Street Literacy: Urban Teenagers’ Strategies for Negotiating Their Neighborhood

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Introduction.
Adolescence is the occasion for many pivotal "first" experiences that are contexts for self-discovery, personal development, and the interpretation of societal value structures. While fashioning and refashioning the boundaries of their identity, and testing themselves and all who surround them, young people engage in the rites of passage of the teenage years — first real responsibilities, first job experiences, and first sexual experiences. In contemporary U.S. urban society, adolescence is also usually the first time that children negotiate public space on their own on a regular basis (not accompanied by an adult), whether it means walking to school by themselves, doing family chores, or spending time outdoors with friends. How teenagers define their environmental transactions is intimately bound with the way in which they construct their identities. In these interactions, environmental experiences are a means for reflecting upon, reproducing, and transforming the self.

Teenagers have a highly developed understanding of environmental protocol and can "read" the environment in specific ways that are at once personal, cultural and social. In order to explore young people's understanding of their neighborhood, their experiences in it, and their construction of self, I have developed the concept of "street literacy." Street literacy is a conceptual framework that describes the dynamic processes of experiential knowledge production and self-construction in a specified context, public urban space. In this paper, I theorize how the environment, and in particular, the street, is a significant context for learning, in order to explore young people's relationship to a disinvested and gentrifying neighborhood landscape. Examining the relationship of the cultural, historical, social, and environmental dimensions of a setting to the construction and production of a range of subjectivities, the study of street literacy weds my research of environmental experiences with theories of development and learning in order that this work might contribute to interdisciplinary theories of spatial practices.

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1 "Subjectivity" refers to the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of an individual, one's sense of oneself and ways of understanding one's relation to the world (Weedon, 1987, 32-3). In this discussion, my understanding of subjectivity is informed by a feminist poststructuralist conceptualization of subjectivity as unstable, contradictory and in process, continuously being reshaped in discourse and other material social practices each time we think, speak, or act.
To be street literate is a little different from being 'street smart' or having "street wisdom" as Elijah Anderson (1990) identifies the sophisticated coping strategies pedestrians adopt for personal safety. It goes beyond negotiating the environmental context, and comprises a way of constructing oneself in the process of understanding the world through interaction and experience in the environment. Street literacy is an interpretative framework that privileges experienced informal local knowledges that are grounded in personal experiences and passed down in the form of rules, boundaries set by parents, neighborhood folklore, and kids' collective wisdom. It is informed by feminist and other (e.g. anti-racist, post-colonial) theoretical work that identifies the values and contributions of peoples who have been categorically marginalized from the production of knowledge, because of issues of class, race, gender, and age.

Street literacy is a concept I developed to interpret the seemingly contradictory experiences I encountered as a novice junior high school teacher in a New York City public school on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. There was a discrepancy between the students' low skill levels in reading and writing and their quite sophisticated understanding of environmental protocols. The students' already wise ways of knowing appropriate behaviors in public settings impressed me, as did their highly developed cynical and critical perspectives on their neighborhood and social surroundings. Not only did students question institutions of authority including the government and media, they also questioned what they saw and experienced in their daily excursions in the neighborhood. For example, while students knew that the police were supposed protect them, they didn't trust them. And more often than not, students spoke about the police as suspicious figures foreign to their neighborhood, who engaged in acts of brutality and harassment.

Evidently, the students' keen awareness of social inequities was not founded only in abstract classroom conjecture, but was due in part to their own, and their families' and friends', personal experiences of injustices. At an early age these teenagers have developed critical perspectives on the contradictory world in which they live. The young people I worked with demonstrated a mastery of negotiating their neighborhood environment. They shared a language of street practices and strategies for staying safe, or more importantly, for enabling them to at least feel safe. Learning and practicing the strategies necessary to navigate their neighborhood environment safely were tasks on which the Lower East Side teenagers with whom I worked spent a lot of their energy. The environmental competencies of negotiating the neighborhood terrain are necessary social skills that are learned in the course of their environmental experiences with parents, older guardians, and other kids. The contradictory nature of what teenagers are learning in their environmental transactions will be discussed later.
I am using the term "street literacy" in this paper to express and recognize the practice, application, and acquisition of a particular form of social and experiential knowledge. In using the term literacy I am not referring to or differentiating between written and oral language uses, but using "literacy" to refer to fluency in a particular domain of knowledge, such as is implied in the terms "media literacy" and "cultural literacy." In my conceptualization of street literacy I am adopting the expressive power of the term as a benchmark of knowledge and skill acquisition that recognizes and values the currency of street practices and informal knowledge production.

A consideration of the qualitative differences between literacy, as the term is traditionally used, and street literacy reveals that street literacy shares some commonalities with oral (or non-literate) language practices. Writing as differentiated from spoken language produces a material product, it externalizes thought in an abstract way, and the practice of writing is an essentially private activity involving an individual relationship to words and thought. Oral language, on the other hand, is a social and shared practice (Scribner, 1984). Similarly, street literacy is embedded in public life and space. Unlike everyday spoken language practices, street negotiations are consciously controlled practices that require an acute awareness of the presentation of self and one's relationship to others and the environment even though they seem spontaneous and intuitive. With practice, however, environmental negotiations take on a second-hand nature that may appear and even feel automatic. Perhaps the most crucial difference between street literacy and literacy is their temporal and spatial dimensions. Environmental negotiations, like spoken languages, are situated in present time and a bounded spatial context. Whereas writing and reading are separate and transcendent activities that allow individuals to travel and discover beyond their temporal and spatial boundaries--opening up new worlds of discovery beyond their immediate context.

The concept of street literacy is inspired by the social interactionist theories of the Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky, who demonstrated how the use of language produces and reproduces cultural forms of behavior (Vygotsky, 1978; Newman & Holzman, 1993). Vygotsky argues that sign systems, such as language, are the product of specific concerns of social development; language is not a natural "given," but mediates how we express and understand ourselves and the environment. Following this line of inquiry, if public space is also assumed to be a construction of specific social concerns, the question of how one's experience in public space mediate one's understanding of the world--producing and reproducing cultural forms of behavior--is comparable, although obviously the problem is dimensionalized in different terms.
Vygotsky's conceptualization of development is especially relevant to understanding the relationship of environmental practices to subjectivity which is implied in the theoretical construct of street literacy. Development is conceived by Vygotsky as an integrative ongoing process in which interpersonal (social) processes are transformed into intrapersonal (internal) processes; the sphere of external activities is turned inward (Marx & Engels, 1846; Marx, 1859). When the individual transforms the external world through action, he/she consequentially transforms his/herself. For Vygotsky, language is the conceptual bridge the individual uses to mediate his/her external and internal relationship with the environment. Language is a creative tool with which an individual organizes and masters the world and constructs the self. Re-interpreting Vygotsky's conceptualization of language to include material, spatial, and social practices, street literacy describes on the one hand the cognitive processes of internalizing public space negotiations, and at the same time serves to dimensionalize development by locating it within an environmental context.

The relationship between social context and cognitive development is theorized in the research of everyday contexts (Lave, 1988; Rogoff & Lave, 1984; Scribner, 1984); shifting the focus of inquiry to the situated nature of learning in the supermarket (Lave, 1988) for example, or the study of practical thinking in the workplace (Scribner, 1984). While street literacy is conceptualized within these parameters, its consideration extends beyond the social practices of a specified context, to incorporate the environmental and material dimensions of place. The vital role our surroundings play in processes of development is articulated in the theory of place-identity (Proshansky et al., 1983), which redefined the model of cognition to include the environment as a framework for personal self-definition. The self is defined and expressed not simply by one's relationship with other people, but also by the physical settings that define and structure experiences in daily life. The theory of place-identity is a departure point for my research of street literacy, which also draws upon contemporary theories of identity that suggest a conceptualization of self-concept that is dynamic and continually reconstituted in action. Street literacy is the fulcrum of processes of the social and personal construction of the environment and the production of site-specific knowledge.

