights Movement, the United Farm Workers Union, a native school in South Dakota among other places. But it was not enough to study activity: we had to acknowledge that any of us at some point in our

careers would be outside of some community, and to be effective planners we would have to become students of culture and history. As an example, one student recounted to the rest of the group how the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II continues to have a profound effect on her community even today.

an emphasis on community

Communities are complex, multi-dimensional entities. Aside from race and ethnicity, people often identify strongly with their gender, socio-economic class, religious group or geographic location. And as alluded to above, communities can also be characterized by their unique history together. But there are more ways to define a community than we can count (and unfortunately, almost as many ways to form a basis for oppression). Perhaps a community exists whenever people believe it does.

I should say a word about this emphasis on community before describing the areas of research many of us set upon for our theses. I quote at length professor Mel King, who provided much of the moral (and academic) support for the development of our paradigm:

> The main purpose, the main value behind so much of our struggle past, future and present is to create 'community.' By that we mean the human

context in which people can live and feel nurtured, sustained, involved and stimulated. Community is the continual process of getting to know people, caring and sharing responsibility for the physical and spiritual condition of the living space...

People flourish in a more personal environment, their strengths can be cultivated, their weaknesses can be improved upon, with the support of neighbors who posses complementary skills and strengths. 'Community' counteracts the frustration, depersonalization and fragmentation which our current society forces on people.

'Community' is important for establishing a common bondedness, for creating a sense of identity, for maintaining and creating cultural continuity, for giving social expression to oneself as a part of a larger whole. 'community' promotes development beyond the immediate family, toward involvement in ever-widening breadths of community, city, state, nation, world, universe. 'Community' is the base from which people can begin to understand what else is going on in the world.

-from Chain of Change

We chose to emphasize community because of our own personal identifications as members of communities of color. One person remarked during the course of the seminar that we

are born into a struggle, and this is a collective struggle for the liberation of our peoples. A notion of people living in community can also be contrasted with highly individualistic notions that pervade industrialized nations.

I would add that the choice to think and work in terms of community is an admittedly subjective one, it is a value judgement, and part our common beliefs as student activists. For some it is such a part of who they have always been that they would deny they ever even made a 'choice,' in the same way that another chooses a career or a new purchase.

As such, no objective, rational explanation can be provided.

research in the indigenous tradition

Perhaps one of the most important things our paradigm did was bring to the attention of students the notion of exteriority: that the knowledge of any planner trained at the university was suspect as applicable to any given community, particularly to communities in which that student was not a member.

We hypothesized that if such practices emanating from the university were exterior to the average real community, each community must already have its own means and mannerisms for change and development. Such indigenous institutions, organizations and cultural traditions should be understood by the planner who would work with such a given community. The

planner would see her role as first harmonizing with indigenous, ongoing efforts, rather than displacing or imposing on existing people and their activity.

Some examples from the seminar were the oratory tradition in the Black and Chicano communities, the church in the Black community, and tribal schools in the American Indian community. Theses written during previous years have also included a study of the role of the church in the Puerto Rican community of Boston's South End, as well as the role that sports have played in the Black community of Boston's Roxbury.

After the completion of the seminar many of us saw our thesis as an opportunity to research other indigenous institutions and organizations in a systematic fashion.

o o o

We are not in search of a universalist theory. Any practice that claims to be transportable to all peoples is suspect. A planning education sensitive to the needs of various communities in the United States must in fact be highly idiosyncratic in nature. Such an education favors the case study method, where one studies specific communities at a particular time in their history. That way the student sees whatever 'lessons' there are to be learned emerging from their actual circumstances, in a very non-mysterious manner. The student and future practitioner will then be in a better

position to critically judge whether such lessons apply to other peoples.

When writing such case studies, there can be very few rules of thumb to answer questions like how much of a time period is relevant to an understanding of the community in question, how large are the geographic boundaries (if they even exist) of the group, how many individuals we must meet, etcetera. The writer is never excused from using critical judgement.

part ii: case studies of performance and media groups

The first section was intended to give the reader a history of the ideas that have informed my approach to the material. This section will give an exposition of the particular decisions I made in setting up my research design.

This thesis explores particular aspects of an area of activity called cultural empowerment. One of my working hypotheses has been that artistic expression is an effective means of human development. The choice to focus on performance groups was based on my own experience in dance, theatre and music. The video production groups came later in my research design. Many of the group dynamics I was interested in studying manifested themselves in the video groups, and perhaps because of their relative novelty these groups were more eager to share their work, so they too were

included in the study. The primary participants of all the groups were teenagers, and they were in fact my target populations.

In practice, setting an experimental design amounted to choosing the 'right' groups, and then deciding on the appropriate questions to ask.

I was very concerned with choosing groups that fit my own understanding of an indigenous organization. This meant several things:

-an explicit focus on a liberation agenda

-all the staff belong to the same community as the participants

-teenagers had a deciding voice in group goals, activities and decisions

In attempting to satisfy these criteria for an indigenous organization, I was quickly reminded that even 'indigenous' was an abstract ideal that had been developed first in the classroom. Nevertheless, I believe all the groups I chose were in some way indigenous.

I did not consider groups that were part of the public school system. This work does not make a direct comparison with the accomplishments (and failures!) of the public school system, as I was interested in covering a whole new domain of activity. With the exception perhaps of some of the community schools, most public (and private) education would obviously not be considered an indigenous effort.

hypothesis revealed

In additions to being indigenous, the groups obviously had to be performance or media groups. What I was concerned with foremost was that teenagers were developing some expressive ability. Whether this translated into a marketable skill was never a primary consideration as people often change careers many times in their lives. What I was more concerned with was that teenagers learn things that would impact the quality of their lives and those around them independently of whatever careers they later embarked on. During the interview process I would look specifically for positive self-esteem, leadership development, political awareness and activism, and of course community development. Locating groups where teenagers learned how to give voice to their experiences was my point of departure.

There is an interaction between group and individual development that I was particularly interested in studying. The group can mean solely the teen participants, it can be expanded to include the various audiences, or even a larger community where teenagers reside that is aware of teen performances and video broadcasts. The individual can mean a teen participant, which this study focuses on, but it can also mean the organization director, or the neighborhood cop, neither of whom are exempt from forces at play in collective art.

My hypothesis was that performance and media art would provide fertile ground for positive change on both the individual and collective levels. In particular, those who learned to articulate feelings and ideas would inevitably be more in control of their lives. And an environment that promoted creative expression in group form and in group forums would lead to positive change and the development of community.

research design: asking all the 'right' questions

How do you know a strong sense of community when you see it? What does a well developed person look like? What is positive change? I decided early on not to answer such questions in advance, but that these would be part of what I was seeking to uncover with my research.

Working according to our indigenous paradigm, I had to acknowledge from the beginning that each community, in this case communities of teenage performers and video producers, would know best what their current problems, issues and needs were. I could lay out very little from my 'laboratory' at MIT against which I could then proceed to compare reality outside. I was starting off outside; MIT was outside. I would have to get in.

The basics of my research design have already been laid out: I believed performance and video were effective means for youth empowerment. I had to select the groups that would

fit certain criteria of indigenous planning. What was left to discover was 1) How well do the groups work, or what is it that they accomplish? and 2) How do they accomplish what they accomplish? Questions like 'how well' or matters of 'positive social change' would ultimately have to be a synthesis of my own understanding of community and human development (self-esteem, leadership, expressiveness, creativity, political activism...) and what the teenagers and community leaders (the organization staff) thought. 'How things were accomplished' would likewise be a synthesis of my own observations and responses from interviews.

One of my own assumptions was that an effective group should be one that could engage and keep its teenage members. Even this would turn out to be a point of contention with at least one staff member.

