Coming of Age in Neoliberal New York

Jennifer Hope Sugg

Graduate Center, City University of New York

How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!

Follow this and additional works at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds

Part of the Education Commons, Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons, and the Quantitative, Qualitative, Comparative, and Historical Methodologies Commons

Recommended Citation

https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds/293

This Dissertation is brought to you by CUNY Academic Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Dissertations, Theses, and Capstone Projects by an authorized administrator of CUNY Academic Works. For more information, please contact deposit@gc.cuny.edu.
COMING OF AGE IN NEOLIBERAL NEW YORK

by

Jennifer Sugg

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Anthropology in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,
The City University of New York

2014
This manuscript has been read and accepted for
the Graduate Faculty in Anthropology in satisfaction of the
dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

________________________
IDA SUSSER

Date

Chair of Examining Committee

________________________
GERALD CREED

Date

Executive Officer

________________________
IDA SUSSER

________________________
KATE CREHAN

________________________
HESTER EISENSTEIN

Supervisory Committee

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
Abstract

COMING OF AGE IN NEOLIBERAL NEW YORK

by

Jennifer Sugg

Adviser: Professor Ida Susser

Thirty years of neoliberal policies have left New York a divided city, with ever-rising rates of income inequality and widening social disparity. Structural transformations associated with global capitalism have led to divergent experiences for male and female youth coming of age in the 21st century. Girls are experiencing greater social integration and social mobility whereas, boys are facing social exclusion and limited opportunities. As young men precariously forge new transitions to adulthood, young women are constructed as ideal flexible subjects, benefiting from feminist achievements, and advancing in the new service economy. Yet in reality, girls continue to face gendered base violence, sexism, and burdens of responsibilities. Through this lens, I examine how gender operates as an organizing principle in young people’s lives today in the Lower East Side (LES) of New York City.

This study also documents how people create cultural alternatives that reflect their values and progressive politics and analyzes how this has been done in the past. It offers an organizational case study of The Lower Eastside Girls Club in an effort to increase our understanding of the history and significance of a successful struggle to educate, employ, and carve out a safe space for women and girls in neoliberal New York. It documents how the Girls Club builds upon a legacy of grassroots initiatives in the LES, including the
settlement house movement of the Progressive Era and Mobilization for Youth of the 1960’s.

This study asks: what should an education accomplish in a democracy? (Giroux 2013) It examines the limitations of the Girls Club’s engaged practice of uplift and empowerment in relation to its progressive politics and critical pedagogy. I suggest that education is a terrain in the “right to the city” (Lefebvre 1968), and that the Girls Club, in constructing alternative models of education and community engagement, is locally engaging in a broader struggle for social justice, albeit with limited success. This study concludes with an analysis of Girls Club’s efforts to push forth a community-led development model that puts women and youth at the center, melding the politics of Jane Addams and Jane Jacobs and offering an alternative urban vision.
Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I give thanks to the women of the Lower East Side, whose vision and struggle have inspired this research and in whose honor I dedicate this dissertation. I am grateful for the support and collaboration of the Girls Club, and especially Lyn Pentecost. In openly sharing their stories, the women and girls of the Lower Eastside Girls Club, made this dissertation a possibility. Secondly, I offer special thanks to my advisor Ida Susser for her constant guidance, support and encouragement over the years, as well as my committee members Kate Crehan, Hester Eisenstein and Faye Ginsburg, whose feedback and advice greatly improved this dissertation. I give thanks to Leith Mullings, David Harvey, and Blanche Weisen Cook at the Graduate Center, CUNY whose research and teachings have also inspired and influenced my academic work, as well as the late Neil Smith and Jagna Sharff for their transformative research in the Lower East Side. Finally, I give thanks to my grandmother, mother and sisters who collectively raised me to become the woman I am today and my dear friends who have stuck with me throughout my graduate studies.
# Table of Contents

Chapter One: Introduction 1

Chapter Two: A Brief Social History of the Lower East Side 26

Chapter Three: Making History 59

Chapter Four: An Organizational Case Study of the Girls Club 91

Chapter Five: Community Caregiving 137

Chapter Six: Youth in Need of a Mobilization 169

Chapter Seven: Girls Coming of Age in the Neoliberal City 217

Chapter Eight: Aspirations of Mobility 243

Chapter Nine: Critical Education in Arts and Activism 272

Chapter Ten: Alternative Urban Visions 308

Conclusion 333

Appendix I: Girls Club Programming Locations 1996-2014 338

Appendix II: Lower Eastside Girls Club Center for Community 339

Bibliography 340
List of Figures

Figure 1  Map: Community Board 3 District.  29
Figure 2  Photo: Women Leading the Way in the LES  109
Figure 3  Photo: Women Who Change the World Mural Project  294
Chapter One: Introduction

Historical shifts in the political economy of New York, beginning with the 1975 fiscal crisis, had, by the 1990’s, created a crisis in social reproduction brought on by welfare “reform” policies in conjunction with processes of deindustrialization, gentrification, and private and disinvestment in the public services and social welfare (Susser 1982, 1996). State disinvestment in NYC entailed severe cuts in funding for housing, health care, education, job training, job creation, childcare, parks and recreation. Youth coming of age in the first decade of the 21st century have been made to bear the cost of social reproduction in the neoliberal city (Katz 2004). This is an extended case study of women in the Lower East Side (LES) of New York City, who when faced with this crisis in social reproduction, mobilized and formed the Lower Eastside Girls Club, campaigned for the right to education and recreation and envisioned an alternative future for their daughters and for themselves. This study looks at how young people have experienced this crisis, how male and female youth have been differentially impacted, and how women in one NYC community collectively organized to provide innovative educational and cultural programming for young women, their families, and the broader LES community.

This thesis argues that the Lower Eastside Girls Club (hereafter referred to as the Girls Club) offers an alternative urban vision. It is reimagining the possibilities of education, as well as social relations at the familial and community level. The research addresses the question: How did a small group of women collectively create a Girls Club and develop it from an all-volunteer staff working in borrowed spaces throughout the Lower East Side into a model community-based youth organization, annually serving
over 300 girls and women\textsuperscript{1}. How did this movement emerge, who are the actors involved and what does this initiative mean for the Lower East Side today and for generations to come? The study situates the Girls Club in the context of the political economic policies transforming the city landscape and amongst ongoing initiatives privatizing education at the federal, state and city level. Given this context, I ask what are the challenges facing girls and boys coming of age in New York City today and how is the Girls Club responding, in the way of programming, employment and educational opportunities? Through this lens, I analyze the immediate and long-term impact and broader significance of this initiative.

This study documents how people create cultural alternatives that reflect their values and progressive politics and analyzes how effective these efforts have been on the Lower East Side. The Girls Club builds upon a legacy of struggles for social justice, emerging out of a concerted effort and collective vision to create an alternative communal space for women and girls. By investigating the relative success of Girls Club programming and practices over time and considering the contradictions that come to light, we can begin to sort out the lessons learned from this model of critical education and community engagement.

\textsuperscript{1} There are around 300 girls (ages 8-21) and women actively participating in programming at the Girls Club. More women and girls are reached through special events and community programs. Prior to the “Center for Community” facility, the Girls Club “graduated” nearly 200 girls over the years (graduating 5-10 girls each year as seniors). The new building has allowed the Girls Club to enrol more girls, provide more programs and employ more women in the LES. As of Winter 2014, the number of girls and women active in the Girls Club has markedly increased up to 300 girls and 100 women respectively. Neighborhood women involved with the organization are predominately, black and Latina; the youth population on the other hand is more diverse (58% Latina, 22% Black, 18% Asian, 2% White). More than one third of girls are immigrants or first generation. 50% of girls speak a language aside from English at home (including Spanish, Mandarin, Cantonese, French, Tibetan, Croatian). Source: 2012 Lower Eastside Girls Club General Survey with 63 participants.
I review the origins, transformation and success of the Girls Club from 1996-2013 and consider its impact on women and girls in the Lower East Side. For comparative purposes, I also study the Andrew Glover Youth Program (AGYP), a grassroots organization that works predominantly with young men in the Lower East Side, offering alternatives to incarceration. I compare the efforts of these two organizations to “rescue”, uplift and empower youth in the Lower East Side today.

The study begins in 1996, the founding year of the Girls Club and a key year in the retrenchment of the US welfare state. It continues through the Giuliani and Bloomberg mayoral terms, as New York emerges as the quintessential neoliberal city driven by market ideologies and the regulatory power of global finance (Susser 2012; Brash 2012; Moody 2007). It concludes in 2013, the year the Girls Club opened its “Center for Community” facility. I discuss the trajectory of this grassroots’ movement, assesses its impact within the community and its broader significance in relation to struggles for “right to city” (Lefebvre, H. 1996 (1968), 2003; Mitchell 2003; Harvey 2003, 2012) and “right to education” (Lipman 2011). I suggest the story of the Girls Club illustrates LES women’s struggle for their vision of a more just city.

The Lower Eastside Girls Club

Since its founding by neighborhood women the Girls Club has become a symbol of the activist spirit of the community. The seventeen-year effort to construct a “Center for Community” builds upon a rich history of collective action in the Lower East Side. Founders of the Girls Club were claiming a stake in the neighborhood while demanding a public good, namely that of equal opportunities for women and girls in the LES. Through community engagement, the campaign to build a Girls Club facility became a common
cause, a rallying call for women (many of whom were mothers but not all) to fight against the erasure of the diversity, vitality and countercultural character of the neighborhood. Former Councilwoman, and Girls Club supporter, Margarita Lopez, exemplifies this sentiment when she exclaims “I feel that I am the mother of every girl on the Lower East Side and every child. And I fight for them like that.” Lopez’s words reflect the kind of collective energy that mobilizes activism and moves people toward social transformation. My research aims to increase our understanding of the history and significance of a successful struggle to critically educate, employ, and carve out a safe space for women and girls amidst ongoing structural transformations associated with global capitalism.

Over the years the Girls Club has evolved from a small, all-volunteer program serving a handful of neighborhood girls out of several makeshift and ever-changing ‘offices’ based in kitchens and church basements, to a full-fledged youth organization running a diverse array of innovative, educational programs. Since its founding, the Girls Club has operated out of 30+ locations throughout the LES, always utilizing multiple spaces at once and providing a wide range of programs (see Appendix). After years of planning, fundraising and construction, the Girls Club finally opened the doors to its new “Center for Community” facility in Fall 2013. Located on the far eastern edge of the Lower East Side, the new building is New York City’s first and only Girls Club facility. Today the Girls Club annually serves hundreds of girls ages 8-21, and their families. The

---

1 Anderson, L. 2002.
2 Mullings, L. 2001 p. 51
3 see Appendix for full details on the Center for Community building
4 The Girls Club works with girls (and their families) that either live or go to school in the Lower East Side. The majority of girls live in the Lower East Side, some however, are girls whose families have been displaced from the neighborhood; so they attend school in the LES but live in outer boroughs of NYC.
girls represent the full spectrum of the community’s racial and ethnic diversity, many come from poor or working class backgrounds, and a majority live in public housing. ¹

The Girls Club has been a coordinated movement led by and on behalf of the women and girls in the Lower East Side. Margarita Lopez describes the creation of the Girls Club as a collective mobilization:

*This building that was built, make no mistake, it cost a lot of effort from a lot of people. Some people were the ones who brought the salt to the soup that we were making, some of the people brought the vegetables that were going to be in the salad, some of the people brought the knowledge of how to turn on the fire, and each and everyone of the members of this community who understand that fundamental concept of justice and fairness brought the power to make it happen.*²

Here I look at how women formed the Girls Club as a response to the ongoing social and economic crises and culture wars impacting the LES from the 1970’s-1990’s and how they built upon the community’s distinct legacy of radical politics and creative expression. I attend to the dynamic relationship between the grassroots and the broader social structure, and women’s unique relationship with, and experience of, their community.

Following the story of the Girls Club offers a perspective on the trajectory of the neighborhood during a period of gentrification, expanding corporate investment and worsening socio-economic inequality (Susser 2012). The process of gentrification is far from ‘all-encompassing’ and in the LES we have seen years of community engagement, accommodation and resistance, as residents have struggled against displacement and

¹ Girls Club members come from diverse backgrounds. Those self-identifying as Latina tend to come from Puerto Rican and Dominican backgrounds, but there are also girls from Mexico, Honduras, Colombia and Ecuador. Girls of Asian descent tend to have recently immigrated from the Fujian, China. There are girls from African countries such as Mali, Senegal, and Democratic Republic of Congo. Other countries represented include Croatia, Tibet, Jamaica and Malaysia. Source: 2012 Lower Eastside Girls Club General Survey with 63 participants. I discuss the economic background of girls further in Chapter Two.

² This statement was taken from Margarita Lopez’s speech at the opening ceremony of the Girls Club Center for Community on October 26, 2013.
depoliticization. Lower East Siders have a long history of engaging in “right to the city” struggles, fighting for access to resources, services and control of neighborhood institutions, beginning with the Settlement Movement at the turn of the 19th/20th century, through the War Against Poverty and counter-cultural movements of the 1960’s, and more recently with the anti-gentrification struggles of the past 25 years. In Chapters Three, Four and Five, I document how women of the Lower East Side have drawn on this collective memory of prior social change efforts in their struggle to improve the lives of their families and neighbors and envision a just future for the next generation.

Crisis in Social Reproduction

One important theme of my research has been identifying a link between the crisis in social reproduction brought on by welfare reform and the wider processes of deindustrialization, gentrification and public disinvestment that have shaped the Lower East Side over the past 35 years. I suggest that the Girls Club emerged as a grassroots response to the crisis in social reproduction brought on by policies attacking social welfare programs and disinvesting in education, affordable housing, health care and child-care. Since the 1970’s there has been a change in political priorities and governments are unwilling to maintain former levels of support for social reproduction, leading to an erosion of the social wage and steep cuts in social welfare and expenditures on child-care and health care at the city, state, federal levels. As a result, the costs of social reproduction have shifted increasingly to individual households and institutions of civil society, including community-based nonprofits like the Girls Club. Women and girls

---

1 Cindi Katz (2004) explores the systemic disruptions to social reproduction in New York City (as well as rural Sudan). She explains that social reproduction “encompasses that broad range of practices and social relations that maintain and reproduce particular relations of production along with the material and social grounds in which they take place” (x).

are tending to the work of social reproduction themselves, drawing on the support of their extended social network, including community organizations.¹

The work of social reproduction includes child rearing, food collection and preparation, cleaning, laundering, and other tasks integral to “homemaking.” In the global North of the 21st century many of these tasks are now available through the market for purchase. Nevertheless, women and girls remain overburdened with social care-giving tasks, especially in post-welfare America. Cindi Katz (2004) reminds us that, “women, almost everywhere, fill whatever gaps are left in ensuring their household’s reproduction and well-being” (20). In New York City today, working-class women work a triple-day, taking on family caretaking, paid work, and unpaid community work. Tensions build as women attempt to balance competing demands and negotiate between unpaid and paid community work and parental responsibilities.² Shellee Colen (1995), deploys the term reproductive labor to describe how, “the physical, mental and emotional work of bearing, raising and socializing children and of creating and maintaining households and people (from infancy to old age) is differentially experienced, valued and rewarded according to inequalities of access to material and social resources in particular historical and cultural contexts.”³

As shown in Chapter Five, policies such as welfare reform have exacerbated processes of inequality and restructured our fundamental ideas of kinship.⁴ These policies rely upon women to perform care-taking functions within urban (as well as suburban, ex-urban and rural) communities yet rarely provide child-care and other

---

¹ Katz, C. 2004 p. 180, 181
² Hays S. 2003
³ Colen, S. 1995 p. 78
⁴ Susser, I. 1997; Lewinsky, T. 2010; Gailey, C. 2011
supports. I consider the intergenerational relationships among mothers and daughters and question how they have adapted to these changes.

Ida Susser (1997) raises the pressing question of who will provide for the emotional educational and general health needs for poor and working class children as women are pulled into the low-wage labor force? I explore how teenage girls are frequently, “filling in the gaps” within the domestic sphere and performing kin work (diLeonardo 1984), serving as surrogate mothers for their younger siblings, cousins and fictive kin (Stacks 1974). For such girls, the Girls Club is vital as a source of respite, relief, support, and diversion. Moreover, as new forms of poverty resulting from economic restructuring have generated violence on the streets and in the homes, women and girls value the Girls Club as a safe haven from societal, as well as domestic, violence, as well as a means to combat it.

**Ethnographic Legacy of Jagna Sharff in the Lower East Side**

My research builds upon the work of Jagna Sharff and her ethnographic work in the Lower East Side in the 1970’s -1990’s, *King Kong on 4th Street* (1998). Sharff documents the societal violence against poor people in the Lower East Side, attends to the broader structural changes in the economy, and focuses on the lives of women and children. At the time of Sharff’s investigation, the Lower East Side was beset by a constellation of crises: a decimation of housing stock, extreme poverty, broken schools, a drug epidemic, as well as an AIDS epidemic. These social problems were compounded by drastic cuts in social welfare spending at the federal, state and city level. This study extends Sharff’s exploration of the effects of societal violence on the lives of women and children.

---

1 Susser, I. 1997; Lewinsky, T. 2010
2 Susser, I. 1997
young people in urban space. Over twenty years later, I have found that many of the same social problems persist, as do many of the same family roles and gendered processes.

Sharff described how a number of young people in the LES fall into “roles of either ‘macho defender/avenger’ of the family, the ‘scholar/advocate,’ the ‘child reproducer,’ or the ‘wage earner’.”¹ In Chapters Six and Seven, I explore how these gendered patterns persist today. Boys in the LES continue to engage in deviant behavior as a form of resistance and many fall victim to incarceration or street violence. Now more than ever, young men of color in the LES are criminalized, policed, and thereby denied the freedom and opportunity to create life anew. Girls, on the other hand, enjoy more opportunities now than ever before, and yet, they continue to confront patriarchal attitudes and behaviors. Girls are expected to excel in school, while also taking on added care-giving responsibilities in the home. I consider how girls negotiate these expectations and aspire for social mobility and question the impact of Girls Club’s efforts to improve girls’ lives by providing meaningful opportunities.

**Gender Divide in the Lower East Side**

A second major theme in this study is an exploration of the coming of age experience, for girls as well as boys, in 21st century New York City. Attending to coming of age processes in urban America offers a window into the vast social transformation this country has undergone. Class, gender, racial and ethnic divisions have been reconfigured on a global scale. At the local level, structural transformations in New York have led to divergent experiences for male and female youth in the Lower East Side. There are stark distinctions demarcating the impact of gendered policies and governing practices. While male youth are facing criminalization, securitization, policing and

¹ Sharff, J. 1998. p. 5
incarceration, female youth are experiencing “responsibilitization”, a form of subject formation associated with the confluence of a flexible regime of accumulation and neoliberal governance. Girls have absorbed the brunt of the crisis in social reproduction, taking on more responsibilities at home and at school, while boys have resisted their extreme social marginalization, by embracing street culture and engaging in the underground economy out of economic necessity (Bourgois 1995). In short, girls are experiencing greater social integration and social mobility while boys are facing social exclusion and limited opportunities.

Youth programming in the Lower East Side is representative of this gender divide. The Girls Club was founded with the mission to serve girls in the community because, at the time, the local Boys Clubs in the Lower East Side refused admittance to girls. Excluded from programming, recreational and educational opportunities, the founding women of the Girls Club set out to create a new model of youth development for girls in the LES. Former Councilwoman Margarita Lopez contends that the Girls Club was “born out of a fundamental concept of justice and fairness”. In her narrative she describes the Girls Club as a grassroots initiative for gender equality in educational and recreational resources. She recalls:

\begin{quote}
In 1986 there was an incident that happened in Community Board 3; permission was asked to expand the Boys Club on Pitt Street. We requested that the Boys Club include the girls and that they expand to give the girls same services. The answer was No…. there was another group of people who understood that in order for 50% of the planet to be equal we needed to bring the all to them at the same time to the same position. And the Girls Club was born at that moment.\end{quote}

\footnote{1} The Boys Club of New York is not affiliated with the national Boys and Girls Club of America. It opted out of the merger, and has remained a boys only institution. http://www.bcny.org/

\footnote{2} This statement was taken from Margarita Lopez’s speech at the opening ceremony of the Girls Club Center for Community on October 26, 2013.
Today, almost thirty years later, the tables have turned, and girls in the Lower East Side are benefiting from access to educational programs and support services, which are unavailable to young men in the community. The organizations servicing male youth in the LES offer little in the way of inspiration and innovation. There is nothing comparable to the Girls Club in vision and practice. This imbalance is an indication of the institutional failure of the historic settlement houses in the LES and other youth serving organizations such as the Boys Club; they have ultimately failed to meet the challenges facing youth in the 21st century.

The Girls Club has more than leveled the playing field; it has given girls a clear advantage in the LES. As young women are leaping ahead, more young men in the LES are left behind. Today opportunities for boys in the LES pale in comparison to what the Girls Club is providing. A scaled back Boys Club continues to work with young boys in the Lower East Side, while adolescent and teen males transition to hanging out and playing basketball and baseball at the Boys and Girls Republic (BGR, a part of Henry Street Settlement). Other young men turn to the streets, and end up passing through the doors of the Andre Glover Youth Program (AGYP), a grassroots organization in the LES, which works to provide alternatives to incarceration. In the absence of meaningful programming and opportunities, many young men are falling through the cracks.

Meanwhile, the Girls Club is thriving, and transforming the lives of women and girls in the LES.

The reversal of educational and recreational opportunities for male and female youth in the LES, have left mothers questioning, “Why aren’t there opportunities like this for my boys?” Whereas, in the 1990’s women were asking: “Why is there nothing for our
girls?” A whole generation of LES girls have benefited immensely from their involvement with the Girls Club since its founding in 1996. While the Boys Club (BCNY) and Boys and Girls Republic (BGR) offer sports and recreation and AGYP, offers a pathway out of prison, the Girls Club offers a wider and more imaginative array of programming incomparable with other youth organizations in the LES and beyond. This divergence in service is indicative of the sea change in gendered experiences for young men and women. Today in New York City as working class young men precariously forge new transitions to adulthood, young women are doubly constructed as ideal flexible subjects; they are imagined as benefiting from feminist achievements, and winning out in the new service economy. Yet, they also face harsh realities of gendered violence and burdens of family responsibility and care-work.

In an effort to explore the distinct socialization process and opportunity structures, for girls, in relation to boys, in the Lower East Side, I balance the case study of the Girls Club, with an analysis of the Andrew Glover Youth Program. Both grassroots community-based organizations, serving gender specific youth populations, Andrew Glover and the Girls Club offer radically different models of youth development. AGYP offers a model of “adaptive activism” (Susser 2009), providing an adaptive solution that addresses the criminalization of Latino and black youth. The Girls Club, on the other hand, offers a more progressive model that aims, albeit with limited success, to educate a new generation of leaders and foster socio-economic justice. This latter model

---

1 The Lower East Side Girls Club has accepted several male members over the years; boys who have found their way into the Girls Club on their own. The Girls Club has not turned any boys away, but has consistently served predominately females. Likewise, Andrew Glover Youth Program has worked with girls over the years, yet remains predominantly focused on male youth who make up the overwhelming majority of its clients. In the new Center for Community the Girls Club plans to expand programming to include males in Digital Media and Sound Design Programs as well as Culinary Classes.
approaches “transformative activism”, a concept Susser deploys to describe a collective action that aims to change to structural constraints people confront.\textsuperscript{1} I argue that adaptive activism and transformative activism are best understood along a continuum. Girls Club programming falls on both ends of the spectrum, simultaneously offering adaptive and accommodating solutions to immediate social problems arising within the community, at other times challenging normative familial, social, and gender relations, fostering social consciousness, and building progressive coalitions in the LES.

\textbf{Youth Studies}

This thesis focuses on youth (mostly girls) ages 15-21.\textsuperscript{2} The term youth is a flexible and contested category.\textsuperscript{3} Youth are typically associated with the life stage of adolescence.\textsuperscript{4} Bucholtz (2002) observes that, “adolescence is shaped by historically specific processes of social, political, and economic transformation, as well as by existing cultural practices” (531). Ethnographic studies by Mead (1928) and Malinowski (1929) established adolescence an important anthropological subject in the first half of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century.\textsuperscript{5} These early studies focused mostly on uncovering cross-cultural

\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{1} Susser, I. 2009 pp. 141, 146.
\textsuperscript{2} In addition studying women and girls involved with the Girls Club, there are two male Girls Club members (now alumnae) I include in this study.
\textsuperscript{3} A note on terminology: The terms adolescents, youth, kids, young people, teenagers and young adults are often used interchangeably, yet their use may vary across contexts. In this thesis, I use the term youth (and young people) to refer to any person(s) between the age of 13-21. Bucholtz (2002) advocates for usage of the term youth, as opposed to adolescence. I focus primarily on “teenage” youth, between the ages of 15-21 in the Lower East Side. I use the term “girl” in this study because it is a useful way to make the association with the Girls Club. I could have used the term “teenage girls” or “young women” but I choose the shorter version “girls” because that is the term with which the girls self-identify. For a critique of the cultural construction of adolescence see Lesko 2001; for a cultural-historical analysis of the emergence of adolescence see Chinn 2008. For a review of anthropological writings on childhood and youth see: Schwartzman, H. B. 2001 and Bucholtz, M. 2002.
\textsuperscript{4} G. Stanley Hall’s seminal and influential study: \textit{Adolescence: its Psychology and its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sex, Crime, Religion and Education} (1915 (1904)) describes adolescence as stress filled, emotional, and turbulent. Erik Erikson (1963, 1968) later describes adolescence as a period of crisis between childhood and adulthood.
\textsuperscript{5} I address Mead’s work in further detail in Chapter Three.
generalizations and variations in the biological, psychological, and social characteristics of youth.

Chinn (2009) argues that the concept of adolescence emerged at the turn of the 19th/20th century among immigrant communities in urban areas, such as the Lower East Side. Urbanization, industrialization, and revolutionary changes in the domestic sphere of family life, had disrupted prior notions of childhood. At this historical moment, adolescents became an object of theory and prescription, “an identity separate from childhood on the one hand and adulthood on the other hand.”

Demographic, cultural and legal changes, as well as a rethinking of adolescence by social scientists and reformers, brought into being the concept of the teenager in the 1940’s. More recently the concept of “emerging adulthood” as been deployed to describe a new stage in the life between adolescence and adulthood reflecting the extension of youth transitions to independence brought about by structural changes associated with global capitalism.

**Integrating Feminism and Youth Studies**

In this thesis I attempt to integrate critical feminist and youth studies, attending to how gender reconfigures youth practices and spaces. Over the past thirty years liberal feminism has been challenged and strengthened by critiques emerging from Post-Colonialists, Post-Structuralists, Socialists, Third-World, Black, Latina and Asian

---

1 Notably, Franz Boas (1912) work anthropometric work on child growth among European immigrants in NYC, enabled him to argue that a child’s “mental makeup” is affected by the “social and geographical environment” (217-218)
2 Chinn, S. 2009 p. 6
3 Savage, J. 2007. Savage argues that the invention of “teenager” to describe young people between ages 14-18 coincided with America’s victory in WWII. It was a marketing term deployed by advertisers/manufacturers to capture the spending power of this cohort.
4 See Arnett, J. 2004 and Bynner, J. 2005. According to Arnett, the features of emerging adulthood as a life-phase include: identity exploration, instability, self-focus, optimism. Bynner, in turn, argues that Arnett’s case for emerging adulthood fails to adequately recognize that young people’s experience is constrained by their location in the social structure.
feminists who have disrupted the apolitical, ahistorical notions of a unitary female subject, and insisted on analyses informed by an understanding of intersecting inequalities and attention to political economy, historical context, and geographic and cultural specificity.\(^1\) These revisionary interventions have reinvigorated feminist politics and gender studies and have contributed towards emerging research on transnational/global feminisms and feminist solidarity. Yet while feminists have sought to critically reconceptualize and reinscribe notions and representations of family, motherhood, reproduction\(^2\), home, community, nation\(^3\), work\(^4\), and political struggle\(^5\); until recently, they have neglected to apply the same degree of theoretical rigor to the study of young people.\(^6\)

Fortunately over the past decade, more studies of youth and youth culture(s) informed by feminist, gender and queer theories, have been surfacing as is evident by the new “masculinities studies”\(^7\) and “girl studies,”\(^1\) ethnographies of gender performativity

---


\(^6\) One notable exception is Angela McRobbie, who has been studying youth culture(s) in Britain from a feminist perspective since the mid 1970’s. see McRobbie, A. 2000 (1991).

among youth\(^2\), and critical analysis of youth sexuality and sex education\(^3\). I build on these efforts to bridge critical feminist and gender theories with studies of youth.\(^4\) Integrating these two streams of inquiry can help illuminate the ways in which young people are being reconstituted in the context of recent political economic transformations and in conjunction with projects aimed at disciplining, empowering, as well as policing youth. I disrupt and counter dominant perspectives of gender socialization, which focus on girls only as future mothers rather than as a critical agents involved in the construction and interpretation of their own world and direction in their lives.

From an integrated feminist perspective, I argue that the Girls Club reflects a type of ‘messy’ feminism. In analyzing gendered processes of socialization as situated within the political economic context, this dissertation raises the following questions: What does feminism have to offer this generation? What kind of feminist philosophy, if any, undergirds the Girls Club programming and practice? How does feminism indirectly, or directly, inform the culture and socializing practices of the organization? What kinds of feminist messaging, such as “Girl Power”, does the Girls Club impart? In addressing these questions this research highlights the contradictions of feminism today. As the Girls Club actively puts feminist politics into practice on a daily basis, the results are often uneven and conflicting, and yet at times, they can be revelatory and potentially transformative.

---

2 For readings on Youth and Performative Gender see: Butler, J. 1990; Nayak, A. and M. J. Kehily. 2006;
4 Chin, E. 2001
Methodology

I conducted the bulk of my fieldwork in the between 2010-2013 but I have been active in the Lower East Side for over a decade, living and working within the community. My engagement with the Girls Club began in 2002 when I was hired as a program coordinator and community organizer. I left this position in 2004 to attend graduate school, but as a neighborhood resident, living on 5th Street and Ave C, I was able to maintain close connections with the Girls Club as well as with the women and girls I had met. As a graduate student I pursued other research opportunities in the city’s public schools. But after working within the NYC school system as an educational consultant, I concluded that the most interesting and innovative educational programming was happening outside of the institutional school system. In 2010 I decided to pursue my fieldwork in the Lower East Side, focusing on the Girls Club. At the time the Girls Club was charging ahead with its plans to build a Center for Community, and I wanted to document this collective effort. I took a position within the organization coordinating programs, with the open awareness among the staff that I was simultaneously conducting my dissertation fieldwork. Lyn, the Executive Director with a PhD in Anthropology, and was supportive of my research and willing to accommodate.

My study of the Girls Club follows in the tradition of engaged anthropology and public scholarship, which blurs the line between the academy and community. It is a model advocated by Aimee Cox (2009), who performed fieldwork at a women’s shelter where she was also serving as acting director. She defines public anthropology as the “overtly expressed intentional application of knowledge and scholarly expertise to improve lives and solve social predicaments”(54). The research presented here, aims to
offer a comprehensive understanding of the Girls Club, as a model of community-oriented youth development programming, in an effort to assess what lessons are to be learned from this model. I question what impact the Girls Club is having on girls, mothers and the LES community, and whether it is transformative or merely adaptive. I examine the broader implications of this initiative in relation to broader social change and “right to city” struggles, which could learn from the model of critical pedagogy, coalition building and creative community engagement practiced by the Girls Club.

From 2010-2012, I was immersed in the Girls Club organizational culture, attending all meetings, privy to informal conversations, and with access internal documents such as grant proposals and program reports. More importantly, I was able to renew my relationships with many of the women with whom I had worked years prior, and develop relationships with new cohorts of Girls Club members, and by extension their families. Given that I had previously worked with the Girls Club, I was able observe the evolving process of program implementation, as well as the emergence and development of the organization over time. Following the research methodology of Jagna Sharff (1998), as a neighborhood resident I was to observe the transformation of the Lower East Side community over a decade’s time, noticing how social issues such as housing and youth violence unfolded. I developed long-standing personal relationships with girls and women in the neighborhood, and had the opportunity to trace women’s support networks and observe girls come-of-age and transition to adulthood (and motherhood). The drawback of my immersion in the Girls Club community is that I lack objective distance, however being so close to the subject matter and observing it over an extended period of time, has allowed me to convey the complexity and contradiction of
the story of the organization, of the women behind it, and the girls impacted by it. Moreover, I was able to cultivate great trust among the women and girls I was studying and gain access to homes, buildings, and activities that would have otherwise been impossible, as a white female, non-native to the city. Fluency in Spanish was a key asset in communicating with an older generation of LES residents, as well as mothers and girls who had recently arrived from Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic.

While working at the Girls Club I attended social gatherings, such as baby showers, holiday and birthday parties. I engaged in endless conversations (in addition to formal interviews), with girls, mothers, colleagues and residents in the community. In 2011-2012 I started collecting data in the form of focus groups and semi-structured interviews with women and girls.1 During my fieldwork, I also had the opportunity to travel with the Girls Club to Chiapas, Mexico four times and New Orleans two times. I have also collected data from the Girls Club’s informal archive of records, audio and video recordings. I have attended monthly Community Board meetings, among other community events, gatherings and rallies and I have followed online news sites and local blogs on a daily basis.2 Late in 2012 I left my position at the Girls Club in order to complete my fieldwork. In 2013 I conducted additional interviews3 and collected life

---

1 Formally, in 2011-2012 I conducted a focus group with 8 mothers, and facilitated semi-structured open-ended questionnaires in person with 20 mothers. I also conducted “exit” interviews with 20 graduating Girls Club members asking them about their experience with the Girls Club and its educational programming and plans for the future.

2 LES news sources included: The Lo-Down, The Villager, and EV Grieve, in addition to traditional city news sources such as The New York Times

3 I conducted extensive interviews with ten Girls Club alumni. Interviews lasted 1-2 hours and were conducted mostly in café’s as well as girls’ apartments, although a few were completed on-line because the interviewee was away at college. These were in-depth interviews with questions touch upon their Girls Club experience, challenges coming-of-age, feelings towards the LES, and aspirations for the future. I also conducted extensive interviews with four additional staff members. Staff interviews lasted around 1 hour and were conducted on-site at the Girls Club, within a private space or after work hours.
histories\(^1\) to complement my participant observation and interview data collected at the Girls Club. In addition to the Girls Club I conducted field research at Andrew Glover Youth Program, which I outline in further detail in Chapter Six.\(^2\) I also connected with youth workers in other organizations in and around the Lower East Side.\(^3\)

**Overview of Chapters**

In Chapter Two I explore the social history of the Lower East Side, providing an overview of the rich geographic, political, social, economic, and cultural context of this community. I consider the impact of New York City’s fiscal crisis in 1975 and subsequent crises brought on by socio-economic disinvestment and political neglect. I specifically highlight struggles against gentrification in the LES and question how youth navigate the boundaries of social and spatial exclusion. I describe the Girls Club as a product of this contested history of the Lower East Side, building upon a legacy of collective struggle.

Chapter Three raises the question: how do people create cultural and education alternatives that reflect their values, and how has this been done in the LES in the past? I attend to the history of women’s care work in the Lower East Side. I describe how women in New York City have historically organized for progressive social reforms, and

---

1. I collected life-histories of four Girls Club staffers, capturing their experience with the Girls Club in relation to experience in the Lower East Side over time. Life history interviews lasted from 2-5 hours and were conducted in the staff members’ homes without minimal interruptions.
2. I conducted interviews with the Co-Founder and Executive Director of AGYP, Angel Rodriguez, as well as Justice Padró of Manhattan’s Youth Division of Court. I also conducted in-depth interviews with two AGYP staff members, lasting 2-4 hours and I sat in on their classes to observe and talk with the teenage males. Most critically, I shadowed Angel at the Manhattan District Courts, visiting countless courtrooms were young men were being sentenced, paroled and acquitted. I had the good fortune that Justice Padró permitted me to observe his courtroom over a number of days, which offered great insight into the struggles these young men face, and what they are up against.
3. I conducted extensive interviews with Erica of the Hetrick Martin Institute, which services LGBTQ youth in Lower Manhattan, and Ana, of the Boys and Girls Republic
yet these efforts have produced contradictory effects.\textsuperscript{1} I review the precedent set by settlement house leaders such as Jane Addams and Lillian Wald and situate the organizing campaign for the Girls Club within the context of community care-giving and collective action. In the second half of the chapter, I review the early youth studies, as well as the literature on deviance, delinquency, and youth culture. I analyze Mobilization for Youth as a model program that successfully served male youth in the LES in the early 1960’s through employment opportunities and political organizing. I also describe other alternative educational programs that emerged in the LES at this time. I argue that the Girls Club draws inspiration and direction from these initiatives.

In Chapter Four I dissect the organizational history, leadership and practices of the Girls Club. I share the biographies of several of the women who work at the Girls Club and highlight the charismatic leadership of the organization’s Co-Founder and Executive Director, Lyn Pentecost. I consider the organization’s practices within the context of the audit culture, and question its funding sources and long-term sustainability. This chapter brings to light the complexity of the Girls Club as a non-profit organization. It asks: what are the contradictions emerging as the organization becomes more established and successful? Will it be able to scale-up and formalize itself as an institution without loosing its grassroots energy, innovation and progressive ethos? Now that its Center for Community building has become a reality, what is next phase in the organizational life of the Girls Club?

In Chapter Five I explore the literature on maternalism and situate the Girls Club within a literature on care-work that examines women’s mothering practices in relation to

\textsuperscript{1} For example, in acting as “guardians of virtue”, settlement leaders contributed to a moral panic over “wayward girls”.
social-housekeeping and community caretaking. I examine how women in the Lower East Side have developed female-centered support networks in an effort to collectively face the challenges of everyday life. In founding the Girls Club, women in the community were attempting to collectivize caregiving and create equal opportunities for the next generation of girls in the neighborhood. I describe the Girls Club as a united effort to provide girls in the LES with a decent education and a better chance at life.

Community caretaking refers to the unrecognized, unpaid nurturing activities traditionally performed by women in low-income communities, including volunteer work in churches, schools, childcare programs, hospitals, afterschool programs and recreation centers. Women’s community work often derives from concern for the wellbeing of young people and entails efforts to improve the lives of their families and neighbors. Care work includes ongoing struggles for affordable housing, safer communities (without police harassment), responsive landlords, quality education, and accessible health services. This unpaid labor strengthens the social fabric and support networks that constitute viable communities. I explore how the Girls Club offers an alternative model for collectively caring for and educating a younger generation. Through this care work women in the LES have been creating space for innovative, experiential educational practices to take hold. I consider the Girls Club as a model of caring for youth in community, functioning as a parallel family and a safe space for women and girls in the Lower East Side.

In Chapter Six I consider how global capitalist processes are disrupting young men’s transition to adulthood in the Lower East Side, questioning what has changed, if

---

anything, from Jagna Sharff’s intimate portrayal from the 1970’s -80’s. I highlight the challenges facing male youth today, including the violence of street culture, economic marginalization, criminalization and incarceration and study the Andrew Glover Youth Program, an “alternatives to incarceration” program that attempts to tackle these issues with limited success. I conclude by considering community initiatives spearheaded by the Girls Club to address mass incarceration and youth violence in the Lower East Side.

In Chapter Seven I analyze gender socialization practices in the Lower East Side today, specifically how girls come to embody and perform their gender roles as they come of age. This chapter raises the questions: How does gender operate as an organizing principle in girls’ lives? How do girls negotiate agency in achieving sexual, physical, and emotional maturity? How do girls cope with the contradictory demands placed upon them? I address the unique challenges facing girls in the LES today, including: the persistence of sexism and machismo, the gendering of space, the policing of sexuality, and gendered base violence. I describe how the Girls Club serves as a buffer from the intense social, political and economic pressures that affect girls’ physical, emotional and psychological wellbeing.

In Chapter Eight I first review the expansive literature on education/schooling, social reproduction and resistance and situate the Girls Club within this theoretical context. I then explore the ideology of the American dream and the prospect of social mobility among girls in the Lower East Side. I question how girls practice aspiration management and examine the emotional costs of doing so. I argue that girls exercise a degree of agency in both creating and responding new opportunities in life. I consider how the Girls Club addresses the challenges young women encounter in a global
capitalist world by providing them the knowledge, know-how, resources and support they need to advance in life. I raise the critical question: In its efforts to empower girls, is the Girls Club unintentionally creating self-enterprising, aspirational subjects suitable to neoliberal modes of governance? Rather than assuming girls act as subjectified and disciplined subjects, I explore how they react to and reinterpret practices of uplift and empowerment.

In Chapter Nine I analyze the Girls Club’s innovative educational philosophy, programming, and practice. It asks: what are the underlying values guiding the organization and how are these values put into practice? I suggest that the Girls Club programming is guided by a belief in collective empowerment, creative expression, and critical engagement. These values are put into place through its experiential programming in Arts and Culture and Leadership Development. At a time when a neoliberal education reform agenda is pushing for economic competitiveness and market discipline on all aspects of schooling, the Girls Club offers a model of critical pedagogical practice. This chapter asks: what should an education accomplish in a democracy? (Giroux 2013) I suggest that education, like housing, jobs and health care is a terrain in the “right to the city” (Lefebvre 1968, 1996), and that the Girls Club, in constructing alternative models of education, is locally engaging in a broader struggle for social justice.

In Chapter Ten I explore the Girls Club as a feminist project. I argue that the Girls Club is re-envisioning what it means to be feminist in the 21st century. I question what feminism has to offer a new generation of girls, and critically examine the value and import of the cultural concept, “girl power”. I suggest that the Girls Club cultivates collective empowerment (Naples 1998) among women and girls, which implies a
personal as well as collective recognition of women’s power in the fight for equality and social justice. I describe how the Girls Club practices a “messy feminism”, pushing forth a creative urban vision of community development that puts women and youth at the center.

The second half of Chapter Ten considers how the Girls Club is reinvigorating community and creating a democratic space of encounter and expression. Being “homeless” for so many years meant that the Girls Club had to develop strong linkages and connections with people, organizations, housing facilities, schools, churches and small businesses throughout the neighborhood. The Girls Club itself has been a collective process in action. As Lyn Pentecost describes, “It’s always been one of those little engines that could. This engine just happened to have a couple of hundred incredible people pushing it forward.”¹ Now that the Girls Club has a home of its own, it continues to foster collaborative relationships with community partners. Chapter Ten shows how the new facility has enabled the Girls Club to strengthen ties with progressive organizations in the LES and become a community hub for activists, artists, and innovators. The Girls Club is bringing people together, fostering local leadership, supporting social change initiatives, and connecting with a progressive political agenda. It builds solidarity while celebrating the vitality and diversity of the LES. Here I describe how the Girls Club is spearheading Jane Jacob’s dream of community revitalization from below by offering a creative and collaborative urban vision for the Lower East Side.

¹ Spokony, S. 2012.
Chapter Two: A Brief Social History of the Lower East Side

The unique social history of Lower East Side informs the politics and practice of Girls Club. The celebration of difference in this community, be it ethnicity, race, politics, religion and culture, can be traced back to its distinctive history of housing the immigrant and working class masses from the mid-19th century onwards. In this chapter, I provide an overview of the social history of this urban community, specifically addressing the tumultuous years of the late 20th century. I explore the impact of New York City’s fiscal crisis in 1975 and subsequent crises in the LES brought on by socio-economic disinvestment and political neglect, including: the deterioration and erasure of housing stock, failing schools, a drug epidemic and related violence, and a public health crisis associated with the rampant spread HIV/AIDS. The devastation of the 1970s’-80’s paved the way for the unrelenting waves of gentrification and income polarization that have further disrupted the LES. And yet, this narrative of the Lower East Side as “victim” of political economic transformations associated with late capitalism (Harvey 1989), only tells one side of the story. As research has documented, LES residents have resisted, collectively organized, and contested the policies and practices that have wreaked havoc in their community.¹

There is a deeply rooted collective memory of struggle in the Lower East Side. It is a community that has been shaped by generations of social protest, “against landlords, the rich, the government, and every other form of authority.”² As Janet Abu-Lughod (1994) exclaims, “this is a neighborhood whose unity has been forged in contest” (37).

² Zukin, S. 2011 p. 98
As a grassroots organization, the Girls Club is embedded in, and a product of, the contested history of the Lower East Side.

Community organizers in the Lower East Side and beyond, have struggled tirelessly against corporate development plans, rampant gentrification, and generalized assaults on working-class, poor, minority and immigrant families (Susser 1982; Abu-Lughod ed. 1994; Smith 1996; Gregory 1998; Sanjek 1998; Sharff 1998; Martinez 2010).

In the Lower East Side there has been a sustained tradition of collaboration across difference that has enabled the neighborhood bohemian character to (somewhat) survive. Martinez (2010) contends that, “the neighborhood’s uniquely contentious working class political praxis is the legacy of the longtime coexistence of so many groups often competing, but also collectively struggling for better housing and working conditions.”

Over the years, it is the women of the Lower East Side who have spearheaded these actions and initiatives, and the Girls Club builds upon this legacy of collective struggle.

The Lower East Side Community

The Lower East Side is geographically located in the southeast corner of Manhattan. For much of New York City’s history, this area remained isolated and cut-off: its marshy land underdeveloped. This changed dramatically in the mid to late 19th century when the area became a port of entry for immigrants pouring in, first from Germany and Ireland, and subsequently from Southern and Eastern Europe. The incoming masses settled in tenement-style housing stock, composed of low-rise, side-by-side buildings, built quickly from cheap materials (Abu-lughod 1994, Smith 1996). The Lower East Side quickly developed a reputation of housing the poor, the criminal, and the...

---

1 Martinez, M. 2010  p.11
2 In 1890, the Lower East Side Jewish population was over 135,000, joined by 80,000 Irish, 60,000 Germans, and 90,000 Italians. see Orensanz, A. 2007.
exotic “Other”. As Neil Smith describes: “By 1910 some 540,000 people were crammed into the area’s tenements, all competing for work and homes: garment workers, dockers, printers, labourers, craftsmen, shopkeepers, servants, public workers, writers and a vital ferment of communists, Trotskyists, anarchists, suffragists and activist intellectuals devoted to politics and struggle.”\(^1\) Newly arriving immigrant populations created political and cultural organizations for protection and support, these included unions, as well as radical socialist and anarchist organizations. Middle-class reformers were also active in the neighborhood creating settlement houses, providing services, advocating for reforms, and assimilating, or rather “Americanizing”, the immigrants. It was a community that was tightly knit, politically mobilized and cosmopolitan.\(^2\)

Given its immigrant background and politicized character, the Lower East Side continued to attract social “outsiders” (Becker 1963) and artists, drawn to the diversity, affordability and freedom that the area provided. The LES has been home to political radicals of the early 20\(^{th}\) century, Beat writers of the 1950’s such as Allen Ginsberg and Williams S. Burroughs, Jazz musicians such as Charlie Parker, hippies and militant activists of the 1960’s, and subsequently anarchists associated with the squatter movement of the 1980’s and 90’s. While much of the alternative character of the neighborhood has been watered down over the years along with rising levels of affluence, the bohemian spirit remains part of the formative character of the neighborhood (Abu-Lughod ed. 1994; Smith 1996; Mele 2000; Patterson ed. 2007; Martinez 2010). A vibrant political culture and ethnic diversity remains a hallmark of the Lower East Side in the 21\(^{st}\) century.

\(^1\) Smith, N. 1996 p. 12
\(^2\) Mele 2000
Today, the Lower East Side, which comprises Community Board No. 3¹, continues to be one of the largest, most diverse, and densely populated districts in New York City. It has the third highest population density in the city, with over 163,277 people. The LES breaks down into 30 census tracts,² and dividing the area by census tract

¹ A note on the geographic area of the Lower East Side... I recognize the Lower East Side to correspond with the boundaries of the Community Board 3 of Manhattan. The boundaries of the CB3 district are 14th Street on the North, the East River on the East and the South, and Fourth Avenue and the Bowery on the West, extending to Baxter and Pearl Streets and the Brooklyn Bridge south of Canal Street. I draw upon these boundaries, in part because these are the boundaries identified by Abu-Lughod (1994) in her edited collection of research on the Lower East Side. Secondly, many policies affecting the Lower East Side are made at the community board level, so CB3 boundaries serve as political demarcations as well. Finally, I use the CB3 boundaries to demarcate the LES community, because this is how many people involved with the Girls Club self-describe their neighbourhood; referring to the community as “loisaida”, “the lower”, as well as “Lower East Side”. While more recently settled residents and businesses tend to describe the NW area as the “East Village”, many long-term residents do not. Within the boundaries of the CB3, my research focuses primarily on the NE section of the LES, East of Ave A, North of Delancey St. Having said that, many Girls Club members live in the SE area of the LES, while still others live in Chinatown. A final point, because much of the LES lacks subway service, people move up and down the eastern edges of the neighbourhood via buses or walking; therefore there is a fluid flow of people creating a greater sense of connection than perhaps there would be if subway lines carved up the community. This exclusion from subway lines also contributes to the unique character of the neighbourhood. See Community Board 3 District Profile http://www.nyc.gov/html/dcp/pdf/lucds/mn3profile.pdf

² Community Board 3 census tracts include: The East Village (20, 22.02, 24, 26.01, 26.02, 28, 30.02, 32, 34, 36.02, 38, 40, 42), The Lower East Side (10.01, 10.02, 12, 14.02, 18, 22.01, 30.01, 36.01), Two Bridges (2.01, 2.02, 6), and Chinatown (8, 14.01, 16, 25, 27, 29). See Community Board 3 District Profile http://www.nyc.gov/html/dcp/pdf/lucds/mn3profile.pdf

29
information paints a vivid picture of the community’s ethnic and economic diversity and uneven development. The eastern edges of the community have the highest rates of poverty where many residents live on the edge of economic survival.¹ The Lower East Side remains one of the most ethnically and economically diverse neighborhoods in New York, with a substantial foreign-born and working class population. According to the 2010 census, 35% of the Lower East Side population was foreign born, of those almost 60% were born in Asia, 26% emigrated from Latin American, and 11.44% emigrated from Europe.² As noted in the Introduction, Girls Club membership reflects this racial and ethnic diversity.