The conceptualization of the environment here is concerned with the interdependence and dynamic interplay between multiple levels of the environment in experience; emphasis is placed

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2 In his analysis of political economy, Marx argues how participation in economic (work) and social activities, informs individual consciousness. "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness" (Marx, 1859, 20-21).
upon the connection between larger social contexts, such as global restructuring, and the immediate everyday settings of people's lives (see Katz, 1994; Sharff, 1998; Smith, 1996). This is clear when we consider the street environment, a particular type of public space, which, on the one hand represents the most intimate scale of the urban environment, and at the same time, is a product not only of the people who inhabit and use the space, but also of local and global investments. As a pivotal site of negotiation between social production and reproduction, the street landscape reproduces contestations over social and spatial control (Castells, 1983; Katz, 1995; Low, 1996). This understanding of the environment emphasizes the interdependencies of socio-spatial structures and human behavior. The street is a site of "the processes of socialization (seen in the active sense) that take place from birth to death, within which collective modes of behavior are constantly being negotiated and renegotiated, rules are learned but also created" (Thrift, 1983, 40). The street is understood on the one hand to be a product of material conditions and a mechanism of social control, and on the other hand as a site of contestation in which processes of interpretation, use and production of space are the subject of investigation (Lawrence & Low, 1990).

The concept of street literacy focuses on the interpretation and production of spatial practices, attempting to bridge the primacy of environmental experience and the situatedness of specific social discourses that surround the environment. The interpretation of environmental experience is a process of temporarily fixing meaning, subject to continual redefinition, as access to different ways of understanding and further environmental experiences challenges the ways in which we construct our relationship to the environment. Therefore, at any one moment, an interpretation of environmental experience is both partial and situated socially and spatially. In order to make sense of our surroundings, we collage borrowed meanings together and then continually challenge this interpretation in experience, juxtaposing social and personal ways of understanding the environment (Bahktin, 1981, 293-294; cited in Wertsch, 1991, 59). Street literacy, as a way of describing the relationship between environmental transactions and subjectivity, is therefore not a monolithic practice, but rather an elastic concept which accounts for the creativity and plurality of meaning-making. Environmental negotiations are partial performances of interpretation and action, informed by the diversity of discourses and social practices available to an individual at one time. Because the processes of internalizing culture and social forms of behavior are described and analyzed more fully in language theories (Wertsch, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978; Newman & Holzman, 1993; Bahktin, 1981, 1986; Scribner, 1968, 1984), they illuminate the concept of street literacy. At the same time, the model of street literacy attempts to address the lack of attention to environmental context in this body of work.
Bernard Rudofsky notes that there was a time when to the child the street was 'an open book, superbly illustrated, thoroughly familiar, yet inexhaustible.' (Rudofsky, 1969, cited Ward, 1973, 17) While certainly as Colin Ward notes city children nowadays often do live in "attenuated environments," the past tense Rudofsky evokes suggests a nostalgic vision of the city, which may or may not be true. However, I would maintain that the urban environment is nevertheless still a key site for learning outside of the home and school. Clearly the urban environment, and specifically the street, as a subject and site for learning is not a controlled educational setting and therefore it may pose some problems for novice navigators. Environmental learning and the production of site-specific knowledge are integral processes of negotiating the everyday environments we live in and use. The urban texts young people are reading now may be more fragmented; maybe some pages are missing and they have to read between the lines (if the cityscape is not censored entirely by perceived fears), but the city landscape is still inexhaustible, though its negotiation may be more exhausting.

**Project Statement**

In this paper, I am conceptualizing street literacy as an interpretative model for understanding how young people's experience of public space is connected to how they make sense of their self and their self in the world. An exploration of young people's environmental transactions and their strategies for negotiating the urban environment of the Lower East Side of Manhattan reveals the implications of the post-industrial landscapes of gentrification and disinvestment (Katz, 1994), informal economies, and current public policy and discourse (Smith, 1996) for the public spaces adolescents traverse everyday and the private spaces of their mental lives (Katz, 1995).

My research of young people's environmental experiences on the Lower East Side is informed by my own experience growing up there over fifteen years ago. My very different experience of the neighborhood was due not only to a changed neighborhood landscape and resident population, but as a white girl raised in a feminist household with middle class aspirations, I was

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3 Evidently, teenagers have a history of childhood neighborhood environmental experiences accompanied by parents, guardians and older children that informs and influences the nature of their adolescent negotiations in the neighborhood environment. Children are captive audiences for parental socialization, and the rules children are indoctrinated with from an early age are an important foundation for teenagers' environmental experiences. Early adolescence, however, is the first time young people negotiate the urban environment on their own on a frequent basis, and the street environment is not only highly complex and problematic material, it is new material to master.
situated differently in the social landscape from the students I worked with. Struck by dramatic changes in the physical and socio-political landscape, I became interested in trying to understand how the restructuring of the neighborhood presses upon the everyday experiences of young adolescents.

My research of young people's environmental experiences on the Lower East Side draws on two in-depth ethnographic research projects conducted in the neighborhood from 1995 to 1997. In the first year I combined methods of mapping, photography, interviews, and participant observation in a study of residents' transformation of public space environments (Cahill, 1996). In the second year, I worked closely with a male African-American teacher at an alternative public school on the Lower East Side of Manhattan over the course of the 1996-7 academic year to develop a curriculum and co-teach a "Community Education Research Class" for seventh and eighth grade students. The group of twenty-eight teenagers I worked with ranged in age from 12 to 15, were predominantly from Latino and African-American backgrounds, and came from working class families in the largely working class but gentrifying neighborhood of NYC's Lower East Side.

Using the neighborhood as a site for research, students learned and practiced environmental social science research skills which they used in order to develop and produce their final collaborative project *The Streetwise Guide to the Lower East Side by Teenagers for Teenagers*. This handbook to the neighborhood, which serves as the database for my research project, includes mapping, photography, surveys, students' interviews with each other, and the "rules" students outlined for negotiating the neighborhood.

My research focuses on one component of the *Streetwise Guide*, the "Rules to the Neighborhood," as a means of exploring young people's strategies for negotiating their neighborhood environment. (The methodology is discussed in more detail later.) The "rules" are a particular environmental discourse, which will be compared to and complicated by another set of competing discourses, the personal environmental stories students shared in facilitated focus groups on the rules to their neighborhood, field notes I recorded over the course of the year, and the students' interviews with one another based on the maps they developed for the *Streetwise Guide*. Working with different data sources allows a deeper understanding of how teenagers use, interpret, and negotiate their neighborhood.

**Young teenagers on the Lower East Side: site-specific identity work**
If adolescence is indeed a transitional stage of socialization from youth to adulthood, a ‘link in the transmission of a way of life between generations’, then we might consider the implications of the messages we are broadcasting to youth about what they can expect in their future and how they can prepare for it (Czikszentmihalyi and Larson, 1984). Identity formulation is identified as one of the central developmental tasks of adolescence (Erikson, 1975). Teenagers take risks and experiment with different identities in various contexts as they establish their social roles. The neighborhood is a significant context for self-discovery that has the potential to lend itself to a broader range of possibilities for experimentation outside of the home and school contexts. However, this is not always the case, especially if perceived physical and social dangers restrict teenager's use of public space. My research with young people reveals their overriding concerns with personal safety and potential violence in their immediate neighborhood contexts. The environment and discourses of fear which produce and reproduce it, certainly have serious implications for teenagers' opportunities to explore and engage in activities outdoors. This may mean that young people are spending an inordinate amount of time and energy learning the life lessons of public space, or withdrawing from the public sphere--staying home--a frequently reported favorite place for the students with whom I worked. Who benefits from the production of fear is a question addressed elsewhere (cf. Madriz, 1997; Katz, 1995; Valentine, 1997), here we are concerned with how the environment influences and presses upon teenagers' identity formation.

