

Today, we still face the repercussions of the rise and the beginning of the decline of urban schools, which took place from 1860 to 1920 (Anyon, 1997). Anyon (1997) asserts, “Educational change in the inner city, to be successful, has to be part and parcel of more fundamental social change” (p. 13). The achievement gap in our nation’s schools is, in part, a symptom of a much deeper socioeconomic illness in the wider society, part of the abandonment of the urban core and the creation of a “truly disadvantaged” racialized urban underclass that does not have access to basic social services and employment opportunities (Wilson, 1987). There is an achievement gap of literacy levels, graduation rates, test scores, and college access between urban poor and suburban wealthy. Horace Mann’s vision of schools as the “great equalizer” contributing to a socially just and democratic society continues to be undermined by inequitable educational practices where schools are often segregated and provide differential instruction to poor urban youth of color who are often alienated and disempowered by traditional curricula and pedagogical practices (Kozol, 1992; Morrell, 2004; Oakes, 2005; Orfield, 1996) that are culturally oppressive (Freire, 1972; Gramsci, Hoare, & Nowell-Smith, 1999). What’s more, racism and violence plague students, schools, and communities (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Noguera (2003) explains why we must not give up hope and must continue with reform efforts in public urban schools rather than close them down, as some have suggested. He notes that “in the same way that it would be unwise for criticisms of overcrowded buses or trains to prompt calls to abandon mass transportation” (p. 26) we must look to providing solutions, not making the problem go away. In short, there continues to be a problem in educational access, civic engagement, and a democratic inclusion of youth voice in secondary public education. This is not a new set of problems, but innovative youth, educators, and researchers offer new ideas that could bring the possibility of novel solutions. One site for possible solutions can be found in educational youth and community organizing programs that are attempting to increase access and civic engagement as well as democratize knowledge production.

This study is a portraiture and case study of Xitlali (pronounced Si-tllah-lee), one Latina youth activist-researcher-educator in one after-school, community-based youth organizing program called Gaining Rights through Investigating, Teaching and Organizing (GRITO). This paper is the culmination of a yearlong participative research in which I worked alongside students, organizers, and researchers to understand solutions to community and school problems offered by youth in youth organizing programs as well as sought ways to improve upon the best models of university-sponsored community-based youth organizing. Self and society is the central issue that arose in the portraits composed from the data of this study. More specifically this study examines the ways the individual and the youth organizing institution can be reconsidered from

four different vantage points—taking one side, interaction, mutual constitution, and political positionality—on self and society (see Figure 4, below). The analysis and discussion address three important themes—educational access and equity, civic engagement, and democratic knowledge production—to youth organizing that were frequently indexed by the youths’ action research projects, the program’s curriculum, and the conversations between all the stakeholders in the GRITO program. They emerged as three of the major problems facing youth in urban in public secondary schools. This work seeks to honor the intent and practice of youth organizing programs, as well as to detail Xitlali’s emergent voice and struggles as she simultaneously led and was sustained by a large group of students, community members, researchers, and educators. I argue examination of the relationship between self and one social institution provides researchers and practitioners a vantage point from which to reconsider the issues of civic engagement, knowledge production and educational access and equity in youth organizing.

This paper explains how four lens provide understanding of self and society—a dualism that is common to educational rhetoric—that mediates how Xitlali, a Latina youth activist-researcher-educator, relates to one after-school community based youth organizing program (GRITO). Both John Dewey and Karl Marx provide a version of four perspectives (refer to Figure 1) as a powerful way to articulate and break down dualisms. In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey (1916) cumulatively lists 37 dualisms that must be confronted if progressive learning institutions are to survive. I went to Dewey’s (1927) chapter “The Problem with Method,” and found Dewey taking his reader through perspectives 1-3 as they pertain to the individual/social dualism and American education. A more complex version of the first through third lenses can be found in the significant statements Marx makes about his methodology, in the introduction to the *Grundrisse*, (Marx, 1973).<sup>1</sup> Marx (Marx, Engels, & ebrary Inc, 2001) later takes up the fourth perspective, where change involves re-structuring everything, in the *Communist Manifesto*. These perspectives are not the sole property of Dewey and Marx and relate back to multiple theoretical paradigms. Below, I explain how these perspectives allow us to understand certain things about Xitlali in GRITO. A fuller discussion of each lens is folded into the analysis section.

Why be multiperspectival when looking at the self and society in youth organizing? There are times where the various perspectives will allow us to see what we are not seeing about educational access, civic engagement, and democratic knowledge production. For example the mutually constituted lens reveals moments of unification of the two sides of the descriptors represented in dualisms in the face-to-face interactions in GRITO, allowing for positive change and greater equity among GRITO members. Other times the use of these perspectives will reveal a gap and point of improvement for the program. In the

case of GRITO the political positionality perspective grants insight into the lack of support for undocumented students and the dearth of institutional connections, which could reinforce GRITO members' chances of acquiring basic rights to education and democratic participation.

I have attempted to outline the central focus of this paper—self and society in youth organizing—and the educational problems related to educational access, civic engagement, and democratic youth voice that GRITO is addressing. Now I will briefly summarize the different groups of scholars who are also looking toward youth for answers to public education's most pressing problems. Recently, there have been several movements orientated toward looking at the success of youths' ability to create positive community change and greater social equity, including: resistance theory (Giroux, 1983; MacLeod, 2009; McLaren, 1998); positive youth development theory (Larson, 2000); civic engagement and policy analysis (McLaughlin, Irby, & Langman, 1994; Morrell, 2004; Oakes, Rogers, & Lipton, 2006); and socio-cultural theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Throughout the history of American social movements and schooling, youth have participated in grassroots efforts to make an impact on local problems in meaningful and lasting ways (Morrell, 2006). After-school youth organizing programs can provide a sanctuary from unjust social conditions and should strive to provide opportunities for youth to speak up and transform the institutions shaping their lives (Kirshner, 2006; Pittman, et al., 2001). Ginwright and James (2002) assert that the best youth organizing groups treat youth “as agents capable of transforming their toxic environments, not simply developing resiliency and resistance to them” (p. 40).

The various intellectual movements from socio-cultural theory to resistance theory have examined youth organizing programs; several studies of programs similar in structure and substance to GRITO have been conducted (McLaughlin, et al., 1994; O'Donoghue, 2007; Torre & Fine, 2006; Yonezawa & Jones, 2006). GRITO's slogan, “RU standing on the Sidelines & Watching the Problem? Step up. Make a change. Play the game. GRITO!” is written by youth participating in GRITO whose mission is organization for positive youth-led social change. The “problems” identified by the youth during the yearlong data collection for the study took place include gang violence and racial stereotyping. Playing the game in GRITO is researching problems in their schools and community and advocating for solutions through school, local, and statewide governance.

