THE HIP-HOP
GENERATION
FIGHTS BACK

YOUTH, ACTIVISM, AND POST-CIVIL
RIGHTS POLITICS · ANDREANA CLAY

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YOUTH
Crisis, Rebellion, and Identity

Whenever I think of an activist, I think of Tupac.
—Xochitl, 14

As a teenager, I read *Nelson Mandela: the Man and the Movement*, by Mary Bensen.[1] I was mesmerized by the story of his life as an activist: how he joined the African National Congress (ANC), developed a military branch of the organization, was indicted and spent twenty-seven years in prison, separated from his wife, family, and friends—all in the name of freedom. I remember looking up to him as someone who gave up his life for "the cause" of ending apartheid in South Africa. His commitment was similar to that of the U.S. civil rights leaders I admired at the time, such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. Although Mandela was still in prison when I read his inspiring story of activism, I was convinced that the struggle and hardship he endured would guarantee a free South Africa.

A few years later, as an undergraduate, I read *A Taste of Power* by Elaine Brown. As I read Brown's autobiography—which told the story of her childhood in Philadelphia, how she became a Black Panther Party member, and later the first chairwoman of the party—I felt the same sense of inspiration and awe as I had when I read Mandela's story. Both of these leaders were activists involved in "the struggle," fighting against inequality to improve their lives and those of the people in their communities. In both cases, I was also taken with the fact that these leaders are Black people, like me. As a young activist, I tried to live in their image.

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Inspired by Brown's work, I became interested in the debates about affirmative action in California. In 1995 Ward Connerly, an African American businessman and University of California Regent was just beginning his campaign, Proposition 209, to end preferences based on race, sex, and national origin in university admissions. As an undergraduate, I received scholarships targeted at "minorities," and recognized the importance of education in providing access to social resources. I was concerned that Black youth and other youth of color's opportunities to succeed would be further limited if such civil rights policies as affirmative action came under attack. Contemporary struggles such as Prop. 209 reminded me of the tenuous nature of the gains made by Brown, Martin Luther King Jr., Ella Baker, and other civil rights activists. I was interested in the ways teenagers and young adults throughout California organized against Prop. 209. I wondered who would lead their struggle. Would a charismatic leader like King emerge? Or had the social context shifted so that an "individual leader" was no longer necessary? These questions, along with my initial interest in social change as a teenager, propelled my research on youth activism in California.

Since the 1980s, state actions intensifying attacks on affirmative action, the war on drugs, and laws against gang activity have left an indelible imprint on the hip-hop generation. For instance, in California, adult voters chose to enact policies like Prop. 209, the California Civil Rights Initiative, which resulted in the end of affirmative action in universities and the workplace, and Prop. 21, the Gang Violence and Prevention Act, which made it possible to prosecute teenagers as adults in the criminal justice system. These policies have contributed to decreased enrollments on college campuses like the University of California and a rise in incarceration rates among Black and Latino youth. In response to these contemporary circumstances, youth of color have been organizing in their communities, particularly in their high schools. In the last decade, youth empowerment organizations, like the two I examine here, have also emerged throughout the country to mobilize, train, and empower youth.

Troubled Youth: Studies of Deviance and Resistance

Current academic and popular constructions of youth of color portray them as gang affiliated, "troubled," and potentially dangerous. From early work undertaken by the Chicago School in the United States and the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Great Britain to more recent inquiries, sociological representations of youth culture have tended to focus on "deviant" behavior. By focusing on gangs or the consumption of fashion, music, and the media, scholars have pointed to a crisis among youth, particularly youth of color and working class youth.[2] Recent attacks on affirmative action, increases in police brutality and racial profiling, and new anti-youth legislation have exacerbated this sense of crisis, urgency, and hopelessness among critics, community activists, scholars, and the youth themselves.[3]

Social movement representations of youth suggest that young people have always been at the center of political activism and social change. Youth have been characterized as the backbone of the civil rights, feminist, antiwar, and gay and lesbian liberation movements.[4] However, little ethnographic research has been conducted on youth activism outside of these movements. Moreover, the "youth" in these movements are primarily college-aged. Little research has been conducted on adolescence as a significant identity from which to frame social justice organizing.[5] New social movement scholars have long focused on the importance of identity to social movement activism. For instance, previous research indicates that preexisting identities are an important determinant of social movement participation.[6] Others suggest that movement participation and identities are shaped by the sociohistorical contexts in which movements emerge.[7] In the following chapters, I examine how the current backlash against civil rights has impacted the activism and identities of teenagers of color.