Erikson's conceptualization of identity as a "psycho-social" process, underlines the connection of tasks of development to the social and historical structures of a time period (Erikson, 1975; cf. Valsiner, 1987; Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Leadbeater & Way, 1996). Situating development in the structure of opportunities of a given time period, Erikson argues that periods of history characterized by the fears and uncertainty of new technological developments will deny a collective and coherent identity formation. "Youth depends upon the ideological coherence of the world it is meant to take over, and therefore is sensitively aware of whether the system is strong enough in its traditional form to "confirm" and to be confirmed by the identity process, or so rigid as to suggest renovation, reformation, or revolution" (Erikson, 1975, 20). The

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4 Ethnographic research on adolescents in economically disadvantaged contexts (i.e. inner city) suggests that not only do teens attach different meanings to adolescent roles and behaviors than do their mainstream counterparts, but that adolescence may not be clearly defined as a distinctive life-course stage that occurs between childhood and adulthood (Burton et al. 1996, 398). While this insight was not considered or explored during the course of my fieldwork, my experience working with teenagers in New York City’s public high schools confirm Burton et al.’s assertion. Examples which stand out in my teaching/researching experience include a thirteen year old’s engagement to his girlfriend, or another young student’s economic and emotional struggles with fatherhood. This does not negate, I would argue, the transitional nature of the period of adolescence, as a site of identity work, but rather attests to the need of a more differentiated and contextual conceptualization of adolescence.
restructuring processes of late capitalism have been characterized by extreme social fragmentation, a lack of stability, and social and personal insecurity (Harvey, 1990). Whether the ideological coherence of the world that Erikson suggests is necessary for productive youth identity formulation ever existed or is a possibility in our future, is debatable. Certainly the current societal state of affairs will present difficulties for all people, but the struggle may be more intense for those whose opportunities are restricted because of configurations of class, race, gender, sexuality, and age.  

Spatializing Erikson's definition of the psychosocial identity serves to locate the tasks of development in specific social, cultural and environmental settings. Orienting adolescent development within the context of the Lower East Side, describes how identity work is circumscribed within the shifting landscape of the post-industrial economy. Not only is the Lower East Side neighborhood environment a difficult place to negotiate materially, it is a complex context for productive identity work.

Significantly, the environment the teenagers live in is undergoing dramatic changes that have considerable repercussions on the formal composition and social organization of the neighborhood, and indirectly on their experience in it. Themes in the current Lower East Side literature (Abu-Lughod, 1994; Mele, 1994; Sites, 1994; Smith, 1994 & 1996) focus on cycles of disinvestment and gentrification, immigration, poverty, informal economies (the most obvious being drug dealing), and the role of public policy in shepherding the development of the neighborhood. However, there has been hardly any published research which explores the relevance of these issues for youth on the Lower East Side (with the exception of Sharff, 1998; for research on youth in other neighborhoods see Skelton & Valentine, 1998; Williams & Kornblum, 1985; Macleod, 1995; Kotlowitz, 1991). My research is intended to redress this omission.

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5 How coordinates of race, class, and gender, contribute to the formulation of identity and delimit the social structure of opportunities is not explicitly discussed by Erikson, but has been described by more contemporary theories of development (Gilligan, 1982; Leadbeater & Way, 1996; Burton et al., 1996) The different social realities of girls and women and people of color are not accounted for by traditional models of adolescent development, which are based on research with white boys and reflect ideologies of the dominant social class. Reformulating a conception of development in light of the social and cultural values specific to gender, race, and class, demonstrates a different orientation toward identity formulation which may or may not fit comfortably within the privileged social value structure (Gilligan, 1982, 167-170). Street literacy is conceptualized along these lines, identifying the achievements of young people, who are often considered in a 'deficit' model, but are highly skilled in negotiating the tenuous and complex social and environmental terrain of their neighborhood environments.
The Lower East Side neighborhood is a site of contradiction which cannot be understood without acknowledging its location within the larger urban economic, political, and social infrastructure of New York City. The decayed, but now developing, residential zone of Community District 3, is located on the eastside of downtown Manhattan. Its proximity to nearby high-rent zones and the downtown business district has made the area an attractive target for planned 'improvements' of various kinds (Abu-Lughod, 1994, 18). The present day built environment of the Lower East Side is the culmination of an historic landscape of tenement buildings built to house the earlier generations of working class immigrants in the 19th and early 20th century. Since the 1960s the neighborhood has endured shifting cycles of disinvestment, and now "reinvestment" in the form of gentrification (cf. Smith, 1996; Abu-Lughod, 1994). The restructuring of inner-city residential space, that is part of a process of gentrification, is part of a larger development process that has been closely connected to globalization (Smith, 1996). "The struggle over the use and production of space is heavily inscribed by social class (as the nomenclature of "gentrification" itself suggests) and race as well as gender" (Ibid, 89).

Gentrification on the Lower East Side is reflected in the disparity between population shifts and rent increases. Smith reports (Ibid, 199): "While the 1980 population had decreased by over 30 per cent in the preceding ten years, rents increased by between 128 and 172 per cent in the neighborhoods census tracts." The uneven development of the neighborhood landscape is also revealed: while a quarter of all households in the neighborhood were below the poverty line in 1980, there was considerable variation by census tract (from 14.9 percent to 64 percent) (Ibid).

A journey through the neighborhood in 1998 reveals the spiraling degradation of the streetscape as one moves east of Avenue B; street corridors are punctuated by vacant lots sometimes claimed by community gardens and casitas, that give pause to the evidence of landlord abandonment and state neglect. At Avenue D, the Jacob Riis and Lillian Wald public housing developments (constructed 1949-50) blocks the view to the East River Park and River. Mostly African-American and Latino working class families live in these apartments, including more than half of the students who participated in this research project. The bouts and fits of gentrification the neighborhood has endured over the past twenty years have not ventured this far east yet. On the "frontier of gentrification," on Avenues A and more recently B, hip bars and upscale trendy restaurants are the face of a "reinvested" landscape masking a neighborhood riddled with empty lots that are home to informal economies of global proportion, the most obvious (and most frequently remarked upon by the students) being drug-dealing. Unclaimed land is becoming scarce however, as developers from outside the neighborhood invest in what is now considered prime real estate.
Asked to imagine what the Lower East Side would be like in the future, students' responses oscillated between very negative, "Hell;" "Like a junkyard;" and somewhat more positive, less emphatic outcomes: "probably cleaner;" "Nice. No drugs, people playing and that's about it."

A few students remarked upon the changing ethnic composition of the neighborhood and the changes this might bring about: "There will be more white people and less black people;" "Probably more people, the rent will go up. There will be more fancier houses, probably less projects;" "I heard that there's going to be a lot of white people here. You know, they're going to take it all over. They're going to make it into, like the Village. They’re going to make it into condos. And people are going to have start paying more money. At least like nine thousand."

But for the present,

There is graffiti
Parks Bad Cops
Some good
Pizza Place
Stores Drugs 2
You name it
we got it baby --Miguel, 8th grade student

The students' descriptions of their neighborhood express the contradictory experience of growing up in a neighborhood shaped by processes of disinvestment and gentrification, contention over public spaces, and a quickly shifting resident base. The Lower East Side neighborhood is a highly differentiated landscape, characterized by uneven development (Smith, 1996, 75-89), experienced daily on students' journeys through the neighborhood.

