

Multiple Arrivals: Narratives of Hope and Promise among Inner City Youth

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the narratives of four young adults, two men and two women, who participated regularly in programs at The Spot, an arts-based recreational center serving inner city youth ages 14-24 in Denver, Colorado. For many young people, The Spot represents their arrival at a place of refuge and support where they can express their hopes and dreams through the creative arts of hip hop, form lifetime friendships outside gang alliances, and interact with adults who acknowledge the marginalization and inequality they face outside its walls. While there, these young people create narratives that link their previous life experiences with their future plans. Given the exigencies of poverty, discrimination, and limited opportunities, these narratives are characterized by multiple arrivals and departures and attempts at assembling disorder into an ordered life. Themes of order, progress, and transformation drawn from mainstream American culture compete and merge with themes of positive ethnic identity; resistance to racism, sexism, and classism; spirituality and anti-materialism drawn from hip hop and street punk culture. Graffiti murals, rap and hip hop music, break dancing, spoken word, and step dancing all serve to organize and explain life trajectories that are marked by incarceration, natural disasters, substance abuse, and the search for life partners. Narratives developed through music, poetry, art, and conversations with peers and staff also serve as means of rehearsing new departures, e.g., entry into a training program, a move to reunite with family, or the birth of a baby.

Introduction

This paper attempts to answer the central question posed by the panel's organizers, "How do people in different situations respond when the present seems incongruent with what they had earlier envisioned as 'the good life'?" by exploring segments in the lives of four young adults in Denver, Colorado. Two are women, two are men, and by self-identification two are black, one is Mexican, and one is white.¹ All were born and have lived their lives in poor urban neighborhoods, three in Denver, one in Chicago. Their stories engage us because these young adults wrestle with competing sets of expectations and visions of the good life: the one they see depicted in mainstream media and that they are taught in school or "brainwashed with," as one of these young men put it and the visions they see around them of lives that are narrated through the "shadow values" and "streetcorner mythmaking" that Eliot Liebow (1967) and Ulf Hannerz (1969) described in their urban ethnographies forty years ago. In working with these young adults over several years, I have watched them struggle with their desires for a good life that includes life partners, children, and steady work and a reality filled with significant disruption and dislocation. These four young adults each resist embracing shadow values, choosing instead to create life stories from more mainstream patterns; however, mainstream patterns that are framed in their own terms, that is, that are true to their ethnic and racial identity and personal history. As I will discuss, the choice to present the stories of these four young adults is not random: I met them through my work evaluating an arts-based youth program and center in downtown Denver, The Spot. Their decision to regularly participate in The Spot's programs over several years is a decision that reflects their intention to negotiate these different visions of the good life in the face of significant disruptions. Thus their arrival at The Spot is also a point of departure for their adult lives.

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Theoretical Perspectives

In looking at the lives of these four young people, I draw from four theoretical perspectives on how we make meaning out of life's events. First is Eight's disrupted life, forced to detour by Hurricane Katrina. His story resembles the disrupted lives that Gay Becker analyzes in her book by that title. Becker argues that lives are inherently disordered and filled with disruptions; however, after an unexpected event we are compelled to create continuity through "narratives of disruption" (1997:15). Next are Jessica's and Tiffani's composed lives. These two young women, who arrived at the Spot as enemies, began telling each other their stories and in the process left as friends and allies in weathering life's disruptions. As discussed by Mary Catherine Bateson (1990), life may be seen as crafted from the materials we are given by our culture and the vicissitudes of human existence: work, love, home, and commitment much as a musician composes a symphony or writer creates a novel. Finally, there is Jerry's narrated life. Cheryl Mattingly, through her analysis of storytelling in therapeutic settings, noticed "that there was a more complicated, interesting, and interwoven relation between telling stories and making practical decisions than I had initially realized" (Mattingly 1998:3). For Jerry, the arts of hip hop culture are the media through which he narrates a new vision for the future. Underlying and significantly informing each of these lives are the normative lives set by dominant discourses of what the life course should look like, what constitutes a disruption, and how to explain and incorporate disruptions normatively as described by Michel Foucault (1977). As Becker notes, the culturally and, as Foucault would add, historically specific normative discourse of the life course provides both the compulsion to create continuity after disruption as well as the sentiments, images, and metaphors we draw from to accomplish this. Thus all four lives: disrupted, composed, narrated, and normative, are cultural products. Ethnography is the method by which we can appreciate their unique beauty and collective strengths and limitations.