## **Methods**

### *Portraiture*

There is a range of methods that attempt to render human life experience in qualitative, richly textured ways, borrowing techniques from fiction writing and literary non-fiction. These methods are part of a “long arc of work, reaching back two centuries, that joined art and science” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 5). Portraiture is one qualitative method that records and interprets subjects’ perspectives and experience, documenting their voices, their visions, their authority, their knowledge, and wisdom—placed in social and cultural context and shaped through dialogue between the portraitist and the subject (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983, 1994). I used portraiture because it allows me to sketch the outline of GRITO and begin to work toward capturing the deep and complex essence of Xitlali’s experience in that program and in society and to render it in a limited number of words.

### *The Liabilities and Possibilities of Portraiture*

Researchers can say X is true for an entire population by only looking at a randomly selected subset of the population. The larger and more random the sample then the more generalizable the findings become. This is the methodological justification of statistical research. How then can studies of one person purposefully chosen produce useful knowledge? The justification for portraiture begs for further explanation and, because of this issue, there is an ongoing debate about the validity of portraiture to reproduce generalizable knowledge. Eisner (1998) has a detailed discussion of the problems with knowledge construction through statistically sound truth claims. Eisner “argues that knowledge is a verb” and tends to accumulate in a more horizontal rather than vertical way. In other words, more knowledge helps people gain more perspectives and create many paradigms rather than collectively building toward a single theory, language, or currency that unites social sciences (p. 211). Multiple perspectives in a more naturalistic rather than puzzle piece version of knowledge accumulation is a better way to address problems in the social sciences that “are more complex than putting the pieces of a puzzle together to create a single, unified picture” (Eisner, 1998, p. 211).

The portrait of Xitlali was purposefully chosen in this study to reveal the essence of human action for change in institutions. Portraiture method allows me to explain *how*, not *how much*. There is a long tradition of school-based ethnography and observation with the purpose of understanding of process rather than normative generalization (Hammersley, 1994). Through an interpretative portraiture I can say what is problematic and what is possible within a particular context (Merriam, 1988). Portraiture is one way to enter into “a unit of human activity embedded in the real world; which can only be studied or understood in context” (Gillham, 2000, p. 1) and adds to horizontal process of knowledge accumulation that will continue to provide practitioners, policy makers, and

researchers ever more tools with which to understand and solve the complex problem of the achievement gap and disempowering schooling practices for underserved public school students in California. In this study such a methodology would be helpful to develop a hypothesis about the dimensions of navigating actions given particular tensions and contexts (Hartley, 1994). This study would take the form of a critical portraiture where the specific selection of powerful social justice educators is valuable because their actions hold strategic importance in relation to the general problem of the tensions that arise in social justice work in schools. The portraiture approach leverages results that allow me, as the researcher, to identify what is problematic and what is possible within a particular context in order to develop a hypothesis on an understudied aspect of social justice education. This portraiture research is purposive in working against social ills and making a contribution to a larger body of interpretive research that leverages a “new way of thinking about the nature of knowledge and how it can be created” (Eisner, 1998, p. 227). Effectively, portraiture reveals a general picture of complex interaction between self and society. The portraiture method informs the choice of subjects and initially guided the procedure for collecting data.

### *Procedures*

I spent one year as a participant observer working with the GRITO program and aided in conducting the surveys and interviews which grounds the data, findings and analysis in this investigation. The data were collected over a nine-month period. Initially, I randomly selected 5 weeks from the 2004-2005 GRITO school year. The field notes from all the events during those weeks were coded. The typical events included: one 6<sup>th</sup> grade session, two 7<sup>th</sup> grade sessions, two 8<sup>th</sup> grade sessions, and a youth/adult staff meeting. Occasionally outside GRITO events such as retreats, community events and presentations, were included if they occurred during the selected weeks. Upon revision of the work I use Xitlali’s writing as a more respectful and less symbolically violent way to understand her relationship with GRITO and the impact it had on her attempt to instigate social and community change through youth organizing.

### **Results: A Portrait**

What follows are two portraits; one of the program and the community and the other brings us in closer to one youth in this community-based program. The first I wrote and the second is in part a self-portrait written by Xitlali about her life and experience in the program.

#### *Behind a Portrait: GRITO and Industry City*

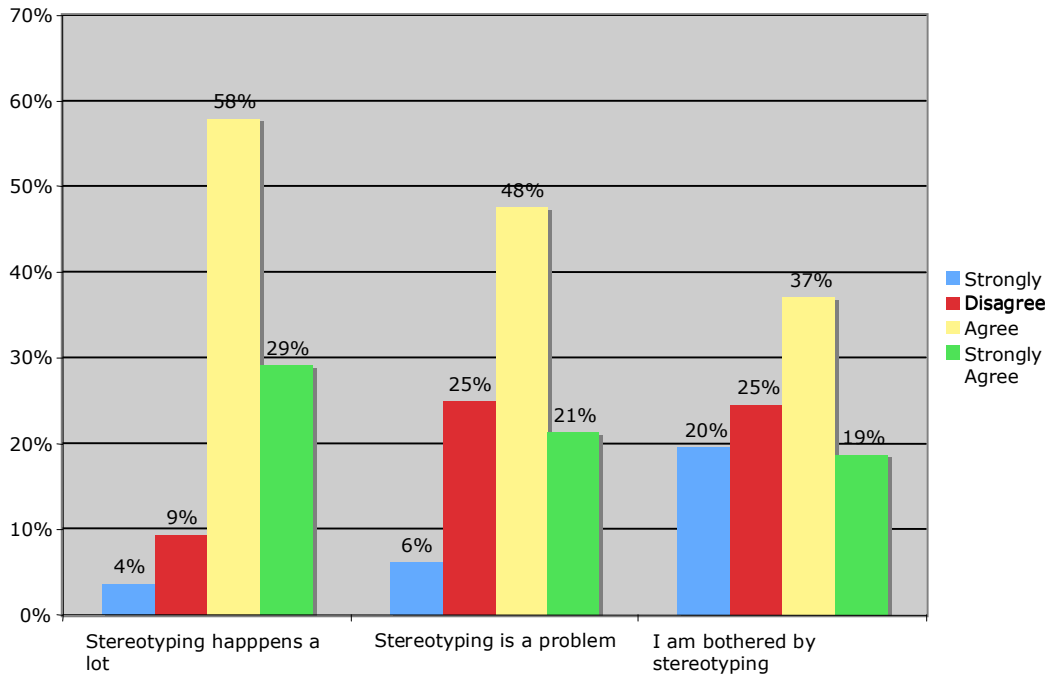
The GRITO after-school program in Industry City at Roosevelt Middle School (RMS) has three distinct cohorts: sixth, seventh, and eighth grades. GRITO students are active participants in their school communities. Through applied research collection methods learned in the program, GRITO youth investigate and attempt to uncover the underlying and deeper impacting social issues at school such as violence and respect. The youth in GRITO have applied to the program and have expressed a serious interest in developing their leadership skills and enacting positive change in their community. The majority of the youth come from marginalized working poor families. Participants are considered “urban youth” by the leaders and researchers of the program because they all are residents of Industry City, a middle- and working-class suburban sprawl located between two major cities on the west coast of the United States.<sup>2</sup> These urban youth have varying grade point averages and are different races including Latino, South East Asian, African American, and white.