The "frontier" of gentrification visible in the built landscape, is also marked in the geographies of the young teenagers. None of the students included the gentrified establishments or blocks of

6 "The Village" refers to Greenwich Village, an upscale neighborhood on the Westside of downtown Manhattan.

7 All names have been changed to protect the privacy of the participants.
the Lower East Side neighborhood in their maps of their neighborhood use, preferring instead to travel further downtown or east to less expensive shopping corridors, and eat at fast food establishments like McDonald's (a much touted bonus of the neighborhood) and other less expensive take-out eateries like pizza parlors or delis. In fact, on class fieldwork outings to more gentrified sections of the Lower East Side, students on numerous occasions identified establishments as white or snobby, and some complained about how they were often made to feel unwelcome in stores, being followed or watched because they are adolescents of color.

Race is a key category in the teenagers' narrations of their environmental experiences. Like class, race has an objective dimension rooted in the structure of opportunities. However, race also has subjective dimensions in individuals' minds as a category that informs the way they understand themselves and their relationship to the social world (MacLeod, 1995, 250). Throughout the school year, the teenagers articulated objective constraints faced by African-Americans and Latinos, a testament to the multi-cultural agenda of their alternative school that encourages dialogue and discussion on this very immediate and real concern of young people, and due in part to more recent political mobilization in the African-American and Latino community that has forefronted race issues in the public eye (as evidenced by the Million Man March in 1996). Nevertheless, the findings of this research study reveal that the students still tend toward individual rather than structural interpretations of their experiences, taking full responsibility for their actions and the consequences, more often than not blaming themselves for not being able to "handle" a situation. This will be discussed more later.

Often the teenagers conflated race and class issues, using the term "white" in a general way to describe "other" people or places perceived as rich or exclusionary, places where teenagers were made to feel aware of their own skin color. While this accepted and collective use of racial distinctions is by no means limited to the Lower East Side, and obviously has a much broader cultural meaning, the students' descriptions of the neighborhood which mark white people's restaurants or white people's buildings reflects the geography of neighborhood gentrification.

Mayor Giuliani's (elected 1994) "quality of life" campaign, exemplified by the anti-squeegee and anti-panhandling crusades, which has become public policy for aggressively cleaning Manhattan's streets of homeless people, demonstrates the double-edged blade of gentrification. The recent reinvestment of private capital in the neighborhood infrastructure is accompanied by state surveillance. Teenagers are not exempt from the diatribes that justify disciplinarian state actions, they are often its target. Police regularly harass minority youth, particularly boys, who,
like homeless people, are being driven off the streets where they regularly hang out (Valentine, 1996). Apart from the intrinsic attractiveness of many city streets, teenagers spend time there in part due to the fact that there are not many establishments where teenagers, especially poor teenagers, are welcome. Sanitizing the neighborhood for an upscale audience, public policy in the form of greater police presence disciplines threats to middle class security including young people of color who are scripted by the media in caricatures of violence and postures of threat (Meucci & Redmon, 1997).  

The male students, in particular, frequently complained about or caricatured the police. One research team composed of male students elected to research the police in the neighborhood; they designed a not-so-subtle survey instrument that expressed their concerns. Questions included: Have you ever been bothered by the cops before? If you're in trouble do you call the cops or do you handle it yourself? Do you ever think about being a cop? Do you see cops in the neighborhood? Are they from the neighborhood? NYC? Have you had any racist experiences with cops? (Or has a cop ever stopped or bothered you because of your color?). In their interviews with approximately 45 peers in their high school the research team found that more than half of their respondents had been bothered by a cop and more than half of their respondents would handle "trouble" by themselves.

The trajectories our society outlines for youth are often restrictive, especially in the case of Latino and African American youth. The reductive social discourses that script youth as violent, selfish, and out of control are narrow pallets for achieving the hallmarks of self-discovery and productive identity work necessary for making the transition into the adult world. There are equally confining spatial corollaries to the limited discourses that define Black and Latino youth. Issues of class and race are particularly relevant to a discussion of the urban environment, especially if it is assumed that the environment circumscribes and produces discourses of power in which teenagers of color are implicated (cf. Katz, 1995; Meucci & Redmon, 1997). Identity work is site specific, in that it is bounded in the structure of opportunities of particular environmental contexts. Teenagers, like all children, need opportunities for exploration and self-discovery, and safe spaces where they can take risks. My consideration of environmental  

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8 Media campaigns focused on urban violence and youth violence in particular, propagate negative stereotypes of young people and distort the reality. Despite the production of fear around adolescents, fewer than one percent of juveniles are arrested for violent crimes. While the homicide rates for young black men have increased at an alarming rate and are well publicized (Meucci & Redmon, 1997, 139), the decrease in city and state expenditures on youth services in New York City has received little, if any, media attention. (The City Project, 1995). 

9 Neil Smith (1996) analyzes the discourses which rationalize and justify the movement of capital, the "frontier" of gentrification, and more recently, the new urban "revanchism," which is cloaked in the conservative populist language of family values and neighborhood security (211).
negotiations is framed by a concern for how public space supports and interferes with the
developmental needs of adolescents for meeting manageable challenges, doing identity work,
expressing creativity, and exploring possibilities for transforming the environment for one's own
purposes.

Opportunities in the neighborhood were distinguished along gender lines. Tompkins Square
Park and other small public spaces were reported to be favorite places in the neighborhood
(outside of their own and friends' homes) for boys because they provided space for active
recreation including rollerblading, biking, and playing basketball. Boys also identified stores to
buy sports equipment and clothes and movie theaters as opportunities in the neighborhood.
Girls, on the other hand, never included recreational spaces or discussed outside physical
activities in their neighborhood maps or interviews. Girls mapped various inexpensive places to
go shopping, eat, and be entertained (the movies). These findings raise questions about how the
socialization of girls and boys plays out in the landscape. (cf. Saegert & Hart, 1978; Katz,
1993) For example, Krenichyn (1997) points out that just as girls may face barriers to using
recreational spaces that are dominated by boys, boys may feel unwelcome in stores or
restaurants (see Krenichyn, 1997 and 1999, for fuller analysis).

Narratives of constraint overshadowed the opportunities in the neighborhood. Every student's
neighborhood description was saturated with stories of the drug culture and the dangers
associated with it, including the "weird" or violent people who deal or use drugs, and crime.
Both girls and boys discussed the limitations on their freedom in the neighborhood imposed by
the drug culture, race issues, police surveillance, the dearth of places to go where they felt
welcome, and fear, which restricts their movement, often keeping them at home. The
environmental testimonies of this group of young adolescents suggest a consideration of the
multiple ways youth are being displaced from the urban landscape, which include being made to
feel uncomfortable in gentrified establishments, youth surveillance, and the extremely high rates
of mortality and incarceration for young men of color (often connected with the drug culture);
staying at home may indeed be the best option.

The landscapes of fear are more often than not softened with descriptions of "nice" people in the
neighborhood or reassurances that they know how to handle the threatening elements they
described: "My neighborhood is so bad. Where I live people are doing drugs and being stupid
and I don't know what to do in my neighborhood. And it's trouble where I live at. A lot of gangs
and drugs and guns. There are lots of kids there that are fun to play with and people I like too."
--Paul, 7th grade student. While the influence of members of the community who are sources
of strength for young people and the importance of the peer group are clear, the students' stories have a tendency to shift tone abruptly, putting happy endings on bleak accounts (Fine, 1998). This revealing story-telling strategy demonstrates one very important way of managing danger, balancing the negative with a salute to the auspicious, and is part of the teens' environmental negotiations.