As a result of gentrification related processes, the Lower East Side has seen a decrease in the Latino population by double-digit percentages over the last decade. Yet, Latinos still constitute one forth of the population. Of the Latinos, Puerto Ricans remain the dominant group, followed by Dominicans.³ According to the 2010 census, the Lower East Side population is 34% Asian, 32% white non-Hispanic, 25% Hispanic, 7% Black/African American, 2% mixed.⁴ Notably the youth population of the LES is even more diverse with 37.2% Hispanic, 35.9% Asian, 13.3% White, and 10.7% Black.⁵

¹ U.S Census Bureau 2007-2011 American Community Survey and District Needs Statement for Fiscal Year 2014” by Gigi Li, Board Chair and Susan Stetzer, District Manager http://www.nyc.gov/html/dep/pdf/lucds/mn3profile.pdf
² District Needs Statement for Fiscal Year 2014” by Gigi Li, Board Chair and Susan Stetzer, District Manager http://www.nyc.gov/html/dep/pdf/lucds/mn3profile.pdf
³ District Needs Statement for Fiscal Year 2014” by Gigi Li, Board Chair and Susan Stetzer, District Manager http://www.nyc.gov/html/dep/pdf/lucds/mn3profile.pdf
⁵ U.S Census Bureau, Decennial Census (2010), Tables SF1 P7 CD, SF1 DP CD. New York City Department of City Planning, Population Division, 2010 Demographic Tables;
Poverty rates in the LES remain some of the highest in the city despite an influx in affluent residents.\(^1\) In fact, the Lower East Side has the third highest number of young people living in poverty in Manhattan, with 39.6% of young people living in poverty.\(^2\) Moreover, 47.3% of LES residents are on some form income support (5,793 on TANF, 13,654 on SSI, and 57,760 on Medicaid).\(^3\) Around 30% of LES residents live in households whose incomes fall below $19,000.\(^4\) The census tracts along the East River, and directly across the from Girls Club, indicate that in 2010, between 42%-54% of families’ with children incomes fell below the poverty line.

Since the mid-20\(^{th}\) century the Lower East Side has been a Puerto Rican stronghold. Immigration waves from Puerto Rico to the Lower East Side (and East Harlem) began in the 1940’s and continued through the 1970’s. Dominicans have also been arriving since the 1960’s and over the years many have intermarried with Puerto Rican residents. While the majority of Dominican immigrants are concentrated in the northern Manhattan neighborhood of Washington Heights, there are many living interspersed within the Lower East Side.

Until the late 1960’s, housing discrimination kept Latinos concentrated in poor-quality tenement housing and barred from the newly built public housing. Among the tenements poverty was rampant. As Jane, a Girls Club staff member who arrived in the Lower East Side during this time, observes of the neighborhood, “It was a place for hardworking people; people were poor. You lived here because the rent was cheap. And

\(^1\) District Needs Statement for Fiscal Year 2014” by Gigi Li, Board Chair and Susan Stetzer, District Manager http://www.nyc.gov/html/dcp/pdf/lucds/mn3profile.pdf
\(^2\) ibid.
\(^3\) ibid.
\(^4\) For the census tracts along the East River, between 22-28% of population’s income fell below $10,000 according to U.S Census Bureau 2007-2011 American Community Survey.
for that reason it was very lively, people lived their lives on the streets.” Despite high rates of poverty and unemployment, Puerto Ricans thrived in the Lower East Side which, became an artistic and cultural center.\textsuperscript{1} The neighborhood was also a political hotbed of militant activists from the Black Panthers and Young Lords, in addition to hippies and runaways.

Today the Lower East Side of Manhattan encompasses several distinct neighborhoods within its borders. These borders that follow the contours of the neighborhood Community Board 3 (CB3) include 14\textsuperscript{th} Street to the North, Brooklyn Bridge to the South, the Bowery/4\textsuperscript{th} Ave to the west, and the East River to the East. Several distinct ethnic niches fall within these borders. There is Chinatown and the traditionally Jewish ‘old’ Lower East Side in the southern part of the LES. The northeast and eastern area of the Lower East Side remains predominantly Puerto Rican, as well as Dominican among other Latino immigrants. Historically, this section has been called “Loisaida” by residents.\textsuperscript{2} The new Girls Club Center for Community is located on Avenue D between 7\textsuperscript{th} and 8\textsuperscript{th} Streets, in the heart of Loisaida. Many of girls come from the public housing tracts along the eastern edge of the LES, but girls also come from areas around Chinatown.

The Latino community remains in the Lower East Side by virtue of their concentration in public housing along the East River. The northwest section of the neighborhood, commonly known as the East Village, is predominately white, and increasingly affluent, with a large influx of students from New York University.

\textsuperscript{1} Maffi 1994
School, and Cooper Union. There is also a vibrant yet aging Ukrainian and Polish community between 4th and 14th streets in the northwest corner of the community.¹

These ethnic neighborhoods are permeable and fluid. Puerto Ricans live throughout the Lower East Side area, as do immigrants from other Latin American countries. A solid block of aging Jewish residents remain in the middle-income Knickerbockers Houses south of Delancey Street. And further south, LaGuardia, Vladeck, and Smith Houses are some of the most diverse public housing projects in the country with a mix of Puerto Rican, Dominican, Black and Chinese residents.

The population of Chinatown, in the southern part of the LES, is very diverse incorporating different ethnic and linguistic populations from China and other parts of Asia. Chinatown has historically received mostly Cantonese speaking immigrants from Hong Kong and Guandong Province², but since the 1980’s Fujianese immigrants have been arriving from the rural, poor Fujian province of Southeast China. These residents speak predominantly Fujian.³ The Fujianese/Cantonese divide in Chinatown has led to friction over the years. The differences lie not only in language and cuisine, but also along class lines. Many Cantonese families tend to be well-established, having lived in the U.S. for generations. The Fujianese, on the other hand, are newcomers, and many are undocumented immigrants with little education.⁴ Over the years, there have been many

³ Kwong, P. 1997; Guest, K. 2003; Ma, S. 2010
⁴ ibid. Notably In recent years there has been a decline in the influx of immigrants coming from China (including Fujian), as many Asian immigrants are bypassing Manhattan as their first port of entry and moving to other neighborhoods throughout NYC and outside the city that are more affordable (namely, Flushing, Queens and Sunset Park, Brooklyn). Chinatown and the LES have historically been home to many garment factories. But after the September 11th terrorist attacks, about 200 garment factories in the area closed, resulting in a further significant loss of manufacturing jobs. see 2011. *A Look At Who We Are Now: How Gentrification Reshaped Manhattan Community Board 3.* Two Bridge Neighborhood Council.
Asain girls involved with the Girls Club, most of whom had immigrated form Fujian when they were children.¹

**Political Economic Context**

New York City has been deeply affected by processes of global economic restructuring reflected in the shift from primarily an industrial-based economy to one based primarily on information and financial services and creative industries.² The financial and economic crisis of the mid-1970’s intensified an already initiated process of neoliberal economic restructuring. David Harvey has defined neoliberalism as “a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (2005, 2). Neoliberal economic policies are directly associated with deindustrialization, disinvestment, and deregulation.³

Early implementations of neoliberal policy followed the fiscal crisis in New York City in 1975.⁴ The core elements of global capitalism rolled out early in New York City included: the relocation of industrial work to the global south, significant cuts in social services, privatization of publicly funded institutions, repeal of union agreements, and the

---

¹The Girls Club members from Fujian tend to live in crowded housing situations, with parents working extensive hours. It is not uncommon for the teenage girls to work in take-out restaurants on weekends, evenings, and summers. Previously the Girls Club was running programs out of locations in closer proximity to Chinatown. Now that the Girls Club has relocated to its “Center for Community” space in the NE corner of the LES, I suspect it will attract fewer Asian girls in the future. On the other hand, it already has a larger contingent (18%) of Asian girls who continue participating in programs at the Girls Club despite its relocation.


³I bring to my work a gendered understanding of neoliberalism as an economic, as well as an ideological force that shapes social relations of production and consumption, reconstitutes social inequalities, and frames life opportunities. Brown 2003; Comaroff and Comaroff 2000

⁴Neoliberal economic policies were first tested in New York City during its fiscal crisis in the mid-1970’s. See: Susser 1982; Tabb 1982; Katz 2004
abandonment of the states responsibility to assist the materially disadvantaged.

Government investment in urban public transportation, infrastructure, social services, education and housing also declined.¹ In the 1980’s these policies were systematically implemented by Prime Minister Thatcher in the United Kingdom and internationally by President Reagan through the Washington Consensus at the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.²

Since New York’s financial crisis of 1975, a regime of politicians, corporate and real estate interests have transformed the city into a command center for the new globalized postindustrial economy.³ During the 1980’s, New York City lost 33% of its manufacturing jobs.⁴ Manufacturing was pushed offshore in an ongoing search for cheaper, weaker, unorganized labor. As manufacturing in New York City diminished steadily, corporate service industries of FIRE (finance, insurance, real estate) expanded.⁵ As a “global city” (Sassen 1991), New York became a strategic site for specialized servicing, financing, and managing global economic processes. This entailed a transformation of the city’s economic base, as well as a reorganization of space and social relations. Emerging jobs were increasingly segmented between high-end, finance-related, and “knowledge-based”, versus low-skill, poorly compensated, irregular service jobs.⁶ A language of competitiveness naturalized attacks on the city’s manufacturing working class⁷ and led to an increase in low-paying service jobs- nonunionized, subcontracted, part-time, and temporary work without health care benefits. As  

¹ Mullings, L. 2005  p.80 see also, Susser 1982;Tabb 1982; Moody, 2007; Brash 2012  
² Harvey, D. 2007; Eisenstein, H. 2009; Susser, I. 2012  
³ Susser 1982; Sassen 1991; Moody, 2007; Brash 2012  
⁵ Harvey, D. 1989  
innovations in transportation and communication have increased the speed and scope of
global financial transactions, investment capital has been fleeing the global North in
search of profit and efficiency in the global South. Under this regime of global
realignment, the search for cheaper labor has created a massive reserve army of labor. As David Harvey (2005) contends, the underlying aim of political economic processes
associated with neoliberalism is the restoration of power to economic elites. The
deskilling of youth is one of the aspects of global economic restructuring that I consider
in this thesis.

Gentrification and Resistance in the LES

The Lower East Side community has changed physically, culturally,
economically, and socially over the past 35 years through ongoing processes associated
with gentrification. Neil Smith (1996) roughly defines gentrification as: the process by
which poor and working class neighborhoods, which had previously experienced
disinvestment and a middle class exodus, are refurbished via an influx of private capital
and middle class homebuyers and renters. Gina Perez (2004) further describes
gentrification as

An economic and social process whereby private capital (real estate firms
and developers) and individual home owners and renters reinvest in
fiscally neglected neighborhoods through housing rehabilitation, loft
conversions and the construction of new housing stock. Unlike urban
renewal, gentrification is a gradual process – occurring one building or
block at a time... gradually displacing poor and working class residents
(139).

1 Neoliberal economic policies creating a reserve army of labor: Susser, I. 1996. p. 413 See also Harvey
exclusively, to the location of groups in production relations. The effect of capitalism's tendency to
generate surplus labor power, which is excluded from employment by revolutions in productive process
and changes in accumulations...but there are political struggles over the composition of this surplus
Smith identified gentrification as the “new urban form of globalization” (Smith 2002). If this is so, then an analysis of the gentrifying processes unfolding in the Lower East Side is vital to our understanding of how global capitalist policies are reconfiguring cities, creating new urban geographies of inequality, and how youth are navigating this unstable terrain as they transition to adulthood.

The contentious history of gentrification of the Lower East Side is well documented. This literature on the neighborhood tends to focus on cycles of disinvestment and gentrification, immigration, poverty, informal economies and the role of public policy in spearheading the development of the neighborhood (Abu-Lughod ed.1994; Sites 1994; Smith 1996; Sharff 1998; Mele 2000). This literature offers little in terms of understanding youth coming of age during this epoch (except for Sharff 1998; Cahill 2000, 2006, 2007). My work in the Lower East Side builds upon the theoretical advances by Neil Smith (1994, 1996) and Jagna Sharff (1998). In Smith’s investigation of gentrification in the LES he outlines in detail the structural forces behind the neighborhood’s downturn. Smith traces how a succession of disinvestment was followed by reinvestment along a moving frontier. Real estate investors and landlords began disinvesting in the low-income tenement housing throughout the neighborhood. As profit margins disappeared, landlords began neglecting their buildings and stopped paying property taxes. Many tenements burned down as landlords hired arsonists to torch their buildings so they could collect insurance. Property owners and landlords abandoning

1 Neil Smith’s (1996) mapping of tax arrears data from 1976-1985 demonstrates that the neglect and abandonment of buildings by landlords proceeded from the northwest end of the Lower East Side to the South and East. He employs a ‘rent gap’ theory to explain the concurrent processes of disinvestment and reinvestment in the built environment. A ‘rent gap’ occurs after years of disinvestment and devalorization when “the actual capitalized ground rent (or land value) under present use is substantially lower than the potential ground rent that could be appropriate at that location under a higher and better use.” See: Smith, N., B. Duncan, and L. Reid. 1994. p.150.
buildings were pursuing a rational plan of disinvestment that left poor families in the LES living in dangerous, decrepit housing, often without heat and endangered by arson.¹

The mother of a Girls Club staff member, Jilma, who has lived in the Lower East Side since arriving from the Dominican Republic in the 1960’s, conveys her experience of neighborhood transformation: “I arrived in the Lower East Side in the early 1960s. I remember the subway cost 15 cents. It was very different then. Avenue C was full of shops, nice shops, many Jewish owned. There were a lot of white people neighborhood then, Jewish, Polish, Italian, and they were kind, decent people. It was at this time that more and more Hispanics came into the neighborhood, from Puerto Rico mostly, but also folks from the Dominican Republic like myself. Many of the white folks moved away and the neighborhood became more run down. In the 1960’s we lived all over the LES. I was working in the small factories around here; I worked in a children’s clothing factory and one that made glasses, and a toy factory. We moved into public housing (off Ave D) in 1972, and I had stopped working to care for my four children. During the 1970’s there were more problems. I remember there were a lot of fires. There were a lot of vacant lots. It became more dangerous; there were a lot of drugs, a lot of problems on the streets. I was raising the kids on my own. It was hard.”

These harsh living conditions described above are well documented by anthropologist Jagna Sharff (1998) in her ethnographic study of the neighborhood from the 1970s-1990’s. The section east of Ave B below 14th down through the Williamsburg bridge, the area of the community most commonly referred to as the heart of Loisaida, bore the brunt of disinvestment and neglect. This area was particularly hit hard with drugs, drug related violence and the AIDS epidemic. Sharff explains that “the devil

¹ see Sharff, J. 1998.
himself could not have done a better job of planning the confluences that not came together, combining the spread of intravenous injections, dirty needles, men returning from prisons, cheaper drugs, loosened community controls over female sexuality, male homosexuality for money and favors, and the lurking presence of the HIV virus” (220).

Girls Club staffer, Milagros, born and raised in the LES recalls her impressions of the neighborhood during the 1970’s-80’s. “The neighborhood was ugly, disgusting. There were prostitutes walking up and down 14th and there were junkies, bums, drug dealers everywhere. You couldn’t walk down the street without being offered five different kinds of drugs. It was just out in the open. And you had people squatting in the buildings. It was a different world. And it was dangerous for outsiders. It was a rough neighborhood at the time, really rough and horribly ugly. I remember there were so many fires, buildings burning every week. The LES was full of empty lots and burnt out buildings. Many of the buildings were abandoned. It was a real ghetto. My brother Eddie got involved with the wrong crowd. I was always going to court for him to help him out; he didn’t have anyone else to help him. My mom couldn’t really do anything cause she spoke no English. It fell on me. I was always on the street looking for him; he would disappear for days. He was into drugs and he was in trouble, in and out of jail. The last time he came out of jail, he was only on the streets for a week before they shot him. He was shot down in 1989, on 8th St and Ave D right at the entrance of the new Girls Club building. The Girls Club is constructed upon my brothers blood.”

In the midst of the devastation, the arts thrived in the Lower East Side. The 1970’s saw a blossoming of Puerto Rican poets, playwrights, musicians and muralists, and the opening of the Nuyorican Poets Café in 1973, and the creative politics of the
community-based youth organization, CHARAS.\(^1\) The 1970’s also saw the rise of Punk and related underground scenes in the Lower East Side, which reflected the disenchantment, alienation and urban decay of the city.\(^2\) Infamous venues such as CBGB opened in 1973 and the iconic shop “Trash and Vaudeville” opened in 1975. By the 1980’s the low rents and gritty character of the neighborhood had generated a vibrant art scene with artists like Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring. As Sharon Zukin (2010) highlights, “the area was an incubator for the new and experimental culture and was promoted as a creative *terrior*” (100). This art scene of the 1980’s helped instigate the forces of gentrification impacting the LES, moving steadily south and east.

After decades as an isolated and stigmatized neighborhood, in the 1980’s developers began to purchase devalued properties, renovate them, and market the neighborhood to artists and students. While the city improved the investment environment through redevelopment incentives, real estate brokers “branded” the NW corner of the Lower East Side as the new “East Village”.\(^3\) The real estate industry was capitalizing on the LES’s geographical proximity to the respectability, security, culture, and high rents of Greenwich Village. The Lower East Side was pitched as an up-and-coming arts district for cultural creatives. Developers were specifically targeting artists looking for cheap rent and studio spaces, priced out of Soho.\(^4\)

The connection between creative industry and gentrification has been well documented (Smith 1996, Mele 2000, Zukin 2010, Kratke 2011). By the mid-1980’s the LES had emerged as a “frontier” zone for creative and alternative lifestyles. The culture

---

\(^1\) Maffi 1994. I describe CHARAS in further detail in Chapter Three.
\(^2\) Mele 2000
\(^3\) Smith 1996; Mele 2000
\(^4\) Smith 1996; Mele 2000; Zukin 2010
industry – art dealers and patrons, gallery owners and artists, designers and critics, writers and performers- converted the neighborhood’s dilapidation into urban chic. By first “settling” the neighborhood, artists and an educated ‘creative class’ played an early yet vital role in gentrification process. Girls Club staffer, Maggie, who arrived in the LES in the early 1990’s describes the vibrant downtown alternative arts scene at the time:

*The LES made a big impression on me in the early 1990’s. I loved it down here. It was the energy. The eccentricity. I guess it was an aesthetic thing. The music scene. The art scene. It spoke to me. I felt the energy. I was coming down here (from the Upper West Side) all the time. I was doing a lot of photography, spending a lot of time in the squats, talking with folks. Their stories resonated with me. We were all outsiders down here. For a long time, I was mournful and bitter at the loss of the neighborhood and the outsider culture. All that creativity was pushed out.*

Thus, while the art scene initially contributed to gentrification, it was subsequently a victim of the same forces it created.

While realtors were marketing the Lower East Side as the next Soho, a rhetoric demonizing the long-standing residents of the neighborhood was simultaneously unleashed. Smith explores how the media, the political establishment, and business elites employed a revanchist discourse to rationalize and legitimize the aggressive displacement of poor and working class residents from the Lower East Side, including young squatters. Youth on the streets and in the parks became prime targets. The NYPD instituted Operation Pressure Point in the mid-1990’s to rein in the out-of-control drug trade in the area. These wide sweeps led to thousands of arrests and embittered many residents.

Reinvestment of private capital in the Lower East Side was accompanied by state

---

1 Smith 1996; Mele 2000
2 Mele 2000 and yet Neil Smith (1996) documents how cultural workers who acted as the pioneers of the first wave of gentrification in the LES, subsequently joined with the “precariat” to fight for Tompkins Square Park in 1988. Both the marginal artists and the working class residents had been fighting off displacement which gave them a sense of solidarity.
3 Smith 1996; Sharff 1998; Mele 2000
surveillance and control. Police harassment drove minority youth, anarchists, punks, runaways and homeless from the streets, parks, squats, burnt out lots, and buildings.

Notably, while Maggie was starting to feel at home in the Lower East Side, Milagros was facing displacement and homelessness. In her own words, she describes the traumatic experiences of escaping an abusive relationship and becoming homeless:

“My husband kept us safe, but he also kept me away from my family and friends. Felix became very controlling and kept me locked up like a genie in a bottle. He was verbally and sometimes physically abusive. But I would hit back. I would fight back. I refused to be like my mom. I saw my mother go through this with my father and I swore I wouldn’t go through the same. Finally, when I was pregnant with Briani we got in a bad fight, and he hit me in the back, and that was it for me. He was hitting a pregnant woman! I knew I had to get out. I took my kids to the EAU\(^1\). It was the only way I knew how to get out of this situation. I felt trapped. I was terrified to go, but I had to go through the process. It was the only way for women to get affordable housing in the city at that time. My mom was trying to get me to go back with him. And I was telling her no way, that I didn’t want to have to go through what she had gone through. He was abusing me physically, mentally, and emotionally. In the early 1990’s a lot of my girlfriends from growing up were getting pregnant and they were telling me that the only place to get housing was through the EAU. This is because the LES was starting to become gentrified at that time and there was no affordable housing, still isn’t. And I knew I wanted to be in this neighborhood. The Lower East Side is my community. This is me! I wasn’t about to be

\(^1\) The EAU is the Emergency Assistance Unit of New York City. For years it was notorious for being the lone overcrowded entrance/intake center for the city’s homeless shelter system. In November 2004 the EAU was replaced by the Prevention Assistance and Temporary Housing (PATH) Intake Center. The new PATH Center provides a separate location specifically for pregnant women and families applying for shelter for the first time. See Homes for Homeless NYC website: [http://www.hfhnyc.org](http://www.hfhnyc.org)
pushed out of here. I wanted to live here. It wasn’t fair. The Hispanics were being forced out. People in the neighborhood were starting to get bought out of their leases so they would move out of the neighborhood and the rents could be jacked up. The neighborhood was changing. There wasn’t anyplace for us to go. The EAU was the way, the only way for women to get into the system and access an affordable apartment. We were placed at a women’s family shelter on 41st Street up on the West side. We were there for 7 months in 1992. Katrina as 4, Jose was 3 and I was pregnant and gave birth to Briani. At the shelter you work with a social worker and they try to find housing for you. You only have three chances. The first two apartments they found for me were horrifying. I was desperate. Then I remembered a woman in the shelter had told me about some renovations happening in the Lower East Side and gave me the number for GOLES (a housing-rights advocacy group in the LES) and I was lucky enough to get a Section 8 apartment through them. I have been in this apartment for twenty years now.1” Milagros’ story speaks how women were negatively impacted by the crises affecting the LES in the 1980’s-90’s but it also speaks to the strength of progressive community organizations such as the housing advocacy group GOLES, which remains active in the community.

The Tompkins Square Park riots of 19882 symbolized the beginning of a significant transformation of the Lower East Side. Subsequently, in the 1990’s, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani’s autocratic style with an emphasis on law enforcement led to a clean sweep of the LES. Many of the people most affected by the economic dislocation and

---

1 Good Old Lower East Side NY. GOLES is a neighborhood housing and preservation organization that has served the Lower East Side of Manhattan since 1977. www.goles.org
2 Neil Smith argues that tough anti-homeless and anti-squatter policies expressed the true ethos of the revanchist city, as city administrators set out to take back the parks, streets, and neighborhoods “stolen” from the public. Tensions came to a fore during the Tompkins Square riots in August 1988, when police “charged” a crowd of protesters in Tompkins Square Park who were advocating for the right to the park as a public space and calling for the protection of the homeless encampments there. Bystanders, activists, police officers, neighborhood residents and journalists were caught up in the violence. See N. Smith 1996.
social disinvestment of the 1980’s, people who had lost their homes, jobs, and support networks, and left to fend for the livelihood on the streets, these are the people who were systematically removed from public spaces such as parks and the city streets by the NYPD. The homeless were cleared away, as were drug dealers/users, prostitutes and young people. Girls Club alumni, Ana, is old enough to remember this “clean sweep” of LES streets: “I remember the LES being very different growing up. I remember when the park along the FDR Drive was a long line of homeless encampments and it wasn’t safe to go down there. Now it’s all fixed up and fancy. It’s beautiful down there now (by the river). I remember the drug use, openly, people in the empty lots and in the elevators and stairwells of my building. Giuliani did a lot of cleaning up and for a moment you noticed that it had all stopped, all the drugs and dirt of the city streets. But it just the surface. It seems like it was all just wiped under the rug. The same problems are reemerging now.”

The squatters were an active force in disrupting the onslaught of redevelopment. The squatters were committed to a radical democratic model of “do-it-yourself” housing outside of institutionalized mechanisms, and by the early 1990’s the Lower East Side had a one of the highest concentrations of squats in the global North. Smith (1996) carefully documents the significance of this squatter movement, as well as the active resistance put forth by the entire LES community, in combating gentrification, the city’s revanchist polices and neoliberal development plans. Many squatters who stood their ground,

1Between 1989 and April 1999, New York City spent millions of dollars trying to evict squatters from the Lower East Side. In one notorious show of force against the Squaters, on August 1996, the NYPD riot squad moved in, accompanied by helicopters and a tank, and cleared out approximately 80 squatters from buildings 535, 537 and 539 13th street. City officials ultimately failed to evict up to 500-700 squatters who remained in buildings around the neighborhood. Many ended up winning their case and securing titles to their buildings. In fact, in 2002, the government of New York City granted ownership of 11 squats on the
ended up securing titles to their buildings from the city. Today, many of these squatters are in their second generation, and they continue to sustain small autonomous spaces of independent art, anti-capitalist politics, and radicalism in the Lower East Side. The squatters, along with progressive housing advocacy organizations such as GOLES, have been politically and artistically innovative in sustaining community resistance to displacement. In 2012 C-Squat created MoRUS the Museum of Reclaimed Urban Space on Avenue C whose mission it is to preserve history and promote scholarship of grassroots urban space activism. Girls Club works collaboratively with MoRUS and GOLES as well as other organizations in the LES such as the East River Ecology Center. Together they form a loose coalition working collaboratively and pushing forth a progressive agenda, which I address in Chapter Ten.

Aside from the squatter movement, Lower East Side residents mobilized and organized themselves to create “sweat equity” co-op housing. These groups fought and won rights from NYC Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD) to a stock of distressed buildings for “homesteading,” a kind of legalized squatting initiative that used “sweat equity” of organized prospective tenants to renovate the properties and convert them into affordable, low-income co-ops. 47 co-ops were created during this time. Janet Abu-Lughod (1994) documents how a “cross-subsidy plan,” was

---

1 Šarecheski, A. 2014.
2 MoRUS aims to promote researching and archiving efforts to create community spaces, as well as educating people on the political implications of reclaimed space. see MoRUS http://www.morusnyc.org/about-us/mission
3 The LESCAC (Lower East Side Catholic Areas Conference), UHAB (Urban Housing and Assistance Board), and RAIN (Rehabilitation in Action to Improve Neighborhoods) are organizations that emerged at this time. See Abu-Lughod et al. 1994.
4 The cross-subsidy plan was an effort to fight for a limited number of affordable housing units through the rehabilitation of city-owned tenements. The hope was that this plan would allow for the reconstruction of
spearheaded by local female housing activists and organized through a Joint Planning Council.

In *Power at the Roots* (2010), Miranda Martinez discusses the success of these female “housing progressives” of the Lower East Side, those who gained political experience as organizers and service providers in the 1960’s-80’s and who remain influential today as power brokers between the city government and the community.¹ Margarita Lopez, Rosie Mendez, France Goldin, Damaris Reyes and the late Mary Sphinx are among this group, as is the Girls Club’s Executive Director and Co-Founder, Lyn Pentecost. These women have gained access to political channels through control of the local city council seat and the community board, by coordinating the efforts of housing advocacy and social service agencies, and through grassroots organizing and negotiation with city agencies. Many of these women have also been integral supports of the Girls Club.

Community gardening has been an important part of women-led progressive initiatives in the Lower East Side.² Since the 1970’s homesteaders have been working to build gardens in empty, abandon lots and residents have fought to protect these green

---

¹ Martinez, M. 2010 p. 19
² Notably, men were also integral to the community garden movement in the LES. Adam Purple’s Garden of Eden, the subsequent destruction of this space, was a pivotal point in rallying people actively protect and defend the garden spaces of the LES. see: http://narrative.ly/squatters-stalwarts/adam-purple-and-his-guerilla-garden-eden/
spaces ever since.\(^1\) Today the around 85 gardens remain scattered throughout the Lower East Side; in fact it has the highest concentration of gardens in the city.\(^2\) While the gardens serve as a sign of community resistance, they have also simultaneously served as an incentive for further gentrification, by beautifying the neighborhood. These pockets of peaceful, green space in the midst of the urban jungle of New York have “added value” to the Lower East Side. Nevertheless, residents overwhelmingly appreciate these green spaces and fight to protect them. The gardens do have some degree of protection as “green thumb”\(^3\) spaces, but it is an ongoing struggle against the city and developers who are eager to secure the few remaining parcels of undeveloped land in lower Manhattan. The relative success of the community garden movement adds to the legacy of community-led activism and occupation in the Lower East Side.\(^4\)

**Neoliberal New York**

Global capitalism and neo-liberal development have transformed cities into spaces of political inequity, as well as, social and economic deprivation.\(^5\) Susser and Schneider (2004) use the term, *wounded cities*, to highlight the destructiveness of global capitalist governance in cities. New York City is the paradigmatic global city where uneven effects of global restructuring at the urban scale have been creating new forms of segregation and dislocation. Former Mayor Michael Bloomberg actively pushed pro-business policies such as tying the city’s economy strongly to the financial and real estate industries and shrinking the city’s available space for manufacturing through rezoning.

---

\(^1\) For an analysis of the community garden movement in the Lower East Side, see von Hassell 1996, 2002; Ikeda 2009; Martinez 2010

\(^2\) Martinez, M. 2010 p. 35

\(^3\) Green Thumb is the largest community gardening program in the nation. http://www.greenthumbnyc.org/

\(^4\) Martinez 2010; Ikeda 2009

\(^5\) Sassen 1991; Smith 2002; Castells; 1989
and tax abatement programs. Moreover, Bloomberg pursued private investment and fiscal austerity, while cutting funding to many social programs. As a result, Manhattan has the widest income gap of any county in the country, with the top fifth of earners (with an average income of $371,754) making nearly 38 times as much as the bottom fifth ($9,845). In the Jacob Riis public housing complex located directly across from the Girls Club facility, the median household income is $13,714, falling below the NYC poverty line, which the NYC Center for Economic Opportunity identifies as $29,477 for a family of four.

Mayor Bloomberg (2002-2013) promoted an approach to urban governance that relies on market decisions and global corporate investment. Over the last decade, federal, state and local government have drastically reduced funding available for the construction or renovation of new affordable housing. With great effort on behalf of housing advocates, the Lower East Side was once a beneficiary of subsidized low-and middle-income housing. However, since 2000, virtually no new Section-8, public housing or Mitchell-Lama housing has been built to replace lost housing stock in the LES. The almost complete elimination of Section-8 vouchers has also made it vastly more difficult

---

1 Moody 2007; Brash 2012
2 Roberts, S. 2011. In recent years there has been a 50% increase in the share of NYC families with children receiving food stamps with 1,823,149 million (roughly 1 in 4) New York City residents now receiving food stamps. See Keeping Track of New York’s Children. Citizens Committee for Children of NYC, Inc. 2013
4 The city computes its own poverty rate (the Center for Economic Opportunity poverty threshold), taking into account expenses for health and day care and higher living costs, as well as the benefits of tax credits, food stamps, school lunches and other assistance. See: Poverty Affects Policy: NYC Center for Economic Opportunity Report: http://www.nyc.gov/html/ceo/downloads/pdf/poverty_measure_2011.pdf
5 Brash 2012; Susser 2012
for low-income and homeless families to find decent affordable housing on the private
market in the LES.¹

The Lower East Side has experienced a housing price explosion over the past
decade with median housing prices and rental prices increasing much faster than the rest
of NYC. Median rent for all renters in the Lower East Side has increased an astonishingly
high 27% since 2005. Despite the huge increase in housing prices/rental rates,
neighborhood household and family incomes for LES residents remain below average for
New York. Renters on fixed incomes (pensions, disability, public assistance) are those
hardest hit. Rising rents are attributable to a number of factors including the deregulation
of rent-restricted existing housing units, government cut-backs in subsidized housing and
rent vouchers, increasing rents in New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA)
developments and the expiration of restrictions on former Section-8 and Mitchell-Lama
housing. One LES youth worker I spoke with observed that 2004-2008 were particularly
rough years in terms of displacement; as he conveyed: “There seemed to be one last push
about that time. A lot of families were being forced out the neighborhood, as buildings
turned over and rents skyrocketed.” Although the 2008 economic recession briefly
slowed down new development in the neighborhood, it appears new construction is back
at pre-recession levels.

Throughout his three terms in office Mayor Bloomberg had been marketing the
city and branding its public image, transforming Manhattan into a ‘luxury brand’ (Brash
2012). In the Lower East Side, “supergentrification” (Lees 2003) looks like chic gallery
spaces and boutiques, expensive restaurants, a proliferation of bars and cafes and in

¹ District Needs Statement for Fiscal Year 2014” by Gigi Li and Susan Stetzer
recent years the building of new exclusive high-rise glass condos with luxury amenities.¹ There has been a shift in priorities toward providing housing for a professional and global capitalist class while local needs for education, housing, health care, and employment have been largely ignored. The new urban gentry of the Lower East Side is typically white young urban professionals characterized by a consumer lifestyle.² In recent years new development has been specifically targeting an even more elitist, globally connected gentry based on the financial service industries. Foreign real estate investment in the LES reflects trends in global urban restructuring and capital flows.³ These processes have resulted in a “wounded city” with increasing inequality and exacerbated racial/ethnic divisions. Poor residents, pushed to the edges of the Lower East Side, are increasingly invisible to the public eye (Schneider and Susser 2003).

Chino Garcia, community activist and founder of the former CHARAS Cultural Center, observes that while the neighborhood remains diverse, the class composition has changed with a greater divide between rich and poor residents so characteristic of the global city (Sassen 1991). "The difference between the old mix and the new mix,” he says “is that in the old mix everyone was the same class."⁴ Poverty rates remain the same in the LES but there has been a sharp rise in the number of affluent residents, which has created a class divide along lines of race and ethnicity. Ida Susser (2012) discovered a similar pattern of inequality in her follow-up study of Greenpoint/Williamsburg, Brooklyn. She describes how “alongside gentrification, the proportion of people in the

¹ Zukin, S. 2010
² Smith, 1996; Mele 2000
³ Cahill, C. 2007; Brash, J. 2012
district living below the poverty level has stayed the same… Meanwhile, racial and
gender hierarchies have not disappeared but they have taken on new contours.”¹

The urban geography of the LES is highly differentiated, with exclusionary spaces
and leftover “ghetto” spaces inhabited by longtime residents who are slowly being
pushed out by landlords, thanks to eroding state protections. The pressures of
displacement are not abstract. Girls Club members and their families experience landlord
harassment, doubling-up, seeing friends and family forced out of their community. In an
effort to avoid displacement, families double or even trip-up in small apartments. A
geography of inequality increasingly divides the neighborhood.² The boundaries of
social and spatial exclusion are visible to longtime residents, creating a sense of relative
depression. Cahill (2007) describes how young women growing up in the Lower East
Side must navigate the contradictions of this divide between “grit and glamour.” One
Girls Club alumni, Marco, describes such a sentiment:

*I grew up on Ave D & 3rd Street in the Lillian Wald Public Housing
Projects. I lived with my Grandmother, brother and sister. I remember the
only challenge for me was limited resources due to lack of money, my
grandmother didn’t have a job and was living on public assistance and we
had no further resources to buy things aside from the basic needs of the
household. I also remember when I went into high school I felt as though
was stuck in this one neighborhood; I wanted out; I wanted to follow my
dreams.*

Increasingly stark class boundaries mark different opportunities for youth in New York as

¹ Susser, I. 2012 (1982) p. 4
² Lillian Wald Housing (along Houston St./ Ave D) and Smith Housing (Madison St. down to South St) have the highest rates of poverty in the LES with 41-81% of residents living below the federal poverty level. The remaining areas of the Lower East Side, including the other NYCHA developments, report 20.9%-41.7% of residents living below federal poverty level. The poverty rate drops to 10.5%-20.8% along the western edge of the Lower East Side as well as, around the Knickerbocker (middle-income) Houses and surrounding Tompkins Square Park. See Institute for Children Poverty and Homelessness. For the census tracts along the East River and Chinatown the most common level of education for adults 25 and older is less than a high school education. see: Institute for Children Poverty and Homelessness: Poverty in Manhattan. http://www.icphusa.org/index.asp?page=17&asset=166 based on
U.S. Census Bureau, 2006-10 American Community Survey 5-year Estimates.
a result of public disinvestment, privatization, and a crisis in social reproduction.¹ Public school represents a neighborhood institution currently under assault within the current regime.² The white return (as opposed to white flight) to the Lower East Side has not translated into better schools, as many of the new residents are transient young professionals without children.³ There is a two tier system within New York City schools, with specialized and well-resourced schools (some of which are charter) catering to “specially gifted” children, while the “rest” go to neighborhood public schools where “dull obedience, regimentation, endless joyless repetition” are the norm.⁴ A Girls Club alumni and youth worker, Ana, observes: “District 1 [LES] schools are horrible. It’s one of the worst school districts. There are a few token good schools like Bard High School and Early College, NEST, and the Earth School, but most of the schools are underserved. PS 34 and 188 are dumping sites. And many of these schools don’t have to meet the same standards because they are considered transitional schools because so many of the students come from nearby shelters or are English language learners. Our kids, LES kids, aren’t going to the good schools. Those students are all ‘bused-in’ or rather transported by car services.” Indeed, 45.7% of Lower East Side children in grades 3-8 are reading below grade level, and 28.7% are below grade level in Math.⁵ While graduation rates for the city as a whole have reached 70%, schools on the Lower East Side average 50%.

When you subtract one or two of the better schools⁶ from the equation, on-time

¹ Katz, C. 2004 p. 178
² Lipman, P. 2011.
³ Lipman, P. 2002.
⁴ Sharff, J. 1998. Sharff argues that institutionalized schools are “the lot of poor children” p. 98.
⁵ New York City Department of Education, New York City Results on the New York State English Language Arts (ELA) & Mathematics Tests Grades 3 – 8 (SY2012). See: http://schools.nyc.gov/Accountability/data/TestResults/ELAandMathTestResults
⁶ NEST-m is one of New York’s premier K-12 public school for Gifted & Talented students. http://www.nestmk12.net/
graduation rates on the Lower East Side hover around 20%.\(^1\)

Given the large foreign-born population, language communication is a major issue in education and health care services. The 2010 census indicates that in the census tracts along the East River, between 65%-and 85% of families speak a language other than English at home (and 39%-53% speak minimal English).\(^2\) Almost a quarter of public school students in the Lower East Side are English Language Learners.\(^3\) According to the 2014 Needs Assessment Report of Community Board 3, district leaders assert that, “serving English Language Learners is a priority, particularly for meeting the needs of those who arrive in this country at middle school-age or above.” More supportive services are needed to address the emotional and adjustment issues of recent immigrant students. This is just one of the many “gaps” the Girls Club is filling by working with first generation and immigrant populations.

**Right to Housing**

David Harvey has suggested that the people who build and sustain a city should have a right to residency and to all the advantages they’ve spent their time building and sustaining.\(^4\) In the Lower East Side affordable middle-income housing is shrinking, leaving very wealthy people in luxury housing and very poor people in publicly subsidized housing. Public housing projects along the eastern edge of the LES have served as the only buffer against total gentrification. These large tracts of public housing have helped stabilize the character of the neighborhood, but the demand for low-income housing far outstrips the supply. There are pockets of smaller-low-income rental and co-

---

1 Andrew Glover Youth Program (http://agyp.org/about/our-communities)  
4 Harvey, D. 2012.
op housing developments scattered throughout the neighborhood (more so than in other Manhattan neighborhoods). These areas of infill affordable housing throughout Lower East Side have helped the community maintain a unique racial, ethnic and class diversity than otherwise would have been possible but such spaces are disappearing.

The vast majority of Girls Club members come from this public housing. The Lower East Side contains one of the city's most concentrated areas of public housing, extending literally for miles. There are over 14,000 New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) housing units in the Lower East Side, strung out along the East River from 12th Street to the Brooklyn Bridge. In fact, the Lower East Side is home to some of the first public housing projects in the U.S. From the 1930’s-1970’s, multiple tracts of public housing went up in the Lower East Side.1 Directly across from the new Girls Club building, on Ave D, between East 6th and East 13th St, is Jacob Riis I and II Houses with a median household income of $13,714 and Lillian Wald Houses, south of Jacob Riis, has a median income of $16,023.2

Aside from NYCHA and the units that remain rent regulated in the hands of long-time residents, there is no private housing available to low-income people in the LES.3 Affordable housing in the LES is a thing of the past.4 As the neighborhood transforms

---

1 Public housing in the LES includes: Vladeck Houses (1938), Jacob Riis and Lillian Wald Houses (1949), followed by the Smith Houses (1953), LaGuardia Houses (1957), Baruch Houses (1959), Rutgers Houses (1965), Gompers Houses (1964), and Campos Plaza (1979). Additional housing projects include including: Bracetti Plaza and First Houses. see Wasserman, S. 1994.
2 In addition to Lillian Wald and Jacob Riis, many Girls Club member live in housing projects south of Houston St. including: Baruch Houses with a median household income of $16,922, LaGuardia houses with a median income of $16,310, and Smith Housing with a median income of $17,486 Other prominent NYCHA housing in the area report similar income statistics including: Campos Plaza on Ave C between 12th St. and 14th St, Gompers Housing, Lower East Side Housing I, II, III, Seward Park Housing, Hernandez Housing, and LES Infill Housing. see. http://www.city-data.com/neighborhood/East-Village-New-York-NY.html
3 Martinez, M. 2010 p. 27
4 25.5% of Lower East Side households are spending more than 50% of their income on rent. 35% of the housing stock is in poor condition, while 22.5% of LES housing is luxury rentals, which means that there is
into a playground for the rich, long-term LES residents feel under attack; a sentiment captured in the popular expression, “They are going to start handing out life-vests and pushing us all in to the East River.” Increasingly in the new Lower East Side, there is stark income polarization, in which an international elite is living alongside some of the poorest and most marginalized residents of New York City. Maggie of the Girls Club observes: “Look at the LES today, there are $3000 studio apartments on Ave D facing the projects. It’s the have and have-nots living within feet of each other…..” Another Girls Club staffer, Carolina, remarks: “It’s like we are being forced out. There is nothing being built for lower income people.”

Collectively, LES residents are engaged in a protracted struggle for urban resources, and their creative energy renews and reinvigorates their struggle. Residents express their sentimental attachment to place and a fierce determination to protect the gains they have made in the past (housing, green space, and local resources). As housing activist and community organizer, Demaris Reyes articulates:

I love it here because this is where I’ve lived almost all my life. I was born in the neighborhood, raised in the neighborhood. I live and I work here. I love the diversity. I love that there are so many people from so many places. I think that there’s a lot of culture here. If I have to say what my favorite thing is, it has to be the people. I love the people.

Reyes’ comment speaks to the loyalty, commitment, and love residents have for the Lower East Side. Among long-term residents such as Reyes, there is a sense of community. These bonds are place specific, and cannot be replicated once people are....

---

*a very limited supply of viable affordable housing. See U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 1-year Estimates (2011), Summary Table B25070; American FactFinder; [http://factfinder2.census.gov](http://factfinder2.census.gov) and U.S. Census Bureau, New York City Housing Vacancy Survey Microdata (2011); [http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/housing/nychvs/nychvs.html](http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/housing/nychvs/nychvs.html)*

*1 This saying became even more salient after Hurricane Sandy caused severe flooding along the eastern edges of the Lower East Side.*
displaced to other neighborhoods throughout NYC and beyond. For Lower East Siders, gentrification is experienced as a loss of self, community and culture, creating feelings of anxiety and anger among young residents. It is a lived experience for LES youth who witness these processes unfolding in their everyday lives, the impact of which I explore further in Chapters Seven and Eight.

**Divided Neighborhood**

Despite the increasing affluence in the Lower East Side, huge swathes of poverty remain. Yet, because of rising income levels in western half of the LES, much of the funding for youth development programming and services has been cut back in recent years. In 2012 the NYC Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD) announced that it would slash funding for after-school programs in the northern half of the LES because the zip code 10009 was identified as being “too wealthy” to receive subsidized services.\(^1\) David Garza, executive director of Henry Street Settlement, called this decision an “all-out assault on working families and the working poor.”\(^2\)

Funding cuts are especially detrimental to youth living on the isolated edges of the Lower East Side. Ana, a youth worker with Boys and Girls Republic, expresses concern about the city’s method of tying funding to zip codes: “The irony is that 10009 is no longer considered a “high-risk” zone- so the city took away funding for social services, and its all because of the gentrification of the west side of the neighborhood.

---

\(^1\) Funding was cut to PS 64’s program run by Educational Alliance, University Settlement’s Program at PS 63, and Henry Street Settlement’s Boys and Girls Republic (which services mostly boys from public housing along Avenue D with their sports programs). See Shapiro, J. 2012. Because the Girls Club does not overly rely upon DYCD funding it was not deeply impacted by these funding cuts. Whereas larger settlement houses receive a bulk of their funding from government grants, such as DYCD, the Girls Club, as a smaller, grassroots organization has been forced to diversify its funding sources. Diversifying funding sources makes the Girls Club less susceptible to city government budget cuts and austerity measures, but raising sufficient funding from multiple sources poses its own challenges. I explore this issue of fundraising further in Chapter Four.

\(^2\) Shapiro, J. 2012.
Kids up by the Ave D need more help because there are no services for them. It’s a good 20-minute walk to 1st Ave and the train. Girls Club will be in a good position to work with the girls and the families along the Ave., because they need it. The kids along the Ave are pretty rough because they are so isolated. The Ave is its own world and they keep to their own. People who grow up there, don’t get out of the neighborhood much, their world is the Ave. You see the impact with these kids when the funds are withdrawn. You can really see it on the streets; there are more kids on the streets. Our programs (Henry Street BGR) have been cut significantly from four days to one day a week. But what that means is that more kids have nowhere to go. There are more kids on the streets. There are more kids in trouble with the law for whatever reason. There are more kids locked away in detention.”

Such are the lived consequences of socio-economic polarization. New Yorkers have always managed to mutually co-exist across social, economic, racial and political divisions. And yet, today, as inequality widens, those divisions are becoming harder to bridge. Poor, working class and minority youth coming of age in neoliberal New York are in desperate need of resources, support and opportunities and yet with each year fewer funds are allocated for such services. Amidst these challenging circumstances, the Girls Club strives to support the needs of young women and families in the LES. In Chapters Seven and Eight I assess the relative impact and success of its efforts fill this gap.

Conclusion

The Girls Club emerged in the midst of the upheaval caused by the political economic restructuring in New York City in the late 20th century. Amidst ongoing
struggles over control of economic, social, cultural and educational resources in the Lower East Side, organized campaigns, such as the one for the Girls Club, demonstrate how people confront broader structural transformations at a local level. As an organization, it demonstrates how women creatively and collectively assert control, and imagine alternatives for the next generation of Lower East Siders. The Girls Club offers a unique model of educational programming, while also playing a supportive role in broader struggles for gender equality, social justice and community-led development.