So here are the basic areas/types of questions I asked about:

-- Why do you do ___? How did you first get involved in ___?

-- How long have you been with the group? Why are you still involved with ___?

-- What have you learned? How do you come up with new ___? -- Do you feel you've changed as a person?

-- What do you think are the most important issues (problems, needs, concerns) facing teenagers in your community today?

-- What do you think can/should be done about ___? Do you think that doing ___ has an effect on ___?

-- what do you plan on doing after ___?

Although these were the basic questions I used a highly improvisational style in all the interviews. Often I needed to establish a rapport first, and I let them ask me questions about my own research and background. I often varied the order of the questions depending on responses for the sake of the flow of the conversation. I also invented 'new' follow up questions on the spot whenever unanticipated but interesting ideas or feelings came up. I also tried to be consistent between between adult and teenage interviewees, asking basically the same questions.

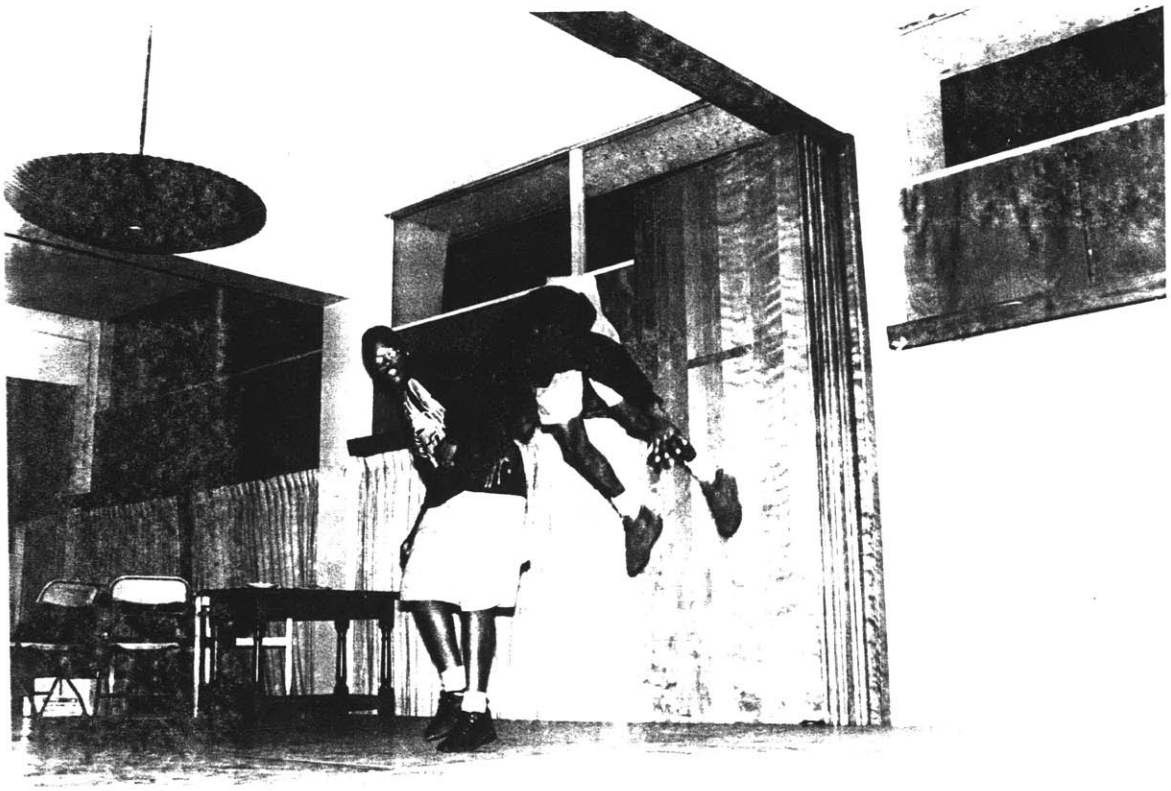
translations

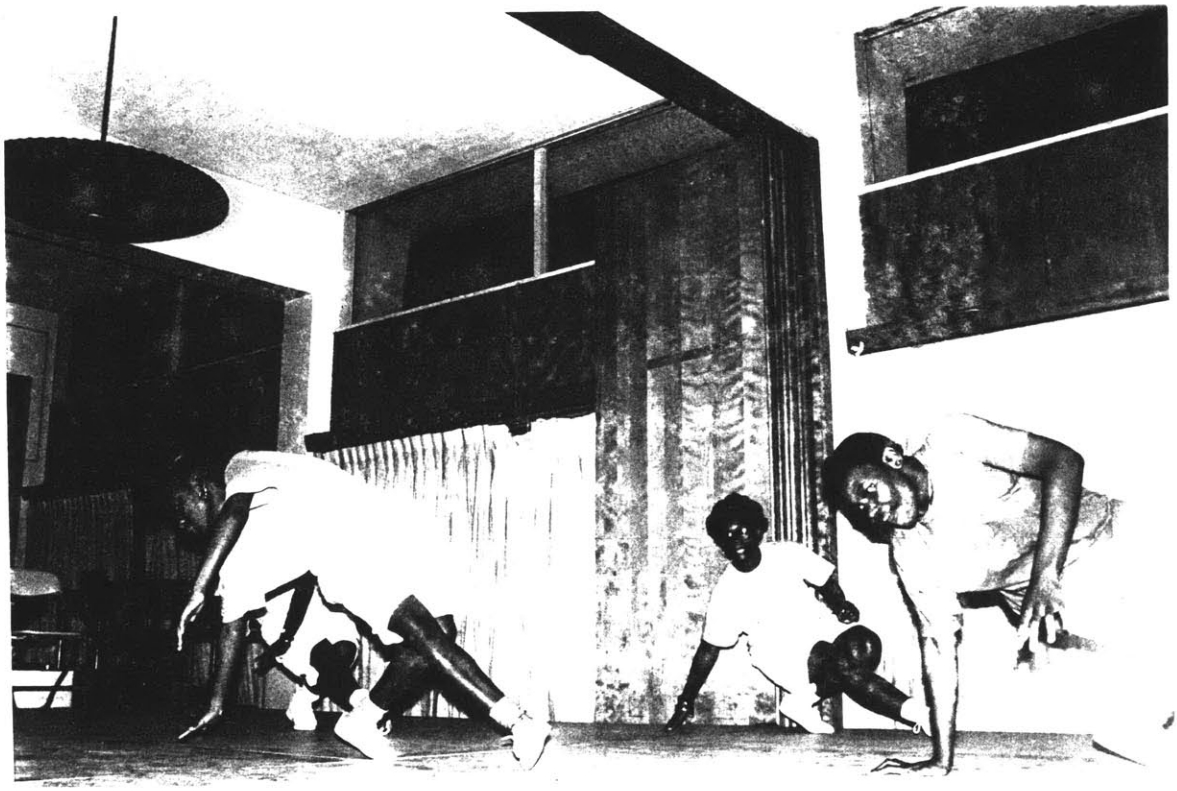
I had some misgivings about asking questions at all. Art is essentially a form of communication between artist and spectator. The form in this case is the play, the dance, the song or the video tape. There is a distinction to be made between what a teenage has learned, what she or he is able to communicate via an art form, and what she or he can verbalize in a conversation. One of the most extroverted performers I met was quite shy when I pulled out the pad and micro-recorder. I of course did attend some of the performances, view some of the video-tapes, and attend an occasional rehearsal, but unfortunately these more 'live' modes of

information gathering never became primary sources in this work. The interview format more obviously lends itself to academic research. Rather than try and interpret what the artists meant, how they had changed, or what they believe about issues of community development, all from a reading of their work, one can simply ask them directly. Neither method in itself is adequate, but a more ideal design would have more thoroughly integrated direct observation of performance, rehearsals and screenings.

