

UC Berkeley

ISSI Fellows Working Papers

Title

Making Space for Urban Girls: A Politics of Geography and Gender

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0c222780>

Author

Gleason, Emily

Publication Date

2008-10-14

ISSC WORKING PAPER SERIES 2007-2008.31

**Making Space for Urban Girls:
A Politics of Geography and Gender**

by Emily Gleason

**Graduate School of Education
University of California, Berkeley
10/10/08**



**INSTITUTE FOR
THE STUDY OF
SOCIAL CHANGE**

Emily Gleason
Graduate School of Education
University of California, Berkeley

emilygleason@berkeley.edu

This paper presents a multi-year case study of an after-school literacy initiative at an inner city high school. In order to understand the lived experiences and practices of urban girls, this study explores how African American girls, in particular, navigate public and private spaces of their everyday worlds. Spatial limitations, institutional pressures, and teens' subjectivities shaped an extracurricular literacy program, built on a theoretical framework of participatory research and youth-led digital media production. By considering the politics of after-school programming and the landscape of urban contexts, I problematize programs such as Girlspace, as well as complicate understandings of youth literacies, geography, and participatory research. This paper argues that for youth development programs to succeed, the complexity of socio-cultural and spatial realities facing urban girls-- as well as their perspectives-- must be understood.

The Institute for the Study of Social Change (ISSC) is an Organized Research Unit of the University of California at Berkeley. The views expressed in working papers are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent those of the ISSC or the Regents of the University of California.

Introduction

Complex relationships to movement and change characterize the lives of many inner city youth in the United States today. Large percentages of working class and poor young people have moved homes numerous times over their life course, and such movement has enhanced their ability to adapt to a variety of living situations, from shared living arrangements to shifting household dynamics (Stack 1974, Jelleyman and Spencer 1997, Long 1992). It is not uncommon, therefore, for inner city youth to rotate among mom's house, grandmother's, cousins', or other residential possibilities. Many Bay Area teens employ linguistic choices that attest to the fluidity and changeability of "home." These city youth talk about where they "stay" versus where they "live."¹ The verb "stay" associates with transience and impermanence; whereas "live" seems to imply a sense of rooted-ness.

In addition to physically moving among homes (and often schools and neighborhoods), young people also experience change with regard to the topography of school institutions. Urban schools are highly susceptible to change, and young people bear the brunt of the ebbs and flows of education trends, from high turnover of faculty and staff to changing structural dynamics in the name of "reform" (Noguera 2003, McLaren 1998). Many young people report having attended multiple schools over the course of short periods of time. Navigating shifting landscapes of home, school, and neighborhoods inevitably impacts youth in salient ways. How do youth make sense of the movement and transitions that characterize their lives, and how does this mobility inform the way they see the world? In this paper, I discuss the spatial contexts of

¹ This observation is based on three years of intense involvement in a particular high-density, urban community, as well as numerous conversations with young people beyond this neighborhood about this linguistic choice

inner-city girls in order to reach educators, researchers, youth development advocates, and after-school organizers concerned about urban youth.

Case studies of programs in specific geographic spaces can lend insight into broader socio-political dynamics at play in the everyday lives of young people. This study offers such a case for a group of teenage girls based at one secondary high school in a high-crime, urban area of Oakland, California during 2005-2007. I explore the spatial dimensions of urban young women's lives, through the lens of an attempted social change after school program. While the program was successful by some measures, it was less so by other standards. This case study illuminates a window into the lives of urban young women juxtaposed against the current climate of after-school programming in the U.S., as expressed in one specific context. I employ a spatial lens to examine how urban youth are impacted by a range of social and political geographies. By analyzing what works -and does not work- regarding after school initiatives, coupled with ethnographic exploration of girls' out-of-school lives, we may begin to understand the complex social and cultural landscapes that youth navigate - and what factors must be in place for sustainable programming.

(Im)mobility of urban youth

Although urban youth in the U.S. are no strangers to change and changeability of their everyday worlds, their movements are limited in multiple ways. Bus and train fare is often pricey; many families do not own cars; and the simple act of getting to and from school or work can be a dicey endeavor. Traveling through space becomes gendered and racialized as young people learn quickly where they can and cannot go. Young women in low-income neighborhoods often avoid hanging out on the streets, as they have been socialized to think of the

street as a realm of darkness and danger (Hyams 2003), and many have experienced brushes with harassment and fear firsthand. Nevertheless, youth manage movement throughout their neighborhoods with logic and expertise (Sharkey 2006, Jones 2004, Anderson 1999). They know the landscape of the ‘hood: the parts of the block where they may walk casually versus other parts where they need to be on guard; street corners that they bypass or frequent, depending on turf, time of day, attire, and other nuances of the local context. Tensions between being highly mobile throughout the local context, and yet simultaneously constrained, complicate young people’s worldviews and perceptions of what is possible.

Often, inner city adolescents experience symbolic boundaries between their neighborhoods and the larger world. For example, although teens in the Bay Area may live a fifteen to twenty-five minute subway ride from San Francisco, many have not visited the city more than a few times, if at all. Visiting UC Berkeley is an unlikely trek for many as well. Limited access to public transit (beyond buses), as well as specific destinations (work, school, church, home, shopping mall), keep young people contained inside certain geographic bubbles. Like many inner cities, areas such as West and East Oakland, the Fruitvale, and Richmond, all in the “East Bay,” are racially and residentially segregated, as well as marked by structural poverty.

Despite the physical and symbolic borders that surround urban enclaves, youth travel across neighborhoods within the borders of the larger community with skill, comfort, and confidence. Young people convey a lively presence on local buses; chatting, laughing, playing music, as they travel between home, school, after-school jobs, community centers, and beyond. As previously noted, youth often travel large distances or complex routes to and from school, work, and home. Additionally, many young people move shuffle between grandparents’, aunties’, or mothers’ houses; “staying” in numerous places rather than “living” in one. They

know how to manage the world of bus schedules and route maps, subways, and the streets with keen navigation skills.

However, traveling between inner city areas of the East Bay and San Francisco is far less common, due to economic constraints. Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART), the high-speed public transportation system, leaves places like East Oakland and Richmond somewhat marooned, with just one or two stops serving entire high-density regions. Due to both the high price of BART and limited access, many East Bay youth find little need to leave the East Bay. Furthermore, many urban Bay Area teens reflect a distinct tension between movement and containment—between “bouncing” and being bound. I suggest that this tension between being highly mobile in some respects, and yet overwhelmingly immobile in others, complicates young people’s relationship to geography, sense of space, place, and self. As I will discuss, young women’s mobility is highly constrained, yet they navigate their local geographies with a range of complex spatial and social practices.

Research Context and Questions

Setting the Scene

In East Oakland, the organization of space is informed by the local topography. Big houses on the hill hover above the flats of the hood. Candy’s Wig Shop (abandoned), no-name liquor stores (always full), and other small shop fronts edge the streets, but there are virtually no food stores, few restaurants, and sparse local businesses. Turning off the freeway, one descends from the wide, tree-lined avenues in the hills, down to the pot-holed, tree-less artery of East Oakland. From the East 20s to East 109th, clusters of kids with dreadlocks, white t-shirts and baggy jeans kick it on the corners. Low-riders cruise the main drags, blasting the beats of