The youth are involved in critical action research. During a research workshop, a graduate student from the university came to give a lecture and workshop on how to carry out action research. He explained that action research is defined as a “form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality, justice, coherence and satisfactoriness of (a) their own social practices, (b) their understanding of these practices, and (c) the institutions, programs and ultimately the society in which these practices are carried out” (McTaggart, 1994, p. 317). The youth, the university facilitators, and the high school facilitators came up with a list of why an action research approach best fit the type of research they wanted to continue doing at GRITO. The list included: 1) all working together and thinking critically about the information we are collecting, and 2) the goal of doing the research to make a difference and make youths voices heard in important school and community decisions.

### *Self and Society: Context of Emergent Themes*

The portrait of GRITO provides a context for the research the youth carried out and for the portrait of one of the youth leaders of the program, Xitlali. The theme I’m about to present owes a great deal to the very organization of the GRITO program. Self and society was a theme that arose in the work of the youth and that is implicit in the GRITO model. In fact, the notion of the individual and their relationship to the program, the school, or the community was mentioned in all 96 field notes that recorded the after school sessions. The crystallization of the theme self and society as central to GRITO, and youth organizing in general, arose from the youth. The impetus for this line of research that focused on this theme was a conversation between the youth: “Stereotypes are causing division! What do we need to bring Blacks, whites and Latinos together? Somebody to step

Crawford: Self and Society in Youth Organizing

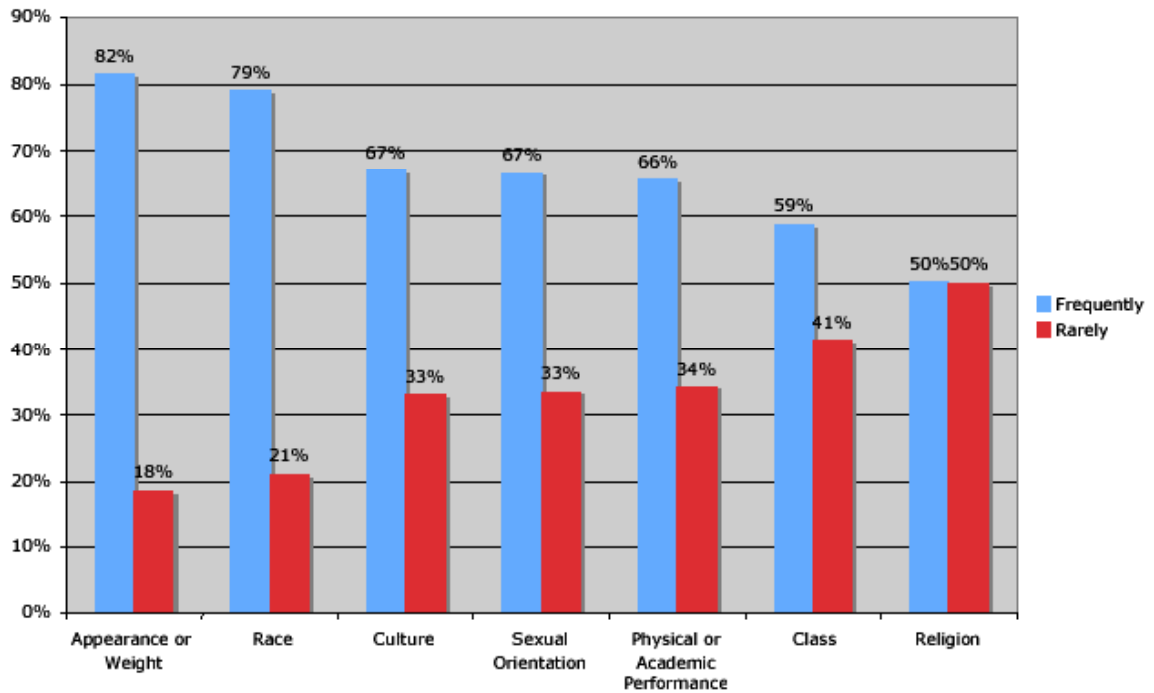


**Figure 1. Student Responses to Survey Questions Addressing Stereotyping at RMS**

up and say enough!” (FN 5.24.05). Youth decided to spend their semester researching the topic of stereotyping and social division at school. The youth had been asked to research a pressing problem in their community or school that they felt they could help make better.

The middle school students wrote and conducted surveys on stereotyping in conjunction with high school and university facilitators. After distributing the survey to the great majority of students at their school, the students found that 87% of the students at the middle school agreed that stereotyping happens a lot. The students also carried out massive school mapping of student social groups in the school. They found out that school space is divided by race and cliques, based on the final map that included photos, group names, interview excerpts, and racial and age percentages of students frequenting certain spots on the middle school campus (FN 4.21.05).

The GRITO students conducted a survey that they distributed to all the students present at RMS on one Friday during sixth period. The students found that the overwhelming majority of RMS students agreed “stereotyping happens a lot at RMS.” Fewer students, but still a strong majority—69% of the students—agreed that stereotyping is a problem at RMS. Even fewer students, although still a majority, agreed that they were personally bothered by stereotypes. Among the students surveyed about what stereotypes were based on, there was clearest consensus around appearance and race.



**Figure 2. What Students Reported That Stereotypes Were Based on at RMS**

Fifty peer interviews about stereotyping at RMS were collected by 18 students participating in GRITO in a cohort guided by Xitlali along with other educators. They found that stereotyping is more commonly based on visual factors. Their peers claimed that stereotyped groups are often different by appearance and interest. This is particularly true when appearance is very obvious and you know what a clique looks like and are therefore able to label them. Stereotypes were connected to social groups and social groups were defined by trust and security because people saw safety in numbers. At RMS, the significance was apparent as students reported that “more than half of the school are wannabes and/or gang members” and want their group to “have their backs in fights” (FN 5.17.05). Based on their interviews the GRITO students concluded that stereotyping is judging, prejudging, and making assumption based on visual factors like appearance or race. They believed stereotyped social groups formed because people want to be accepted. One student shared that a student she interviewed said, “I think acceptance is huge, for example there are a lot of gangs and in order to be in a gang you have to be accepted” (FN 5.12.05). Ultimately GRITO students were conflicted about the reason for social groups. One student said, “Acceptance can be a need for youth, but it also leads to cliques and gangs which cause division at school because someone is only accepted into a group if they are similar to each other” (FN 5.19.05). This tension that arose in the GRITO students’ research between acceptance as leading to negative stereotyping and

acceptance being part of what makes a school or community social centered on the theme of the self in society.

In the interviews RMS students reported differences based on looks and interests, behavior, where they live, and both looks and interests. Students who reported looks and interests as a main difference between certain groups and/or between individuals and society repeated a variation of what one student interviewed said, “They’re different from, like their interests and the way they dress and how... well how they look, how they dress, like their hair and makeup and clothes. They’re definitely different. Or jewelry. Shoes.” Another student said it is “their own style” or their “music, clothes, the grades.” Behavior was another reason for difference: “Well, they have, like, different clothes and they act a different way and they have different ways to say things, pretty much,” one student stated. Others cited people’s “different personalities” or how “they act different. Like popular people talk / brag a lot. Jocks brag.” Some students interviewed cited looks as well as interests and behavior. One student said different social groups were separated “by what they wear and how they act,” and another said it was “the way they talk, act, look, likes, dislikes, etc.” The most salient and frequently cited difference between stereotyped social groups was based on where they live. In fact, many students said the different groups were formed “by neighborhood.” Usually these neighborhoods were separated “racially too.”