Recognizing that contemporary forms of activism may not fit neatly into previous social justice models, sociologists have begun to compare and contrast contemporary youth activism with sixties activism. For instance, the sociologist and former Students for a

Democratic Society (SDS) president Todd Gitlin's recent book *Letters to a Young Activist* tackles this issue directly. In particular, Gitlin questions how youth can organize in an era when popular (and academic) discourse identifies the 1960s as the pinnacle of social movement activism. In one letter, "On the Burden of History, or Several Warped Ways of Looking at the Sixties," Gitlin asks:

> How can you not feel preempted, diminished even by your parents and teachers sitting around the proverbial campfire retelling (not for the first time) their antiwar stories? The afterglow threatens to steal your sense of uniqueness—an especially bracing propensity in a land that relishes the feeling of getting born again at the drop of an advertising campaign. Nothing you can do about your date of birth, after all. So you're trapped. The sixties (like parents) are useful but also oppressive. What would you do without them? What can you do with them?[8]

I attempt to answer Gitlin's questions by looking at the ways in which youth of color organize in light of the "burden" of the sixties. This book focuses on youth, identity, and social change at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Specifically, I focus on activism and the development of collective and individual political identities and organizing strategies among teenagers in Oakland, California. Moving beyond Gitlin's discussion of age, I ask: How do dominant representations of activism, which reflect previous social movements and struggles, inform how youth of color, members of the "hip-hop generation" participate in social change processes?[9] Further, because power exists and operates in dispersed and diffused ways, how is youth activism affected by the activism of previous social movements as well as the current backlash against civil rights? Finally, how does this participation, combined with dominant representations of activism, inform their political and activist identities? In addition to analyzing the dominant representations of activism, or what I refer to as the "idealized cultural image" of activism, I examine how youth activists organize and participate in social change in an era when people may in fact be "getting born again at the drop

of an advertising campaign," as Gitlin suggests, but also when this country is experiencing a backlash against civil rights laws.

The Duality of Civil Rights

Other scholars have written about the post–civil rights movement creating a *dual* experience, which has shaped youth of color identity since that time. For instance, journalist and activist Bakari Kitwana highlights the duality of the persistence of racial segregation and discrimination in the wake of civil rights gains, which has contributed to a current crisis for hip-hop generationers (Kitwana 2002). The incongruity of the gains in civil liberties accompanied by continued racism, sexism, and heterosexism constitutes a cognitive and communal crisis for youth. In the face of this crisis, youth of color have employed several different strategies to create collective and individual identities. In *Black Picket Fences*, Mary Pattillo-McCoy suggests that middle-class Black youth experience a dual identity because of the negotiation of two worlds: racial marginality and high socioeconomic status. This negotiation makes Black middle-class youth distinct from their white middle-class counterparts as, despite their economic gains and benefits, racial segregation ensures they live in close proximity to poor and working-class youth, contributing to a bifurcated experience. As a result, Pattillo-McCoy observed while conducting an interview with a middle-class African American that "he . . . had a different manner of speaking with his friends from college and his friends from the neighborhood gang."[10] For instance, when he is with his friends he used "Black English," while at school and at home he uses a more standard English. This practice, which Pattillo-McCoy describes as "code-switching," is necessary for youth of color who may have to balance civil rights gains like upward class mobility and access with the values and practices of the street. This balancing act is indicative of a historical moment where diverse strategies are necessary to address oppression and opportunity.