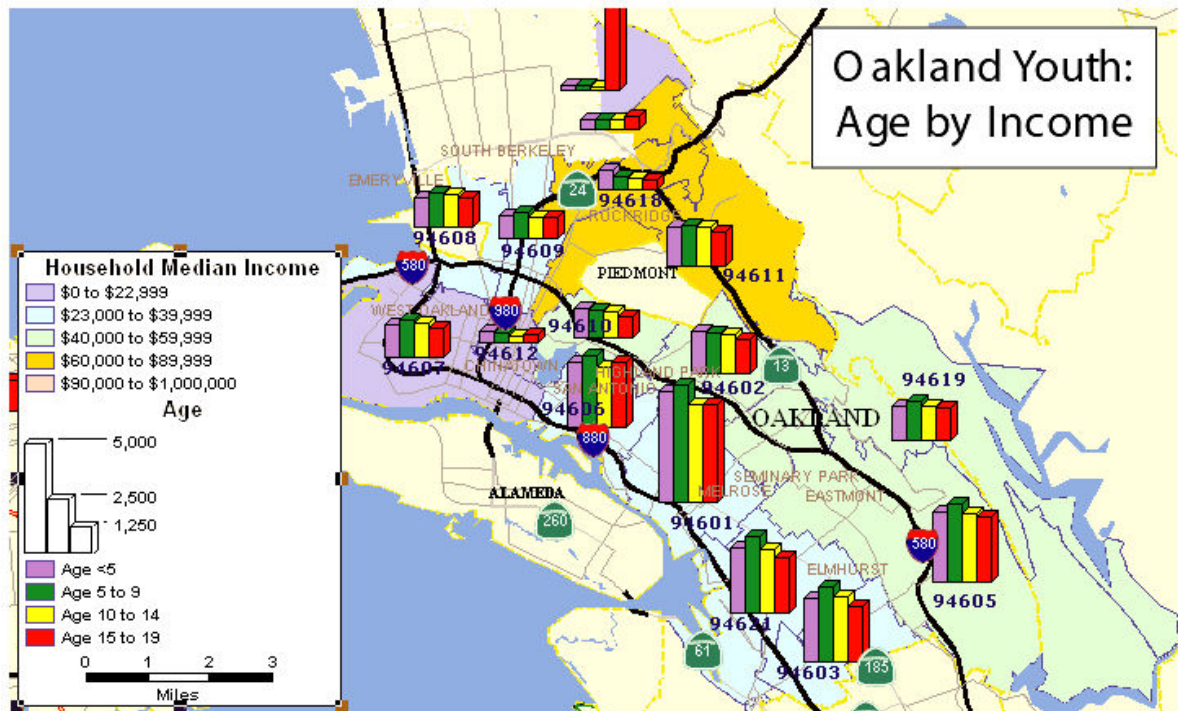
KMEL: sounds of E-40, Too Short, Mistah Fab. Kids claim space through their music, and the bass reverberates through the streets. Construction is always being done in this part of town: jackhammers pound pavement, and puffs of dust cloud the air, but a distinct order and logic orient the space, nonetheless. People travel with an understanding of the landscape, knowing when and how to move, knowing where to go, and where *not* to go. Along major thoroughfares of the city, clusters of flowers, teddy bears, and wreaths dot sidewalks, memorializing where someone was shot. Usually, a handful of cop cars circle the streets; often sirens blare. On any given street, at any given hour, scenes of the city are in motion-- cars with shiny rimmed wheels spin down the street; energized banter spills from neighborhood shops; security guards patrol fenced-off school grounds; music cranks through open apartment windows; teen prostitutes linger as people pretend not to notice; women walk hand in hand with kids; teens laugh, scream, play, hang out at the bus stop, walk home — these are some of the sounds and sights of this urban landscape.

East Oakland comprises the largest area of Oakland, with the highest concentration of young people (See Figure 1)². It is a low-income region with a large numbers of people living below the poverty line. This high-density area stretches diagonally across the map of Oakland, encompassing more than half of the city's geographical landscape. Structural poverty has hit hard in Oakland, along racial lines. Soaring homicide rates, unemployment, drug activity, prostitution, school dropout, and youth incarceration plague East Oakland, where the highest numbers of minorities and youth reside. Concentrated poverty and crime have enabled East Oakland to receive renewal efforts, as well as youth programming, in the last few years³.

² Oakland Fund for Children and Youth [OFCY] (2005, September 1). *Oakland Maps: Interpretation of Trends and Gaps for the Oakland Fund for Children and Youth: Appendix B*. Oakland, Ca. Retrieved April 23, 2008 from: <http://www.gibsonandassociates.com/images/pdf/finalofcyoaklandmapsappendixb.pdf>

³ King, J. (2006, January 26). Youth Center Began as a Safeway. Now it's a window on the world for East Oakland Kids [Electronic version]. *San Francisco Chronicle*.

Figure 1



After School

I have been working with young women from East Oakland for several years through an after school program called YouthBeats, based at a public high school⁴. This was an alternative literacy program- an after school technology initiative to engage youth in music-creation, beat-making, digital story production, and other arts-based activities. The consistent shortage of young women in YouthBeats’ programs prompted me to investigate where girls are after school, asking questions about what they do, and where they go from 3:00 – 6:00 pm, or the “at-risk”

⁴ All names have been changed to protect the privacy of the young women and the communities in which they live. Also, names of programs, geographical locations, and other identifying details have been amended.

time frame⁵. Answers to these questions ranged from “I have nothing to do” to “I work several jobs” to “I have to go home to take care of my cousins or siblings or help run the house”. After months of informal interviews with young women, I noted that teen girls consistently wanted to share narratives of their lives and seemed to be interested having a space of their own, beyond the borders of school and home. I wanted to create a forum for girls to talk about gendered realities- and to construct media projects of their own, with the support of an adult facilitator. Therefore, Girlspace, a participatory research project, emerged from the desire to create a safe space for teenage girls to begin to address issues of social, political, academic, and community concerns- and to develop a project of their own. Technically, these girls would join the already-established after-school program called YouthBeats, although Girlspace would have a distinct purpose of its own.

Conversations with these youth frequently concern issues of language, identity, and the urban context (implications of terms such as “bitches and hos,” how language connects with girl vs. girl hostility, bodies, street smarts, and other significant topics). Our space served as a forum for these high school teens to come together to talk, vent, share, with the hopes that the group would mobilize a technology-based project around their own issues and needs. The most recent Girlspace project resulted in a media production that explored gendered violence. A small group of African American girls produced a 42-minute film on sexual violence that girls face in their community. This paper moves beyond analysis of the film and production process, however, to the programmatic journey over the course of the two and a half years.

⁵ A significant body of research cites the after-school hours (from 3:00 pm to 6:00 pm) as a critical window of risk for many youth. Links between the after-school hours and juvenile crime, drugs and alcohol, sex, and dangerous activity have been made, and such research has been used to support after school organizations nationally. After-school opportunities are generally thought to keep young people safe, support working families, reduce crime, and provide academic guidance, mentoring, and opportunity for positive community and interpersonal development. Fight Crime: Invest in Kids (2000). *After School Choice: The Prime Time for Juvenile Crime, or Youth Enrichment and Achievement*. Washington, D.C. Retrieved from <http://www.fightcrime.org/reports/as2000.pdf>

Questions this paper addresses:

- What salient issues and factors shape programming possibilities for urban girls?
- In what ways are institutional as well as social, spatial, and structural realities mapped onto the landscape of after school initiatives?
- In what ways are youth identities and communities inter-related, and how do beliefs about place, space, and gender shape young women's habits, movements, and choices?

Despite academics' and practitioners' intentions to produce research that advocates for low-income and minority students, many studies fail to portray the complexity of working with youth amidst contested urban landscapes. I discuss the layered meanings, subtlety, and potentially uneven experience of conducting research with youth. By looking to a particular case, which employed "participatory research methods," the complex process of conducting collaborative research with young people in a constrained context is made visible. Only by exposing the messiness of bringing together academic scholarship and youth development, only by exposing the complexity of spatial constraints that urban youth face, can we begin to do justice to the rich contact zone of this kind of ethnographic research.

The writings of academics and practitioners who work with and in support of urban youth often reflect our desires to counter demonizations of urban youth, as seen in the media. We write in hopes of undoing the caricatures of black and brown youth as troublesome, deficient, disrespectful (Males 1999) and to add depth to conversations about youth in disadvantaged communities in more useful, engaging, and complex ways. We want to share stories of young people's successes and strengths, of programs and policies that *are working* to ameliorate the

state of our nation's hallways, classrooms, and community based organizations. This paper complicates idealized visions of after school programming by looking to the on-the-ground daily grind of political, spatial, cultural and economic realities.

Urban Girls

Young women in low-income communities are saddled with significant time pressures as well as responsibilities. Many urban teens work in part-time jobs, particularly in the service sector (Tannock 2001). Adolescent girls, in both rural and urban communities, also uphold significant domestic responsibility in the after school hours, especially if one or both parents are working. Differences across ethnic groups vary, but, by and large, young women report upholding domestic responsibilities and care-giving roles more frequently than teenage boys. Although many boys do carry out domestic responsibilities, girls are more often saddled with chores, care-giving roles, or housework duties that limit their opportunities in the afternoons. Young women live gendered realities and the work that they do at home – or in the workforce – affects their involvement in after school programs. Many of the girls with whom I work talk about needing to “do everything” in their household: cooking, cleaning, and caring for siblings, cousins, and elders. Some expressed *wanting* to work for their own sense of independence, and others talked about *needing* to work to have money to buy clothes or pay phone bills. Their answers were consistently gendered though, as the young women spoke in adult voices of upholding responsibility, helping out at home, or “pulling their weight” for their family.

Against the backdrop of these young women's lives, finding a space to call their own proves salient, but difficult. Space in this neighborhood of Oakland is tight, and currently very few after school opportunities exist solely for high school girls. While there are a plethora of co-

ed extracurricular opportunities, gender imbalances are not unusual among after school programs (Mead 2001, Deutsch and Hirsch 2004). A study on youth programming found that girls' engagement in youth-based programs was more uneven than boys' experiences (Mead 2001). "The result was a mismatch between the program's design and the girl's interests and concerns- a mismatch that caused girls to be marginalized, their needs to be unmet, and their potential to be unrealized" (23). Rarely do teens have a forum to unravel the complexities of their daily lives or the space to discuss household and family responsibilities, relationships, sex, school, racism, sexism, and other pressures of the social world with an adult mentor. These young women navigate an urban landscape where poverty and structural violence have hit hard; all the while, they demonstrate resilience and strength. Many uphold great leadership at young ages; yet very few are afforded the luxury of space to explore choices, challenges, and what it means to "grow up girl" (Walkerdine 2001) in this community.