When students were asked during these same interviews how they defined stereotyping they most frequently cited race. One student said stereotyping happens when people tell “like racial jokes, talking about white people, Mexican people and Black people. It’s basically making fun of someone for their race.” Another student said stereotyping is “labeling someone [by] what you think about their race.”

The students’ principal line of inquiry focused on stereotypes, but that conversation more frequently centered on racial stereotypes and racism. Several conversations in GRITO about the views students’ peers expressed during the interviews are particularly relevant to this point. The student researchers repeatedly voiced concern about the oversimplification of racial stereotyping. Juana complained that it’s not so easy to put people into a stereotype box. Some “said Eminem was Black when he’s really White. When I watch the Mexican channel, they have bleach blonde hair but they speak Mexican fluently” (FN 6.1.05 p. 8). James made another comment:

Like I used myself. Sometimes when I walk around I kinda act like I’m Black, but I grew up around mostly black and Latino kids, my elementary school was mostly Latino kids, those are the people I have grown up with and relate to. Just like Eminem. Sometimes you use examples like Michael Jackson. (FN 6.3.05 p. 5)

Both of these comments are part of a broader conversation about the way an individual gets boxed in by society in which youth and facilitators engaged. Toward the end of their research the youth began to talk about how our school (or our society) and we are very complicated. Stereotypes usually miss the complicated relationship between self and society.

*Xitlali's Portrait*

Xitlali has demonstrated excellence in school, leadership, and mentoring. Xitlali demonstrates commitment to education to change and work with her community instead of the dominant paradigm that encourages urban youth to assimilate and get out of the community (Gutiérrez, 2005). Xitlali is the HMC success story and the next section examines various ways to understand this youth advocate in one community-based organizing program.

Xitlali, the longest participating GRITO member, crossed the Mexico-U.S. border with her family, experienced domestic violence, and grew up in a neighborhood claimed by violent confrontations with the Sureños<sup>3</sup> and Norteños.<sup>4</sup> In seventh grade Xitlali's counselor feared she would be a victim of gang violence or get pregnant before she ever entered high school, leading her to recommend Xitlali to a new program starting at Roosevelt Middle School (RMS). Xitlali became part of the first cohort of GRITO. Xitlali became a community advocate for youth voice and their needs in her community. Five years later, Xitlali is still involved in GRITO and has graduated high school with honors. She continues to mentor young activists in the program and is respected by the youth, the superintendent, the mayor, and the city council members of her community. Xitlali has facilitated talks to classes at a prestigious private California university about her experience as a youth organizer, advocate, and mentor. She leaves them all in awe.

Xitlali applied to four-year universities this year. The following is an excerpt of her college personal statement and Xitlali's own articulation of her experience:

**My Seasons of Change: From Challenges to Opportunities**

The person that I am today has been particularly shaped by my embracing difficult circumstances as positive opportunities for growth. Early in my high school days, the thunderstorm came pouring down and struck me in the face, and I started to run as fast as I could to avoid it. When my mom separated from my dad, my life took a radical turn; my dad became an alcoholic and eventually landed in jail and my mother began to reconstruct her life. After years of crying because I needed to wash the dishes in the sink, I realized that my new role at home was a small price to pay in light of the suffering my mom endured from a violent relationship she fortunately left behind.

After a few years, I had to step up to what had been my biggest fear: responsibility. The moment she became a single mother, my life began to take many turns. My mother began to work every day and so I became the responsible oldest child of the house. Although it seemed a huge burden at the time, I have learned this responsibility has only made me stronger. It is not something I have a choice to do, but a responsibility I need to do for myself, my mother, and my family. All these changes I experienced growing up have made a more profound effect than I ever imagined. It has changed my thoughts, my personality, and my view of the world.

Even though many of the changes I experienced growing up were negative, I have also learned that change can take place for the positive. I have learned that changes challenge you to proactively do something about your situation and become more responsible, not only for yourself but for others, too. For example, I am currently involved in a program with youth who are seeking a “change.” However, change takes time and I have seen it through my own reflection in the mirror. I have come to realize in my own experience that change starts with the individual: change starts with me. I know that in my soul I have seeds of love, madness, hatred, joy and happiness; I can have a certain amount of each depending on how I choose to feed my soul and which parts to nurture. I feed it by being happy even during the toughest times and by being free to be angry – but controlling my madness by just sitting down for a minute and letting all those emotions wash through me.

Over time, I have seen that these seeds are starting to bloom. I can see the tree that I am becoming. My branches are reaching out to youth who need help. I have touched many lives with my colorful leaves as people tell me they are inspired and motivated by my words and my actions. I am changing in color, adapting to survive. I am becoming taller and stronger by keeping myself straight and always looking up even if it rains or if it is dark.

Through my work, the youth that I am working with will come to the conclusion that they also have power in their hands to make a change. Through my involvement in G.R.I.T.O. (Gaining Rights through Investigating, Teaching and Organizing Project) over the past four years, we have learned about change by thinking about our different circles of concern (issues that we see in the world, the community, the schools, and ourselves) and where we can most effectively influence change. By working from the issues closest to our reach, we can be part of that transformation we hope to see. In G.R.I.T.O, we identify these issues, research them, and work in advocacy and action to make a difference in our school and community. I have been involved in this program, initially as a founding member and eventually became a mentor, facilitator, and role model for middle school students in the program.

This is one of the reasons why I want to be a sociologist. Working with people fascinates me. I want to learn more about people and their surroundings. I want to be able to help young students develop new skills to make them feel confident in themselves and empowered to make a change.

To make a difference there are goals that need to be set up in order to accomplish them. My major goal is to transcend beyond what my family could not afford to do: go to school and get a good education. My family migrated here to have their “American Dream” come true by giving the younger generation a better life through a good education. Nothing will make me prouder than to be the first person in my family to graduate from high school and then college. To me education serves as my nutrients, sun and water to continue growing as a tree--branching out to meet my goals while positively improving my community and my family.

**Figure 3. Xitlali’s Personal Portrait**

Along with the support of other adults in GRITO, including myself, Xitlali applied to college. Xitlali applied to private and state schools armed with a high GPA, innumerable hours of community service work, recommendation letters from the past director of GRITO and another from a renowned scholar who also directs the Horace Mann Center (HMC) under which GRITO is housed, and not stellar SAT scores but impressive SAT II scores. She was not accepted to the university collaborating with GRITO.