In the following chapter I focus in the history of the settlement house movement and female leadership in the Lower East Side. I also review youth studies from the early 20th century and consider the literature on deviance, delinquency and youth culture. I discuss, at length, the Mobilization for Youth initiative, among other educational experiments, that emerged in the Lower East Side in the 1960’s. I argue that the Girls Club directly builds upon this legacy of historical attempts to construct alternative educational and cultural spaces within the Lower East Side.
Chapter Three: Making History

The Girls Club is a product of the unique political and cultural history in the Lower East Side. The settlement house movement, at the turn of the 19th/20th century, and Mobilization for Youth, in the 1960’s, serve as historical precedents of the present day Girls Club. As an organization it draws inspiration from the legacy of these community-based initiatives. In this chapter, I review the literature on youth, deviance, and delinquency and investigate the legacy of community-based educational initiatives in the Lower East Side. I consider the historical circumstances that precipitated the emergence of these initiatives and question how people create cultural and educational alternatives that reflect their values, and how this has been done in the past.

Settlement House Movement of the Lower East Side

Women in New York City have historically organized for progressive social reforms in their community, yet these efforts have produced contradictory political effects. Settlement Houses, led by women social reformers, combined social service, with collaborative practice, community building and social action. These women understood that the source of community problems lay outside of the community and encouraged social action to tackle systemic injustices. The Girls Club looks to the settlement house movement as a model for combining service delivery, community engagement and social action in dynamic and innovative ways. It blends Lillian Wald’s pragmatism, Jane Addams’ vision, and Emma Goldman’s radicalism.

Settlement houses emerged in the late 19th century as a public response to the excesses of laissez faire capitalism of the Gilded Age. The settlement house concept

---

originated in Great Britain, but it took off in the rapidly industrializing United States.\footnote{Jane Addams visited Toynbell Hall Settlement House (founded in 1884) in London and created Hull House in its likening. see Addams 1910; Rodgers 1998; Knight 2010} By 1910 there were over 400 settlements nationwide. The impact and expansion of settlements was most evident in New York City, which was experiencing a confluence of immigration, urbanization, and industrialization.\footnote{Fabricant and Fisher 2002} Jane Addams, founder of Hull House in Chicago, describes the settlement house as:

\begin{quote}
An experimental effort to aid in the solution of the social and industrial problems, which are engendered by the modern conditions of life in a great city. It insists that these problems are not confined to any one portion of a city. It is an attempt to relieve, at the same time, the over-accumulation at one end of society and the destitution at the other.\footnote{Addams, J. 2002 (1893). "The Subjective Necessity for Social Settlements"}
\end{quote}

Hull House, as well as Henry Street Settlement, aimed to provide social and educational opportunities to immigrant youth and their families in the surrounding community.

Some of the most progressive settlements were started in the Lower East Side, which was experiencing social, economic and political upheaval at the turn of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century. By the 1890’s the Lower East Side had become a portal and residential enclave for waves of incoming immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe.\footnote{Lillian Wald first visited the Lower East Side in 1893 as a visiting nurse teaching a class on home nursing and hygiene in the LES. Wald wrote, \textit{"that morning's experience was a baptism of fire. Deserted were the laboratory and academic work of college. I never returned to them... I rejoiced that I had a training in the care of the sick that in itself would give me an organic relationship to the neighborhood in which this awakening had come.\"} She founded Henry St. Settlement shortly thereafter. Wald, L. 1971 (1915). pp. 5-8} In his powerful exposé, \textit{How the Other Half Lives} (1890), journalist Jacob Riis documents the chaos, overcrowding and public health crises that accompanied mass immigration and industrialization in the Lower East Side.\footnote{Two public housing projects, that stand directly across the new Girls Club Center for Community on Avenue D, are named in honor of Progressive Era reformers: Jacob Riis and Lillian Wald.} In 1886 Stanton Coit founded the
Neighborhood Guild (later renamed University Settlement) on Forsyth Street.\(^1\) College Settlement subsequently opened in 1889 at 95 Rivington Street, and in 1892, Lillian Wald created the Nurses Settlement, which later became known as Henry Street Settlement. In addition, Young Women’s Settlement House was founded near Tompkins Square Park in 1897, Hamilton-Madison House was founded in the Two Bridges area in 1898,\(^2\) and finally Grand Street Settlement was founded in 1916.\(^3\) University, Grand Street, Hamilton Madison and Henry Street Settlement Settlements all remain open today, and yet, these settlements have grown more institutionalized and less politicized in recent years.

The Settlement House Movement highlighted the potential leadership of women in the public sphere. Jane Addams identified Hull House as an outlet for university educated women, and sought to open up a life of meaningful action to young women. Settlements provided a space and opportunity for educated, middle and upper class (white) women who wanted to learn, apply their skills and training, while retaining their ‘feminine’ values.\(^4\)

The residents of Hull-House formed a particularly impressive group of women including: Florence Kelley, Dr. Alice Hamilton, Julia Lathrop, Ellen Gates Starr, Sophonisba Breckinridge, and Grace and Edith Abbott. While living at Hull House settlement, these women became a tightly knit unit, collaborating, creating, investigating and campaigning for social change. Deegan (1990) describes Hull-House as “the

\(^1\) Coit, Stanton. 1974.
\(^3\) Grand Street Settlement http://www.grandsettlement.org/about-us/our-history
\(^4\) Addams referred to Tolstoy’s phrase “the snare of preparation” to describe how young educated women are hopelessly entangled in inactivity at the time in life when they are longing to “construct the world anew and conform it to their own ideals.” Addams, J. 2002 (1893). “The Subjective Necessity for Social Settlements,” and “The Snare of Preparation” in The Jane Addams Reader pp. 14-28, pp. 100-113.
professional woman’s commune” of its day. Living in community, the female residents were free of the confining restraints of domesticity, had time and energy to devote towards social advocacy and activism. Deegan observes:

*These women wrote together, lived and ate together, taught together, exchanged books and ideas, vacationed together, became officers in each other’s organizations, developed a pool of expertise on a wide range of topics, and generated numerous changes in the social structure of government... Social settlements became an alternative lifestyle for women (49).*

Blanche Wiesen Cook (1977) argues that, “networks of love and support that enable politically and professionally active women to function independently and intensively consist largely of other women” (44). She contends that social reformers such as Addams, Kelley, and Wald gathered energy, momentum and strength from their supportive and caring communities, and that the collaboration and solidarity of the settlement house sustained and recharged their exhaustive service and leadership in public life. In Chapter Five I argue that the Girls Club performs a similar function today for women and girls of the Lower East Side, serving as parallel family of support and guidance.

While Jane Addams may be the most famous figure of the Settlement House Movement, Lillian Wald was the leader in social reform efforts and settlement house initiatives within New York City and the Lower East Side. Lillian Wald founded Henry Street Settlement in 1893. She went on to lead Henry Street Settlement over 40 years (1893-1933) and was replaced by Helen Hall, who successfully directed Henry Street Settlement for a comparatively long tenure (1933-1967).

Henry Street Settlement is known for its pioneering efforts in public health as well as social service. Wald was committed to providing holistic care to people of the
Lower East Side.¹ She created a model of urban public health nursing, the “Visiting Nurse Service,” which specialized in preventative care and received fees based on the patient's ability to pay.² Much like Jane Addams, Wald thrived in the woman supported, woman allied alternative world that Hull House and Henry Street Settlement provided. Residents at Henry Street Settlement described Wald as a source of inspiration.

At Henry Street Settlement, Lillian Wald blended service provision with a progressive political agenda and advocacy. She was an advocate for children, adolescent youth and families of the Lower East Side. Wald lobbied for laws against child labor, and advocated for educational access. Florence Kelley joined forces with Wald in 1899; together they fought to establish the United States Children’s Bureau, and pressured President Theodore Roosevelt to create the Federal Children’s Bureau.³ They also pushed thru passage of the 1921 Sheppard-Towner Maternity and Infancy Protection Act, which allocated federal funds to health-care programs.⁴ Wald also advocated for Special Education for children with disabilities⁵, the hiring of public school nurses, and the free lunch program in New York City Public Schools.

¹ The Girls Club follows this model of public health nursing. It has developed a partnership with the Hunter Bellvue School of Nursing and is a placement site for nursing students in the community public health program. Currently the Girls Club has two nurse interns and one full-time nurse on staff.
³ In Wald’s advocacy for a Federal Children’s Bureau, Wald noted: "The national sense of humor was aroused by the grim fact that whereas the Federal Government concerned itself with the conservation of material wealth, mines and forests, hogs and lobsters, and had long since established bureaus to supply information concerning them, citizens who desired instruction and guidance for the conservation and protection of the children of the nation had no responsible governmental body to which to appeal" see Wald, L. 1971 (1915). p. 165.
⁵ Wald was a strong advocate for children with learning disabilities and physical handicaps. She professed that "every human being merits respectful consideration of his rights and his personality." see Wald, L. 1971 (1915). p. 121.
Lillian Wald, along with Jane Addams, directed the bulk of her energies toward child and family welfare. Addams especially spoke fervently about how city life was “killing the spirit of youth” and that more opportunities of recreation and play were vital.\(^1\) Towards that end they designed settlement houses as spaces to engage and entertain youth through recreation, education, art and drama.\(^2\) The Girls Club seeks to extend the mission of harnessing youthful energy in building a community center relevant to the Lower East Side of the 21st century.

The Girls Club also gathers inspiration from Emma Goldman, who serves as a foil to the more traditional maternalism embraced by Wald and Addams.\(^3\) She was the vanguard of radical organizing activity in the Lower East Side and distinguished herself from reform-minded settlement leaders. While Addams and Wald worked within the law to modify and reform it, Goldman worked outside the law, and sought to replace it with anarchist principles of voluntary communism.\(^4\) Wald and Addams fought for reforms, while Goldman, an as an anarchist, sought to reinvent society. Emma referred to the women of Henry Street Settlement as “women of ideals, capable of fine, generous deeds” but disapproved of their work and feared that it created “snobbery among the very people they were trying to help” (Goldman, as cited in Cook, 1977 p. 44). In short, Emma Goldman was a radical firebrand; as a committed anarchist, she dismissed settlement house reformers as reactionary, supplicants of the rich on behalf of the poor.

---

\(^1\) Addams, J. 1910.
\(^2\) Programming at Hull House, for example, included kindergarten classes, boys’ and girls’ clubs, language classes, reading groups, college extension courses, a public bath, a café, a gymnasium and a labor museum. See Addams 1910.
\(^3\) I explore the concept of maternalism in detail in Chapter Five
\(^4\) Cook, B. W. 1977.
Addams, Wald and Goldman were contemporaries who represented a range of choices and pathways towards achieving socio-economic equality. Cook (1977) articulates:

*As different as their political visions and choices of strategies were, Addams, Wald, Eastman and Goldman were dedicated to a future society that guaranteed economic security and the full development of individual potential for women and men on the basis of absolute equality. Reformists, socialists, anarchists, all four women made contributions toward progressive change that are today being dismantled. The playgrounds, parks, and school lunch facilities they built are falling apart all over America because of lack of funding and a callous disregard for the needs of our country’s children (45).*

Despite their differences, these leaders all acted with passion, courage and conviction in re-imagining the world and struggling towards the goal of a just and equal society. Notably, Goldman also demonstrated an interest in the liberatory potential of education. In 1911, Goldman opened the Francisco Ferrer Modern School¹ in the Lower East Side, which served as a more radical version of the settlement house. A century later, the Girls Club is building upon this vibrant legacy of women’s leadership and educational initiatives in the Lower East Side.

**Early Youth Studies**

During the Progressive Era, as social scientists were producing knowledge to support activist claims for child and family welfare; in this context, youth became the prime subject of the new social sciences: psychology, sociology and anthropology. This emerging scientific discourse on youth was highly gendered and constructed in reaction

---

¹ Francisco Ferrer was a Spanish Anarchist and Educator who set out to establish a system of ‘free’ education, free of the oppressive influence of the Catholic Church. He established a successful school in Barcelona in 1901 but it was shut down by 1906 and in 1909 Ferrer was arrested and executed by the authorities for his suspected role in the recent “tragic week” of protests in Barcelona. In outcry, Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman started the Francisco Ferrer Association in New York in 1910. See *Talking History: The Shelton Modern School*. http://www.talkinghistory.org/stelton/steltonhistory.html
to social processes of urbanization, industrialization, revolutionary changes in family life.¹ G. Stanley Hall’s influential study: *Adolescence: its Psychology and its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sex, Crime, Religion and Education* (1915 (1904)) describes teenage years as stress filled, emotional, and turbulent. Hall argued that adolescents are biologically unstable, strongly peer oriented and prone to cliques or gangs, and therefore adult control and direction is critical.

Hall articulated a particularly gendered analysis of youth development. For male adolescents, he called for schools and organizations to instill manliness, strength and comradeship. His concern for male virility led to an industry of male oriented character building organizations such as the Boy Scouts and the YMCA. For female adolescents, he prescribed care, protection, and supervision in order to cultivate ‘proper feminine behavior’. Hall claimed to offer scientific confirmation that a girl’s innate disposition was more fragile than a boy’s. He argued against co-education, and discussed girls’ schooling as mere preparation for marriage.²

Anthropologist Margaret Mead, a systematic observer of child and youth development,³ strongly objected to Stanley Hall’s analysis. She openly rejected his broad characterization of adolescence as a period of conflict, distress, rebellion, delinquency,

---

¹ Lesko 2001, Chinn 2009
² Hall reaffirmed Rousseau’s controversial thesis in *Emile* (1762) *Emile* is a foundational text on the Philosophy of Education in the West in which Rousseau most famously stated that women should be “passive and weak,” and are “made specially to please man.” see Rousseau, J. J. 1965 (1762). Mary Wollstonecraft offered a strong critique of *Emile* in *A Vindications of the Rights of Woman* (1792).
³ Margaret Mead was fascinated with childhood, adolescence, child-care, mothering, and gender. Mead studied women and children, a subject matter that had largely been invisible to earlier researchers, wherever she went. As a pioneer in the anthropology of childhood, a huge portion of Mead’s professional life and legacy was bound up in the documentation and analysis of children, of taking them seriously, understanding children’s lives and seeking to understand their importance for culture at large (Mead 1928, 1930, 1933, 1970, 1975). Mead argued that anthropologists should expand the “questions all good ethnographers ask” (1933, 1) and include the study of child behavior in their “rubric” of investigation (1933, 15). For a critique see Freeman, D. 1983, 1999. Derek Freeman found fault with Mead’s fieldwork data and strongly critiqued her for neglecting the role of biology and evolution in human behavior while concentrating solely on the cultural influences. For additional critique see also: Di Leonardo, M. 1998.
idealism, and anxiety, inherent in the physical development process of all human beings. Advocating from a cultural relativist perspective, Mead influenced the nature vs. nurture debate by exploring the question: How does culture shape human development in relation to biology? In her ethnographic study, *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928), Mead poses this question to Hall: “Are the disturbances, which vex our adolescents due to the nature of adolescence itself or to the civilization?” (10). She argues that developmental stages are in fact, shaped by cultural expectations and processes of socialization. Coming of age, in other words, is a cultural and social process. In observing girls’ experiences in Samoa she discovers that adolescence “represented no period of crisis or stress, but was instead an orderly developing of a set of slowly maturing interests and activities. The girls’ minds were perplexed by no conflicts, troubled by no philosophical queries, beset by no remote ambitions” (109). Mead is asserting that adolescence is not inherently traumatic, uncertain or “stormy”, as described by Hall, and that sexual development and experimentation need not be problematic.

In *Inventing Modern Adolescence* (2009), Sarah Chinn observes that at the time of Mead’s writing, there were parallels between the lives of young immigrant women in urban areas like the Lower East Side and girls coming of age in Samoa. Both groups were experiencing sexual freedom and independence, as well as handling care-giving responsibilities in the domestic sphere (these issues remain relevant today, as noted in Chapters Seven and Eight). Chinn contends that teens in Samoa as well as industrializing New York exhibited how “adolescent self-determination was a mixture of bodily independence, sexual experimentation, and freedom from parental controls” (151). Immigrant youth in the city streets collectively constructed a new identity for themselves
as American. Teen culture in early 20th century urban America was associated with loosening sexual mores, rebellion against parental authority, and new commercial sites of leisure and consumption, all of which were causing alarm among social reformers.

**Settlement Reformers as Guardians of Virtue**

Whereas urban male youth have long been associated with delinquency in the form of criminality, urban female youth have been negatively associated with sexual deviance. At the turn of the 19th/20th century, settlement leaders and social reformers broadly identified themselves as “guardians of virtue” caring for the perceived needs of young immigrant and working class women. They expressed concern that the freedom and independence young women found in joining the workforce, made them vulnerable to labor exploitation and sexual violation.

From 1870-1920 the number of women in the US labor force increased from 1.72 to 8.28 million. Booming factory industries drew women workers, but society did not yet accept their economic and social independence. Women’s entrance into the workforce en masse created cultural anxieties over “wayward girls.” Many believed that shifts in women’s labor and family patterns threatened the nuclear family order. Cultural concerns, tantamount to a moral panic, emerged over issues of female promiscuity, increasing rates of divorce, out-of-wedlock births and decreased birth rates among (white) middle class women.

While choosing non-traditional paths for themselves, many social reformers continued to be influenced by traditional Victorian notions of innate gender difference.

---

1. Kesslar-Harris, A. 1982. Yet as Jones (1985) has well documented Black women had always been active in the labor market as slaves and subsequently low-wage laborers. The research of Gaines (1993) and Lasch-Quinn (1993) highlights a similar ‘uplift’ ideology playing out within the emerging black middle class communities.

2. Abrams, 2000; Knupfer 2001; Chinn 2009
and female purity. Victorian ideology and the “Cult of True Womanhood” upheld the sacredness of motherhood and characterized (white) women as the bearers of high spiritual and moral values. 19th century Victorian mores constructed (white) women as pure and innocent: the asexual wife and devoted mother. Women’s true nature was said to be fulfilled through piety, purity and domesticity.¹ There was concern for the sexual as well as socializing activities of working class girls in the industrial city. Social reformers decried opportunities for sexual enticements as an omnipresent danger permeating the public dance halls, the work place, and the unsupervised recreation outlets of city streets.² They advocated for marriage as a positive alternative for working girls, regarding it as a safe “port of domesticity.” Anxieties over young women’s shifting roles focused largely on recent immigrants from Eastern Europe as well as unmarried working-class white women. Many believed that young women’s new found economic independence would lead to unrestrained sexuality and immorality, and the associated social problems of venereal disease, illegitimacy and prostitution.³

Jane Addams, in *The Spirit of Youth and the City Streets* (1910), voiced similar concerns stemming from her experience working with young immigrant women at Hull House in Chicago. Addams posed the following questions: “When girls “go wrong” what happens? How has this tremendous force, valuable and necessary for the foundation of the family, become misdirected?”⁴ Women that failed to meet ‘normative’ standards of femininity were identified as a ‘problem’, subject to moral and scientific identifications

¹ Welter, B. 1966.
² Chinn, S. 2009
³ Addams, J. 2009 (1910); Abrams 2000; Knupfer 2001; Chinn 2009
as defective delinquents, psychopaths, adventuresses, speiler (or dance) girls, women adrift, charity girls, or fallen, feebleminded, or ‘inverted’ women.¹

In response to this moral panic over “wayward girls”, Addams and Julia Lathrop established the nation’s first Juvenile Court in 1899 in an effort to stop the abuse of young women (and men) by the adult criminal system. For Addams and other settlement house reformers, the campaign for a Juvenile Court system went hand in hand with other reforms to eliminate abusive conditions.² In order to protect young people from labor exploitation, reformers distinguished between childhood and adulthood. In a similar way, they distinguished female from male workers, so as to win greater legal protections for (white) female laborers. Thus, in the struggle to pass legislation protecting (white) women and children in the labor force, settlement reformers expanded the power of the State and institutionalized adolescence as a life stage.³

While juvenile courts were designed to protect youth from the excess of judicial authority and punishment of adult courts, they had the effect of policing young women’s sexuality.⁴ Social workers and charity workers sought to redirect and reform young women’s conduct before it became a “problem.” Unsupervised forms of recreation amongst the city streets, including vaudeville shows, five-cent theaters, and dance halls, were perceived as harmful to moral development. As Addams declared, “let us make safe the street in which the majority of our young people find their recreation...”⁵ Over a hundred years later, social concerns for young women on the “city streets” persist as I document on the Lower East Side (see Chapter Seven).

² Ibid.
³ Lesko, N. 2001, Chinn, S. 2009
⁵ Addams, J. 2009 (1910). p. 15
Settlements like Hull House of Chicago and Henry Street Settlement in the LES provided sheltered activities for young European immigrants within the confines of the city. The settlements’ organized “girls’ clubs” and other supervised forms of recreation to provide safe ways to fulfill youths’ desire for playful diversion. The social reformers’ active quest to preserve the innate virtue of young immigrant women lends insight into the centrality of maternalist thinking and ideals of proper femininity that underlay the enactment of legislatives reform during the Progressive Era, as discussed further in Chapter Five.

(Male) Delinquency and Deviance Studies

Looking at delinquency studies from a historical perspective enables us to see patterns in the characterizations of urban male youth over time. Today in the Lower East Side, and beyond, a rhetoric of deviance continues to be deployed as part of a broader effort to criminalize young men of color. In the 1960’s Mobilization for Youth was a remarkably innovative program that successfully addressed the needs and challenges of the most hardened teenage men in the Lower East Side. In documenting this short-lived program, among other alternative education programs in the LES, such as University of the Streets and CHARAS, I aim to illustrate how the Girls Club is building upon a legacy of grassroots educational and cultural alternatives in the Lower East Side. While these programs were male-centered, the Girls Club is female-centered, and therefore offers a different style of leadership and program orientation. The fact that the educational alternatives in this community have switched in focus from male to female youth over the last half of the 20th century is indicative of broader cultural and social transformations.
unfolding in society, an issue, which I will return to in Chapter Six and Seven. First, I review the literature on youthful deviance and delinquency.¹

Urban scholars associated with the Chicago School produced several ethnographic studies of youth in the 1920’s and 1930’s. These studies tended to portray teenage youth as delinquent, deviant and rebellious. Following Stanley Hall’s lead, much of this early research was highly gendered, reflecting divergent social concerns for male and female youth. Young men were associated with violence and crime while young women were negatively associated with promiscuous sexuality and wayward activities. Frederick Thrasher’s, The Gang (1927), offered a complex social analysis of male delinquency and gang involvement. Thrasher argued that delinquency was a product of the disorganizing forces of urban slum life, which created family and social dysfunction. Clifford R. Shaw, in The Jack-Roller (1930), likewise argued that delinquency flourished in urban areas of social disorganization. Paul Cressey’s ethnography, The Taxi-Dance Hall (1932) is one of the few studies that explored female acts of deviance. Cressey studied rebellious young women who danced with men for money in urban dance halls. In so doing, these women were breaking social norms of feminine respectability while actively seeking out husbands.² Collectively these ethnographies document how young men and women’s lives in urban America at the time were framed by economic exclusion. Nevertheless, in correlating delinquency with local residential areas of crime, poverty, “unwholesome” recreation and vice, these studies ultimately failed to fully account for the broader social structure.³

¹ In Chapter Eight, I incorporate the educational literature on youthful resistance.
² Cressey, P. G. 1933.
These distinctively gendered concerns persisted in the academic and policy arena for years to come. In the 1940’s-50’s research on deviance among male youth started to incorporate class as a causal factor in gang involvement, and suggested that (male) gangs functioned to absolve tensions related to class immobility, generational angst and urban decline.\(^1\) Despite their male biases, these studies were highly influential in subsequent research on youth and youth culture in the 20\(^{th}\) century. The theoretical insights they offer with regard to aspirations and opportunity structure remain relevant in understanding the challenges young people face today as they transition to adulthood in the Lower East Side.

William F. Whyte, in *Street Corner Society* (1943), offered an alternative to the Chicago School’s conceptualization of cultural breakdown and disorganization.\(^2\) In his study of Cornerville, an Italian neighborhood in Boston, Whyte highlighted the essential integrity and coherence of working class culture, noting its logic of social relations and reciprocal obligations while also emphasizing the systemic and institutional underpinnings of class inequality.\(^3\) He focused on the question of social mobility, studying the divergent aspirations of “corner boys” vs. “college boys.” While “college boys” internalize middle class values and lifestyles and gain prestige through higher education and professional work, “corner boys” act within narrowly circumscribed channels of the community, creating gangs that function to provide a cohesive identity and access to blue collar jobs, but that also serve to limit the boys to Cornerville for good.

\(^1\) See Whyte 1943; Cohen 1955; Goodman 1960; Cloward and Ohlin 1960; Becker 1963  
\(^2\) see also Davis A, Gardner B.B., and Gardner M.R. 1941.  
Whyte argued that youth should be offered more social and economic opportunities to participate in “middle-class” society and given greater responsibility in guiding “their own destinies” (275). I would argue that the Girls Club is succeeding in turning “corner girls” into “college girls”, by offering girls social and economic opportunities and a sense of agency in life. And yet, the transition to middle class lifestyles is not nearly as simple as moving up and out, especially in the age of debt financed education. This thesis documents how “college girls” in the LES are in many ways still tied to family and community. In other words, among girls in the LES today, there is no clear and easy distinction among “college girls” and “corner girls”.

Building on Whyte’s work, Albert Cohen, in *Delinquent Boys: The Culture of the Gang* (1955) developed the theory of “delinquent subculture,” describing delinquency/gang involvement among working-class male youth as a creative response to structural socio-economic inequality. Cohen highlighted the compensatory function of the juvenile gang, clarifying that working class youth, who are academic underachievers, develop self-esteem and respect through gang involvement. In the gang, core values of the ‘straight’ world- sobriety, ambition, conformity, are replaced by their opposites- hedonism and defiance of authority. Cohen describes how working-class male youth are disaffected from schooling because middle-class standards are applied in evaluating students and workers alike. He identifies the ‘middle class measuring rod’ as a term to describe middle class normative characteristics such as: ambition, ethic of individual

---

2 Notably, Cohen defines female delinquency solely in terms of sexual delinquency; he contends that female status, security, and acceptability of her self-image depend upon the establishment of satisfactory relationships with the other sex. Ibid. pp. 88-91
3 Cohen’s “Middle Class Measuring Rod” is strikingly familiar to the rhetoric of “character” and “grit” among neoliberal education formers today. Educational Psychologists’ Seligman and Peterson define character as “a set of abilities or strengths that are very much changeable- entirely malleable, in fact. They
responsibility/resourcefulness/self-reliance, achievement driven, future-orientated, rational/efficient, cultivating social manners and graces, self-control/non aggression, participation in wholesome activities for leisure, respect private property. Many of these norms remain prevalent measures of success fifty years later in New York City.¹

In *Delinquency and Opportunity* (1960), Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin brought a community specific analysis to delinquency research. Basing their study in the Lower East Side, they theorized that different local structures of opportunity yield distinctive types of youth gangs (conformists, fighters, thieves, drug users). They highlighted the relationship between delinquent subcultures and specific local structures of economic opportunity, and argued that the problem is not the individual or group/gang but rather the “slum community,” and therefore preventive action should address the “social setting that gives rise to delinquency.”² In short, this theory relates delinquent behavior to social structure, specifically to the availability of opportunities and alternatives to deviant behavior.³ They argue: “adjustment problems arise when there are serious discrepancies between aspirations toward success goals and opportunities for achieving them.”⁴ Cloward and Ohlin determined that the Lower East Side was “undergoing progressive disintegration” as old structures, which had previously provided

---

¹ I identify these normative characteristics to highlight the similarity between Cohen’s description of the ‘middle class measuring rod’ and what contemporary theorists associate with tactics of neoliberal governance enacted upon youth (Rose, N. 1996, 1999; Kelly 2001 Harris, A. 2004; Harris ed. 2004; Aapola et al. 2005; Gonick 2006). “Responsibilitization”, in other words, is not necessarily new. I explore this issue further in Chapter Eight.
³ Piven, F. 1967 p. 88
social control and avenues of social ascent, were disappearing, and creating a sense of normlessness or anomie.¹ They argued that “legitimate but functional substitutes for these traditional structures must be developed if we are to stem the trend toward violence and retreat among adolescents” in the Lower East Side.² This research provided the theoretical basis for many of the social programs piloted in the 1960's, including Mobilization for Youth, which attempted to prevent delinquency by improving economic opportunity and providing employment (i.e. providing poor youth with legitimate avenues to legitimate success). And I argue that the Girls Club employs a similar model in the Lower East Side of the 21st century.

**Youth Culture Studies: Deviance as Resistance**

During the 1960’-70’s the Birmingham Center for Contemporary Culture Studies (CCCS) in Britain was also producing important research on youth. Influenced by some of the deviance research coming out of Chicago, the CCCS produced a number of collaborative studies examining youth resistance in post-war Britain. Foundational among these texts are Hall and Jefferson’s edited collection: *Resistance through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*³, and Hebdige’s: *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*⁴. Drawing upon Gramscian, as well as semiotic analyses, they theorized how youth subcultures are eventually co-opted and reincorporated into the dominant culture. Gramsci’s work offered a sense of dynamism, productive agency, and struggle, highlighting the cultural work necessary to establish, overthrow and maintain hegemony.

---

¹ Anomie, according to Durkheim, results from a breakdown of social bonds between individuals and community, social norms no longer control actions. He recognized anomie as a phenomenon related to processes of industrialization, mass regimentation and urbanization at the turn of the 19th century. See Durkheim, E. 1893, 1897.  
² Piven, F. 1967  
⁴ Hebdige, D. 1976.
The Birmingham School (CCCS) is important because it highlights the agency of young people in through acts of resistance and defiance. CCCS raised fundamental questions about the intersection of class, race and gender in the social historical constitution of individuals and suggested avenues of inquiry into how these are created and reproduced.¹

Stanley Cohen, of CCCS, documented the emergence of British youth subcultures (such as the Teds, Mods, Rockers, Skinheads, and Rastas) as a product of ruptured kinship relations and dislocated working class communities in the post-war England.² CCCS explored youth subcultures’ resistance to the parent as well as dominant culture through collective ritual acts and perverse style. Subcultural practices were seen as responses to the felt contradictions experienced by working class youth. Accordingly, youth subcultures are based on rituals that resist the values inherent in the dominant culture.³ CCCS understood youth subculture as sites at which the major forces of society are experienced and lived. Subcultures mediate the interrelationship among the social structure and individual lives in complex ways.⁴

Other subcultural theorists of CCCS were particularly interested in decoding the political implications of youth style and socialization. Emphasizing the interpretation of rituals and symbols, they drew heavily on structuralist and semiotic approaches.⁵ Dick Hebdige (1976) argued that subcultures that revolve around the use of commodities, such as fashion and music, have a symbolic dimension infused with political meanings not always obvious to the outsider, or adult observer. He places emphasis on how young

³ According to Clarke et al. (1976) individuals share "a set of social rituals which underpin their collective identity and define them as a 'group' instead of a mere collection of individuals. They adopt and adapt material objects--goods and possessions--and reorganize them into distinctive 'styles' which express the collectivity [and] become embodied in rituals of relationship and occasion and movement" p. 47.
⁵ Cohen 1997 p. 157
people appropriate and transform standard cultural artifacts, obscurely representing the very contradictions the artifacts are designed to conceal.

CCCS studies of “spectacular acts of resistance” were later criticized for overly romanticizing acts of rebellion which never led to substantive changes aside from temporarily winning space from the dominant culture. As a collective, CCCS failed to encompass notions of gender and race adequately within its analysis of working class culture. Feminists, such as Angela McRobbie\(^1\) and Jenny Garber, critiqued CCCS for its myopic focus on male subcultures to the exclusion of female subcultures and practices of resistance. They observed that girls only appear in subcultural writings as male appendages. McRobbie and Garber (1976)\(^2\) argued for the need to analyze the ways women and girls interact among themselves to form distinctive leisure cultures of their own, a topic I return to in Chapter Seven.\(^3\)

**Mobilization For Youth in the Lower East Side**

Implemented prior to the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, Mobilization for Youth (MFY) was a joint project of the social service agencies serving in the Lower East Side and the NY School of Social Work at Columbia University. It was based out of Henry Street Settlement, but spread throughout the community.\(^4\) The official aim of MFY was to prevent delinquency and gang involvement among youth in the Lower East Side.

Ohlin and Cloward designed Mobilization for Youth to put into practice their

---


\(^3\) McRobbie’s analysis of bedroom culture is taking up in Chapter Six.

\(^4\) MFY grew out of a meeting at Henry Street Settlement in May 1957 when Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin of Columbia University School of Social Work presented the concept of MFY to Henry Street Settlement Board members. see Hall, 1971 p. 269
“differential opportunity theory.” In designing MFY they drew upon their own research in the Lower East Side and incorporated aspects of Chicago School’s approach to juvenile delinquency (specifically Clifford Shaw’s Chicago Area Project).

President Kennedy (through his commission on Juvenile Delinquency and Youth Crime) launched Mobilization for Youth in 1962. MFY represented an alliance of social reform and social science, becoming a living laboratory for the “scientific evaluation of social-action approaches to delinquency,” ultimately covering a 67-block area Lower East Side. The program was ideally seeking “a way of success” as opposed to merely rescuing a “few disadvantaged dropouts who live on the fringe of American culture.”

MFY was designed to prevent delinquency by unlocking opportunity and transforming the broader community. It called for changes in the structure of employment opportunities, in the schools, in the socializing institutions of the neighborhood, and the structure of political influence. MFY aimed to create a more meaningful interrelationship between school and community by encouraging parental involvement, engaging high school students as tutors, conducting home visits, and developing more culturally meaningful materials in schools. The multifaceted plan included creating public service jobs for teenagers, opening neighborhood service centers, providing employment to neighborhood residents as sub-professionals in service

1 Naples, N. 1998 p. 42
2 Ohlin and Cloward’s research on gang activity in the LES led to the publication of Delinquency and Opportunity (1960).
3 Clifford Shaw’s massive study of Delinquency Areas in 1929, is where he started developing the idea of “community competence” with Chicago-trained sociologist Leonard S. Cottrell. See O’Connor, A. 2001 p. 126
4 Backing for MFY came only after years of planning, coordinating, strategizing, and lobbying. In launching MFY, President Kennedy publicly announced that $12.6 million of federal, city and private funds would be spent “on the most advanced program yet devised to combat delinquency on a broad scale.” MFY also received funds from the Ford Foundation Grey Areas Project and the National Institute of Mental Health. See Hall, H. 1971 p. 273
5 Piven, F. 1967 p. 90
6 Marris, P., and M. Rein. 1973 (1967) p.81
institutions, and organizing residents into groups to solve their own problems. The Neighborhood Service Center/Storefront Helping Stations were organized to make available, under one roof, an array of skills and resources needed to deal with practical problems (welfare, employment, housing) in an atmosphere that was visible, informal and non-bureaucratic. Through this holistic approach, Mobilization for Youth was the first comprehensive and coordinated attempt to combat delinquency and poverty through intervention involving an entire community.

Richard Cloward explains that the primary MYF goals were “to help local groups participate in social issues- encourage residents to choose issues, frame them in their own terms, and act within their legal rights to deal with problems they face daily.” Ohlin points out that, “we wanted to provide a framework where we could concentrate a whole series of programs together in the same area. This would show great impact. We felt that the problem was not just one of providing new services here and there, but of trying to reach a new threshold by an integrated approach.”

Frances Piven recalls how MFY “program descriptions and proposals were riddled through with the terms “experimental,” “new approaches,” and “innovation.” This social experiment in the Lower East Side set the stage for the Anti-Poverty programs, which were to follow two years later, when many of the practices that were piloted on the Lower East Side for helping lift people out of poverty were implemented across the country. Ultimately, MFY served as a model for the Community Action title of the 1964 Economic Opportunity Act, which became the cornerstone of the Great Society Programs known as the War on Poverty.
MFY sought out local leaders within the Lower East Side and hired them as “community workers”. Fifty Lower East Side residents, many of them women, were hired by MFY either as visiting homemakers, as parent/educational aids or as community organizers. Homemaker services worked with families to increase their “competence” in home management and help them access community resources (public assistance, public housing), while also offering companionship and psychological support, and providing escort and mother’s helper services.¹ Naples (1998) explains that, “resident workers could serve as a ‘bridge’ between middle-class agencies and low-income residents. They could interpret the community’s needs to the professional, non-indigenous staff and act as role models for their neighbors.”² The Girls Club Mom Squad program, as described in Chapter Four, takes definite cues from the successful MFY model of community ‘bridge’ workers.

One goal of MFY was to enhance “community competence” in the Lower East Side by empowering the poor to take action in their neighborhood. It created opportunities for LES residents to participate in social actions, which helped improve their lives in meaningful and practical ways. In 1963 MFY opened a storefront, “Casa de la Comunidad” on 4th Street between Ave. B and C which became a site for community outreach programs, including drug abuse treatment, welfare assistance, youth programming, voter-registration and fair-housing campaigns. Subsequently, MFY opened two coffee shops- Club 169 and The Hideout, which served as recreational

¹ Brager, G. 1967 p. 165
² Naples, N. 1998 p. 41
centers and drop-in lounges for youth.\(^1\) The new Girls Club “Center for Community” takes inspiration from this MFY model of creating communal spaces and melding the provision of social services with social change initiatives and transformative education opportunities. Moreover, it creates opportunities for women and girls to participate in social actions, political or otherwise, in the Lower East Side and beyond. I discuss these initiatives and activities at length in Chapter Nine.

While MFY actively supported protests and demonstrations, as does the Girls Club today. In 1963, many Lower East Side residents participated in the March on Washington, the Puerto Rican Silent Prayer March in New York, and the March to Albany for a $1.50 state minimum wage.\(^2\) MFY staff supported Black and Puerto Rican leaders in developing a Police Civilian Review Board, and sponsored voter registration drives for poor residents. In a similar fashion the Girls Club has created the Power of Peace Anti-Violence Coalition, partners with *Voto Latino* in getting out the vote efforts and voter registration drives, and has organized around issues of domestic violence and mass incarceration\(^3\). MFY organized residents for welfare rights and tenants rights including a contentious rent strike. It also supported a group of Puerto Rican moms, Mobilization of Mothers (MOM) who successfully pressured the New York Board of Education to move a hostile principal from a local elementary school.\(^4\) This MOM initiative indicates the historical precedent of mothers mobilizing for educational opportunities within the LES community, years prior to the founding of the Girls Club.

---

1 Mele, C. 2000 p. 150, see also Weissman, H. 1969. The concept of the community drop in center was also utilized by Jagna Sharff during her collaborative ethnographic research in the LES during the 1970’s see J. Sharff 1998.

2 Brager, G. and Specht, H. 1967 p.149

3 As noted in Chapter Nine, the Girls Club has participated in Anti-War protests, Anti-Gun Violence rallies, pro-Farmworker rallies, and Occupy actions.

4 Naples, N. 1998
As previously noted, settlements were organizing women in the community around similar issues at the turn of the century.

Mobilization for Youth was labeled as radical by the FBI as a result of its social change initiatives. The FBI began surveillance of MFY in 1963 and in August of 1964 accused the agency of irregularities in financial management, of employing communist sympathizers and subversives, and fomenting summer riots in Harlem. MFY then came under Federal and City government review. The NAACP and American Jewish Congress, and National Association of Social Workers came out in support of MFY, notably many of the local unions did not. While none of the charges were ever substantiated, MFY was forced to diminish its community organizing work. By the early 1970’s political pressures, institutional control, professionalization, funding cuts, and an increasingly conservative political environment ultimately constrained the effectiveness of MFY’s efforts to mobilize the poor of the Lower East Side.\(^1\) Nevertheless, for a narrow window of time in the 1960’s, MFY served as a pioneering demonstration project, paving the way for Community Action Programs in the national War on Poverty.

The War on Poverty, starting in 1964 with the passing of the Economic Opportunity Act;\(^2\) it offered the first federal government sponsored attempt to involve the poor directly and formally in decision-making, advocacy, and service provision in their own communities. This federal initiative included in the following programs: Community Action Programs (CAP’s), Job Corps, Civilian Conservation Centers, Emergency Food and Medical Service, Migrant Assistant program, Day Care, Head Start, Upward Bound,

\(^1\) Notably, the Community Action Programs, which were modelled after MFY were vehemently attacked by Rumsfield and Cheney under the Ford/Nixon White House. See Naples, N. 1998

\(^2\) The Economic Opportunity Act (EAO) signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson on August 20, 1964 established the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO), which administered the “War on Poverty” programs otherwise know as “The Great Society” programs. See Naples, N. 1998
Domestic Volunteer Service Programs (VISTA), Neighborhood Youth Corps, and New Careers Programs among others.¹ The Office of Economic Opportunity targeted specific urban areas in distributing funds: New York City, Chicago, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Detroit, St. Louis, Washington D.C., Boston, Atlanta, and Pittsburgh.² Within New York City, the Lower East Side was specifically targeted for OEO programming, much of which was built upon the social infrastructure established by MFY. Anti-poverty programs of the 1960’s proactively worked towards addressing both poverty and racial injustice. Piven and Cloward argue that War on Poverty funds were channeled into poor urban neighborhoods to “deal with political problems in the cities” resulting from racial and ethnic tension and unrest.³ Henry Giroux, on the other hand, offers a more optimistic perspective, stating that during the War on Poverty, “American society exhibited at least a willingness to fight for the rights of children, enact reforms that invested in their future, and provide the educational conditions necessary for them to be critical citizens.”⁴

The Community Action Programs (CAP’s) of the War on Poverty, modeled after MFY, included a controversial mandate of Maximum Feasible Participation of the poor. This included the notion of hiring locals on the basis of their familiarity with the community rather than their educational credentials but it also included organizing local residents in community actions. In short, CAPs served to deepen community residents’ political action. As Naples (1998) points out in her study of the New Careers program in the LES, Harlem and Philadelphia: “The CAPS also provided a crucial site where women affirmed their commitment to address problems in their defined communities, as

¹ ibid pp. 219, 220
² Naples, N. 1994 p. 223
³ Piven and Cloward, 1971 p. 256.
⁴ Giroux, H. 2008 p. 115
well as a place where they could collectively discuss the nature of the problems and envision effective solutions.”

In organizing poor people for social action and protest, CAP’s were essentially in the position of using public funds to attack public agencies, which was generally resented by the establishment. This mandate led to political pressures from mayors, public officials, and traditional service organizations forcing CAP’s to circumscribe their commitment to and work towards social change. Naples documents how working class women in the LES, through their involvement in CAP’s, were exposed to new ways of understanding and resolving problems in their communities. Yet in doing so they also encountered a series of social, structural, and economic problems that could not be resolved at the grassroots level. By the late 1960’s CAP’s experienced intense pressure toward professionalization and bureaucratization. This reflected a general trend towards depoliticization and defunding of the War on Poverty initiatives by the early 1970’s.

The backlash MFY experienced foreshadowed how subsequent national anti-poverty programs would ultimately be cut-short of their revolutionary potential of mobilizing the poor. Despite being short-lived, MFY had a great impact. MFY projects and innovations proved to be influential in subsequent grassroots community organizing efforts. The model of combining legal services, job training and placement programs, educational programs, and the organizing of welfare clients, was replicated in federal anti-poverty programs, though in a modified, less politicized way. Helen Hall, former executive director of Henry Street Settlement recalls that, “one of the lessons to be learned from Mobilization for Youth is the importance of continuous experimentation by

1 Naples, N. 1998 p. 4
2 Hall, H. 1971 p. 275
private social agencies in the field of social change… Private agencies’ freedom to act can be of enormous value in organizing for change and protest.

The Girls Club has responded to this call for experimentation and innovation in community-based youth programming. I describe the more transformative aspects of the Girls Club initiative in Chapters Nine and Ten.

**Alternative Education Initiatives in the Lower East Side**

In the 1960’s education became a focal point of political action. While some New Yorkers organized around community control over schools, others sought to construct alternatives. Many residents in the LES identified the institution of schooling as part of the problem, reproducing the status quo and as opposed to facilitating social mobility. In an effort to combat schools’ perceived demoralizing impact on youth, progressive activists organized alternative spaces of learning, culture and the arts in the LES. These oppositional initiatives included Real Great Society, University of the Streets, and CHARAS. As a collective, these projects serve as a foundation for the emergence of the Girls Club in the twenty years later.

The late 1960’s thru the early 1970’s was a period of resistance and cultural revitalization in the Lower East Side despite the political economic hardships the community confronted. The Young Lords and the Black Panthers were active in the neighborhood, operating out of the Christadora building near Tompkins Square Park. The local Young Lords’ newspaper, *Palante*, published Pedro Piertri’s “Puerto Rican

---

1 Hall, H. 1971 p. 276
2 Another example, St. Brigid’s Catholic Parish, known for its progressive politics, opened an alternative school on 9th St. for high school dropouts in 1971. The “Ninth Street School” was open to young people ages 13-18. It was designed as a community school with a focus on building familial and community relations. The school was also bilingual, with an emphasis on developing social and cultural consciousness. It disbanded in 1981. Radical Catholic activist and Lower East Sider, Dorothy Day, was a great supporter of the school. See. Ortiz, K. M. 2011
obituary” which inspired the Nuyorican poetry movement and the subsequent opening of Nuyorican Poets Café. Early on, in 1965, Real Great Society (RGS) was formed by young activists, several of whom were former gang members: Fred Good, Chino Garcia, Angelo Gonzalez, Armando Perez, and Carlos Troche. RGS’ political awareness was shaped by the militant politics of the 1960’s and the War on Poverty. With calls for "community empowerment," "advocacy planning," "citizen participation," "Black/Boricua Pride," etc., RGS espoused a “right to city” language.

RGS acted on utopian visions of city life.¹ In 1967 RGS created the University of the Streets. They began enrolling students and offering classes in drama, music, tutoring, arts, radio/TV repair, philosophy and politics; the building also housed an art gallery and day care center, and provided a space for political organizing. RGS collaborated with progressive collectives including: Cooper Square Committee², Adopt-a-Building, Seven Loaves Art Coalition, Kenkeleba House³, Mothers in Action⁴. CHARAS emerged out of RGS in the late 1960’s. As the University of the Streets petered out due to funding and housing constraints, CHARAS turned its energy towards building geodesic domes in the Lower East Side, under the direction of Buckminster Fuller.⁵ In addition to the domes, Fuller inspired CHARAS to apply modern technology to solve inner city problems,

---

¹ Good, F. 2007.
² In 1959, the Cooper Square Committee (CSC) formed to oppose the City of New York’s Slum Clearance plan. In the late 1960’s, the Cooper Square Committee’s members created a community based plan, known as “The Alternate Plan,” which established basic principles: Displacement must be minimized—Development must be carried out in stages—Site tenants must have first priority for the housing that is developed. See: http://coopersquare.org/ Francis Goldin, one of the founders of CSC, and the only one still alive, is a supporter of the Girls Club. Girls have visited Goldin’s apartment and interviewed her about her housing advocacy work in the LES.
³ An organization on 2nd street that promoted minority artists, showcasing the work of African-American, Afro-Caribbean, Latino, Native American, and Asian-American artists.
⁴ Mothers in Action created a communal day-care center in the LES. See: Good, F. 2007.
⁵ Architect Michael Ben-Eli was also involved in this project. ibid.
which led to rebuilding of several “sweat-equity” buildings on 11th street which introduced “green” technologies such as solar energy and wind power. ¹

In the early 1970’s, CHARAS started occupying El Bohio a grassroots collective in an abandoned public high school on East 9th and Ave B, and remained there until 2001 when the Giuliani administration took control of the building and evicted the organization.² Over the past 12 years, activists have managed to stall plans to redevelop the space for private use. As of 2014, the former El Bohio building remains empty as neighborhood activists combat the plans, and capital backing, to turn this community space into college dorms for The New School.

This brief period of political mobilization, community control, cultural valorization, accompanied by radical education initiatives remains vibrant in the historical memory of the Lower East Side. Chino Garcia, of RGS/CHARAS, remains active in the community and involved with the Girls Club.³ Mobilization for Youth, as well as University of the Streets and RGS/CHARAS, are all examples of socially conscious youth initiatives with transformative aims. They gained inspiration from the settlement house movement sixty years prior and fueled a new generation of alternative educational/communal/creative projects in the community. These social experiments were established outside of institutional life, grounded in arts and experiential education, and guided by a goal of social justice. The Girls Club builds upon this legacy.

