Mediating Youth

COMMUNITY-BASED VIDEO PRODUCTION AND
THE POLITICS OF RACE AND AUTHENTICITY

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"We're in a fishbowl!" Sarah exclaimed. We all agreed, as passersby looked in at us with curiosity. Our small group of youth participants and adult educators, organized by the Media Education Center (MEC), a community-based media production organization located in northern California, was embarking on an intensive project that would result in a short narrative video about youth life in San Francisco's Mission District. The organization's cofounder, Sarah, had made arrangements for classes to be held at the West Coast Video Foundation (WCVF), one of the nation's premiere nonprofit media production centers. One wall of our workshop space was floor-to-ceiling windows that faced a long hallway leading to other media suites; because of this we worked under constant observation. The Mission District, which for much of the late twentieth century had been a working-class Latino neighborhood, has been reshaped in recent years by an influx of white artists, recent college graduates, and then later, young dot-com professionals. In the late 1990s the district was considered "ground zero" for the struggle against gentrification and displacement in the San Francisco Bay Area.[1] We were working in a space that reflected these new shifts in the district, a state-of-the-art nonprofit media center on the edge of residential areas. The whirring of computers from the production suites surrounding us hummed throughout the room, as we brainstormed the plot.

It was 1999, MEC's second year of operation. At the time, MEC had no permanent workshop space and used a small storage room of a more established media organization as its administrative office. In order to run its workshops, the fledgling organization partnered with other nonprofits and community centers to use their facilities.[2] In return, more established centers were credited as sponsors or collaborators of locally celebrated initiatives aimed to benefit low-income and racialized youth. Sarah began to conceive of MEC in the mid-1990s when she was asked to create a public service announcement on HIV/AIDS with a group of Latino teenagers from an alternative high school. After the success of that project—the video received a great deal of positive attention in the community and the school district—Sarah was asked by community centers and local city agencies to coproduce other such videos. At the same time, she remained

a practicing artist and a long-term lecturer at a local arts college. Most of these early collaborative projects were completed on shoestring budgets with little or no funds to pay Sarah as lead artist. The grant money that she received for our collaboration had been the largest source of support that the organization had received at the time and offered a small amount of seed money to begin building a larger organization that could support multiple, ongoing projects.

Having our collaboration housed at WCVF seemed to highlight our precarious position at the center of massive economic, demographic, and technological shifts while having little access to the resources and the financial gains of these transformations. WCVF, on the other hand, like many arts centers and nonprofits geared toward white media artists and high-tech entrepreneurs, had benefited from demographic changes in the neighborhood and had secured a large warehouse space that functioned as a fortress of technological innovation, one that quite literally kept long-term residents outside its walls.[3] WCVF had received hundreds of thousands of dollars of support from private foundations, and state-of-the-art media technology companies in Silicon Valley had donated much of its equipment. Sarah's social capital, as a long-established video artist and activist in the city, gained us this temporary access to the center. She knew most of WCVF's staff and was the only one in our group who moved comfortably within the center.

Several months before our workshops began at WCVF, Sarah had asked me if I would be interested in assisting her in a youth-based media collaboration. We had worked previously on a documentary about youth and community development, and Sarah was aware of my research interests in youth studies, media, and representational theory in my graduate pursuits at Stanford. I agreed, and earlier that spring we had begun to conduct workshops in Valencia Gardens, a housing project located in the Mission District. Working with a liaison in the housing complex, we recruited a group of five middle-school-aged boys and one high-school girl. Within a few weeks, the entire project had collapsed. We could not sustain a discussion or complete a lesson on technical aspects of production without major disruptions. Participants would leave to play with friends in the courtyard. Parents would interrupt to have their children run errands or finish their homework. The only activity that seemed to hold the participants' attention was role-playing various scenarios.

Before reattempting the project at WCVF, Sarah and I discussed why our previous efforts had failed. We questioned whether we were prepared to work with such a young population, given that most of Sarah's previous collaborations had been with older high-school students. We also wondered if the familiarity of the workshop site for the participants was too distract-

ing. Some would go home for a portion of our time together and wander back in later. While I questioned whether the recruited participants were interested in the project, and I suspect that Sarah considered this also, we never discussed it. However, one major change that we made before beginning the WCVF workshops was partnering with the local city government, so that youth participants could be paid for their time through federal summer employment funds for low-income youth. We hoped that payment would solidify commitment from our recruits.

Prior to recruiting the participants and involving me as an assistant, MEC and its grantors had designed the video to be about youth and to be shot from a youth's perspective. Yet framing the project in such a way raised a host of issues about representations of youth, race, and gender in visual media, as well as questions about the complexities of community collaboration through video. How do we understand collaboration when white adult artists and institutions own the resources and broker access for youth of color? What are the narrative and technological limits placed on the project by its sponsors? Who ultimately has ownership of the video? How do we read the representations constructed in these collaborative videos in relationship to dominant visual and popular culture? In reconsidering our attempts to produce a collaborative video about urban youth, I explore the relationship between representations of racialized youth in U.S. popular culture, local cultural practices, and ideologies of race and authenticity through an examination of the MEC summer workshop.[4] Collaborative media projects such as the works of MEC respond to a dire absence of racialized youth's access to and engagement with public discourses, even while these bodies circulate transnationally as emblems of American popular cultural dominance. Yet I question why artists, organizations, and grantors tout these collaborative, adult-initiated projects as "authentic voices of youth."

While engaging in struggles over the politics of representation, youth-based media arts organizations often perpetuate a troubling tendency to use visual technologies to capture an authentic urban experience. The difference here is that the groups' claims to authenticity are rooted in privileging notions of experience and the perspective of racialized youth. As my analysis reveals, struggles over representation and authenticity drove our collaborative process. In fact, many of the conflicts that arose during the summer workshop reflected larger struggles taking place in the Mission District at the time. These struggles were symbolic, representational, and geographic battles over territory. In fact, Sarah's reason for initiating the project seemed to have much to do with her own attempts to negotiate a relationship as a white, middle-class artist to a neighborhood that had become the symbol of rampant gentrification and erasure of working-class

nonwhites. In the midst of these battles, the concept of youth took on a stabilizing and authentic force that centered our collaborative work.