The term "post–civil rights" has been broadly used to refer to significant shifts in structural and individual realities for people of

color (particularly youth) since the civil rights movement.[11] Scholars point out that teenagers of color grow up in an important historical moment. At the same time that youth of color have presumably benefited from desegregated schools and antidiscrimination laws, recent state policies have increasingly restricted youth agency. For example, the establishment of "super jails" for youth, police surveillance of suspected gang members, and the prosecution of juveniles as adults all impact members of the hip-hop, or post–civil rights, generation. For instance, people of color have been granted certain rights as citizens of the United States, but we are still informed and targeted by the changing power structures: the rise in the prison industrial complex, increased surveillance of youth, and de-industrialization. I use the term hip-hop generation similarly in this book: while there have been gains with regards to civil rights for white women and people of color, the post–civil rights moment is a time ripe with contradiction: Take, for instance, the globalization of hip-hop culture, which was started by Black and Puerto Rican youth in the Bronx and has now become a worldwide phenomenon. In the United States, mainstream representations of hip-hop are almost exclusively of Black men. From Jay-Z to Lil Wayne, the predominant images splayed across the screen are African American men. Yet, the rates of incarceration for African American men outside (and sometimes inside) of the realm of hip-hop remain among the highest of all groups. Similarly, while there have been increases in LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer) visibility with more and more celebrities coming out as queer, same-sex marriage is legal in several states (though not at the federal level); at the same time LGBTQ youth are four times more likely than their straight counterparts to commit suicide. LGBTQ youth of color also seem to experience high rates of violence, attack, and murder.[12] These contradictions define the post–civil rights generation.

I don't mean to suggest that there weren't contradictions during the civil rights era; certainly there were contradictions during the African American civil rights movement: students were mobilizing the vote among poor African Americans in the South, challenging and overturning state laws, at the same time that these same activists

were being surveilled, attacked, imprisoned, and murdered. One key difference is that today's youth activists, in addition to the contradictions that are currently present, are also expected to organize *in the shadow* of previous social movement activists. More importantly, this organizing happens in the midst of the mass commodification of activist images and documentary (and fictional) retellings of these movements. For instance, the documentary *Eyes on the Prize* is a staple in American high schools, as are other films that, together, contribute to a collective understanding of social movement organizing, 1960s style, in American memory. These images were present in both sites that I studied, either as posters in the public high schools where youth organized or in the offices where they worked. This legacy is also written into the politically conscious hip-hop that youth listen to. Songs like "Propaganda," by Dead Prez, artists the youth reference, pay homage to the legacy of the Black Panther Party. As they state, "thirty-one years ago, I woulda been a Panther. They killed Huey 'cause they knew that he had the answer. The views that you see in the news is propaganda." Overall, these words serve as reminders of the social movements that preceded them as well as motivation for the youth's own organizing.

Artists like Dead Prez also make a direct link between previous social movement actors and youth organizers today, who, they suggest, have been told lies by the media, the government, and their schools. Given the pervasiveness of this dual experience for youth, particularly for youth of color, one might expect a unified, collective action against such oppression. However, U.S. public discourse has not yet recognized a large-scale social movement. The absence of a recognizable social movement may be linked to the largely diffused and dispersed ways that power and oppression operate today. Power is decentralized, often creating what Michel Foucault calls an "invisible enemy."[13] The implication is that true resistance and change have been rendered impossible because power is no longer centrally located or visible. Other scholars have written about how recent civil rights gains have created a contemporary context where the invisible enemy is still quite powerful.[14] However, I suggest that rather than being invisible, the deployment of state and ideological power is

masked by an apparent increase in social and political rights. At the same time, though, this power has become increasingly visible in the lives of youth of color. While "positive" strides may have been made in areas, like racial desegregation in schools and neighborhoods, gentrification, a decline in wages, attacks on affirmative action, continued "tracking" in public schools, and an increase in hate crimes continue to shape the experience of youth.[15] Since 1996, five states, including California, have passed voter-bans on affirmative action. In cities like Oakland, where this study takes place, the decline and restructuring of the shipping industry and the rising costs of housing has significantly shaped the migration of communities of color out of the San Francisco Bay Area into regions farther East.[16] This economic and political landscape informs the social location and experience of youth of color.