¹ ibid
² The El Bohio building was purchased by developer Gregg Singer in 1998 for $3.15 million; Singer has plans to develop the space into college dorms but has thus his plans have been held up by the city yielding to political protest. Chino Garcia of CHARAS continues to organize in the struggle to redirect the development of the building and transform it into an Arts and Cultural Community Center (as opposed to a college dorm. See EV Grieve, 2013. “Two Sidewalk Bridges Arrive as City Disapproves of Plan for P.S. 64.” (http://evgrieve.com/2013/04/2-new-sidewalk-bridges-arrive-as-city.html)
³ Chino and Lyn Pentecost have been working together since the 1970’s and remain close. The Girls Club commissioned Chino to mosaic the male bathrooms in the Center for Community facility.
Conclusion

The depolitization and disinvestment of federal anti-poverty programs in the 1970’s essentially resulted in a “demobilization of youth” in the LES. The end of the War on Poverty corresponded with a rise in violence, poverty, drug use, as well as the infrastructural deterioration of the neighborhood. These problems were compounded by the city’s fiscal crisis in 1975 (Susser 1982, Tabb 1982). While the general optimism and radical fervor of the 1960’s had faded, the legacy of community action programs lived on in the LES through the women and men who had formed militant political identities participating in these direct action initiatives (Naples 1998).

Today, as a society, we have moved far right of the progressive ideals of Mobilization from Youth. As Henry Giroux affirms: "If youth once constituted a social investment in the future and symbolized the promise of a better world, we are now entering another stage in the construction of a global social order in which children are increasingly demonized and criminalized..."1 While the Girls Club is combating this trend for women and girls, the situation remains particularly grim for male youth of color in the community. This reversal highlights a transformation in gendered opportunities in the LES over the past thirty years. Male youth are being left behind (bars) in the 21st century and the girls, while making great strides, are left with more care-giving responsibilities and are dealing with a localized culture of sexism, misogyny and normalized violence. The Girls Club confronts these emergent challenges while drawing lessons from the past. It draws upon the unique history of transformative initiatives in the Lower East Side as it re-envisioned education and the possibilities of urban life for the 21st century. As Girls Club founder and Executive Director, Lyn, asserts:

1 Giroux, H. 2009 p. 29
We consciously set out to create a new model of community agency, creating a culture that values creativity and experimentation, while putting girls and women at the center of community development and revitalization...Our founding vision was a dual one: to reframe the field of youth development as a ‘whole community’ issue, and to construct a building to house that vision.

This extended case study of the Girls Club attempts to offer a holistic understanding of the organization. Documenting the historical legacy of the initiatives and ideals upon which the Girls Club is founded has been the primary focus of this chapter. In the following chapter, I examine the origins, development, practices and people of the Girls Club, offering a critical analysis of the organization and highlighting its contradictions. In the following three chapters, I explore the social, cultural, political and economic forces impacting upon the lives of LES residents, capturing the stories of the women and girls impacted by the Girls Club, as well as the men and boys whose absence from this initiative speaks volumes.
Chapter Four: An Organizational Case Study of the Girls Club

Community organizing efforts are particular to their historical era. By the 1990’s social and economic crises had wreaked havoc on Lower East Side for almost two decades. This chapter offers a case study of the organization and offers a glimpse of women’s concerns, their demands, and their organizing efforts during the era of Mayor Giuliani and later Mayor Bloomberg in NYC. It examines how the political-economic circumstances led to the founding of the Girls Club in 1996 and have since then informed its programming and practice. It asks: what has the Girls Club accomplished, what lessons has it learned, and in what is its future direction?

The story of the Girls Club is the story of women coming together to create equal educational opportunities for girls in the LES, and in the process building a solid community organization that transcends the community and works towards a broader social change agenda. I highlight the stories of four women involved with the organization, as well as Lyn Pentecost, the founder and Executive Director, who has been the guiding leadership behind the Girls Club since its inception. I also raise the issue of “founder’s syndrome”\(^1\). This terms points to how community-based organizations, like the Girls Club, are so preoccupied with day-to-day efforts to organize, deliver services and fundraise, that they over rely on a founder’s charismatic leadership, which is an unsustainable model in the long term.

In the second half of this chapter I discuss the challenges and limitations of the non-profit structure. I analyze how governance practices of auditing and accountability affect the Girls Club and highlight the contradictions that emerge from daily practices within the organization and how staffers navigate such tensions. Given the severe funding

\(^1\) Block 2004; Schmidt, E. 2013
limitations imposed by government policies of social disinvestment, the Girls Club has struggled to raise the funds necessary to sustain its programming while simultaneously financing the construction of its facility. Remarkably, the Girls Club managed to raise 20 million dollars to cover the full expenses of constructing the Center for Community, $10 million of which came from the city government. Through a dedicated grassroots campaign, the Girls Club was able to pressure local female powerbrokers in the City Council to allocate funding for the project. The fact that the Girls Club is now free of real estate debt is a significant accomplishment in New York. While it is currently in the advantageous position of not having financial obligations in the form of rent or mortgage, the Girls Club still faces the challenge of sustaining building and programmatic expenses without losing its progressive edge or compromising its values. I explore the creative, as well as compromising, fundraising tactics the Girls Club has deployed over the years to stay afloat.

**Founding Narrative**

The official founding narrative of the Girls Club is as follows: “The Lower Eastside Girls Club was created in 1996 to address the historic lack of services available to girls and young women on the Lower East Side… Many social service agencies [had] closed their doors and moved… including a branch of The Children’s Aid Society and a chapter of what is now Girls Inc. One of the few agencies to remain open and "tough it out" was the Boys Club of New York, operating two full-service facilities for boys. Yet, when Boys and Girls Clubs nationwide merged in 1986, becoming the agency now known as Boys & Girls Clubs of America, few noticed that The Boys Club of New York, 

---

1 The remaining 10 million in capital funds came from foundations and private donors. The Kresge Foundation was a substantial funder (http://kresge.org/) in the capital campaign.
over 100 years old and operating a large facility on the Lower East Side, opted out of the merger. By 1990 the Lower East Side had become the last neighborhood in the United States with the "boys only" Boys Club distinction. A diverse group of Lower East Side women consisting of mothers, workers, artists, educators, scientists, athletes, businesswomen and community activists organized in 1996 to address this obvious inequity. Soon thereafter, The Lower Eastside Girls Club was founded.”¹

An elaborated version of this founding narrative² points to the fact that in the mid-1990’s a group of women in the neighborhood began meeting to discuss the lack of available services for girls. It was during these brainstorming sessions that Maria and Lyn (two of the founders still active in the organization) crossed paths for the first time.³ Maria had been active in the community through HIV/AIDS education and advocacy work while Lyn had been a housing activist and was teaching in the Urban Studies department at nearby NYU. They had both been living in the Lower East Side since the early 1970’s, Maria had immigrated from Ecuador, while Lyn had been studying at Cooper Union and homesteading on 1st Street. The mothers started meeting and discussing the problems for women and girls in the LES community. The concept of a Girls Club emerged out of these conversations. Maria had wanted to start an arts and crafting program for neighborhood girls and, in fact, was already running crafts programs

² In trying to elaborate upon this story, and gathering details, I spoke with some of the women who have been involved since the beginning. Over many conversations and cross-referencing, I’ve been able to piece together a few of the missing details about how the idea of the Girls Club came into being.
³ Throughout this dissertation, to protect research subjects’ anonymity I have used pseudonyms with a few exceptions. The following names are not pseudonyms: Lyn Pentecost, the Executive Director and Co-Founder of the Girls Club, Angel Rodriguez, Executive Director and Co-Founder of Andrew Glover, Justice Padró of Manhattan’s Youth Division of Court, and the names of active politicians and advocates in the Lower East Side such Rosie Mendez and Margarita Lopez. All of the information collected has been kept in strict confidence. While a few of the interviews and life-histories were recorded and transcribed, many were not at the request of the interviewee. Copious notes were taken in the place of transcriptions. Narratives have been shared with participants for verification and follow-up interviews and conversations have filled in any gaps.
out of her apartment in a Section 8 building off of the Bowery. Lyn, a former arts student turned anthropologist, supported the idea, recognized Maria as a natural community organizer, and believed that collectively they could make it happen. As Maria’s daughter explains: “Maria had the basic idea, the girls and the community behind her, and Lyn was the brains. Maria may have just preferred to have continued running the same old crafting programs for girls but Lyn had a grand vision.” Everyone agreed that the community ‘needed’ a Girls Club, as one Girls Club mother expressed:

“The boys always had the Boys Club; we always had nothing. The Boys Club has been there for years; that’s not fair. You know, they always get everything. Thank god, finally they are going to do something for our girls.”

Beyond need, women in the community desired a Girls Club and strategically framed this demand as a question of fairness and equality.

A History of the Girls Club: Early Years

In the beginning, the Girls Club staff consisted of Maria, Norma, Debbie, and Lyn; three Latinas and a Caucasian; united in their commitment to the Lower East Side and their outrage over the dearth of opportunities for girls in the community. Many of these women knew one another from their involvement with another LES collective, Children's Liberation Day Care. All of the women had been active in the prior struggles for affordable housing and community gardens, and in combating the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the Lower East Side. They were adept activists, accustomed to organizing

---

1 Section 8 is a Voucher Program that subsidizes market rate apartments for low-income families, as well as the elderly and disabled. It was created during the Federal Housing Act of 1937; Section 8 of this act authorizes the payment of rental housing assistance to private landlords on behalf low-income residents. Most households pay 30% of their adjusted income for Section 8 housing. See U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development: http://portal.hud.gov/
collectively and willing and to fight another battle on behalf of young women and girls. Demanding gender equity in youth services was just another front in the struggle for a just society.

Maggie, who started an intern when the Girls Club was first forming, is now the Associate Director of the Girls Club. Her account of the early days is particularly insightful. “I had been doing an internship at another LES youth organization and that was a complete bogus organization because they had this great space but they weren’t doing any real work with the kids in the community. It was a joke. I tried to get stuff going but I couldn’t really do much within the organization as it was. About the same time, Lyn was trying to get something started in the Lower East Side. I told her I would volunteer or do whatever she needed. I had a lot of theater and performance experience and could do that with kids and I could also do photography. So that is where we started. It was all hands on deck.”

“At first it was very low key, we were all doing it part time, meeting with girls maybe once or twice a week. It was Lyn, Maria, Norma, and Debbie. Maria was doing crafts and getting out in the community, Nancy was helping out, and Debbie got a basketball team going. I was the intern doing performance activities with the girls, getting the word out on the street and recruiting in schools. Lyn was writing grants and gaining backing and support. Within a few months I got my mom involved as a volunteer doing photography. The Museum Club was started early on by Jeanett, a local artist, and not long after that, another woman, Helen, got a drumming class going.”

“When the Girls Club first started I think we were on Ave D; I can’t even remember we’ve worked out of so many locations. I believe it was on Ave D between 5th
and 6th Streets. We were working in the back of a sock and underwear shop. In the early days, there were a lot of moms involved helping out, volunteering here and there. There was Debbie who had a son and daughter and Norma who lived in Baruch housing with a teenage daughter and a son with special needs. Both of these women were instrumental in getting the Girls Club started, and both had been in abusive relationships. I remember days when their partners would come to the Girls Club and threaten them. These women were dealing with a lot; we all were. (Community) moms’ involvement was a big part of the Girls Club. They got involved because their daughters were in classes. They needed jobs too; the jobs were critical in helping their families.”

Girls Club alumnae share memories of these early days. Ana, now age 27, recalls, “Maggie came into my 7th grade acting class, I think maybe in 1998, and was recruiting kids for her VIP (voice, identity, power) class. I looked up and here was this stunning woman with piercings and tattoos and asking us to join a theater class and I was like, ‘Sure, take me wherever you’re going; sign me up.’” Another alumna Mia, now in her early 30’s working as an actress in LA, recalls when she started attending the Girls Club at age 15. She describes, “It was a small staff at that time, mostly just moms from the neighborhood, and it was really just afterschool activities rather than the variety of programs they have now. But it was absolutely a second home for me, which was incredibly important because I couldn’t get a lot of attention from my parents because they worked all the time.”

In 1997 the Girls Club held its first annual “Girls Congress” which brought in over 300 girl participants from across the Lower East Side, bringing together all the

---

1 As cited in Spokony, S. 2012.
organizations serving youth in Lower Manhattan.¹ It was a day-long conference, with speakers, activities and workshops all designed to raise girls’ awareness about social justice issues and empowerment. Girls Congress became an annual event for the Girls Club. Each year the theme is different, for example, in 2003, the girls organized an Anti-War Sit-In to raise awareness among young people (male and female) about the U.S. Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and military recruitment efforts. In 2007 the Girls Club organized a “Global Girls Congress” which took on issues impacting girls women worldwide. And in 2011 the girls organized an environmental conference, “Greening our Future”, with food justice activist Anne Lappé.²

During the early years, the Girls Club remained modest in size, serving 25-50 girls on a weekly basis and up to 300 girls for special events. The small size allowed the Girls Club to be flexible, informal, personal, ad hoc and spontaneous. Jane, Maggie’s mother, and long-time Girls Club photography teacher recalls: “For the first few years it was very laid back and small. We had a crew of girls. I still keep in touch with them. We were working out of a dark room at Middle Collegiate Church and then we worked out of the squat ABC No Rio for years, set up a dark room there. People always wanted to work with us and we always needed space. We’ve been all over the Lower East Side. It’s been a wild ride all these years. Some of my favorite memories of the Girls Club are taking road trips with the girls, all the crazy adventures we had. We would see how far we could stretch the girls out of their comfort zone. The times when we were all thrown together, thrown into situations and everything was happening organically.” Chantel, an alumna

¹ This ground-breaking event was mentioned in the official feminist timeline of Baugardner and Richards’ 2010 edition of Manifesta, Young Women, Feminism and the Future.
² Anne Lappé is an educator, author and advocate of food justice. She is the founder of the Small Planet Institute and author of Diet for a Hot Planet (2010) (among other publications).
now age 27, recalls one such adventure referred to by Jane: “I loved going to Breezy Hill Farm in the summer. We stayed in that weird old farm house, and that lake full of grass where we would go swimming. We learned all about the farm\(^1\), and farm operations like the cider press.”

Girls Club was transient for the first eight years. It faced the challenge of running programs in whatever spaces it could secure around the community. To do so, it had to develop close relationships with other organizations, schools and businesses. Getting the Girls Club off the ground was a persistent struggle, as the organization has bounced around to over thirty locations throughout the Lower East Side (see map in Appendix). Locations were always tenuous and temporary. As Lyn observes, "When we launched the Girls Club, we had a virtual ribbon cutting because we had no place to call home."\(^2\) Like many LES residents the Girls Club has experienced displacement due to landlord disputes and unreasonable rent hikes. When the Girls Club started, tap dance shoes, art supplies, enrollment forms, etc. were pushed around in a shopping cart. It was a mobile operation. Subsequent program locations included the back of a sock and underwear shop, the basement community room (which frequently flooded) in a building on 4\(^{th}\) Street, Middle Collegiate Church on 7\(^{th}\) Street, ABC No Rio Squat on Rivington St, Cornelia Connelly Center on 4\(^{th}\) St., and several NYCHA community rooms. In 2004 the Girls Club was able to rent a storefront space on 1\(^{st}\) Street and 1\(^{st}\) Avenue, which provided room for some offices as well as programming space, but the it continued running programs in a community room on 3\(^{rd}\) street, as well as in a yoga studio, a squat space, and local cafes. The Girls Club has also run programs in schools throughout the Lower

\(^1\) Breezy Hill Orchard in the Hudson Valley see http://www.hudsonvalleycider.com/
\(^2\) as cited in Chamberlain, L. 2005.
East Side.¹ To get around this challenge of space and place, the Girls Club developed programming that was designed to utilize the city itself as a classroom; photography and citizen journalism classes push girls to explore the neighborhood on foot and interview residents, shop owners, pedestrians, park goers and gallery curators. In the summer months the Girls Club travels to Coney Island and Governor’s Island, by train and ferry respectively, on a weekly basis.

Maggie points out the benefits of being challenged for program space. She comments: “We have remained small because we haven’t had room to grow. But it’s been good in that the programs have remained small. We’ve been able to do really amazing, progressive stuff, under the radar. And we have remained grassroots and so while we may have these donor driven program deliverables now, we are also able to do good, quality, interesting, radical stuff under the radar.” This freedom, in part, stems from the Girls Club’s creative fundraising tactics. The combination of informal structures and informal financing based on personal relationships with philanthropists and small foundations has enabled the Girls Club to maintain a significant degree of independence, which has helped it remain autonomous, innovative and community oriented.

**Growth, Independence, Success**

While starting out as an all-volunteer organization, within a year the Girls Club was earning enough income, through small grants, to start paying volunteers a regular, though modest, salary. Over time the staff gradually grew in size. Today the Girls Club

---

¹ PS 188 on Houston and Ave. D, the Earth School and P.S. 64 on 6th Street, P.S. 63 on 3rd Street, P.S. 20 on Houston and Essex Street, and neighborhood High Schools such as Marta Valle, New Design, Seward Park, Washington Irving, East Side Community High, School of the Future and ICE (several of which have now been shut down or broken up due to poor performance).
employs fifteen women and three men\(^1\) full-time and five more women part-time. Many more mothers volunteer and work special events as part of the “Mom Squad”\(^2\). Most employees start out as volunteers.

The period from 2003 to 2008 was a period of growth and consolidation for the Girls Club. Two of the founding members, Norma and Debbie, decided to move on to other jobs. Most of the staff remained, Maggie continued directing programs, Maria led arts and crafts, flamenco, outreach, Jane led media arts and photography, Milagros led Sweet Things Bake Shop\(^3\), and Anne who joined in 1999, helped with fundraising. Lyn, Maggie and Anne would prove to be the core staff, sustaining the organization through ups and downs for the next 15 years. Jane comments, “Lyn holds on to her staff; some of us have stuck around for years. That stability is important to the Girls Club’s success.”

During these years, the earliest Girls Club members began stepping-up to staff positions: Tish and Carolina, came on as program associates and Gina joined Sweet Things Bake Shop full-time.

Moving into the storefront on 1\(^{st}\) Street in 2004 provided room for a few offices as well as a program room/gallery space. This meant that staff had a home base from which to run some (not all) programming. At this time the Girls Club expanded its programming to include a wide range of classes in the arts, activism and sciences, both in local schools and as afterschool, Saturday and summer programming. Girls Club consistently reached about 75 girls a week and worked with many more during on-going special events. Girls were

---

\(^1\) Girls Club has recently hired male staff including a Chef and Community Organizer.

\(^2\) Mom Squad is a program women that live in NYCHA housing. It combines part-time employment with training workshops and participation in Girls Club programming (body movement classes, sewing, poetry/memoir/fiction writing, culinary classes).

\(^3\) Sweet Things is the culinary training program at the Girls Club. The bakers (LES moms) specialize in sugar cookies and cupcakes and sell them for both retail and special orders.
entering through many channels: school classes, parental enrollment, peer introductions, staff outreach, and larger open attendance at community events. At the 1st Street location the Girls Club also started running an ongoing Saturday performance series and film screenings in the gallery space of the storefront.

By the closing of the first decade of the 21st century, the Girls Club was an established youth development organization. By 2010 (when I started my fieldwork), the Girls Club had reached a certain level of recognition and respect within the community and beyond. It was a period of stabilization in terms of programming, but simultaneously a time of planning for expansion as the Girls Club was getting closer to the goal of building a facility of its own. The facility, which finally opened its doors to the public in Fall 2013, offers a new beginning. It enables the Girls Club to reach a broader scale both in terms of population served and in terms of being a thought leader- in the areas of education, youth and community development, women’s empowerment.

**Women of the Girls Club**

The women who helped build the Girls Club over the years have all struggled in some way with economic hardship, emotional losses, and domestic violence. These formative experiences create a sense of common cause among them. A study of the organization calls attention to the diversity of women’s experience while acknowledging their commonalities. Sociologist, Nancy Naples informs us that feminist scholarship is enriched by an “exploration of how women from different racial-ethnic, class, cultural, and regional backgrounds confront different constellations of power that differentially shape their political consciousness and political practice.”¹ Below I highlight the different pathways that have led women to working at the Girls Club. I attend to how

---

¹ Naples, N. p. 344
they construct the narrative of their experience of the Lower East Side and their work with the organization.

Jane: Returning to the Lower East Side

Jane has been working with the Girls Club since 1998 leading the Photography and Digital Media programs. She is also the mother of Maggie, the Associate Director of the Girls Club.

“I grew up in a western Pennsylvania coal-mining family. There were a lot of problems with my family; I lived with different family members at different times, moved around a lot. It was difficult and chaotic. I left home early at the age of 16. I remember it was around the time Bobby Kennedy was shot, and MLK, when I first came to the Lower East Side with a friend. I thought it was amazing; I was blown away. It was a like a wonderland. It was full of kids like me, living in abandoned buildings; I had never seen anything like it. It was a community of young folks, a haven for kids without families. And it was an exciting time because of the anti-war efforts and women’s liberation. But I eventually came to see that these radicals I was living with were pretty fucked up too, they were too militant and mean. I got disillusioned. I mean, I’m no Emma Goldman. I couldn’t deal with it. And all the while you had this huge drug culture going on. I was surrounded by drugs. Eventually I hit bottom. I started to see the LES as the end of the line. It was a place for fucked up people who didn’t want to be there and didn’t have anywhere else to go. So I left and ended up in the Upper West Side, which wasn’t all that fancy like it is now; it was the days of needle park.¹ I didn’t really go back to the Lower East Side much until I took my daughter down there in 1988 to see tent city and Tompkins Square Park. That made an extreme impression on her.”

¹ a reference to the 1971 film, Panic in Needle Park, which offers a stark portrayal of life among a group of heroin addicts who hang out in a small park in the Upper West Side.
“As a mother I became interested in mother-child activities. I first became involved at the 92nd Street Y, started as a parent child volunteer and then got involved with the Children’s Museum and started a parent child program there. I worked there for 15 years, built up a really successful program. I educated myself by sitting in on classes at Bank Street and at museums. After the Children’s Museum, I went to the International Center of Photography (ICP). I took classes independently, and I got really involved working with youth. I was assisting but wasn’t allowed to teach classes because no one ever took me seriously as a professional. I didn’t have the credentials.”

“My daughter, Maggie, brought me in to the Girls Club in 1997. When I met Lyn, she told me I should come teach photography with the girls and I did. I volunteered for a year. I won the first volunteer of the year award, and I’ve been there ever since. Girls Club has been like a family because for me it really was family- working alongside Maggie for 15 years has been wonderful.”

**Nidia: Immigrant Mother Finds a Home**

Nidia, an immigrant from the Dominican Republic, has been living in the Lower East Side for 23 years. She started volunteering at the Girls Club when her daughters started attending the afterschool programs. Nidia subsequently transitioned from volunteering to working full-time.

Nidia came to the U.S. from the Dominican Republic in 1990 at age seventeen, first living in Brooklyn and then coming to the Lower East Side. She met her late husband working in a factory in Brooklyn not long after she arrived. Today she has a son, nineteen, two daughters, age eighteen and twelve. Nidia first came into contact with the Girls Club through Maria, whom she would talk with outside Public School 20 when she dropped off her girls in the morning. Maria, a native of Ecuador, is one of the Girls Club’s founders and currently directs younger girls’ programming. Maria encouraged
Nidia to send her daughters to the Girls Club for afterschool programs, and invited her to volunteer in the afternoons.

Like many mothers who become involved with the Girls Club, Nidia started to volunteer more of her time and eventually transitioned into working part-time and subsequently full-time. Nidia explains her seamless transition to full-time employment: “At first I started to volunteer at the Girls Club after my job. I did that for about a year and a half and I mentioned to Maria that I would really love to work at the Girls Club. They agreed, so I began working part-time. I did that for about three months, working at La Tiendita at Essex Market, and then sometimes helping out at the bakery or the café. At the bakery I was learning so many things. I really enjoyed learning how to bake, especially the decoration part of it. I have always enjoyed doing creative art projects, especially painting. I have been working full-time for a few years now. I work the first half of the day at the bakery and the second half of the day helping Maria with the little girls and doing art projects. I enjoy that I get to be so creative with the arts, but I also enjoy that I get to hop around; I never get bored.”

Nidia enjoys working at the Girls Club because it gives her a chance to earn money while spending time with her daughters and other supportive women. As she says: “I think the Girls Club has improved my ability to be a mother. I can now provide more stability for my children. I feel I can count on the Girls Club – it’s like a family.”

**Gina: From Girls Club member to Employee**

*Gina was born and raised in the Lower East Side. She has been involved with the Girls Club since she was 12, and has been employed as a Sweet Things baker for seven years.*

---

1 Interview translated from Spanish. June 2011.
Gina grew up in public housing in the Lower East Side, on Ave. D and 6th Street. Today at age 27, Gina has been involved with the Girls Club for 14 years. She was one of four girls, raised by her mother. Gina is now a mother to a young son and lives on her own with her son in an apartment in a mixed-income building in the neighborhood. She observes: “I thank God for my blessings. I have a 4-year old son and I want to raise my son right. I am a single mom and it’s hard to raise a son. I want him to be a strong, independent man. I want him to have things I didn’t have. My mom had my sister at 15 and me at 17. I remember being 5 years old and living in a shelter and me and my sister sleeping on either side of her pregnant belly on a mat. My mom really struggled.”

Gina explains, “I was introduced to the Girls Club when I was 12 years old by my aunt, Norma, who used to work at the Girls Club and help found it. I joined all of the programs that they had back then. All my sisters and I joined. We really needed something. I learned so much and I grew, as each day went by. I stayed with it until I was 16, when I started working at the Sweet Things Bake Shop. With Sweet Things I figured out that I was good at baking and I loved it.” Gina began a work-study program at ICE (the Institute of Culinary Education) and continued working at the Bake Shop while pursuing a certificate. Today Gina is a baker at the Sweet Things where she fulfills cookie orders, prepares baked goods for La Tiendita and teaches with baking classes.

Like many mothers at the Girls Club, Gina has lived in the Lower East Side through tumultuous years, which have left an imprint on her; she has experienced the harsh realities of gentrification first hand. Gina asserts: “The Girls Club changed me a lot. I became more independent. I grew from a little girl into a lady and into the woman I am today. It changed my values – made me grow as a person. I used to be one of the
little girls and now they look up to me.” She is grateful for the opportunities the Girls Club afforded her as a teenager and now as a young mother and employee. As she conveys: “It is my family; it’s part of my life. I want to see it grow. I want to give back.”

**Maggie: Other Mothering**

*Maggie, who has been living in the Lower East Side since the early 1990’s, started interning at the Girls Club in 1996 and has been working there ever since. She is dedicated to the community, to the girls and their families. While she has no biological children, Maggie has taken on a mothering role in the Lower East Side community.*

“My first memory of the Lower East Side was my mother bringing me down here when there was a tent city inside Tompkins Square Park. I remember it being kind of wild and feeling a little unsafe. As a teen I started taking photos down here; I was really fascinated with the buildings, all the old tenements. I loved seeing all the people, the punks. I was sneaking out, coming down here with my friends going into shops like Patricia Fields and Trash and Vaudville where I later worked as a teenager. I could just feel the energy of the community. Everyone looked different. I identified with the people because I felt I looked different. I’ve always been drawn to outsiders, those living outside the boundaries of normal society. I felt at home here. I had romanticized my mom’s experience in the LES. I moved down here when I was 16; I had graduated from high school early. From age16-20 or so I was modeling and working in (night)clubs. I was part of the whole Club Kid scene.”

“When Lyn offered me an internship, I jumped at the opportunity. From day one, I was here, and I’m still here. I’ve been doing this now for seventeen years. At the beginning, I used to cry a lot, just from taking in all the girls’ stories, but now I can distance myself better. I believe I’ve developed really good relationships with the families and the girls. I am able gain their trust. Over the years, I’ve gotten to know so
many families in this neighborhood. I know all their stories. They know they can call me anytime, and they do. I know every girl that has walked through the Girls Club’s door.”

**Milagros- Mother, Grandmother, Survivor**

*Milagros, who has been working at the Girls Club since 1999, was born and raised in the Lower East Side. Milagros has struggled through economic hardship and emotional losses. Milagros’ two daughters attended the Girls Club and have also worked there part-time over the years.*

“My father and mother are from the Dominican Republic. My father brought my mother over here in the early 1960’s. I was born in 1966. At the time we were living on 8th St and Ave C, right by the Girls Club bakery. Isn’t that something? We moved around a lot! I lived on almost every block in the LES before we got into public housing on Ave D.”

“I had heard about the Girls Club through Norma. Norma is a childhood friend. I have known her for years! Norma had helped start the Girls Club and she told me about it and I wanted to get Katrina and Briani enrolled. Girls Club took them in. It was great because I needed the help and I wanted them there. I started to volunteer at the Girls Club in 1999, this is when they were at the Cornelia Connelly Center.¹ My daughter kept talking about it and was telling me to come in so I finally did. So I volunteered in the kitchen for a bit and then I was hired to come in and cook a meal for the girls in the kitchen once a week and I would volunteer the other days. Eventually, they got me a Wednesday night gig and that expanded to two days and then three and then full-time in Sweet Things kitchen and later La Tiendita.”

“My oldest daughter, Katrina was studying at BMCC, CUNY but she quit when she became pregnant. She has worked with the Girls Club, La Tiendita off and on, and

---

¹ Cornelia Connelly is a Catholic middle school on 4th Street between 1st between Ave A and Ave B that serves predominately low-income Hispanic students from the Lower East Side. see [http://www.conellycenter.org/](http://www.conellycenter.org/)
also at the local Whole Foods. Now she is working again in the Sweet Things kitchen and catering Girls Club events. She lives with her baby nearby in a subsidized apartment and that helps cause I can babysit. I help pay her rent and light bill and she’s also on food stamps. I prepare meals for her several nights a week. I am happy to be working with her again at the Girls Club.”

The women who make up the Girls Club reflect and embody the class, racial and ethnic diversity of the Lower East Side. They have drawn upon traditional female identities to justify taking actions to improve their community and the lives of their families.¹ Women working for the Girls Club, develop their identity in dialogue with the concrete activities that shape their daily resistance to inequality and injustice. Childhood memories of, and personal life experiences with racism, sexism, violence and poverty their commitment to creating opportunities for young women in the LES and their belief in the Girls Club. In connecting through shared experiences and a collective history of the neighborhood, these women find common ground from which to envision and struggle for a better future for the next generation of girls coming of age in the LES.²

While the Girls Club has long been a female centered network and feminine space, as of 2013, the gender dynamic has changed. Two men have joined the Girls Club staff and still others are in the Girls Club Center for Community building occupying the community partners’ offices. In this new chapter of the Girls Club, the women are working alongside male allies; it will be interesting to see what they are able to accomplish working across gender lines, and whether this new dynamic will affect the caring and supportive environment the Girls Club has cultivated over the years.

¹ Naples, N. 1998. p. 12, see also Susser 1982; Bookman and Morgen ed. 1988
Nevertheless, even as men have come onboard staff, the majority of programming and services will be limited to women and girls. I return to this issue of planning for co-ed programming towards the end of this chapter.

**Visionary Leadership**

![Figure 2: Women Leading the Way in the LES: (Left to Right) Lyn Pentecost, then District Leader Rosie Mendez, then Councilwoman Margarita Lopez, Mary Spink of Mutual Housing, Veronica Ballass Manager of Lower East Side People’s Federal Credit Union](image)

Since the Girls Club’s founding in 1996, Lyn, the Executive Director, has been the driving force behind the organization’s growth and success. Above all, she has demonstrated great skill at building organizational capacity and grassroots organizing, fundraising, and cultivating political allies. Lyn could be described as a modern day equivalent of Jane Addams or Lillian Wald, reinventing the settlement house for the 21st century. Through her work with the Girls Club she is practicing engaged anthropology, a

---

1 At the ribbon cutting ceremony for the opening of the Lower East Side People’s Credit Union. Lyn Pentecost, Executive Director of the Girls Club, then District Leader Rosie Mendez, then Councilwoman Margarita Lopez, leader of the Mutual Housing Association, Mary Spink, and Credit Union manager, Veronica Ballass see: 2012, *The Villager*, “Mary Spink, Affordable Housing Advocate and Member of CB3.” [http://thevillager.com/2012/01/26/mary-spink-affordable-housing-advocate-c-b-3-member/](http://thevillager.com/2012/01/26/mary-spink-affordable-housing-advocate-c-b-3-member/)
commitment to supporting social change efforts that arise from the interaction between community goals and anthropological research.¹

Prior to making the Girls Club her life’s work, Lyn led another life as an adjunct professor in the Metropolitan Studies Program at New York University. She had studied Art and Architecture at Cooper Union as an undergraduate, and received her doctorate from Temple University in Anthropology where she studied with filmmaker Jean Rouch² and conducted fieldwork in Chiapas, Mexico and New York City. While Lyn grew up in northern New Jersey, she is just one generation removed from the Lower East Side. She returned in the 1960’s to attend Cooper Union and settled in the LES permanently in the 1970’s, homesteading³ on 1st Street with her husband. Since arriving in the LES Lyn has dedicated herself to arts, education and advocacy work. She chaired the board for Coalition Housing Development, which helped develop hundreds of affordable housing units on the Lower East Side.⁴

Through this prior community organizing work Lyn was connected with a core group of female leadership in the Lower East Side, women who gained experience as organizers and service providers in the 1960’s-80’ and who have remained influential and politically active in the community. Women such as Margarita Lopez, Rosie Mendez, France Goldin, Damaris Reyes and the late Mary Sphinx have served as power brokers

¹ Engaged Anthropology as defined by the American Anthropological Association http://www.aaanet.org/about/whatisanthropology.cfm
² Jean Rouch was a French filmmaker and anthropologist who spent most of his adult life filming in Nigeria. His “ethnographic” films were met with controversy because they blur the line between fiction and documentary. He is considered to be one of the founders of cinéma-vérité. See. Jean Rouch Website: http://der.org/jean-rouch
³ The homesteading movement in the Lower East Side was led by liberal reformers who supported the goal of affordable housing and began occupying abandoned buildings en masse. By the late 1970’s the city started granting legal titles and financial assistance to prospective owner-occupants willing to rehabilitate them. See. Van Kleunen 1994 and Abu-Lughod, J. 1994. “The Battle for Tompkins Square Park”
⁴ Lyn has been active in other progressive community organizations such as The Lower Eastside Hispanic Housing Coalition, The Collegiate Church of New York, and The Federation of East Village Artists (FEVA).
between the city government and the neighborhood, and key allies in mobilizing for a Girls Club.¹ Over the years, these women have gained access to political channels including the city council and community board, leading housing advocacy and social service agencies.

Lyn developed close relationships with neighborhood moms at the Children’s Liberation Day Care Center in the LES. Despite being the mother of two sons, both of whom participated in afterschool and summer programming at the local Boys’ Clubs, Lyn was outraged that girls were excluded from such services and allied with women working towards addressing this gender imbalance. While the founding women worked as a collective, it was apparent, early on, that Lyn had the capacity to lead. When the organization registered for 501(c)(3)² status, Lyn was nominated to direct the project. By the mid-90’s Lyn had been involved in local politics and grassroots organizing for twenty years.³ She knew everyone in the neighborhood, and she knew how to make things happen. Former Councilwoman Margarita Lopez, in her speech for the opening ceremony of the new Girls Club building, identifies the qualities that make Lyn the leader of the mobilization:

*I want to single out Lyn for one reason. Not because I believe that leaders are the ones that make a movement, because I don’t believe that, no I don’t believe that. I believe it is the masses that makes thing happen and then they select a voice to speak for them. I want to single out Lyn for one reason, one single reason. It’s always needed a conscience in a movement, and the conscience is the one that never quit. It’s the one that make the voice loud. It’s the one that sometimes we don’t like what the voice say. It’s the one that sometimes annoys you. And it’s the one that sometimes

¹ Martinez, M. 2010 p. 19
² 501(c)(3) status refers to charitable (non-profit) organizations that are tax-exempt under section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code. Notably, 501(c)(3) organizations are restricted in participating in “political and legislative” activities. see: U.S. Internal Revenue Service: http://www.irs.gov/
³ The topic of Lyn’s Ph.D. dissertation grassroots community organizing and housing politics in the Lower East Side.
you say, “why am I dreaming with this woman for God’s sake!” And I want to single out her because every endeavor that requires the growth of humanity must have a voice like that [pointing to Lyn].

Charismatic Leadership

As a leader, Lyn is equally charismatic and authoritarian. Her unwavering vision serves to inspire and motivate. And yet this same guiding leadership also creates a hierarchical structure within the organization. From day one, Lyn has dedicated herself to the mission of the Girls Club with a relentless passion. It has become her life’s work. She has been the force field driving the Girls Club’s success. Jane, Girls Club staffer, describes Lyn as “insisting, pushing nonstop, constantly talking about the Girls Club.” Maggie describes how, “Lyn has her hand in everything. She dealing with the building, with all the fundraising, and all the program details, and design details of all our materials. I don’t think she sleeps.”

Lyn expects her staff to follow her leading, exhibiting a self-less dedication to the girls, a love of the Lower East Side, a belief in the Girls Club’s mission, a passion for social change, and a willingness to work hard and adapt as needed. “It is definitely a "go big or go home" kind of environment,” as one staffer described. Jane similarly speaks of Lyn’s drive; “Her vision is to expose the girls to the best and provide the best. She always said ‘when the girls arrive, you should drop everything and focus on them. Put the child first, always. They are why we are here.’ I always remind myself of that, remind myself of the value of making that connection, to be present, to be there and be welcoming.”

Stella, former Girls Club staffer, reflects on Lyn’s creed of role modeling and consistency: “Lyn insisted that modeling for the girls is very important, leading by your

---

1 Max Weber defined charismatic authority as "resting on devotion to the exceptional sanctity, heroism or exemplary character of an individual person, and of the normative patterns or order revealed or ordained by him." Weber, M. 1968 p. 215
actions in terms of what you eat, what you wear, how you act. You must be a constant in
the girls’ lives.”

Jane observes that hard-work, time, energy, self-less dedication and commitment
are integral to Girls Club culture. She explains: “us old folks are used to doing whatever
Lyn asks of us, stay late, come early, work seven days a week if need be.” Maggie who’s
been with the Girls Club since the beginning concurred: “It’s a 100% effort; the Girls
Club requires a 100%. It’s not a 9-5 job; there are no boundaries. It’s whatever it takes,
for as long as it takes.”

Given the organizational culture of long-hours and collaboration, staffers develop
a sense of camaraderie and come to recognize the Girls Club as family. Jane observes:
“All the women on staff support each other and help each other deal with the stress. It’s
easy to burnout and loose that spark. We help renew it in each other.” Likewise Stella, a
former Girls Club staffer observes: “The Girls Club is like a family: dysfunctional and
completely loving! Like any group of strong-headed women, it has its tough moments.
People are passionate, and opinionated, and speaking your mind is valued, though we
don’t always agree. But there is a lot of encouragement too. It’s supportive. You never
feel alone and you’re never left on your own to do a project. Everyone helps. I would say
it’s a happy dysfunctional family.”

While Lyn is highly respected among the women who work at the Girls Club, her
relentless drive, and command and control style push staffers to their limit. Lyn sets a
high standard for her staff, as one associated noted: “When the mentality is “anything is
possible,” Lyn doesn’t take no for an answer. For her, its, ‘Figure it out. Find a way.’”
Leadership Succession

There are limits to the non-profit structure in terms of democratic governance. As Stella comments: “The non-profit structure makes it difficult for the Girls Club to be a democratic place. It’s a tough structure because the Board of Directors\(^1\), the Executive Director, and all the funders have the final say. It’s part of my frustration with the limits of nonprofits.” And this is a key contradiction that is characteristic of many, if not a majority, of non-profits, the Girls Club professes an egalitarian vision and yet its organizational structure is hierarchical. While people have challenged Lyn’s authority within the organization, Lyn’s leadership has been a key factor in the Girls Club’s success. Which raises the question, what is the Girls Club in the absence of her charismatic leadership?

Stella speaks of Lyn’s commanding leadership: “Lyn is a full presence; devoting their body mind and soul to the organization. She’s the visionary and she is a good fundraiser. It’s money that allows the Girls Club to do such amazing work. It’s hard to see anyone filling her shoes.” To this comment, Jane adds, “the Board realized that there is no Girls Club without Lyn. She makes everything happen.” As the organization expands however, Lyn’s ability to single-handedly lead, motivate and manage a growing staff will be challenged.

\(^1\) The Board of Directors plays an active role in helping to develop and maintain the sustainability of the organization. Where as AGYP Board of Directors was made up of all men, all of whom are involved in investment banking, finance and real estate, the Girls Club’s Board of Directors represents a diverse spectrum of (mostly) women who are social conscious leaders in their respective fields. Current Board Members include: Lyn Pentecost, Selena Ching (Communications), Julia Cheiffetz, (Amazon Publishing); Rosario Dawson (Actress); Tricia Donegan (Yoga instructor/studio owner); Jen Gatien (film producer); Judith Helfand (film-maker, media-activist); Steve Perricone (banker); Bruni Pabon (retired teacher); Rosie Rodriguez (graduate student); Mariana Salem (New Museum); Rachel Weingeist (Rubin Foundation); Ian Blumengstein (Lawyer); Lisa Laukitis (Lawyer); Barry Berg (architect); Veronica Bailin; Jacqui Lewis (Middle Collegiate Church) Potential candidates for the Board include: Carter Emmart (Hayden Planetarium, Natural Museum of History)
The most dramatic power struggle came ten years ago when the Board of Directors asked Lyn to step down from her role as Executive Director and redirect her efforts towards the capital fundraising campaign for the then planned facility. Some board members were aiming to curtail Lyn’s reach and limit her power within the organization, which had expanded over the years as other founding mothers had stepped back from direct involvement in the Girls Club. Lyn stepped back obligingly, but within a year, the two replacement Executive Directors hired on by the Board to fill Lyn’s shoes had both resigned, at which time the Board of Directors, with the backing of the Girls Club staff, formally invited Lyn back as Executive Director.

The question of organizational succession is significant for all community-based organizations founded by charismatic leaders. Many non-profits suffer from “founders syndrome” or the over reliance on one leader. Mission driven community-based organizations are often preoccupied with organizing efforts, service-delivery, and relentless fundraising, such that their focus is on meeting immediate needs and short-term goals. In this environment, long-term “succession planning” is not a top priority. Moreover, grassroots organizations tend to be committed to hiring ‘nonprofessionals’ who may lack a formal education but who bring experiential knowledge and skills to the job. Despite efforts to foster a horizontal leadership structure, non-profits, at the behest of funders, often develop a hierarchy based educational credentials and management skills; founders are heavily relied upon to fulfill leadership tasks in managing funding, operations and staffing. In the case of the Girls Club, since the founding, the organization

---

2. Block 2004; Schmidt, E. 2013
3. Incite 2007
has been fighting to sustain programmatic operations while lacking a stable home base and simultaneously raising capital to build a facility. In this struggle to stay afloat, common among many non-profits, the Girls Club has not had the time or capacity to strategically plan for a transition in leadership.

Now that the Girls Club is stable and securely housed in a facility, it is time to plan for the future. To ensure for long-term stability and success, the organization will have to resolve the foundational question of leadership succession and create a more transparent and democratic organizational structure. Towards this end, the Girls Club is trying to establish a more integrated leadership model, one in which strategic decisions are made collectively. With an integrated model, the power of the executive director is balanced by an active and engaged Board of Directors, an emboldened staff, invested funders and community study.¹ In striving to develop a leadership structure that is collective and horizontal, the Girls Club also aims to avoid becoming a bureaucratic, corporatized organization that is no longer grounded in and guided by the LES community. The question remains, the degree to which Girls Club will succeed in doing so. The shape and form the leadership takes today, will impact the politics and practice of the organization in the future.

**The Building Campaign**

From day one, Lyn wanted a Girls Club building and her focus on this goal was steadfast over the years. She contends: “I've been in community arts and the nonprofit world my entire life. Programs come and go. But buildings are like diamonds. It's the only way to become a permanent fixture in the neighborhood.”² Former City

---

¹ Cohen 2012; Edgington 2012
² Chamberlain, L. 2005
Councilwoman Margarita Lopez, awarded the Girls Club conditional control of land (at a cost of $1) on Avenue D between 7th and 8th Streets, which was T-shaped lot that covered more than 15,000 square feet. On winning this space, Former Councilwoman Margarita Lopez reflects: “While on the City Council I helped secure the land where they will construct the future Lower East Side Girls Club. It was difficult because this was one of the last big empty lots left in the neighborhood. That was part of my contribution to the community of which I am most proud. We struggled hard for it and we made it happen.”

The New York Economic Development Corporation granted the Girls Club rights to the land in January of 2002 under Bloomberg. In order to build on the land, however, the Girls Club had to agree to allow for housing above the facility space. The first three floors were to be devoted to the Girls Club facility, and the rest would consist of mixed-income housing. Unhappy with this ultimatum, the Girls Club fought for 50% of the housing for low and middle-income residents (the norm for new developments in NYC is 20% affordable, 80% market rate). Before even securing the land, the Girls Club recruited the architecture firm, Cutsogeorge, Tooman and Allen (CTA) Architects, to design a “Green” (LEED gold standard) Girls Club facility, with a female architect, Christa Waring, leading the project. CTA worked pro bono for years on the project. As an undergraduate Lyn had minored in Architecture at The Cooper Union School of Art, studying under the architects, John Hejduk and Paolo Soleri. Given her background and

——

2 Prior to Mayor Bloomberg, Mayor Giuliani refused to release this plot of land to the Girls Club. Pro-business Mayor Bloomberg recognized the potential of having a community organization “tame” an large empty lot in frontier edge of the Lower East Side where genetrifying forces had not yet reached. As part of the bargain to build on this land, the Girls Club had to compromise to having condos built on top of the Girls Club. The Girls Club made sure that 50% of the housing built would be affordable housing.
3 Over the years, CTA has also welcomed Girls Club interns into their office so the girls could gain exposure to the field of architecture and participate in the design process of the new building. See Chamberlain, L. 2005
training, Lyn was intimately involved with all the details related to designing the Girls Club building.

Gaining access to the land and partnering with CTA was the beginning of a long campaign to raise funding and solidify community backing for the building project. The Girls Club had to pressure local politicians to secure its hold on the land parcel. For a while there was speculation that it might be sold off to developers as the pursuit of construction capital dragged on. The Girls Club had to occupy and lay claim to its own land in order to secure it. To do so, it organized a Community Farmers Market on the land every summer and fall in order to officially occupy it while also providing access to fresh, local fruits and vegetables on Ave. D, which had heretofore been a food desert. The Girls Club routinely organized mothers and daughters to (unofficially) lobby\textsuperscript{1} at City Hall chanting songs and holding up signs that read “we need a girls club miracle.” These actions rallied public support for the cause but keeping enthusiasm up was difficult. The Girls Club faced the challenge of organizing a campaign around a mere vision. By mid decade, some funders started to doubt that the Girls Club had the capacity to turn an empty lot into a state-of-the art community facility. Some suggested that Lyn tone down her building aspirations, but she never backed down, and neither did the local political leaders: Councilwoman Margarita Lopez and her successor Rosie Mendez, as well as Congresswoman Nydia Velasquez. With sheer perseverance, slowly, over the years, the Girls Club pieced together the necessary capital and in October 2010, the Girls Club broke ground. It would take another three years of construction to complete the facility.

\textsuperscript{1} As an organization with 501(c)(3) status the Girls Club is prohibited from engaging in official lobbying practices.
In order to build the new facility the Girls Club was forced to engage with the politics of real estate, development and finance in New York City. Of this compromising encounter, Maggie remarks: “Lyn has had to deal with so much. It’s been a never ending shit-show the past two years with complications with the building: dealing with the construction company and the new market tax credits; local developers trying to bilk us for money and holding up construction until we pay. On top over everything, our building developer went ahead and finished the construction of the condos almost a year before finishing the Girls Club facility. The building has been way behind schedule, and the Girls Club has been getting screwed along the way because we’re the non-profit.” The building campaign and protracted battle with developers and financers, lasting over a decade, inevitably took a toll on the morale and motivation of the organization’s leadership. The fact that the Girls Club refused to give in or back down in the struggle to build its Center for Community speaks to the determination and solidarity of the women behind it. As former City Councilwoman Margarita Lopez commented at the groundbreaking ceremony: “I think that what is coming is just the beginning, we’re going to make history like we’ve never made it before.”\(^1\)

**Non-Profit Fundraising in Bloomberg’s New York**

And yet this triumph comes at a price. Since officially obtaining the land in 2002, the Girls Club has had the mammoth task of raising $20 million dollars to construct the facility. Aside from this capital fundraising campaign for the new building, the organization has had to relentlessly apply for grants to sustain its operation costs. With each passing year fundraising has required more energy and resources as the grant-writing and reporting process have become more time-consuming and tedious. It has

---

\(^1\) Hedlund, P. 2010.
been challenging for the staff to keep up with donor driven programmatic demands. As Jane explains: “The Girls Club is more grant driven now, less organic. We have all sorts of financial obligations. This whole building project has been major. It’s big time. And it’s taken a big toll on Lyn.”

In fundraising and development, the Girls Club has struggled to remain true to its grassroots progressive ethos. Again Jane testifies to this predicament: “Over the years more bigwig people were brought in, out of necessity, because we needed money, and those people to bring in money. To get the money you have to have money. And to survive we needed to tap into more of that NYC money. Lyn reluctantly caters to some of their wishes because she doesn’t have a choice.”