The polemics of collaboration and production in youth-based media organizations are central to this study. For media arts organizations, video is an effective tool for attracting and securing funding because it demonstrates to grantors quite tangibly the process of youths learning and expressing themselves visually. Collaborative video projects produce a visual document—a product—that outlives the temporary collaborations. This visual document stands in not only for the process itself but also for the lived experiences of the youth represented. Thus the product acquires value as an object that captures the realness of youth's experiences as authentic and distinct from mass-mediated representations. On a fundamental level, the artists/educators and youth producers work to produce "community" visually through the projects. The implications of production with regards to these organizations' work are rich. To produce means to give something form and shape, to make an idea into a product, to create a relationship through the product. Production implies both a performance and labor process. It has material ramifications. Media arts organizations' work with youth demonstrates that youth can produce, that they are productive in the face of antiyouth legislation in the United States and a public discourse of youth as terror.[5]

Most of the projects originate long before youth are recruited to participate. They take shape through the process of fund-raising. In developing community collaborations, the organizations, for the purpose of acquiring funds, begin to sculpt a narrative about the youth and the community with which they propose to work. The participants are brought in much later in the process and typically do not have access to the grant narrative and the language that produces the collaboration or the community.[6] The grant narrative then articulates the community in particular ways that, in many cases, frame the project as a combination of charity, community work, and art outreach. Ron Burnett, in his analysis of community video, problematizes the representation of community in these localized practices:

> The often-expressed desire of video activists to bring the people in the communities they work with together for the purposes of change and social cohesion is situated in a concept of community that is both naïve and untheorized. Aside from the difficulties of gaining access to the rather complex and multilayered aspects of community life, the very notion of community is based on a denial of difference and on a vague concept of conflict resolution.[7]

The notion of community within the context of localized media practices often simplifies or denies differences among constituents of a neighbor-

hood or group; in other words, youth are often homogenized as either the community or its offspring, whereas the artist's relationship to the community often reflects urban transformations that displace or erase the very community targeted by the project.[8]

MEC is one of numerous youth-based media arts organizations in the United States that developed over the past couple of decades. These organizations grew primarily out of developments of the late 1960s and 1970s that diversified the field of media production and the populations that had access to creating media: community-access television stations, media activism, portable video technology, and the institutionalization of media studies as a field of scholarship. In particular, the technological development of video significantly decreased the costs of production at a time when artistic movements of the 1960s and 1970s were actively involved in political and social transformation. Nationally, groups such as Videofreex, Downtown Community Television Center, and Global Village pooled resources and equipment, provided artists with access to video technology, and explored the possibilities of artistic practice and political commentary through the medium itself.[9] These collectives saw their work as alternatives to the growing power and reach of mass media, specifically the television, in the United States.

Video, as an accessible and portable technology, developed in the midst of the civil rights, student, and antiwar movements of the mid- and late 1960s. Martha Rosler analyzes how the history of video art commingles with 1960s radical political movements and a growing skepticism of mass media and corporatized cultural production. Rosler writes that pioneering artists saw video as a revolutionary medium artistically and socially: "Not only a systemic but also a utopian critique was implicit in video's early use, for the effort was not to enter the system but to transform every aspect of it and—legacy of the revolutionary avant-garde project—to redefine the system out of existence by merging art with social life and making audience and producer interchangeable."[10] Alexandra Juhasz's account of historical developments in alternative media connects media literacy to community-based movements: "Through the community-access movement, programs in media literacy and efforts like Deep Dish Television, which transmits alternative video across the country by satellite, a small number of highly committed Americans are using the camcorder for its most radical purpose, the one suggested in all of the movements documented in this history, to make the media an interactive rather than one-way flow, media which expresses the distinct needs of individuals or communities."[11] Alternative video has the potential of making media more interactive but also deserves to be rigorously analyzed for the ways that it challenges, problematizes, or reinforces dominant representations.

Grassroots media centers and collaborative projects, like the white media artist–activist Dee Dee Halleck's film workshops with black and Puerto Rican youth in New York during the 1960s and 1970s, set the stage for the birth of youth-based organizations and the range of projects that they produce.[12] Similar to the video collectives of the early 1970s, based primarily in New York and California, youth-based centers believe in the democratization of society through media access. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, in the United States, Canada, and Great Britain, media arts organizations and the teaching of media literacy to youth grew into a major movement that has brought together public art practices with community development and critical pedagogy. The strength of this movement rests in its ability to engage local communities in public and visual discourses through media production.

Responding to the predominance of visual media in contemporary popular culture, youth-based media organizations tend to base their practices on concepts of media literacy to educate young people to read and analyze the symbols of media construction. Since the 1990s, many media organizations have benefited from the development and proliferation of moderately priced digital video cameras and editing systems. Using new digital technologies and teaching the principles of media literacy, youth-based media organizations attempt to bridge "the digital divide" (a condition at least partly attributed to the excessive greed and social irresponsibility of high technology companies) by equipping underrepresented groups with the tools of media production.[13] The organizations provide youth with access to visual technology and aid youth in creating visual media from the perspective of (almost always racialized and impoverished) youth.

Scripting Youth

During the first two weeks of the MEC video project, the group size shifted from session to session. At its largest, the group consisted of eleven youth, five males and six females of various races and ethnicities (five of them had come from a neighboring Latino youth center that I had previously worked with). In the end, the youth producers settled at five: Anita, Michelle, and Kathleen (three teenage girls), Sarah (the instructor), and me (assistant instructor and observer). In some ways, setting the workshops at WCVF, the premiere media production center in the area, built an air of professionalism and legitimacy that was not a part of the workshops that we attempted to conduct in a neighborhood housing project. Yet this location brought with it its own set of problems that I conjecture limited the group size. Some youth reported hostile stares and

inquiries about their presence by WCVF clients and staff. On one occasion, the receptionist asked that MEC adult staff members chaperone the youth participants while they were using the facilities. This was contrary to how adult producers used the facilities and occupied its many communal spaces (kitchen, bathroom, and reading rooms).

What solidified our commitment to the project varied, but we were all paid for our involvement through private grants and city funding. Kathleen, whose father is Algerian and mother is Native American and white, was the oldest of the youth producers. Having just graduated from high school, she wanted to gain video production skills that would translate her interests in visual art and theater into future employment. Anita, whose mother is white and father is black, lived with her black aunt in Valencia Gardens, a housing project in the center of the Mission that became one of our primary locations for the video shoot. She was the least vocal in the group, but she was the only participant who had been involved in our initial attempts to hold the workshop in her housing community. Michelle, a fifteen-year-old black female, learned about MEC through Anita and knew the least about video production. Michelle had spent most of her life in predominantly black neighborhoods of the Potrero Hill and Lakeside districts and was also the only youth who was not from the Mission. She resented that the project focused almost exclusively on this district. "Why can't we include HP [Hunter's Point] or Potrero Hill?" she asked frequently, an issue that grew more intense for her as the project progressed. Driven by her vision of media education, Sarah, a middle-aged white woman, poured a great deal of energy and excitement into this young organization that she had cofounded. She was also working hard to turn a talent and passion into something financially sustainable. I was there in search of something as a researcher and participant—an exploration of representations of youth and localized cultural production. I was also there out of friendship; Sarah had asked me to be involved with the project, knowing that I had grown interested in youth-produced media and had worked with youth professionally for several years. I sensed that Sarah thought that my black skin would help mediate the relationship between white instructor and racialized student producers in the project.