Some youth embrace hip-hop culture, music, and performance to articulate their ideologies and create political identities, as this genre most accurately reflects the lives, language, and rhythms of youth of color, particularly in urban areas.[17] Both youth of color and white youth have turned to hip-hop culture and other forms of performance to understand and create community with one another.[18] As George Lipsitz (1994) suggests, youth use hip-hop culture to "bring a community into being. . . map[ping] out real and imagined relations between people that speak to the realities of displacement, disillusion, and despair" (Lipsitz 1994, 36). In the late twentieth century, the hip-hop industry began addressing the important connection between youth, identity, and hip-hop culture. Conferences brought together hip-hop artists, producers, writers, and young people to discuss the political possibilities of hip-hop music. This forging of community was so successful that the hip-hop mogul and co-founder of Def Jam Recordings, Russell Simmons, founded the Hip-Hop Summit Action Network (HSAN) in 2001. Since that time, HSAN's primary strategy has been focused on mobilizing the "hip-hop vote."[19] In 2003, the National Hip-Hop Political Convention was founded by hip-hop activists to create a political agenda for and encourage civic engagement among the hip-hop generation.

With the explosion of a global youth market (especially American hip-hop culture) and the "marketing of cool," teenagers have assumed a powerful role as consumers. For youth activists, this is particularly relevant because they are organizing in an era where teenagers of color simultaneously embody the identities of powerful global consumers of these images and social threats. For example, "urban" youth of color are routinely targeted by police for suspected gang membership or other criminal activity, solely based on their specific age, race, class, gender status, and social location.[20] Simultaneously, the marketing of "cool" and mass commodity consumption has been extended to radical activism. Commodity fetishism, as Marx described it, has taken on a new role in relationship to "radical" and "revolutionary" thought.[21] The *peculiar social character* of commodities is especially pronounced in the objectification of the political words, images, and leaders of 1960s social movements, which have been recuperated into consumable objects.[22]

Tools for Social Justice: Constructing Ideal Activists in Popular Culture

Each political generation has its own definitions of what it means to be an activist. For some, Martin Luther King Jr., Fannie Lou Hamer, and other leaders of the 1950s civil rights movement embody activism. Others strive to emulate Huey Newton, Dolores Huerta, Yuri Kochiyama, and other 1960s icons. Regardless of the actual person or figure, an activist is typically identified as an individual who stands up for what she or he believes in and fights for social justice. Since the 1960s, people have been inundated with images of what an activist looks like (and the spirits he embodies) through the commodification of the words and actions of such individuals as Malcolm X, Angela Davis, and Che Guevara. Snippets of their lives have been truncated for consumption in history books, biographies, popular music, T-shirts, and bumper stickers. Magazines like *UTNE Reader* regularly feature articles that focus on contemporary figures who embody the spirit of these historic "visionaries." In all of these

venues, what I call an "idealized cultural image" of social and political activism has been embedded in the collective U.S. cultural imagination.

Popular discourse typically focus on individuals, often social movements leaders, that characterize social movement activism. Images of individuals like Angela Davis, Martin Luther King Jr., and Malcolm X have been commodified as the epitome of those who fought to challenge oppression. The "great individual" has been reinforced by the commercialization of these figures in popular culture. Their images have been immortalized in our collective cultural memory through Angela Davis T-shirts, Martin Luther King Jr. posters, or a bumper sticker of Malcolm X's call to action, "By Any Means Necessary." In effect, these cultural products serve not only as visual representations of previous social protest and activism but also as the model that all other activism is based. I seek to understand how we can fully understand contemporary forms of activism when the ideal is based on the historiography of these individuals and movements. How do people, especially teenagers of color, organize and participate in social change when the names and images of these leaders often stand in for the masses of social movement participants and, sometimes, for the movements themselves?