**The Rules: Managing Danger**

"Here on the LES it's pretty nice but there is drugs, violence, and racism therefore it's not very nice. But the people are nice. And if you want to come here you have to know what to wear and where to go." --Damon, 7th grade student

"The neighborhood is okay if you make friends instead of enemies and it is good to get to know managers of stores." --Juan, 8th grade student

The Lower East Side of Manhattan is the context for the "rules to the neighborhood" compiled by the students for their final project, the *Streetwise Guide to the Lower East Side by Teenagers for Teenagers*. The rules were introduced by a student who said that a guidebook to the neighborhood should include useful local knowledge about a place with which one is not familiar. For example, he said, "You know, like in L.A. you shouldn't wear red or blue because they might think you in the Bloods or the Crips." 

This explanation set the tone for a class discussion on themes or concerns to be addressed in a section of the handbook on the rules. The themes were written down on a large newsprint pad and placed in a prominent position in the classroom; these notes served as loose guidelines for the focus group discussions. In recorded focus group discussions students in groups of four came up with the rules while adult facilitators guided the conversation by taking notes on what the students said on large newsprint pads, and asking the students to clarify and explain their rules. The students came up with rules on various topics, including police, drugs, sex, safe/unsafe places; illustrating their knowledge through stories and personal examples. (See appendix A for table of rules) The students spent the majority of the two hour focus group sessions speaking about strategies for managing danger and fear, which, in itself, demonstrated their overriding concern with personal safety. The students' concerns with safety are shared by children living in low-income neighborhoods across

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10 "LES" refers to the Lower East Side neighborhood of Manhattan.

11 While this may seem an extreme measure of precaution to readers unfamiliar with the indicators of gang activities, in fact this student's description is based in realities that are closer to home than L.A. For example, in November 1995 a teenage girl in New York was assaulted because she was wearing red, the color of the Bloods gang in territory claimed by the Crips. New York Times, October 1997.
the United States, who see violence as a part of their social reality (Noguera, 1995 cited in Meucci & Redmon, 1997).

Situated at the interface of the individual and society, rules embody the dialectical relationship between human agency and social structure. To study the "rules of the neighborhood" is to attempt to understand the dynamic processes of social reproduction and potential transformation in a specified context. "Rules are learned but also created" in settings for interaction and socialization, which include the home, school, and the neighborhood context, which are key sites for social reproduction within which knowledge and experience about the world is gathered, while "collective modes of behavior are negotiated and renegotiated" (Thrift, 1983, 40).

Wood and Beck (1994) identify rules as one of three components of a spatial setting, the other two being the values and meanings expressed, and the physical dimensions of a place. Rules make explicit the values and meanings embodied in a setting. In their study of rules concerning a home (Woods' home), Wood and Beck state that those whose room it is know the rules, as they have invented or imported them from other rooms; the whole system is experienced as "naturally occurring" (Ibid, 3). The proverb, 'when in Rome do as the Romans do,' is problematic in public spaces where the question of ownership and the articulation of rules is not straightforward. The rules of public space are not always self-evident, and are often contradictory. This is especially true in the neighborhood of the Lower East Side, whose public spaces and streets have a history of contestation (Smith, 1996; Abu-Lughod, 1994). The teenagers' "rules to the neighborhood" express an intersection of the competing interests of community stakeholders. Vying for control, the state's representatives (the police), long-standing community members, drug dealers, newcomers, landlords, homeless people, cultural institutions, and even teenagers, exert their power and influence through various means which include the enforcement of public policy, threats of potential violence, ownership of property, forming and negotiating social networks, and appropriation of space. Corresponding rules of behavior, whether explicit or implicit, assert spatial and social control and serve to maintain and reproduce the particular interests and values of a certain group. Conformity to one group's rules may mean violating the rules of another group. Young people negotiating the neighborhood must be "multi-lingual" in order to pass through without harm. Finagling fluency, teenagers learn and perform the rules of others games, as they forge their own language of street practices and their own 'rules" (which is one way to make space theirs, as in their own room. The vocabulary of street literacy is rich and teenagers choose their words carefully from already established languages (cf. Butler, 1988; DeCerteau, 1984), sometimes inventing new ways of articulating spatial and social
practices. Their environmental stories reveal the creative interplay between degrees of penetration (or insight) into the social structures which shape and press upon their lives and the limitations of young adolescents' understanding and potential to transform their social and environmental situations (Thrift, 1983; Willis, 1977).

The "rules to the neighborhood" were intended as advisements for other teenagers new to the neighborhood or just coming of age. The list of rules does not represent a group consensus, but illustrate concerns of individual teenagers who share a neighborhood landscape. My analysis will focus upon one rule, mind your business, that was articulated by the students in various ways: keep walking, don't start trouble, keep to yourself, keep your own opinion, keep your comments to yourself, and don't act stupid with people you don't know. Focusing upon one set of rules allows an intimate examination of street literacy. This rule (and its permutations) was particularly salient to the participants, who reiterated it in many different ways in their stories of environmental negotiations. Mind your business, or a variant thereof, was shared by all of the students participating in the research project and also speaks to many of the issues touched upon by other rules on their list. The following is an excerpt from a transcript where one group of students explained the rule mind your business. It illustrates how the "rules" are surrounded by personal narratives that locate neighborhood protocol in a complex web of personal experience, neighborhood know-how, and cultural exchange.

Yvonne: "I don't look at people because if you start staring at them, and you look and something, they think you're looking at them bad and they going to step up to you and they're going to start getting into trouble acting like they're all big and bad."

Jorge: "That why. You got to just mind your business. Let them do what they want to do and let them get into trouble."

Yvonne: "Don't even say shit to nobody. Don't even look at them funny because one of them might just step up to you with a gun. And people are that stupid to do that. Believe me. I know."

*Mind your business* is an historic and global strategy of non-involvement which takes many forms including foreign policies; silent witnesses to domestic crimes; or hardened urban residents who side-step bodies of homeless people on their way to work, to name a few examples. For teenagers on the Lower East Side the practice of *keeping to oneself* or *minding your business* demonstrates the particular dilemmas faced by young people in their neighborhood interactions. At the same time, it reveals how the teenagers' decisions may help to in reproduce the very situations they are trying to avoid.
The complex nexus between the reproductive and generative role of the teenagers' "rules to the neighborhood" echoes Paul Willis's theory of cultural forms and social reproduction (1977, 171-9). Through his conceptualization of "penetration" and "limitation," 12 Willis demonstrates the important role culture plays in the dialectic of social reproduction. Cultural forms of production which may expose the social injustice or inequality of a social system are identified as "penetrations". "Limitations" are the barriers to total penetration or understanding, which in turn ensure the stability of the existing social structure. The teenagers' rules are "partial penetrations" which subvert and reproduce the social structure at the same time, enabling the very situations that the students declared they wanted to avoid.

Silencing the self, keeping your comments to yourself, may on the surface appear to be a passive practice, however this is misleading as it masks young people's self-reflexive decision to disengage. In considering who benefits from silence, we need to acknowledge the teenagers' own testimonies to self-preservation and control over their neighborhood environment. The strategy of silence is performed to protect oneself. But it is also the case that drug dealers, who are repeatedly invoked as threatening specters on the students' neighborhood landscape, benefit from silent witnesses. Silence is double-edged. In minding their own business, teenagers are conforming to an implicit rule of the drug culture, which demands complicity. In the same breath, this rule performance, violates a basic assumption (or rule) of law enforcement, which depends upon community members to participate in taking responsibility for the community well-being by doing such things as reporting drug dealing. However, as stated in the teenagers' outline of rules, the police are not to be trusted. The students understood the police to represent interests of the dominant class--rich and/or white people--not them. Complicity enacted out of fear of personal retaliation may also therefore be an act of opposition, a partial penetration into the system that puts young men of color in jail. Violating the rule of minding your own business might mean not only endangering the self, it may also be understood as taking responsibility for putting someone, someone who is more like you than the police, in jail. At the same time, this understanding acts as a limitation, it helps to perpetuate living in a landscape of potential violence.