{Library and bookstore research also became an important mode of discovery, but much of this occurred after the interviews with boston groups, and thus won't be discussed in this chapter.}

In addition, it should be noted that the form of my own end product is text and photos. A more experimental design that would be truer to the subject would also integrate performance and video into this report.





chapter 1

As the reader might expect, there is no pre-existing body of literature which discusses the uses of performance and video production to empower teenagers and their communities. My topic lies in the nexus of several seemingly disparate areas of study.

paulo freire and liberation pedagogy

I admit that part of what I was searching for in the groups I studied was a version of the political awakening I myself have experienced during my years as a student activist. I was thus concerned with locating groups that made teenagers aware of power inequities that had shaped their lives. Thus if a political education was one of the ingredients I would expect to find in "successful" performance and video groups, it seemed necessary to have an ongoing theory of this process.

The Brazilian educator Paulo Freire provides just such a theory. I would like to turn to his essay "Cultural Action and Conscientization" (The Politics of Education, Bergin and Garvey)

where he gives an exposition of the ideas most relavent to this work. Freire says about the essay:

'With specific reference to Latin America, I shall discuss the emergence of the masses into the political process in the Third World and analyze the levels of consciousness that characterize that emergence. Finally I shall discuss the nature and function of a truly liberating education in this period of historical transition.' [p. 67]

Granted my thesis is not about liberation struggles in Latin America. But I want to continue drawing a metaphor between oppressed communities in the United States, and Third World Countries whose economies are dependent on and subordinate to the economies of First World Countries. Indeed, as the line between dependent and dominant populations is much clearer in the Latin American case, the theory Freire develops provides people of color in the United States with an understanding of our own situation that might not otherwise be possible.

Freire begins with an explication of his term "conscientization.": "Only beings who can reflect upon the fact that they are determined are capable of freeing themselves. Their reflectiveness results not just in a vague and uncommitted awareness but in the exercise of a profoundly transforming action upon the determining reality. 'Consciousness of' and 'action upon' reality are, therefore, inseparable constituents of the transforming act by which men become beings of relations."

Let me put some of his concepts in city planning terms. Those of us who work in "indigenous planning" see planning as a process of community and <u>human</u> development. But we must ask, what does a

"developed" or "liberated" person look like? Such questions lead us to ask about the nature of humanity. In Freire's first book (Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Continuum) he posses the problem as on of the humanization of society (making society and people more human, in their natural state.)

In order to characterize (non-oppressed) humans, he contrasts us with animals. What distinguishes us from say horses and bees is that we are conscious beings: we are able to reflect and act upon our reality; a subject "is capable of transforming, of producing, of deciding, of creating, and of communicating himself." As these quotes imply, we won't be looking for a finished, "fully developed" state in people through our work, but we will be looking for a process whereby people establish a certain dynamic relationship with their reality. We have often characterized this relationship as one where they are in control, whereas Freire describes the subject as one who can will changes (transform), produce, make decisions, create and communicate.

If conscientization, like liberation and development, are processes, then Freire postulates that people can experience various "levels of consciousness," throughout this process. Such levels cannot be said to be uniquely individual manifestations; they are in fact a product of cultural-historical conditioning. That is to say, an individual's level of consciousness will be a product of larger structural relationships between groups, cultures, and even nations throughout time. Freire is concerned with the Third World vis a vis the First, whereas we are concerned in the "metropolises" with areas Freire refers to as "areas of silence", as opposed to those who "have

voice." [Note that even his use of the metaphor of voice, or sound, and speach for power seems to justify my preoccupation with communication via performance and video.]

Freire calls Latin American societies closed, dependent and silent. He characterizes them, among other things, by a precarious and selective educational system whose schools are an instrument of maintaining the status quo; by high percentages of illiteracy and disease (which he describes as diseases of underdevelopment and dependency); by alarming rates of infant mortality; by a low life expectancy; and by a high rate of crime. And he names a mode of consciousness to correspond to people living under these highly unfavorable social conditions: the semi-intransitive consciousness.

If one puts in the names aids and drug addiction for "disease" one has a fairly close description of many of the problems facing urban communities of color in the United States today. What's different than the average mainstream discussion on "ghetto life" is such discussions name these areas as sources of their own plights, whereas Freire makes explicit a <u>relationship of dominator to oppressed</u> to account for such adverse living conditions. In any event, if his analysis of Latin America is correct, we would also expect to find a "semi-transitive consciousness" among people of color in the United States.

In this state "the only data the dominated consciousness grasps are the data that lie within the orbit of its lived experience. This mode of consciousness cannot objectify the facts and problematical situations of daily life...Lacking structural perception, men attribute the sources of..facts and [problematical] situations in their lives

either to some superreality or to something within themselves." In other words, lacking an ability to perceive larger political relationships and power inequities, the oppressed may come to believe they deserve their miserable plight, and that they are somehow fundamentally responsible for their condition.

Freire goes on to explain that in their "emergence from silence" Third World Peoples pass through another state: the naive transitive consciousness. People "begin to be able to distinguish what before was not clearly outlined" about their "objective existence in society." They begin to be able, for instance, to put pressure on the power elites. The ultimate state is the critical consciousness.

I have given a brief exposition of Freire's levels of consciousness for several reasons. I was fascinated by the notion that there are mind states which correspond to oppression. Freire implies that the oppressed have an inability to <u>perceive</u> objective reality. Not only are they dumb, but they are deaf and blind as well. These metaphors of sight and sound suggest that one of the keys to liberation is an ability to articulate one's reality. Thus if there is any real connection between this metaphor and actuality, one would expect the performing and media artist, both trained to communicate reality in all its <u>subjectivity</u> to be "free" thinkers, if not liberated souls.

<u>a parallel development in theatre</u>

It's one thing to have a theory developed from working with Brazilian peasants and <u>believe</u> it also describes the reality in this

country and suggests certain methods of work, it's another thing entirely to find a similar theory emerging from an African American performance group.

When I began my literature review, I wondered if there were other people who believed performance could be a tool used to liberate oppressed groups. I was aware that the sixties had been a time of great cultural pride as well as artistic experimentation, so that's where I expected to find a performance theory. The National Black Theatre, founded in Harlem in 1966 by Barbara Ann Teers, provides such a theory. In the article "the NBT: The Sun People of 125th Street" (The Theatre of Black Americans, Applause) Jessica B. Harris describes the "black art standard" the NBT developed:

Our art standard requires that all theatrical presentations, be they dramatic plays, musicals, rituals, revivals, etc., must:

1) Raise the level of consciousness through liberating the spirits and strengthening the minds of its people.

2) Be political, i.e,. must deal in a positive manner with the existing conditions of oppression.

3) In some ways educate, i.e., "educate to bring out that which is already within." Give knowledge and truth.

4) Clarify issues, i.e. enlighten the participants as to why so many negative conditions and images exist in their community in order to eliminate the negative condition and strengthen the positive condition.

5) Lastly, it must entertain. [p. 284]

In Black Theatre in the 1960s and 1970s (Greenwood Press) Mance Williams discusses the participants of this theatre: "NBT's peculiar theatrical performance technology requires a highly specialized actor-training. This training program is actually a process, however. The first stage of the process is a form of deprogramming...The specific intention is to return Blacks to their spiritual base so they can rediscover their individual identities and their collective identity. To accomplish this, each actor must first comprehend, then pass through, five circles of evolution. The levels are more or less successive steps in the development of a "liberator." [NBT's term for an actor] [p. 22]

The "liberators" of the National Black Theatre seem to agree with Freire that oppressive social relations generate corresponding mental states. The participants of this theatre group must be "deprogrammed" by passing through various stages. What the NBT adds to the Freire analysis is a specific means for an education for liberation. This means is the dramatic play, the musical, the revival, etcetera. In other words, the African American community will be liberated by means of performance.