During our early sessions, we brainstormed what felt like limitless possibilities for our projects. Sarah facilitated several group activities that encouraged us to create individual and shared narratives. We imagined recruiting legions of volunteers and securing elaborate locations. We discussed mirroring sophisticated camera techniques, including aerial views, and special effects seen in large-budget commercial media. Our tenuous collaboration was strengthened by such imaginative prospects. While Sarah worked to create a space where all voices were heard and considered,

the grant narrative that she constructed to secure funds had already laid the groundwork for the project—a video that addressed issues facing youth in the Mission District. Once the group size had settled we immediately moved into scripting a narrative about a racially mixed group of youth who reflected the producers' backgrounds. Sarah walked us through the stages of video production (preproduction, production, postproduction, distribution). After the first two weeks of general introduction to the equipment and the principles of media literacy, we began to map out the subject and structure of the project. Surrounded by audiovisual devices and in the throes of an awkward but exciting collaboration, the youth producers seemed not to notice my tape recorder that sat in the center of the table.[14]

During the preproduction stage, Sarah introduced the group to a range of genres and styles. She began by explaining the differences between documentary and narrative genres. Sarah then discussed how MEC's model for collaborative filmmaking was creating fictional narratives based on "real life experience," meaning that the aesthetics and techniques of documentary are used to construct a fictional tale. Two films that she focused on as models for our collaborative process were Michael Winterbottom's *Welcome to Sarajevo* (1997) and Mathieu Kassovitz's *La Haine* (1995). The youth producers found the latter more interesting, given its subject matter (a French film about marginalized youth in a Parisian ghetto who are influenced by hip-hop music and aesthetics and who are plagued by forms of discrimination familiar to racialized youth in the United States). Sarah was deliberate in showing the youth collaborators forms and styles of filmmaking that were not commonly shown in dominant media outlets. Yet Anita, Michelle, and Kathleen were eager to discuss the landscape of visual media that formed their everyday experience with popular culture. When asked by Sarah and me about what types of films and visual media resonated with them, the youth producers mentioned the action film *Set It Off* (1996) directed by the black filmmaker F. Gary Gray and starring four black popular actresses; the African American–centered horror film *Tales from the Hood* (1995), directed by Rusty Cundieff; and an Eminem and Dr. Dre music video for Eminem's rap, "Guilty Conscience," in which the white rapper and his black producers act as a dueling conscience for characters who stand at a crossroads in their lives. In the video, the frame freezes at a moment of crisis, as Eminem and Dr. Dre lyrically battle about the choice that the character should make. At the time of our collaboration, this was a popular video and Eminem had just become a phenomenon with the release of his first major album. Surprisingly, the music video became the center of many of our discussions about the form and content that our final project would take, as the youth producers enjoyed its style and how

it presented choice and consequences. The music video's influence also revealed that the forms of media dismissed by MEC in favor of independent and alternative media have the most relevance for many groups of youth.

The youth producers brainstormed several ideas that interested them and eventually limited the topics to four: juvenile justice, teen pregnancy, racism, and welfare/families in poverty.[15] After agreeing that each topic would receive a story line in the video, Sarah led the group in a series of exercises to turn their ideas into a script. Each youth producer wrote a scenario for the four topics. Once they completed the writing assignment and shared their initial stories, Sarah and I facilitated a discussion about how to bring the scenarios together into one story. The selection process and honing of a preliminary script went on for several days amid heated discussions. In fighting for the legitimacy of a subplot, Michelle and Kathleen argued about how "real" the idea was. For example, Michelle wanted to include a confrontation in a corner store between a black youth and an immigrant storeowner because, she argued, "That really happened." In the end, her scenario was incorporated into the script.

The final subplots that the producers agreed on were (1) a story about a young girl on welfare in the projects who gets into a fight with another girl over gossip; (2) two teenage boys facing discrimination in a corner store; (3) an interracial couple who confront the prejudice of one of their parents; and (4) a teenage girl who considers having sex with an adult but is afraid of getting pregnant. The issue of realness continued to be a hotly contested topic for the producers throughout every phase of the project. Though selecting or more significantly abandoning plot ideas was a contentious issue for the group, the producers were in agreement about the project's style and structure. They wanted the events to happen in "real time" and the story to unfold in one cinematic day. The group agreed that the final piece should appear as one ordinary day in the lives of San Francisco teens. To underscore this purpose, the group agreed on a title suggested by Kathleen, *Mission Tales*.

Pedagogy and Practices

During one brainstorming session, Kathleen argued that our project was important because youth cultural practices—music, style, and language—are routinely stolen by adult entrepreneurs. According to her and the other producers, youth are the innovators in U.S. popular culture and everyone (signifying adults) both hates them and wants to be like them. She identified herself through her statement as one of the "victims" and fetishes of capitalist visual culture and exchange.[16] Kathleen mentioned

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"cool hunters" who are hired by large fashion and advertising companies to stalk city streets in pursuit of the latest marker of youthfulness and hipness. The small group discussed the significance of viewing positions, consumption, and the discourse of deviance and desire that circulates through and around bodies marked as young. The discussion recognized that while images may be targeted at youth, adults hold the position of normative viewing within the logic of spectatorial reception. The MEC participants questioned the pleasure received by adults in viewing representations of youth in media and popular culture. What was central to their conversation was the importance that visibility, as everyday practices in the public sphere and as representational practices in popular culture, played in marking and depicting youth. The MEC youth producers positioned themselves as cultural innovators of youth visuality but also as the victims of representation based on this visibility.

Youth hypervisibility—on the street, in groups, fashionable, and irreverent—is a persistent trope of contemporary U.S. popular culture and mass media.[17] Youth is an identity shaped in and throughout modern capitalistic (economic, cultural, and technological) shifts. As a concept, youth gains meaning, thus representation, in the public sphere of twentieth-century capitalism, as a term to denote the quintessential, always consuming, always desiring, always performing subject. Irit Rogoff writes, "The field of vision becomes a ground of contestation in which unstable normativity constantly and vehemently attempts to shore itself up."[18] Normative visual systems strive to maintain their dominance through a proliferation of images that are decontextualized and hypervisible, that is, the fetishized spectacle. Youth's function within dominant visual culture is as fetishized spectacle. When this body is racialized, its value as spectacle is increased, as difference is intensified from the viewing position of normative white adulthood and its alterity increases from the position of youth audiences. The pleasure of seeing youth—wild, dark, large, and two-dimensional—on the screen merges with the fear of seeing uncontrolled, unparented, and multidimensional youth on public streets. The self-conscious awareness of this marketability can be seen in hip-hop fashion advertising and music-video culture in which rappers tout their currency as thug or threat. Blurred with the reality of everyday spaces, the representational currency of images is heightened, so that the asocial, amoral young being of the screen reflects the deviance of subjects living in this transitory space between constructs of childhood and adulthood, identified by the temporality of an identity marked as youth.

For MEC, having youth make alternative videos can potentially challenge and undermine the currency of youth as spectacle. As significant as the organization's technical resources and training is its awareness of the

representational currency of bodies marked as young. Beneath the missions of many youth-based media organizations is the belief that something is "wrong" with how youth—particularly low-income, "at-risk," racialized youth—are represented in mass culture, and simultaneously that youth have a peculiar relationship to visual culture. MEC argues that youth voices are not heard and that teaching youth video production skills offers them opportunities to express themselves in a world where adults (including those who run media arts nonprofits) control equipment and access, in other words, the means of production.[19] To counter dominant representations, MEC teaches youth how to create alternative representations of youth in narrative productions. Yet the concept of alternative is not problematized, though it is contentious, given the power relations of media organizations where adults still control media access but provide opportunities for youth to engage in specific media projects that produce localized representations of young people. Within this paradigm of alternative versus dominant media, alternative takes on the salience of authenticity, in part because of the incorporation of "real" youth's experiences.