12 Unfortunately the jarring connotations of using the word "penetration" to describe a heightened critical consciousness (I prefer the word insight or illumination) were not recognized by the male authors who developed the term fifteen to twenty years ago. The word "penetration" is also misleading in that it suggests that the application of a cultural form of production is a singular act, which misrepresents the diffuse, circular, and shifting character of processes of producing knowledge. Nevertheless, Willis's conceptualization of "penetration" is relevant to the task at hand, explaining how young teenagers' "rules" at once reproduce and produce a subversive critique of the system. In his conceptualization, Willis makes clear that "penetrations" are always partial, as they are bound into the social structure they are uncovering (1977, 119). Thrift (1983) and Pred(1984) use the term in a similar fashion.
While it may be argued that young teenagers' spatial practices contribute to reproducing a threatening neighborhood environment by not reporting drug dealers (and putting them in jail), this insight fails to identify the pivotal role structural and economic interests, and their social consequences, play in producing the sometimes violent landscape of poverty. The explanatory power of the dialectic of agency and structure provided by Willis's theory of cultural reproduction demonstrates how teenagers' rules serve an important maintenance role. I would argue, however, that Willis's theory places far too much responsibility on the teenagers for reproduction, echoing conservative arguments that blame poor people for their impoverished conditions. At another level of analysis, it becomes clear that the drug culture is an informal global economy, intimately connected with the larger structures of capitalism, which may help inner city youth survive in an economy that offers them few legitimate job prospects (cf. Bougeois, 1995; Williams, 1989; Sullivan, 1988).

On the Lower East Side the contradictions of uneven development are played out at the local level. The examination of the strategy of mind your business reveals the multiple forces pressing upon teenagers performed by the embodied players of disinvestment (drug dealers) and gentrification (police) who summon their conformity. Whether the strategy to mind your business could be interpreted as a choice teenagers make within the limits of a structure of opportunity, or as the only option possible, it is certain that it is a practice founded upon a critical rationale.

Mind your business is also categorized as an offensive and active strategy for managing interpersonal danger by Sally Merry (1986). Merry reports that the strategy of "handling other people" through non-involvement and avoiding confrontation was often used by members of the black community she studied. While this strategy may be an active strategy, in that it enables its users to participate in public life, on a psychological level it seems to be very close to another strategy Merry identifies, that of avoidance and withdrawal. The defensive retreat into the home, guarded by locks, window bars, and guns, is an approach used by those who are less skilled at identifying those categories of persons likely to be dangerous, and are more worried because they have less control over the environment. Young teenagers, who are still in the process of mastering streetwise skills, fall into this category. Significantly, because of their own or their parents' fears, many students spent the majority of their free time in their own homes, which was the most frequently reported "favorite place" in the neighborhood. The students' home ranges were quite limited. Many were unfamiliar with the neighborhood outside of a few
well-traveled routes and frequented areas of recreation and commerce. The categories of mind
your business and retreat are not so clear-cut as Merry suggests.

Fear also leads young people, and teenage boys in particular, to sometimes choose to use more
offensive or aggressive strategies to manage danger, such as posturing as a "gangster" through
dress and/or behavior. While on the one hand, this self-positioning may serve to reproduce the
dominant social discourse of young black men as threats, it is possibly a more powerful position.
Posing as a threat to society may afford a certain freedom for street negotiation; certainly it
allows youth greater participation in public life than staying home or withdrawing in defensive
postures. In addition, this posturing is part of a strong collective identity that celebrates social
transgression and is reinforced in many aspects of urban youth culture. It should be noted,
however, that this freedom is somewhat illusory, action in the public sphere is restricted by state
surveillance and in fact teenagers who adopt this stance are more prone to monitoring and
disciplinary action because of the symbolic threat they embody (Hebdige, 1983). Dress codes
and public identities aside, police in New York and elsewhere are known to target teenagers of
color for surveillance more than whites regardless of the strategies they adopt for public
presentation.

The students also resorted to a third strategy for managing danger that Merry identified,
"cognitive mapping," the construction of categories that delineate places, times, and people that
are safe or dangerous. In dealing with people or areas less familiar, an individual will tend to
generalize unknown terrain and resort to cultural stereotypes (Merry, 1986, 167). Elijah
Anderson explains, "the accuracy of the reading is less important than the sense of security one
derives from feeling that one's interpretation is correct" (Anderson, 1990, 231). Degrees of
strategic sophistication, street wisdom, may be measured by highly differentiated cognitive maps
which would allow an individual take control of his/her environment, "In becoming a self-
conscious and sensitive observer, he becomes the author of his own public actions and begins to
act rather than simply react to situations" (Anderson, Ibid). The young teenagers who
participated in this research project demonstrated their lack of familiarity, possibly due to the
fact that they apparently spent most of their free time at home, with the Lower East Side
neighborhood and its residents in their broad categorizations of particular areas and people as
dangerous--Avenue A south of 7th Street, Avenue C, Avenue D; homeless people, drug
dealers, punks, squatters, and police. When challenged the students would elaborate upon their
sweeping generalizations of the neighborhood and demonstrate a more complicated
understanding of their surroundings. The students' more sophisticated coping strategies (the
rules) and analyses of their neighborhood surroundings, enable them to work with their
somewhat reductive cognitive maps, in order to take control of their fears and try to feel safe in unknown areas of the neighborhood.

The practical function of the teenagers' rules is that they allow young people a sense of security in a precarious environmental setting. Rules are strategies not only for traversing the neighborhood environment, going from point A to point B, they are also procedures for psychic self-preservation and for managing the unstable environment in which they live. Engaging in established environmental etiquette concedes young teenagers the confidence they need to walk through a neighborhood context that is perceived to be dangerous. For example, one of the rules the students came up with is "If you are alone, make like you're walking with someone." Potentially this commonsense rule is a way to stay safe, but more importantly it enables one at least to feel safe. Delivering oneself from harm—physical survival—is identified as an alternative indicator of successful adolescent development for young people living within dangerous community settings (Burton et al., 1996). A fourteen year old boy in Burton et al.'s study notes: "I know I'm successful because I know how to survive on the streets. I bet them rich white kids couldn't do what I do" (Ibid, 401).

While not everyone lives in such challenging surroundings as the teenagers I worked with, most people—young and old, white and black—will admit to strategies they exercise when feeling threatened or vulnerable. Children and adolescents in suburbia, in the wealthy neighborhood of the Upper East Side of Manhattan, and even in rural environments, also learn a variation on the mind your business theme as expressed in the commonsense parental advice to not talk to strangers. The similarities of the rules mask marked differences in the meanings attached to these behavioral directives and the distinct ways the rules are embodied by youth in different social and environmental settings. While well-publicized by the media, stranger-danger is an isolated phenomenon compared with the prevalence of potential violence the young teenagers I worked with witnessed on a daily basis. Environmental negotiation on the Lower East Side is an exercise in contradiction for young teenagers of color whose strategic spatial practices maneuver between the structures of state surveillance, racism, and the hazards of the drug culture. The avoidance of dangerous strangers for children living in different circumstances, while equally scary, may be a more straightforward enterprise as compared with the daily task of managing the entrenched violence of poverty and the surveillance associated with a gentrifying neighborhood. Circumventing suspicious strangers implies being able to differentiate between the "bad" and "good" guys, which while never easy for young and sometimes impressionable

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13 Cindi Katz (1995) suggests that the stranger-danger discourse, or 'terror talk,' not only serves to hide the more prevalent dangers to children in private spaces, but is connected to the disinvestment in public space.
adolescents, does not require the same degree of self-awareness and critical reflection that is necessary to negotiate a contentious neighborhood context. The dichotomies of good/bad and black/white are problematized in the everyday experiences of young teenagers living on the Lower East Side, who at an early age are forced to grapple with the contradictions they confront in their neighborhood. Smooth and silent performances of *mind your business* belie the complex processes of negotiating self and society and the internal (and sometimes external) struggles which are involved in conforming to, testing and transforming, and reproducing the social structures of one's environment.