The NBT reminds us that we are concerned with the development of community. Williams writes of a collective as well as an individual identity. In this chapter Freire introduced the idea that relationships matter in understanding development, but he referred primarily to antagonistic ones between groups or nations. The next piece in our theoretic mosaic deals with the development of self through relationships that are not necessarily antagonistic.

carol gilligan's theory of voice and adolescent development

In "Exit-Voice Dilemmas in Adolescent Development" (Development, Democracy, and the Art of Trespassing, University of Notre Dame Press) Carol Gilligan places voice in the context of adolescent development.

Freire's conception of voice refers to an ability to have a deciding say in one's economic processes and decisions. He is referring to the ability for Latin American nations to be self determining entities. We would extend his argument and make a claim for the right of communities of color in the United States to determine their own economic, cultural, political and social destinies. Our concern with cultivating a teenage voice, their ability to articulate their own experiences and vision through art, thus becomes part of a struggle for communities of color to determine their own future.

Such a struggle is inherently contradictory, as the life of any community is hopelessly intertwined with the national economy and social fabric. Carol Gilligan helps give perspective to this contradiction, by giving an account of voice as an integral part of the development of identity. For her, voicing dissent and difference are not precursors to autonomy and independence. They are a means of establishing a new distance within a relationship, while maintaining that relationship.

Gilligan sees voice as "the attempt to change rather than escape from objectionable situations." She is critiquing what she sees as the male of norm of independence as the healthy direction adolescent

development must take. What she objects to is the notion that exiting from situations of inequality is the best and only solution to them. She writes of a female point of view that values attachment in human relations, and sees independence as commingling with dependence as adolescents grow into adulthood: "Identity is formed through the gaining of perspective and known through the experience of engagement with different points of view.

According to this view, a sense of self identity includes a series of attachments, ongoing relationships with others, where voice is the mediating force. Dysfunctional relationships are those where "there is a wall up" between parties. An example is given of a young girl whose mother is unable to receive her point of view. The girl's response was an intense search for a way to let her voice come through.

The ideal response to this blockage is thus not detachment or separation but finding ways to transform the relationship in order to sustain it. Instead of the wall we are offered the image of the strain or sieve as a way of maintaining a connection through a barrier.

The reciprocal form of speaking is listening. Gilligan describes a female ethics of caring as entailing a willingness "to be there," "to listen," and "to understand." For her care is thus founded in "an ability to perceive people in their own terms and to respond to need." And "the willingness and the ability to care become a source of empowerment and a standard of self evaluation."

Gilligan's perspective offers something new to our notions of human development. Freire is concerned with people's discovery of their uniquely human capacity to produce and create, while

reflecting on their work. To him dependency is a circumstance that exists in the Third World that inhibits people from realizing their human potential. We might think that the antidote to these oppressive power relations was complete independence and autonomy. However Gilligan challenges the notion that separation is the unique and natural solution to silence and inequality. She suggests that dependence and independence are not opposites, at least in adolescent development. Giving and receiving voice and perspective are part of an ethics of caring, and continued attachment, which offer an alternative to separation. She sees the transformation of relationships to allow for difference and distance as an integral part of the development of self, and as a source of strength for the individual.

I do not know to what extent adolescent development can provide a model for relationships between nations, or between individual communities and the larger society, but Gilligan's analysis is important because it gives us a better understanding of the potential of voice. Voice is not only what has been denied oppressed groups, but giving voice may also offer the means of transforming while maintaining relationships.

the video groups

chapter 2

background

I interviewed two video groups for this study: Risin' to the Top, based in two Cambridge housing projects just outside the MIT campus, and The Video Club, based at the Roxbury Boys and Girls Club in Boston. I became aware of various video projects involving teenagers in the Boston area during my research. Many are one shot deals, where a professional video people come in and do a tape with a teenage group. In such cases teenagers do not learn production skills. There are also public schools who now offer video classes to students. After the course is over, students do not necessarily have access to equipment and the staff.

The groups I chose were notable first because of their long term status in the community. Both have existed for approximately two years, and the majority of current members had been with the groups from the beginning. Neither group was associated with a public school. The Cambridge group is run out of a community arts center, which provides a variety of services for teenagers and kids living in the projects, ranging from arts and crafts to lunch and

daycare. The Roxbury group is run out of a Boys and Girls Club, which also has sports facilities and sponsors social events for the community.

A second notable feature of these groups was the relative autonomy they afforded the teen participants. In both cases teenagers now had the deciding voice in topics covered in their videos, as well as in the way they were covered. In one group, the original director had since left, and the new director said she saw her primary role not to supervise those already trained, but rather to focus on starting a new program that would train people without production skills.

The topics covered ranged from teenagers and jobs to teen pregnancy and even a teen point of view on the Golf War. Topics are always chosen based on what participants interests as well as what they deem other teens in the community want to know about. The Cambridge group broadcasts a monthly on the local community access station, while the Roxbury group produces music-video length shorts that are distributed by friends and staff.

I conducted ten interviews of staff and participants. All four participants of the Roxbury group were interviewed, while only about half of the participants of the Cambridge groups were interviewed. Sampling was based purely on who was available and willing to be interviewed. This chapter focuses primarily on the results from the teen interviews.

why do teenagers join video groups?

The surprising response to this question was almost unanimously: "because there was nothin' else to do." None of the participants mentioned a prior interest in video. Most of the Cambridge teenagers had been members of a photography class that became a video group. In both cases, the impetus to form a video group came from an adult staff who had an interest and prior training in video.

Once in the groups however, the participants all seemed to develop a fondness for making videos that won't be easily shook in the future. When I asked the question, "why are you still in the group?" some of the responses i got were:

-I like the fact that we can get our point across through video

-because every time you learn something new

-I just like it, I like playing with my hands, breaking things apart, putting them back together, and video is like the same thing except you put things together as in different clips of film, or as in making a commercial

In many of the interviews there was a clear sense of a relationship developing between the teenagers and their activity. Not only in time did most of the teenagers develop a personal attachment to making videos, but some also expressed a sense of a larger importance to doing a kind of work that previously they knew nothing about. One girl said:

-When I started off it was a fun thing, but now it's gotten more serious...we had fun learning <u>how</u> to do video, <u>how</u> to take on the camera, how to edit; now we know how, I'm not saying it's not fun anymore, but it's more getting a little bit more out of it, or trying to

show someone else something, trying to help someone else find out something...we try to voice the opinion of our peers...

This teen expresses not only a new attachment, but also a growing sense of responsibility to the work she does.

All of this suggests that the forming of new indigenous video groups will not come about spontaneously from organized teenagers. If the outcome of these two experiences are judged to be desirable, they may only be repeated on the initiative of other committed adults.

what do teenagers get out of their involvement in video groups? what do they learn and how do they change?

I tried to get a sense of the developmental process participants in the two groups experienced.

Many of the interviews supported my hypothesis that there would be a positive effect on self-esteem. One person said:

-I guess I could say, they gave me more self-confidence in myself...I use to be real quiet and shy, and then when I got into this group it kind of builds up your self-esteem, they encourage you to do things and really build you up.

Another person said:

-It helps you to be free, because a lot of people, like me, I can speak better than I write. If I wanted to I could have a tape and just speak apeak speak speak speak, but I couldn't write everything...so with video, you can just be yourself.