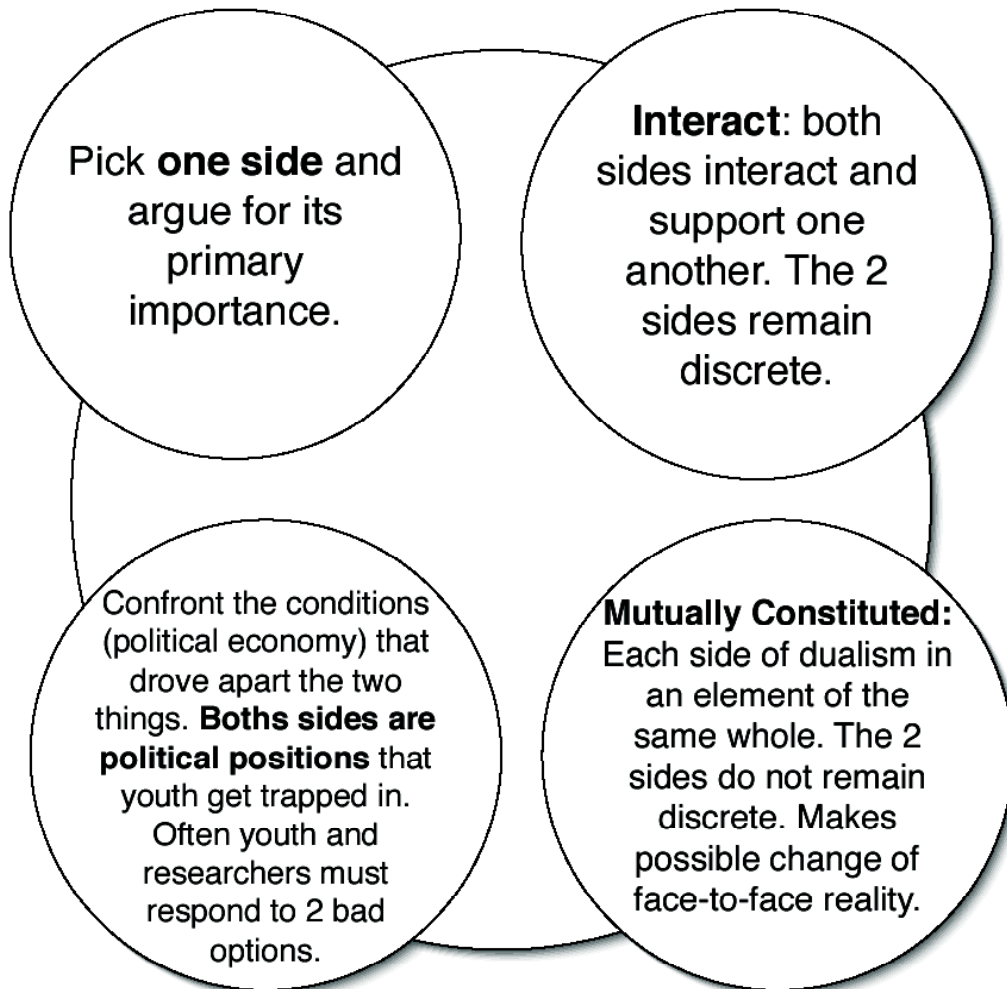
Xitlali occupies several positions of marginality as a poor woman of color, who does not have legal status in the U.S. Every action, every dream is limited and colored by these social markers of marginality. In the end of Xitlali’s essay she states, “Nothing will make me prouder than to be the first person in my family to graduate from high school and then college.” Xitlali is not expected by society to graduate high school. On one hand, her graduation is an act of resistance from the norms of marginalization (Solorzano, 2001). On the other, she embraces her family and their marginalization as part of the reason why education is a priority to her. Xitlali is making a huge change in her community, family, and self by setting graduation as her goal. The importance of this act would not be understood if marginalization in the terms of race, class, gender, and legal status were not considered. However this sole focus firmly cements Xitlali as the Other, rather than as a complex individual constrained by the labels that society places on her.

### **Analysis & Discussion: Dualism’s Four Lenses**

Xitlali holds a piece of the world I have been trying to understand over the past year and I have taken four different angles to make sense of it. In order to understand Xitlali and GRITO, first I have to work through several labels that get

tacked onto her experience. These social categories are given by both self and society and include talking about Xitlali at various points in her life as: Latina, poor, undocumented, and *chola* (gang affiliate). These labels are dualistic, because society could conversely talk about a youth as: white, rich, documented, and law-abiding. As I stated in the introduction, this paper explains four ways of understanding dualisms that arise around notions of self and society and that are mediators for how the world sees Xitlali in GRITO by looking at: 1) one side, 2) interaction, 3) mutual constitution, and 4) political positionality. These four perspectives are interrelated and grow more complex with each of the four points of view as they assist in our understanding of the lived experiences of those participating in GRITO.

### Four Lenses



*Figure 4. Doing Dualisms: Four Perspectives on Self and Society*

These phases of looking at dualisms are developed in context with different historical forces and are always in flux, never mutually exclusive or discrete. This is not a top down evolutionary model (Darwin, 1860). I chose these particular lenses as the best for understanding Xitlali's experience in GRITO because they are the implicit framework from which educational psychologists (Hoy, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978), policy analysts (McLaughlin, et al., 1994; Orfield, 1996), anthropologists (McDermott & Varenne, 1995), sociologists (Mehan, 1979), and critical theorists (Freire, 1985; McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2005) make sense of schools and community.

Ernst Cassirer (1938) asserts, "Only when we have binocular vision do we see depth" (p. 793). In this paper I attempt to operate under "quadra-ocular vision" through the four lenses on doing dualisms. This work will reach a greater depth of understanding by taking these multiple perspectives. To those who would argue that complexity brings about greater confusion than understanding I would say, "The denial of complexity is the beginning of tyranny" (Eisner, 1998).

### *Summary of Each Lens*

#### *Pick One Side*

One way to "do" dualisms is to pick one side of the dualism and fight for it (McDermott, 2005). From this perspective one would choose the individual (instead of the social) and argue for them, blindly progressing without acknowledgment of the social implications. The debate often simply further entrenches two bad options. This way of understanding the interaction of self and society is often found in more base versions of educational policy (Bush, 2007) and in personality trait theory (Cattell, 1950).

#### *Interact*

This perspective shows how one side of the dualism interacts with the other (e.g. individual↔social). Each side is contingent on the other and relies on the other for support. The two sides remain discrete. Interaction is important because it acknowledges relationships and broadens the understanding of the social phenomenon. Policy research on civic engagement (McLaughlin, et al., 1994) and human development research on positive youth development (Larson, 2000) often studies the interaction of individual and society and how it shows that all people are capable of positive development and civic engagement regardless of the one-sided views many politicians promote (O'Donoghue, 2007). The only problem is that too often nothing new is being said with respect to the problem. The two perspectives are merely being synthesized. There is something important about understanding that the two perspectives are not discrete or mutually exclusive and that self and individual aren't really so antithetical (McDermott, 2005).