**Degrees of freedom and the structure of opportunity**

Whether an individual can be an author of his/her own actions is a point of contention that is discussed in theories of social reproduction that attempt to unravel connections between social forces and individuals' experiences. In my work I am proposing the model of street literacy as an exploration of the degrees of freedom possible in mental life and action and to understand how spatial practices inform subjectivity. My examination of the relationship between young people's environmental transactions and the broader social structure is informed by Bourdieu's (1977) conceptualization of "habitus," which explains how the spatialization of everyday behavior may be understood as an embodiment and internalization of social structure in social interactions. The "rules to the neighborhood," may be understood in Bourdieu's terms as socially mediated directives for behavior, bounded by invisible but implicit social understandings of what is acceptable. From this angle, the rules serve a disciplinary function (cf. Foucault, 1975) that prevents disruption in the social order, keeping teenagers invisible to maintain the status quo. In fact, social understandings of what is acceptable may be more visible than theorized by Bourdieu, as violating the implicit rule *mind your business* demonstrates, "You will be killed" (Jasmine, 7th grade student).

Whereas action in the public sphere is constricted and regulated by social practices and state surveillance (the police), in the more elastic and private spaces of mental life there may be

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14 As well-expressed in the rap lyric: "Not bad meaning bad; but bad meaning good" (Run D.M.C., 1986, *Raising Hell* album). The distinction between "good" and "bad" is challenged in a context where police harass and the drug industry employs community members who have few job prospects. Teenagers are forced to bridge the contradictions in their environmental interpretations, defying reductive definitions in spatial practices which reveal the ambiguity of their social and environmental situations.
greater degrees of freedom for individual creativity and imagination. DeCerteau's writings on spatial strategies exemplifies and celebrates the space of mental life as a potentially transformative space; his insight is particularly revelatory in understanding how students' "rules" function on a psychological level, and the creativity implied in the concept of street literacy. DeCerteau (1984) defines everyday practices as "internal manipulations of a system—that of language or that of an established order" (Ibid, 24). The established order the teenagers practice is their neighborhood and social surroundings. If the environmental and social surroundings direct behavior, the analysis of the teenagers' interpretations of their neighborhood, focuses on the processes of the social construction of space and the transformative possibilities of meaning-making. Placing emphasis on how social agents construct their own realities and meanings to interpret their experiences, shifts the lens of analysis up close, to the production of subjectivity. Collaging the multiple discourses and material social practices available to them, teenagers' interpret and negotiate their neighborhood environment, experimenting and reconstituting the self through in a dialogic process. Adolescents practice streetwise survival skills that enable them to at least feel safe and hopefully deliver them from harm. The rules and stories that constitute the instructions for using the neighborhood shed light on how teenagers interpret their environmental experiences; how they use the neighborhood is another story.

The "instructions for use" the teenagers have outlined are not steadfast. They are constantly being contradicted and are full of holes. The guidelines for the neighborhood are in fact different than actual practices of the neighborhood environment. In their everyday negotiations, rules are bent and adapted to real life situations in their immediate settings. The advice to "avoid Avenue D" is a rule that most students violate simply by going home (it is where they live), suggesting their acknowledgment and internalization of negative stereotypes about their community. The recommendation that "girls shouldn't wear tight clothes" is a rule that most girls ignore, because while they articulate a fear of being raped, they want to feel sexy and attractive. Teenage girls are not exempt from the normative messages of fashion and the moralizing messages of popular culture regarding sex roles and behavior. They put aside their fears, take risks, and try to find pleasure in the contradictory world in which they live.

Breaking the rules does not always go unscathed, sometimes you can get caught. Getting caught has different penalties, not minding your business with regards to drug dealers could have serious personal repercussions. Violating the rules is a serious undertaking, it involves testing

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15 Mental spaces are, of course, not uncontrolled as Foucault's (1975) notion of personal surveillance and self-discipline clearly demonstrates; and individuals' interpretations are mediated by the discourses to which they have access (as discussed earlier).
the limits of personal and collective experience, which may create new rules and inform future spatial practice. But at the same time, challenging a rule is burdened with a sense of personal responsibility, you should have known better. Knowledge production is indeed a serious task, intimately entwined with the processes of self-construction, particularly salient in adolescence, as teenagers test themselves and the boundaries of their social and environmental contexts.

The contradictions of making, breaking, and living with the rules reveals the difficult position of young teenagers who try to make sense of the multiple, and also contradictory, levels of the environment they negotiate. The personal, local, and global ecologies of the environment are not "nested" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) so neatly within each other. Hallmarks of success in one context may not be valued in another. For example, a young teenager who drops out of school to take care of his grandmother, may be appreciated in his community but considered a failure in the larger economic context (Burton et al., 1996, 402). If short skirts are the dress code for young women in the neighborhood, this doesn't mean a teenage girl is immune from the media's chastisement that she deserves unwanted sexual attention. The many levels of the environment interact, contest, and vj for influence over young teenagers' lifecourses and definitions of their experiences. Shifting between multiple interpretations of their environmental experiences, the young teenagers' explanations of their "rules to the neighborhood" usually privileged local constructions of meaning, while the self-blame attached to "getting in trouble" attests to the power of other levels of the environment, whether it be the media, the police, or the economy, on their public and private lives.

On a political level, the "rules" the teenagers produce are, as we have discussed, partial penetrations into the social conditions of their existence. This insight provides, what Willis (1977, 175) calls a "logical possibility of radicalness," a basis from which the construction of political alternatives could be mobilized. However, the teenagers' full understanding of the their social conditions was limited by what Thrift identifies as five types of interrelated unknowing. (Thrift, 1983, 45):

*unknown:* not possible to know at a particular time or to members of a social group;  
*not understood:* not being within the frame of meaning for a society or social group  
*hidden:* being hidden from members of a society;  
*undiscussed:* being taken for granted as 'natural,' and  
*distorted:* being known only in a distorted fashion.
The limitations on teenagers' radical critique of their social structure and the possibility of transformation is concretized by an education system committed to perpetuating some of the types of unknowing discussed by Thrift. The teenagers' narratives of negotiating the police, the drug culture, white people, and poverty, were portrayed as individual struggles. The challenges youth face were believed to be an intrinsic part of their social reality because they are 'not understood,' not within the scope of their comprehension; "distorted" in their analysis that is limited to the local level, and too often "undiscussed," and therefore accepted as 'natural.' Students took pride in managing the difficulties they encountered in their environment; Maria, a sixteen year old 8th grade student explains: "There are some racist people where I live. I can deal with it. Everything is not a surprise to me. It's not so bad once you get used to it. I mean it is bad; but it's not once your used to it." Connections between teenagers' environmental experiences and the social consequences of structural changes in the economy are blurred, because they are misunderstood by young people who more often than not blamed themselves for their predicaments. Interpretations of their social situations are "distorted" by a seductive cultural ideology that cultivates the myth of the "American Dream" whereby if you behave yourself, get good grades, and stay out of trouble, you will go to college, get a good job and possibly be able to move out of the neighborhood, which represents a successful developmental outcome for inner-city adolescents (Burton et al., 1996, 401).16 The harsh social and economic realities of capitalism are felt and negotiated by young adolescents of color living in impoverished neighborhoods but not fully understood. Police harassment was defined in isolation, 'us' versus 'them,' disassociated from the processes of gentrification, which in turn was not connected with the disinvestment of their immediate surroundings. While some students considered drug dealing to be a job option, they did not, and were unable to connect this risky profession to the larger global economy.