The Spatial Turn

Relations of power are really, crucially and unavoidably spun out across and through material spaces of the world. It is within such spaces that assemblages of people, activities, technologies, institutions, ideas and dreams all come together, circulate, convene and reconvene... and it is only as a consequence of the spatial entangling together of all of these elements that relations of power are established (Hyams and Sharp 2000, 24).

Thinking about the social construction of space is key to analyzing the confluence of factors that comes together in urban after school programs and community-based programs. Building on Foucault, Hyams and Sharp point out in the above quote that relations of power are messily entangled through space. This concept of space as a contested set of intersecting social practices complicates binaries, which have dominated scholarly work. I want to disrupt dichotomies seen in education literature in particular, regarding in-school versus out-of-school,

youth versus adults, boys versus girls, etc. Academic polarizations overly simplify understandings of actors, frameworks, and organizational paradigms. The interconnected-ness of young people's actions in different domains, e.g. home, school, work, the street, at community centers cannot be obscured or de-contextualized (Heath, and Street 2008; Maira and Soep 2005; Burton, Obeidallah, and Allison 1996; Skelton and Valentine 1998). Increasingly, educators, geographers, linguists, sociologists, and others have re-conceptualized youth practices, broadening views of youth as a fixed social category, defined by linear developmental pathways. Youth geographers, in particular, argue that it is crucial to consider the "crumpled space-time topography" (Nespor 1997) in and around schools, mapping actual trajectories of young people as they move to and from school, to and from community centers, work, home, and the like, to examine the practices and symbolic forces in play.

A spatial lens on education requires that practitioners and researchers consider the "shifting locations" of the field, specifically focusing on the "spatial practices" (de Certeau 1984) written onto bodies, rather than on notions of space as a bound container (Gupta and Ferguson 1997). Building on de Certeau's focus on everyday movements that make places and identities, anthropologist James Clifford explains, "space is discursively mapped and corporeally practiced" (1997, 54). Critical education leans on this constructivist lens, encouraging young people to think deeply and reflexively about their own spatial realities and how they are situated in the world. Critical theorists of literacy, race, education, and gender among others believe in the power of using inquiry and critical reflection to arrive at learning. Questioning one's position, subjectivity, and relationship to language, power, and social structure may lead to "liberating praxis" (Freire 1970). Serious considerations of space have shown that some of the most powerful learning often takes place beyond the classroom walls and beyond the school grounds

(Heath 1983, Lave 1991, Street 1985, 1993, hooks 1990). Thinking about spaces, places, and geographies of youth prove useful in order to understand how young people make meaning, employ strategies, display resilience, and navigate through their “figured worlds” (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain 1998).

Space is hard to come by for many after school programs, youth-based organizations, and community centers. Institutional crowding, scant resources, and inaccessible facilities create hurdles that become insurmountable for many up-start initiatives. However, youth organizations that grow out of sustained presence and history in local communities, depend on youth leadership and organization, and see youth as critical assets to community growth may have a greater chance of surviving and thriving (Heath and Smyth 1999). Nevertheless, for many, if not most youth organizations and projects in urban areas, the task of harnessing space and resources emerges as a pressing concern which impacts the sustainability of the work. “These groups (without permanent meeting location) often struggle to carry through on project or performance planning; without a place to meet, store belongings, spread out to read or write, or talk uninterrupted, they live without contingency and the possibility of needing to meet elsewhere for their next gathering” (Heath and Smyth 1999, 27). Heath and Smyth describe a group of young women who travel as programmatic nomads due to a lack of a permanent site. “One group jokingly calls themselves the ‘bag-girls’ since they carry their supplies around in plastic grocery bags, pulling them out on church steps or in library conference rooms, or any other space available to them for meeting, planning, and working on projects” (27). Groups that are forced to migrate have more to overcome in terms of creating a sense of rooted-ness, dependability, and establishment.

(Rule-Governed) Zones for Youth

Since the late 1990s, policies regarding after-school and out-of-school programs have set in place controlled areas for urban youth. The 21st Century Learning Center Program, an outgrowth of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002, included a range of spatial zones. By 2005, after school programs took on specific goals linked primarily with academic achievement and safety during the after school hours for young people in urban areas⁶. As part of the 21st Century Learning Program, thousands of centers were established in efforts to create appropriate and safe spaces for youth. Although intended to foster community, the borders of community centers and after school programs were frequently re-drawn so that sites became limited to sanctioned programs correlated with academic standards. This political trend to tie standards to after school programming has had ripple effects: community and teen spaces have been re-framed, maps re-drawn. Currently, community-based organizations and after-school programs that seek funding through 21st Century grants *must* be linked with in-school activities; most will be based at school sites. One report states that as many as 90% of 21st Century Learning Centers are situated inside schools⁷. Because 21st Century Learning grants represent the only federal funding source dedicated to after-school activities, they make up a significant portion of programs aimed to help low-income students. Organizations hoping to receive funding may re-prioritize to privilege standardized achievement, academic enrichment, and literacy related to educational development. Moreover, the politics of funding, youth development and space are intimately inter-connected, as the sites where young people can create their own agenda in the after school hours have been tightly restricted in the era of No Child Left Behind.

⁶ *When Schools Stay Open Late: The National Evaluation of the 21st Century Community Learning Centers Program: Final Report*. 2005. U.S. Department of Education. Available at <http://www.ed.gov/ies/ncee>

⁷ <http://www.afterschoolalliance.org/21stcclc.cfm>

Methodology

Participatory research theories and techniques combine with ethnographic methods in this study. My data come from participant observation, transcriptions of video footage and interviews, as well as extensive field notes recorded after group sessions between January 2005 and June 2007. In September 2004, I began talking with teenage girls at a high school in Oakland, California about the contours of their lives. I was trying to gain a fuller picture of inner city, adolescent girls, knowing that so many poor and working class youth have been framed as deviant and lazy by mainstream media sources. I wanted to gauge whether or not any of the students, given the opportunity, would be interested in generating a youth-led project for girls, loosely related to media and/or technology.

After considering research methodologies, I proposed a participatory research (PR) project. The underlying purpose behind PR involves arming participants with research skills, combined with an activist outlet that will respond to their own desires and needs (Gaventa 1991, Maguire 1987). I imagined that a PR project with urban teens might entail creating an income-generating scheme, a digital story of girls' lives, a pamphlet for Oakland youth on employment opportunities, or a community service project, for example. The options were endless, but the project should emerge from the young women's questions, discussions, and determined needs. In a project outline written in September 2005, I proposed: "Their own research will guide their agenda, and inevitably, their project will grapple with gendered realities in unknown, but potentially powerful ways."

Two years later, this naive notion proved in some part true; yet in other significant ways, key obstacles changed the shape and scope of the project. In addition to social, political, and spatial influences, the young women transformed the project in multiple ways. They resisted formalizing the space, committing to one project, or working as a team, thereby flipping on its head any single “research agenda”. The changeable dynamics made it such that the environment, group size, location, participant demographic, and climate of the program looked a bit different each semester.

The Ethnographic Approach

Today anthropologists and ethnographers in particular work increasingly with those they study and share findings along the way. They try to stay alert to the fact that institutions and individuals in power may well use the ethnographer’s findings to confirm stereotypes, set policies, or determine critical matters, such as land boundaries and ownership. Ethnographers have to keep learning how to be responsible and sensitive to these possibilities while also using empirical data to answer the question “what’s happening here?” We therefore have to take account of limitations and constraints while continuing to advance our understanding of universals of human life and learning (Heath and Street 2008, 126).

Although I worked with different groups of girls from the same neighborhood school community in Oakland for three years, this paper focuses on what took place between January 2005 and June 2007. This paper is based on qualitative data analysis of topics that emerged in sessions over the course of the two and a half years, as well as relevant topics that emerged outside of the group concerning the viability of such a project. Ethnographic field notes recorded over the course of two and a half years capture a wide range of activities: Girlspace recruiting efforts, group meetings, project planning and production. At other times, field notes would capture afternoons when the group was more loosely formed, and I hung out with students in the courtyard, at school basketball games, or at the youth center. Depending on the momentum of a particular group or project, I attended the site one to three afternoons a week, from 3:00 pm to

6:00 pm. Analytically, I coded for mention of space, journeys, travel, and I paid close attention to the development of project ideas in relation to the changing nature of the group context.

I collected lots of data involving conversations with girls about their feelings on issues of mobility, identity, and community. Many of the field notes reflect the topics that they wanted to consider collectively; many other field notes reflect struggles to construct a sanctioned space for young women after school and recruit a consistent group of participants who had the interest and opportunity to be invested in such a project. (A large number of young women had other places to be in the afternoons, such as at home, caring for younger family members, or at a job.) Moreover, this paper considers the urban landscape, institutional contexts, and the geography of gender as a framework to consider Girlspace.