Early in the project, Sarah explained to the group, "Media is any way we communicate with each other," as she passed out handouts on media industries and how audiences interpret media messages. For MEC, providing access to the tools of production, as well as teaching the principles of media literacy, will begin the process of disrupting current representational practices that posit youth as aberrant. In publicity materials, MEC describes its mission statement as "a media literacy training program designed to teach youth how to deconstruct and make their own media through a combination of lectures and hands-on training. By using the familiar form of the narrative, [MEC] leads the students through an improvisational and scripting process to fictionalize their shared experiences. Applying the technical training they have received, the youth then make their own *movies*."[20] Such tools potentially provide youth with the opportunity to challenge the social order while also highlighting how necessary youth are to its very constitution.

The pedagogical concept media literacy, a subset of the field of media studies, has been popularized outside the academy through community centers, advocacy groups, public policy, and secondary education. Media literacy combines radical approaches to education with sociocultural and economic critiques of media industries. Media literacy is most concerned with broadening the approach to literacy and cultural meaning by looking at media as a valid educational field and as the dominant cultural mode of expressing meaning. While there are various schools of media literacy, the approach most commonly offered in community-based media centers is one that combines Marshall McLuhan's utopian vision of the democratiz-

ing possibilities of media technology and access with a Frankfurt school rhetorical suspicion of mass media. In community-based organizations, the teaching of media literacy often posits an antagonistic relationship between producers and receivers, between the message and its interpreters. A former artist of MEC whom I interviewed after *Mission Tales* was completed discussed the various legacies of media literacy and the version that proliferates in community-based practices:

> I found a lot of variation on what people call "media literacy." There's the media literacy, "Let's bring the television into the classroom. I'm doing media literacy right," or like [the public television] version of media literacy: take a text—a video of some sort—and call it the authority, and talk about television from that perspective which is the instructional television version. . . . Then there's the "teach kids that media is bad and don't go near it" [version]. I think that there's part of me that is plagued by that without wanting to be. . . . The media literacy that has gotten the most air-play is very definitely this protectionist version of media literacy—the very "media is bad. Don't watch that"—or like health media literacy: anti-smoking campaigns, anti-bulimia campaigns. . . . [A well-known artist] goes into schools and she'll show people different advertisements and talk about how kids are being targeted to smoke or whatever.[21]

The artist alludes to the popularity of a reactionary approach to mass media in media literacy curricula. This approach works in part because it operates through simplistic frameworks of mass media as uniformly bad and community or alternative media as intrinsically good. It provides catchy and totalizing explanations to youth producers who, armed with video technology, see their role as going to war with mass-mediated images of youth as spectacle. For example, after MEC's preproduction workshops, Kathleen summarized media literacy as "being able to see something in the media and take bits and pieces, and know what they're really coming at you with. . . . I think it's being able to distinguish the bullshit from the real in advertising."[22]

Underlying the "media is bad" approach that the artist mentions is the belief that there is a "real" in representation that dominant visual systems distort. *Mission Tales*, case in point, is an attempt to get at the "real" in representational construction. In essence, the definitions of media literacy purported in media arts organizations, and often regurgitated by youth participants, do not recognize the excess in meaning produced through and as by-products of representation. Yet the totalizing rhetoric of some schools of media literacy are undermined and contradicted by the projects that emerge in these organizations. In our case, the single most important influence on our project's style and content was the Eminem–

Dr. Dre music video, a video that explicitly displays a white rapper invoking spectacle by performing a racialized masculinity popularized by black popular cultural figures.

Real Youth, Authentic Blackness

One week after the youth producers began crafting the final script, the conflict about representing the real climaxed. Working to create a subplot about racism and teen dating, Kathleen devised a story about an Asian American teenage girl who dates a young black male. The conflict centers on the teen and her mother, a first-generation immigrant who does not approve of her daughter dating interracially. Kathleen suggested that the daughter also have an African American female friend to reflect the diversity of San Francisco. Michelle, who felt uncomfortable with the story from its premise, argued that a girl of Asian ethnicity would not be a friend with a black girl. The rest of the group tried to convince Michelle that her opinion did not represent that of everyone else. Michelle became angry and asserted, "You wouldn't see a Filipino hanging with a black and white girl and getting into a car with a nigga." The argument got louder and more emotional. Sarah and I threw nervous glances at each other about whether we should intervene. Finally, I said to Michelle that her experience did not speak for all youth in San Francisco. Exasperated, Michelle conceded to the inclusion of the interracial friendship but was angry and withdrew from the discussion temporarily.

My initial analysis of this incident interpreted Michelle's position as one that privileged her concept of realness over the other group members. I understood her response as one that could not allow for another perspective or narrative. However, in reconsidering the debate, there seems to be more at stake for Michelle than her investment in realness. For one, the reactions to Michelle demonstrate the other members' investment in notions of realness, including my own (for example, constructing the Bay Area as a diverse place where different youth groups get along harmoniously). In hindsight, Michelle's resistance to the story on interracial dating and friendship may have been a way to question the ease with which such a narrative was constructed, without much consideration of the interracial tensions and conflicts that exist in the city. Michelle's comments have a particular resonance in California, where racial and ethnic demographics are drastically shifting. As black populations shrink throughout the state, the number of Latino and Asian Americans and immigrants continues to grow. This transformation plays out in community practices in San Francisco, where neighborhoods like the Mission District and the Tenderloin,

heavily populated by Latino and Southeast Asian youth, tend to be targeted with programs and funds, such as the grant that Sarah received for the project. Our response to Michelle increased her feeling of alienation from the project and her conviction that the narrative was not about her and the people whom she knew.

The drive to document the authentic experience of racially coded youth is complicated by the advent of new digital technologies and image manipulation software. At an important moment in digital technology's expansion of image-making possibility and visual manipulation, realness as a set of discursive practices to mark and identify certain marginalized bodies thrives within the practices of media arts organizations and within contemporary visual culture at large. Realness operates in relationship to representations of racialized youth on multiple levels: as a concept alluding to that which is the essence of reality; as an aesthetic style in black popular cultural production, namely, hip-hop music and film; and as a set of visual tropes that constitute a particular racialized and gendered subject position. Realness has a troublesome history within the realm of black cultural theory and artistic practices. Black scholars have critiqued the concepts of realness and authenticity within black popular culture as a reification of an essentialist notion of masculine black subjectivity that is both misogynistic and homophobic.[23] Along these lines, the critical race theorist Kendall Thomas problematizes the popularity of the discourse of realness in black cultural discourse when he writes: "The discourse of authentic black identity has been increasingly accompanied by an authoritarian effort to impose its normative vision. The proponents of authenticity have fashioned a crude racialist litmus test to establish true *blackness*, which African Americans for whom the organicist idea of a unitary racial identity is neither a necessary nor desirable predicate for progressive antiracist politics predictably fail to pass."[24] The limitations that Thomas sees in such a quest for authenticity is relevant to youth cultural practices, as well as the struggles of other minoritized groups. While racial authenticity has been used to call for collectivism among minoritized groups, the discourse more often supports normative power systems, specifically white male heterosexual power in the context of the United States.[25] Even more troubling, the reliance on realness and authenticity reduces racialized youth's capacity for cultural engagement to a "telling of their own stories."