### *Mutually Constituted*

One way to break out of the dualism is to say the two sides don't really exist outside of a momentary partial perspective. McDermott explains that, "Paired opposites often pair nothing more than opposing points of view on the same reality" (2005, p. 5). The division between individual and the institution represents a singular phenomenon. The two sides of the dualism are mutually constituted (e.g. individual↔social). The two ends don't remain distinct. From this perspective the individual and the group create moments in which they talk together about and recreate the terms of engagement. The institution becomes greater than the sum of its individuals and each individual greater than a part of the whole. In educational psychology, the mutually constituted point of view is labeled as socio-cultural theory (Wenger, 1998) and situative theory where the researcher studies "activity in intact multiperson, human-technology systems" (Greeno, 1998, p. 16). The two sides only exist in dominant discourse and engaging in mutual constitution has the power to change this face-to-face reality.

### *Political Positions*

The political positions lens allows its user to confront the conditions (political economy) that drove self/society apart into dualisms. People together can create, confront, transform, and destroy the system, which marginalizes certain people. This can only occur if the underlying goals of the community change; the efforts are liberation instead of assimilation (Freire & Freire, 1978). Ultimately, the individual and the institution take up political positions departing from the singular phenomenon that was artificially divided into opposing sides but appears as a natural historical construction. This fourth lens of political positions is the least known and least connected to empirical educational research.

## **Xitlali and Three Ways to Reconsider Self and Society from the Four Lenses**

Above, I outline the four lenses—pick-one-side, interact, mutual constitution, and political positions. Here, I apply these lenses as they integrate the data and the three themes that arose from the data. Civic engagement, educational access and equity, and knowledge production are three themes that not only arose from the portrait, but that also are important to the topic of youth organizing and social justice education. In this section I heed Marx's call to rise from the concrete to the abstract in order to reconsider the complex issue of self in society.

### *Civic Engagement*

#### *Pick One Side*

Many of the youth participating in GRITO thank the program for their success and attribute the credit for their individual skills to what GRITO does for them (FN 03.04.05). Xitlali also credited her own involvement in GRITO as one of the catalysts that shifted the direction of her life. She spoke to the importance of gaining certain types of skills and starting with one's own self by stating, "I have come to realize in my own experience that change starts with the individual: change starts with me." Developing new skills according to Xitlali became the first step in making change: "I want to be able to help young students develop new skills to make them feel confident in themselves and empowered to make a change." The admissions essay promotes the focus of Xitlali's writing on the individual, herself. This is not to say that Xitlali sees the change that she was working toward and the success she had achieved as a sole endeavor unto herself.

### *Interact*

Xitlali acknowledged some of her contributions to GRITO when she wrote, "I have been involved in this program, initially as a founding member and eventually became a mentor, facilitator, and role model for middle school students in the program." Xitlali also represented much of the knowledge that had been gained about the power of youth and the developmental trajectory of their civic engagement. For example, researchers now know that youth initially get involved in youth organizing and think things will change overnight, but after prolonged involvement in change efforts they begin to understand that change takes time (Conner & Strobel, 2007). Xitlali and GRITO had this type of symbiotic relationship.

Xitlali articulated her belief in the importance of interaction. She wrote, "I strongly believe that taking part in how your community is shaped has an impact." While it is acknowledged that change takes time, it is still possible. Both GRITO and Xitlali's potency rests in "taking part" or engaging in the community of GRITO members and the broader community in which they live, which includes: school, family, gangs, the school board, city council, and the university. Xitlali continued, "If an individual becomes the seed of helping out, then that seed can produce roots throughout their surroundings, such as their homes, school, and community." Change according to Xitlali starts with the individual who then reaches out and through that interaction initiates greater change in their community. Change therefore becomes collaborative.

This second interaction reveals that success and achievement are located in the interactions of GRITO and the youth. The positive aspects of this second lens are its ability to articulate the effective and meaningful ways in which everyone involved in GRITO interacted so that strategies for positive interactions may be generalized to other contexts like school classrooms. This perspective only addresses change as it pertains to a very specific set of skills, for very

specific interactions with the onerous task on the individual to generalize these skills. The drawbacks to this perspective are that the inequity between people involved in GRITO as well as labels of marginalized and individual are still present. In order to problematize inequality and share the burden of generalization we must examine the fourth lens in which Xitlali and GRITO mutually constitute one another.

### *Mutual Constitution*

Xitlali as an "urban youth" doesn't exist outside of GRITO nor does GRITO merely exist as a sum of its individuals. GRITO would not be the organization it is without Xitlali, and Xitlali would not be the same person she is today without the presence of GRITO in her life. There is a synergy to the interaction that exceeds dependence. Xitlali used the metaphor of a tree in order to talk about herself and those she helped as creating each other:

I can see the tree that I am becoming. My branches are reaching out to youth who need help. I have touched many lives with my colorful leaves as people tell me they are inspired and motivated by my words and my actions.

Touching the lives of the other youth she worked with changed the color of who Xitlali was, and through her help she has undoubtedly changed them too. The line where the individual leaf stops and the tree begins is not clear, and if the division between the two is the focus then the important phenomenon of color changing is missed.

Dewey also uses the example of a tree to show that one can argue it's a collective or an individual, but either way it's still a tree. The two perspectives do little to capture the essence of what it is. Dewey asserts, "The tree stands only when rooted in the soil; it lives or dies in the mode of its connections with sunlight, air and water. Then too the tree is a collection of interacting parts; is the tree more a single whole than its cells?" (1927, p. 185). The two sides of the dualism are doing more than just interacting; each side is an environment in which the other can exist. It is illogical to set a boundary between one side and the other and then argue that they are interacting, or that really only one side is more important.

The individual, GRITO, and the community slowly change; dividing the process into change together and change apart is not an accurate representation of the process, but remains a simplified version that doesn't truly capture the complexity of change. GRITO and its members have as their goal positive community change, but this change can only be understood when the group becomes greater than the sum of its individuals and each individual greater than a part of the whole.

Xitlali transcended labels and boundaries that are placed upon her through social marginalization. In an earlier version of her personal statement she wrote, “I want to personally help out and also be helped and learn from different cultures, religions and be open minded; helping out has no boundaries and any one can do it and I hope to help get my message across.” Xitlali identified the mutual dependence of learning and helping. Furthermore, she recognized the mutually constituted nature of helping by asserting that such a process has no boundaries.

When considering civic engagement in youth organizing programs it is important to remember that: (1) positive change is limited temporally and spatially, and (2) sometimes this doesn’t happen in youth-organizing programs. The next lens analyzes the political economy that is the foundation of the reality in which face-to-face interactions are ensconced. One positive aspect of the implementation of this perspective is that it can change face-to-face reality in GRITO.

#### *Political Positions*

University-sponsored community organizations must be a site to contest the limitations of their members from civic engagement in the community in the form of access to political power, productivity in the community in the form of future access to meaningful jobs, and access to higher education in the form of financial and legal resources. During the past five years, research and advocacy issues have increased in depth, from bus passes to bullying to gang violence. Youth organizing programs and all their members need to engage in the discussion: What basic human rights don’t members have? What is the political, economic, and cultural environment that makes the denial of those rights possible, and how can a group of well-organized youth and allies change that sociopolitical situation?