Setting and Methods: The Spot

In response to several summers of increasing gang-related violence culminating in the "summer of violence" in 1994, Dave DeForest-Stalls, a former Director in the Denver Department of Recreation joined with others working in youth development projects to form the Com'n on Strong Grant-makers to create a safe, gang-neutral urban space where adolescents and young adults could gather in the evenings: The Spot. After a slow start recruiting and retaining youth participants, DeForest-Stalls consulted with local hip hop artists, street youth (grunge punks), and gang members to design programs based on the four elements of hip hop culture: bboyin' /bgirlin' (break dancing), DJing, emceeing, and graff (graffiti). The Spot's philosophy and mission was to "meet young people where they are," build trust and supportive relationships with staff over time, and, through these relationships, provide encouragement and direction to gain life skills, education, and employment. Young men and women ages 14 to 24, from all ethnic, religious, economic, sexual orientations, and social backgrounds are welcome to participate in The Spot's activities on a voluntary basis: there is no formal enrollment or membership required. Participants can participate in designing and managing programs through the Youth Council. The atmosphere at The Spot is based on mutual trust and respect and an open door policy with only a few basic rules such as not bringing weapons (or turning them over to staff while on the premises)² and not coming to The Spot high or drunk or carrying drugs or alcohol. One of the central challenges faced by The Spot's staff members is recognizing and diffusing conflicts and violence and offering young people the opportunity to handle conflict in a respectful, non-violent manner. In 1997 The Spot purchased its current home, a 9,500 square foot two-story building just north of Denver's central business district in Five Points, the center of Denver's Black community since the early 20th century (Hansen 2008). Despite the outmigration of many Black families from this area as a result

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of gentrification (Robinson 2007), The Spot continues to draw young people from throughout the Denver metropolitan area.

In 2003, the new executive director of The Spot approached me to design an outcome-based program evaluation that would provide data to support grants to fund The Spot's programs. Although the director was eager to have this data, she was also reluctant to engage in any project that might make participants feel like they were "being the objects of research" or collect information in way that would violate the trust and respect between staff and participants. We agreed that a participatory approach that involved youth participants in aspects of designing and conducting the evaluation in accordance with their level of interest would be the approach most consistent with The Spot's philosophy and ethos. For two consecutive weeks, Sunday to Thursday evening from 5:30 to 10:30 p.m., I sat in the lobby of The Spot conducting an unduplicated count of participants in the first week and administering a survey to measure outcome variables the second week. I say "I" for simplicity, but I could not have done this work by myself and there were no funds to hire assistants. Throughout the two weeks a core group of participants, including Jessica and Letisha, sat in the lobby with me ensuring that we counted every young person who entered the doors and that everyone was asked to complete a survey. The desk in the lobby became a center for casual conversations among youth and staff and a place from which I could participate in a variety of conversations and activities such as the adjoining bball court and music studios (just observation of these activities, no participation). We repeated these two-week data collection periods every six months for the next two and a half years, over which time I had ample opportunity to get to know these four young adults, among others, and to talk with them about what was happening in their lives. Although the young people who go to The Spot are a self-selected group, these four individuals are similar in age, gender, and ethnic background to long-term Spot youth.