There seems to be several dimensions the teenagers' involvement in the groups that builds their self-esteem. The most

basic level is that they are taught to do something, sometimes as technical as running a camera, then they are asked to do it repeatedly, and then they are rewarded for doing it. This builds confidence: teenagers can come away from the experience saying: "I know how to do something well." One person said:

-people respect me for the things I have to hook up.

Another made explicit how the way she saw her own abilities had changed:

-yeah it made a big difference...bein' in the group and bein' with other people, and learning new skills and things has just made it seem like.. well things that I wanted to do before doesn't seem as hard as they were.

This is an opportunity not always afforded in the school system, where students are often only rewarded for high achievement on standardized tests. Such tests privilege the written form of communication, whereas video groups allow for other forms of expression: oral, as in the ideas expressed in meetings or during interviews, and visual, as in what teenagers chose to shoot. And then there are all the creative possibilities of expression afforded by the combining of voice, music, image and text...

Self-esteem is also built by peer support (positive peer pressure). In one group, in order to have an idea made into a video, a teenager presents it to the group in one of the weekly meetings. Teenagers and staff discuss it and ultimately vote. Usually the teenager gets her idea produced. She sees other people researching her idea, working the cameras and conducting interviews for her. One person said:

-It made me more in control of other people [than]...I ever was...When you speak, people listen, and you're in their respect.

There were also group dynamics at work that fostered self-esteem in individual members, where the 'group' in question was not just the video organization, but also the larger community in which participants lived, and which watched the videos and gave the teenagers feedback.

Self-esteem however seems to be too weak a term to describe some of the development that occurred. Self-esteem, positive self-image, or self-confidence are all individual characteristics or descriptives. What was in fact happening was that a small community was developing, where relationships mattered a great deal. And one thing that fostered this development was communication. One person contrasted her experience in the video group with school:

-School is just, the teachers talk, and you listen; I mean it's not really communication. They say whatever, and that's what you gotta know. But here, you share your knowledge: whatever you know, you show someone else, and whatever they know they'll show you.

There is also developed a sense of belonging and purpose. I asked one person why she came to the video group each week, instead of hanging out on the streets:

-Because here I feel like I'm a part of somethin', you feel like you're important, you've got somethin' to do, and on the streets it's rough.

Many people described their group as a kind of family:

-It made me feel like if I was in a family, cause when you speak, people listen, and you're in their respect.

So a sense of belonging to a community was established when teenagers where allowed to express themselves freely, and when their ideas were taken seriously by their peers, and presumedly by the staff as well.

Another important aspect of their development was teenagers learning that they could make a difference. To me this is the essence of political empowerment, the discovery that your actions can have significant (positive) impact on those around you. And it is the opposite of the "culture of despair" that currently reigns in many progressive circles.

Soon after the first broadcasts, students got feedback which told them that people do indeed watch their shows, and also sometimes have strong reactions to their point of views. One show that criticized police and security guards in the high school led to angry phone calls and letters in the local newspaper. Another show that depicted pregnant teenagers in a not-so-very-negative light also angered some adults.

The teenage participants became use to getting stopped in the halls of their school by friends and strangers to be complimented on the last show, or to be asked questions about the next.

One teenager commented about the impact their work can have:

-I can see how we can change it, how we can change the opinion of our peers.

Of course the most obvious things the teens learned was how to produce video, by participating in every step from when a person first gets an idea for a new tape to the actual broadcast. One person described this process well:

-I learned that making a film or a movie or a video is hard work! I didn't know that before, I thought you just shoot a film, run it out, you just put it on the screen for everyone to see, I didn't know you had to go through it and edit it, and clip it, see what you want, see what you don't want; right camera, if you're in the studio: right lighting. I didn't know it was all: step step step.

When this person spoke not only did I get a sense he had a new appreciate for film and video, but also a sense of awe that he was able to get through the entire elaborate process himself. Another teenager told me about how now she is able to catch all the "mistakes" the professionals make when she watches broadcast television.

There is of course more they learned than I've listed here, particularly relating to the subject matter of the shows they did, but I will address them below. I will conclude this section by quoting the director of one of the programs, as she was able to observe things that could not come out in an interview with the teenagers:

-They're developing life skills. Discipline. Believing in themselves. They learn a little bit about the things they do the shows about. They learn how to work together in a group...everyone in the group isn't necessarily someone they're going to hang out with outside the group...so there's learning in terms of how to work with

people...that are not necessarily your friends, and how to be productive and get something out of it for yourself.

what are the most pressing issues for teenagers today?

Research within the "indigenous paradigm" I wanted to get a sense from teenagers as to what their most important issues where, rather than taking the teenage world according to the academic literature and mainstream media. As the reader may well know, such media stresses the pathology of the modern teenager. According to the typical mainstream profile, the average male is a drug attic, a rapist and a killer. All the females are pregnant or already have children.

Not surprisingly, the teen point of view that emerged from my interviews was quite different than that of the mainstream press. It was also somewhat more sophisticated than the simplistic analysis that underlies the typical press article. Many teenagers involved in video groups had a broad understanding of economic problems that sometimes culminated in violence and drug activity.

A typical response to what are the problems for youth (also the same response offered as to why the participants joined the video clubs) was that there's not enough to do. Teenagers attributed this to the closing down of teen activity centers, to unemployment among teens (one person I interviewed had returned to the video group after getting laid off), and even to the budget cuts. More than one teenager made a link between economic problems and the choice to sell drugs:

-I don't think that certain communities have enough for kids to do, so they have to find things to do. I think they should help the families that need the money, 'cause there's some families out there that the mother knows that their son is selling drugs, but they need the money: to eat, for clothes, for stuff like that. I think that's wrong. I think the community should do some thing else: giving them money, giving the mothers and fathers jobs, to help them support their family.

Sometimes anger was expressed against the community for failing individual families and all teenagers. Other times anger was expressed against the government:

-I think the government for one should stop wast' so much money buildin' stuff for war when there's trouble right here at home. 'cause they're spending so much money building a missile and stuff like that when they could be using that money for books and stuff for school, 'cause most of the schools, they have shabby old books and stuff. They could use the money for much better things, but I guess they really don't care about kids.

This articulate teenager was very clear about where she felt government priorities were. And she went on to make explicit the effect such priorities have in her own community. I asked her where should the money go:

-They should start with the schools, because if you don't have a good education you're not going anywhere...you don't want to sit in a classroom..broken desk..no books...you'd rather be outside, that's what I'd rather do. They should start with school. If they really

took care of the schools, then they'll see that kids'll change, kids'll really change.

Such a mixture of frustration, resentment and hope characterizes many of this generation of youth. They refuse to believe the simple analysis offered by the mainstream press, and have had the opportunity to develop an alternative point of view with their media work.

Drugs and gang violence were indeed mentioned as problems teenagers face, but it was always linked to irresponsible (lack of) activity on the part of adults. One teenager said straight out:

-They [adults] let the problem grow too big.

The picture emerges of a neglected generation. Teenagers also experience fears about the "streets." Most participants were quite grateful to the video programs to keep off the streets and out of trouble. But rather than having fear of a single violent attack, they had more concernes for their long-term success in life: what would become of them? Would they have control of themselves? Could they trust themselves to make intelligent life choices if left to their peers on "the streets?"

what solutions to today's problems do teenagers in video propose?

I encountered virtually no apathy among teenagers about society. Most were quite articulate about problems and had definite ideas about what more the government or their community could be doing to improve things for teenagers and others. As mentioned

above, they thought more money should be spent on schools, and on activities similar to the centers that had sponsored their video programs. Most teenagers I interviewed saw their video programs as having had a positive impact on their own lives. As one teenager put it:

-In this group you get a lot of privileges, a lot of opportunities, a lot of knowledge and skills...[it's] something better to do than nothing at all, getting into trouble, [it] keeps you occupied..and it's fun to do..if you don't know much about video or anything else, this is a great way to learn, if you want [to think] about your future, this is a good place to start.