In a special issue of *UTNE Reader*, which focused on "visionaries under thirty," the hip-hop activist and author William Upski Wimsatt—himself labeled a thirty-year-old visionary—expresses a similar concern. He asks, "Where are the activists of the twenty-first century? Where is the next Martin Luther King Jr.? The next Dalai Lama? Gloria Steinem?"[23] While these are important figures and individuals who, as Wimsatt suggests, "burst onto the scene and took action" for peace and equality, Wimsatt reinforces the idealized cultural image of activism by identifying these figures as people to emulate. While it may be necessary to have visible role models, taken out of context and immortalized in commodified objects, these images become the very *essence* of what it means to be an activist, in effect overshadowing not only the work of contemporary activists, as I examine here, but also the monumentally historic impact of previous social movements. This happens not only in the naming of political leaders as

A t-shirt featuring an ideal-
ized image of an activist,
Angela Davis.

visionaries but most importantly in the use and distribution of their political images and uncomplicated summaries of their beliefs.

The use of the idealized cultural image in popular culture often works to erase the actual struggles of the leaders at the same time that it helps to shape a historical and cultural understanding of a particular social movement. Angela Davis poignantly refers to this process as it relates to the commodification of her own image, activism, and political imprisonment for her associations with the Black Panther Party and Communist Party. For instance, in her analysis of a *Vibe* magazine fashion spread titled "FREE ANGELA," where women sported Afros, wore black leather, and held their hands up in fists, Davis argues that this marketing image erases the political importance of her activism and mistreatment:

> This is the most blatant example of the way the particular history of my legal case is emptied of all content so that it can serve as a commodified backdrop for advertising. The way in which this docu-

ment provided a historical pretext for something akin to a reign of terror for countless young Black women is effectively erased by its use as a prop for selling clothes and promoting a seventies fashion nostalgia. What is also lost in this nostalgic surrogate for historical memory . . . is the activist involvement of vast numbers of Black women in movements that are now represented with even greater masculinist contours than they actually exhibited at the time.[24]

Davis acknowledges how an event of media commodification effectively minimizes the oppression she experienced and the activism in which she engaged. More importantly, the use of her image also ignores the struggles of other Black women involved in the social protests of the 1960s. Moreover, the commodification of activist images, such as the "FREE ANGELA" spread, ignores the organizing and activism in which women are involved today. Ultimately, these images of activism have become embedded in our cultural memory, often superseding other definitions of protest and social change.

Sydney Tarrow suggests that protest movements and activism are grounded in the history of society, becoming part of our permanent "repertoires of contention."[25] Embedded in these models of what it means to be an activist are shared understandings of social change. These repertoires determine the types of activism the media pays attention to, how and which types of activism are portrayed in history books, and how activists construct their own identities. The idealized cultural image of activism has become part of these shared repertoires of contention, immortalized in popular culture memorabilia. For contemporary youth activists, one of the more important aspects of the mass production of activist images is the role these images play in the social construction and shared understanding of activism.

Marita Sturken refers to such shared understanding as cultural memory or, memory that is a shared blend of history, culture, popular culture, and political meaning. This collective memory is often created in the process of constructing a national identity around particular events, especially traumatic events.[26] For instance, arti-

facts like the Vietnam War memorial and the AIDS quilt serve to remind the larger public of the Vietnam War and the AIDS epidemic. Furthermore, films and other representations of these events often stand in for the actual events for people who weren't involved in the war or who do not know anyone who has died of AIDS.[27] In effect, representational objects contribute to a collective sense of national identity, citizenship, and community. Sturken states:

> When Americans watch events of "national" importance—the Persian Gulf War, the Anita Hill/Clarence Thomas hearings, the explosion of the *Challenger*—on television, they perceive themselves to be part of a national audience regardless of their individual political views or cultural background. Citizenship can thus be enacted through live television.[28]

Lipsitz also suggests that through mass media images, collective memory becomes, "a crucial constituent of individual and group identity in the modern world."[29] These images, like the images of Angela Davis, minimize the struggles of the antiwar movement and AIDS activism in an effort to create a national identity in relationship to these events.

While the idealized cultural image of activism overshadows contemporary activism, it also has the potential to downplay the activism of generations past, as Davis suggests. For example, the public display of a particular activist can also communicate political and social ideology. Wearing a T-shirt with an image of Martin Luther King Jr. may be an indication of a teenager's belief in nonviolent protest. In this instance, the person wearing the T-shirt becomes linked with the ideology of the activist displayed—merging the decades between the work of someone like Fannie Lou Hamer and the experiences of the youth today. As Sturken reminds us, within this process of remembering—the construction of a cultural memory—there is also a process of *forgetting* that takes place. As a culture, we commodify activist images, and in so doing we often forget the struggles of the people involved in a particular incident or movement. Public figures such as Malcolm X and Angela Davis have become abstract,

almost perfect images of what it means to be an activist, standing in for the ultimate representation of social and political change in the United States.