As a relatively modest non-profit youth organization, the Girls Club has had to piece together countless sources of funding each year to stay afloat. Unlike many of the more established youth development organizations in Lower East Side it does not rely on big federal government grants, in part because it is too small to access many of the federal block grants, nor does it have an army of grant-writers to do so. Instead, the Girls Club receives a combination of small grants from smaller foundations in addition to city government grants such as from DYCD (New York City Department of Youth and Community Development – a new agency started by Bloomberg).

The woman who crafts this jigsaw puzzle of funding grants and keeps the Girls Club afloat is Anne. Fundraising for the organization for fifteen years and working alongside Lyn, has allowed Anne to cultivate a strategic network of funders and

---

1 The Girls Club has received a select few federal grants over the years. Girls Club received the USDA Community Food Project Grant in 2003, 2006, and 2009 to run its farmers’ market and subsequent CSA and it received a US Department of Juvenile Justice Grant in 2008 for a job-training program (see Chapter 6 for full description of programs).
philanthropists needed to sustain the Girls Club. Clearly, Anne has played a critical role in establishing the Girls Club, and yet as a fundraiser she is often removed from the day-to-day struggles program staffers confront. As is common in many non-profits there is an “upstairs/downstairs” divide between the Development/Fundraising (grant-writing) staff, which at the Girls Club is only two people, and the larger Program Staff. In this case, while program staff are held accountable for keeping the promises and meeting “deliverables”; they are not always involved in the initial design process where the deliverables are decided. Herein lies another limitation of the non-profit organizational structure, the design and direction of the organization is not decided upon through a democratic process or consensus. Non-profits are in the disadvantaged position of having to rely upon, and thus accommodate the demands of foundations.

Audit Culture

Over the years donors have pushed for professionalization and accountability in the form of reporting, monitoring and evaluation. It has become harder for program staff to meet funder expectations, just as it has become harder for public school teachers to meet rising standards of accountability (often directly tied to test score “outcomes”). This trend has been referred to as “audit culture,” in which “accountability” becomes the defining criterion of program evaluation.¹

Kate Crehan describes how community arts organizations in London have been impacted by this turn, noting that grant funding is hedged with demands that ‘targets’ and ‘outcomes’ be clearly specified in a way that allows for quantifiable assessment: “anything that cannot be counted or assigned a numerical value tends to be dismissed” (Crehan 2011, 138). This mandate for monitoring and evaluation has intensified over the

¹ Strathern 2000
years with funders requiring detailed ‘outcomes’ for every aspect of a program. Such funding requirements are often complex, contradictory, baffling. Because the Girls Club does qualitative work, by way of developing relationships with girls and their families and achieving small successes over time, it is nearly impossible to identify, much less, itemize and quantify “outcomes.” In a study of community based non-profits in New York, Fabricant and Fisher (2002) argue that the audit culture has negatively impacted many organizations: “the process and qualitative dimensions of the social service experience are traded off in favor of quantitative indices of output or outcome…eroding the conditions necessary for trust, reciprocity, empathetic connection and relational continuity” (237).

Audit culture is part of a systemic change in social governance structures. Nonmarket institutions such as non-governmental, non-profit, and civil society associations are being recasted in the image of the for-profit corporation. David Harvey (2005) describes how the market has become the principal arbiter in the allocation of goods, services, wealth, and income in society. This transition to a corporate funding structure and an “audit culture” in the non-profit sector has major implications for grassroots organizations like the Girls Club. It redirects organizational energy and resources towards development, fundraising, and administration and away from programming, service provision, and organizing work. Once a grassroots organization becomes reliant on outside funding for economic survival, the goals of the funding source frequently determine program design. In addition, the process of researching and applying for funds requires a great deal of organizational time resources and highly
skilled labor in the form of grant writers. This funding structure restricts an organization’s autonomy and ability to flexibly act and respond to the community, limits the range of possible projects it can take on, reduces funds and ties incoming funds to stringent obligations and time frames, and destabilizes an organization because funding streams are unpredictable.

Organizations like the Girls Club are being asked to do more with less, which means the it has to cut corners, stretch resources, juggle funding streams, and in general “make do.” Fabricant and Fisher (2002) have described how the logic of the market is penetrating non-profit organizations, with government contracts and grant administration as a tool of privatization—through increasing audits, more accountability, demands for productivity and attention to “outputs.” DeFilippis et al. (2010), likewise point out that “efficiency, accountability, the bottom line, cost-saving, worker productivity, and entrepreneurialism are the watchwords in contemporary not-for-profit governance.” With the marketization of the non-profit sector, employment is often project-based, temporary, or part-time and hence workers are increasingly overworked, underpaid, and demoralized. Operating under these constraints ultimately redirects organizations’ priorities and constrains meaningful work in the direction of social change.

Maggie speaks to this challenge at the Girls Club, explaining: “Now we have all these reporting and funder deliverables. It’s more donor driven. And there is always the problem of the disconnect between the development [fundraising] staff and the programming staff; they [development staff] promise the moon to win these grants and its just impossible to meet the deliverables given our limited staff, resources and [then]

---

1 DeFilippis et al. 2010 see also Grosser, 1973; Piven and Cloward 1977; Naples, 1998; Alvarez, 1999; Fabricant and Fisher 2002
space.” Even the girls are starting to feel the pressures of high-stakes fundraising. One teenage girl comments: “I feel that the Girls Club is having to push for too much of this money thing, which I understand is needed, but it’s losing sight of what’s important, helping girls like me find their way.”

With funding for non-profits increasingly limited and more restricted each year, the Girls Club has had to be extremely creative in raising funds. The financial crisis of 2008 led to even more prohibitory cuts in the non-profit service sector in NYC. The Girls Club has struggled against compromising its values in an effort to appease donor driven mandates. It is a on-going struggle for the Girls Club to stay afloat without selling out. As noted above, in Maggie’s and Ariel’s comments, meeting deliverables and raising sufficient funds is a constant challenge, draining the energy and spirits of staffers and girls alike, but somehow Girls Club staffers make it work, in part because the Girls Club does not bow down to funders’ demands.

Critics highlighting the limits of the non-profit profit structure have referred to it as the “non-profit industrial complex” (NPIC).¹ They raise questions addressing the ways and means through which the mechanism of government and foundation funding constrains and undermines work for transformative social change by creating a “donor driven” model that creates competition among organizations and fractures the movement for social change. Critics furthermore point to how nonprofits, in shouldering the social burden of service provision, inadvertently contain unrest resulting from rollback of social

¹ The nonprofit industrial complex refers to the network of private foundations, service organizations, charities, and institutionalized movement groups, that operate under the IRS provision, 501c(3), which exempts them from income tax. See. INCITE 2007. Similar critiques have been raised about Non-governmental organizations (NGO’s) which are the international equivalent of non-profits. For an analysis of global civil society and the politics of women’s NGO’s see Alvarez 1999, McCarthy, 2001, Smyth 2000, Cornwall et al. 2006, Jad 2006.
welfare provisions. In addressing the challenges of the non-profit funding structure, Amara Perez (2007) has described how funding is difficult to raise, unpredictable, and inconsistent, and that ultimately “over time, funding trends actually come to influence our work, priorities, and direction as we struggle to remain competitive and funded in the movement market.” Furthermore, maintaining professionalized and businesslike practices absorbs time and energy away from efforts to fight for social change and denigrates political integrity. Despite these limitations however, Perez maintains it is still possible for nonprofits to maintain their “political edge and revolutionary commitment.” Likewise, Rachel Wright in her studies of contemporary non-profit culture describes how employees strive to provide high-quality care while bringing about social change within the confines of an increasingly corporatized structure. I argue that the Girls Club straddles this edge, pushing back against the limitations of the non-profit structure and carefully navigating the fundraising terrain, creatively deploying funds for progressive projects, and manipulating the system to its own advantage. As one staffer observes: “There are always a lot of deliverables, but the Girls Club doesn’t just aim to meet the deliverables; its not frightened that everything has to be perfect for funding deliverables. It just does it. The Girls Club always finds a way to do what it wants.”

**Entrepreneurial Endeavors**

Over the years the Girls Club has developed small-scale social enterprises: Sweet Things Bake Shop (est. 2000) and *La Tiendita* Fair Trade Gift Shop at Essex Market (est 2005). The Girls Club values the education, training and employment opportunities these programs provide. Any income generated feeds back into the sustaining the programs.

---

1 Perez, A.H. 2007, p. 97. see also Wright, R. 2013.
2 Wright, R. 2013
La Tiendita is the Girls Club’s fair trade/girl-made gift shop at the historic Lower East Side’s Essex Market. The shop, which is run by neighborhood women and girls, sells crafts and handmade items from women’s collectives around the world, in addition to baked goods from Sweet Things and “Made by Us” product line. Women working in La Tiendita participate in trainings on Fair Trade, Financial Literacy and Accounting.

Sweet Things combines instruction in the culinary arts (baking and cooking), training in catering and service, with nutritional education for women and girls in the LES. Sweet Things first operated out of a community kitchen on 4th Street followed by a small bake shop on Avenue C. It now operates out of the new Girls Club facility on Ave D, where there is both a professional kitchen for culinary instruction and a semi-public café space. Sweet Things specializes in butter cookies, cupcakes among, other baked goods, which are sold at La Tiendita gift shop in addition to custom orders for holidays, catering and special events. In recent years it has expanded to products using vegetables and fruits from local farmers and working from recipes of Girls Club mothers and grandmothers (an example of one such product is Sofrito). The Sweet Things kitchen also prepares healthy snacks and meals for the girls on a daily basis, and functions as a

1 Under the guidelines of Essex Market, La Tiendita must have a food oriented focus, hence the emphasis on “made by us” kitchen items.
2 Since 2012 the women and girls participating sewing classes have created their own “made by us” line of kitchen items (aprons and potholders). Many of the products are use the fabric line created by comedian, Amy Sedearis is author of Simple Times: Crafts for Poor People (2010), in which she pokes fun at the elitism of crafting and I Like You, Hospitality Under the Influence (2006), in which she chides women’s return to the kitchen.
3 The café in the new Girls Club facility serves as a communal gathering space for the girls and staff, as space for eating meals and holding community luncheons. The Girls Club also occasionally rents out the space for children’s birthday parties (generating some income). In the future the aim is to open the café space for brunch on Sundays and weekday breakfast hours.
catering company for ongoing events held at the new facility. In 2014 Sweet Things expanded its free culinary and nutritional education classes to community groups.¹

Girls Club entrepreneurial programs, Sweet Things and La Tiendita, are not income generators for the organization. While sales may bring in a modest income, overall the programs are not profitable.² As the Executive Director, Lyn, conveys: “for every cupcake we sell for a dollar, it takes us $1.75 to make… everyone asks how do we sustain it? The answer is fundraising. We find the money elsewhere to support these programs.” This comment speaks to an acknowledgement that the market driven push for non-profits to generate income and become self-sustaining through entrepreneurial endeavors is problematic. DeFilippis et al. (2010) have described how community organizations have been forced into business ownership or creating social enterprises as a means to sustaining their mission and work as government and foundation funding dwindles away. And yet this premise poses a contradiction: community organizations such as the Girls Club have a mission to produce a social good rather than profit. In this case, Sweet Things and La Tiendita are designed to educate and employ women in the neighborhood, as opposed to exploit them and extract a profit for the Girls Club.

The newest training and employment program at the Girls Club is the “Mom Squad”³, which recruits women from the public housing projects in the LES.⁴ The year

---

¹Community Culinary and Nutrition classes are being piloted with a group of women that have been impacted by domestic violence and trafficking (Sanctuary for Families). These weekly classes are oriented around representing the diverse culinary traditions of the women’s country of origin.
²Sweet Things brings in around 7% of the Girls Club annual revenue. More money goes into the running the program and is gained through sales (i.e. there is no profit). Funds are distributed within the organization to sustain the training program.
³It is not a requisite to be a mom to join the “mom squad”. While the majority of the six women hired are mothers, one of the women is not a mother. The name “mom squad” is used to connote “mothering” to Girls Club members.
⁴In 2014 Girls Club received funding from NYCHA (NYC Housing Authority) for training and employing NYCHA residents.
long program entails four components: 1. Educational classes in financial literacy, nutrition, resume creation/interviewing, and computer literacy 2. Employment at La Tiendit 3. Working as Girls Club docents and facility guides and 4. Participating in community education classes (Writing, Sewing, Cooking, Health/Wellness (yoga, body movement)). The “Mom Squad” stems from an effort, on behalf of the Girls Club, to educate and employ women in the LES. Again, as Lyn explains, “These women need jobs, experience and opportunity. These corporate entrepreneurial training modules that are so popular now, don’t address the question ‘why are there not jobs out there?’; they are selling phony paradigm. We take a different approach here.” This commitment to creating employment for women, mothers and teenage girls, in the LES, speaks to the progressive impulse underlying the Girls Club’s entrepreneurial programming.

**Creative Fundraising**

The progressive agenda of community-based organizations such as the Girls Club, is inherently undermined by the funding structure of the non-profit model which favors bureaucratization and formalization. Agencies and organizations emulating professional and corporate practices are able to raise more funds, but do so at the expense of their autonomy and connection with a community base. Many non-profit organizations have been run into the ground with building expenses, operations’ costs, and infighting over budget allocations. Many small-scale grassroots organizations lack the professional knowledge and skills to win competitive funding grants and if they do, they may fail to efficiently manage the funds. At the opposite end of the spectrum, corporate style non-profits, often have a team of grant writing and money management professionals, and are thus able to obtain the funding and government contracts to sustain themselves, but in

---

1 Stephen 1997; INCITE 2007
doing so these organizations grow so large they loose touch with their grassroots base.\textsuperscript{1}

The Girls Club is unique in that it has remained small and grounded in community over the years, yet it has been very skillful in fundraising and management. Thus far, the Girls Club has gotten by with one development/fundraising officer, Anne, and Lyn as the grant writer. As a team they have been able to raise and manage sufficient funds to sustain and grow the organization.

In an effort to elide the pitfalls of ‘Audit Culture’ the Girls Club devotes a lot of time and energy toward raising independent funds. To do so, it has had to be extraordinarily savvy, and sophisticated in raising funds, allocating resources and meeting funders requirements. The Girls Club devotes a lot of energy towards raising funds that do not have strings attached. Three strategies include: a) holding ongoing special events and celebrations to independently raise funds without strings attached, and b) establishing a broad social network of small individual donors as well as progressive philanthropists and c) securing partnerships in the new facility.

One of the most successful means of raising funds without strings attached has been creating annual celebratory events, such as “Cocktails for Camp”, “Mardi Gras” and the “Walk-a-thon for Women and Girls Health.” Another strategy has been to recruit a team of NYC Marathon runners each of who pledge to raise $5,000 each. The running team annually raises around $50,000. In the new Center for Community, additional revenue sources include renting out Baker Hall for events (which is happening on a weekly basis), and making strategic alliances with organizational partners such as BioBus and REEL Lives who help cover building expenses and share incoming funding from

\textsuperscript{1} Fabricant and Fisher 2002; DeFilippis et al. 2010
grants. Through creative fundraising strategies such as these the Girls Club manages to piece together a patchwork of independent funds.¹

Remarkably the Girls Club successfully raised the $20 million to completely pay for the new Center for Community facility in its entirety. In other words, the organization is not saddled with mortgage payment or high rents, which is no small feat of accomplishment in Bloomberg’s New York. The fact that the Girls Club has no real estate debt is significant but it does not mean the organization can easily sustain itself going forward. The Girls Club now faces the challenge of raising enough funds to cover a rising budget that includes operational costs and a growing staff. Looking ahead, the question of sustainability looms large. And a recent partnership with Hollywood and fashion industry insider, Tyra Banks, raises the question of whether the Girls Club has compromised its soul in order to realize its dream of building a Center for Community.

The Tyra TZONE Compromise

The completion and opening of the new Girls Club Center for Community represented that the organization had arrived the big-leagues of the New York City not-for-profit establishment. Clearly the Girls Club was no longer relegated to the “grassroots.” And yet, on the ground, organizational programming and operations went on as normal. The Girls Club had a now room of its own, but after successfully fundraising for the building for seventeen years, it was now back to square one, with limited funds to outfit the building, scale up staff and expand programming. The Girls Club had the good fortune of now living “rent/mortgage free” (having paid for the facility

¹ For the fiscal year 2012, the Girls Club’s operating budget consisted of: 7% Earned Income Initiatives (Sweet Things/La Tiendita), 12% Foundations, 23% Individuals, 30% Government (City, State, Federal), 5% In-Kind donations, and 23% from Special Events such as Mardi Gras/Walk-a-Thon. Of this budget 86% of the funds went directly to program services while 14% went to fundraising and administration. See Lower Eastside Girls Club website: http://www.girlsclub.org
outright), but it now faced higher operational costs just to keep the lights on, heat running and the kitchen operational. For many years, the mentality was “If you build it, they (funders) will come”\(^1\), but in 2012 the Girls Club needed raise capital for the transition, and it needed to do so quickly. A partnership with the Tyra Banks TZONE Foundation emerged as a possible solution. Thus, in 2012, the Girls Club formalized a three-year partnership with the TZONE Foundation.

Tyra saw the new Girls Club Center for Community as an opportunity to expand the foundation’s mission.\(^2\) As part of this three-year contract (2013-2016) Tyra has committed to raising three million dollars to run an empowerment program at the Girls Club.\(^3\) Girls Club Development Director, Anne explains that, “After reevaluating her charitable interests, she (Tyra) approached the Girls Club about making the TZONE more of an actual space that girls could come to, instead of just a grant-making foundation that gives out money. She wanted to build upon the concept of supporting girls’ leadership and self-esteem programs, and build a space that would be accessible for the girls permanently so that there was continuity throughout their lives and they always have a safe space to go.”\(^4\) But the question remained of how big a role the TZONE would play in the new Center for Community facility, and how would this partnership impact Girls Club programming and politics in practice?

The Girls Club is contractually obligated to offer a Tyra Banks TZONE program bi-annually, which entails an eight week self-empowerment for incoming Girls Club members, but otherwise Trya has no control over the programmatic or development

\(^1\) Reference from film: *Field of Dreams* (1989)  
\(^2\) Wilson, E. 2012.  
\(^3\) She held her first fundraising event on October 18, 2012, raising over one million dollars. These funds were critical in the Girls Club’s transitioning to the new Center for Community building.  
\(^4\) Lee, A. 2012.
132

(fundraising) direction of the Girls Club. 1.5 years into the three-year partnership there have not been any significant changes to the grassroots politics and practice of the Girls Club. Remarkably, it appears that in making a contractual relationship with Tyra, the Girls Club has received a steady stream of revenue, without significant strings attached. And yet, and yet… having Tyra’s name appear on the outside of the building is a powerful signifier to the world, that the Girls Club is a leader in the field of youth development programming, and that it may have inadvertently, been “seduced” by the corporate “post” feminism and capitalist materialism, Tyra Banks represents (Eisenstein 2009).

Girls Club staffer, Stella, expresses her speculations on the Tyra partnership. “Lyn told me once, that after years of working with girls she realized you needed some pizzazz, some star power to get the girls initially excited and engaged. The glitz and glamour attracts the girls, brings them in. So I think that is part of the reason why the Tyra partnership makes sense. Tyra is a powerful, successful African American woman who is committed to supporting and funding the Girls Club. While we may snub our nose at her TV show and Hollywood persona, I honestly believe she is committed to the girls and I believe she will bring in girls and much needed financial backing without strings attached. But I also think it’s a shame that Tyra gets to put her name on the building after all the hard work all the women in the neighborhood put into the building.1 Unfortunately, that’s the world we live in: money is money.”

It will be interesting to see how the partnership with Tyra’s TZONE Foundation unfolds in the coming years. A question for the future is whether this partnership will

---

1 Tyra’s name is up on one side of the new Girls Club’s facility, but according the organization’s leadership, the sign is temporary. A staffer offered the following statement: “It took one hour to put the sign up and it will take one hour to take it down in three years time once she raises the money promised.”
allow the Girls Club to maintain its autonomy and still successfully scale-up and expand programming. Notably, the Girls Club has a three-year contract with Tyra that is limited in scope. Leadership staff within the organization contend that the partnership is a strategic move, designed to raise the funds necessary to get the new building up and running and the Executive Director insists that Tyra’s name can easily come off the building once the contract is completed. There is the unspoken consensus that the Girls Club is “using” Tyra for her money and connections, much in the way Settlement Houses leaders such as Jane Addams cultivated funding relationships with gilded capitalists turned philanthropists such as the Rockefellers (Fabricant and Fisher 2002).

The Tyra partnership speaks to the lack of transparency within the Girls Club as it has grown into a larger more established non-profit organization. While upper level Development (fundraising) staff are privy to the details of the contractual agreement with Tyra, most Girls Club staffers have been left in the dark, with little or now idea that a funding relationship had been solidified until after Tyra’s name was on the building. Many Girls Club staffers were left confused about the meaning and significance of this new partnership. One staffer questioned, “I don’t get it; what is Tyra’s role here? Is she giving us money? People in the community are saying Tyra took over the Girls Club?” Such persistent gossip I encountered is indicative of how Tyra’s name as a signifier raises her profile and perceived influenced over the Girls Club.

While in reality Tyra appears to have little influence on Girls Club programming, public perception is otherwise. People’s confusion highlights a blaring contradiction. How can the Girls Club serve as an alternative educational model and feminist space and yet make alliances, albeit temporary, with a Hollywood, fashion icon that epitomizes
materialism and individualism? The not-for-profit structure is such that in order to survive within a global-capitalist society, organizations have little choice but to compromise their principles in order to access sufficient funding to stay afloat. In this way, one could say that in this instance the Girls Club falls toward the “adaptive” end to the activist spectrum (Susser 2009). Indeed, the funding structure itself undermines and limits the possibilities of working towards transformative social change. Nevertheless, in Chapter 9 and 10 we will see that the Girls Club strives to overcome this limitation.

**An Alternative Educational Space**

While its funding structure is limiting and problematic and the organizational structure is imperfect, the Girls Club’s new Center for Community building is an accomplishment that is indicative of its ability to overcome challenges and potentially serve as a community-led center for learning for generations to come. The Girls Club Center for Community\(^1\), which opened in Fall 2013, is the culminating achievement of this seventeen-year struggle. It is a concrete manifestation of prior endeavors to construct alternatives that reflect the oppositional values and politics of the Lower East Side. The new 30,000 sq foot facility offers girls and their families in the Lower East Side use of over a dozen program centers – including a state-of-the-art Biology Lab, Full-Dome Planetarium, a Career and College Planning Center, a Center for Social Justice, a Digital Media Arts Lab, Film Screening room, Audio Design Lab, Design and Material Arts Studio, Visual Arts Studio, public Art Gallery, Commercial Training Kitchen and Café,

---

\(^1\) Girls Club facility price tag was $20, and with funds raised over extended fund-raising campaign. The Girls Club is in the advantageous position of not having mortgage/rent obligations to cover henceforward. The facility was constructed using nearly $10 million from the city, earmarked through the persuasive efforts of local elected officials. It is a 12-story building located on Ave D. between East 7th and East 8th streets also includes 78 units of mixed-income housing above the Girls Club. The Girls Club will not own these units and will not earn any income from them. The construction of these units was part of the bargain with the city to obtain rights to the land; the Girls Club was able to negotiate that 50% of the units be affordable with only 50% of the units market rate.
Center for Body Movement, “Maker” lab for Physical Computing, and Pollination Garden and Rooftop Farm. (For more details on the Center for Community building see Appendix). The building serves as a model space for alternative, experimental educational programs. It is a space where the notion of “re-imagining everything” is possible (Boggs 2012).

**Conclusion**

The Girls Club Center for Community is in many ways akin to a 21st century settlement house; it provides a model for progressive community-based youth serving organizations across the country and beyond. It is a space of possibility, but it will take a lot of hard work and dedication to ensure that the building lives up to its full potential. What will be the guiding vision for the organization, now that the building campaign has been realized? Will this Center for Community become a community-led center of learning? Can the Girls Club scale up and expand programming while maintaining its familial culture of supportive camaraderie? Can it expand yet remain grounded in the grassroots? If, when and in what capacity will male youth be able to access the resources and opportunities made available through the Girls Club? These are the pressing questions the Girls Club must address as it transitions into a new phase of its organizational life.

In the following chapter I explore the literature on maternalism and look at how women in the Lower East Side have historically developed female-centered support networks in order to collectively face challenges of everyday life. I situate the Girls Club within the literature on care-work and social housekeeping. I suggest that the Girls Club
offers an alternative model of caring for youth in community, functioning as a parallel family and safe space for women and girls in the Lower East Side.
Chapter Five: Community Caregiving

Nada que las mujeres no pueden hacer. Todo podemos hacer.
Juana, Girls Club mother

Chapter Five situates the Girls Club and its vision of caring for youth in community, within the theoretical context of “activist mothering” (Naples 1998) and transformative care-work (Mullings 2001, Susser 2009). I explore the literature on maternalism and look at how women in the Lower East Side have historically developed female-centerd support networks in order to collectively face challenges of everyday life. I situate the Girls Club in relation to women’s social housekeeping, community caretaking, and their mothering practices.

I consider how women’s care work has served as a culturally available path of resilience and resistance in the LES. Women have drawn on traditional female identities to justify taking actions to improve their living situation, local services, and opportunities available to their children. Moreover, LES mothers have longed relied on local kinship and friendship ties as an economic survival strategy. It is these relationships that initially led mothers to organize and form the Girls Club and successfully sustain it for seventeen years. I conclude by considering the ways in which the Girls Club functions as a safe space, that is, a collective space of retreat and refuge where women and girls are able to carve out spaces of autonomy and solidarity.

Considering the gendered nature of care work, as well as the social construction of femininity in the Lower East Side today, can serve to illuminate the uniquely gendered struggles that women, mothers and their daughters, have wagered over the years and which a new generation of girls will wager in years to come. My analysis is grounded in an understanding of race, class and gender as relational concepts; historically created
relationships of differential distribution of resources, privilege and power. Resource inequality, institutionalized racism, and gender discrimination dialectically structure access to employment, housing, education, health care, and supportive relationships.¹ Struggles against class exploitation, racial discrimination, and gender subordination intersect and women confront these constraints in a myriad of ways on a daily basis in the Lower East Side.

**Maternalism/Social Housekeeping and its Contradictions**

Many reformers of the Progressive Era saw themselves as organizers and advocates for social, political and economic justice. The settlement houses, led by mostly women, struggled to improve urban communities by creating parks for public recreation, upgrading schools and promoting afterschool programming, establishing visiting nursing services, and fighting for municipal reforms. They lobbied for legislation, served on local boards, promoted candidates and ran for office. Before they won the right to vote, these women were conducting research and campaigning for tenement housing reform, defending labor unions and workers’ rights, and advocating for the rights of women, children and the disabled.²

In spearheading reforms in education, housing and public health, settlement leaders focused on protecting and enabling young people. This “Child Saving” agenda was an important subset of Progressive Era political activism and was closely associated with the Settlement House movement.³ Child savers emphasized community

---

1 Mullings, 2005 p. 79-81
3 Gordon 1988
responsibility for young people and settlement houses were perceived as the means to reform, Americanize and educate poor, immigrant youth and their families. In addition to launching advocacy campaigns on issues of child labor and public health, these women also advocated for public playgrounds, compulsory education, day care, kindergartens, mothers pensions, foster care, and juvenile courts.\(^1\) Much of this movement was spearheaded in the Lower East Side, where the settlement house initiatives had gained the most momentum.

New York settlements, along with Hull House in Chicago, were dynamic, innovative and pioneering social service organizations at the forefront of progressive initiatives. Settlement leaders played a key role in the formation of the American welfare state. Jane Addams, Florence Kelly, and Lillian Wald crusaded to expand the states role in social welfare and succeeded in opening up space for middle class women’s paid employment in the fields of social work, health care, and education. They fought to reform laws governing child labor, industrial safety and inspection, tenement regulation and juvenile justice. They worked to promote legislation to protect immigrant workers, limit women’s working hours, mandate schooling for children, and recognize labor unions. By the 1930’s the National Federation of Settlements was calling for compulsory unemployment insurance, workers’ education programs, nation wide relief standards, health insurance, workers’ rights. Grassroots social action, in part organized by settlement houses, helped consolidate support for reforms such as the Social Security Act of 1935, the Wagner Act of 1935 and Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938.\(^2\) In short, settlements of the early 20th century were not just providing social services; they were

\(^1\) Katz, M. B. 1986.
fighting for social change, a model, which the Girls Club strives to replicate in the 21st century.

Much of the early literature on social reform, charity work, and the settlement house movement is framed in the context of maternalism.¹ Seth Koven and Sonya Michel (1993) define maternalism as “ideologies and discourses that exalted women’s capacity to mother and applied to society as a whole the values they attached to that role: care, nurturance, and morality.”² Linda Gordon (1988) analyzes the concept of maternalism within the context of the Progressive Era, a historical moment when Victorian values shaped the social world of the West. She describes settlement reformers as maternalists. Gordon explains:

First, they regarded domestic and family responsibilities as essential to the vast majority of women and to the social order, and strongly associated women’s with children’s interests. Second, they imagined themselves in a motherly role to the poor. Viewing the poor as in need of moral and spiritual as well as economic help, middle class women sometimes imagined giving that help as a mother to a child, combining sympathy with authority. Third, maternalists believed that it was their work, experience, and/or socialization as mothers that made women uniquely able to lead certain kinds of reform campaigns and made others deserving of help (55).

At the height of the suffrage movement and progressive reformism, women activists put forth claims that they possessed a superior morality, which enabled them provide nurturance and care as wives and mothers. They argued that women were best positioned to extend these care-giving responsibilities to the public and political world as voters, reformists, activists, and public persons. Women deployed maternalist claims to justify their movement into the political and public sphere. In doing so, women were able carve

---

out space within a male dominated capitalist society and push forth a progressive reform agenda that partially subverted male dominance.

Most famously, Jane Addams claimed that women’s family values and caregiving roles made women particularly suited for the “social housekeeping” necessary to reform the political arena. Addams claimed that, “women are pushed outside of the home in order that they may preserve the home.”

1 She said that women have a responsibility for the members of their household, for the education of their children, and for their safety and protection from the city streets and social ills. She added that women have a “responsibility for the social standards of the community.” This responsibility, Addams affirmed is the “conscientious duty” of American women.2 In a similar vein, writing more than a century before Addams, Mary Wollstonecraft argued for equal educational opportunities for women by claiming that an education enables women to better fulfill their new civic responsibilities as citizens and as mothers of the next generation of citizens.3

At the turn of the century maternalist depictions of women as more nurturing and caring than men provided the justification many middle class women needed as they embarked on professional careers in urban communities. As middle class women started graduating from college in record numbers, they were unable to secure positions in medicine, academia, and law and were forced to pursue ‘caring professions’ such as social work, nursing, and teaching. Thus for many educated women during this era, community service began replacing the home as a separate sphere of domesticity. In fact, between 1890 and 1910 the number of professional social workers grew from 1,000 to

1 Addams, J. 2002 (1908), p. 255
2 Ibid. p. 256 and p. 262.
3 Wollstonecraft, M. 2012 (1792).
30,000, 80% of whom were women.¹ Collectively this new cadre of reform-minded, educated women, pushed critical issues such as labor exploitation, urban poverty, and the struggles of disenfranchised women, children and immigrants into the forefront of public policy and national consciousness.²

Feminist scholars have long debated the question of why women are socialized as care-givers. Building upon the work of Carol Gilligan, some feminist theorists have highlighted how ‘female values’ of relationship, connection, and nurturance stand in contrast to supposed ‘male values’ of competition and achievement, which in turn has political implications. Such essentialist feminist theories are rooted in biologically based sex difference and from there go on to surmise that women are more nurturing and caring because of their unique relationship to reproduction. Carol Gilligan (1982) has suggested that women perceive and construct social reality differently than men because women are more oriented towards sustaining social relationships and are naturally oriented to be responsible for others as caregivers and mothers. Furthermore, she holds that women have different conceptions of self and morality; differences that emerge during early life transition experiences of attachment and separation. Gilligan claims that women’s experience of interconnection shapes their moral domain and gives rise to a distinct moral voice. She distinguishes between a male ethic of justice and a female ethic of care and argues that we need to recognize the distinct reality of women’s lives and hear their unique voice.³

¹ Kesslar-Harris, A. 1982.
Such an understanding of maternalism neglects class, racial, ethnic, historic and regional dimensions of social experience that also shape ‘maternal practice.’\footnote{Ruddick, S. 1989} African American scholars, along with other women of color and progressive white feminists, have long criticized mainstream feminism as being historically and narrowly defined by the interests of white middle class women to the exclusion of women of color.\footnote{Notably, the Settlement house movement was led by predominately white, middle- and upper class women. For a critique of see Lasch-Quinn, E. 1993; see also Newman 1999.} They have argued for an intersectional analysis that encompasses race, class, gender and sexuality.\footnote{P.H. Collins (1990) argues that black feminist thought embraces “a paradigm of race, class, and gender as interlocking systems of oppression” (p. 222). see also Wallace 1978; Lourde 1997 (1980); hooks, b. 1997 (1980); Davis, A. 1981; Combahee-River-Collective. 1982; Moraga and Anzaldua Ed (1983); Mohanty, C.T. 2003 (1984); Anzaldua 1987; Brewer 1993; Mullings, L. 1997; McCall 2005} Likewise, Bookman and Morgan (1988) argue that while “gender is a powerful tool for understanding women’s political experiences, it is not a sufficient tool.”\footnote{Bookman, A. and S. Morgan, eds., 1988 p. 23} Such essentialist perspectives, as espoused by Gilligan, fail to analyze how women’s consciousness is highly conditioned by history, culture, race and class. Bookman and Morgan assert that, “Women’s political consciousness may certainly be influenced by their concerns as mothers, but it is also deeply affected by aspects of their gender which are not rooted in childbearing or family relations.”\footnote{Ibid. p. 22} While women’s collective action may originate from familial concerns as mothers, all female experience is mediated by race and class.

Maxine Molyneux (1986) distinguishes between practical gender issues and strategic gender issues in an effort to differentiate between women’s organizing around practical everyday needs for food and shelter, day care, and housing verses organizing around issues specific gender identity. Stephen (1997), who has studied women’s
community organizing in urban Latin America, and Naples (1998) who has studied women’s community organizing in New York and Philadelphia have both criticized this formal binary of strategic vs. practical interests. They document how women who organize around survival needs and community-based concerns, may also organize around strategic gender issues. Likewise, Nadasen (2002) takes a historical look at the feminist welfare rights movement led by poor Black women in the 1960’s and 1970’s. Nadasen describes women confronting racism, sexism, and class oppression who “succeeded in creating a movement that was as much a feminist movement as a movement for racial equality and economic justice.”¹ Stephen, Naples, and Nadasen all point to the interactive nature of labor, politics and mothering and insist upon focusing on family life in addition to neighborhood institutions and social networks when considering the development and expression of political consciousness. Interconnections between women’s social relationships at home, work, and the community generate unique forms of resistance and consent.²

**Care Work**

Women have historically undertaken a disproportionate share of work in sustaining the Lower East Side community through tumultuous times. Anthropologists have used the term “kinwork” to describe women’s recruiting and servicing of support networks in their communities (diLeonardo 1984). Likewise, the term care work describes the economic, household, and community responsibilities for which women assume responsibility.

¹ Nadasen, P. 2002.
*Norman Street* (1982), Susser’s seminal urban ethnographic study of women’s community organizing in Greenpoint, Brooklyn during New York City’s fiscal crisis 1975-1978, addresses the exportation of industry from the city and the concurrent imposition of neoliberal policies. Susser highlights the grassroots struggles working class women led to defend their neighborhood against deterioration and disinvestment. The women of Greenpoint took on leadership roles in providing and defending services in their neighborhood, such as affordable day-care, free summer lunches, and fire safety and protection. Susser outlines how community action requires that people evaluate the needs of a community, identify gaps in services, and work collectively to overcome them. Through this process women start to perceive everyday personal problems as issues to be approached collectively.¹ Women acting through their gendered roles as mothers, volunteers and as caregivers strengthen their kinship and friendship networks, and start to form and sustain the collective unity necessary for effective community action and mobilization.² A similar process happened in the Lower East Side, whereby women built upon their collective knowledge and life experience and mobilized to create educational opportunities for their daughters.

Leith Mullings (2001) employs the concept of *transformative work* to describe women’s efforts to address and transform the constraints confronting them in the domains of work, household and community.³ These are efforts to sustain continuity under transformed circumstances, as well as efforts to transform circumstances in order to maintain continuity. She explains that for women, “protection of their children, which mobilizes their activism, requires the protection and transformation of their households,

---

¹ Susser, I. 1988. p. 262
³ See also Susser 2009
communities, and the larger society. For this reason, efforts to sustain and maintain continuity inevitably involve significant social transformations. "1 In her study of local women’s activism in combating the AIDS epidemic in South Africa, Susser (2009) differentiates between adaptive and transformative activism, the latter of which aims to change the over all structural constraints that people confront. 2 In analyzing women’s active contribution towards creating transformative change within the constraints of the political economic and cultural context, Susser explores women’s experience on the ground as well as the broader challenges they face in overcoming major barriers, winning autonomy and sustaining support.

The concepts of transformative work/activism are useful in terms of grasping the meaning and significance of the Girls Club. In coming together and collectively organizing to form a Girls Club, women were performing, and continue to perform, transformative care work. They have established an organization that serves and supports women and girls, while simultaneously planting the seeds of social transformation through creating alternative models of education and socialization, establishing a model of collectively caring for youth, and building progressive community coalitions (to be explored further in Chapters Nine and Ten).

**Activist Mothering**

The 1960’s War on Poverty provided a platform for broader participation of low-income women in their communities. Along with the Great Society (War on Poverty) programs there was an increased emphasis on the poor representing themselves, which

---

1 Mullings, L. 2001 p.51
2 Susser 2009 p. 146
led to a policy of “maximum feasible participation of the poor.” In Grassroots Warriors (1998), sociologist Nancy Naples describes how the Community Action Programs provided the federal funding and mandate for working class women and women of color to gain employment doing the work they were already doing on behalf of their communities. Through the maximum feasible participation mandate, previously unrecognized and unpaid community caretakers were brought on as paid activists, advocates, and social workers in order to bridge the divide between “outside” service providers and local community residents. She examines women’s political activism on behalf of their families and communities and documents how this care work contributes to the economic social and emotional survival of the neighborhood. 

Naples deploys the term activist mothering to capture the social reproduction of the community; how politics, mothering, and labor compromise mutually constitutive spheres of social life and how political activism forms a central component of the community workers’ motherwork and community caretaking. The term also captures the caretaking activities of women who do not have children of their own but who conceive of their community work as mothering (which is the case for several of the founding women of the Girls Club). Naples expands the notion of “good mothering” to encompass social activism that addresses the needs of children and community.

Naples distinguishes between the activist mothers of her study and the settlement leaders and maternalists of the Progressive Era. She explains that although the settlement

\[ \text{1 Piven and Cloward 1971, Naples 1998, Fabricant and Fisher 2002} \]
\[ \text{2 Naples (1998) presents a longitudinal study of 60 women community workers hired in the New Careers programs in New York City and Philadelphia as part of the War on Poverty and highlights how this program empowered women to develop strategies for confronting the problems of poverty, illiteracy, homelessness, and hunger in their neighborhoods.} \]
\[ \text{3 Ibid. p. 111} \]
\[ \text{4 Ibid. p. 113} \]
activists lived in the neighborhoods in which they worked, as educated middle class white women, they were “outsiders,” using their class privilege to advocate for and make claims on behalf of others—children, working women, immigrants, and the poor. Activist mothers on the other hand, as identified by Naples, are active within their own communities, making claims on their own behalf and on behalf of their families and neighbors. Similar to how Girls Club mothers such as Milagros who self-identify as “insiders,” are integral members of their community where they have longed struggled with welfare, housing/shelter, school and health care bureaucracies. Milagros articulates a sense of pride in her role: “I know I am valuable for the Girls Club. These are my people, I can convince them to give the Girls Club a try. I can bring people in. I am good with people. And they trust me. No one brings the community in like I can. The community trusts me; I am one of their own. They can identify with me; that’s important. This is my community. I want to work here and I want a Girls Club for my community. These are my people. I have a role to play here.”

Milagros herself is following her own mother’s lead, as she describes: “My mother taught us values. She taught me never to take what’s not mine. She only has a 4th grade education and she can’t speak English. But she taught us values, and morals, and respect. My father was not good to my mother. He was physically and verbally abusive. He beat her. He was controlling. She has suffered a lot. She is an angel, my mom. She adopted three crack babies, when they were straight out of the hospital. She has raised them like her own kids. Adopted them. Now they are like 10, 8 and 7 and they have all

---

1 Yet while settlement reformers were racial and class “outsiders” as noted by Naples (1998) they were also residents in the settlement houses, living and working in communities such as the Lower East Side for extended periods of time. Lillian Wald, founder of Henry Street Settlement, in the LES lived and worked in the community for over thirty years, see Fabricant and Fisher 2002. Notably, a majority of the staffers at the Girls Club reside in the Lower East Side.
sorts of problems, developmental problems. My mom has struggled with them, whatever we didn’t give her in terms of problems, she has it with those kids. She is like a mom to everyone.”

The basis for women’s collective action in the Lower East Side can be found in everyday life and the fulfillment of social and familial responsibilities where patterns of cooperation are sustained. Nevertheless, because society continues to take women’s “social housekeeping” role for granted, there is a tendency to greatly underestimate the skills, experience, and networks women develop as a consequence of their community based work. Naples argues that, “there is nothing natural about the composite of responsibilities assumed, political analyses developed, and difficult challenges faced by women who serve as community workers in low income urban neighborhoods.”

**Mothering in Community**

Reliance on networks of kin support has long been recognized as a survival strategy among the poor and working-class. Women have historically developed female-centered support networks in order to collectively face challenges in life and in society. The Girls Club has built upon this strength generating an alternative/parallel family form as well as new practices gendered socialization. The Girls Club offers a model of raising youth in community at a time when traditional extended kinship networks are being disrupted due to structural economic transformations.

Extended kin support networks may include blood relatives; spouses, partners, and ‘exes’, including fathers of children; kin of children’s fathers; fictive kin and friends.

In the groundbreaking study, *All Our Kin* (1974), Carol Stack counters the notion of the

---

1 Naples, N. 1998 p. 39
2 For more readings on reliance of kin support as a survival strategy see: Stack 1974, Susser 1982; DiLeonardo 1984; Collins 1990; Mullings 1997; Sharff 1998; Perez 2004
culture of poverty by documenting women’s innovative, collective strategies of survival in a poor Mid-Western community. She discusses the extensive networks of kin and friendships that support and reinforce each other and how these networks are operationalized efficiently and effectively. She describes the alliances that develop among women to trade and exchange goods, resources, and the care of children and broadens the definition of family to include an “organized, durable network of kin and non-kin who interact daily, providing domestic needs of children and assuring their survival.” Stack identifies “fictive kin,” as those friends that assume the recognized responsibilities, respect and reciprocity and exchange of kinsmen.¹

Likewise, Mullings’ (2005) ethnographic research in Harlem highlights “the fluid and dynamic nature of the family and support networks; the continuing importance of consanguineal kinship; the variety and flexibility of residential arrangements; the significance of non-blood kin; and the importance of women-centered networks.” ² Sharff (1998) observes how in the Lower East Side, a safety net of support stretches out among the mother, mother’s family, godmothers, and grown children and grandchildren, and also including male partners and their mothers; these people are all working together, “ensuring collective strength for raising children through vertical and horizontal lines of kinship” (84). She argues that such a flexible, extended family structure, unlike the nuclear family, is well adapted to uncertain income and the precariousness of life on low wages. Susser (1982) documents how gentrification leads to the disintegration of fictive kin relationships and social networks of supports in urban neighborhoods. The Girls

¹ Stack, C. 1974.
² Mullings, L. 2005 p. 85
Club attempts to combat this breakdown of extended family structures due to gentrification processes, by offering an alternative means to collectively care for youth. Building on Stack’s work, Patricia Hill Collins (1990) deploys the concept of “other mothering” to describe a broad notion of mothering. She describes how, within the African American community, “other mothers” form extended kinship networks and pave the way for political activism through their community caretaking and sharing. Collins identifies how women pass down cultural traditions as well as strategies of survival and resistance through the generations, and discusses the continuing practice of resource sharing among low-income women in urban neighborhoods, which includes providing food and shelter to friends and family, as well as helping care for the elderly or the young. Her notion of mothering also includes advocating for child-care and after-school programming, fighting school bureaucracies, landlords, and city officials, and making demands upon the police for safety and freedom from harassment.

Maria, co-founder of the Girls Club, exemplifies this concept of other-mothering. A thirty-year resident of the neighborhood, Maria is a native of Ecuador. She prefers to speak in her native Spanish, which serves the Girls Club well in terms of outreach in the community, as many of the Girls Club mothers and grandmothers have limited English proficiency.¹ One Girls Club parent describes Maria as “a loving grandmother with the energy of a 20-year old.” Maria has a tremendous level of commitment and dedication to the girls and to the community. She loves the Lower East Side, and she loves her role as an unofficial community educator, advocate and liaison. Before helping to found the

---

¹ Maria as well as two other Girls Club staff members are native Spanish speakers, other staff members are also fluent in Spanish. Girls Club has a mother who is a native Mandarin speaker on staff, which is critical for outreach and communication with Chinese parents many of whom are non-English speakers, and speak Mandarin as a second language.
Girls Club in 1996, Maria was working as an AIDS educator and activist at a local Health Center. She has also been a member of the District One parental school board\(^1\) as well as the Community Board. At the Girls Club she has taken charge of the younger girls’ programming which includes a range of arts related activities and even a weekly Flamenco class. Above all, Maria is a community organizer, child and family advocate, social connector, and source of guidance and support for young mothers. Maria enjoys engaging with young mothers, many of whom may have recently arrived from Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, are not yet conversant in English, and are just learning how things work in the city. Maria takes pride in showing them the ropes, and informing them of free services and opportunities available through the Girls Club and other community organizations.

Maria takes her community-mothering role seriously. Parents trust Maria with their daughters and in turn she nurtures the girls (and their mothers) as if they were her own. Parents recognize and respect her dedication. One mother comments, “Maria is like my mother, supportive and loving.” Another mother exclaims, “Maria is a grandmother to the community. That’s how community works- that’s how you build community.”

The concepts fictive kin and other mothering are both helpful in understanding the connection between women’s social housekeeping and community caretaking, and their mothering practices. Jagna Sharff (1998) clearly describes these adaptive social relations in the Lower East Side:

> In real life, women took from and gave to their connected comadres food, money, and services. Grandmothers and sisters took over the care of a woman’s children for days, months, or years. Poorer mothers without mates could count on food and emergency loans from their neighbors.

\(^1\) This was before Mayor Bloomberg did away with parental school boards and created “Community Education Councils” with less power.
without any worry that they might have to repay immediately, or with
interests. Seemingly unorganized reciprocity flowed in the neighborhood,
cushioning the constant crises and threats of disaster endemic to a poor
area. The sharing held the community together, in spite of the lack of
equity and the overarching violence from above and the competition and
violence within. Women turned friends into kin and family, the matches
and babies, through the links of fictive kinship, through the social bonds of
co-parenthood (102).

Similarly, Gina Perez (2004) documents the myriad ways Puerto Rican women in a
Chicago neighborhood help create “meaningful lives in marginal circumstances.” She
describes how women cultivate rich networks of family, friends, neighbors and small
businesses that enable them to provide for their families month to month. She observes,
that, “women invest great amounts of mental and emotional energy in cultivating these
relationships and strategizing about how to maintain other networks critical to making
ends meet.”1 Gentrification of the LES is particularly devastating because these changes
weaken critical informal ties among women in the neighborhood and disrupt the carefully
crafted networks that have provided a source of emotional and economic support as well
as political strength. Since the early 1980’s many of the community networks described
by Sharff have been disrupted and adversely shaped by processes of gentrification as
thousands of low-income, residents have been pushed out of the LES by landlords and as
local housing has become unaffordable. Many long time residents have resorted to drastic
housing measures to stay in the Lower East Side, such as doubling-up with other family
members and close friends, taking in boarders and hosting extended kin.

With the disappearance of low and middle income housing in the Lower East Side
many Girls Club members’ families, as well as staff, have experienced housing
instability, homelessness, living in shelters, and being displaced from the neighborhood

---

1 Perez 2004. p. 132
altogether. As documented by Susser (1982) and Sharff (1998), housing markets and unemployment frame women’s options and household structure. Mothers across the Lower East Side are fighting for the right to a neighborhood that sustains their aspirations and ideals, but their energy is frequently sapped with uncertain struggles to find employment, housing, and a decent education. Girls Club offers support for struggling mothers and grandmothers and serves as a source of stability for girls experiencing housing instability and homelessness. Many girls I spoke with, whose families have been displaced from the neighborhood, consider the Girls Club their home in the Lower East Side. As kinship networks are being disrupted, the Girls Club plays a vital role in the neighborhood, by filling in gaps of care and support, reconnecting families, and fostering solidarity.