#### *Educational Access and Equity*

##### *Pick One Side*

The current national political discourse operates at the level of picking either the individual or the society and creates the political positions that educational theorist react to and analyze. For example, President Bush’s educational policy “Leave No Child Behind” operates from the perspective of blindly choosing the individual as its champion rather than schools, society, or social service sectors. Bush (2007) is choosing the individual (instead of the social) and arguing for it, blindly progressing without acknowledgment of the social implications. The debates simply further entrench the two bad options.

Under the “pick one side” lens, Xitlali is seen as an extraordinary “urban youth” and GRITO is seen as an exemplary program. Operating from this

perspective would engender first a shout: Hooray for the positive skills, individual achievement and knowledge that will help Xitlali succeed in the future! Xitlali was engaged, has a positive self-concept, high academic and social competency, was intrinsically motivated, and demonstrated strong leadership skills. In other words, she was an adolescent psychologist's and positive youth developer's dream case study. Second would come a profession of thanks: How lucky that Xitlali had the intellectual competence and natural ability to succeed. And finally, a question: Why can't all youth do this? (Varenne, McDermott, Goldman, Naddeo, & Rizzo-Tolk, 1998). The conclusion that some have reached while operating under this perspective is that failure is not the fault of the system (structure); rather it must be the individual's own fault for not taking advantage of more programs like GRITO. The structure and agency debate (Bourdieu, 1977) is another dualism that arises in discussing Xitlali's story. This debate says that either Xitlali was effectively oppressed and limited by the structure of the political, economic, and social system (Bowles & Gintis, 1976) or Xitlali had agency to act and determine her success/failure despite the system. The agency argument blames Xitlali; the structure argument underestimates her power. Talcot Parsons (Parsons, 1949), Roy Bhaskar (1998), and Anthony Giddens (Giddens, 1984) are attempting to move beyond the structure/agency dualism.

The pick one side perspective grounds us in a basic knowledge of who Xitlali is and what GRITO does. The positive aspects of this lens are found in 1) the celebration of a certain type of marginalized individual's characteristics and achievements and 2) the acknowledgment of GRITO as a program doing positive things in a marginalized community. The drawback to this perspective is that it unintentionally tends to give credence to the misconception that most marginalized youth choose not to achieve success, because if Xitlali could succeed then why can't they? This lens, when used on its own, often leads to an essentializing and "otherizing" of the participants in a study. Rather than look at the individual, the social (GRITO), the dominant, and the marginalized actors in GRITO as discrete entities, the next lens encourages an analysis that looks at how these parts interact. Xitlali encouraged us to do the same thing with her writing.

### *Interact*

Xitlali and GRITO depended on one another for legitimization as positive change agents. GRITO gave Xitlali access to dominant social and cultural capital.<sup>5</sup> For example, she knew why it was important to go to college and had help in applying. GRITO gained support and aid from Xitlali by way of her success story, her presentations, her guidance in shaping GRITO's curriculum, her skills, her low-cost labor, her insight into what youth need and want, and as a source of data.<sup>6</sup>

### *Mutual Constitution*

Educational access and equity from the perspective of mutual constitution doesn't acknowledge broader social, political, and economic constraints that affect the youth and the program.

### *Political Positions*

These questions are crucial to GRITO's libratory goal of social justice and positive community change. GRITO is transformative in face-to-face interactions and even extending to GRITO-sanctioned events, but stops there. If these questions are not challenged, researched, and discussed, then GRITO will remain an after-school program that will not give many of its members the ability to do anything after school (i.e. after 3 p.m. and after 12<sup>th</sup> grade). Yet another question for all involved in GRITO and invested in its ultimately libratory mission must ask is, how is it possible that these dualisms exist? GRITO is a space that affirms local knowledge and validates youth intelligence and social insight. GRITO exists because such institutional privileging of that which is marginalized is novel in a liberal educational system that reproduces social inequities and power hierarchies based on class and race (McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2001). The division of marginalized and dominant is necessary to maintain the political economy in California, which is characterized by neo-liberal capitalism and individual meritocracy of schools strengthened by the Protestant work ethic and achievement ideology (McLaren, 1998). The political economy that Xitlali continues to face is one in which California's agriculture and garment industries will not survive without the undocumented Mexican worker (Cozic, 1997)<sup>7</sup>. Undocumented immigrants contribute 5 to 10 times as much in taxes as they use through public services, including education. Undocumented workers add 63 billion dollars to the state of California's budget through labor and taxes<sup>8</sup> (Ramos, 2002). These issues are omnipresent in the lives of youth in GRITO, but there has been silence on the issue—a refusal to engage what could be a painful and unfamiliar topic to many of the youth and adults in GRITO.

In the current political economy, there is no way to naturalize and become a citizen if you have entered illegally. Xitlali's best bet was "AB-540" which allowed her to pay California residence tuition since she had attended a California high school for the three years prior to her graduation (she has been here much longer than that). Even though she did not have to pay exorbitant foreign students (or out-of-state) tuition, she was not eligible for any state or federal financial aid. There are very few scholarships for which students who do not have a social security number can apply.<sup>9</sup>

The marginalized vs. dominant dualism in the form of legal vs. "illegal immigrant" prevents Xitlali from realizing her dreams through access to a four-year institution. The protestant work ethic does not apply to her, because she can't pull herself up by her own bootstraps (Durkheim & Fauconnet, 1922). Her

marginalized label constantly plagued Xitlali, as she operated with the fear that she would do something that would get her or her family deported.

The fourth lens, political positionality, reveals the direction that leadership and community programs can take in order to achieve goals of social justice and positive community change within and outside of the programs. The positive aspects of this lens include: (1) it makes both individual and social change possible, (2) it is necessary for many of the youth to have basic rights and transfer skills to after school, and (3) it's not enough to simply acknowledge system-level constraints. The drawback to this perspective in looking at GRITO is that programs like GRITO are focused on the individual and a broader acknowledgment of system constraints almost never occurs, and thus the lens becomes a way to see where the program can go rather than where it is.

Xitlali did not go to a four-year college the year after she graduated. Even though she had lived in California nearly all her life, she was not able to get financial aid. When she finally does graduate college, after spending two years at a community college, she will not be able to get a job because she does not have a social security number. She is a paragon of community-based youth organizing excellence and neither she, nor the GRITO staff, knows how to give her the tools to change this situation. In some sense Xitlali had superseded all the HMC's and GRITO's expectations, yet GRITO and the HMC have failed her. How can we make sense of the successes of this individual who is institutionally barred from a four-year university?

### *Knowledge Production & Political Economy*

#### *Interact*

Xitlali gained support and aid from her association with GRITO in the form of a monthly stipend, support in her personal and public goals, the creation of opportunities to speak to decision makers in her community, the opportunity to speak at various national scholarly conferences, and the official position as mentor to middle school youth. Furthermore, Xitlali assimilated sufficient academic vocabulary and gained confidence in her ability to "wow" any professional and academic crowd.