The youth in this study were well aware of the idealized image of activism and who constitutes an activist. For instance, Frida, a-seventeen-year-old Latina participant at Multicultural Alliance (hereafter MA), clearly articulated the idealized cultural image of an activist and her own relationship to it when I asked her if she thought of herself as an activist:

> I don't like that word because it's so stereotyped. Like in the media, what I've seen in the media is that an activist is someone who speaks with a banner and a piece of paper and is demanding something. And an activist is so much more than that, like talking to someone you don't know, like telling your sister something different. Like you don't have to be screaming and this and that. I mean, I do that too, but I don't really like that word.

In this quote, Frida clearly references the idealized cultural image of activism by first naming the media as a player in the construction of what an "activist" is. Given the shared cultural images of leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. and movements like that of the Farm Workers, it is no surprise Frida has internalized this image of activism. However, she also states that although she does participate in this type of activism, her own definition includes specific mechanisms, or tools, that are available to her as a young Latina.

While, as Gitlin states, the idealized cultural image of (sixties) activism burdens contemporary youth activism, it is also important to acknowledge that for many civil rights activists the "dream" has been met on a number of levels and the *struggle* itself is over. Popular discourse suggests that the main project for the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s has been reached. The Civil Rights Act was passed in 1964, the Voting Rights Act in 1965. Organizations like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the National Organization for Women (NOW), and others focused on equality as the overriding goal for "the move-

ment." While I do not suggest that racism (sexism, heterosexism, and classism) and discrimination no longer shapes people's lives, the civil rights movement and other social movements of the 1960s, as many of us have understood it, were primarily organized in opposition to a series of state and federal laws. As Robin D. G. Kelley argues, "(l)ocal and national campaigns waged by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE), the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), to name only the big three, fought for citizenship, the right to vote, and desegregation, and succeeded in getting the federal government to pass the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act."[30] Significantly, these groups organized around a shared experience of the denial of civil rights to protest the racist policies of the American political system. Ultimately, this organization drew upon and reflected a collective identity. As Michael Omi and Howard Winant suggest,

> Racial change is the product of the interaction of racially based social movements and the racial state. . . . In the postwar period, minority movements, led by the black movement, radically changed the dominant racial ideology . . . [these] movements create collective identity . . . by offering their adherents a different view of themselves and their world; different, that is from the characteristic worldviews and self-concepts of the social order, which the movements are challenging.[31]

While some have critiqued the civil rights, women's, and the gay and lesbian movement as "identity politics," the collective identities that emerge out of social movements organized around identity, I argue, have since defined what it means to be Black, female, gay, or lesbian for a younger generation of activists. It is difficult to imagine or understand what it means to be African American, Chicano/a, or gay without taking into account the social movements organized around those identities. More importantly, the experience of being involved in social movements has the potential to impact the rest of the activist's individual life. As one volunteer explained when refer-

encing her experience in Freedom Summer, "'It was simply the most important experience of my life. It really set me on a course in my life that I'm still on.'"[32]

Ultimately, social movement participation and activism can shapes one's individual and collective sense of identity as well as her or his life goals. However, the legacies of the civil rights movement, feminist movement, and the gay and lesbian movement of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s continue to influence the strategies, role models, and individual identities of today's social movement activists. It is important to note that youth also identify with *new* role models who reflect their generation and the possibilities for organizing in this particular historical moment. For instance, as Xochitl's opening quote suggests, the rapper Tupac Shakur is the person she identifies as an activist. When I asked her why, she pointed to his ability to "keep it real":

> Yeah, because a lot of times, like Tupac gets a lot of stuff because he disrespects women and all that stuff, but in order to get yourself heard you need to speak on people's level and then once you're on top, you can get your voice heard. He did a lot of songs that weren't about bitches and hoes and all that. But he had to go through that for his voice to be heard. But he never forgets about that, even when he was up there, he never forgot.