The fetish of the real in black culture has been appropriated by various nonblack youth cultures partly through the vehicle of hip-hop culture and music. Whereas "keeping it real" at one moment referred to an identification with a particular shared (whether symbolic, mythic, or material) black experience, it now also refers to a style that reacts against white adult norms and codes of conduct. "To be real" or "to keep it real" within certain U.S.

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youth cultures can serve to validate an experience outside mainstream, white adult value systems; it also becomes a popular aesthetic through counterbricolage by corporations and media outlets like MTV and BET. A popular example is Coca-Cola's "Real" advertising campaigns in which black actors, athletes, and hip-hop and R & B stars promoted the brand, after the company learned through marketing research that consumers were drawn to products and advertising that were "real."[26] In its various uses, the concept remains bound by the pursuit of an essence or aura of a specific identity category that is racialized and gendered in which blackness represents the ultimate referent of realness.

The discourse of realness relies heavily on the conventions of realism to construct tropes in visual culture. The purpose of the MEC narrative was to counter mass-mediated realist representations of racialized youth by re-presenting a realist narrative of youth produced by racialized youth. A combination of dramatic and documentary realism was the style that our group chose to create *Mission Tales*. In line with MEC's teaching strategy, the producers desired to create fictional youth characters who had to face "real" decisions familiar to other youth. With that in mind, the debate about realness in the MEC production workshops intensified during scene rehearsals, as we prepared to shoot the project. Kathleen's mother, who is a theatrical facilitator and an educator, volunteered to help the producers through this process. In one scene from the script, a fight between two girls takes place in a neighborhood housing project. Anita and Michelle, who were close friends and had spent much time outside the workshop space planning the fight scene, were excited to rehearse it. The scene begins with Anita's character exchanging money with a neighbor for food stamps at her aunt's request. She then sees Michelle's character at the park. Having heard that Michelle's character has been talking "mess" about her, Anita's character confronts her, and they fight in front of a group of youth.

During the rehearsal, Michelle attempted to direct and choreograph Anita's character. For example, she repeatedly told Anita to back up and to be more aggressive. Kathleen's mother tried to intervene and told Michelle to let the scene play out spontaneously. The rehearsal began to mirror the friendship between Anita and Michelle, in which Michelle is the more outspoken one and makes decisions for both of them. They ran the scene several times with increased interruption and heightened frustration. Their fight rehearsal grew more heated during each run-through. In the end, the rehearsal turned into an actual physical fight. After a moment when everyone, except for Michelle and Anita, stood frozen—not quite sure of their level of engagement (wondering were they "really" fighting or just acting well)—Sarah, Kathleen, and I separated the two. Anita's face was bleeding and tears were in her eyes. She left the room with her head down,

and Sarah asked Michelle what happened. Michelle breathed heavily and paced the room. She said that she could see Anita aiming to make contact with her and so she decided to hit Anita for real. The seamless transition from a scripted fight to an actual fight underscores the operation of competing versions of what is "real" in the production process that questions the fixed discourse of realness. The fight between Michelle and Anita was the climax in the youth producers' struggle over the narrative about youth identity and about whose experience is considered more valuable and authentic. Michelle's sense of disenfranchisement continued to brew and ultimately led to the confrontation. After the fight, her attendance and participation grew sporadic; by the time we reached postproduction, she was no longer involved.

Sites of Authenticity

Attention to personal experience often becomes the pedagogical method by which artistic practice merges with activism and tropes of authentic youth in many media arts collaborations, as MEC's mission and teaching philosophy emphasize. Youth participants, also embedded in the discourse of realness as a method of framing youth, consider the collaborative project as an opportunity to render their real experiences for an audience. Projects like *Mission Tales* and others produced by MEC are interested in visually exploring what is perceived to be the extraordinary and everyday experience of racialized youth. Events based on one's personal experiences (particularly experiences that racialize and sexualize participants as outside normative, white adult culture) serve as potential scenes and story lines. In her seminal article "The Evidence of Experience," Joan Scott cautions against privileging experience as authentic or originary:

> When experience is taken as the origin of knowledge, the vision of the individual subject (the person who had the experience or the historian who recounts it) becomes the bedrock of evidence on which explanation is built. Questions about the constructed nature of experience, about how subjects are constituted as different in the first place, about how one's vision is structured—about language (or discourse) and history—are left aside. The evidence of experience then becomes evidence for the fact of difference, rather than a way of exploring how difference is established, how it operates, how and in what ways it constitutes subjects who see and act in the world.[27]

Along with the incorporation of personal experience, youth media projects authenticate narratives by setting stories in sites considered to be places

where youth gather or "hang out." The central milieu for representing racialized youth in visual culture is the postindustrial urban street. From fashion advertisement to news media to large budget films, youth have been naturalized as residents, or even possessors, of the streets.[28] The location choices of *Mission Tales* underscored the street as the primary site for authenticating (racialized and working-class) youth.

The development of the corner store subplot in MEC's project is an example of the significance of personal experience and public sites in creating youth narratives. Early in the workshops, Michelle and Anita worked on a story line about two black youth who experience discrimination as customers in a neighborhood corner store. The producers were interested in addressing the tensions in many ghettoized urban communities in the United States between Asian and Arab store owners and black residents. They based this plot on an actual experience but were initially vague about whether they had experienced the discrimination or their friends had. Their reasoning for including this subplot was that it was based on an actual experience and that black youth commonly face such discrimination as consumers.

In contemporary representations of urban youth, the corner store functions as an extension of the street-urban public space. Visual culture, particularly film and music videos, reproduces images of immigrant shop owners who are uncomfortable with or antagonistic toward black youth. The corner store often recurs as a contested zone where marginalized cultures clash. The Hughes brothers' critically acclaimed urban drama, *Menace II Society* (1993), most notably demonstrates the significance of the corner store as a symbol of tensions between different constituents of postindustrial urban communities in the United States. In the film, O-Dog, a young black menace, kills two Korean immigrant store owners after one owner insults him. The recurrence of the corner store as a site to locate black youths' real experiences as one of conflict with older immigrant adults displaces the role of normative white power relations in disenfranchising both groups through economic, geographic, educational, and other restrictions. In so doing, normative power relations remain unchallenged. Instead, racialization and the process of othering are located outside whiteness and relocated within the contested zones of the "domestic Other" and "immigrant Other."[29]

In *Mission Tales*, Taquan, a black youth, enters a corner store with his friend Darryl (who was scripted as black, but because of difficulty finding someone to play this role, Kathleen's brother, also of Native American and North African descent, played the character). Taquan loiters around the store counter aimlessly looking at product displays while Darryl goes to the malt liquor cases at the back of the store. The actual owner of the

store, Sal (who agreed both to let MEC use his store and to play a racist owner), watches Taquan suspiciously and seemingly ignores Darryl in the back of the store. Sal tells Taquan to get out of the store: "I'm sick and tired of you goddamn punks trying to steal." Darryl senses that trouble is brewing and runs to the front counter just as Taquan points a gun at Sal's head (the story unfolds similarly in *Menace II Society*). The frame then freezes, and we are exposed to Taquan's thoughts through voice-over narration: "This punk ass Arab disrespecting me in front of my friend. I'm going to squash it because I don't want to go to jail. It ain't even worth it." The confrontation between Sal and Taquan takes on added significance in a post–September 11 United States and the growth in state-endorsed anti-Arab sentiment.