#### *Mutual Constitution*

Dewey (1927) explains this notion of a singular phenomenon parsed in different ways as nonsense: "A collective unity may be taken either distributively or collectively, but when taken collectively it is the union of its distributive constituents, and when taken distributively it is a distribution of the and within the collectivity. It makes nonsense to set up an antithesis between the distributive phase and the collective" (p. 191). Dewey takes up the mutually constituted perspective in looking at the individual and collective dualism. He says that rather

than looking at both ends, one can only gain “knowledge of an actual condition in their modes of operation and their consequences” (1927, p. 195). According to John Dewey we can all do smart and dumb things, but the really interesting question is whether we can organize society in such a way to do things to make society better. In Dewey’s paradigm you can’t act intelligently by yourself. Individuals are in society and society is in individuals.

Xitlali couldn’t be marginalized without the existence of privilege. GRITO exists because of privilege, granted in the form of economic power and expert validity that Ivy University, the Horace Mann Center, and its researchers possessed. Dominant researchers had a field to study because of the problem of the marginalized urban youth. Therefore, Xitlali constituted the position of privilege that the researchers had. Xitlali always had voice, but was not heard by dominant members of society. Xitlali’s voice is heard today, because she is a part of GRITO and therefore GRITO aids in mitigating one of the key characteristics of her marginalization: her lack of influence and power in the community. GRITO gains voice in the academic spheres of education policy and psychology because the researchers writing about GRITO have youth like Xitlali to show as proof of the power of listening to youth.

Boundaries are what divide countries (Mexico and the U.S.) and divide social phenomenon (people living and interacting) into dualisms. Xitlali and other high school mentors in the program met once a week to discuss solutions to problems in GRITO, to plan and shape curriculum, to constantly refine the direction and mission of GRITO, as well as to reflect on GRITO’s past. By creating a fluidity of subject positioning between researcher and student, engaging in mutual constitution has the power to change the face-to-face reality within youth organizing programs.

### *Political Positions*

Xitlali, as a marginalized youth, and the directors and researchers, as dominant, are merely two political positions. These constructed labels only have some influence on the face-to-face interactions in GRITO as discussed in the previous section. Although in society there are social and material consequences to these labels. For example, the marginalized status of Latino youth is more than just a name. In the U.S., Latino youth have the highest dropout rate of any ethnic group. In 2002, for every 100 Latino 9th graders in California, 54 graduated high school four years later, and only 5 graduated having completed the required university preparatory coursework (Oakes, et al., 2007).

The dominant label that directors and researchers of GRITO hold allows for them to benefit economically, through their paid positions in the HMC, from GRITO and youth organizing more than the youth in the program. This is an example of the sort of institutional privileging of dominant social actors that

legitimizes the institution of education (which doesn't admit Xitlali into the freshman class). These labels are hard to get out of. Even the interpretive language for the labels has a constitutive effect outside of GRITO. For example "urban youth" is merely a euphemism for poor, African American, Asian American, and Latino kids, who in GRITO's case live in a more suburban than urban setting. Nonetheless all versions of "urban youth" really just signify social constraints that dominant youth don't have to face. This recognition should lead to a search for less restraining positions—but what are they? In what ways can GRITO, and all those involved in youth organizing, change the conditions that caused the two perspectives to be cemented into a dualism.

### **Conclusion**

The dichotomy of self and society (e.g. individual/social) gloss important divisions in our experience. The self and society dualism is essential to daily discourse and sometimes essential to organizing youth in youth organizing programs in response to inequity especially along the lines of access, civic engagement, and knowledge production. But we cannot afford to trust the dichotomy of self and society as a pedagogical foundation for youth organizing programs or as an analytic tool for youth or university action-orientated research. The self and society dualism offers simplifications, both convenient and misleading. This is because as McDermott and Greeno explain, "they come to us without a description of the perspective or level at which they are designed to be meaningful" (2002, p. 337). The problem with self and society dualism then is that it too easily makes sense of the complex relationship between Xitlali and GRITO, or between any youth-research-activist and any youth organizing program. The terms *self* and *society* erase the complexities that divide Xitlali from GRITO and overdetermine the social arrangement of the learning space of the program, the youth research, and the university research.

GRITO and Xitlali's portraits, the case study, the self and society dualism that arises from these results, and the four lenses addressing self and society in youth organizing are all pointing to ways in which we can reconsider the way we think about youth organizing. Picking one side allows us to understand the positive skills and achievements of Xitlali as a specific type of person and GRITO as a positive program that is good at seeking out stars from a specific group of students. Looking at interaction allows certain types of people (youth and adults) to interact in positive ways. Examining the mutually constituted nature, one can see how the people involved with these programs have the ability to change the face-to-face reality in GRITO. Finally, political positionality suggests a direction which programs like GRITO and their participants can take to achieve goals of social justice and positive community change on an individual level as well as

within and outside of program. These perspectives can inform and operate in a powerful harmony. As in this case study, the story of one individual can be understood from each lens. The story of the group, the activism, the research of youth in community-based organizing and in all leadership and community change programs can be understood from the various perspectives.

Organizers, researchers, and educators who want to understand Xitlali and other urban youth activists in and outside of community programs must allow for youth programs to organically develop around the needs, voice, and visions of the youth and their community. The university and researchers must challenge their own authority. Youth-led research and advocacy programs must equip their students with the knowledge and skills they need to obtain basic rights and function outside of school.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Marx discusses production and consumption and develops a framework for thinking about these two concepts. Other dualism can be brought through his progression of dealing with production and consumption. Marx's progression consists of the following points: (1) First, people are inarticulate about production and consumption; (2) production is the main category, and production is the same as consumption via its immediate identity in a specific context; (3) production and consumption are mutually dependent and they interact; and (4) production and consumption are mutually constituted.

<sup>2</sup> I use the term "urban youth" because the term is used by the youth, leaders, and researchers involved in GRITO. I will use the term in this paper to connote ethnically diverse youth who tend to be marginalized by dominant social discourse. The youth in GRITO face gangs, drugs, violence, and poverty daily.

<sup>3</sup> A Mexican and Mexican-American gang prevalent throughout California. The gang's color is blue and it is affiliated with the Crips.

<sup>4</sup> Sureño's rival gang; it is affiliated with the Bloods and claims red as its color.

<sup>5</sup> Contemporary scholars have begun to look at cultural capital and social capital as embodied in dominant and non-dominant communities (Bourdieu 1977) and to define social capital as a set of "resources that inhere in family relation and in community social organization" (Coleman, 1994, p. 300).

<sup>6</sup> Xitlali supplies GRITO with data through her presence in field notes and the interviews and surveys she completes.

<sup>7</sup> I am not suggesting that this is limited to Latinos. For example, the Asian population also composes much of the sweatshop labor force, especially in San Francisco. Organizations such as AIWA (Asian Immigrant Women Advocates) have formed to address the exploitation of Asian women in sweatshop labor.

<sup>8</sup> Only 4% of undocumented Mexican immigrants apply for public assistance, which is less than the average American family. 86% of undocumented Mexicans work. They work 5-7 hours longer per week than the average American worker and are generally paid 20% less than their American counterparts (Ramos 2002).

<sup>9</sup> See Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF) for more resources: <http://www.maldef.org/education/scholarships.htm>

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