I would like to highlight several aspects of the video program this person mentioned. First, as discussed above, one of the benefits of these types of groups is simply <u>that it keeps teenagers occupied</u>. Secondly, not only do they find video interesting over the long term as an activity, but this person said <u>it's fun to do</u>, that is, she actually <u>enjoys</u> it. The pleasure people get from their work should not be overlooked. In community development we must be concerned not just with maintaining minimum standards, but also *quality of life*. The concerns of teenagers go beyond fear of getting involved with drugs or getting shot. They want to enjoy life too. Planners and community leaders must be concerned with more than just providing alternatives to a life of crime. With or without these types of programs, I believe many teens would not choose violence anyway.

The third aspect I wanted to highlight was how this teenager has begun to think and plan for her future. Many of the teens I interviewed believed that those of their peers who currently choose

destructive activities and life-styles have simply not developed an ability to think beyond today.

I believe there are several aspects of these video programs that encourage teenagers to plan for their future. One is the research people do on social issues. Teenagers learn to follow long term patterns. For example, one group did a show on teenage drop-outs, and another on young moms, and follow-up work was done a year later. The director was convinced that subsequently the teens in her group would think twice about having a child now or leaving school. These would be seen as choices having long-term life impacts, rather than simple whimsical actions.

Second, the teenagers experience a nurturing, creative environment, and they like it. This raises their expectations of what life can be like, and makes them want to get more out of it.

Third, teenagers involved in these programs often get to meet professionals engaged in the same activity, or they begin to identify with professional media people they know of. One person said:

-Spike Lee, he's totally like we are.

He also spoke critically of Ted Koppel. Such identification means teenagers have a vision of themselves living that kind of professional lifestyle in the future. They soon develop a sense that what they are learning could prove to be very important in their lives, a feeling teenagers often do not have about their public school education.

a teen voice

As I have suggested above, much of the work these groups do transcends problem solving. If anything, keeping out of trouble is a by product of a more important activity these teens feel committed to, which is namely expressing the voice of their peers. And I always got a sense from those I interviewed, that even when they covered topics identical to those of the main stream press, what they said was quite distinct.

-Kids we always see stuff different than most adults would. We have our opinion, they have theirs.

There was clear resentment against the kind of bad press adults have given teenagers in recent times. Teenagers now feel a need to undo the damage and encourage their peers:

-There are stereotypes, like people who live in the projects, and when people see us in the projects they're like, "yeah they do drugs." This was our way of showing people how we feel about things, how we live our lives...We're trying to get a message across that teens can do something other than what adults think of us.

Many people were basically saying:

-See look at me! I don't do drugs! I'm not shooting up people! And I have a point of view about the world too! Why don't you listen!

The media becomes a vital way of being heard, for groups to express their view of the world and to shape their own images of themselves. And groups didn't limit themselves to covering local events. In one of the most striking examples of a teen point of view that diverged from main stream media, one group did a documentary

on teen reactions to the Golf War. I asked two of the teen producers how what they did was different:

-the media always just does things to make it seem glamorous, or they do something to make it look bad.

specifically about the war, what was in that video that's different than anything you would see on the six o' clock news?

-'cause in our video, it's like how people feel, and in the news it's just facts, statistics, what happened..

-about the war..

-yeah that's what I mean: how people feel about the war, like people talkin' about it, on the news it's just facts right? "people died, this gonna happen today, they had a meeting such and such.." There's no feeling about it.

-why is it important to put in feeling?

-cause when they went to war [the government] I don't think they really thought. I'm sure they say they thought about people's feelings and all that they went over there, but you wanna know how people feel about people didn't wanna be over there, and we just wanted to let people know that.

The voice she is calling for is quite a subjective one. This teenager is arguing that you cannot have an impersonal coverage of events like the nation going to war. Her own point of view has been quite politicized by the research she had to do, research with culminated in a sense of urgency to let others know.

The teen voice often called for the allowance of subjectivity, a subjectivity that was non-judgemental, not condemning of others who held a different point of view. The teenagers often stressed that

they weren't trying to tell anyone how to think or who to be (an attitude they had no doubt experienced all too often from adults.)

-we feel like what we're doing helps teenagers because it's not someone older than them, telling someone what they should do and shouldn't do. And what we do, we do it in a way so you can have your own opinion. We don't do nuthin' to make you say, "oh, I don't like this person, because on this show they said this or that." We do it in a way so you can have your own opinion.

Perhaps the issue where the teen point of view differed the most from that of adults and their media is that of teen pregnancy. Several adults called up one group to complain about a teen show that covered this topic. They were upset because the show did not outright condemn teen parents, but actually depicted parenting as an o.k. choice for some young people. Adults of course saw the show as encouraging more teenagers to have babies. As one teen put it:

-I think it is o.k. for a teenager to have a child, it's nothing wrong, only if they can handle it...

-What did you think when you saw that show? Did you think that most women were handling it well, having a child? Was it a good time for them? Is that what they said?

-They didn't say nuthin' like that. They just said they loved what they created.

Missing from the show was the usual sense of pathology and condemnation usually present in the coverage of this topic, nor was there a prevalence of the shame on the part of the mothers one might expect to encounter. The show was life affirming. Sometimes the father was present, sometimes not, but either way the mother

would persevere. To me this was a model of a show where teens talked about themselves on their own terms. They spoke with an honesty and an ease I've rarely witnessed on the networks. It was teen video at its best.

performance groups

chapter 3

background

There were two basic types of performance groups I came across in my research. One focuses on a particular issue or set of issues, often health related. For instance a number of health clinics sponsor groups where teenagers are trained in both acting skills and health issues. Teenagers then improvise their own skits on the various issues, and then they tour around to various schools, churches and community centers presenting these skits. The skits usually end with a question and answer session, where audience members can ask questions of the actors, who remain in character. Adult health "experts" are also sometimes on hand for the tough or technical questions, and sometimes literature is also distributed. The main purpose behind (the funding of) these groups is to "get the word out" to teenagers on a certain issue such as AIDS.

The other type of group does not necessarily have a particular message. They produce the traditional entertainment revue. The acts can consist of theatre skits, dance numbers, singing and rapping.

"Issues groups" tend to be the larger of the two types, having on the average from eight to a dozen participants. As there is a heavy education/informational component in the final presentations, there is a stress on dialogue with staff and adult "experts" during the preparation time.

The entertainment variety groups often split off into various "posses": groups of three or four teens who write their own raps, or choreograph their own dances. Final presentations may combine the different trios, with hip hop dancers performing while a posse raps. The total group may have two dozen or more teens involved in some fashion or other, with constant open enrollment. Issues groups tend to close off membership after an initial round of auditions.

I attended performances of approximately a half dozen groups during my research, but only conducted systematic interviews with two: Haitian Teens Confront Aids and Dreamers Inc. Haitian Teens Confront Aids is sponsored by the larger group Partners in Health. The purpose of both Partners and Haitian Teens is to slow the spread of AIDS and to combat discrimination. Partners has as its aim to transfer the latest U.S. technology to Haiti to combat AIDS. Haitian Teens seeks to educate Haitian American teens on issues of AIDS prevention using peer leaders. Teenagers were officially "employed" by the agency and got paid for their work. They met regularly once a week, and more often before an upcoming performance. All the staff were Haitian, and the group also consulted with medical experts and professional Haitian artists. I interviewed four teenagers. Sampling was based on those who volunteered, who tended to be the four with the group the longest, and who would soon be leaving.

Most of this chapter will focus on information from the interviews with this group, because the interviews were the most systematic and in depth, and also because of the group's primary social focus.