Although these young people live within a bounded geographical region, most have access to the larger world through access to media and technology (Appadurai 1996).⁸ For the purposes of this paper I will focus on the Bay Area teens with whom I worked, all of whom had some technology exposure and experience. Most carried cell phones, or even “Sidekicks”, and many relied on heavy doses of Myspace daily via the local youth center or school library. Nevertheless certain students were far more technologically savvy than others; some knew how to hack into the school computers to access specific sites, others were uncomfortable navigating the web at all. A few of the young people that I discuss were directly involved in a youth media project.

⁸ I do not want to imply that urban youth have transcended the digital divide. In fact, a wide gap persists between middle, upper, and working class youth’s access to technology. Thirty million households in the U.S. do not have a computer. For low-income youth, the only place to get on a computer is at school or a public library. Of Hispanic children, 39% only have access to computers at school; for Black students, the percentage is 45%, compared with just 11% of Asian youth, and 15% of White youth. “Mind The Gap: It’s a High-Speed, High Def, Wi-Fi world. But Not for Everybody”, *NEAToday Technology Divide*. <http://www.nea.org/neatoday/0803/digitaldivide.html>

While membership shifted in the Girlspace program (as did the physical space, time and day that we met, consistency of sessions, etc.), intimate conversations about spaces, places, and identity formation rose to the forefront every semester. The student body of the high school where Girlspace was based was 50% African American, 43% Latino, 6% Asian American, and less than 1 % white. The majority of young women who took part in Girlspace over the years were African American, several were Latina, and occasionally clusters of Tongan youth participated. On any given week, with the exception of the one semester which had a consistent group of young people, Girlspace drew zero to eighteen participants, with an average of three to six students per session. The age range and ethnic and racial population differed slightly each week. This study, furthermore, reflects a “partial truth” (Clifford 1986), as the program engaged primarily African American teens and a white researcher/facilitator. I report on the lives of urban girls, primarily African American teens, with the understanding that my perspective reflects my own background and biases, and that ultimately as a middle class white woman, I am situated outside this community. As questions of “authenticity” swirl and the “crisis of ethnography” simmers in the background of my brain, I weave my own experience as an outsider/educator/researcher into the fold. To do otherwise would be to share only a piece of the puzzle. To do otherwise would be like trying to force the edges of a contact zone into a neat and tidy box, which would, of course, distort the integrity of the shape altogether.

Findings

Meaning-Making in Hushed Tones

One day after school, in the stuffy, over-crowded library which doubles as a student center, a group of girls sat around a table, furtively passing around a black and white photo and whispering loudly. As I got closer, I realized the square photo was an ultra-sound. The girls huddled together, inspecting the image, and speculating about the girl, the baby’s father, what was going to happen to the girl, if she would drop out of school, etc. I sat down and began to talk with some of the kids. They shared clear opinions on the matter.

Several of the girls criticized the pregnant girl for being so “bootsy”. One girl at the table rolled her eyes and said it was the pregnant girl’s own fault. The girls’ voices escalated as they talked over each other, and the library monitor tried to quiet the overcrowded room. As they were shushed, the picture disappeared out of sight, and the matter was dropped.

Field Note, December 2005

Girlsplace emerged in the hopes of creating a separate space for young women to come together to address complex social issues, such as these, and to collaboratively generate a project that would respond. The after school program was the result of many conversations, hours spent at the school, and efforts to create an opportunity for young women to have a space (beyond an over-crowded, tightly monitored library) to disentangle life-issues, and to construct a useful - as well as creative- project. Although this paper hones in on some of the specifics of this particular initiative, broader issues of spatial limitations, resistance, and the social and political realities of urban youth are ultimately central to the discussion.

Politics of Space

In the lifetime of Girlsplace, headquarters regularly shifted based on participants, politics of the sponsoring organization, and the availabilities of space in the local school and youth center. Over the course of a two and a half year period, Girlsplace meeting locations moved approximately ten times between: an over-crowded school library, the lobby of the nearby youth center, a dusty custodial closet, multiple school classrooms, and a computer lab. Afternoon sessions included trying to track down someone with keys, or trying get into some newly designated (routinely locked) locale. Many young people were lost amidst the shuffle.

For a consistent period, we used a room at the adjacent youth development center. The room was spacious and clean, but it was at the back of the building that only students with IDs and passes to the youth center could get into. Often, I heard from kids that they couldn’t find our group, so they just left. After a while, our use of the room at the center was shut off anyway due

to political problems between the head of the center and the head of the organization with which I worked. The spaces were dwindling.

The following field note illuminates the labor entailed in securing space and participants, and captures some of the frustration along the way.

I milled around the [youth] center for a while trying to gather girls. I went into the living room and saw several of the [Tongan] girls from last week. They greeted me and said that they were interested in coming [to Girlspace] today. Fayannah said she was coming. I sat down and chatted with her friend Sela about the project too. At this point, a boy in a chair across the way, said, “Hey you, you guys have to go to school!”, implying that my presence meant school. I laughed and said, “This is not school. It’s for fun.”

The girls in the living room were interested and asked if we were meeting in the same place as last week (back in the center, in the conference room.) I explained that we didn’t have space there this week, and we might have to go to Eastern [their high school, across the way]. They all groaned, and said, “NO, then...I don’t think so. I’m not going back there.”

I tried talking them into coming (the school is located just across the parking lot), but they were determined to say “NO” to Eastern.

Next, I went to the café in the youth center. I saw several other girls from the last few weeks hanging around and I encouraged them to come join us. They all were into it, but when they found out we were meeting at school, they snickered, and said, “No way”. I was worried at that point that Sharita and Crystal would bail too, but they seemed un-phased.

On our way out, about 45 minutes later (it takes a while to convince kids to return to campus once the school day is over), we ran into Margarita. I had been trying to recruit Margarita for months, as she always expressed excitement about being part of the group, but for a variety of reasons always had conflicts. Today, when I enlisted her to join us, she immediately agreed. She swiveled around and walked across the parking lot with us.

And so, it was three girls and me! On our walk back to Eastern, I told them about the small, but tidy space that we were to use for Girlspace. It could be really cool if we were to decorate and make it into our own, with posters, paint, bean bags, etc. They were curious and willing to check it out. But first we had to bang on the door of the school to get someone to let us into the building.

When we walked through the doors into the “office”, I was surprised to see piles of empty boxes littering the floor. Buckets and mops were scattered around the room, and dust covered the surfaces. It looked like our “office” had been transformed into a construction zone overnight.

The girls didn’t say much, but walked around the cramped space, taking it in. Crystal remarked on how dirty it was. The other two looked around and were quiet for a minute, and then Margarita said, “Well, it’s not bad...If we clean it up”. The other girls chimed in a moment later, and I breathed a sigh of relief.

It was dirty, but it would be very possible to clean up and make it our own. The girls began talking about bringing a radio in. I suggested that I could get pizza, and we could have a cleaning party next week. They were excited about the possibility, and they started wondering if they could even get keys to the room to get going faster. Next week, we would clean, we decided. I would provide gloves and supplies, and pepperoni pizza, and they would bring the music, and some other female friends. It was a plan.

But, then Sharita said, “Yeah, cuz we need to figure out where we’re going to go FAST. For real. I don’t like migrating all around. Plus, no one even knows we’re up here...”

- *Field Note, October 2005*

Locked Out

The following week when we went to try to unlock the “closet” that was finally ours, we were notified that, in fact, the space had been allocated to a different organization. We were back to square one. Over the course of the next two and a half years, we explored a variety of possible meeting locations. Many of these spaces were based at the school. Once a group finally established a semi-permanent school-based meeting spot, each afternoon that we gathered, I would track down a particular teacher to get into his/her classroom. Generally, I had to interrupt faculty meetings to ask for keys, and I often lost students along the way. One or two young women would generally sneak out and make a bee-line to the basketball gym to warm up or to the liquor store across the street for another snack. And could I blame them? The instability and lack of rooted-ness (metaphoric and physical) was felt by all of us. And yet, in the context of the locked high school facility where we were based, this is what we came up against time after time. The students grew frustrated with standing outside of locked classrooms and the locked exterior entrance. The spaces of possibility were shrinking with each locked door and institutional constraint, not to mention the young people’s suspicion of anything that smelled like school. Moreover, the school environment informed the organization and climate of our project in subtle- and not-so-subtle ways. Institutional dynamics constricted the space of possibility for this group.

As we saw in the previous field note, some teens were suspicious of my presence around the youth center, or hanging with groups on the sidewalks, as I conjured up “school” for them. Most likely, my white, middle class, youthful demeanor was closely associated with a school-

going vibe. Many of the teachers at urban institutions are young white women, teaching primarily students of color, so this would not be a far-fetched leap to make⁹. Although lots of students came to know me over the years as well as rely on my constancy, for some, my presence meant school, which meant, “No Thanks.”