**Girls Club as Family**

Family is a constant theme in all my conversation with girls, mothers and Girls Club staffers. In the wake of political economic transformations over three decades, wrecking havoc on the Lower East Side and disrupting processes of social reproduction, the Girls Club has come to serve as a second family for many women and girls. It demonstrates a model of raising girls in community. At a time when young mothers are pulled into the low-wage labor force, and extended families are dispersed around the city and beyond due to gentrification related displacement, the Girls Club becomes a nurturing space where girls are collectively raised and mothers have the opportunity and space to meet for recreation and renewal. The Girls Club functions as an extended family offering stability, permanency, positivity, and support. As one alumna confides: “I know I can always come back here. You can count on it and come here if you have any
problem.” Or as another Girls Club alumna explains: “I learned that when you have the support, love and opportunity it’s because of the ones who raised you. The Girls Club was the village that raised me.”

The Girls Club builds upon the Carrera Parallel Family model\(^1\), which loosely follows several key principles such as providing holistic services tailored to the needs of the individual girl, having all staff treat the girls with respect and dignity as if they are family, develop long-term continuous contact with girls, working with the family as a whole unit, providing a variety of services under one roof and practicing compassion. In practice, this model means that the Girls Club serves as a second home, and an alternate family to girls throughout the Lower East Side. Notably, the Girls Club is vocal in stating that it is by no means trying to “replace” or “compensate” for the family (as is purported practice among many youth development programs\(^2\)), rather the Girls Club serves as an extended, source of support and access to resources and services. It’s a collective, social safety net.

Many girls have emphasized a powerful sense of sisterhood that develops among Girls Club members, staffers, and volunteers. The phrases: “Girls Club is always there for me,” and “we are like family” came up time and time again in conversations, interviews, and focus groups with Girls Club members. As one teenage girl explains, “being around a group of women has changed me” and her friend adds, “The bonds that I have with the girls and the women at the Girls Club are like no other. They are like family; I can always

---

\(^1\) The Carrera Parallel Family model originates from the CAS-Carrera afterschool/summer enrichment program, founded by Mike Carrera, a Professor Emeritus of Health Sciences at Hunter College, CUNY; see http://www.childtrends.org/lifecourse/programs/CAS-Carrera.htm

\(^2\) Geoffrey Canada’s approach at the Harlem Children’s Zone, his model is transform every aspect of the environment that poor children are growing up in, “to change the way their families raised them and the way their schools taught them as well as the character of the neighborhood that surrounded them.” See Tough, P. 2008.
turn to them.” Maggie, Girls Club Associate Director, shares the story of a girl, Alia, who had been living between foster parents and her grandparents for years and when her mom pulled her life together, and wanted Alia to move down South with her, Alia actually decided to stay in the LES with her grandparents. “She said it was because she wants to be with the Girls Club. She didn’t want to leave us. Through all these years, it’s the Girls Club who has been her family.” For many girls it seems they find the familial support in the Girls Club that they are missing at home.

Girls come to recognize the familial culture of the Girls Club. As another alumna observes: “It's amazing to see how we've all grown up together, and everyone that I've spent time with on staff takes the time to know you personally and develop relationships with us all, and most of all there's just this overall love for each other.” Gina, Girls Club staffer, explains her perspective as a mother and a former member: “If I met a young girl now I would tell her my story. I would tell them that through the Girls Club they can become more independent and learn skills. It gives them a chance and some of them really need the help. I want there to be a safe space they can always come to. I want to see more of the girls stay together and have each other’s back.” Another girl describes her experience at the Girls Club as just that, a “space for sisterhood bonding and support” where girls develop a sense of solidarity.

Over the years the Girls Club has been generating an alternative family form suited to the political economic context of 21st century New York. After decades of destruction to the city’s social fabric, here we see a unique form of regeneration and reconnection. The Girls Club is imagining a new collectivity. And yet it remains to be seen whether the it can sustain this familial form and function in the future. Will it be
able to sustain this solidarity as it grows as an organization in its new facility? Will the new space, continue to serve as a safe, familial space for girls and women and where do men, young and old, fit in the new Girls Club Center for Community? Mona, an alumna, expresses this uncertainty: “The Girls Club truly is my second family. I feel very safe here. My hope for the Girls Club building is that even with the hundreds of new girls joining, that it will still feel just as connected like big family.”

Flexible Women

Anthropologists have extensively documented the everyday lived experiences, gendered effects, and overall devastating impact of neoliberal governance and citizenship practices on marginalized urban populations.\(^1\) Gender remains central to global capitalism; cultural expectations of gender have shifted with the decline of welfare regimes and the restructuring of labor markets. As with gender, expectations of proper personhood for youth have shifted, with a new emphasis placed on flexibility, productivity, and self-governance.\(^2\)

The regime of flexible accumulation has been accompanied by a rise in the informal economy, precarious employment, enfeebled unions, the shrinking of the welfare state and escalating poverty.\(^3\) The Post-Fordist\(^4\) workforce entails an increase in hiring of women workers with less leisure time, fewer benefits, less job security, and less

---

2 Martin 1994; Susser 1997; Wright 2006
4 “Post-Fordism” relies on more disperse production and distribution strategies, just in-time deliveries rather than deep inventories and a more contingent workforce. Social wage deteriorates, as employment tends to be temporary/part-time, and poorly compensated. Katz, C. 2004 p. 285, see also Harvey, D. 1989; Susser 1997
provision for childcare. Integration of women and children into the workforce serves to depress wages and has been accompanied by a reduction of government services for children and family even as more women are working. As more men have been excluded from employment and public assistance or disappeared through incarceration more women have become responsible for poor households. Sassen (2002) describes this process as the feminization of survival, whereby households, communities, and governments are increasingly dependent upon women’s earnings and informal labor.

In the ethnography of street life and the underground economy in Spanish Harlem, In Search of Respect (1995), Philippe Bourgois identifies changing gender power relations and transformations in family arrangements with respect to emotional nurturing and economic stability. He emphasizes that, “Motherhood roles have remained fixed while women’s rights and the structure of the traditional family have undergone profound, long-term transformations. Mothers, especially heading single-parent households, are still saddled with the exclusive responsibility for nurturing their children.” And he subsequently adds, “There is little that is triumphantly matriarchal or matrifocal about this arrangement. It simply represents greater exploitation of women...”

I argue that women organized to form a Girls Club in 1996, in part, because it helped them to collectively meet their everyday, care-giving needs which became an even greater challenge after welfare reform. Through the Girls Club, mothers and grandmothers in the LES essentially created their own quality educational and afterschool programming for their children/grandchildren, in the absence of state supports, which in

---

2 Susser, I. 1997
3 Sassen, S. 2002
turn enabled them to be more ‘flexible’, taking on the work demanded of them by the state.

Since its inception the Social Security Act has been the subject of controversy and division.¹ Indeed, political conservatives have historically stigmatized female aid recipients.² During the culture wars 1980’s-90’s, welfare was vehemently attacked by conservatives who claimed that “dysfunctional” “ghetto” behaviors were rooted in a “culture of dependency” associated with AFDC.³ Gendered and racialized representations, such as that of the “welfare queen” or the “crack mother”, underlaid historical caricatures of the “tangle of pathology”.⁴ Welfare was widely portrayed as enabling deviant behavior and reproducing the cycle of poverty.⁵ By the mid-1990’s dismantling social welfare programs such as AFDC became the cornerstone of neoliberal economic policy and revanchist rhetoric served to justify federal and state disinvestment. The resulting, Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996 has been described as an attack on women (Susser 1997). It was a defining moment in the economic restructuring of the U.S. and one that significantly impacted poor women and women of color. This sweeping welfare legislation ended AFDC replacing it with Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). It ended the federal entitlement for welfare, devolved the program to the states, and imposed harsher

¹ History of the US welfare state dates back to the 1930’s. The 1935 Social Security Act incorporated a formulation of the deserving poor with a focus on widows and children. While it stigmatized welfare recipients Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) was based on the notion that poor women needed support to care for their children. See. Susser, I. 1997; Gordon, L 1988.
² Moynihan, D. P. 1965; Lewis, O. 1966
³ Murray, C. 1984; Kelley 1997
⁴ Smith, N 1996; Briggs 2002; Cahill, C 2006
⁵ Murray, C. 1984
provisions of eligibility and strict time limits.\textsuperscript{1} Recipients are expected to move from welfare to self-sufficiency by working. All women are now required work, regardless of whether they have infants, or young children, while providing minimal financial aid for childcare.\textsuperscript{2}

\textbf{Child-Care}

Poor and working class women in the Lower East Side were directly impacted by PRWORA legislation, becoming the quintessential “flexible women” (Susser 1997). They experience non-standard employment\textsuperscript{3}, lack of adequate income, and precariousness of access to benefits, which creates stress, uncertainty and unpredictability in their lives. In this regime of flexible labor many women are experiencing insecurity, holding inflexible jobs that are incompatible with the child-care and elder care-giving responsibilities.\textsuperscript{4} Women are overstretched among paid work, home-work, motherhood and community work. As the workday lengthens and community needs expand, many mothers, grandmothers, aunts etc. have less time to spend with their families. They must be increasingly resourceful in providing for and protecting children under their guardianship. Many women in urban communities such as the Lower East Side spend an extraordinary amount of time escorting children, limiting their movement, and trying to keep young people safe and on the right path in life.\textsuperscript{5} For women facing such challenges in the LES, the Girls Club is a welcome resource of support, guidance, and care.

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Assistance to families has now been cut-off after a two-year period and there is a 5-year aid limit over one’s lifetime. Morgan and Maskovsky, 2003 p. 315-316 and Lawinski 2010.
\item Naples, N. 1998; Susser, I. 1997; Lawinski, T. 2010
\item Non-standard employment includes part-time, temporary, and seasonal work, where women lack union protections and workplace supports; their hours are irregular and wanting and their wages are insufficient. see Lawinski, T. 2010
\item Ibid
\item Mullings, L. 2001 p. 43
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
Finding trustworthy childcare is a high priority for women and the inability to do so serves as a barrier to education and employment opportunities. In New York City the single greatest expense for low-income households with children is child-care, surpassing even the cost of housing and food.\(^1\) With child-care costs rising and few income supports available, women are increasingly drawing upon extensive networks of “other mothers” to assist them with child-care (in Chapter 8 I describe how girls are being pulled into this child-care work). Many poor parents in the LES have few options left for child-care. Mothers involved with the Girls Club report child-care being a major source of stress in their life. They are grateful that the Girls Club provides free after-school care for their daughters. One mother I spoke with explained that she is a home attendant and works mostly in upper Manhattan, so it’s important for her to have access to free programs and a safe place for her two girls to go after school. As she explains: “I don’t know what I would do without the Girls Club because I don’t have a lot of money. Financially, its good for me and also for the security… It’s a weight off my shoulders and then (also) to have people to talk to for support.” Another mother shared the following comments:

*The Girls Club has been a life-saver for myself and my daughter. I did not know what to do with my daughter after school while I worked. Being a single parent of two, many programs are very high in cost and cant offer a fraction of programs that the Girls Club is offering to the community for free.*

Several mothers spoke out about the importance of keeping their teenage daughters off the streets, a theme I return to in Chapter 7. One mother said she wouldn’t permit her

\(^1\) Women’s Center for Education and Career Advancement, 2010. “The Self-sufficiency Standard for New York City” (http://www.wceca.org/) Also, in a 2010 study, roughly one-quarter of New York City parents who were eligible for but not receiving child-care subsidies due to cut-backs, were unemployed because they could not find affordable child-care. Other parents were forced to change work hours (24%) or forgo promotions (13%) for the same reason. Center for Children’s Initiatives, 2010 “When Families Eligible for Child Care Subsidies Don’t Have One” p. 4. http://nynp.biz/CCIReport.pdf
girls outside to “hang out on the Ave” (Avenue D) and so without the Girls Club “they would be cooped up at home.” Another mother added, “I would tell other mothers to put their girls in the Girls Club, that it offers a positive influence, keeps them off the street and on the right path.” This expressed sense of gratitude is a common thread in my conversations with mothers. In particular, mothers professed a sense that the Girls Club is a “safe space” and a “positive influence.”

Notably, the Girls Club rejects the notion that it is a child-care service provider. A Girls Club staffer clarifies this distinction: “The Girls Club is not a day-care, a lot of parents think of us as a day care, but then realize it is more.” As one parent commented: “I liked the programs, and honestly the fact that the Girls Club was free was part of what made it appealing in the beginning. But then I really liked the art programs and photography they offered.” Another parent affirmed “You know it’s not just one program its multifaceted – the girls are brought inside the Girls Club family- they are shown all the goodness of the LES.” Girls Club staffer, Stella comments: “The moms I worked with trusted and respected the Girls Club a great deal. They are Lower East Siders, born and raised, and they are passionate about the LES. They live in rent-controlled apartments and they don’t want to leave the neighborhood. These moms have progressive and feminist politics. They are passionate about empowering their girls and they loved the Girls Club for what it provided their daughters.”

Many mothers volunteer at the Girls Club and assist with after-school programs and day trips. Especially for newly arriving immigrant mothers, the Girls Club offers a welcome sense of community. One mother explains, “I came to the United States (from Malaysia) in 1997 and my daughter joined the Girls Club in 2009, and since then she has
been more independent, more active and happy. I follow her lead that is why I am involved with the Girls Club. It is important to her and so it’s important to me. The Girls Club makes us both more social. It has definitely changed our life for the better.”

Another mother comments that “for me the Girls Club gives me an activity to help with, and I get to meet other parents and be social.” As yet another mother explains: “The Girls Club has allowed me to be free to teach and give myself to my community and girls. It allows me to be positive in life.”

Young mothers who work full and part-time at the Girls Club experience a similar struggle in providing child-care for their young children, but they work collectively to address their child-care needs and help each other out. The mothers working Sweet Things Bake Shop and La Tiendita support each other by trading work shifts and filling in shifts when a mother needs to take a day off to care for her sick child or parent. Girls Club policy allows for flexibility in trading shifts and adjusting work hours to allow for family related appointments and doctors’ visits. Nevertheless, part-time non-profit work garners a low salary and thus Girls Club staffers tend to rely on family members as the primary form of child-care. Full-time staffers benefit from flexible vacation time, which allows for personal time-off and sick days in lieu of vacation time. The Girls Club also provides money for babysitting fees when staffers are called upon to work events at night, which frequently happens. Notably, the Girls Club hires local mothers, and involves them in training programs, which ensures them income and employment close to home. It also allows mothers to remain actively involved in improving the quality of life of their family by improving their children’s access to health care and education and providing stability and a means to remain in the Lower East Side. Moreover, a few
mothers have the opportunity to work alongside their daughters everyday; the Girls Club has two mother-daughter pairs on staff, and several more mothers who work at the Girls Club have daughters involved in programming.

**Safe Space**

Bedrooms of adolescent girls have been characterized in youth culture studies as spaces of autonomy and resistance for young women (McRobbie and Garber 1976) but most girls in the Lower East Side do not have a room of their own. They live in overcrowded apartments amongst siblings, cousins, extended family and family friends. For them, the Girls Club becomes a collective space of retreat and escape where they are able to carve out spaces of autonomy. It's also a space where girls experience safety, trust, and stability. Mothers recognize this in the Girls Club and staff members, many of them mothers, cultivate the experience of the space as a refuge.

Jagna Sharff discusses the relative importance of creating safe spaces in her study of the Lower East Side in the 1970’s-90's.¹ For women and girls on the Lower East Side, the Girls Club has fulfilled this need. But given all of the challenges young people in the LES are facing today, what makes a safe space? Erica, a youth worker from of the Hetrick Martin Institute², articulates an honest and compassionate understanding of all that “safety” encompasses for youth coming of age in the 21st century. “A safe space for youth,” she says “is consistent, reliable, and allows youth to change their name or pronoun as often as they want, seek and receive resources and create community and kinship, families. A safe space should also offer girls regular opportunities to express

---

¹ On the importance of safe space, Jagna Sharff (1998) explains that, “attempting to channel the children’s energy more constructively, we redoubled our efforts… to provide a “safe house,” where children could learn and work out their problems and focus on children’s normal pursuits.” p. 90
² The Hetrick Martin Institute offers a wide array of resources for LGBTQ youth. It is located in the West Village (just outside the boundaries of the LES). HMI is discussed further in Chapter 7. See. www.hmi.org
themselves and feel loved. Most importantly, emotional support is a necessary part of a safe space” (emphasis added).

Maggie, Girls Club Associate Director, conveys how the Girls Club has served as a refuge over the years. As she explains: “We’ve been small and this has enabled us to do so much for our girls. We can be everything for them. Some girls have nowhere to go, some girls have eight people living in a three-room apartment, Girls Club is their escape. It’s their haven. And they stay as long as possible. For the girls and the families that get involved with the Girls Club- it makes a huge difference in their life.” Likewise, Nidia, Girls Club staffer and mother of three, observes that, “many of the girls at the Girls Club have a lot of problems. We see everything. Some are foster children and some have been abused. Some live with their grandmothers, or their mothers are real young, so they need someone to talk to and give them advice. The Girls Club keeps these girls safe and off the street. Winning their trust takes time. You have to give them affection and help them feel safe.” Jane of the Girls Club adds: “We are providing a space for girls to go. The girls are coming to a place where they matter, where they are supported. Our small size has helped; small classes are asset because all the girls get attention. We give the girls a warm welcome and a place that cares for them. For girls whose situation at home is bleak, this is invaluable. For every girl that walks through the door, her life is transformed. And the mothers as well, they are having a great experience. They are going places, meeting people, and doing fascinating things.”

Mothers and staff members, going through crises can likewise call upon the Girls Club as a resource of support and guidance. Marion, a mother who has been involved with the Girls Club for over a decade, explains how the Girls Club serves as a safe and
empowering space: “I am beyond grateful to the Girls Club... It’s a good thing not to have a kid on drugs, and not pregnant, and doing the negative that us parents worry about. I think it’s a SAFE place for girls, whether they’re lost, abused, or abandoned, or lonely, this is safe haven.” Tiffany, mother of two, expresses happiness in having the Girls Club around for the next generation: “This is a place of exposure and opportunity. We’ve never had a safe place for girls, just girls! And it’s wonderful to know, that I didn’t get it, but thank god my daughters do.” Many mothers expressed this sentiment of gratitude, and recognition that the Girls Club is opening opportunities for their daughters that they themselves didn’t have. It’s an expression of hopefulness, that their daughters may live fuller lives than they have had access to.

Lydia, mother of two, who recently relocated from the south Bronx, expresses gratitude for the sense of safety and support she has found with the Girls Club. “We just moved here about a year ago. We feel safe here. And that there’s a place like the Girls Club, that they can go over there and they don’t have to be hanging out in front of the buildings. I wish I would have had this in the Bronx, maybe I wouldn’t have been outside with them that day, you know. Last year me and my kids were outside and shots were fired. When I went around to get my kids, my youngest was on the ground, she was shot and (my older daughter) witnessed it. She has had to take on a lot of responsibility taking care of her little sister. The Girls Club takes it away from her again. It lets her be a kid. As a female, as a woman, as a single mom, girls need that sometimes you can’t always run to your mom and talk to your mom about things. You know its good to have somewhat of a back up. You know like if I miss something, they might pick up on it. There’s a place where she can go and talk to another girl, that’s awesome. I think its not
so much that she’s going to her club, its like she’s going to her other family. She just feels that is where she’s supposed to go.” Through the Girls Club, her daughters are able to once again experience the freedom of play. As another Girls Club alumna, Kaya, an immigrant from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, articulates: “I think in my life, I had to grow up so fast but after hanging out with these girls, I have let down my walls that I have built up and remind myself to relax and that I am still young and to enjoy life. The Girls Club has shaped me and helped me relax.”

Conclusion

In this chapter I have explored how women’s unpaid labor strengthens the social fabric and support networks in the Lower East Side. The Girls Club emerged as a grassroots response to an absence of educational and recreational opportunities for girls in the LES. The founders were also responding to a crisis in social reproduction brought on by policies attacking welfare, government disinvestment in education and affordable housing, and processes of gentrification that disrupted social networks of support and reciprocity in the LES. Women, acting as community caregivers, mobilized to form the Girls Club, which now serves as an alternative model for collectively caring for and educating girls coming of age in the 21\textsuperscript{st} century.

In the following chapter I explore the other side of this equation, examining the challenges and experiences of young men coming of age in the Lower East Side today. In the absence of a comparable Mobilization for Youth program which provided much needed resources, support and opportunities in the 1960’s, young men today are left to fend for themselves. The discourse of “masculinities in crisis” speaks to the struggle of transitioning to adulthood in the post-industrial era of global capitalism where young men
in urban communities like the Lower East Side are facing the harsh realities of economic marginalization, criminalization, violence, and incarceration. I examine the Andrew Glover Youth Program, an “alternatives to incarceration” program, that is servicing young men in the community, and suggest that while it is providing second chances, it offers little in the way of transformative opportunities. Young men in the LES need comparable access to the opportunities and resources made available through the Girls Club. Given this evident gap in social supports for teenage males, I discuss Girls Club initiatives that are bringing boys into the fold and generating a community dialogue on the pressing issues of youth on youth violence and mass incarceration.
Chapter Six: Youth in Need of a Mobilization

Chapter Six explores the reality and experience of half of the youth population who have been left out of the Girls Club movement. It asks: How are male youth faring in the Lower East Side today? What are the challenges they face as they transition to adulthood? What are the gendered contours of a young man’s everyday life in this community? What educational and recreational alternatives are available to them in the absence of a comparable Girls Club?

The fact that Girls Club replicates a Mobilization for Youth model and adapts it for girls and women only is indicative of a transformation in gender relations in the Lower East Side. The boys are now left behind. Without an initiative like Mobilization for Youth, young men today in the Lower East Side are left with few supports in facing the harsh realities of violence, economic marginalization, criminalization and mass incarceration. The three Boys Clubs have been reduced to one, mostly serving younger boys in a fee-based afterschool program that focuses on sports. The Boys and Girls Republic (BGR) also provides sports related programming, albeit serving teenage males.¹ The Andrew Glover Youth Program (AGYP), which works with juvenile offenders, offers a narrow vision and practice. Despite saving youth from incarceration, which is an invaluable service in it of itself, AGYP offers comparatively little in the way of engaging educational and recreational opportunities. It reflects more of a ‘child saving’ ethos that addresses the immediate problem rather than the underlying social issues. As an alternative, the Girls Club “Power of Peace” Anti-Violence Coalition is a co-ed initiative

¹ The Boys and Girls Republic, was formally known as the Boys Brotherhood Republic. In 1997 (after the founding of the Girls Club), it merged with Henry Street Settlement at which time it started admitting girls. Today, however, it continues to serve a mostly male population, with the exception of having girls basketball and softball program.
that holds promise for fostering civic literacy (Giroux 2013) and leadership among a new generation of LES youth.

**Living on the Edge**

*My brother was shot on 8th street and Avenue D right there where the new Girls Club entrance will be. They shot him dead. I feel like that is part of the reason I am committed to having a Girls Club. I have always wanted a Girls Club. I want that for our community.*

Milagros, Girls Club Staffer and lifetime LES resident

On January 4, 2013, Raphael Ward, 16, was shot dead near his apartment building in Baruch Public Housing where he lived with his mother and a younger brother.

According to the police, he was fatally shot while standing near the corner of Rivington and Columbia Streets, on the eastern edge of the Lower East Side. He had the honor of being New York’s first murder victim of 2013. The community grieved for the loss of another young man to senseless violence. Raphael Ward was not known to be involved in a gang, and the circumstances of his death are unclear, though it was rumored a coveted new jacket was a factor. The gunman, it turns out, was another young Hispanic male, age 16, from a neighboring housing project. Community activists, including Girls Club members, organized rally and marched down Avenue D to Columbia Street\(^1\) to protest gun violence, and to demand the promised surveillance cameras in NYCHA (public) housing. Not much has changed in a year; in fact over the past year there have been two more fatal shootings, and many more non-fatal.\(^2\)

---

\(^1\) Columbia Street is an extension Avenue D south of Houston Street, bordering the eastern edge of the LES. Columbia street is lined with the Baruch Housing complex.

\(^2\) The shootings all involved young men of color. Victims include: Deontay Moore, 19, of Jacob Riis Housing (across from the Girls Club), George Taliferro, of Smith Housing. See Litvak, E. 2013
Many Lower East Side residents were not surprised with Raphael Ward’s murder. In the previous year there had been five fatal shootings in the Lower East Side, and countless more non-fatal incidents. Girls Club alumna and youth worker with Henry Street’s BGR, Ana, comments: “There has recently been a lot of violence, 5 shootings within the last year in and around LES housing. I think now we’re sort of regressing for some reason. We’re like going back into the 1980’s. Maybe it’s the economic downturn, or something else. But tensions are rising. And I’m seeing more drug use amongst the youth.” Compared to 1990 when 60 murders were recorded, the crime statistics do not appear so alarming. But many Lower East Siders believe the numbers are suspect and do not tell the whole story. Girls Club staffers have also come to recognize that, as one youth worker put it, “A lot of crime is not reported. We see it. We get the texts. We talk to the kids. We see their Facebook posts. Other People are not seeing it because they’re seeing what they want to see.”¹ Ana explains: “People have this idea that the LES is something amazing, but people don’t get it. They don’t get the whole story. Sure half the neighborhood is all cleaned up and fancy but the other half is still dealing the same old problems and nothing has changed; there is poverty and crime. Just go up FDR Drive and that’s where its at. Look at all the public housing; you have Jacob Riis I and II, Campos, Lillian Wald, Baruch, Rutgers, Gompers, Vladeck, LaGuardia, Smith. Everyone has been pushed to the edge.”

Residents have expressed frustration and highlighted ethnic and class polarization in the LES. They point to a division within the community between the gentrified “East Village” to the north and west, and the traditional ethnic (Hispanic and Asian) Lower East Side along eastern and southern edges, Avenue D down towards the Brooklyn

Bridge. One youth workers expressed: “I need all of these community leaders to stop glorifying all the good and take a realistic look at what’s happening in this neighborhood. We are not the East Village. We are the Lower East Side.”

NYCHA Residents are vocally upset with local politicians, in part because violence within public housing projects remains high, and yet this violence remains under the radar. Living at the margins, these residents feel invisible and forgotten. Security cameras that were promised and for which money was allocated, have yet to be installed in many locations.

The dissolution of the Lower East Side as a diverse ethnic and working class enclave and the uneven, unstable gender hierarchies these changes have produced, has generated conflict and is reflected in violence on the streets and in the home. One must consider youth violence in the contemporary urban context of disinvestment in public housing, education, childcare, healthcare and welfare and loss of the city’s manufacturing base. The underlying causes relate to the structural changes in the economy and their social consequences. And yet, violence among youth has been a historic socio-economic issue in the Lower East Side, going back to the 19th century when Jacob Riis was writing *How the Other Half Lives* (1890), through the 1950’s when Cloward and Ohlin (1960) were studying youth delinquency in relation to economic opportunities in the neighborhood. Subsequently in the 1970’s-80’s, Sharff (1998) documents, in detail, the prevalence and nature of youth violence in the Lower East Side. In 2013 violence remains a problem among poor and working class youth of color who comprise an overwhelming majority of the LES youth population. As one lifetime LES resident and

---

1 ibid.
2 Security cameras have been recently installed in Campos Plaza and Smith Housing, after several murders occurred there in 2010-11, and residents persistently demanded them. However, the countless other housing projects in the Lower East Side are still waiting for security cameras, including Baruch houses, were Rafael Ward was gunned down in January 2013. See Surana, K. 2013.
youth worker at Andrew Glover put it, “I’ve worked with LES kids in trouble with the law for over 20 years, and I was one myself, and I’ll tell you, I see the same stories now as I did then, just the faces have changed.” Youth related violence in the LES is not a new phenomenon, what is relatively new in recent decades is the mass incarceration of youth offenders.

Processes of global capitalism shape the everyday lives in New York City, where young people grow up surrounded and confronted by challenges such as: scarcity of jobs, poor quality education, cutbacks in social services, lack of affordable housing, the prison industrial complex, lack of financial security, and fragmentation of communities due to gentrification and displacement.¹ Ana Aparicio (2009) highlights the racialized consequences of political-economic processes affecting Dominican youth in Washington Heights, including increasing racial disparities in unemployment, education, public assistance, health care and incarceration rates.² The same can be said for Puerto Rican and Dominican youth coming of age in the Lower East Side today.

Federal, state and local governments have been disinvesting in young people in the LES, and NYC more broadly, for 40 years now, as is evidenced by the poor quality of public education and push for marketization and privatization of public schools. Cindi Katz (2004) contends:

*The increasingly stark boundaries mark, among other things, different opportunities for children’s learning and other experiences along class, race and gender lines. The lost of these learning recreational, and leisure opportunities among certain groups of children in New York as a result of public disinvestment, privatization, and shifts in outlays for social reproduction can lead to their deskilling...* (178).

---

¹ Cahill, C. 2006
² Aparicio, A. 2009. She studies contemporary organizing efforts and emerging contestatory politics of Dominican youth in Washington Heights.
Lack of access to economic resources encourages poor men of color to “become men” through displays of physical strength and violence.¹ Elijah Anderson (2009) argues that, the “inclination to violence” springs from the circumstances of life – “the lack of jobs that pay a living wage, the stigma of race, the fallout from rampant drug use and drug trafficking, and the resulting alienation and lack of hope for the future. Simply living in such an environment places young people at special risk of falling victim to aggressive behavior.”²

According to the 2014 Community Board 3 Needs Assessment³, there is rising concern over the continuing criminal activity and turf wars involving guns and knives activity among youth in the Lower East Side, much of which goes unreported. District leaders assert that, “proactive programs are needed, particularly for at-risk youth, such as employment and training opportunities, and programs other than sports. Families of these youth are also in need of intervention and support system programming. Community centers are vital to promoting positive self-esteem, youth development and leadership skills among young adults in our community.” These stated needs of the Lower East Side today, mirror the community’s concerns in 1960 when Cloward and Ohlin observed that youth delinquency arises when there is a discrepancy between culturally induced aspirations toward success and realistic opportunities for achieving them.⁴

**Gendered Poverty Today in the LES**

According the 2013 report *Keeping Track of New York's Children* there are 2

---

⁴ Cloward, R. A., and L. E. Ohlin. 1960. They go on to point out that “male youth experience desperation born of the certainty that their position in the economic structure is relatively fixed and immutable… [and] a cultural ideology in which failure to orient oneself upward is regarded as a moral deficit.” p. 78
million youth living in New York City and that one in three of them (under age 18) are living in poverty.\(^1\) The poverty rate among young people in the Lower East Side is even higher at 39.6%.\(^2\) Among the public housing tracts along the East River, the children poverty rate averages 60%.\(^3\) 20.5% of LES youth live in households with an income below $15,000.\(^4\) Another factor in child poverty rates in the LES is the fact that between 30-40% of LES youth are raised by their grandparents (predominantly just their grandmother) for an extended period of time. Around the same rate of youth are raised by single mothers.\(^5\)

Within the Lower East Side, there is an estimated 12,941 youth per square mile, with a total of 22,000 young people (under the age of 18).\(^6\) Breaking down the data into specific census tracts shows that 20-30% of residents in public housing along the East River are foreign born, with another 17-20% having migrated from Puerto Rico. Many more are second generation.\(^7\) Due to gentrification related displacement, the Lower East Side also has the second highest rate of families with children entering shelters in

---

\(^{1}\) 2013. *Keeping Track of New York's Children*. Citizens Committee for Children of NYC, Inc. NYC has more young people than any other city in the United States with the next highest city of Los Angeles having 874,525 youth.

\(^{2}\) U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 1 year Estimates (2011), Summary Table S1701. American FactFinder; http://factfinder2.census.gov

\(^{3}\) LES City-Data: http://www.city-data.com/neighborhood/Lower-East-Side-New-York-NY.html

\(^{4}\) 20.5% of LES youth live in households with an income below $15,000, another 11.7% live in households with incomes between $15,000 and $24,999, and 11.8% live in households with an income of $25,000-34,999. The median household income for New York City is $39,162. U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 1 year Estimates (2011), Summary Table S1901 and S1701; American FactFinder; http://factfinder2.census.gov

\(^{5}\) U.S. Census Bureau, 2007-11 American Community Survey 5-year Estimates. See http://factfinder2.census.gov


\(^{7}\) U.S. Census Bureau, 2007-2011 American Community Survey. A few census tract areas in Chinatown have up to 70% foreign born population. See http://factfinder2.census.gov
Manhattan.\textsuperscript{1} This is problematic, as research has demonstrated that young people need stability in their lives. Housing insecure families are more likely to be food insecure, in fair or poor health, and be at risk for developmental delays.\textsuperscript{2} Notably, there is a concentration of shelters located within the Lower East Side, which means that a good number of youth in the LES, including several Girls Club members, are enduring the struggles of shelter life.

In her ethnographic study of the Lower East Side in the 1970’s and 1980’s, Sharff (1998) explored how young people experience the violence of poverty differently by gender. From a young age, as fathers may disappear through political economic and social forces, boys in poor households are expected to live up to the male role of provider, which often means leaving school, taking low paying jobs, or engaging in the underground economy (Macleod 1987, Sharff 1998). Boys are also serving as protectors of their mother, sisters and younger brothers.\textsuperscript{3} Ana, a youth worker with Boys and Girls Republic, speaks of a similar reality for boys in the LES in 2013:

\textit{These boys have no hope, they are too busy being concerned with helping their mom pay for rent or making sure their baby sister has cereal to eat in the morning. There is a real sense of hopelessness among these kids! They are only used to surviving.}

Poor girls, in turn, are more likely to be kept home busy with domestic tasks and channeled into schooling. They are less likely to be drawn into the competitive and dangerous territory of drug dealing and more likely to survive (Sharff 1998). In Chapter

\textsuperscript{3} Sharff, J. 1998 Sharff observes that, “having a man in the house, whether an older son or a sexual consort signified social power for a woman in terms of protection, and, if need be, vengeance for herself and her children” (33).
Six, I address at length how many of the patterns, identified by Sharff, persist for girls today in the Lower East Side.

Susser (1996) has also described how gender relations are mutually constitutive in relation to poverty. She contends that, “Gender frames options also defined by poverty and race- in response to similar conditions of school failure and unemployment, young men can opt for validation in the macho image while young girls can see motherhood as a route to success.” Ana offers a similar view from her experience of growing up in the LES and now as a youth worker. “I’m seeing that girls have no sense of self-esteem or self-worth,” she says. “They need to learn how to love themselves, to learn that they too can have a future, that they are not just a baby-making machine. But I understand their desire to have a baby. It gives them something to look forward to. Girls gain a sense of self-worth through starting a family. It gives them something believe in.” Most teens I spoke with at the Girls Club have a conscious awareness, or what Willis (1977) refers to as ‘partial-penetrations’ into understanding this systemic pattern of troubled boys and young mothers as a product of socio-economic circumstance. Lucia, for example, observes: “As I look around me, I notice many young girls dealing with pregnancies, relationship issues, dropping out of school, and using drugs. Boys too face the challenge of being fathers, dropping out of school, and not being able to find work. I know that this could all be avoided.”

**Street Culture and the Underground Economy**

Poor male youth of color are increasingly marginalized in the new global economy. As manufacturing jobs are transferred to China and the global South, young men growing up in New York are finding themselves deskilled and dislocated from the

---

1 Susser, I. 1996 p. 426
emerging service, finance and creative industries. The underground economy increasingly serves as the leading source of employment in marginalized pockets of New York, including the eastern edge of the Lower East Side.¹ In this political economic landscape of diminished job prospects, street dealing has represented an alternative avenue for earning a living or simply surviving.

*In Search of Respect* (1995), Philip Bourgois’ ethnography of Spanish Harlem during the 1990’s crack epidemic identifies a concentration of poverty, substance abuse, and criminality as a product of state policy and free market forces. Bourgois contends that young men from Spanish Harlem lack the educational credentials, cultural capital, and professional capacity to gain employment in the city’s service sector. The underground economy and the social relations thriving off it are best understood as modes of resistance to subordination in the service sector of the new US economy. Where as in the past, these young men could have found work in the industrial sector, he explains that today youth are ill-prepared for the service sector, in part because their street culture is “in direct contradiction to the humble, obedient modes of subservient social interaction that are essential for upward mobility in the service economy” (142). In turn, Bourgois identifies drug culture as an informal global economy, intimately connected with larger structures of capitalism, which may help inner city youth survive in an economy that offers them few legitimate job prospects. The dynamic underground economy is lucrative, accessible and offers avenues of socio-economic ascent and respectability.² Nancy Jones (2010) explains how violence comes into play within this context: “complex relationship among masculinity, respect, strength, and dominance too

¹ Sharff, J. 1998
² see also Sullivan, M. 1989. Sullivan equates crime with work and examines the relationships between criminality and employment opportunities in three neighborhoods in NYC in the early 1980s.
often encourages poor inner-city boys and men… to resort to physical violence, or to risk their lives, in order to be recognized and respected by others as men” (6).¹

Judith Goode describes structural violence as a process whereby intolerable living conditions and brutalized daily life, produce culturally constructed beliefs that allow people to cope with their life circumstances in ways that are ultimately self-destructive but meaningful.² By proudly embracing street culture and seeking an alternative to social marginalization, the young Puerto Rican males, in Bourgois’ ethnography, become agents administering their own destruction and community suffering. Following Willis (1977) lead, Bourgois argues, “that people like Primo and Ceasar have not passively accepted their structural victimization. On the contrary, by embroiling themselves in the underground economy and proudly embracing street culture, they are seeking an alternative to their social marginalization. In the process, on a daily level, they become the actual agents administering their own destruction and their community’s suffering” (1995, 143). In Tally’s Corner (1967), Elliot Liebow describes a similar situation facing African American males in Washington D.C. in the 1960’s as they encounter difficulties gaining access to employment. The parallels in Bourgois and Liebow’s work raise the question of what is novel about contemporary street culture.

Many Girls Club members are intimately connected with drug culture and the underground economy, through family members, friends and neighbors. They discuss drug dealing as one of the few viable sources of income for the male youth in their lives. Many of the girls have had fathers, brothers, cousins and lovers involved in the underground economy at some point in their life, and many have seen their loved ones

¹ see also Anderson, E. 2000.
² Goode, J. 2010
incarcerated for extended periods of time. Staff at Andrew Glover express that many poor families in the Lower East Side -- where a father, uncle, and son may all be incarcerated -- now accept prison as a standard rite of passage. Girls tend to agree with such perspective, as is noted in the following conversation:

“No kids dream of wanting to be drug dealers.”

“Actually some do. The see their dads and uncles doing it.”

“Older drug dealers recruit younger ones.”

“They feel they have to provide.”

“Girls may not be dealing but they may be sleeping with the dealers.”

“I don’t think that there are drug dealers that don’t want out of the business. People who are selling are not making much money. They are putting a lot of time into it- working for hours on the corner but not making much money for the time they put into it.”

These comments speak to the contradictory emotions girls feel in relation to drug related violence they experience in their everyday life. They recognize dealing as a viable career path for those who have been marginalized from the mainstream economy. They recognize that these guys may be following in the footsteps of their fathers or older brothers and that they also are being recruited involuntarily at a young age. They acknowledge their own participation in this scene. They empathize with boys who feel the need to provide for their families and know that its not easy work; the hours are long and the risks are high. In short, girls appreciate the complexity of it all, in what may be considered “partial penetrations into the social conditions of their existence” (Willis 1977, 175). Girls recognize that while it may offer their brother’s respect, money, and sex, the underground economy ultimately condemns young men and their families to poverty, economic insecurity, and high levels of institutional and personal violence.

---

1 Andrew Glover Youth Program http://agyp.org/about/our-communities
Jagna Sharff (1998) insightfully observes young men coming of age process in the LES: “They grow up to fit precisely into the niches of adult life that society makes available, through channels of class and race; through education, training, and opportunities the society provides. Unfortunately, the niches provided by this society were almost exclusively in illegal occupations, which so often meant a prison berth at best, or worse, a cemetery plot” (107).

Maggie, Girls Club Associate Director and LES resident since the early 1990’s, explains her observations of the drug culture when she first arrived in the LES: “There were whole families in the neighborhood who were involved in the drug trade in some way. This wasn’t out in the open but it was happening and it wasn’t uncommon. I mean everyone in the family would be involved; even kids were selling on the street. That’s the way it was until around 1996-97 when the NYPD cracked down on the drug trade completely.” Many of the folks arrested in the earlier crackdowns on crime are now being released from prison, Milagros’ son Andy for one. Some Lower East Siders associate this mass return with a rise in crime.

---

1 Sharff (1998) goes on to speculate that about a quarter of young men in the LES were raised to fill conventional working class jobs, another quarter were wasted through addiction to drugs and alcohol and others survived through either assuming gay lifestyles, joining the armed forces or achieving some form of upward mobility either through luck or licit or illicit means.

2 Sharff (1998) describes Operation Pressure Point in 1984 during which hundreds of NYPD officers occupied the neighborhood in an ongoing drug bust sweep, making 2,000 drug arrests in one month, and 17,000 arrests in 1.5 years. The aim was to create “law and order” and make the area more appealing for “urban pioneers.” (p. 177-178) See also, Smith, N. 1996

3 Litvak, E. 2012. “Youth Violence on the LES: A View From the Front Lines,” in The Lo-Down. Litvak quotes one youth worker stating: “In the early 90’s, especially on the Ave(D), they did a huge sweep. Everybody got arrested. Now they’re all coming out of jail. Or their kids are now teenagers and all they know is the street life, the drug life. So they try to follow in their footsteps. And the ones coming out of jail, because they have no other skills, go back into “the street system.” There are no options when you come back, so all you can do is come back to what you know. There’s no re-introduction into society. You got discharged. Someone picks you up and the second you’re out; you’re pacing all your old stomping grounds... They’re selling weed and they’re all in competition for the same clients because no one from this neighborhood leaves this neighborhood. All of the parents here are from the crack cocaine-dope era. So half of (the kids) are products of drug users — their community is completely built on that. This is what they know. This is what they’ve been taught.
The media reproduces a common sense understanding of youth violence in urban space as rooted in individualistic, psychological pathology. And yet, what might appear as intergenerationally transmitted patterns of family violence is, in reality, a complex interrelationship between joblessness, personal pathology, family instability, and structural vulnerability in the labor market.\(^1\) It is imperative to situate young men’s work in the underground economy within the familial and economic context, and understand selling drugs as just one possible option among a range of strategies that span the economic spectrum.\(^2\) The young people are clearly able to identify and articulate the complexities behind street culture, the underground economy and violence. Teens have a critical perspective of their neighborhood and a keen awareness of social inequalities stemming from personal experience and the second-hand experiences of relatives and friends. The violence of poverty is real to them and they experience the social consequences of it in everyday life. Caitlin Cahill (2000) has described this sophisticated understanding of neighborhood and environmental protocols as “street literacy.” Young people acquire and apply a particular form social and experiential knowledge to navigate their corner of the world.\(^3\) And yet there are “limitations” (Willis 1977) to young peoples’ understanding and potential to transform their socio-economic injustices they encounter.\(^4\)

**Street Corner Society in the LES**

Young people with whom I spoke identified a spatial dimension to the ongoing violence in eastern half of the Lower East Side. LES teens speak of a “turf war”,

---

2. Sharff, J. 1998 p. 6
3. Cahill 2000, p.253
4. Sullivan, M.L. 1989. Sullivan, for example describes criminal activity among youth as a form of redistribution that provides for the survival but also exacerbates their isolation from the mainstream society and reproduces inequality.
territorial violence, deep-seated tensions and gang-related violence among teens living among the different housing projects along the East River. Youth also report that gentrifying forces have contributed to violence because rising rents have lead to overcrowded housing and tensions within households and among residents. Public housing is a separate world within the newly gentrified LES, and social relations reflect this alterity. Cloward and Ohlin spoke of a similar reality of territorial conflict in the 1950’s Lower East Side. The pressing issues at that time were urban renewal policies and divisions among crowded immigrant enclaves; today the issues are urban development policies enabling hyper-gentrification and displacement and causing tensions among public housing blocs.

The neighborhood is deeply divided for young people. Teens strongly identify with the housing projects in which they live. Rivalries among the different complexes are intense, and localized gangs are a major factor. Teens talk about different sections of the Lower East Side as though they are separate neighborhoods. There is Campos, as in Campos Plaza at the north end of Ave C, and “The Ave,” as in Avenue D, where Lillian Wald and Jacob Riis Houses are located (along with the Girls Club). “The Hill” is made up of the housing developments south of Delancy Street, including the Vladeck, LaGuardia, Rutgers, and the “Backside” which includes Smith Houses. The Baruch Houses are thought of as “the middle ground” or simply “Baruch”. Ana, of Boys and Girls Republic, explains it well: “You the Ave (with Jacob Riis and Lillian Wald Housing), then you have Baruch housing south of Houston, then south of Delancy you have the “hill” with LaGuardia, and then the backside, with Smith. The last victim was a

1 As Sharff (1998) observed this social isolation, describing how “an invisible ghetto wall seemed to surround the Latino Lower East Side, ensuring the perpetuation of sufficiently different modes of social interaction on the inside to make the inhabitants feel like strangers on the outside.” p. 15
young man on Pitt Street; he was from Baruch (Houses). So now there is more beef
between Baruch and the Ave. It’s all gang related; it’s all territorial.” A Girls Club
member offers a similar account, “There is up the hill, down the hill. There is a big
difference between 12th St. and 4th St.; those are different worlds. For my 18th birthday
party, the boys were asking me, ‘Are there going to be boys from down the hill there?’ I
had to make sure that there weren’t to avoid any problems.”

Smith Housing, at the southeast edge of the LES, is identified (or stigmatized) as
being particularly violent. Ana of Boys and Girls Republic, explains her take on Smith
Housing. “I’m from Smith, I don’t see it as bad at all. My family has been there from the
beginning. There is more of a sense of community, loyalty and trust amongst the
residents. People talk to each other, neighbors know each other, but the issue is that once
outside of Smith- there is loyalty so that’s where kids may get into trouble. But the Ave
[Ave D] is a mess. There is infighting, between 3rd St and 6th St, and then Campos, and so
on. When you have no sense of ownership and the only thing you have is your pride and
reputation, you will man up for your housing. But if the guys go outside of the LES and
are in, let’s say the Heights (Washington Heights), then they will have each other’s
backs. My brothers have had to deal with all of this. That is how I know” (emphasis
added).

The Lower East Side is literally surrounded by universities and the service,
financial and creative industries, to the North, West and South. The Lower East Side is
by no means an isolated inner city “ghetto”, and yet young men of color in the Lower
East Side experience a sense of dislocation. Wall Street Financial District, less than a
mile to the South, is a world away. Nor are these youth included in the expanding
creative industries sector just to the West, where Facebook’s new headquarters is soon to be relocated on Broadway and 8th St. Moreover, New York University, The New School, Cooper Union and Baruch and BMCC (CUNY), are all in close geographic proximity. Ana speaks to the marginalization youth are feeling in the LES: “I’ve been working mostly with boys the past few years, so I see their side of the story. I see that there is nothing to offer these young men. There are no jobs. There’s nothing they can do to earn a decent living. There is nothing for them. I can’t get them excited about anything. I’m not able to impart upon them the importance of getting an education. It just doesn’t resonate. We have nothing to offer them. And they have no means of providing for their families, no male guidance or role models.” Henry Giroux (2008) reflects Ana’s observations and aptly captures the challenges young men of color face, coming of age in New York:

Disposable populations are less visible, relegated to the frontier zones of relative invisibility and removed from public view….rendered redundant as a result of the collapse of the social state, a pervasive racism, a growing disparity in income and wealth, and a take-no-prisoners neoliberalism… criminalized either by virtue of their status as immigrants or because they are young, poor, unemployed, disabled, or confined to low-paying jobs… portrayed as a generation of suspects.¹

Despite calls for more proactive youth programs and employment opportunities in the LES, the city has offered a token athletic program as crime prevention measure. It is an inadequate, underfunded and off-target solution. In 2012 the city created a Police Athletic League Basketball training camp to be held at Boys and Girls Republic on Ave. D a few nights a week. This program was designed to “provide a safe and positive environment and encourage productive activities for local residents between the ages of

¹ Giroux, H. 2008 p. 114
14 and 19."¹ By 2012 the Basketball training program had lost most of its funding and was scaled back to one night a week. By the end of 2012 there were five more shootings, with Raphael Ward being the sixth in 2013.