Dreamers Inc. is an entertainment oriented group, based in Cambridge, but which has members from all over Boston, and even a few suburban towns in Massachusetts. What's interesting about the group membership is not only are there people from a variety of racial and class backgrounds, but members are permitted who are not necessarily teenagers. In essence participants are never forced to "graduate." On the other hand, only some of the most polished artists are actually paid for performances. Only the drama group takes up explicitly social themes, and only on occasion. For the annual show "La Faire" the group does light comedy. The group has also produced a moving docu-drama on video, written by one of the staff called "Now He's Gone" which is a moving of a community's reaction to the death of a teenager due to gang violence. I did two group interviews and two individual interviews of members of Dreamers inc.

why do teenagers get involved in performance groups?

All the people I interviewed had a prior interest in acting, singing or dance. This contrasts with the video groups, where participants had very little prior interest or knowledge. Many of the participants also had prior performance experience, and saw these groups as a way to perfect or continue practicing their craft. Dreamers was unique in that it allowed someone who had an interest in one type of performing art to audition and then later

switch to a different type. Both groups did recruiting, but word of mouth was an important way participants learned. Haitian Teens sent people into the local high schools.

All of the teens I interviewed in the health group were surprised to learn about the heavy emphasis on AIDS:

-and then they talk about AIDS AIDS AIDS all the time, and then we get tired with that, and then I say, "Oh man, we on vacation and then they are talking about AIDS all the time. We have to write things about AIDS, my goodness!" And then everybody was mad!

It is doubtful wether any of these teenagers would have joined the group if they had know in advance the extent of the focus on AIDS, and one person said he didn't think his parents would have allowed him. But as was also the case with the video groups, the participants soon developed a passion for the true content of the program. I was indeed struck by the devotion all the teens expressed for educating their peers about AIDS prevention, as well as the compassion they expressed for people with AIDS. Finally they all believed they had a personal investment in knowing about the disease:

-why did you stay in the group [when you learned it wasn't about only acting and singing...

-cause it was interesting too. That's why. Cause you have to know some of the things. Cause I didn't know how to protect myself, I didn't know lots of things about AIDS. I learned it here in this group.

-so why are you in the group now?

-because I want to learn more about AIDS, and about other things too. And then I want to teach other people what I learned in this group.

what do teenagers get out of their involvement in performance groups? what do they learn and how do they change?

It seems that one of the most important things teenagers get from their involvement in the health group is a reaffirmation of their cultural identity. This was a unique aspect of a group where everyone was of the same nationality. People complained of negative stereotyping of Haitians in school, and of people who would deny their heritage when asked what they were. This was illustrated in a video made after one of their plays, where a Haitian cabdriver tells another that he always tells people he's something else. The cabdriver is than confronted by his son who overhears and corrects him.

As a testimony of the effectiveness of art to empower people, one of the participants related the story of a culture show she was involved at her high school:

-It was so powerful! A lot of people was like, "oh you guys were great, and that was good!" So a lot of the kids that didn't want to say they were Haitian, the're like: "Oh I'm Haitian!"

In addition to an affirmation of their cultural heritage, most of the participants seemed to go through a profound transformation with the group, in which they became more expressive and bonded with the group:

-[I learned to] show my feelings, express my feelings toward group or people...sharing love with others..

People seemed to describe an actual personality change, where they went from an introverted stated closed within themselves, to feeling like part of a larger community:

-I was kind of rough people [person]; people who kind of, you know, I don't play with other people, I don't laugh; like a sad people; so now I'm kind of {laughs as she speaks} sweet people...

And another person:

-I was kind of selfish actually, you know, everything for me. I didn't want to get involved, I didn't really have friends at all, I always wanted to stay at home...I didn't really have a happy life, you know, miserable... but now, that's changed because I'm not selfish anymore--I learned to share about my life, and talk about what's going on with me, share stuff, everything I have, share with them everything...

People clearly learned to reach out to others, to care. They all described the group as a kind of family. If this isn't community development, I don't know what is.

-[I learned] how to live with a lot of people, because basically we live like family. I just learned to know how to accept people around me and to just have a friendship between us.

Another important part of the learning was the development of a new compassion for people with AIDS:

-Well I've really learned a lot, like at first I didn't even know, because if somebody told me you have AIDS, I wouldn't even talk to you, I wouldn't even look at you...I basically learned how you can

talk to somebody who have AIDS, and just not tell the person, "Oh you have AIDS! Don't talk to me!" However the person got AIDS, whatever he did, [I learned] just to really always talk to person because the person gonna die...

So people learned to extend themselves not just to those in the training group, but to others beyond. What they were in fact learning was leadership.

There were clear parallels between the learning that took place here and what other teenagers got out of being in the video groups. Participants were empowered in the sense that they believed they could make a difference in the lives of their peers. There was an urgency and the sense of a mission in their voices as they responded to my questions about why studying and teaching about AIDS was so important:

-[about safe sex] they have to know for themselves too, like I know!

-I've learned about AIDS; I didn't know...people with AIDS, what do they actually think, and what they think of us, and how we should think about them, and how can we help them, so that we can make them feel more comfortable around us and around other people, and how we can also use our talents to teach other people about AIDS, and how to make them feel more comfortable about the issue about AIDS.

what are the most pressing issues for teenagers today?

The responses from the performance health group varied substantially from those given by the teens involved in the video groups. Two explanations come to mind, each of which I believe has some truth to it. One is that teenagers in the Haitian community face a substantially different set of problems than other urban teenagers. The other is that the group activity, health education versus video documentary, has substantial influence on the participants' view of reality.

All four of the Haitian teens I interviewed mentioned Haitian identity as a big issue among teenagers today. One of the key concerns had to to with pride: wether someone would admit to their nationality, and would they be ashamed to speak Creole in public. Three of the teens had lived in this country for three years or less, so it's not surprising that they are experiencing conflicts of cultural identity. For two of the people I interviewed, they said they had been proud to be Haitian before joining Partners in Health. The group seemed to be a sight were such issues already working under the surface for these teens got aired publicly in a supportive environment. This was also true for the one person I interviewed who had moved to the States when he was eight, although for him I sensed the discussions met deeper emotional needs he had to have friends of a similar background.

The next most important issue mentioned, judging by how frequently it was cited, was parents: issue of communicating with them and getting them to trust teenagers to do activities on their own after school. Three people mentioned such problems. In contrast, none of the video people mentioned parents as a problem.

The only comment that echoed with what the video people said was one teen who remarked how surprised parents seemed to see them perform well. The video people had complained about the bad image they had in the eyes of adults. Probably this emphasis on issues with parents unique to Haitian teenagers results from the difference between a more strict, traditional culture of recent immigrants compared to that of non-Hatian families.

At some point in the interviews, all the teenagers mentioned the problem of AIDS, although only one mentioned it as a problem when I specifically asked about issues confronting teenagers today. Clearly this was a concern internalized by all of the teens due to their participation in Partners in Health. Aids as an issue was almost completely absent from my discussions with teenagers in video and other teenage performers. I do not have enough information to comment on the significance of AIDS in the Haitian community, but certainly Partners in Health was quite successful in reaching participants on this issue.

Surprisingly, only one teenager mentioned drugs and violence as a teenage problem. And his understanding of these issues was less clear than the opinions expressed by the teenagers in video. So the issues covered and the official focus does seem to have some bearing on what teenagers perceive to be current issues.

what solutions to today's problems do Haitian teenagers propose?

Since the most important problems Haitian teenagers described had to do with issues of personal pride and getting along with parents, the solutions they suggested were primarily to continue education and cultural programs like Partners in Health and the Haitian Club at the high school. Such programs were believed to be helpful in educating both parents and teenagers. I asked one teen about the effectiveness of a video they made:

-what do you want them to get from it?