Keeping it real (or, as DJ Kool Herc says, keeping it right[33]) and speaking on people's level is a common theme in the contemporary youth movement and a key component in their activist "tool kit."[34] Hip-hop, like consciousness-raising tools in the feminist movement, gay and lesbian movement, and the civil rights movement, has been attacked by adults because of the misogynist, sexist, homophobic, and sometimes violent content.[35] In spite of this (and sometimes very much because of it), the culture remains significant for teenagers of color as they organize around social justice issues in their local communities. This is one of the intergenerational dynamics I address in my examination of two nonprofit organizations in Oakland, California.

Studying Youth in Action: Two Nonprofits

Oakland is an interesting site for studying youth activism because it is both ripe with political history—for example, the Black Panther Party organized here, and the San Francisco Bay Area was the site of many student antiwar protests and demands for Ethnic Studies programs in the sixties—and it is an urban area that has been plagued with a high crime and murder rate amid growing racial and economic disparities. At the same time, student organizing in opposition to Props. 187 and 209 sparked a youth movement that drew attention to the experiences of post–civil-rights youth. Since that time, several nonprofit organizations have been established to address the needs of urban youth of color in the Bay Area. These organizations range from youth recreational centers to social justice organizations, from educational and community centers and boys' and girls' clubs to poetry slam training grounds. Youth from different socioeconomic, racial, sexual-orientation, and gender statuses participate in these organizations primarily after school and on weekends. Between October 2000 and June 2002, I worked with two such organizations—Teen Justice (hereafter TJ) and Multicultural Alliance (MA).[36] I volunteered as a mentor and research evaluator for TJ from October 2000 to June 2001. In August 2001, I began working as a program coordinator at MA, where I assisted in training youth to lead anti-oppression or, popular education, workshops for other youth.

Teen Justice was founded in 1996 in response to several race riots between Blacks and Asians in Oakland public schools. In an effort to combat the violence, TJ focuses on developing multiracial leadership and student organizing in their community and on high school campuses. As a volunteer at TJ, I worked with the leadership team at Bayview High School. Multicultural Alliance, a smaller nonprofit, was founded in 1998 out of the founder's desire to generate a deeper understanding of and appreciation for cross-cultural/cross-community organizing among youth. Similar to TJ, MA worked with young people to develop youth leaders who assumed a central role in fighting oppression in their communities and among their peers. The pri-

mary tool for creating this society free from oppression is teaching youth to facilitate anti-oppression workshops with other youth in Oakland.

As a researcher in these settings, I engaged in participant observation by taking field notes and conducting informal interviews with youth and staff members at each organization. In particular, I studied two processes. At TJ I focused on the development of a youth center at Bayview High. At MA, I focused on the development and execution of anti-oppression workshops with other youth. I decided on these events to gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which youth of color engage in social activism. I used participant observation to understand and explain how youth of color make sense of themselves and their society through activism. I sought to achieve this understanding through "virtual or actual participation in social situations, through real or constructed dialogue between participant and observer, or what [social scientists] call the hermeneutic dimension of social science."[37] In what follows, I engage in this hermeneutic or explanatory process by linking theory and data. Specifically, I situate my ethnographic study of youth activism in relation to previous research on youth culture and social movements.

Although participant observation provides the main empirical basis for examining youth activism in Oakland, another primary source of data collection for this study comes from in-depth interviews I conducted with twenty-one youth participants from TJ and MA.[38] I interviewed the majority of youth with whom I worked closely at both organizations, including members of the organizing/leadership team at TJ and the primary workshop facilitators at MA. I also conducted formal interviews with key staff members at each organization, as well as informal interviews with other adults in the scene, who often played key roles in supporting and assisting in the leadership of the youth in this study.[39] I conducted interviews until I felt I had reached a "saturation" point, that moment at which the interviews ceased to provide any new information.[40] For interviews in both organizations, I relied on my initial contacts and a purposive, snowball sample to obtain participants. By employing multiple methods, I provide an in-depth description of the case of

youth activism at the beginning of the twenty-first century. More-over, these methods allow the youth themselves to provide their own definitions of activism.