The underground drug culture in the Lower East Side shows no signs of diminishing anytime soon. On the contrary, business is booming with young professionals creating a high demand. In April of 2013, there was a major sweep, rounding up young men and a few women, from Baruch, Campos, Jacob Riis and Lillian Wald housing on drug-related charges.² This case shows a unique role reversal, in which the LES youth were providing a service in demand to high-end professionals and creative workers supposedly integral to the global economy.³ The talent, planning and strategy that went into this operation will only serve to put the accused in jail for longer terms because they were very successful in their line of work. It begs the question, what if this energy, skill, and potential was redirected towards positive ends and collective organizing for social change. Rather than harnessing this potential, our society has created the prison industrial complex as a punitive solution.

**Criminalization of Male Youth of Color**

---

² The localized gangs go by names such as Bloc Boys, Money Boyz, Stacks, and Cash is King, all of which I have heard mentioned in conversations with girls and youth workers over the years. It was a high-end, organized, and well-orchestrated, cocaine delivery business with customers paying $120 per gram of cocaine. A few of the clients that were picked on misdemeanor charges included financial advisors, a bartender at the exclusive Bowery Hotel, and a prominent Brooklyn artist. Notably, only a few clients were picked up on misdemeanor drug charges. See Litvak, E. 2013. “Huge Cocaine Ring Busted on Lower East Side” and “Financial Advisers, Brooklyn Artist, Bowery Hotel Bartender Accused of Buying Coke.” in *The Lo-Down*. New York.
³ Sharff (1998) insists that it is poverty that sends young men in the LES to prison. She argues that, “rampant middle-class and upper-class drug use and addition remain largely unexamined and unpunished because the users had the means to both buy and to conceal their use and its effects.” p. 194
Securitization and policing are critical issues affecting urban youth coming of age in the 21st Century.\(^1\) Under Mayor Rudolph Giuliani’s zero-tolerance approach to petty crime, the NYPD implemented the notorious “broken windows” policy in the early-mid 1990’s, targeting “quality-of-life crimes.” The idea was to sanitize the streets through increased policing, which as noted in Chapter 2, led to removing “undesirables,” and especially the homeless from public spaces. This policy led to the aggressive arresting of beggers, window washers, subway fare dodgers, as well as, black and Latino youth dressed a certain way and walking around high crime neighborhoods and housing projects. It also led to a dramatic increase in racially targeted police brutality. Also at this time, the city began strictly enforcing the federal public housing one-strike-you’re-out-rulings, which meant that the presence of a felon in NYCHA public housing became a legal cause for eviction.\(^2\)

Mayor Michael Bloomberg has continued with these policies and expanded upon them with the “stop and frisk” policy, all of which have lead to division and distrust between youth and the authorities. Justice Padró, Presiding Judge of Manhattan’s Youth Part of the Supreme Court, contends that, “We need a community dialogue. Communities need to step up to this new reality.” And moreover he adds, “We need a dialogue between the NYPD, Communities and Youth. Cops are truly seen as the bad guys. When we were growing up we knew the difference between good and bad cops. But today, these kids distrust all cops. It’s an us against them mentality.” On this point Ralph, a youth worker with Andrew Glover Youth Program observes that among youth in the LES, “Everyone

\(^1\) McArdle, A. and Erzen, T. 2001; Low, Setha M. 2003; Lippert, Randy, and Kevin Walby. 2013
hates cops. Everyone hates snitches. Everyone’s scared of being called a snitch. And everyone is just plain scared to walk around.”

Social and spatial boundaries in the Lower East Side are patrolled by stepped up police forces who construct young men of color as criminals. The stereotype of brown and black-skinned men as “hoodlums” is a cultural representation that is used to justify contemporary policies regarding urban youth, criminal justice and education (Parenti 1999; Alexander 2010). This concept of the “hoodlum”, which Oxford English Dictionary defines as a “youthful street rowdy”, was a recurrent theme in the 2013 NYC mayoral race.1

Stan Cohen’s (1972) concept of the folk devil is a useful descriptor to express how young brown and black men have been targeted as a threat. In a study of Puerto Rican youth in Chicago, Gina Perez (2002) observes that, “in the urban imagination black and brown men are discursively constructed as dangerous, threatening, in need of surveillance and punishment because they transgress norms of dress, class and ethnicity.”2 Likewise, Henry Giroux (2009) argues that the media has reinforced representations of young people as "variously lazy, stupid, self-indulgent, volatile, dangerous, and manipulative." The folk devil identification provides pretext for state repression. The folk devil also plays a role in distracting from structural explanations of socio-economic marginalization and discontent. Young men become involved in hyperlocalized gangs taking action against other gangs instead of collectively attacking

---

1 Republican candidate for NYC mayor, John A. Catsimatidis, described Democratic mayoral candidates as wanting to “give the streets back to the hoodlums”. When asked, by a NYT reporter what he meant by hoodlum, he states “A person that is up to no good, that doesn’t have a job, has a problem with either drugs, has a problem with something. And every day when he wakes up, he has to earn a couple of hundred dollars to either buy drugs, buy liquor or something, and that’s a hoodlum — that every day, he’ll commit a crime, whether it’s minor, major or whatever.” quoted in The New York Times September 5, 2013. see. Kaplan, T. 2013.

2 Perez, G. M. 2002.
the underlying structural causes of their oppression.\textsuperscript{1} As one youth worker at Andrew Glover pointed out, “These boys seem oblivious to the gentrification. They are too busy fighting amongst themselves. They can’t stop talking about ‘up the hill’- ‘down the hill’, Jacob Riis and Campos vs. Baruch.”

Teens I spoke with in the LES identified police harassment as a significant problem and spoke of distrust of the NYPD. Girls Club members complain about lack of access to public space. In a group conversation, one girl remarks, “We get harassed for hanging out on the corner; We can’t hang out at all;” while another girl adds, “Well with these new buildings on every corner full of yuppies, they’re calling the police all the time to complain.” Girls also voice particular concerns about the vertical sweeps conducted by the NYPD in NYCHA housing.

Vertical patrols and stop(question) and-frisk had been the two main policies of the NYPD, under Mayor Bloomberg, that were leading to mass arrests of black and Latino men on the Lower East Side. Both practices highlight the extreme level of securitization and policing that goes on in public housing. ‘Vertical patrols’ are when officers, en mass, sweep through every floor of a building, guns drawn, in a show of force. Innocent young men are routinely arrested during these sweeps for being inside public housing buildings without identification. Such cases are routinely dismissed by judges in court, but not until after a youth has gone into the system and spent time at Rikers Island (jail). Teens I spoke with found this routine practice, invasive, intimidating, and scary.\textsuperscript{2} The NAACP and the

Legal Aid Society filed a lawsuit against the city and the NYPD, stating that this practice is infringing upon the Constitutional rights of citizens. In August 2013, federal Judge Shira A. Schneidlin ruled that the stop-and-frisk tactics of the NYPD violated the constitutional rights of minorities in the city and called for a federal monitor to oversee broad reforms. The ruling dealt a major blow to Mayor Michael Bloomberg’s crime-fighting legacy.

Under Mayor Bloomberg the number of stop-and-frisks carried out yearly nearly quadrupled. In 2002 there were 97,296 stops, this escalated to 685,724 stops in 2011 (including 605,328 stops of innocent people). Of the 685,724 stops in 2011, 350,743 (52.9 percent) were of blacks, and 223,740 (33.7 percent) were of Latinos. Conversely, whites accounted for only 61,805 (9.3 percent) of the stops. Young black and Latino males were the targets of a hugely disproportionate number of stops in 2011. While black and Latino males between the ages of 14 and 24 accounts for only 4.7 percent of the city’s population, they accounted for 41.6 percent of those stopped. Weapons were found in only 1.9 percent of the instances in which frisks were conducted in 2011. NYPD data show that blacks and Latinos who are stopped are significantly more likely to have force used against them than are whites. The prevalence of racial profiling and the threat of police harassment is an ever-present reality for young males of color throughout New York City. Encountering such negative stereotypes, face-to-face discrimination, and racial stigmatization, has serious social consequence and psychological costs. Young men experience social rejection, which can lead to feelings of rage, humiliation,

1 Goldstein, J. 2013
frustration, resignation, and depression.\textsuperscript{1} Girls Club has come out vocally against stop-and-frisk. In spring of 2012 the Girls club participated in *The Silent March to End Stop and Frisk*. The march was organized by a number of Civil Rights, Faith, Labor and Community groups in order to protest the policy.

The Center for Constitutional Rights, recently brought a lawsuit on behalf of several individuals, claiming the policy violates the Constitution's Fourth Amendment, which prohibits illegal searches and seizures, as well as the equal-protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, which is often invoked to fight laws seen as racially discriminatory.\textsuperscript{2} While this case is going through a prolonged legal process\textsuperscript{3}, many New York residents are hopeful that the new Mayor Bill De Blasio will mandate a halt to of policing policies such Stop-and Frisk. During his mayoral election campaign he voiced forceful criticism of NYPD tactics. It is yet to be determined how youth will fare under the Mayoral administration.

A youth worker with the Andrew Glover Youth Program informed me that, “The young men she works with have mostly committed minor abuses, and have been thrown in court. These sweeps and stop-and frisk-have led to the arrest of more and more young people on petty crimes. Before, in the neighborhood there was much more heroin on the streets and violent crime. Today kids are being locked away for nothing. Many of the young men are very young; too young to “get it” or fully comprehend the consequences of their actions. This is what Justice Padró refers to as “adolescent mind.””\textsuperscript{4}

\textsuperscript{1} Feagin, J. R., and M. P. Sikes. 1994.
\textsuperscript{2} El-Ghobashy, T., and M. H. Saul. 2013.
Options are increasingly limited for poor young men of color from the LES; many are either sent to prison or conscripted to fight in wars abroad. Notably, in Fall 2011 Mayor Bloomberg announced that he was making a $30 million contribution, through his foundation, for new programs to aid minority males in the city. George Soros offered matching funds and the city government made up the remaining $70 million (for $130 million total). The three year program, which was to start in 2012, aims to place job-recruitment centers in public housing complexes, retrain probation officers in an effort to reduce recidivism, establish new fatherhood classes and assess schools on the academic performance of male black and Latino students. It is yet to be seen what this initiative is able to accomplish, but at the outset it seems that efforts to modify behaviors through “fatherhood classes” may not be the most useful way to channel monetary resources.

Black and Latino youth need jobs, not more job centers. In 2012 the NYC summer youth employment dropped to 29,416 teens down from 52,255 teens in 2009. 100,000 NYC youth applied but did not get summer youth employment jobs.

Within the LES gender ideologies persist, portraying successful manhood as a father provider, despite the fact that living-wage jobs are hard to find, and while police harassment, brutality, and incarceration disproportionately affect black and Latino men in the neighborhood. The official unemployment rate for youth ages 16-19 in the Lower East Side is 15.3%. Lucia, of the Girls Club, is well aware of the correlation between violence, crime and lack of employment and opportunity. She contends: “What the youth

---

1 Barbaro, M., and F. Santos. 2011. Also, in March 2014, President Obama announced a similar initiative, “My Brothers’ Keeper” to build support among business and foundations to create opportunities for black and brown male youth throughout the country. http://www.whitehouse.gov/my-brothers-keeper


need is something to do, and a job. I feel like teens nowadays hang out with the wrong crowd or make bad decisions with their lives because they are not involved with anything. If they were more involved with their community, or if they had jobs, youth would have less reason to be in the streets, or start trouble.”

Christian Parenti (1999) argues that the criminal justice system “regulates, absorbs, terrorizes and disorganizes the poor… prison allows for the economically heuristic effects of mass unemployment without the political destabilization that it can bring… Today the poor are thoroughly locked down”(27). In the United States, 1 of 4 black males serve time in prison. 1 of 6 of Hispanic males serve time in prison.¹ Michael Niman of the University of Buffalo found that nearly 75% of inmates in New York State prisons come from seven neighborhoods in New York City, including East Harlem and the Lower East Side. ² Gentrification has clearly not eradicated the poverty and violence that affects black and brown youth; it’s merely served to erase it from the public eye.

**Juvenile Justice**

To get a handle on the rising rates of the criminalization and incarceration of young men in the LES, I visited Manhattan’s criminal court downtown, and spent a few days roaming the courtrooms. On each floor family members lined the corridors, mothers, grandmothers, girlfriends, and babies in tow. Black and Latino men stood in defense in every courtroom I visited. The scene eerily reflected Jagna Sharff’s observation of the same courthouse in the early 1990’s: “the clientele was about 60 percent Latino and 40 percent black…in front of each courtroom were white court officers, white aides, and white lawyers, male and female” (186). On the positive side, in

---

¹ Alexander, M. 2012.
2013 a few of the court aides and officers were men and women of color and one of the most prominent and respected judges in the courthouse was a Puerto Rican man from Spanish Harlem, Justice Eduardo Padró.

I had the privilege of sitting in on Justice Padró’s courtroom to observe endless court proceedings in which the defendants were black and Latino males between the ages of 13-19. Eduardo Padró is the Presiding Judge of Manhattan’s Youth Part. The Youth Part adjudicates the cases of youth who are tried as adults in New York County Supreme Court. Justice Padró utilizes a problem-solving approach to assist juveniles and those with drug issues through special rehabilitative programs. He believes that getting to the root causes of people’s problems can often stop the criminal behavior. As a Puerto Rican who grew up and continues to reside in Spanish Harlem, the judge has a similar background to many of the young men who enter his courtroom. He understands the realities of street life, drugs and alcohol but he has also experienced a more privileged world with support systems and education; in fact, he directly benefited from the community programs offered during the War on Poverty.

Justice Padró believes he can make a difference as a judge. It is evident that he truly cares for the young men that stand before him on a daily basis. From observing him interact with the youth defendants in the courtroom one could tell that he is passionate and committed to directing these young men on right path. He knows each and every case, he knows the defendants by name, relates to their circumstances, and knows where they come from. In turn, the defendants are appreciative of his concern and show respect in return. He is firm but incredibly just when sentencing. He commands respect (for example, he has a sign hanging in his courtroom that reminds young men to pull up their
pants) but he believes in second chances, which is why he directs so many young men to Andrew Glover Youth Program instead of jail. It is not uncommon for youth to come back to the courthouse to thank him personally. Needless to say, Justice Padró is exceptional in his care and attention to youth suffering through the criminal justice system. This is in part because he is a judge within the Youth Part of the court system. Many more youth are sent directly through the Adult Part of the court system, where judges I observed were less openly generous and empathetic.

Observing Justice Padró’s courtroom one sees first-hand the types of negotiations involved in legal proceedings. Justice Padró has found ways to innovate within the Juvenile Offender and Drug Diversion Courts and that has made all the difference in the lives of many young people. He takes great pains to recognize and get to know the youth and understand the specifics of their case and the uniqueness of their situation. He then aims to channel those youth into programs as alternatives to incarceration, but more alternatives are needed in NYC. There are simply not enough programs out there to address the needs of these youth.

The Girls Club provides alternatives for young women, but what options do young men have in the Lower East Side? For them, second chances and opportunities are few and far between. Option one is the Boys Club, which, as stated earlier, opted out of the merger with the national “Boys and Girls Club of America.” The Boys Club¹ provides an array of afterschool programs (at a cost), but they tend to work with younger boys ages 6-13, and their programs are limited to sports and recreation, homework help,

¹ According to the BCNY, there are now only 3 clubhouses left in NYC. One in Harlem, one in Flushing, Queens and the Lower East Side location – the Harriman Clubhouse 10th St and Ave A. The Boys’ Club of New York (BCNY) was founded in 1876 to “offer New York’s young boys hope for a better future. Through its clubhouses and summer camp, BCNY builds boys into men of character with strong values, discipline, and a positive perspective.” See: http://www.bcny.org/
with few options in the arts and sciences. Male teens in the LES, particularly those from public housing tend to hang out at “Boys and Girls Republic”\(^1\) which offers evening sports and recreation programs for teens ages 14-19. It is also the site for the Police Athletic League’s “ProHoops training camp”, which happens now two nights a week as part of an anti-violence initiative started in 2011.\(^2\) A third alternative for young men, is the Andrew Glover Youth Program, which works with the most troubled teens in the Lower East Side, offering alternatives to incarceration.

In an effort to fully understand the pressing issues affecting teenage men in the Lower East Side I decided to spend some time at the Andrew Glover Youth Program, which is in many ways the male counterpart to the Girls Club. I conducted in-depth opened ended interviews with two AGYP staff members, which lasted from 2-4 hours. I also sat in on classes at Andrew Glover Youth Program to observe and talk with the youth, in addition to hours of observation at the courthouse downtown. The picture that emerges is troubling; teen males in the Lower East Side are facing a lot of obstacles without the support, resources and opportunities now available to girls in the community through the Girls Club. The social consequences, and localized impact of global economic restructuring in New York over the past 40 years have left male youth greatly

\(^1\)The Boys and Girls Republic is located on 6\(^{th}\) Street and FDR Drive. Historically, this organization worked with boys. In 1998, the Boys Brotherhood Republic became a program of Henry Street Settlement and was re-named the Boys and Girls Republic and opened up programming for girls (2 years after the Girls Club was founded). The heart of BGR is the basketball gymnasium, and boys still tend to dominate the courts. In conversation with BGR youth workers, they noted that they work overwhelmingly with male youth and few girls consistently involved. See: http://www.henrystreet.org/programs/youth/boys-and-girls-republic.html. Male youth from further South in the LES, such as LaGuardia and Smith Houses, as well as Baruch, tend to participate in recreation (i.e. Basketball) programs at Grand Street Settlement (grandstreetsettlement.org) Pitt Street location.

\(^2\) 2011. "Trying to rebound from violence with hoops program," in The Villager. New York. December 8, 2011. Thi program was critique by many in the community for being a poor response to youth crime in the LES. By 2012 the “ProHoops” program had been cut back to two nights a week due to funding cuts, according to BGR youth workers.
marginalized.\(^1\) Nancy Lopez (2003) uses the phrase “Hopeful Girls, Troubled Boys” to capture this phenomenon, which she witnessed working with black and Latino youth in NYC schools. Given challenging circumstances, the Andrew Glover Youth Program is fighting an uphill battle, meeting with small successes, and yet ultimately not working towards transformative social change.

**Where the Boys Are: Andrew Glover Youth Program**

The Andrew Glover Youth Program (AGYP) has offered meaningful alternatives to incarceration for youth in the Lower East Side for over 30 years. In the 1970’s AGYP founder, Robert Siegal, lived in the Lower East Side and was dedicating himself to helping the community's troubled teenagers and their families. At first, Siegal used his own studio apartment as a safe haven for neighborhood kids…But ultimately, after going to court and convincing a judge to keep one teenager out of jail, he realized that this was the most important service he could provide. Together with Angel Rodriguez, who was born and raised in the LES and who at the time was the intermediate director at the local Boys Club, they formed Andrew Glover Youth Program. They named it after their friend Andrew Glover, a New York City policeman who was shot to death in 1975 in the Lower East Side. Siegal passed away unexpectedly shortly after founding AGYP, and Angel Rodriguez has dedicated himself to running the organization ever since. It was in 1979, that the AGYP first reached into some crowded Manhattan criminal courtrooms and found kids who might turn their lives around if they had a second chance. Rodriguez presented the courts with an option: instead of sentencing youth to jail, they could send

\(^1\)Susser, I. 1992
them to the Glover Program for counseling, training, education and employment assistance.

AGYP’s primary mission is court advocacy, providing continual contact and cooperation with the courts, police, and social service agencies and advocating for youth in courtroom proceedings. It offers to provide daily supervision to first-time juvenile offenders if a prison sentence is waived.\(^1\) The ultimate aim is adjudication, whereby a felony gets erased from a youth’s record if under age19. At the Avenue B storefront space, AGYP provides educational, recreational programs, with peer group support. It also provides referrals to a wide range of services and programs. Andrew Glover expanded to Spanish Harlem in 1997, setting up an office there with funding from the Robin Hood foundation. The core of the programming, though, still remains in the Lower East Side.

Co-Founder and Executive Director, Angel Rodriguez, clearly identifies his understanding of the main challenges facing young men in the LES: concentrated poverty, broken families, failing education and drugs/underground economy. Over half of AGYP participants, around 60%, are Latino, and 30% are black. Cindy, the art teacher, explains that “most of families of the youth all live in public housing along Ave D (and Campos Plaza on Ave C). They all grew up together. Everyone knows each other, and Angel (the Executive Director and co-founder) knows everyone.” 79% of the participants are male, and the median age is 18 years old.\(^2\)

AGYP addresses a wide range of problems that get teens into trouble. It could be a family issue, a drug habit, alcohol abuse, illiteracy, or a need for counseling or job

---

\(^1\) Andrew Glover Youth Program (http://agyp.org/)
training. AGYP gives individual attention to every youth enrolled and tailors services for each client, including drug treatment, counseling, tutoring, anger management, and art classes. AGYP staff informed me that with all the spending cuts over the years, there are fewer services to offer youth now than there were in the past, fewer classes to send them to, fewer counseling options etc. They do their best to connect a youth with the services he/she needs. They also work with the family. For their end of the bargain, every youth must comply with a nightly curfew in addition to attending assigned programs. Angel insists that they only work with youth who “accept personal responsibility for their actions”, i.e. show a willingness to try to stay out of trouble and comply with program mandates.\(^1\)

AGYP also recently started a mothers group, providing a space for mothers to meet up, support each other, learn of opportunities/services and share resources. After participating in the new AGYP mothers group, Cindy, an AGYP instructor, observed, “You see what the home life is like for these kids. You see where they are coming from. You see that these mothers are so young, hardly more than kids themselves, and they are crying to see their kids in trouble, and yet these mothers are dealing with so much. Many of them have dealt with domestic violence in the past. One of the mothers had been cut-to-pieces with a machete by her husband. She can barely use her arms now. Her three sons witnessed it all. She went on to study martial arts, is now going for her black belt. She is an amazing woman. Sadly her sons are all into trouble.” In 2014, the Girls Club started a weekly, evening yoga class for the AGYP mothers group.

AGYP works out of donated office space in the Manhattan Criminal Court, and out storefront on Avenue B and 7th Street in the Lower East Side, and on 117th St. in

Spanish Harlem. Angel explains that with “all the projects are shooting at each other” it’s hard to find a neutral space where all the kids can safely come. Many youth feel that they cannot walk through each other’s (gang) territory. The office on Avenue B, two blocks away from public housing, serves as a safe zone. Cindy, the art teacher adds, “All the kids at AGYP come from different gangs. Here they come together. Angel is real strict that there not be any drugs or any gang affiliations in the building. He runs the program like a father. He knows all of the public defenders, he knows all the judges and they respect him. He always makes sure the youth are serious before they get involved.”

AGYP only works with young men from throughout the Lower East Side, and now Spanish Harlem. With a 34-year presence in the community it is well established and respected. AGYP youth workers all live in the LES, and Spanish Harlem respectively.¹ They know the community, know the families, and know the system. They know everything because they’ve been there before. Many of youth workers are, themselves, former clients. They must be available to provide assistance and counseling around the clock. Ralph, who has worked at AGYP for 18 years, explains, “we are a little bit of everything: educators, legal advisors, parents, social workers, and healers.” AGYP is remarkably successful, though admittedly working with only a small portion of LES youth caught up in the Judicial System. Nevertheless, the statistics illustrate that the program is working. Only 15% of all AGYP clients have been re-arrested in New York State for three years after enrolling in the program, compared to 72% for juvenile offenders processed in NYC. The three-year recidivism rate for successful graduates of AGYP was very low at 7%.² One year of detention costs the state $265,000 and only

¹ Andrew Glover Youth Program (http://agyp.org/)
20% of youth remain crime free, in turn, AGYP costs $3400 a year and 85% remain crime free.¹

Cindy, the art teacher at AGYP for 15 years now, is a remarkable woman, with a long track record of social activism. Born and raised in apartheid South Africa, outside of Cape Town; she’s been fighting for social change for most of her adult life. In college during the 1970’s she was active in the ‘Divestment Campaign’, which aimed at preventing companies from investing in apartheid South Africa. A decade later, living in the Castro district of San Francisco she became very active in HIV/AIDS advocacy work, which led her to publishing a book on the AIDS quilt.² She moved to the Lower East Side from San Francisco in the mid 1990’s and was eager to get involved in community work. In 1998 she started volunteering as an art teacher at Andrew Glover, which was down the street from her Ave B apartment. She has been there ever since, volunteering every Friday for 15 years. She now has artist volunteers who help her balance the teaching load, but for the most part it is a solo operation. Over the years she has learned that other volunteer artists have a hard time working with the youth population at AGYP. In addition to her work with AGYP she is also does art workshops with the Girls Club, and created the mosaic art for the one of the bathrooms in the new facility.

While Cindy’s works with the toughest of teens, her personal artistic pursuits are fanciful in nature. Her art addresses the joy of life and love and takes inspiration from stories of enchantment from literature, mythology, nursery rhymes, and fairytales.³ Cindy explains that her interest in celebrating life through her art, in part stems from her

¹ Andrew Glover Youth Program (http://agyp.org/)
³ Cindy Ruskin Website: http://www.cindyruskin.com/
ongoing battle with Lupus which she was diagnosed with at age 15. Her art tells a story about happiness and about the wonder in the world and she enjoys sharing this with young people in need of joy in their life.

Cindy teaches a weekly art class for AGYP youth, that usually includes 10-15 kids, mostly male (1 girl to about 10 boys). She notes that it takes a long time to notice a difference, but “if you stick with it long enough it amazing to see how the kids evolve.” She explains that it’s about “Getting the kids to try something new, getting them out of their shell. Messing up is part of the process. We’re more concerned with the process than the final product. I see art therapy as a way to work with them to expand their attention; they have very short attention spans.” She sees the art class as a form of meditation, where the youth can experience a rare sense of peace. She adds, “I let them play their own music too. I just want the kids to enjoy themselves, to have fun.” Cindy also points to the challenges of working with disaffected youth. “You have to wait a long time as a teacher in this line of work to be rewarded. No one thanks you. Sometimes you feel invisible. You don’t know your impact. And I’m left to wonder what role am I playing for them. It’s incredibly challenging. But I enjoy it because it forces me to creative.”

Cindy goes on to describe her perspective on the challenges facing young males growing up in the Lower East Side. “These boys are young and living such a tough life already. They just need to see that you are an adult that can show up, to see that adults can follow through. They need consistency in their lives. There is no consistency in their family life. Their mothers or grandmothers are all that they have. Few of them have had consistent support from adult fathers. They have no role models. Many of the kids are
bitter and angry with their fathers. They have witnessed abuse, and then they in turn abuse their mothers. There is a lot of violence in the family: screaming, yelling, and swearing. This is what we see, and what the mothers have spoken of during the support groups. The challenges we are dealing with are poverty first and foremost, gangs, failing education, and absent fathers. NYC is a diverse city but these kids are isolated. Here you have a silent apartheid. In South Africa it was in your face you had to take sides and deal with it; you were forced to confront it. Here people can ignore it, and they do.”

Ralph, a lifetime LES resident and a former client of AGYP who has worked with the organization for 20 years, offers a different perspective. As he understands it: “The boys come from broken homes and dysfunctional families. They are either living with grandma or their mom and they are disrespectful. Kids don’t learn manners or respect anymore. The mothers are so young; they don’t know how to parent. They want to be friends with their kids; they don’t discipline. There is no one to keep them in line. The fathers aren’t around and there are no role models for these kids. These boys look up to the thugs on the corner. It used to be, back in the day, when I was growing up, if you were acting up on the corner, the guy in the bodega would have known your parents, and he would have dragged you home and there would be consequences. It was like a whole village was raising the kids. We don’t have that now.”

Cindy explains, “These boys need a second chance, a skill and a trade. They have a lot of potential; they just need more training to develop a skill set. We need more teachers here but there is no real structure for volunteers at AGYP. And our kids our tough; it’s hard to engage them. Many volunteers give up. If you hand these kids opportunities they may not take them. Many of them just want to get rid of their criminal
record. These kids are bitter and angry at the system. Other kids are just messing up and playing around; being mischievous teenagers. A lot of them are getting stoned to self-medicate, to get out of their reality. I can’t blame them. Angel’s drive is fighting for these kids in a world that is so unfair. These kids are thrown away; they are disposable. Angel has a relentless drive to help them; this is his life.”

Cindy adds, “The youth need more second chances, and some help in learning to take the chance. Kids don’t always know what’s been offered to them. They can’t wait to work but there are no jobs and these kids have no money. Drugs are easy money. The guys that are determined and successful end up in the army. They do well there; it’s their way out of the neighborhood. The few girls that participate are usually more successful at finding their way; they’re more focused and responsible.” Ralph agrees, noting that career options are limited for these youth. “They either go into the Armed Forces, the Police, or become Corrections Officer in the Jails. Or they go into construction or become an electrician, but most of the guys don’t want to do physical labor.”

Cindy describes the challenges some of the young men have face in finishing school or getting their GED. “Many of the kids have learning disabilities, and there is a stigma attached to that down here. Meanwhile, my friends in the Upper West Side are anxious to have their kids diagnosed with something so they can have more time on the SAT; they are pulling strings. Those kids have all of the advantages. The parents up there play the system much more. They are getting all these extra privileges for their kids that they don’t deserve. And the moms are making excuses for them, so their kids don’t learn to take responsibility. They are worse than the kids at Andrew Glover. It sickens me to see the level of inequality. These kids here are so marginalized from society, so far
removed from success. They can’t see any success in their future. They have so many struggles to deal with. The whole system is against them, once in prison, you can’t get housing or loans. There are no jobs. And the generations are turning around so quickly. They are having babies at a young age. There is a lot of baby mama drama at AGYP. It makes sense in a way, making a baby is the one thing they can do. It’s the one thing they have control over. Some of the kids come back from prison and they tell the others how hard it is. They lecture each other about the harsh realities of life in prison and starting over. Many just still see it as a rite of passage.”

Andrew Glover is a small operation with a limited budget. The staff remains small, with some administrative staff, and fieldworkers who work out in the neighborhood keeping track of the youth. These outreach workers are mostly former clients; they know the neighborhood, the families and the streets. Volunteers teach all the classes. AGYP gets 90% of its funding from private sources (i.e. non-government grants).

Angel argues that this private funding affords AGYP flexibility and contributes to its success rate because it’s not arbitrarily required to cut off support for clients at age 18. One of its major funders is the Robin Hood Foundation, who granted money for the East Harlem expansion and as well as funds to distribute participants’ families after Hurricane Sandy.

AGYP’s success can largely be credited to the heart, soul and sweat that Angel Rodriguez offers his organization on a daily basis. He truly lives up to his name, Angel, having saved hundreds of youth from incarceration over the years. Cindy, the art instructor, observes: “Angel has made this his life’s work. He has no children of his own and dedicates a 100% of his time and energy to the program. He lives and breathes his
work. Angel is dedicated to the young people, to saving their lives, and protecting them from jail. But he doesn’t have the ambition or vision of Lyn at the Girls Club to make the project grow into something more, to go beyond its current mission."

While he may not be a visionary leader, Angel does the works passionately for his cause on a daily basis. Keeping up with Angel during an average day in the courthouse is exhausting, as he runs from one courtroom proceeding after another advocating for young defendants. He seems to know every judge, DA, and defense attorney in the Manhattan circuit (both the Adult and Youth part). Having developed an excellent rapport with all of the key players in courtroom proceedings, Angel is able to sit in on proceedings and participate in negotiations between judges and attorneys. He is thus able to directly advocate for the youth and try to convince the DA to lessen the charge or convince a judge to assign a teen to AGYP instead of Rikers Jail. Angel applies a different strategy to every case and witnessing how smoothly he operates one would think he’s more knowledgeable than the young attorneys. Indeed, he has seen so many cases over the years that he knows exactly what tactics to deploy depending on the circumstances and the presiding judge. Judges and lawyers trust Angel and have faith in the AGYP program. NYC judges assign at least 200 teens to the program each year. Angel asserts: "My focus is to educate the world -- parents, judges, lawyers -- that something else can be done other than throwing young people away in our correctional system. When they're between 13 and 21, it's easier for kids to make changes in their lives. If we keep them in school and working and engaged in positive things, we can keep them out of prison. And they'll be productive."

The Money Trail
In order to have a full understanding of a non-profit organization it always critical to follow the money trail to trace the funding sources. For any non-profits these days, it is a rat race to secure sufficient funding that both aligns with your mission and allows for flexibility. It is near impossible for an organization to stick to its ethical principles when it is struggling to survive and accomplish meaningful work. And yet, organizations such as the Girls Club have made strides to align their funding streams with their ethics and values. Notably, Andrew Glover receives private funding from an intricate network of real estate moguls and investment bankers. Key AYGP supporters\(^1\) include: Bruce E. Mosler, Chairman of Global Brokerage of Cushman & Wakefield, Inc., the world’s largest independent real estate services firm\(^2\); Steve Pozycki, founder, Chairman and CEO of SJP Properties, a developer of office buildings and residential condominiums\(^3\); Stephen B. Siegel, Chairman of Global Brokerage at CBRE, the world's largest commercial real estate services company\(^4\); Robert Ivanhoe, chairman of the Global Real Estate Practice, Greenberg Traurig\(^5\); Rick Trepp, a prominent authority in the field of structured finance who launched The Rockport Group in 2002, a company whose SaaS platform has become the industry leading provider for commercial mortgage loan

---

1. As noted on the AGYP web-site (http://agyp.org/ ) and in conversation with AGYP leadership and staff.
2. Cushman & Wakefield: Global Real Estate Solutions Inc. (http://www.cushwake.com)
4. Mr. Siegel is widely regarded in commercial real estate circles as one of the industry’s most prolific professionals. He was featured in Urban Land Institute’s, "Leadership Legacies: Lessons Learned from Ten Real Estate Legends. (2004) and named by Crain’s as one of the 100 Most Influential Business Leaders in New York City. In addition to extensive and lucrative real estate dealings in NYC he is involved in Israeli real estate, winning Israel Bonds’ Real Estate and Construction Division’s 2007 Israel Peace Medal for his leadership in building Israel's economy through the Israel Bonds program. See: http://www.cbre.us/o/newyorkcity/people/stephen-siegel/Pages/overview.aspx
5. Ivanhoe concentrates his practice in sophisticated real estate structures, financings, workouts, restructurings, acquisitions and dispositions of all asset classes of real estate. See: http://www.gtlaw.com/People/Robert-J-Ivanhoe
origination, underwriting, securitization and asset management; David Politano, Managing Director of MetLife Real Estate investors (under whose leadership was the $5.4 billion sale of Peter Cooper Village and Stuyvesant Town); Jonathan Mechanic, partner in the law firm Fried, Frank, Harris, Shriver and Jacobson, representing major NYC developers, real estate investment trusts, and investors (oversaw the transaction of the sale of Stuyvesant Town and Peter Cooper Village); Grant Thompson, CEO of CQS Management Limited, a global multi strategy asset management firm; Dean H. Schaffer, Managing Director of PanAmerican Capital Partners, a global investment banking services firm; and Charles C. Radcliffe, Managing Director of First Republic Securities Company.

Needless to say, this is an impressive list of power brokers in the field of real estate investment and financial markets. Apparently, these men join forces in their business dealings and financial interactions, as well as in their philanthropic giving and charity. This network of funders highlights the limits of the nonprofit structure. AGYP is employing a consensus building approach with a focus on building relationships with a wealthy and powerful corporate sector. Such an approach belies the fact that a conflict of interest exists and that unequal power relations underlie the existing “juvenile delinquency” problem in the Lower East Side.

---

1 In January 2013 the companies announced TreppPort, LLC, a joint venture that provides a web-based, end-to-end lending, surveillance and asset management solution enabling clients to assess their entire global commercial real estate (CRE) exposure. http://www.therockportgroup.com/about/index.html
2 Moreno, V. 2009.
3 GQS Management Limited http://www.cqs.ch/
5 First Republic Wealth Management: http://www.firstrepublic.com/wealthmanagement/team/charles-c-radeliffe
6 DeFilippis, J. et al. 2010 pp. 118-119.
AGYP is funded by the very same financial actors who have instigated the political-economic forces that have destabilized the Lower East Side (and NYC more broadly) over the past 35 years. Through the manipulation of the financial and real estate markets these men are part of the 1% who have made it to the top of the new global economy. Within New York City, Mayor Michael Bloomberg has greatly facilitated the success, expansion, and power of the real estate and financial industries (Brash 2012). In amassing their wealth these men have been contributing to the hypergentrification and uneven development of the Lower East Side, deepening the crisis in social reproduction that has led so many young men toward the criminal justice system. The very actors that are creating the problem by “pushing youth to the edge”, are the same men offering a pittance in donation to AGYP in return for the social recognition that they are the valiant child savers of the 21st century Lower East Side.

The relevant question then becomes, who are the real criminals in this scenario? The young men of the Lower East Side caught up in the criminal justice system for minor offenses or drug related charges, or the movers and shakers who brokered the deals, developed the financial tools, and made illusory investments that fueled the real estate boom and bust and subsequent financial collapse in 2008? Undoubtedly the Andrew Glover program and especially Angel Rodriguez are providing an invaluable service by single handedly reclaiming young people’s lives and offering much needed second chances. And yet these superman tactics seem to be merely keeping a sinking ship afloat. There will never be a shortage of young people to rescue in the Lower East Side under the current political economic system.

**What is to be done?**
Going back to the Courthouse to make sense of it all, I had the opportunity to enjoy a long conversation with Angel Rodriguez and Justice Padró over lunch in his quarters. Justice Padró had a lot to say about what he sees as the significant challenges facing youth today. At first he references the latest neuroscience research on the “adolescent brain”, which demonstrates that the brain functioning of juveniles is not sufficiently mature to hold youth responsible for certain offenses. This research on the adolescent or teenage brain is increasingly influencing domains of public policy relating to juvenile justice where it is invoked to support rehabilitative programs in juvenile courts and to challenge policies that subject juvenile offenders to the same punishment as their adult counterparts.¹

Justice Padró goes on to raise many of the same issues brought forth by W.J. Wilson in *The Truly Disadvantaged* (1993). Justice Padró laments that the upwardly mobile have moved out the community and that there are no role models for young men to follow. He calls upon middle class minorities to “come back and give back to their community.” Long time LES resident and AGYP youth worker, Ralph, expresses a similar sentiment:

> These kids need successful role models to show them the way. They need folks who have been successful to come back to the community and show them that it’s possible, someone they can identify with, people they can relate to, and people who come from where they come from. They need guidance. All these kids want to get out of here; we need people to invest in them, support them.

¹ see Bonnie, R. J., and E. S. Scott. 2013. Bonnie and Scott convey that there have been “Three recent Supreme Court opinions invoked developmental research in finding harsh adult sentences for juveniles to be unconstitutional under the Eighth Amendment prohibition of “cruel and unusual punishment.” In each of these opinions, the court emphasized the reduced culpability of juveniles because of their developmental immaturity, pointing to adolescents’ diminished decision-making capacity, their vulnerability to external pressures (including peer pressure), and their unformed characters. In Roper v. Simmons (2005), the court rejected the death penalty as a disproportionate sentence for a crime, relying heavily on behavioral research. Both Graham v. Florida (2010) and Miller v. Alabama (2012) also pointed to brain science in striking down sentences of life without parole for juveniles.”
Justice Padró, in turn, speaks of the “disintegration of the family,” noting that there is no support network for kids to fall back on, or family to rely upon; “people can’t rely on their extended families anymore. With babies having babies, it’s a problem because they aren’t ready to be parents. So many of the young men I see are fathers already.” He also points to the prevalence of drugs, and hence drug related crime. He acknowledges youth turn to the underground economy because “there’s nothing for them. The schools are failing them and there are no jobs.”

Lingering effects of deindustrialization are still being felt in low-income neighborhoods such as the LES. On this point, Justice Padró remarks that, “You used to be able to get a decent industrial job without a high school degree, not anymore. Kids these days are not prepared. There are no jobs and no opportunities.” He blames the “disinvestment in education, housing, youth employment/youth programming” for the present crisis youth are facing. Justice Padró links this disinvestment back to the backlash of the social advances of the 1960’s. He explains, “Things were better when Angel and I were growing up; there were jobs and opportunities. The War on Poverty provided programming and job opportunities for youth. That’s how I got started. Kids today don’t have those opportunities. There isn’t a Mobilization for Youth. And they are criminalized for everything they do. These zero tolerance and stop-and-frisk policies are causing a lot of kids to be rounded up unnecessarily.”

Angel Rodriguez chimes into the conversation: “People got things done back then… there was the Young Lords and the Black Panthers.” Justice Padró exclaims, “We need a movement! There is no movement for these kids. We had the Civil Rights movement, the anti-war movement and the feminist movement. The sense of change and
possibility were palpable. There was hope and opportunity. Kids today don’t have hope.” (emphasis added) Jagna Sharff offers a similar observation from her work in the Lower East Side. She contends that “Particularly for young men, there was now no movement, no organizing principle that could embrace their energies and aspirations, unlike young women who did have new possibilities and new hope in feminism” (56). One can see this gendered dichotomy playing out today in the Lower East Side; boys are troubled, and the girls are hopeful. How will the Girl Club Center for Community tackle these challenges and generate more equitable educational and cultural alternatives for male as well as female youth in the future?

**Power of Peace**

In 2010 youth of the Lower East Side came together to call attention to teen violence. The Girls Club’s “Power of Peace (POP)” teens facilitated this forum. 100 youth from across the Lower East Side came together to discuss the problem of crime and youth violence in the area. Notably in 1962 Mobilization for Youth organized a similar youth committee to prevent violence among LES teens. The group of 24 MFY youth had united to ease racial tensions among the Puerto Rican, Black, Irish, Jewish and Italian residents. At the time youth participants reported that they were all “fearful of walking through another group’s territory.”¹ The same exact fear is voiced today among LES teens living among the public housing projects that stretch for miles along the East River, except for today Puerto Rican, Dominican, and Black teens are fighting amongst themselves, as are rival gangs within Chinese immigrant community².

---

¹ Jones, T. 1962.
² For a thorough analysis of Chinatown gangs as well as organized crime groups known as “tongs” see Kwong, P. 1987.
At the forum it was evident, that given the appropriate resources, there is potential for youth leadership to take a prominent role in developing and delivering an anti-violence message. The youth in attendance at the task force meeting were extremely perceptive and articulate in discussing youth violence and its causes. They were engaged, had strong opinions, and clear ideas on what they believe needs to be done to reduce the violence. By the end of the forum they offered a list of coherent recommendations to prevent gang related violence. Much of it was couched in terms of “partnering” with adults to create safe spaces and innovative programs.

Overwhelmingly the youth voiced a desire for gainful employment and meaningful educational opportunities. They demanded more funding for out of school time and summer youth employment. They asked for stipends to be made available for youth participating in educational and enrichment programs. And they discussed the possibilities of the city working with businesses to create paid internship opportunities. Youth spoke of an eagerness for second chances, opportunities to start fresh after making mistakes or falling on hard times. They want to be able to finish high school or obtain their GED. As it stands now it’s easier for a youth to be incarcerated than to access a decent education. And as one Girls Club member asserted, “the need for GED classes is critical.” Access to GED prep classes is extremely limited in the Lower East Side, and there are extensive waiting lists, so that even young person eager to earn his/her GED faces obstacles doing so. In sum, the youth at the forum were simply demanding that city invest in them, instead of arrest them.

Youth at the forum also expressed a sincere interest in facilitating a dialogue between the police and LES community residents, and specifically the youth. This is just
the kind of dialogue Justice Padró insisted was imperative. But before a dialogue can take place, the city must put an end to discriminatory policies such as stop-and-frisk and vertical patrols that have led to senseless arrests of thousands of young men of color on minor offenses. The implementation of these punitive policies over the past 30 years has significantly eroded social relations between the people of color across NYC and the NYPD. As a consequence youth have been witness to countless injustices; and their wounds are deep. Community youth organizations, like the Girls Club could help facilitate a dialogue, bridging the gap in communication, helping rebuild trust and healing prior wounds. Youth should take a leading role in any such reconciliation process.

Conclusion

The Girls Club is expanding Power of Peace to become an intergenerational program, a move, which is creating ample opportunities to further these critical conversations among youth. It has also partnered with the Criminal Justice Initiative¹ and initiated on-going community meetings among women in the community, led by activist Kathy Boudin². These meetings, held in the Girls Club’s Social Justice Media Center, have brought together teens, mothers, women and elders of the community in an intergenerational dialogue about how violence, mass incarceration and policing are affecting them. These conversations have been emotional, and at times heated. Women in

¹ Criminal Justice Initiative is located at the Columbia University School of Social Work, was created in the fall of 2009 to address the societal impacts of the unprecedented numbers of people incarcerated during the past three decades, many of whom also face significant challenges upon returning home. See: www.cjiny.org
² Kathy Boudin was a member of the radical leftist group, Weather Underground, and in 1984 was imprisoned for her involvement in an armed robbery. Since her release from prison in 2003, she received her Ed.D. from Columbia University Teachers College with a focus on adolescents with incarcerated mothers. She directs the Criminal Justice Initiative and works as an adjunct professor at Columbia University School of Social Work. See: http://cjiny.org/
the group (which averages about thirty) speak of how crime goes unreported in the community because of a generalized fear and distrust of the NYPD. They are concerned for their safety, especially those within the housing projects, but few see the police as a resource to call upon. Incarceration has touched nearly everyone in the community in some way. Residents are angry and frustrated, suffering from the emotional weight of shame and sorrow. Women have been left to carry a lot of this burden, while their sons, husbands, brothers and cousins have been incarcerated.

These meetings have been critical in initiating dialogue on this issue. It creates a space where women come together specifically to share their personal, emotional experiences with incarceration and channel this individualized struggle into a collective issue. The group has identified different avenues of continued participation: a support group for family members with incarcerated relatives as well as policy advocacy work on the issue youth violence, community policing, and actively demanding funding for jobs and education as opposed to mass incarceration. This collective voice is needed to bolster the broader struggle for justice.

Through these initiatives the Girls Club is fostering praxis; it is providing the guidance and space for reflection upon the world in order to transform it.”¹ As Paolo Freire (1993(1970)) articulates, coming to consciousness, conscientization, denaturalizes that which appears as a given and exposes the work involved in making the world of appearances seem permanent and natural.² This is the first step towards articulating alternative possibilities in the present and future. I elaborate further on this question of critical pedagogy and social justice initiatives on behalf of the Girls Club in Chapter

---
¹ Freire, P. 1993 (1970) p. 33
² Katz, C. 2004 p. 257
Nine. Before that however, in the next chapter I explore the other side of this story, looking at how girls are coming of age and being socialized today in the Lower East Side. I examine the socializing practices and question the role of the Girls Club in supporting these young women as they transition to adulthood.
Chapter Seven: Girls Coming of Age in the Neoliberal City

Chapter Seven focuses on how girls are socialized to experience gender in the Lower East Side today. I define gender as a lived experience, as well as a social relation; it reflects widely held beliefs and normative expectations about the attitudes and behaviors appropriate for one’s sex category. People evaluate themselves and each other within the framework of these normative gender expectations in ways that reinforce or challenge assumptions about the “innate” qualities of boys and girls (Jones 2010). Here I address how girls come to embody and perform their gender roles. I explore the socializing customs and practices at play in the Lower East Side today and the ways in which the Girls Club is intervening in these processes of socialization.

In the Lower East Side today, boys are experiencing increasing marginalization and criminalization, while girls are experiencing a degree of empowerment and opportunity. And yet, even these moderate gains are countered by persistent patriarchal attitudes and behaviors in the community. Gender problems persist despite the advances girls have made since the 1970’s - 1980’s when Jagna Sharff was documenting daily life in the LES. In 2014, girls continue to face the burden of care-giving responsibilities, restricted access to public space and pressures to conform to ideals of femininity. Moreover, girls still frequently endure violence and abuse (physical, sexual and emotional), from the interpersonal to the societal level. They are also experiencing troubles stemming from systemic issues such as poverty, unemployment, unstable and overcrowded housing, and family separation (due to incarceration, deportation, substance abuse).

Highlighting the varied challenges girls face today in the Lower East Side as they
transition to adulthood serves to illuminate processes of gendered socialization. Sexist behavior and gendered rhetoric remains prevalent in the LES, as do practices of gendered policing of space. I examine how norms of regulation come down heavily on these girls as they become the object of surveillance. I consider both the adaptive and transformative ways in which the Girls Club is responding to these challenges. I document the ways in which the Girls Club, acting at the individual level, strives to foster resilience and personal fortitude in girls so that they may consciously direct their lives in a positive direction. Later in Chapter Nine, I illustrate how the Girls Club also offers girls a systemic critique, helping them understand the nature of oppression and the connection between personal troubles and broader social forces.

This chapter raises the questions: How does gender operate as an organizing principle in girls’ lives? How do girls negotiate agency in achieving sexual, physical, and emotional maturity? How do they cope with the contradictory demands placed upon them? My analysis is grounded in the underlying question and exploration of how girls “encounter, oppose, and absorb the transformative effects of capitalism in the course of producing their identities, doing their work, playing, imagining themselves, constructing alliances, and carrying out their everyday lives” (Katz 2004, 22).