While the physical and metaphoric quest for space for urban girls characterized the entire tenure at this site, between December 2006 and June 2007 a more permanent space was secured at the school. During this time frame, a concretized Girlspace group formed, and a project materialized. This “successful” stretch of time (in terms of having committed core participants, a base, and a project off the ground) was also the only semester that the young people were officially “compensated” for their involvement. Although funding was not available for youth researchers, they received academic credit, which they deemed “second-best”. Ideally, stipends would have been provided to committed youth media/action research participants so that they would feel economically rewarded and therefore more liberated to pursue projects that truly interested them. Although stipends do not ensure youth commitment to their own social agenda, economic compensation might enable youth who have to work equal access. The economic realities are such that large percentages of youth currently hold jobs after school, in both the formal and informal sector¹⁰. However, by providing school credit as a motivating factor, the goals and criteria of the project were increasingly influenced by academic requirements. As the project developed, the expectations of the students’ Senior Project were over-imposed onto the

⁹ Despite the growing population of students of color in schools, only 13% of their teachers are minority. Also, 75% of public school teachers are female, and 89% are White, according to the National Educational Association and Tomorrow’s Teachers. <http://www.nea.org/mco/teacher.html>

¹⁰ According to the Child Labor Coalition, two thirds of American high school students are employed, although unemployment disproportionately impacts students of color. <http://www.stopchildlabor.org/USchildlabor/statistics.htm>

Also, see “Trends in Youth Employment : Data from the Current Population Survey”, *Report on the Youth Labor Force*, 2000.

“youth-led” research agenda. For example, the young women’s documentary on violence that girls face in their community also needed to be accompanied by an essay and a Power Point presentation. The film aesthetics were also shaped by consideration of the audience of teachers. The theoretical framework underlying “participatory research” shifted in practice, as the project was appropriated to some extent by the demands of the academic standards and requirements.

Establishing Space: Tensions between Talk and Action

Most students had free-flowing topics to discuss, but most had a harder time generating project ideas. The fact that so many sessions took on a preliminary, early-stage feel (with the exception of the semester which resulted in a film production) inevitably impacted the momentum of project plans. The following field note captures the flow of a typical session when students were “new” to the program.

I was acutely aware that there were seven Tongan girls at this point in the room (they kept filtering in, and I would welcome them, filling them in on what we were up to) as well as Sharita (African American) and myself.

The Tongan girls were very familiar with each other- despite their mixed ages. Sharita sat a bit outside the circle. I wanted Sharita to feel comfortable, and I referred back to last week several times to link what she had said then to today’s session. The game, Two Truths and A Lie, soon broke the ice though as they all chimed in eagerly. Siale stumped us when she read her list: “1) Me and my boyz stole a car in 9th grade. 2) I was born in Tonga. 3) I’ve went to 5 jr. high schools.”

We all guessed first that she didn’t steal the car- and then that she didn’t really attend five junior high schools, but in fact, she hadn’t been born in Tonga. She told us the story of stealing a car –with “her boys”- and then going to juvenile hall for a week. Everyone seemed interested upon hearing her story.

After this game, we branched into conversation about issues that are problematic, stressful- everyday concerns. I asked if anyone had something to talk about- and explained that for a few weeks, we’ll just be talking a lot, as a way to get at what the “big” issues are that we might try to develop a media project around.

Alli, who had just joined us, sat next to Sharita (two black girls on the right and seven Tongan girls on the left. I sat facing both groups, trying to construct a circular shape for the discussion). Alli raised her hand and said that a big problem lately is “girls on girls” –fighting. This topic opened up the discussion right away as a lot of girls started nodding around the room. “Girls be starting things with girls - turning on each other, talking shit.”

I let them talk about it for about ten minutes, and then I asked, “What can we do about it? I really want to talk about these issues, but also think it’s key to think through what we can do about it.” The girls sat silently for a minute. No one made eye contact with me.

Sharita said, “Not much”.

“What can we do?” I asked again.

“Nothing”

“I really don’t think there’s much for us to do....”

We continued to sit in silence.

Then, Fayannah looked at me and tentatively offered, “Spread the word?... We could talk about it how it’s not cool?”

Field Note, October 26, 2005

In analyzing this field note, it is key to remember that this was the first session for all the young women, with the exception of Sharita. In this meeting, the young women grappled with the exercise of imagining a project that would be feasible, once they agreed on an everyday problem. After the fun ice breakers, as I sought to create an open forum for sharing, brainstorming, and engagement, the mood shifted dramatically. A vibe of pessimism hung heavy in the room when the girls tried to imagine a “solution” to the problem of hostile language practices. Admittedly, it’s very possible that the way I facilitated the discussion encouraged the young women to think that there might be *one* right answer, even though I sought to resist such a didactic, teacher-centric pedagogy, and to provoke a more expansive “problem-posing” (Freire 1970) praxis.

In the previous example, Fayannah seemingly thought that I was searching for a particular answer as she threw out her searching statement/question for my approval. Although I was trying to encourage a break from this teacher-student paradigm, to “un-do” the conditioning of school takes considerable time, exposure, and trust. Even as I sought to encourage students to think outside the box and to dream up creative possibilities for change, the students often settled on seeking “an” answer. This rigid framework of thought is also the approach students are socialized into in schools. Moreover, it is possible that many of these preliminary sessions took

on a school-based mode, despite my underlying vision of the program as an open-ended, liberatory space for youth.

In the next example, which took place during this same session, the young women continued to wade through the conversations about violence in language. At this point, however, the young women flipped the script and problematized males' offensive, yet normalized language practices toward females. Not surprisingly, themes of self-defense, verbal sparring, and physical fighting emerged in response to the problem, versus fleshing out ideas for a multi-stage project. The young women had their own "projects" in mind, as they vented about "dudes'" disrespectful language and how they respond.

At this point, Sharita chimed in. "I don't think it's that girls are trashing on girls that much- it's more like the dudes are always calling girls bitches or hos or whatever..."

"Yeah, it's all the time. Guys are saying, bitch, slut, ho, ripper, runner, bopper."

For the next 30 minutes or so, we talked about this subject of boys degrading girls- calling them bitches all the time. The girls were timid to say "bitch" so they would say, "Yeah, a guy can call a girl a 'b' and the girl has to respond, so she's like, 'Yeah, yo mamma' and it just gets into this back and forth thing". We talked about how the girls hear it all the time from guys- there's a constant trash talk towards girls, and they went around the room citing incidents when guys had called them the "b" word. I again asked, "What can we do about this language thing?"

Alli, at this point, said, "Well, any guy that's gonna diss me, I might just fight. I don't have a problem with fighting boys. Some girls wouldn't do it, but I don't care." The conversation circled around the room and a few girls said that they too fight boys. Sharita laughed at this but took it in. They all agreed that no matter what, it gets hostile when someone criticizes you, because you're not going to let him have the last word. You still want to defend yourself in some way, so it'll go around and around.

Then, Sharita asked, "For our project, can we do like a conference- or something- with invitations...? Like a panel. We could invite boys in and have them listen to us- hear what we have to say about our problems with being called 'bitches'. I think the male-female topic is a good one".

Several of the other girls nodded in agreement. We agreed to start with this idea next week.

Field Note, October 26, 2005

This more conventional project idea was suggested by an academic all-star, who is extremely competent in playing the game of school. Most likely, Sharita borrowed from her school-going sensibilities to come up with this idea. She routinely dropped into Girlspace

sessions and tried to build momentum for this idea. Although this project would have aligned perfectly with the vision of the program, it never materialized. In fact, no single project emerged that particular semester. The Tongan youth would show up intermittently, and several other students (primarily African American) floated in and out. Sharita was somewhat of a regular, but as a prominent school leader, she had many other activities and responsibilities which consumed her time. The young women who participated were nomads, bursting with table topics, but unable to locate the time or space (or desire?) to execute long-term goals. The reality was that young women were eager to show up occasionally to talk, but committing to a sustainable project that would truly grow from their own needs and desires proved difficult. Against the backdrop of school, where space, time, curriculum, and movements are tightly organized, challenging students to “buy-in” to youth-led action research requires substantial time and support. Young people have been conditioned to “do school” for years, and so asking teens to critically engage with their social and political worlds for their own sake, rather than school requirements, may be significantly challenging. When urban young women have space to debrief, debate, and discuss daily realities, they may find their involvement more appealing- and realistic- than committing to a longer term “project”.

Walking While Female

Young women who participated in Girlspace repeatedly addressed issues of language and spatialized practices. They talked consistently – and with intensity -- about issues that emerged *en route*, traveling to and through public spaces of the urban context. Students frequently took up conversation about the male gaze that followed them as they moved- through hallways, streets, parks, and other public spaces. The topic of unwanted (and sometimes wanted) attention

consistently elicited animated discussions among the girls, as they compared stories of being hit on, followed, harassed, cat-called, and the like. Even as they sought to “one-up” each other with more egregious examples of men’s behaviors, their stories were raw, readily accessible, and free-flowing. Most young women, regardless of age or demographic, spoke about the familiar difficulty of walking while female. The gendered dimensions of space emerged as a central sticking point in group discussions, time after time.