Though the youth producers of MEC did not make mention of *Menace II Society* explicitly in shaping their script, the familiar interactions and dialogue between Sal and Taquan refer to visual tropes of deviant black youth and racist immigrant owner. Even more significant, the lines between Sal and Taquan are unscripted and unrehearsed. Instead, the nonactors playing Taquan and Sal were both aware of the opposition between the subject positions that they portrayed and the language that represented each position.[30] Sal refers to the trope of criminal blackness when he tells Taquan to leave his store. Taquan's deliberate racialization of Sal as an Arab (he pronounces it "Aye-rab") implies that racial groups exist in opposition of each other. In the scene from *Menace II Society*, O-Dog marks the shop owners as Other when he declares, "I hate ya'll." *Mission Tales*, in its unscripted scene, is more explicit in racializing minorities who are not black as the Other and as in opposition to the othered black youth. In both scenes, the store owners through posturing and language make it known that O-Dog and Taquan are not welcome in these spaces and that the economic exchange is strictly out of necessity. The interactions in both cases set up a contest between who has relative economic power and property ownership and who has cultural and legal citizenship in contested racialized spaces of U.S. cities. Yet the MEC producers attempt to disrupt the trope by allowing the spectator access to Taquan's thoughts and, most important, by stopping Taquan from enacting racial and xenophobic violence against the owner.

In developing the scene, Anita and Michelle made a conscious choice to have Taquan walk away from the conflict. Michelle explained their reasoning during preproduction when Sarah, hesitant about the story line, warned the youth producers about playing into stereotypes unwittingly.

> Sarah: We need to really be aware of the kind of images that we are creating, that doesn't play into stereotypes that we don't support.

> Michelle: If I was going to keep it real, 'cause I know what you saying that we should have it positive, but if I was going to keep it real, in that story, the dude, he would have stole something. [Laughing] But we left that little stealing part out. He didn't shoot him, but we left the stealing part out. But I mean, I'm just telling you the truth. That would have happened.
> Sarah: . . . We have to think already about what the audience is going to think about this stuff.

Their exchange demonstrates the ambivalence between portraying the "real" experience of youth and of local racial politics and constructing narratives that do not reify racialized youth as deviant and xenophobic. Most significant, Michelle's response alludes to the blurring of the material real and representational real through an invocation of the discourse of realness. Michelle's statement that if she was going to "keep it real," then she would show some type of asocial or criminal act, appears at odds with her earlier statement that the story should be included because it really happened and that it was based on real experiences of youth as targets of discrimination. Although Michelle's use of "real" refers to actual lived experience in this case, it is steeped nonetheless in the privilege of authenticity. In other words, Michelle subjugates the actuality of experience to the realness of youth as victims of discrimination to further the producers' narrative. Anita, who agreed with Michelle's reasoning, exposed the basis of the story line by telling the group about the actual experience that motivated the producers. Anita stated that Michelle and her friend were targeted by immigrant store owners because Michelle's friend attempted to steal from the store. In the final script, this level of complexity was not included in the plot. Furthermore, the producers changed the gender of the characters, so that the conflict would take place between a black male youth and a nonblack storeowner, as is commonly portrayed in popular media representations. Michelle's experience was altered for the script to match a narrative of black youth's experiences as one of perpetual discrimination and conflict.

Each story line in *Mission Tales* moves toward a level of intervention, by presenting voice-over narration of the characters' thoughts at critical moments of decision making. The MEC producers, in trying to reflect the realness of youth's experience as closely as possible, decided to include statistics about youth violence, child poverty, and teen pregnancy. Influenced by the Eminem and Dr. Dre music video discussed earlier, Michelle had suggested this device to the group: "We're going to have the story freeze. Then we're going to have the good come out, then the bad come out. Then, we're going to have facts—the picture is still frozen—but we will have side facts come out. . . . We're going to have people act out a situation,

then we're going to show true facts." The statistics, taken from official governmental sources, are presented at the end of the narrative over the faces of characters who represented the respective topic. For example, over Taquan's face, there is a gloomy statistic about the sexual abuse of youth who are incarcerated in adult prisons. The youth producers unanimously chose statistics that framed youth as victims of violence, poverty, and oppression. The incorporation of statistics as factual evidence works to blur the boundary even more between material reality and representation. While the video is quite consciously a docudrama with fictional narratives, the use of statistics and ethnographic footage allude to an extradiegetic truth that expands beyond the narrative boundaries. The ethnographic stylized footage and "scientific" facts express a certainty about the conditions of urban, racialized youth. Thus the statistics in the final video evoke a disembodied and objective authority on the status of racialized youth, juxtaposed with the subjective nature of the youth narratives presented in *Mission Tales*.

Circulating the Real

During the postproduction process, youth participants typically become less involved for several reasons. Because postproduction is more technically intensive than preproduction and production, it is difficult logistically to involve anyone with limited experience. Additionally, postproduction is typically the most expensive process for independent and low-budget projects. Unless the organizations have close ties to postproduction houses, like MEC's relationship with WCVF, there is little money and time available to train youth in postproduction. In many cases, a professional editor is hired to string together a narrative from the footage that the youth producers shot.

The postproduction process for *Mission Tales* was exceptional for media arts organizations. The youth producers paired with adult technicians and worked in shifts on editing the video, using a high-end digital editing system, in a WCVF suite. The goal in editing *Mission Tales* was to give each producer a level of autonomy in shaping scenes for the final video. In actuality, Kathleen was the most consistent about attending these tedious sessions. Thus the final video more closely reflected her vision. The relationship between the youth producers and adult instructors/facilitators also changed during this phase. Most significant, Sarah had to leave town during postproduction and had no hand in shaping the editing. Another MEC instructor, Amy, stepped into Sarah's position, and I continued as an assistant and observer.

When the MEC summer collaboration was over and the final edits were made on the video, the youth producers organized a community screening that attracted hundreds of people, primarily youth and adults from other local community organizations. The team of adult and youth volunteers who worked with the youth producers as cast and crew was also present. Kathleen made a speech about the process and presented flowers to Sarah and myself. Though much of *Mission Tales* delves into intergenerational and interracial strife, the community screening, in which all participants were acknowledged, demonstrated how the project was a meaningful collaboration between various constituents of the Mission District and other San Francisco neighborhoods (from Sal, the corner store owner, to WCVF employees who agreed to play characters in the production, to the Valencia Gardens that allowed much of the project to be shot there).

Typically, the circulation of youth media ceases with this type of community premiere and celebration, although venues for screening youth-produced media have grown in recent years. Yet, when videos do circulate beyond these screenings, the context of their distribution tends to contribute to their authenticity as portraits of "real" experiences of urban youth. During the mid-1990s, youth-produced videos gained increasing circulation in museums, major film festivals, and other adult-oriented cultural events. Often, though, the videos' circulation within these venues reifies notions of realness, as the value of the work is based on the authenticity of experience represented and the lack of sophistication of the production. Using John Fiske's concept of "video high" (highly produced, mass distributed) and "video low" (little technical expertise, considered more authentic), youth-produced videos circulate as "video low," or as unmediated access to the mind and experiences of racialized youth.[31] Unlike adult media productions, youth videos are not promoted by advertising the names of the producers but by advertising the realness of the production, the authenticity of experience represented, and the fetish of the category, "youth." For example, exhibitions of youth-produced videos at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts had titles like *Keepin' It Reel* and *Extreme Teens*, respectively.