A Disrupted Life: Eight

Eight is a solid, muscular black man of medium height who greets his friends with a broad smile and bear hugs, but can be very intimidating to anyone who crosses him. I got to know Eight when I met with The Spot's youth council to review the first draft of the survey. He was outspoken and immensely helpful in his critique of the survey, helping us to rewrite poorly worded questions, establishing the right level of language, and pointing out our sometimes ridiculous misperceptions with humor. At 23, he was getting old for The Spot when I met him in 2003 and staff members frequently reminded him that in another year he would have to either start working for The Spot or stop coming as a participant. Eight was born in Chicago and had come to Denver at 16 fleeing from gang-related threats to his life. An active drug dealer, he had a felony record for assault, so becoming a staff member at The Spot was not a realistic option for him. He had completed his GED and expressed interest in stopping selling drugs, but told me that this was difficult because of how lucrative it was and how difficult it was to secure legitimate, mainstream employment with a felony conviction. During the spring of 2005, Eight began to talk about moving to the South where he had extended family that would help him find work so that he could "get a fresh start. I'm getting too old to be dealing drugs and I don't have a taste for it anymore. But everybody here knows me as a dealer and it's hard to convince them I don't want to do that anymore. And it's hard to let go of the money." By late July that year Eight had managed to scrounge, save, and raise enough money to repair his aging van, load it with coolers of food and sodas, and say farewell as he drove off with his wife and children to start their new life in Gulfport, Mississippi where a job was waiting for him. Barely four weeks later, shortly after arriving in Mississippi, Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast, and by October he and his family were back in Denver. I saw Eight a few times after he returned to Denver and asked him how things were going. Despite his disappointment in having his plans to resettle derailed by the hurricane and his distress over the financial

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losses that he and his extended family suffered, he was optimistic and hopeful, determined that his would be, as he said “a detour and not a roadblock” in his path to securing stable legitimate employment. Each time I saw Eight, though we never had time to speak at length, he told me that he continued to resist the temptation to return to dealing, had a steady job, and was making his way slowly toward the life he desired. Staff members corroborated this and the last I heard he is doing well.

Eight’s arrival back in Denver in the fall of 2005, so shortly after his departure for Gulfport could not have been more unexpected or potentially disruptive to his resolve to start a different life. Applying Becker’s theory, what cultural images and metaphors did Eight use to give meaning and order to this unexpected return? Throughout my conversations with Eight he relied on the metaphors and narrative line of addiction and recovery to frame his decision. He was leaving his “old life” of drug dealing with its connections to danger, crime, and constantly moving from outside normal society to its borders for a life modeled on more normative, middle class values of a job in the legal economy and a lower but stable and legitimate income. He described the old life in terms of danger and violence and risk, but also temptations of quick and abundant cash, reputation and respect reminiscent of the crack dealers Phillippe Bourgois depicted in *In Search of Respect* (1996). Thus the new life becomes one of sobriety, safety, and respect that come from legitimacy rather than intimidation and money. The recovery metaphor, of course, is based generally in Protestant Christianity, the revival movements of the rural South, and specifically in the story of the Prodigal Son (ref). Framed as recovery, Hurricane Katrina is but an expected setback in a road to redemption that is bound to be filled with temptations and challenges. As a disruption created by nature, it is less threatening than a disruption from internal or interpersonal struggle or conflict.

Composed Lives: Jessica and Tiffani

I am sitting in the lobby of The Spot on a chilly, windy, snowy night in early April. Two young women sit on the broken down couch to my right, talking about the upcoming GED graduation, the latest news of friends, and the best site for ringtones. “Yeah, we’re a matched pair,” says Tiffani, her arm over Jessica’s shoulder, “She be the white girl, I be the black.” Both have just turned 20 and have known each other for about 18 months. They tease and challenge each other constantly, answer each other’s cell phones, and “have each other’s backs” should anyone threaten the other. But Tiffani and Jessica were not always friends; in fact, when they first met at the Spot there was active mistrust and dislike, which prompted a staff member they both trusted to suggest they start getting to know one another. “I thought she was just another dirty white street kid,” Tiffani told me. “I thought she was just another hot-headed gang bangin’ girl I’d have to fight,” said Jessica. Tiffani was living with her grandmother at the time, who had a steady job working for the government. They lived in a new house in an outer suburb with Tiffani’s younger siblings. Tiffani had graduated from high school the previous year and was considering training as a certified childcare worker. She had a reputation as a fighter with a bad temper. Jessica, on the other hand, had left home at 16 and had been living on the streets for several years. When I first met her, everyone called her by her street name, Blue. She was thin but wiry and very strong, often high on meth. She was also known for her tough attitude that kept people at a distance, backed by a sharp tongue that might lash out if you did reach out. She had dropped out of high school and was afraid that she wouldn’t be able to pass the tests for the GED because of a learning disability.