-they just have to catch a lesson.

-do you think that they do?

-yeah they do, cause most of the time...there is all the people who watch it already and they say, "oh man, this one is good; I didn't know that!" So I see they must get something.

As for the issue of AIDS education, the teens were clear advocates of the methods used at Partners in Health over the formal lecture style of the school. I asked one teen to describe why Partners was more effective:

-They made us get involved in it, they asked us questions like, "you tell us what you know about AIDS" ... and everyone had fun...

I asked him to compare their video with others he'd seen.

-Most of the videos that I've seen on AIDS before, they're performed by grown-ups or professional actors, but this one, particularly was done all by teenagers, and it was written by us, and it made it more fun that we did something of our own mind, and out of our own head, and we put our own words into it, and we're the ones who perform it. And we.. help each other out, so how we can make it better, and that's good.

Here we have again the theme of inside versus outside. Teenagers were more taken by something that they made them something they perceived as coming from outside. Their own personal involvement, giving the issues their own voice made them enjoy the work and take the message seriously.

conclusions

chapter 4

The purpose of this effort was to explore real examples of indigenous organizations. In particular, I wanted to understand how well participation in "indigenous" video and performance groups empowered teenagers to take control of their lives. My principle hypothesis was that when teenagers practiced art forms that exercised their expressive abilities, that they would better be able to articulate and shape their own destinies, and that of their community.

Such claims are difficult, if impossible to prove, and I never really hoped to do so. Instead, I chose to focus on documenting what teenagers learned; the development they experienced from participating in the various groups. It is useful at this point to summarize my findings, before going on to make larger conclusions about the potential of such groups.

Participation in performance and video groups had positive effects on self esteem. In addition, participants developed a sense of belonging to a new community, which they often described as a

family. Teens in some of the groups felt that their work did in fact make a difference to other teenagers and adults, and thus they learned that they could have an impact on society. Teens learned how to care about something that they worked on, and developed concerns for societal and community problems. They also learned discipline, and how to work with other people in a cooperative manner. Some teens reaffirmed the importance of their unique cultural background. And finally, teens learned a new activity that they enjoyed.

Most of what I documented was based on what teenagers were able to verbalize. But what few of them were able to articulate, but what was quite apparent to me, was the extent to which these groups were performing leadership development. Teenagers learned that their own ideas mattered, and they were trained to develop these ideas, their point of view, their voice, in a structured format, and how present it to others. They all got constant feedback as to the quality and the merit of what they had to say. For the performers they knew right away what their live audience thought. For the video producers, feedback followed the broadcasts. But the video producers especially seemed to have a clear sense of the importance and responsibility of their work. What had started as merely something to do became a devoted passion.

I had initially chosen to study teen performance groups to demonstrate how effective they combated "the evils of society." I did in fact meet several teens who confided in me that before the work in these groups became so demanding that they had to cut out certain activities from a time when they had not been such "good

kids." But in my extensive research I have come to reassess the value of these groups. I am not so naive to think that the solution to today's problems would simply be the proliferation of more performance and video groups. But they can and do play a key role in a solution.

For one, teenagers have been given a chance to speak for themselves. Not every teen has had the opportunity to speak to a large audience, but those who have have tried to articulate the collective concerns of their generation. They have let us know that we, the adults, are as much a part of the problem as they, in neglecting their needs for so long, and in labeling them as the enemy.

The few teenagers who have joined these groups have been trained to be leaders. We cannot know now all that they will accomplish in the future for their community, but the importance of their experience cannot be underestimated. Even if they do not all go on to be agents of greater social change, they have learned that they can control their lives, and they have been taught something that they enjoy doing. When the school system proves to be rewarding for so few teenagers, an alternative method whereby teenagers can learn to be successful at something should be welcomed. Indeed, the learning may rival the public system: I got a sense particularly from the video groups, that teenagers were developing a critical awareness of societal issues to an extent seldom seen in public schools.

We also can perhaps never fully appreciate the larger impact these teenagers have on their communities in the present. They are role models for their peers. There was a ceremonial, almost

ritualistic aspect of many of the performances I witnessed. Those sitting in the audience seemed to see themselves on the stage, experiencing almost the same feelings of exhilaration as the performers, and gaining the knowledge of a vision of themselves as they could be. These are their hopes and aspirations on the stage, an ideal world in their own terms. The young rappers, these are the next generation's heros. How can we ever hope to measure the affective difference these shows make on the crowd? When does a person really make a choice to engage or not to engage in a life damaging activity?

I proceeded in this investigation with a hope that these activities could make a difference, and many of the teens I spoke with were no more certain than I that what they did could have long term impacts on the lives of others. They too were operating on hope and faith. If we must chose somewhere to begin to stop the current violence and despair that plagues many of our communities, why not begin with a faith in those who engage in life affirming work? It is not enough to look for organizations that accentuate the positive, or to search for the most practical solution to current problems. We must remember that joy and laughter should also be a part of the solution, for it is a part of growing up, and it is also a part of life.

Not every teen will be attracted to performance and video. Some do feel fulfilled by school. And there are other alternative forms of empowerment, such as sports, which others have written about. What I have hoped to do in documenting these organizations is provide model groups against which to compare other agencies and

institutions which claim to work for youth. We must set the standards as high as possible. These groups have helped teenagers demonstrate what they are capable of, when given a chance: some attention, instruction, and a belief that they can do right. The question is no longer do performance groups empower teens, but can other groups succeed as well as these have in engaging them in positive and fulfilling ways?

hypothesis revisited, next steps

My hypothesis was that performance and media art would provide fertile ground for positive change on both the individual and collective levels. In particular, those who learned articulate feelings and ideas would inevitably be more in control of their lives. And an environment that promoted creative expression in group form and in group forums would lead to positive change and the development community.

I must admit to a difficulty in verifying the change I believe these groups bring about. What I observed were "empowered" youth in the sense that they were well directed: they had confidence in their abilities, they were strong in their beliefs and they had career goals. Many of those I interviewed, particularly those in the video groups, displayed a critical awareness of society. The best I can conclude is that these teens now possess a disposition to make changes, a potential to work towards liberation struggles. But what I have not have been able to document was actual institutional change that came as a result of the work of these groups.

My design was set up to document individual characteristics of group participants. Even here it is difficult to know objectively if the individual has changed, since I am only meeting them after their involvement. Just about everyone admitted to being a different person since they joined the group, but of course I don't know to what extent there were confounding factors, other influences that might have brought about leadership development. An alternative design might compare teenagers in the program with other teenagers from the same neighborhood or school who did not join the group.

But the bigger question is what impact do these groups have on the larger environment? In the case of the group Haitian Teens Confront Aids, where I witnessed sharp confrontations between the actors and members of the mostly adult Haitian audience in the discussion that routinely follows their performance, I believe I witnessed attitude changes, if not behavioral ones as well.

But in general, by interviewing teen participants, I was not able to discover what if any institutional changes result in their work. Further study might follow one group and establish a greater understanding of the teenagers' relationship to their community. A longitudinal study would be necessary to measure long-term impacts of these groups on main-stream media. Also, we would want to know if viewer habits would change with the introduction of more teen video.

There are two issues in question here: do teen participants later go on to bring about change without these groups but as a result of the "education" that they received in them? And do these groups somehow move or "push" non-indigenous groups to change

their perspective? I would expect to find that groups that have a more explicit focus on advocacy would be more successful at both. Further research should also involve interviewing audience members to find out how important they view this work, as well as investigating the impacts on mainstream institutions.

This research has established what the groups have achieved on the very limited level of those who participate. I hope I have provided a basis by which others shall continue.

the author in transit

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