The multiple barriers to understanding Thrift identifies is coupled with the consuming daily struggles of negotiating neighborhood danger, an unstable economy, and a precarious future; leaving little time or space for collective analysis and the 'logical possibility of radicalness' Willis indicated to be the basis of social change. In addition, the overwhelming and personally engaging tasks of coming of age which include the significant body changes of puberty, first sexual experiences, the daily struggles with self-presentation, and processes of formulating self-concept, are experienced by young teenagers in a very personal way. It may, therefore, be difficult for teenagers to move beyond the self-focus of adolescence, to another level of analysis.

16 A few of the students I worked with already had misgivings about their chances of attaining this dream, which were evidenced in thoughtful plans about how to get on welfare and secure Section 8 (government subsidized) housing.
which clarifies the influence of structural and economic forces on their personal and particular experiences.

Conclusion

It is in the ongoing process of production of "rules" and spatial practices, everyday environmental negotiations, that the construction of subjectivity takes place. *Mind your business* is a self-identification, a penetration, that is inhabited within the structure of opportunities at the local level. Subjectivity is constituted, and reconstituted, in the 'marking' and 'making sense' of oneself in the world (Willis, 1977, 173), which takes place in the everyday environment of one's immediate surroundings. Keeping in mind the limitations, or types of unknowing, discussed above, it is understandable why teenagers in the Lower East Side deploy individual rather than structural interpretations of their environmental experiences, taking full responsibility for their actions.

Focusing on the contradictory nature of the teenagers' rules, the environment they negotiate, their interpretations of it, and the construction of subjectivity, is a project of shifting lens, moving between different lifespaces, in order to examine reciprocal processes of influence and constraint. The concept of street literacy is an attempt to demonstrate how environmental transactions restrict and shape subjectivity, while at the same time recognizing the creativity and skills of young people in their negotiation of fear, and precarious social and environmental settings.

Street literate teenagers, while learning to master the skills of survival are at the same time engaging in processes of self-construction, learning social forms of behavior in their experimentation with various roles and interpretations of their environment. Collaging together personal experience and social discourses, teenagers interpret their environment and then act upon and within it, in partial performances that reconfigure their self-concept in each transaction. Adolescent development is site-specific. It is a dialectical process of support and constraint that is situated within the particular environmental and social settings of young people's everyday lives. The immediate setting adolescents negotiate on a daily basis competes with larger institutional, social, and economic contexts, as the example of the Lower East Side clearly demonstrates. And what then do young people learn in their environmental negotiations? Tentative conclusions would suggest that young people's environmental knowledge base may include self-awareness, mistrust, personal responsibility, timing, quick judgment, and critical and cynical perspectives on public institutions and their representatives. Taken to the extreme these characteristics may be personally restrictive, but this does not need to be the case. We
need to create opportunities to build upon the strengths of the skills young people have developed. Certainly their critical thinking and self-awareness suggest skills that institutions of higher education value and try to teach students through theoretical training. However, the critical perspectives these young people have developed are not recognized nor cultivated in traditional high school curricula that seem irrelevant to teenagers when compared to the complex issues they grapple with on a daily basis. Programming spaces and time for critical reflection on the environment motivated by young people's own concerns might be a departure point for a productive dialogue. The process of becoming aware of the structural constraints of one's social and environmental situation, confronting the roots of one's poverty and discrimination, is identified as a process of 'conscientization,' by the educator and theorist Paulo Friere (1970). This is the first step towards developing alternative possibilities in the present and future.

Conclusions are tentative, because in order to really understand how the environment circumscribes subjectivity and personal development we will need to look at a larger range of ages and different settings. Certainly a longitudinal study of adolescent street literacy would be the best scenario, enabling teenagers to map their subjectivity on a timeline and draw connections between their personal environmental transactions, local news and current discourse, changes in the neighborhood environment and their use of it, and their interpretations of the environment and themselves in the world.

APPENDIX A
Rules to the Neighborhood Compiled by students for the Streetwise Guide to the Lower East Side by Teenagers for Teenagers (1997) The list of rules do not represent a consensus but illustrate concerns of individual teenagers who share a common neighborhood.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Safety in the street</th>
<th>Safe Places</th>
<th>Safety for handling drugs and drug dealers</th>
<th>Teenagers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mind your own business</td>
<td>Go home to feel safe</td>
<td>Don't let them see you talking to a cop; not smart. They'll come after you later.</td>
<td>Be aware in shops or supermarkets. They might think you're going to steal something.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don't act stupid with people you don't know</td>
<td>Go somewhere where there's lot of people you know</td>
<td>Stay away from corners</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don't start with people</td>
<td>14th and 15th streets are safer</td>
<td>If you see someone drug dealing, don't say anything</td>
<td>You're judged by the way you dress.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keep walking</td>
<td>Avenue A above 7th street is okay</td>
<td>If drug dealers aren't bothering you don't bother calling the police.</td>
<td>Don't wear bandannas on your head that match the clothes you are wearing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don't start trouble</td>
<td>Drug dealers won't bother you if you're invisible</td>
<td>People might think you're in a gang. Avoid purple bandannas in particular.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keep to yourself</td>
<td>Unsafe Places</td>
<td>Stay away from drugs. You could get AIDS or get addicted.</td>
<td>Avoid wearing red and white or black and white beads</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keep your own opinion</td>
<td>Avenue A below 7th</td>
<td>Say No – don't always go</td>
<td>Safe Sex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keep your comments to yourself</td>
<td>Street with the flow.</td>
<td>Avoid people who have needles.</td>
<td>Don't have sex.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------</td>
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<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If people are in a crowd, they will protect you</td>
<td>Avenue C and D are very dangerous</td>
<td>If you see a needle don't pick it up or touch it.</td>
<td>Use condoms or birth control pills.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walk with someone or make like you're walking with someone</td>
<td>St. Marks Place (because of the squatters and punks)</td>
<td>You can get AIDS or HIV from needles that have been used.</td>
<td>Use latex condoms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don't go out after 10 pm or before 5:30 am</td>
<td>East River Park at night</td>
<td>Don't sell drugs, get a job. Drugs will eventually lead to trouble (arrest).</td>
<td>Don't drink. This could lead to sex and pregnancy as some people might take advantage of you.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don't walk by yourself</td>
<td>Places you don't know</td>
<td>Don't smoke cigarettes</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Learn how to fight</td>
<td>Abandoned buildings</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Avoid homeless people</td>
<td>Graffiti</td>
<td>Police</td>
<td>Girls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don't flash jewelry, money, or sneakers.</td>
<td>Don't cross out some else's tag</td>
<td>Can't trust cops.</td>
<td>Cover up.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls and little kids should walk with someone during the day or night</td>
<td>If you see cops, run!</td>
<td>Watch for undercover cops (they walk and dress a certain way, sometimes you can see their holster).</td>
<td>Don't show too much skin (you could get raped).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Get a permit</td>
<td></td>
<td>Don't look suspicious.</td>
<td>Men will think you want sex if you wear tight clothes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do it in private places like stores, with their permission.</td>
<td>They follow you into stores, so don't steal and mind your business.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Listen to them and do what they say (except something stupid)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Don't run from them (except sometimes).</td>
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REFERENCES


Lee, Felicia "Young and in fear of the Police" NY Times. October 23, 1997.


Valentine, G. (1997) "Oh yes I can." "Oh no you can't": Children and parents' understandings of kids competence to negotiate public space safely. Antipode 29(1), 65-90.