From these different backgrounds, Tiffani and Jessica built a solid, lasting friendship represented for them by their arrival at The Spot. Jessica supported Tiffani in learning to manage and discipline her anger so that she could resolve conflict with the force of her words and passion instead of getting herself into trouble by fighting. She helped her out in caring for her younger siblings when her grandmother was hospitalized.

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Tiffani helped Jessica relax, give up meth, and trust and connect with people at The Spot. She took Jessica over to the GED classroom to sign up for classes and worked with her on her homework. I speak of Jessica and Tiffani together because their growing friendship led them to move outward and work with a few other young people at The Spot to organize a block party in 2005. Although The Spot began as a coalition among street youth, who are mostly white, and hip hop artists and former gang members who are mostly black and Mexican, by 2000 these groups were somewhat polarized, with The Spot serving primarily black and Mexican youth and white street youth hanging out on the streets or in a faith-based youth center nearby. Staff members had been discussing this with participants at The Spot and together they decided to hold a block party to bring these groups together. Tiffani and Jessica devoted themselves to the project with enthusiasm, helping to raise funds for a dunking tank to dunk staff members, organizing activities, and publicizing the event. Their friendship continues to be an important part of each of their lives that provides continuity and support through life's unexpected and expected events. In the past few years, both have had children and separated from their children's fathers, Tiffani is in school to become a corrections officer and Jessica has held a job at Starbucks for almost two years and moved out of her mother's house to an apartment of her own. They are godparents to each other's children and, as Jessica said, "We'll be friends forever."

Viewing Tiffani's and Jessica's friendship through the perspective of composed lives allows us to see the pattern it creates through their commitment to each other. Bateson argues that women, "whose whole lives no longer need be dominated by the rhythms of procreation and the dependencies that these created" must still balance conflicting demands and the "discontinuities of female biology." Additionally, for Letisha and Jessica, are the constraints imposed by scarce resources. As Bateson observes: ". . . it is particularly tempting to disassemble a life composed of odds and ends, to describe the pieces separately. Unfortunately, when this is done the pattern and loving labor in the patchwork is lost" (1989:10). Tiffani's and Jessica's arrival at The Spot was the beginning of a lifelong friendship neither had imagined or expected; one that sees them through the many changes of becoming adults in an environment when they have few external supports. Because they knew each other's history they can support the changes they want to make and remind each other of the progress they have made and the goals they wish to achieve. I do not want to idealize their friendship. They have had their share of fights and days and even weeks when they didn't speak to one another. But those rough periods, too, become part of the life they are composing.

A Narrated Life: Jerry

I have come to know Jerry more recently than Eight, Tiffani, and Jessica, in part because Jerry is a bboy. At The Spot, bboys were a group apart, an elite group focused exclusively on their art with a military like camaraderie, discipline, and group ethos. They would usually arrive around 6:00 p.m., well after the doors opened and go directly to the studio without a quick hello or nod to whoever was in the lobby. There is an unstated order in the b-room and almost no discussion or socializing. The bboys are focused on their moves, on practice, on listening to the beat, on observing each other. Jerry arrived at bboyin' and The Spot through hip hop culture after having a very clear sense of where he wanted his life to go.

At 13 or 14 I was going to be a gangster, a gang bangin' fighter who represents my 'hood. I was going to be a drug dealer because my father was a dealer, all my uncles were dealers. It's what I knew.

At 15, Jerry ran away from his aunt and grandmother, who had been raising him, and lived on the streets for a year and a half. He describes this as a time of great freedom: "I was the freest in my life. I didn't

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answer to no one; no chores. I wouldn't change it because I wouldn't be who I am if I hadn't been on the streets." Although he had planned on associating with gangs but not becoming a member (because it is hard to leave), he finally joined and then was expelled from a gang when he was 17. Throughout this period of his life, unlike most of his peers, Jerry stayed in high school in part because he loved to read and he had some teachers that he greatly admired.