Disciplining of the female body happens through language, gaze, and codes of the street (Jones 2004, Anderson 1999). As the young women talked about repeatedly in sessions, gendered slurs from men and boys are commonplace; the everyday language practices of certain places and spaces. Ripper, runner, bitch, breezy, slut, ho, bopper, and the list goes on. The girls talked at length about being called a “b” (their polite nickname for bitch) as well as the issue of how to address people who use such terms freely. Often, slurs from men and boys - and some girls- slice through the air as young women make their way through corridors of the streets, sidewalks, and hallways. As language flies between men and women, a sexual policing takes places, according to the students. Some learn to check themselves, to discipline their bodies, and to reign in their “dangerous female sexuality”. Or they may resist such regulations. *Or*, as the young women with whom I work attest, they may do *both*. Language and sexuality are not so simple or evenly inter-related.

In the following selection, one young woman vented about the (mis)perceptions of movements after school, which contrast the freedoms which seem to be afforded to young men.

Taisha explained:

Well, there’s a lot of dudes in my family, and like, it’s real bad...Like my uncle thinks that I’m tramping all the time. He thinks when I come here to the center, I’m trampin’. It’s crazy like, if you a dude and you have sex, it’s like you get an award or something...but if you be a girl, you get blamed... Like in my family, my grandma told me that if I get pregnant, I’m disowned from the family..... Like I

said, there are so many dudes in my family, so you hear all their stuff too, you know? Like my cousin can have sex and talk about his women, but not the female.

Even inhabiting public spaces may be perceived to be provocative, as this quote demonstrates. Girls talk about where they can and cannot go, according to family expectations, as well as according to cultural mores. Taisha, quoted above, mentioned on several occasions that her uncles thought she was “tramping” when she went to the youth center in the afternoons. Her mobility was more heavily monitored than her male cousins, who were allowed to go where they pleased, and the boundaries between her autonomy and scandalous sexuality seem to be blurred, according to Taisha. Many of the young women with whom I worked are strong, athletic young women: the stars of sports teams at their school. Yet, an air of protectionism emanated from many of their families and the community at large. They may not be “allowed” to walk freely around outside the neighborhood after school or in the evening, without fear of being endangered by men or vilified as sluts.

This idea that spaces are either made dangerous *by* youth, or dangerous *for* youth, as in the angel vs. devil dichotomy (Valentine 1996) is echoed by the girls’ comments. The way that spaces produce and re-produce gender and gendered hierarchies can be clearly seen as young women share accounts of how simply being outside may be associated with loose morality. Valentine’s work on the polarized assumptions surrounding childhood takes on new meaning when filtered with the lens of gender, as well. Valentine expounds:

Autonomous young people appear to be automatically perceived to disrupt the moral order of the street. In the climate of pain about “dangerous children”, adults (parents, the police, the state, the media, and so on) appear to be articulating a need for greater spatial controls to be exerted over young people in order to maintain the boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’ (597).

While the angel vs. devil dichotomy frames contemporary youth at large, Valentine argues, the salience of this dichotomy is amplified when gender considerations are factored in. As Doreen Massey (1994), Linda McDowell (1999), and other feminist geographers have illustrated, gender

shapes spaces just as spaces shape constructions of gender, and the relationship between indoor/outdoor, good girl/bad girl, and masculinity/femininity is frequently fraught with tension. In particular, an urban mythos that streets and outside spaces are dangerous for girls/women runs rampant. In many instances, the social construction of crime and fear work to limit women's mobility more than men's, some scholars argue (Madriz 1997). Many young women are encouraged to dress "appropriately", to avoid talking to men, to go straight home, and to stay off the streets; all of which perpetuate a sense of young women as victims, endangered, and vulnerable. Madriz argues that this talk - this socialization of girls - works to nurture a fear of crime, rape, and male violence, while feeding "the notion that women and men are not entitled to the same rights: women should not and cannot go places where men go; women cannot engage in activities which are open to men; women should wear 'proper' attire so that they are not molested by men; and since women must protect themselves and their children from criminal victimization, they had better stay home and be good girls" (16).

In many inner cities, young women learn to negotiate derogatory language, physical conflict, and violence on a daily basis. According to Jones (2004), poor, urban young women often participate in hostile language practices and behavior in order to "mediate the physical vulnerability they may experience in their everyday lives"(52). This trend was articulated during countless afternoon sessions at Girlspace, as issues of language, violence, and gender re-occurred. Young women talked about the implications of certain locations being shaped by the sounds and slurs that fill the space, and they problematized hateful language practices, utilized by both males and females. Young women talked about the normalization of the term "bitch" to describe young African American women, just as the word "nigger" has been normalized to talk about young black men. On many occasions, however, the young women disrupted the

normalcy of such discourse, and illustrated the problematic interconnections between language and violence. In the following example, one young woman explains the problem with the “b” word.

A woman raised you, gave you your name and everything--took care of you. And you gonna say ‘bitch’? . . . You hear it all the time, walking through the halls... like, I was reading the school newspaper- it was an Oakland high school paper, and this girl wrote this poem in it and she was like, ‘All through the halls, my ears ring with the “b” word...’

And like, how can you even respond to that word as a female?

Someone’s like, ‘Hey bitch!’ You gonna turn around? No, that’s not your name.... You shouldn’t be *able* to respond to that.

You should be like, ‘First of all, No. You shouldn’t be saying that...’

‘First of all, I am not one of those.’

‘First of all, would you call your mama that?’

Would you call you grandmother that? Would you call the woman who brought her into the world? And her into the world? And her into the world?

- Tracy, age 15, May 4, 2006

Despite awareness of hallways and streets and other public arenas as being corridors of catcalls and offensive language, young women resisted various forms of aggressive male attention.

Some young women fought back, as a previous field note revealed (*“Well, any guy that’s gonna diss me, I might just fight. I don’t have a problem with fighting boys.”*) Other young women said that they might resist being called a bitch by simply “being a bitch”. I am unclear about what this means exactly in young women’s eyes, however, “being a bitch” serves as a sensible defense to such attack. Again, young women’s relationship to language, sexuality, and their own strategic actions prove multi-layered, and multi-directional. Being labeled a tramp for being outside or for wearing certain clothes does not necessarily translate into young women behaving as victims or being immobilized by gendered codes. Reactions to the spatial “rules” and expectations – or geographies of gender- include a range of practices that enable young women to make their way through space with confidence and logic at certain times, while caution or fear may inform movements at other times.

Tactics young women employed ranged significantly, based on the level of wanted or unwanted attention. The strategies young women regularly relied on included: averting their gaze while walking down the street, ignoring the string of “Hey baby...”’s muttered by men leaning out of low-rider cars, or giving out the wrong cell phone number, when pressed. One young woman, however, objected to the last maneuver, claiming that that plan backfired on her once. She recounted that she had given out a fake phone number to a young man who was harassing her, as he drove along beside her on the street. The “dude” called the phone number immediately, which she had not anticipated. When he realized that he’d been duped and that the number was not hers, he became annoyed. As he sped off, he flung a glass bottle at her, narrowly missing her head.

Other strategies that young women shared included telling men that they are far younger than they actually are, pretending to be on the phone, or walking in groups. One young woman asserted that every time she prepares to get off the bus at her stop, she reaches down to tie her shoes. She explained that once off the bus and in her ‘hood, at any moment she better be ready to run. The strategies girls employ and are willing to share with each other are invaluable tools for managing mobility through the urban landscape.

Additionally, girls collectively addressed what they observed in terms of differential treatment from men, based on attire. In one session, Angel talked about the anonymity she gained when wearing baggy sweatpants and a sweatshirt on “game day” for her athletic team. She boasted that no one bothered her when she was wearing loose sweats before her game. She explained that at first she was shocked, and kept swiveling around, curious as to why no commentary followed her as she walked down the street. Here, Angel performatively describes the realization of freedom gained in shapeless sweatpants:

I be walkin' down the street, and then like, (She pretends to look around, from right to left quickly)... "No one's talking to me!", she exclaims with wide eyes.... "And this one time, I was with my best friend in tight jeans [on game day], and all these guys were like, "What's your name? What's your name? What's your name?" [to friend] but I was like, "They're not talking to *me* today!", she laughs.

She followed this impersonation up with the comment that she was going to wear sweats more often. However, attention is not always a bad thing, the young women assured me, and on many occasions, they actively seek young men's notice and pursuit. The game of attracting and avoiding attention is clearly a complex and multi-layered endeavor, not easily simplified or generalized.

As young women navigate zones of public spaces, from the hallways to the streets, they learn how to manage varying degrees of comfort and discomfort, risk-taking and risk-aversion. The young women repeatedly acknowledge commonplace kernels of wisdom that they, as girls, have grown up hearing: stay off the streets; stay out of the darkness; stick together; stay safe. But, in the same breath that young women recite truisms about certain places or routes not being appropriate ("*especially* for young ladies," as Angel warns), they might explain that they regularly have to walk through those same regions to get home at night. The contradictions are complex. While young women verbally spout rules of the street, their actions tell a different story. In multiple examples, young women complicated notions of safety, geographies of gender, and resistance, as they admittedly traveled through parks, streets, neighborhoods generally deemed risky for young women. Further, we must ask, is it resistant to be outside, if to be outside is considered precarious for young women?

