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young people-powered media

• WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 16, 2013

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[A \(Brief\) Guide to Queer Youth Organizing, Avoiding Burn-Out and Surviving](#)

An interview with writer and lawyer Dean Spade

by Suey Park



{Young}ist sits down with [Dean Spade](#) to talk about how queer youth are creating change. Spade is a lawyer, [writer](#), professor and founder of the Sylvia Rivera Law Project.

To what extent are young queer people interacting with the legal system in attempts to create change?

I see a lot of young queer and trans people mobilized around key ways that the violence of legal systems impact their lives—especially criminal systems, immigration enforcement, welfare and education. I see queer and trans young people taking part in [opposition to gang injunction laws](#) that target young people of color for criminalization, opposition to [stop and frisk and other policing policies](#) that subject them to violence and harm, resisting [school policies](#) and [programs](#) that [push them away from education](#), and [in opposition](#) to the rapid growth of immigration enforcement. It seems like everywhere I look I see vibrant movements with youth leaders opposing the systems that are controlling resources and harming lives.

I have been particularly inspired by groups like the [Native Youth Sexual Health Network](#), [Streetwise and Safe](#), [FIERCE!](#), [Young Womens' Empowerment Project](#), [Youth Justice Coalition](#) and other grassroots groups that have demonstrated radical imagination, showing us what it means to do urgent immediate work to get to the root causes of harm in their own lives and neighborhoods and communities. These groups and many others are doing immediate work to support people facing police violence, poverty, colonialism, and deportation and they are working to dismantle the legal and administrative systems that perpetuate these violences.

How can we make change when we are dismissed from institutions or organizations for speaking up? Are there ways to connect with other youngists outside of larger institutions?

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It seems to me like troublemakers who hit a nerve, who become effective at really transforming conditions, get kicked out of places. Transformative movements are often labeled ‘criminal’ or ‘terrorist’ to try to squash them and destroy them, and individuals who make noise about harmful conditions are often called “disruptive” or are told we “don’t work well with others” inside institutions that want things to stay mostly the same. Many people doing transformative work from within various institutions do so in careful, strategic and sometimes stealth ways—it’s a complicated dance that all movements and activists engage in, since we are never totally outside systems and institutions. We have to focus on how to survive these painful expulsions, how to create alternative systems of support for ourselves and our work, and how to support each other when a system throws people away. A key message of all of our movements is that people are not disposable, but it can be hard to hold that message when we live in a world that makes people disposable. It is a constant effort even within our spaces and relationships to reject the logic of disposability. We need to create organizations that do not kick people out, and to do so we need to become people who can be with difference and disagreement, which is difficult.

For those of us who are currently in school, how can we find ways to connect with our local communities?

A great place to start is to get involved in activism you see happening in your immediate surroundings. Are people on your campus engaged in any [labor struggles](#)? Are students pushing back against [harmful practices by campus security or by local police brought on to campus](#)? Are students on your campus pushing for the campus to [divest from companies](#) that profit from the Israeli occupation of Palestine or from [oil](#) companies? Are they trying to get the school to stop contracting with [harmful vendors](#)? Are people in your region advocating for better [public transit](#) or [environmental regulation](#)? Are people agitating about local school policies, pushing back against [privatization](#) or [standardized testing](#)? Is the jurisdiction you live in planning to build new jails or prisons that people are [organizing to stop](#)? Are people where you live trying to close down [military projects](#)? These are just a few of the kinds of struggles that I see students engaging with at campuses. There is lots of terrible stuff going on and lots of amazing resistance happening. Connecting to that resistance provides opportunities to form deep relationships, contribute to struggles for justice, learn about how social change works, and build skills and analysis useful for participating in it.

Many young activists experience burnout or suffer from mental health issues as a result of our work. Do you have any survival tactics you would like to share?

This is a big problem in all of the work I have participated in. There are a lot of very harmful conditions that our movements are trying to respond to. There is often more need than can be met immediately by the structures we are building, and people tend to overwork. Most of us have also internalized capitalist norms that can cause us to be rigid, controlling, perfectionist, individualist, competitive, and self-hating, and these characteristics can show up in groups and undermine collaborations and creativity. It seems like people do best to combat this when we foster relationships and organizational cultures that are aware of these dangers and actively try to shift values toward collaboration, attention to caring for our well-being by getting sufficient rest and healthy food and health care, mutual appreciation, compassionate feedback and self-reflection.

It is helpful to remember that we are part of very long struggles and that rushing things can cause a great deal of harm. Taking time and space to fully consider things is usually worthwhile. Planning transitions carefully, such as a member leaving a group or taking on new work, rather than making them rushed or abrupt, is important for everyone’s well being and for the continuity of the group. Distributing knowledge and leadership broadly, so that no one person is knowing or doing the bulk of the work, is key to sustaining the work. We must work to value our relationships more than we value achieving goals or being “productive” in the task-oriented sense. It can also be helpful for us individually to engage in long-term reflection about what wounds we bring into the work, and how that might impact our behavior toward others or impede our abilities to care for ourselves. Some resources I have found useful are Trauma Stewardship, the Workaholics Anonymous book, and Generative Somatics.

Do you have any advice for young organizations on the ground? How can your scholarly work inform our practices?

We have to be scholars of movements as we engage in movements, and we have to experiment and be willing to acknowledge when things do not work and be willing to start over, admit mistakes, forgive ourselves, learn and remember.

A lot of important social movement history and wisdom has been hidden from us—we’ve been told a lot of lies about social movements in the US and beyond, or those histories and contemporary realities are hidden from us by corrupt capitalist, racist education systems and corporate media. So, we have to be aggressively curious and seek out info about how movements operate, how change works, what people have tried and are trying and where we might find inspiration.

For me, it helps to have that kind of curiosity with others. I’ve learned a lot in activist reading groups that emerged as groups of people with whom I was doing local work encountered big questions and wanted to seek out models and ideas. I find it easier to do that kind of studying, learning and thinking with others, and for me that has been most effective in groups that were not part of a school or university. But everyone is different in that way—some people use film, or graphic novels, or performance art or blogs or archives or internships or college courses or any number of tools to pursue this curiosity. But I think this curiosity and experimentation is key—no one knows the answers about transformative social change. No one has ended global oppression yet, but lots of people are trying amazing experiments about how to make change, and we all have a lot to learn from each other. We have to question the mainstream stories about how change happens. They tell us change happens through charismatic individual leaders, by getting the right person in elected office and through lawsuits. But transformative movements have disagreed, suggesting that these elite strategies rarely create deep change and often just change the window dressing of oppressive systems. These movements tend to use a different set of tools, including mass mobilization, grassroots media, direct action, horizontal organizational forms, consensus decision making, popular education, art, music, poetry, expropriation, vandalism, disruption and much more. We have to become lifelong activist-scholars seeking and experimenting with questions of how transformative change happens.

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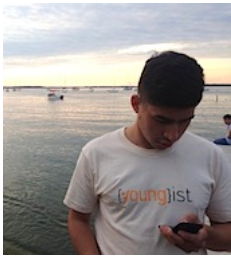
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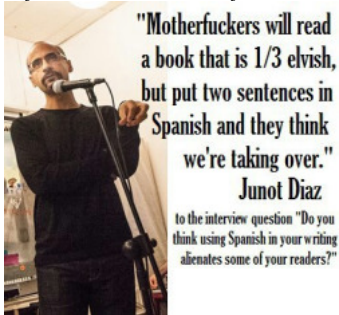
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