One teacher who asked him about the book he was carrying, *Guerilla Warfare* by Che Guevara, introduced him to a critical view of American history, an alternative narrative to that he had received up to that point, one that took into account racism and social class. "He was the first teacher I met who actually said something negative about Abraham Lincoln." At about the same time Jerry was chosen for the cast of "Zoot Suit," a high school production that received national attention. One of the other cast members, Jason, was a bboy and introduced Jerry to hip hop culture. His uncle had taken him to The Spot when he was 10 and Jerry remembers loving it: "There was a group of guys in a huddle working on rap and another group in the corner graffin' in black books. It was like a club there was so many people, alive and hyped with wonderful energy." But his grandmother thought it was a gang hangout and so he didn't return. At 18 he returned to become a bboy and also began doing graff and tagging. Jerry says it was the power of hip hop's ideals that grabbed his attention and changed his ideas of where he wanted to go in his life.

Bboys are underground. They don't listen to the radio; they don't dance to make money but to express themselves. They aren't sellouts. It's about love not the money. Break dancers do it for the fame, the attention, the money. The new kids don't know the history. Bboys listen to James Brown and Latin jazz and rock 'n roll, underground music. Hip hop and rap when it started was about freeing the people from mental slavery but then rap was commercialized and used to oppress them. It's about the freedom and uplift of humanity.

Jerry is one of the most respected bboys at The Spot. Cirque du Soleil comes to Denver with each new show and works closely with The Spot because of its work with youth through street arts. Jerry has exchanged classes with Cirque performers and attributes many of the elements of the new bboy style to their influence. In 2006 Jerry quit selling drugs and in 2007 became an AmeriCorps volunteer at The Spot. He now works for a small, faith-based non-profit agency serving families in Five Points and is working to find new ways to continue working with youth. When I asked him if he had expected he would be at this point three years ago he said, "No way. I made a lot more money when I was 13 selling drugs and now I have a girlfriend and a baby to support. But I love what I do."

As Jerry told me his story, the power of narrative to envision, rehearse, and create change was evident. Through the idiom of hip hop arts, bboyin' and graff, and its philosophy he began to hear an alternative critical narrative of American history and his place in that history that provided him with a different plan for his future. This new trajectory provided him with a way to express himself in a way that felt genuine, to serve a project larger than himself, and not to become caught up in mainstream American consumerism. As he developed and repeated his narrative, pieces of it were realized and he arrived at a new and unexpected destination.

Conclusion: Normative Lives

As I write about these four young adults it is easy for me, a white woman of comfortable means, to idealize and romanticize their lives and the stories that they tell. There is much to evaluate critically in the narratives they share. As Foucault argues, social conformity, coercion, and oppression underlie the cultural

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discourse of normality. These young adults, by virtue of their location in the social structure, are most likely to be oppressed and disserved by discourses of a normative life course. So we might ask, "How well do these cultural narratives serve them?" As both Jerry and Eight would acknowledge, they have much less money than they did when selling drugs. They have traded quick money for a greater sense of safety and security. Jerry, for one, was very clear that he wanted to be around to raise his infant son, not in jail – an experience he never had. Foucault also says that social change comes from the epistemic margins, from people like Jessica, Tiffani, Eight, and Jerry, who stand far enough apart from the centers of power to recognize that they are a form of "brainwashing" as Jerry would say. Whereas each has found a culturally based framework for making meaning from disruption: recovery for Eight, friendship across diversity for Jessica and Tiffani, and the critical perspective of hip hop for Jerry, they have crafted them to their own needs and desires.

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Notes

1. The four persons whose stories are told here have been given pseudonyms both for their street names and their real names to protect their privacy and confidentiality. The evaluation project, including informal interviews, was approved by the IRB of the University of Colorado Denver for 2005 and 2006.
2. Youth would get the weapon back at the end of the night based on the understanding that the weapon was a survival tool. Firearms were the exception: they were not returned to the young person. A staff member would drop the firearm at the police station without revealing where it came from.

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