In the example of the film project that emerged through Girlspace, students wanted to document places where they feel unsafe as females. They chose to film in a local public park in the evening. First, the youth researchers generated plans to record particular locations that arouse fear and uncertainty for girls. Next, they secured video technology and ventured out at

night, documenting the experience of walking through the public park in the darkness. As they narrated their journey through the “scary,” unlit expanse, they countered the assumption that certain urban places are off-limits for young women. Notably, the young women encountered other women in the park, despite the common knowledge that such a darkened route might be ill advised for women. The following selection illustrates some of the complex spatial dynamics that were highlighted through this particular scene, and in the young women’s lives, in general.

Angel turns toward the camera to acknowledge the entrance of two women (strangers) who they happen upon, as they traverse the park. She introduces them by their names, explaining: ‘I guess we just filmed them and asked them if they are uncomfortable walking through _____ Park.’

Erica: ‘Well, at night, it’s very scary, cause years ago, people used to get killed in here and stuff. So, at nighttime, when it get dark, I don’t walk through here by myself but, if I’m with someone, like now, and the lights is on, it’s okay....’

Nya: ‘But other than that, NO!’...

Erica: ‘But other than that, No, it’s not cool you guys. Don’t walk through _____ Park at night, when it’s dark.’

Notably, the lights to which they referred were situated far apart from each other on a pathway, providing minimal light. Interestingly, both the filmmakers and the women they encountered in the park, espoused verbal testimonies that were simultaneously complicated by their actions. All of these young women were congregated where they testified that they should *not* be-- in a largely unlit, notorious place at night. However, they effectively changed the shape of the space with their presence, despite the urban lore about such places being off-limits for women. Their collectivity in the dark park and their daily practices traveling through urban spaces complicate commonly espoused “rules” of the street related to gender.

Girl Groups: Co-Constructing Networks of Support

Young women rely on each other as they travel through the “cuts,” both literally and figuratively, and this reliance enables them to resist spatial assumptions and gendered expectations. To understand how young women make sense of navigation through the urban

landscape, I lean on sociologist Carol Stack's discussion of kin networks and support systems.¹¹ Extending Stack's spatial lens on family and domestic arrangements to the present-day journeying that urban young women experience across neighborhoods, schools, transit routes, and streets proves useful to this analysis. As we have seen, young women enlist a network of females to help each other negotiate zones of risk or danger. In the previous example in the park, the young women's dependence on friends appears systematic and organized. Their rules are relatively simple and clear-cut: Don't walk by yourself. Stick together. Be ready to run. Young women use each other to deflect danger or unwanted attention, and to therefore defy the spatial "rules." This use of extended kin to navigate reflects a conscious level of strategy and active resistance, which inevitably impact geographies of gender in dynamic ways.

Young women's "active resistance," however, must be contextualized in terms of larger landscape of power—the macro and micro structures nestled in the foreground and background of these young women's lives. Accordingly, anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod (1990) warns against romanticizing resistance; she urges academics to recognize resistance (and to honor and analyze it) but to see it in a broader context of power relations. Yes, Abu-Lughod argues, resistance demonstrates agency, but resistance also points to the matrix of power relations that set the stage. Taking Abu-Lughod's lead, what does it mean for the girls to *resist* and to go

¹¹ Carol Stack's hallmark work, *All Our Kin* (1974) documents the extended systems of an urban, poor, African American community in the U.S, shedding light on survival strategies employed via kin networks. This work contributes a critical spatial dimension of low-income black communities, as Stack traces the elastic boundaries of kin-networks that mobilize when times get tough to shoulder the load of child-care and material needs, amidst contexts of unemployment, poverty, eviction, and other daily struggles. This text demonstrates how kin networks strategically shift across spaces and places, providing social, economic, domestic, as well as psychological support. She documents how residential setups re-arrange based on the needs of the moment, and in particular, she documents how children frequently flow between households. This "flow" is not arbitrary, however, but a concerted system of exchange, reciprocity, and functionality. Highlighting the changeability of houses, and the journeying between locales, Stack's participants sound extremely similar to the young people with whom I work in Oakland as they discuss "staying" at different home bases (aunties' houses, mom's house, grandmother's house) depending on the particular context. I extend Stack's spatial lens on family and domestic arrangements to the mobility that urban young women experience across neighborhoods and local communities.

where they're not "supposed" to go? Additionally, what does it mean for young women to reject formalizing a particular "project", despite the vision of the program? I contend that young women's resistance demonstrates strategy, collective and individual agency, and complex participation in their own gendered experiences, as well as larger constructs of power.

Moreover, exploring young women's navigation skills *must* be understood against the backdrop of the socio-political and geographical landscapes that make such a simple homeward journey an act of strategy, opposition, and resistance in the first place.

Further, I do not want to glorify the young women's resistance or fall into the trap of defending the theoretical foundation of the Girlspace program. Such a discursive move would detract from the issues at hand. Larger questions of constricted space, institutional pressures, as well as social and economic realities make it such that considerable roadblocks face many after school programs (including "youth-led" groups) in urban areas. Studies have demonstrated, however, that sustainable projects frequently thrive when they grow out of community-based organizations. Additionally, youth-based programs may succeed when roles, rules, and risks are clearly outlined, and young people feel confident that the program will last (Heath 1999). Needless to say, unpacking young women's resistance to spatial assumptions and gendered expectations must be understood in the context of larger structures of power in the urban context.

Conclusions: The Need for Space

This study demonstrates that spaces for talking through daily realities with other young women and a listening adult remain difficult to locate in the inner city. Sharing life stories, arriving at "I feel you" moments, and challenging each other to make sense of the world contribute to young people's development. Because my interactions with young women were

primarily during meeting time and in the midst of the space-chase, I have seen few “outcomes” of the group, in terms of greater confidence with young men, family, other girls, and so forth, *beyond* our sessions.

However, I did observe one of the girl members referring to a discussion that took place in Girlspace in order to support her argument with a boy. Sharita was in a heated dialogue with her friends Deandre and Jasper. In the lobby of the “Center,” they were bantering back and forth about labels for young women. Jasper was supporting a friend who had said that he “hated that ho” about a girl. Sharita was outraged, and pressing them to acknowledge that this language was harsh and ultimately unnecessary. Deandre laughed in her face and responded that such behavior is only appropriate because young women at Eastern High School are so aggressive. He proceeded to dramatize what he meant.

Deandre stood up. He cleared his throat to get attention and then he began a loud impersonation, “The girls at Eastern are like... ‘What you gonna do about it, huh? Huh? What you gonna do about it? I’m gonna beat yo ass. I’m gonna beat yo ass. Yeahh, yeahh, yeahhh!’” (Here he flailed around and pretended to get up in people’s faces. He spoke in a high-pitched, escalating voice. All of the kids around were laughing hysterically and he was causing a lot of attention beyond our little area.)

He stopped, and then said to me in an explanatory tone, “The girls at Eastern...When they open their mouths, they’re not going to close ‘em until, like, the next period.”

Sharita: “Shut up.” Sharita turned toward me, “Remember when we were in the room with Crystal and some other girls and we were talking about this...?” I nodded. Sharita turned back to Deandre and said, “You can’t say girls at Eastern.”

Deandre repeated his statement emphatically: “GIRLS AT EASTERN.”

Sharita: “*All* girls though?”

Deandre said, “It’s like that. I mean, for real, people jump down your throat here....It’s a jungle where we live. I mean, it’s the ghetto.”

Sharita: “What you talkin’ about, Deandre. If you treat it like a jungle, it’s gonna be one. Why it gotta be a jungle?”

- *Field Note, March 3, 2006*

In this incident, Sharita referred to a previous discussion that centered on perceptions of young women, in order to support her challenge of Deandre’s dramatic caricature. She seemed

to lean on the memory of previous conversations in Girlspace to fuel her response to Deandre, demanding that he clarify his claims. She challenges constructs of community, self, and gender throughout this exchange, although, whether this can be attributed in some way to her involvement in the girls group is of course impossible to determine. This student demonstrates important questioning skills as well as leadership, and having the space and support to develop these skills is undoubtedly critical to a young person's development.

As I have illustrated throughout this paper, creation of an established location, program, and "free space" was significantly compromised and challenged by spatial, institutional, and cultural constraints. The fact that the program has not survived *must be* considered through a spatial lens, as the social, institutional, gendered, and economic factors played significant roles in how the program took shape.

It is crucial to unpack the complexities of space in the urban context, understanding where young women feel policed or disciplined - versus spaces where they feel freer. Of course, as we've seen, spaces are neither static nor fixed; in fact, places and pathways may evoke a range of experiences for young women- from vulnerability and danger to thrill and liberation all in the same moment. However, understanding the complexity of space issues that urban young women face must be considered before programs, services, and even educational opportunities are launched. The power of such a "girls space" is possible, but it must be understood in the matrix of power relations in which it is ultimately embedded. Such a program where young people can question, take ownership, and think critically about their own lives is certainly possible and important to cultivate.