The lack of attention and resources that are put into circulation and distribution complicates the fetishization of the product, that is, the video within the collaborative process of youth-adult art making. Once the product has been realized, it both gains and loses value. The final video stands to grantors and publicity venues as proof of the success of the collaborative model, and yet it may never be seen again in public circles. In some ways, the product experiences a death after its completion. While it often goes unstated that the future of the video project is a shelf life, the youth producers may have expectations that their tape will have the type

of visibility of an MTV show or mass-produced film, especially in light of the popularity of reality TV shows. Throughout the production of *Mission Tales*, Kathleen glowed with possibility about the life of the final video. When I interviewed her during the editing phase about her hopes for the project, she stated:

> We're about to take the 1999 Sundance Festival. I'm not joking; they accept video. . . . I'm planning on hopefully taking one of the awards for the Stockholm, or the Amsterdam, or the France Festival. No seriously, this video is about to lead into a career for me as a director slash actress. . . . The main reason why I did this project is cause I'm out of high school. I'm trying to find something to do as a career and I really think that this is going to lead me somewhere.[32]

While the video did not go as far as Kathleen expected, on her own accord, she entered the project into several festivals. The Mill Valley Film Festival, located in the wealthy and predominantly white region of Marin County in Northern California, accepted and screened *Mission Tales* in their youth shorts program. The video, however, became a source of controversy at the festival. *Mission Tales* was grouped in the children and youth media section of the festival, and therefore many parents brought their young children to the screening. The language, crime, and sexual references in the narrative offended several people in the audience, who demanded that the film be removed from the lineup. Kathleen and the other producers interpreted the response as proof of the realness and effectiveness of their project. Given that the festival's audience is primarily white, upper class, and suburban, for the youth producers, the parents' responses demonstrated how out of touch this audience was with the experiences of urban, working-class, racialized youth.

It should be noted, however, that the film has received a mixed reception by youth audiences. An MEC artist/instructor explained how a group of students responded when she screened the video in a workshop class: "The kids were very upset about the images that they saw in [*Mission Tales*] and I also think the cursing. It's a difficult video to watch. It's rather fatalistic. A lot of [MEC] videos are like kids die in the end or somebody dies in the end."[33] The artist described the fatalism and sobering tone as common shortcomings of youth-produced videos. She connects this sentiment to the totalizing rhetoric of media literacy lectures offered during preproduction workshops:

> I watched a lot of stuff [youth-produced videos at a screening that she organized], and I had a really difficult time with a lot of what I was watching. . . .

At the same time, I'm really into kids investigating themselves and doing personal projects. I feel like the narrative leads to generalizations in a big way. The kids are always dying in the end. Things are dire. . . . [MEC] gets into these very big projects because they look good, and they do. . . . I had a really hard time sitting there watching these projects, one after the other. There's no in between. . . . I feel really bad not liking this stuff.[34]

Because of the short shelf life of most of these videos, the product (the video resulting from the collaboration) is not the most lasting or successful component of media arts organizations. The power of such organizations rests in the possibilities that production creates. The process of making a video project *produces* relationships with others and the public sphere. The organizations ultimately underscore the necessity of youth being active and engaged in larger public discourses. On the one hand, youth media production offers an alternative to globalized, corporatized popular visual culture, by emphasizing the significance and dynamism of localized cultural practices. The work of the organizations defies notions of youth as merely consumers or recipients of popular culture. On the other hand, producing videos in media arts collaborations in no way resolves the problem of realness in representations of racialized youth. The process of collaboration for our MEC group demonstrates how the struggle over resources and representational control is not simply resolved by giving tools of media production to disenfranchised groups. Within these groups, community and identity are not stable terms but dynamic concepts that are rigorously debated and challenged. As the MEC collaboration reveals, the representational politics of alternative and activist media, as well as their politics of production, must be critically considered to disrupt the representational currency of dominant representations of racialized youth as simultaneously authentic and aberrant.

Notes

1. I cannot do justice here to the complex issues of gentrification and displacement that took place in the Mission District during the late 1990s and early 2000s. It is important to note that many white artists found themselves also displaced by the high-technology companies and start-up dot-com businesses that moved into the area during this time. A group of primarily white artists of which Sarah was a central member organized several activities to protest the displacement of artists by these businesses, developers, and city officials. One such activity was called "Art Strikes Back!" Around the same time, a media installation was installed in a local nonprofit gallery in the Mission titled *fuckyou.com*. These battles were closely documented by local newspapers, particularly the *San Francisco Chronicle*. See, for example, Ilene Leichuk, "Posters Give New View of Homeless: Underground Artists Fight Gentrification," 4 September 2001; "Ammiano Tries to Curb Mission Development," 21 June 2001; Vanessa Hua, "Reversal of Fortune: Buildings That Symbolized the Gentrification Sweeping San Francisco to Fill Empty Floors amid Dot-Com Collapse," 4 March 2001; David R. Baker, "Fifteen Arrested as Protesters Occupy Offices of Internet Firm in Mission," 22 September 2000; Mark Martin, "Artistic Statement in Mission: Artists Poke Fun at the New Economy," 5 August 2000; and Janet Wells, "Neighbors Protest Plan to Build Condos: Schools' Mission District Property," 22 June 2000.

2. Since then MEC has built an institutional infrastructure consisting of a large workshop and administrative space in a popular neighborhood for artists and young white professionals. This is in large part due to the grant-writing and fund-raising efforts of Sarah.

3. One veteran employee of WCVF who had worked there since the organization moved into the building stated anecdotally that when the new site opened, many of the homeless people in the area would use its facilities, especially the bathrooms and kitchens. Night employees discovered one homeless man who slept in the production center every night. After these early encounters, the organization became very guarded about screening new clients and unknown individuals who entered its space.

4. This is part of a much larger study of collaboration and representation in youth-based media arts organizations. In addition to MEC, the larger study looks at four other media arts organizations in urban centers in the United States. All personal and organizational names, as well as titles of community video projects, have been changed to protect the privacy of participants.

5. During the mid-1990s, a politicized youth movement emerged in California as a response to growing antiyouth sentiment and legislation. This movement often overlapped and collaborated with youth-adult artistic collaborations. One of the most oppressive measures targeted at youth was Proposition 21, the Juvenile Crime Initiative. The measure, approved by voters in 2000, lowered the age at which youth could be tried as adults for felonies to fourteen. The representations of youth as terror runs throughout American news media in the 1990s, from images of blacks and Latinos as gang members to disaffected, white young males on shooting rampages at schools. For more on representations of youth crime and violence, see Henry Giroux, *Fugitive Cultures: Race, Violence, and Youth* (New York: Routledge, 1996); and Robin D. G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: Free Press, 1994).