What Are We Fighting For

The burden of sixties activism, as Gitlin describes it, is present both in academia and popular culture. One important factor in the study of social movement activism is the sociohistorical context in which it emerges. In chapter 2, I use ethnographic data to explain how the geographic, racial, and economic landscape of metropolitan cities like Oakland influences the lives and organizing frames of the poor and working-class youth of color. Specifically, I discuss importance of the local setting and scene for youth activism. Because of ongoing economic and racial segregation in Oakland, I also examine how different California voter ballot propositions like 187 and 209 have influenced local strategies to remediate problems in the lives of youth of color. In particular, I look at several laws that established the specific financial support for TJ and MA at the time of this study. More importantly, these local initiatives reflect larger, national initiatives that have targeted affirmative action programs, vilified undocumented immigrants, and increased the criminalization of "deviant" youth of color. Overall, I construct a genealogy and social history of the origins of youth activism in the post–civil rights era by providing an in-depth examination of the framing strategies, missions, influence, and assessment of the outcomes of the overall programs of Teen Justice and Multicultural Alliance.

Chapter 3 builds on chapter 2 by examining not only how youth organize in the aftermath of civil rights gains and losses but also how they navigate racial and ethnic, gender, and sexuality boundaries in the twenty-first century. In particular, I describe how multiracial youth activists identify with specific social categories and build coalitions with one another across these lines. This information is crucial at a time when youth of color continue to be constructed as deviant in popular culture, and are treated as such by policymakers, educators, and parents—a moment I describe as *violent*, most

notable in the social abandonment of urban youth of color. Youth at TJ and MA integrate their experiences with the structures of racism, classism, and ageism into their organizing strategies. Finally, I explore how youth construct these frameworks at the same time that the youth activists themselves were traversing the violence in their neighborhoods, home lives, and schools.

I begin chapter 4 by examining how youth incorporate hip-hop culture into their organizing strategies inside and outside of their work at TJ and MA. Popular culture, and hip-hop in particular, has been an important source for mobilizing youth around social injustices in the Bay Area. Youth at both organizations identified hip-hop as an important social justice tool, not just for their individual motivation and understanding of their social location but also as an important source for mobilizing other youth. Overall, I look at how youth, who incorporate hip hop into their organizing, become cultural workers who educate others about their lives as youth in the post–civil rights era.

In addition to identifying as members of the hip-hop generation, many of the youth identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or queer. All of the youth at MA, regardless of sexual orientation, made homophobia a key frame in their social, cultural, and political work in peer-led, anti-oppression workshops. I examine how youth activists negotiated across racial/ethnic, gender, and sexual orientation lines to make heterosexism and homophobia a central frame in their organizing activities. In chapter 5, I also examine how popular discourses based on a predominantly white Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) Movement (via same-sex marriage debates and television shows like *Will and Grace*) shape queer identity and activism among queer youth of color, while simultaneously excluding them from this movement. This impact is even more pronounced with firmly established, national school-based organizations like the Gay/Straight Alliance (GSAs) and other gay and lesbian youth organizations that specifically service LGBTQ youth. Finally, I also consider how homophobia based in bias at school, in their families, and among other youth activists impacts the youth of color in this study and their relationship to queer identity and community.

In chapter 6, I explore whether and how the youth think of themselves as activists. Specifically, I explore whether their definitions of activist align with social movement theories and popular cultural representations of activism, both of which are largely understood in relationship to the idealized cultural image of activism. Overall, I ask the questions, "Given larger cultural understanding of activism and social change, is their organizing work activism?" and "How do their own understandings of activism and their role in social change rewrite dominant repertoires of activism?"

I conclude this study in chapter 7 by outlining a theory of youth activism and its implications upon future sociological and movement understandings of social change. I also explore how these efforts affect understandings of disenfranchised, urban youth in the post–civil rights era. Specifically, how do the strategies of organizing at the local level, the use of popular culture to mobilize others, and popular understandings of the term "activism" combine to affect the predominant understandings of youth, social movements, and activism?