Researchers and educators need to create forums for young women to come together to question, learn, listen, laugh, and create. The girls with whom I worked demonstrated critical

consciousness as they challenged each other- and myself, and the world around them. Having a separate space to talk together is ultimately a privilege, however, and before such programs are launched, it is crucial to understand the web of inter-locking constraints that exist in the socio-spatial context. The young women with whom I worked were “locked out” from the schools, the streets, and in many cases metaphorically locked out of after school programs, as these programs are increasingly situated in schools. Against the backdrop of intersecting restraints, spaces for low-income, urban young women were limited, at best.

Girlsplace was designed to be a “free and liberatory” space-- a domain for collaboration, reflection, education, and identity construction for young women. Time after time, I was told that there was a huge need and plenty of girls with “nothing to do” after school. However, Girlsplace does not exist in a vacuum, separate from the sideshows, the bus stops, the boys on the corner, the intrigue and fear of being looked at, the CAHSEE exam, the increasingly pressured topography of school. Girlsplace existed within the fray of babysitting duties at 3:00 pm, trash talk in the hallways, the beginning of the shift at Togos, the story of the drive-by last weekend, basketball tryouts, music sharing on Myspace -- the daily swirl and movements of the city. “Nothing to do” turned out to be “lots to do” in limited quarters. Ultimately, a program such as Girlsplace is possible and critical; however, understanding the constrained spatial dimensions of urban young women’s lives is key before such a program will ever have the room to breathe.

References

- Abu-Lughod, Lila. 1990. "The Romance of Resistance: Tracing Transformations of Power through Bedouin Women." *American Ethnologist*. 17: 1, 41-55.
- Appadurai, Arjun. 1996. "Here and now". *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1-23.
- Anderson, Elijah. 1999. *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City*. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Bettis, Pamela and Natalie Guice-Adams. 2005. *Geographies of Girlhood: Identities In-Between*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Brown, Lynn. 2003. *Girlfighting: Betrayal and Rejection Among Girls*. New York: New York University Press.
- Brown, Lynn and Carol Gilligan. 1992. *Meeting at the Crossroads: Women's Psychology and Girl's Development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Burton, Linda, Dawn Obeidallah, and Kevin Allison. 1996. "Ethnographic insights on social context and adolescent development among inner city African American teens". In *Ethnography and Human Development: Context and Meaning in Social Inquiry*, edited by Richard Jessor, Anne Colby, and Richard Sweder. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Clifford, James. 1997. "Spatial Practices". In *Routes: Travel and Translation in the late 20th Century*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 52-91.
- _____. 1986. "Partial Truths". In *Writing Culture. The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, Edited by James Clifford and George E. Marcus. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1-29.
- Erkut, Sumru, Jacqueline P. Fields, Rachel Sing and Fern Marx. 1996. "Diversity in girls' experiences: Feeling good about who you are." In *Urban Girls: Resisting Stereotypes, Creating Identities*, edited by Bonnie Leadbeater and Niobe Way. New York: New York University Press.
- Ferguson, Ann. 2000. *Bad Boys: Public School in the Making of Black Masculinity*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan.
- Fine, Michelle, Lois Weis, Craig Centrie and Rosemary Roberts. 2000. "Educating Beyond the Borders of Schooling." *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*. 31: 2, 131-151.

- Fleetwood, Nicole. 2005. "Authenticating Practices: Producing Realness, Performing Youth. In *Youthscapes: The popular, the national, the global*, edited by Sunaina Maira and Elisabeth Soep. Philadelphia: PENN/ University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Freire, Paulo. 1970. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum International Publishing Group.
- Gaventa, John and Helen Lewis. 1991. *Participatory Education and Grassroots Development: The case of Rural Appalachia*. London: International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED).
- Heath, Shirley Brice. 1983. *Ways with Words: Language, Life and Work in Communities and Classrooms*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Heath, Shirley Brice and Laura Smyth. 1999. *Artshow: Youth and Community Development*. Washington, D.C.: Partners for Livable Development.
- Heath, Shirley Brice Heath and Brian Street. 2008. *On Ethnography: Approaches to Language and Literacy Research*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- hooks, bell. 1989. *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*. Boston: South End Press.
- Hyams, Melissa. 2003. "Adolescent Latina Bodyspaces: Making Homegirls, Homebodies, and Homeplaces". In *Life's Work: Geographies of Social Reproduction*, edited by Katherine Mitchell, Sallie Marston, and Cindi Katz. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- , 2000. "Pay Attention in Class and Don't Get Pregnant: A Discourse of Academic Success among Adolescent Latinas." *Environment and Planning A*. Vol. 32: 635-654.
- James-Burdumy, Susanne, Mark Dynarski, Mary Moore, John Deke, Wendy Mansfield and Carol Pistorino. 2005. *When Schools Stay Open Late: The National Evaluation of the 21st Century Community Learning Centers Program: Final Report*. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance. Available at <http://www.ed.gov/ies/ncee>
- Jelleyman, Tim and N.Spencer. 2007. "Residential Mobility and Health Outcomes: A systematic Review". *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*. Vol. 62: 584-592.
- Jones, Nikki. 2004. "'It's Not Where you Live, It's How You Live': How Young Women Negotiate Conflict and Violence in the Inner City". *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*. Vol. 595: 49-62.
- Lave, Jean and Etienne Wenger. 1991. *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

- Leadbeater, Bonnie and Niobe Way. 1996. *Urban Girls: Resisting Stereotypes, Creating Identities*. New York: New York University Press.
- Leadbeater, Bonnie and Niobe Way. 2007. *Urban Girls Revisited: Building Strengths*. New York: New York University Press.
- Long, Larry. 1992. "International Perspectives on the Residential Mobility of America's Children." *Journal of Marriage and the Family*. Vol. 54: 4, 861-869.
- Lopez, Nancy. 2003. *Hopeful Girls, Troubled Boys: Race and Gender Disparity in Urban Education*. New York: Routledge.
- Madriz, Esther. 1997. *Nothing Bad Happens to Good Girls: Fear of Crime in Women's Lives*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Maguire, Patricia. 1987. *Doing Participatory Research: A Feminist Approach*. Amherst, MA. The Center for International Education.
- Maira, Sunaina and Elisabeth Soep. 2005. *Youthscapes: The Popular, the National, the Global*. Philadelphia: PENN/University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Males, Mike. 1999. *Framing Youth: 10 Myths about the Next Generation*. Maine: Common Courage Press.
- Massey, Doreen. 1994. *Space, place, and gender*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- McDowell, Linda. 1999. *Gender Identity and Place: Understanding Feminist Geographies*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- McLaren, Peter. 1998. *Life in Schools : An Introduction to Critical Pedagogy in the Foundations of Education*. 3rd ed. New York: Longman.
- Nespor, Jan. 1997. *Tangled Up in School: Politics, Space, Bodies, and Signs in the Educational Process*. Mahwah, N.J.: L. Erlbaum Associates.
- Newman, Katherine. 2002. "No Shame: The View from the Left Bank." Responses to Loic Wacquant by Mitchell Duneier, Katherine Newman, and Elijah Anderson. *American Journal of Sociology*. Accessed Nov. 2003. <http://www.duneier.net>.
- Noguera, Pedro. 2003. *City Schools and the American Dream: Fulfilling the Promise of Public Education*. New York: Teachers College.
- Pastor, Jennifer, Jennifer McCormick and Michelle Fine. 2007. "Makin' Homes: An Urban Girl Thing." In *Urban Girls Revisited: Building Strengths*, edited by Bonnie Leadbeater and Niobe Way. New York: New York University Press.

- Sharkey, Patrick. 2006. "Navigating Dangerous Streets: The Sources and Consequences of Street Efficacy". *American Sociological Review*. Vol. 71: 826-846.
- Skelton, Tracey. and Gill Valentine. (eds.). 1998. *Cool Places: Geographies of Youth Cultures*. London: Routledge.
- Stack, Carol. 1974. *All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Tannock, Stuart. 2001. *Youth at Work: The Unionized Fast-Food and Grocery Workplace*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Taylor, Jill McLean, Carol Gilligan and Amy Sullivan. 1995. *Between Voice and Silence: Women and Girls, Race and Relationship*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Valentine, Gill. 1996. "Angels and Devils: Moral Landscapes of Childhood." *Environment and Planning D.: Society and Space*. Vol. 14: 581-599.
- Walkerdine, Valerie. 2001. *Growing up Girl: Psychosocial Explorations of Gender and Class*. New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Weis, Lois and Michelle Fine. 2000. *Construction Sites: Excavating Race, Class, and Gender Among Urban Youth*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- _____. 1993. *Beyond Silenced Voices: Class, Race, and Gender In United States Schools*. Albany: State University of New York Press.



INSTITUTE FOR
THE STUDY OF
SOCIAL CHANGE

2420 Bowditch Street #5670
Berkeley, CA 94720-5670

tel: 510-642-0813
fax: 510-642-8674

email: ISSC@berkeley.edu
web: <http://issc.berkeley.edu>