6. What makes the attempts to build community through such collaborative art projects even more precarious is the dearth of funding available to professional

artists and organizations in the 1990s and early 2000s, in part because of the U.S. Congress's well-documented attacks on state-funded art, specifically the NEA. Because artists have difficulty receiving funding for their art practices, many have turned to teaching and collaborations with youth as mechanisms for securing grants, other sources of funding, and publicity.

7. Ron Burnett, "Video: The Politics of Culture and Community," in *Resolutions: Contemporary Video Practices*, ed. Michael Renov and Erika Suderburg (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 299.

8. Sarah actually has lived in the Mission District for several years, though she is not a member of the various communities to which the youth belonged. At the time, I lived in Oakland and was not involved in the community represented through the grant or the collaborative project. For an interesting analysis of the relationship between art and urban renewal/gentrification projects in recent U.S. history, see Tom Finkelpearl, *Dialogues in Public Art* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000).

9. See Martha Rosler, "Video: Shedding the Utopian Moment," in *Illuminating Video: An Essential Guide to Video Art*, ed. Doug Hall and Sally Jo Fifer (New York: Aperture, 1990), 31–50; and Deirdre Boyle, "A Brief History of American Documentary Video," in Hall and Fifer, *Illuminating Video*, 51–69.

10. Rosler, "Video," 31.

11. Alexandra Juhasz, *AIDS TV: Identity, Community, and Alternative Video* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 43.

12. See Dee Dee Halleck, *Handheld Visions: The Impossible Possibilities of Community Media* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002). For more on the development of video art and activism, see Hall and Fifer, *Illuminating Video*; Deidre Boyle, *Subject to Change: Guerrilla Television Revisited* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); and Renov and Suderburg, *Resolutions*.

13. The digital divide, referring to the disparity between those who have technological access and skills and those who lack resources and exposure in an increasingly globalized technocracy, is a concept that I find problematic, because it does not fully address issues of inequality and representations of inequality with regard to race and technology. At the same time, the concept has gained a great deal of cultural cachet in American public discourse and public policy circles. For a more critical analysis of race and technology that moves beyond remedial debates currently taking place regarding "the digital divide," see Alondra Nelson, ed., "Afrofuturism," special issue, *Social Text*, no. 20 (2002): 21–47.

14. Prior to the start of the workshop, I had arranged with Sarah to spend half of my time during the project as her teaching assistant and half of my time taking research notes. I worked with her on an administrative level to recruit participants and to secure a workshop site before the project began. Once the workshops began, all sessions were recorded. Recording during production and postproduction was logistically impossible. The youth producers were aware of my role; I explained to them that I was doing research for my dissertation at Stanford University and that I was interested in community media practices and representations of youth through media. During the first couple of sessions, Anita enjoyed the novelty of the tape recorder and would point the microphone at individuals when talking. She also often prompted me when the tape needed changing. This curiosity soon died as we moved into developing the narrative. Occasionally I felt conflicted by my dual position, particularly during preproduction meetings when shaping the

narrative. As a participant, I felt responsible to be present and involved; yet I was also concerned about my influence in shaping the project and the power dynamics between the youth producers, Sarah, and me. In the end, I recognized that there was no clear division between my different roles in the project and that my search to document and represent the workshop process and the politics of representation involved in the program contributes to the reliance on realness in representational practices.

15. These topics are typical of the youth-based media projects that I researched. Many of the final pieces often serve as public service announcements on the dangers of drugs, violence, or unprotected sex.

16. Group discussion, recorded by the author, San Francisco, 1 July 1999.

17. For more analysis of representations of racialized youth in urban public space, see Nicole Fleetwood, "'Busing It' in the City: Black Youth, Performance, and Public Transit," *TDR* 48 (2004): 33–48.

18. Irit Rogoff, "Studying Visual Culture," in *The Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff (New York: Routledge, 1998), 22.

19. For more research and analysis on youth arts organizations, refer to recent work by Shirley Brice Heath and Elisabeth Soep.

20. Untitled informational packet, 1999.

21. Artist, interview with author, Oakland, CA, 19 October 1999.

22. Youth participant, exit interview by the author, San Francisco, 11 August 1999.

23. See Kendall Thomas, "'Ain't Nothin' Like the Real Thing': Black Masculinity, Gay Sexuality, and the Jargon of Authenticity," in *The House That Race Built: Black Americans, U.S. Terrain*, ed. Wahneema Lubiano (New York: Pantheon, 1997), 116–35; Stuart Hall, "What Is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?" in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogue in Cultural Studies*, ed. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (London: Routledge, 1996), 465–75; Phillip Brian Harper, *Are We Not Men? Masculine Anxiety and the Problem of African-American Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Valerie Smith, "The Documentary Impulse in Contemporary African-American Film," in *Black Popular Culture*, ed. Gina Dent (Seattle: Bay, 1992), 54–64.

24. Thomas, "Ain't Nothin' Like the Real Thing," 129.

25. Kendall Thomas and a host of other scholars (including Gayatri Spivak and Stuart Hall) have argued for the necessity of a new form of collectivism across differences, often called "strategic essentialism." Seeing racial identification as "a contingent situated strategy" allows for collective political engagement to challenge white, heterosexual, adult normative systems while recognizing the contradictory and conflictual variables that constitute this identity (Thomas, "Ain't Nothin' Like the Real Thing," 132). In the context of youth community art practices, strategic employment of identity is used to call forth participants. My critique here is how this collectivism among youth in American urban centers often relies on the rhetoric of racial authenticity associated with heteronormative black political and artistic movements in the United States.

26. "'Real' Recognition for North American Advertising Campaign," Coca-Cola Company Official Web site, 16 January 2004, www2.coca-cola.com/ourcompany/wn20040116_real.html.

27. Joan W. Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," *Critical Inquiry* 17 (1991): 777.

28. Robin D. G. Kelley, *Yo' Mama's Disfunktional: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America* (Boston: Beacon, 1997); Martin Sanchez Jankowski, *Islands in the Street: Gangs and American Urban Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Paul Willis, *Common Culture: Symbolic Work at Play in the Everyday Cultures of the Young* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1990); and Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Routledge, 1979).

29. Endemic of the polarization between minoritized groups is the representation in news and popular media of tensions between black communities and Korean shopkeepers. These tensions and their portrayals have intensified since the Los Angeles riots (April 1992). The reiteration of these groups as diametrically opposed and divided by unbridgeable cultural gaps overshadows the material struggles for limited resources and how normative white power marginalizes and divides minoritized groups. George Lipsitz's recent study, *American Studies in a Moment of Danger* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), is a compelling analysis of these divisive political practices and their negative effects on the struggles of racialized communities. Furthermore, recent projects like *The Black Belt* exhibit at the Studio Museum in Harlem (2003) and Vijay Prashad's book, *Karma of Brown Folk* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), attempt to trace significant cultural exchanges taking place between black and Asian communities.

30. It is important to note that during the setup for the corner store scene and between "takes," Sal and the youth playing Taquan joked and talked uninhibitedly with each other. The two had not met prior to the MEC shoot. Their ease at performing tropes of opposing identity groups was based on what I interpret as an unspoken awareness and trust that the words were iterative and not targeted at the being to whom they were addressed.

31. John Fiske, *Media Matters: Race and Gender in U.S. Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

32. Youth participant, exit interview by the author.

33. Artist, interview by the author.

34. Ibid.