**Socialization as Caregivers**

As many feminist scholars have pointed out, females have long been held responsible for care-giving roles in the absence of external social supports, and women’s role in social reproduction has fueled the capitalist mode of production.¹ In the Lower East Side women and girls have always had to “lean in” not in the Sheryl Sandberg

---

(2013) sense, but in the sense that they have had to take on care-giving responsibilities both inside and outside of the home. In this section, I analyze girls’ socialization as caregivers and observe how a reincarnated version of capitalist patriarchy is playing out in the lives of young women in the Lower East Side today.

From a historical perspective, girls’ socialization as caregivers is nothing new. Chinn (2009) describes how young women in the Lower East Side at the turn of the 19\textsuperscript{th}/20\textsuperscript{th} century were burdened with familial responsibilities and desired the freedom offered in the city streets. A similar social commentary could be made today as girls in the LES continue to be socialized as “co-reproducers” of the household. Daughters and sisters are still serving, nurturing and maintaining the bodies and souls of women and children. Young women spend much of their time doing domestic work - co-reproducing the household. A typical day afterschool and on weekends may be spent inside their homes doing chores such as cleaning, cooking and childcare. It is not uncommon for girls to be held responsible for preparing meals, washing dishes, feeding and diapering younger siblings. As practices of hetero-patriarchal power still serve to constitute the “home” as a female domain, the Girls Club serves as a third space of carefree play where girls can sideline their adult responsibilities for a few hours. For teens, the Girls Club serves as an escape and a route to independence.

In the 21\textsuperscript{st} century new gendered expectations of youthful responsibility (Ruddick 2003) have replaced expectations of counter-cultural resistance associated with (white male) youth of the 1960’s-70’s.\textsuperscript{1} While their male peers have been criminalized and incarcerated in ever greater numbers, young women in the LES are inadvertently left to take on more responsibilities, in the absence of a safety net. To illustrate the challenges

\textsuperscript{1} see Becker 1966; Hall and Jefferson eds. 1976; Hebdige 1976
girls face in the LES, and the responsibilities they take on, I share some of the life experiences of Ariel and Lucia, both long time Girls Club members.

Ariel, a 20 year old born and raised in the LES, lives with her mother and younger brother, in a two-bedroom (rent subsidized) apartment. Ariel has always served as a surrogate mother to her little brother Josh and an institutional broker for the family. With their mother working long hours, Ariel has had to take on many of the parental responsibilities, babysitting, feeding, bathing, and caring for Josh. In recent years, her brother Josh (age 7) has increasingly had behavior problems at school with his teachers reporting ‘anger-management’ problems. Ariel suspects it’s because of all the fighting he’s seen at home between their mother and Josh’s father (whose been in and out of their lives). In 2012 Josh was transferred into special education classes, despite protests from Ariel and her mother. Ariel took it upon herself to meet with Josh’s teachers and volunteer during fieldtrip days to see first-hand what the issues were. Through her advocacy she was able to get her brother transferred back into mainstream classes in 2013.

In facing all of these challenges, Ariel has developed a sense of competence and efficacy through her caregiving responsibilities; she talks about Josh as any mother would brag about her child. I found this to be a common pattern among teenage Girls Club members; they have already long been socialized as caregivers and taken on adult responsibilities. Moreover, in acting as surrogate mothers, girls often relate to their mothers more as a peer and friend than as an authority figure. Case in point, Ariel and her mother have a complex relationship; in addition to sharing a mother daughter bond, the

---

1 In addition to her younger brother, Ariel has five siblings on her father’s side, all living in Florida. She also had younger sister, with whom she was close, and who tragically passed away at a young age.
two are best friends and co-parents. The reality for many girls in the LES today is that they are supporting their families, instead of receiving support from the family unit. Lucia’s family dynamic exhibits a similar pattern.

Lucia, a Girls Club alumna age 20, shares the circumstances of her life. Her experiences speak to contemporary socialization processes in the LES. As she explains: “I was born in the Dominican Republic and came to the US when I was three. I grew up with my mother and my step-dad who works as a livery cab driver. I’m 19 years old and I have an older brother (age 21), and 3 sisters (age 17, 12, 3). We all live in a three-bedroom apartment in the Baruch projects, along with a family friend who sleeps on the couch.” Lucia recounts, “When I was sixteen I was on the verge of losing my mother. Her last child labor in the summer of 2010 was complicated, endangering her life and that of my baby sister. As the oldest daughter this left me to nurture and care for my new born sister, as well as my other siblings. Taking care of a baby was not too difficult for me because I had helped with my other sister when she was a baby. But at this time, I was 16 and had a lot on my plate. I was left with all responsibility of waking up throughout the middle of the night to put my baby sister to sleep, feed her, change her, dress her, etc. Then I would wake up for work at 6 a.m. to work a full day.”

Lucia shows a deep commitment to her family. When her family encountered crisis, she willingly stepped into the role of surrogate mother and household caretaker, while, according to Lucia, her older older brother neglected all responsibility. The gender-based division of labor in the home has taught Lucia the exhausting hardships of

---

1 Many Girls Club members I spoke with live in overcrowded housing, with multiple siblings sharing small bedrooms. Some Girls Club families fit 6-8 people in a two or three room apartment creating stress and strain for everyone. Likewise, Jagna Sharff (1998) observes from her ethnographic work in the LES, “tiny apartments were crammed with people, many of them relatives visiting or relocating from Puerto Rico… It was not uncommon for “visitors” to stay for prolonged periods.” p. 39A
homemaking, childrearing and caretaking. She longs for freedom; the day when she can afford her own apartment, live with her girlfriend, and shed some of her care-taking responsibilities. And yet she feels a sense of guilt and obligation toward her sacrificing mother, and shares the dream of ending her family’s hardship. Lucia is finding her own pathway in life, negotiating the contradictory demands of family, school and career. Her aspirations to excel in college and choose a career path rub up against her struggles with family life, where she is stuck long hours caring for her siblings.

Karen, another alumna, expresses this sentiment of the Girls Club as refuge and escape from the stressful responsibilities she faced at home. “My mother became deaf when she was five years old when her teacher in Jamaica hit her in the ear. Having a mother who is illiterate and deaf I had to take on an adult role at such a young age, getting money orders for rent, reading things for her, going to doctor’s appointments, doing pretty much everything. I just felt that I was handling too much; I wanted to escape… The Girls Club was more than just a place I went to keep occupied. They shaped me into the person I am today.”

Many Girls Club members report that their brothers continue to be exempted from responsibilities and have leisure time for hanging out on the streets or playing sports. The brothers assert their masculinity by distancing themselves from home life.¹ Ana, a Girls Club alumna and youth worker with Boys and Girls Republic, explains that young men in the LES, like her brothers, are free to roam the streets, play basketball, and get into mischief. They are absolved from the childcare responsibilities, domestic duties and family obligations imposed upon their female counterparts. She observes that, “working with girls is hard because girls around here have so many responsibilities, responsibilities

¹ Lopez, N. 2002 p. 114
that are not placed upon the boys of the household. The girls often have to take care of their siblings, take care of the house. They have so many obligations at home it is harder for them to consistently attend programs.” After-school, weekend and summer programming at the Girls Club competes with girls’ family obligations and responsibilities. Girls frequently have to cancel their participation on any given day because of family emergencies or requests to care for cousins and siblings. As an organization it needs to be flexible in accommodating the unpredictable schedules of girls and their families, and work around them.

In taking on care-giving responsibilities for younger siblings and cousins, as well as parents and grandparents, girls are picking up the slack for cutbacks in social services in a post-welfare America. One significant role the Girls Club plays is in providing a space of refuge for girls where they can be relieved of the responsibilities forced upon in the outside world. It a space where girls can be girls and moreover, it is a place where they are the receivers of care as opposed to caregivers.

**Babies Making Babies**

Sexual experimentation is a hallmark of the coming-of-age process (Mead 1928, Chinn 2009), and yet sexual activity remains heavily policed among youth in the LES, and beyond.\(^1\) While teenage girls may be acting as surrogate mothers in their families, there remains a cultural taboo against them becoming biological mothers. Girls in the LES cannot escape the stigma of teen pregnancy. Alarmism over girls’ sexual activity is a reality today just as it was a century ago.\(^2\) Here I consider the problematization of

---

\(^1\) Ginsburg and Rapp, Ed. 1995; Susser, I 2009.
\(^2\) As noted in Chapter Three, social reformers and settlement house leaders during the Progressive Era were concerned about young women’s sexual activity as they had more freedom to work outside of the home and roam the city streets. see Addams, J. 1910 and Knupher, A.M. 2001
teenage pregnancy.

The term “children having children” comes up frequently when talking with mothers and grandmothers in the LES about their fears and concerns for their daughters and granddaughters, and it came up in conversation with Judge Padró and Angel Rodriguez at Andrew Glover. Mothers are afraid for their daughters having to deal with the burden of having a baby, and the embarrassment that might cause the family. But the men I spoke with, such as Justice Padró and Angel, are more concerned about teen pregnancy because they associate young mothers with “bad” kids (the implication being that teens end up delinquent because young mothers are inept and the fathers are missing). While the actual statistics of teen pregnancy have been declining over the years, long-held stereotypical associations live on. The reality is that teenage pregnancy itself is not the problem rather the community’s (and society’s) response creates the social problem.¹ It is not uncommon for girls in the LES to view pregnancy as a positive because it brings them a degree of respect. McRobbie (2000) observes how teenage mothers in an economically depressed urban area (in England) view pregnancy both as a confirmation of womanhood and a legitimation of sexual activity.

In studying the nature of this phrase “children having children”, Jessica Fields reminds us of the critical issue at hand: “girls of color and poor girls are less able than racially and economically privileged girls to avoid unwanted pregnancies or to make them go away through abortion, discreet adoptions, better contraception, or more sexual agency.”² In other words, teen pregnancy is a stand in for social inequality. While, young women of color are frequently portrayed as probable “teen mothers”, the truth is that

¹ Burbank and Chisholm, 1998
² Fields, J. 2005.
these girls are more likely serving as surrogate mothers for their younger siblings and cousins, as their mothers have been pulled into the low-wage labor-force.¹

The Girls Club walks a fine line on the issue of teen pregnancy. While it holds pregnancy prevention trainings in partnership with Planned Parenthood, and provides condoms anonymously and freely, for the most part the Girls Club avoids the role of providing traditional sex education. This reluctance is in part because many of the girls come from conservative Catholic or Evangelical families and their parents will prohibit them from attending the Girls Club if they suspect sex education is being taught.² Given these limiting circumstances, the Girls Club offers a proactive approach to family planning. It encourages girls to respect themselves, protect themselves, and confidently act with sexual agency. As of 2014, the Girls Club is utilizing its new public health nurse interns³ as wellness educators. These nurses have created mini-classes, which offer an under the radar means of educating on women’s health and sexual awareness.

Rather than preaching to teens and telling them not to get pregnant, the Girls Club works from a reckoning with girls’ desire. This approach incorporates Michelle Fine and Sara McClelland’s concept thick desire. Fine and McClelland articulate that, “young people are entitled to a broad range of desires for meaningful intellectual, political, and social engagement, the possibility of financial independence, sexual and reproductive

---

¹ Girls acting as surrogate mothers for siblings has a long history in the US (and the world over) as described by Louise Lamphere in From Working Daughters to Working Mothers (1987). For a discussion of the relationship between race, ethnicity, class, age and reproduction see also the edited collection from Faye Ginsburg and Rayna Rapp, Conceiving the New World Order: The Global Politics of Reproduction (1995)

² In 2011 for example, the Girls Club was going to partner with Planned Parenthood NYC to offer a Peer-Educator Sex Education class to girls ages 11-14. After several parents refused to sign the consent forms and threatened to pull their daughters from programming, the Girls Club canceled the course. As an alternative, the Girls Club and PPNYC decided to offer one off workshops.

³ Girls Club has a partnership with Hunter, CUNY Bellvue School of Nursing. Every year the Girls Club serves as a placement sight for two registered nurses studying for a Masters in Public Health. The nurses provide on-site consultations with girls and their parents, as well as wellness classes in women’s health and nutrition.
freedom, protection from racialized and sexualized violence, and a way to imagine living in the future tense.”¹

Nevertheless, the realities of teen pregnancy are among Girls Club members are very real. Girls do become pregnant and when they do, they still are welcome to participate. Kyla, for example, who has been a member of the Girls Club since age eight, became pregnant at age 18, and now at age 22 she works at the Girls Club part-time in the kitchen and frequently caters special events in the new Girls Club facility. Angela, who had a baby at age 18, continues her involvement with the organization, participating in the Girls Club’s support group for women with incarcerated relatives. As an outgrowth of this group, Angela is starting a domestic/partner violence support group for teens and young mothers. An older alumna Dawn, who gave birth at age 16, also continued attending the Girls Club was eventually able to pursue a successful career in the culinary arts, starting with Sweet Things and now working as a restaurant chef. Her daughter, now age 12, has been an active member of the Girls Club for years. As Dawn recalls: “Girls Club was always really supportive. I continued to follow my dreams as a teen mom.”

Looking ahead, the Girls Club has plans to expand programming for young mothers including support groups, parenting and GED courses, and classes in cooking, writing and body movement (yoga, dance, zumba).

The Girls Club also serves as a safe space to talk about abortion and is accepting of girls’ decision to abort. Girls Club members who do become pregnant often turn to staff members to find a resolution. They do so when they are terrified to share the news with their parents/grandparents, who may be conservative Catholic or Evangelical or who may be violent and controlling. Long-time staff members, such as Maggie, have been

able to gain girls’ trust and confidence. Girls feel comfortable talking with her and discussing their fears and concerns of having an abortion, and the pros and cons of doing so. Maggie recalls routinely engaging in such conversations with girls over the years and helping them find their way to the Planned Parenthood on the western edge of the neighborhood. Girls also turn to each other to talk about self-protection and pregnancy options. The Girls Club familial environment enables girls to form their own networks of support and guidance whether it comes to sharing resources, securing an abortion or getting out of an abusive relationship. In a community where teenage pregnancy remains prevalent, and abortion remains a dirty, unspoken word, the Girls Club is providing an invaluable resource to young women; it is providing a space and a support network where talking about sex and abortion is not taboo. Girls are offered guidance and care, educated on their options, and empowered to make their own life decisions.

**Gendering Space**

Discursive dichotomies of safety/danger, good/bad, modesty/promiscuity still play out in everyday socializing practices in the LES. Young women are frequently defined in terms of their sexuality, their physical attractiveness, sexual availability, and reproductive capacities, which become tropes for their general appraisal. Girls and women thus continue to be confined and judged by standards of ‘pure’ femininity, and while also participating in this scrutiny, surveillance, and evaluation of other females themselves.¹

The myth of the “welfare queen” is a hegemonic race-gender narrative that permeates the lives of young women in the Lower East Side (Cahill 2006). As part of this narrative, which mirrors the “girl trouble” narrative of a century prior (Knupfer

¹ Maira, S. 1999
2001), girls in the LES are stigmatized as being prone to early sexual activity and becoming “teenage mothers who have numerous children out of wedlock.”¹ The stereotype of Latina women being “mamasitas”- sexually available, immoral and “cheap” is similar to the jezebel stereotype associated with African American women, as critiqued by Collins (1990). This sexualized discourse exemplifies material social practices of meanness and revenge.² It is deployed to justify the exploitation of poor women of color and is associated with the race-gender-sexual exoticization of young females in urban areas.

Ideals of femininity are recreated in everyday spaces.³ Geographic scholars have highlighted the gendered relationship between the production of space and place, and identity formation by highlighting the spatial constitution of subjectivity (Massey 1994; McDowell 1999; Katz 2004). Young women in public or on the streets are frequently portrayed as vulnerable, dependent and sexually promiscuous.⁴ Therefore, youth practices of hanging out in public spaces, such as streets and parks, are difficult for girls to negotiate, especially given the increasing criminalization and surveillance young people face. Public spaces, such as the streets, have negative connotations in the LES. Mothers frequently praise the Girls Club for keeping girls “off the streets.” Many girls have also internalized this logic, as Michelle, a Girls Club alumna, observes:

*Girls Club a great help to girls in the neighborhood. It gets them off the streets and into something productive. It made a big difference in my life. Instead of being trapped at home... I was out finding my own interests.*

¹ Lopez, N. 2002 p. 33
² Neil Smith suggests that revanchism is the manifestation of class, gender, sexuality, race and nation terror experienced by those in power who sense they are facing an “other” out of their control (1996, 211).
³ Thomas, M. E. 2008.
Geographer, Meslissa Hyams (2003) investigates the relative precariousness of adolescent Latina body-spaces in urban spaces. While she is focusing on Mexican-American youth in California, there are many similarities to the patterns of behavior I have observed among Puerto Rican and Dominican families in the Lower East Side. Parents (and grandparents) are concerned with young women’s sexual vulnerability and their desire. These young women suffer from seclusion in private space and are under close supervision in public space. Nancy Jones (2010) finds similar traditional, patriarchal notions of proper femininity in Philadelphia neighborhoods. The stereotype of “Good” girls, she observes, are the ones “do not run wild in the streets; instead they spend the majority of their time in controlled settings: family, school, home, or church… they are not sexually promiscuous, nor are they anything but heterosexual, they are committed to putting the needs of their family first” (49). I heard a version of this quintessential “good” girl stereotype time-and-time again in conversations with mothers.

Over a century ago settlement house reformers raised alarm about the danger of ‘wayward’ girls loose on the city streets, as noted in Chapter Three. Since that time, little has changed; perceptions and practices of many LES residents remain patriarchal. Sexual danger figures prominently in mothers’ concerns about their daughters’ futures. There is a generalized taboo in the LES against girls “hanging out on the street” or “on the Ave”.¹ Mothers warn of the “dangers” including: assault, associations with sexual promiscuity, ruined reputation, etc. As one Girls Club mother explained:

_I’m so happy that we have the Girls Club now cause if you look around, the girls around here who are on the streets are 13, 15, 18 years old and already having kids cause they want to be on the street and they don’t_

---

¹ “the ave” is common reference to “Avenue D”, which is located along the northeastern edge of the Lower East Side. Ave D runs alongside Lillian Wald and Jacob Riis public housing complexes. The Girls Club Center for Community is also located on Ave. D.
have anything better to do. Their mothers let them run wild. The Girls Club provides a space for our girls to get off the streets, out of trouble, while hanging out with friends and learning new things.

For many mothers, the “street” is sexualized, and the iconic image of la callejera (female street walker), is deployed to encourage young women to conform to normative conceptions of “good” girl femininity.¹ Girls embrace and reinforce, as well as challenge and contradict these normative expectations.

Like many girls in the LES, Ariel’s “good” reputation is closely guarded by her father. She is routinely subject to cloistering and surveillance. Ariel’s father is a constant presence in her life, calling upon her several times a day to check in on her, keeping an eye on her, and minding her business. She is subjected to social control and her movements are restricted. Ariel grows weary of her father’s control, but also voices appreciation for having a father around, acknowledging that most of her friends do not. According to Ariel, he doesn’t want her “hanging out on the streets” with the “wrong crowd.” He’s suspicious of most young men in the LES and doesn’t trust her interacting with them. Like Lucia, Ariel longs for independence and freedom from parental controls and family responsibilities. She is dreaming of the day she is “out of the house” and free from her father’s surveillance. This controlling pattern is not uncommon. Other Girls Club members have even tighter restrictions on their movement and are often stuck at home saddled with caretaking responsibilities for the household. For some girls, the Girls Club is the only social space outside the home they are allowed to go aside from school.

Unlike settlement house reformers a century ago, the Girls Club encourages girls to independently explore their neighborhood and pushes back against policing and controlling of girls’ movements. However, it simultaneously acknowledges that the

¹ Hyams, M. 2003, p. 543
streets remain a male dominated space within the Lower East Side and helps girls strategize for ways to self-protect. Indeed, girls are able to exert a degree of agency in navigating their community. Growing up in the LES, girls acquire cultural knowledge and rework it in their everyday lives. Lucia, for example, is a street literate teen, able to negotiate her urban environment. In order to survive in the projects, teenagers in the LES, male and female alike, have to enact “situational avoidance strategies”, meaning that they avoid social settings that pose a threat or where conflict may arise. Out of necessity, girls develop ritualized activities oriented towards securing their personal well-being.  

As Lucia describes: “Baruch Projects have always been described as dangerous and ghetto. However, I’ve never felt endangered because I’ve never really associated myself with the people around there.” In adapting such strategies Lucia is able to successfully navigate the untamed edges of the Lower East Side. And yet such avoidance strategies fail to protect Lucia from the harassment and cat-calls of which she frequently complains. She can try to avoid some of the dangers but she cannot avoid sexual harassment on the city streets.

Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber (1976) analyzed the social space girls occupy in society, and explored alternative spaces of autonomy and resistance for young women, such as the bedroom and the youth club-house. They pointed out that girls tend to be more active in the private domestic sphere of family life rather than the public world of the street where most subcultural activities occur. McRobbie and Garber argued that girls tend to occupy the private sphere of family life rather than the public world of the street where most subcultural activities occur. Among the population of girls

1 Jones, N 2010, p. 52
2 According to Nancy Jones (2010) “Ghetto is a popular slang term that is commonly used to categorize a person or behavior as ignorant, stupid, or otherwise morally deficient. As with other terms with youth culture- it has multiple meanings and can be used in ways that reinforce and challenge the pejorative meanings that circulate in popular culture” (9).
McRobbie (1977) studied in Birmingham, she found that their lives were more structured and restricted to environments like home, school and a community youth center. Notably, McRobbie recognized community youth centers as a space where girls were able to carve out spaces of agency, autonomy and affirmation.¹

**Machismo² and Gender Based Violence**

Gendered power dynamics are exacerbated by poverty, not originated in poverty (Jones, 2010). With the economic failure of the global economy directly impacting the urban America, poor, working class, Black and Latino men are facing a crisis of high unemployment combined with high rates of incarceration. Many men are experiencing these rapid historical, structural transformations as a dramatic assault on their sense of masculine dignity. Given these circumstances, a culture of machismo remains prevalent in the Lower East Side. While the patriarchal notion of “man the breadwinner” is no longer viable, traditional notions of the nuclear family based on male authoritarianism, have been recast around a concern over sexual fidelity, promiscuity, and public displays of male domination.

Bourgeois (1995) documents the misogyny of street culture and the violence of poverty in everyday life (see also Sharff 1998). He describes how “street culture” attempts to challenge oppression in the form of racism and sexism through a highly individualistic ethos which fosters an aggressive and often violent masculinity. Misogyny among teenage males in the LES is palpable. Youth workers at Andrew Glover and Boys and Girls Republic describe boys’ language as misogynist and offensive, such that, girls are frequently referred to as bitches and ho’s and girls are perceived as sexual objects.

² For a discussion of meanings of Machismo see Gutman, M. 1996
This discourse is particularly common and intensified in masculine spaces such as Andrew Glover.

Paul Willis (1977) presents a similar depiction of sexism within the working-class counter-school culture. The ‘Lads’ enact their own sense of superiority through talking about girls. Echoing the observations of Andrew Glover youth workers, Willis shares how, among the ‘Lads’, “lascivious tales of conquest or jokes turning on the passivity of women or on the particular sexual nature of men are regular topics of conversation” (43). The ‘Lads’ clearly distinguish between a ‘good’ girl and an ‘easy lay’. He points to a conflict in their view of women, that they are seen as sexual objects, commodities to be consumed, and also as domestic comforters. Girls should be sexually desirable but not sexually experienced.

Stories of domestic violence, sexual violence, and incest are common among Girls Club members. This crisis of patriarchy manifests itself in self-destructive behavior, as well as misogyny-fueled aggression leading to domestic violence and sexual abuse. Young men with few resources to enact mainstream notions of masculinity outside of their community find broad cultural acceptance for keeping the young women in their lives subservient with force. The machismo of street culture strives to maintain women in subordinate roles as mothers or as dependent girlfriends. Poor and working-class women of color experience violence in terms of domestic violence, as well as in the form of police harassment and the disproportionate imprisonment of male family members and friends. On any given day women and girls in the LES may encounter a fight with an

---

1 Willis (1977) documents the explicit patriarchal attitudes of the ‘Lads’ in conversation. He quotes one ‘lad’ bragging about his girlfriend: “Her’s as good as gold. She wouldn’t look at another chap. She’s fucking done well, she’s clean. She loves doing fucking housework…” (45).
3 Jones, N. 2010 p. 155
intimate partner, threats of sexual assault/harassment, police harassment or criminal violence.

LES girls are familiar with emotional, physical, and even sexual, violence among parental authorities/adults in the home, as well as parent on child abuse. Ariel, for example, has taken on the issue of domestic violence in her own home. For years, she was angry with her mom for putting up with a violently abusive partner. Her mother routinely fought back, resulting in what Ariel refers to as “World War III” in their tiny apartment. Ariel explains that her mother was reluctant to kick her son’s father out because she herself grew up without a father and desperately wanted a father figure in her son’s life, violent or otherwise. The situation persisted off and on for years. Ariel expressed anxiety over the contradiction she faced on a daily basis, being at the Girls Club, a space of female empowerment, and then going home to witness misogyny, aggression, and violence against her mother. During those years Ariel had the role of protecting her half-brother, calling upon the police to break up fights, and even pursuing an order of protection. She found that the cops were rarely helpful, as they were reluctant to interfere in domestic disputes. Ariel’s account is a common one among both women and girls involved with the Girls Club.

Partner-violence is not just limited to the domestic sphere and an older generation. Interpersonal violence is common among young heterosexual couples. Girls Club members routinely report to staff, incidences of physical, verbal and psychological violence they have experienced. While dealing with a complicated mix of emotions, desires, and pragmatic economic concerns, many girls are hesitant to turn away from an
unhealthy relationship.¹ Like all humans, girls and women in the Lower East Side are eager to feel loved and “protected” and this desire often outweighs their concerns of abuse. Having a supportive network is critical in helping girls (and women) recognize and reject partner violence. Teenage girls describe their male peers in the LES as jealous, manipulative and controlling of their girlfriends.² Jealousy fuels confrontations, including male on female violence, and violence among male and female rivals. A youth worker with Andrew Glover admitted that jealousy and possession over girlfriends fuels a lot of needless violence in the neighborhood. Likewise, many Girls Club members attest to this reality, having experienced it firsthand or witnessed it among close friends.

Girls at the Girls Club frequently discuss the psychological, physical as well as sexual abuse they have encountered with their boyfriends, and among other males in their life (fathers, uncles, cousins, mother’s boyfriends, family friends, etc). Control, ownership, and possession is a big issue, now that social media technology allows for boyfriends to easily monitor, contact, stalk, threaten and manipulate girls. Teenage girls report instances of cyber stalking, cyber bullying, and blackmail. Moreover, social media such as Facebook and Snapchat allows boyfriends/ex-boyfriends to post offensive and embarrassing updates or explicit photos, or threaten to do so. These social media outlets are frequently deployed as tools of control and manipulation. And while girls are equally able to post updates about their boyfriends, the effect is not the same, because it is the girls who have reputations to uphold in the LES. As a response to the abuse of this new technology, Girls Club routinely provides workshops on social media, to provide girls with materials, information and a safe platform in which to share their experiences.

¹ Jones, N 2010 p. 118
² Paul Willis (1977) offers a similar observation, in describing how sexual rumors about a “Lad’s” girlfriend are “a first-rate challenge to masculinity and pride” (44).
Girls Club also offers self-defense workshops for women and girls and most importantly, serves as an intermediary for girls in critical situations. Girls know that they can call upon Girls Club staff at any hour of the day, and they do. Once an issue of inter-partner violence comes to light, the Girls Club connects the girl with an in-house, certified counselor to work through it.

The Girls Club created an anti-violence coalition, Power of Peace, in 2008 to protest a rise in domestic violence assaults in the LES and the stabbing death of Tina Negron who was stabbed by her boyfriend in the local Key Foods supermarket. The Girls Club, along with Councilwoman Rosie Mendez, organized the, *Silence is Violence*, rally as a community response.¹ The Girls Club also participated in the Brides March in Washington Heights, organized by the New York Latinas Against Domestic Violence.²

Violent assaults continue to be a problem under the radar for women living on the edge of the Lower East Side.³

The Girls Club has also organized public performance and actions, which speak out against gender based violence. In 2010, the Girls Club put on the premier production of *I Am an Emotional Creature*, a play written by Eve Ensler (author of *The Vagina Monologues*) and directed by actress and activist Rosario Dawson (a native Lower East Sider). This play is about “the secret life of girls around the world” and aims to promote

¹ *Silence is Violence* Rally was held March 27th 2008. As noted in the press release: “Following the February 29th stabbing death of 25-year-old Tina Negron inside a Key Food supermarket at Avenue A and East Fourth Street, members of the Lower East Side Community have formed an Anti-Violence Coalition to address the increasing problem of violence on the Lower East Side.” Co-participants in this rally were: Council Woman Rosie Mendez, District Leader Anthony Feliciano, Family Members of Tina Negron, Peace Games, GOLES, Middle Collegiate Church, St. Marks Church in the Bowery, Lower East Side People’s Mutual Housing Association.
² For this event, women wearing white wedding dresses occupy the streets of northern Manhattan in a protest against domestic violence and in memory of Gladys Ricart who was murdered by her ex-boyfriend on the day she was to marry her fiancé. http://www.bridesmarch.com/
³ For example in 2012 a pregnant, young woman was shot by her boyfriend during an argument in the lobby of her building. See Litvak, E. 2012, "Teen Girl Shot at 210 Stanton Street."
youth-led activism around issues of violence against women. Twenty girls participated and each girl read a monologue representing a girl’s experience from a different part of the world. This powerful performance impacted both the girls and audience members. Several girls informed me that participating in this performance was a formative life experience, as well as an introduction to feminism. Girls Club has participated in Eve Ensler’s “One Billion Rising” action for the past two years. This action calls upon women all over the world to “strike, dance, and rise up” against violence and protest the rape and abuse of women the world over. While such an action is not transformative, it does serve to educate the girls, make them aware and get them excited about taking a stand on an issue that affects their daily lives. Similar to the impact girls experience from the *I Am An Emotional Creature* performances, this action serves as a powerful introduction into feminist perspectives on gender-based violence.

The Girls Club is currently planning a series of co-ed intergenerational, community dialogues on the issue of gendered-based violence. This is a collaborative initiative in partnership with Andrew Glover Youth Program, scheduled for Fall 2014. As Maggie emphasizes: “We are bringing in boys and fathers because we can’t do domestic violence prevention programs without bringing males into the fold.”

**Sexuality**

Sexual orientation and identity among youth on the Lower East Side is complicated. The Gay Marriage debate, and recent Supreme Court striking down of the Defense of Marriage Act, has led to a growing social acceptance of homosexuality.

---

1 see One Billion Rising (http://www.onebillionrising.org/)  
2 The vote in the case striking down the federal Defense of Marriage Act was 5 to 4. The Supreme Court ruled that married same-sex couples were entitled to federal benefits and, by declining to decide a case from California, effectively allowed same-sex marriages there. see: Liptak, A. 2013.
among the general public. And yet, among many poor, working class, and immigrant families throughout New York City, attitudes towards homosexuality remain very conservative. This is especially the case among Hispanic, Catholic and Evangelical families in the Lower East Side in which patriarchal, anti-gay biases remain staunch. In this oppressive environment, male and female queer youth of color are particularly vulnerable and desperate to find spaces of refuge. Girls Club has opened its doors to queer male youth who have benefited the guidance and support of their peers and staff members. Likewise, lesbian girls are also active within the organization. Girls Club’s open door policy means that queer youth are immersed into programs without drawing any extra attention. And yet, Girls Club staff members are sensitive to the reality that many of these kids are forced to remain ‘in the closet’ at home. Indeed, their stories of hardship are rarely told in the Hollywood version of teen sexuality, with the exception of films such as *Pariah* and *Gun Hill Road*, which offer incredible portraits of the queer youth community. These films created a voice for young black lesbians and young Latina transgender women.¹

In conversation with Erica, a youth worker, at the Hetrick Martin Institute², a youth organization in Lower Manhattan that works specifically with LGBTQ youth, we

---

¹ *Pariah* provides a powerful story, sharing a specific experience of coming out, and offers glimpses of the community of queer youth of color. Screening *Pariah* with Girls Club teens provided an opportunity for an open a discussion around issues of teen sexuality. The fact that this film struck a deep chord with so many girls, reveals that many of them experience a similar mix of feelings of rejection and desire. As one girl described it... “that stuff was very real. It’s a young black girl doing powerful things - running away, kissing a girl...”

²The Hetrick Martin Institute offers a wide array of resources for LGBTQ youth. As Erica, HMI youth worker expresses, “Young people need access to education, post high school opportunities and “next steps” counseling to support the journey on to college, vocational school, etc. Job resources are also crucial. HMI doesn’t have a clinic, but we manage referrals to clinics such as Callen Lorde and APICHA. We offer college prep counseling, job readiness, dinner every night at 6pm, GED programs, a clothes pantry with washer and dryer, snacks, and a shower. And we also have 3 mental health counselors on staff.” However, HMI is limited in that it tends to primarily be a male-identified space, meaning that women and female-identifying men are in the minority and may feel uncomfortable utilizing these resources.
talked about the unique challenges this youth population confronts. Erica works with youth in the “Ballroom Scene”\(^1\) on issues of sexual health and aims to reduce their risks by empowering these youth to assess their needs, and learn safe ways to express themselves. She remarks that it’s not easy to create an authentic “safe space” for LGBTQ youth facing unique challenges in coming of age. She states: “It's one thing to call a space a "safe zone" or have a gay teenager singing Pat Benatar on *Glee*, it's another thing to have radical community education for these teens. The social structures that maintain oppression for queer people of color were invented to keep us down and in the same position…. Its important to motivate self-worth, self-image and a belief in their own future...”

The literature on youth performance has shown us how masculinity, femininity and heteronormativity are learned, disciplined, produced as well as performed (Nayak and Kehily 2006; Thomas 2004; Pascoe 2007). Incorporating Butler’s (1990, 1993, 2004) theorization of gender as performance and an interactional accomplishment, these studies document how young people in educational settings are not merely acted upon but have agency in enacting stylized forms of gender embodiment and sexuality, and yet these gender practices occur in relation to others and within a constraining spatiality and context. Thus, while an emphasis on performativity suggests the possibility of subversion through acts of gender transgression, such practices may not necessarily transform gender binaries or heteronormative imperatives.

\(^1\) Erica works specifically with youth involved in the Kiki Ballroom scene, in which a few of the male youth of the Girls Club have been involved. She notes that the Kiki ballroom scene in particular is for youth between the ages of 13 to 24, creating a sense of community and acceptance. The scene consists of “fashion pageants” with competitive vogue dancing, high fashion and categories. Every youth member requires initiation to reach "legendary" status.
For many queer youth in the Lower East Side, gender expression continues to be a challenge. The ability to have queer expression is a privilege. Erica observes that “Code switching is so real...everyday you will see a young person enter the building [HMI], make a beeline for the bathroom to put makeup on or change an outfit. And then when it's time to go, all of the extra stuff gets removed and another "identity" must get played out.” Queer male youth who attend the Girls Club share similar experiences of code switching as they move between school, the Girls Club, and their homes in the public housing projects. Girls as well, may adjust their clothing, hair, and make-up to conform to varied norms of femininity while at home, school, and hanging out at the Girls Club. Girls “code-switch” by adapting their behavior to the rules that govern a particular situation.¹

Erica discussed how many families ostracize LQGTQ youth, a process I have also witnessed among families in the LES. Erica explains that, “At times, a family will reject a young person but then invite them back in. There is a bit of adjustment period in regards to gender and sexuality. Youth live with friends, in shelters, in group-homes, on the street or with another more accepting family member. I have a few youth living in group-homes currently, or sleeping on the couches of friends. There’s not a lot of stability and this is a huge pattern for youth on the fringes. The basics get taken away from them and therefore survival instincts and sound judgment can be challenging for these youth. LGBTQ youth of color need housing and health services, specifically, medical support from doctors that are trained as trans-specific professionals. At this time I believe that around 55% of youth are HIV positive in the Kiki scene/YMSM (young men who have sex with men) community. Not all youth are connected to care. The high rate of infection promotes denial among youth. Also the young people that are getting infected are barely

¹ Jones 2010
housed or even "out" in their home or community.”

Erica laments that Hetrick Martin tends to be a very male identified space. “We have a women's group, but our girls are looking for more ‘women identified only spaces.’ We need to offer more for our girls, like the Girls Club.” Lucia explains how she herself identifies the Girls Club as a female centered space. “Girls Club is a safe haven where girls can come together and be themselves. I knew if I ever ran into any issues, I could speak to one of my friends at Girls Club and even staff I could seek support. I felt everyday I was at Girls Club that I did not have to be ashamed of who I was or what I wanted in life. I could just be me. The staff and girls were so supportive of my sexual orientation. My family has not been accepting of my sexuality at all. I still have to be secretive about seeing my girlfriend; both of our parents are against it. And yet, the Girls Club, met my partner, welcomed her in and never made us feel ashamed or caused us to feel embarrassed of who we are. Girls Club is like a family because it is very open, and open to everyone. No one is judged nor "punished" for decisions that they make in life.”

Conclusion

Young women suffering the stresses of poverty, sexism, abuse and isolation benefit from having access to a space where they can share, listen, and learn from one another. The Girls Club serves as a buffer from the intense social, political and economic pressures that affect girls’ physical, emotional and psychological well-being. At the Girls Club youthful anger, energy, and emotion is creatively channeled. It helps girls work through personal issues and provides a space where critical agency can be cultivated. The Girls Club is a safe space, apart from home, school and street life, where girls can develop an awareness of the connection between self-transformation and social
transformation. As progressive education scholars, Ginwright and Commarota (2002), explain:

*Through dialogue, youth develop sense of optimism, emotional stability, intellectual stimulation, positive self-regard, and general resilience when facing personal, family, community challenges... social transformation begins with self-transformation and provides a way to connect individual actions with social changes (92).*

Girls Club provides what Lipman (2011) refers to as a “humanizing space” that enables girls to see themselves as subjects of history. It creates a sense of collective pride and solidarity in facing the challenges together, as one alumna conveys: “With the Girls Club you feel like you’re a part of something.” I explore the Girls Club’s efforts to foster solidarity and collective agency further in Chapter Nine.

In this chapter I have explored the coming of age process for girls in the Lower East Side today and concluded that girls continue to be burdened with care-giving responsibilities while simultaneously struggling against misogyny, gender based violence, and the policing of space and sexuality. In the following chapter I document how the ideology of the American dream persists among Girls Club members and examine how girls manage their aspirations in life. I highlight the emotional costs of upward mobility. I also analyze the role of the Girls Club in this process and point to the limitations of an engaged practice of uplift. In delivering a message of empowerment, I question the role of the Girls Club in processes of identity formation and aspiration management. What social and cultural alternatives is the Girls Club providing as girls’ transition to adulthood?
Chapter Eight: Aspirations of Mobility

Amidst the increasing privatization and marketization of schooling in America (Lipman 2011) the Girls Club offers an alternative model of educational practice. It philosophically stands on a belief that schooling is part of the problem, not the solution, and advocates for a model of free, experiential learning opportunities outside of school. In first section of this chapter I review some of the expansive literature on education/schooling, social reproduction and resistance and situate the Girls Club within this theoretical context.

The next section critically examines the role of the Girls Club in cultivating a “can do” mentality among “at-risk” girls. It raises the question: is the Girls Club a neoliberal project, producing youthful citizen subjects who are responsible and self-governing? I suggest that it is addressing the social inequities young women encounter in the contemporary era of global capital by “leveling the playing field” and providing girls the knowledge, know-how, resources and support they need to survive and thrive in neoliberal New York. In its efforts to empower girls, however, the Girls Club may be unintentionally creating self-enterprising, aspirational subjects suitable to neoliberal modes of governance. In this way, the Girls Club is both reflective of, and limited by, the contradictions of global capitalism, which celebrates entrepreneurialism, economic rationalism, and individualization.

Through this lens, I identify the limitations of an engaged practice of uplift. I explore how girls in the Lower East Side manage their aspirations and how the Girls Club promotes social mobility and to what effect. I question the new meanings and practices around youthful responsibility and whether Girls Club members embrace or reject the
practices designed to empower them. Rather than assuming that girls act as subjectified and disciplined subjects, I explore how they react to, and reinterpret these practices, and demonstrate agency as they transition to adulthood. I consider girls as semi-autonomous agents acting on their own behalf. In doing so, I hope to offer a more nuanced understanding of the ways power dynamics and subjectivities are being remade in the 21st century. In the following chapter, I go on to highlight how the Girls Club attempts to transcend the traditional educational models of uplift and empowerment through critical pedagogical practices that impart a message of social justice and solidarity.

**Education, Social Reproduction and Resistance**

Scholars have long recognized schooling as an institution that reproduces social inequalities and maintains the status quo. In *Learning to Labour* (1977), Paul Willis offers a sophisticated analysis of how working class students experience the process of social reproduction in England. Likewise, stateside Bowles and Gintis’ *Schooling in Capitalist America* (1976), explores how the process of schooling reinforces relations of dominance and inequality from an economic determinism perspective. They identify the “correspondence principle” to describe how schools socialize students to occupy the same position in the class structure as their parents.\(^1\) Since the late 1970’s many other scholars have carried forth this research, studying schools as a social space and institutional setting where class, gender, racial and ethnic differences are reconstituted, as well as contested on a daily basis.\(^2\)

Following the lead of Willis (1977), ethnographic studies have documented the complex nuances of young people’s agency in resisting school staff, policies, practices

---

and curriculum. Likewise, reproduction theorists have analyzed how class structure is reproduced from one generation to the next, and have studied schooling as a site where social relations of capitalist society are reproduced (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Giroux 1981, 1983). This expansive literature identifies and explores a range of issues including, but not limited to: structural and cultural determinants of schooling policies and practices, micro politics/power/discipline practices of schooling, uncovering hidden curriculum and unjust tracking of students, socio-demographics of truancy, the political economic and cultural context of schooling, and reform initiatives. This dissertation argues that it is necessary to expand our definition of education beyond schooling in order to account for out of school time initiatives.

Paul Willis’ (1977) classic ethnography is associated with the Birmingham School’s focus on resistance. In this study, Willis follows a group of 12 working class “Lads” in a depressed industrial town in England, and documents how the working class boys enacted everyday resistances to all symbols of school authority. Willis examines school and transition from school to work in relation to class and gender. He roots his analysis of changing subjectivity in lived, sensuous practice and cultural production. Willis argues that subjective formation is accomplished in practice, that what the Lads are coming to know and not know about their conditions of existence is part of who they are becoming. He documents how the Lads develop a partial understanding of the real conditions of their existence.

1 Willis 1977; MacLeod 1995 (1987); Fagan 1995; Anyon 1997; Ferguson 2001; Lopez 2002; Bettie 2003
3 As noted in Chapter 7, Willis however does not critically examine relations of gender as central to understanding of the Lads’ lives.
Willis focuses on the social creation of subjectivity across a multiplicity of historically and practically interconnected settings, tracing out the interconnectedness between sites of their construction. He highlights the continuity between the factory-floor culture and the counter-school culture. The Lads rejection of schooling results, in part, from their profound insight into the economic condition of their social class. As working class youth they recognize the inherent inequalities in the educational system and therefore act out through oppositional behavior such as “having a laff” at school authorities. The Lads do not participate in trading respect and obedience for knowledge and merit; Willis refers to this rejection as a “radical act” because “it refuses to collude in its own educational suppression” (1977, 128).

The Lads achieve, what Willis refers to as partial penetrations, of their circumscribed class circumstances in life as they draw on the shop floor, the street, and the pub for cultural resources. Such penetrations are partial, distorted and confusing. It is the dialectical relations between penetrations and their limitations that bind Lads to their class location and working class lives. The Lads come to reject the school ideology of individual advancement by creating a division between manual and mental labor. Mental labor is rejected as feminine and manual labor is celebrated as masculine. In valorizing shop-floor culture, masculinity and manual labor, the Lads emulate the lives of their parents and reproduce their place within the class structure. The Lads’ nonconformist cultural innovations are complex and contradictory, simultaneously transformative and reproductive.

French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu contributed to reproduction theory through the concept of cultural capital, which he defines as the general cultural background,
knowledge, disposition, and skills that are passed from one generation to the next. Bourdieu argues that each social class transmits distinctive cultural capital, and that schools systematically valorize middle and upper class cultural capital and depreciate the cultural capital of the poor, working class and minority students. In other words, he identifies schools as a trading post where socially valued capital is parlayed into superior academic performance. Academic performance is transformed into economic capital through a job market that values academic credentials. Finally the school legitimates the process “by making social hierarchies and the reproduction of those hierarchies appear to be based upon the hierarchy of ‘gifts,’ or merits.”

In addition to cultural capital, Bourdieu employs the concept of habitus to explain how schooling entrenches social inequality and how the mechanisms of social reproduction are naturalized. Habitus is composed of the attitudes, beliefs, and experiences of those inhabiting one’s social world. It disposes individuals to think and act in certain ways. Habitus is the mediating link between individuals and society, a conceptual bridge between subjective inner consciousness and the external constraints of the material world, between human agency and social structure. Bourdieu describes school-mediated exclusion as a process whereby schooling implants in those it marginalizes a set of cognitive and evaluative categories that lead them to see themselves as causal agents of a process that is institutionally determined. Social class largely determines success or failure in schooling, but academic performance is cloaked in a language of meritocracy, which blames the victim for his/her “failure” to succeed.

---
Building upon the work of Willis and Bourdieu, Henry Giroux (1983) argues that youth resistance is not self-explanatory, and that it needs to be linked with the subjects’ own explanations of their behavior and contextualized within the nexus of peer, family, and work relations out of which resistance emerges. His theory of resistance examines the agency and experience of individuals and describes oppositional behavior as a response to structures of constraint and domination. He takes up Willis’ notion of cultural production and considers how oppositional behavior draws on aspects of working class culture in a creative and potentially transformative fashion.

In *Ain’t No Making It* (1987), Jay MacLeod brings together Willis, Bourdieu, and Giroux’s theoretical advances with a focus on youth aspirations. He argues that “teenage peer groups make their own history, but not under circumstances of their own choosing.” The aspirations of youth, according to MacLeod, serve as a mediating link between socioeconomic structures (what society offers) and individual agency and autonomy (what one wants). In this ethnographic study, he looks at the experiences of the “Brothers” (upwardly mobile Black youth with high aspirations) and the “Hallway Hangers” (working-class white youth with low aspirations similar to Willis’ Lads) in the Clarendon Heights public housing project. MacLeod concentrates on the regulation of aspirations among youth and explores the relationship between structural forces and cultural innovation in social reproduction. He finds that while the Brothers consistently hold high aspirations, affirming the achievement ideology and the actuality of equality of opportunity, the Hallway Hangers see the spoils of economic success as beyond their

---

reach and “invert the dominant ideology in a way that gives them access to “success” albeit in the forms the dominant culture recognizes as failure.”

MacLeod asserts that the Hallway Hangers contest the achievement ideology not because they have insights into the workings of structural inequality but because of the assault this ideology makes on their self-esteem. Because youth believe that they succeed or fail in school on the basis of merit, they internalize the blame for failure, lose their self-esteem, and ultimately accept their academic failure as a natural outcome of their personal shortcomings. For the poorest young men, according to MacLeod, the only defense against the achievement ideology is to turn it on its head and attempt to salvage as much dignity as possible and redefine the criteria for success. MacLeod affirms that the Hallway Hanger’s inversion of the achievement ideology is thus a creative cultural response to class domination by those at the bottom of American Society. Nevertheless, this creative oppositional behavior is limited.

Having reviewed the literature on education, social reproduction and resistance, I will now consider how the Girls Club, as an alternative educational initiative, is inflecting social reproduction processes in the Lower East Side. I then consider the Girls Club’s mission to empower girls in relation to practices and strategies associated with neoliberal governance. I highlight Girls Club members’ agency in navigating thru challenges in life as they aspire for upward mobility. And I question the Girls Club’s influence in this process.

---

2 ibid. p.131
3 For Willis’ Lads’ it was sexism that kept them from decrying class domination, in the case of the Hallway Hangers it is racism that derails the development of a radical political consciousness. Neither, the Lads or the Hallway Hangers could find common cause with working class youth across racial or gender lines. Antonio Gramsci describes this tendency among the subaltern towards developing a dual, contradictory consciousness, embodying both progressive, counter-hegemonic insights and reactionary, distorting beliefs. See Gramsci, A. 1971.
Social Reproduction After-School

As the “flexible” work-day expands, so too has the market afterschool programming. Since the mid-1990’s young people have been increasingly swept off the streets and channeled into “youth development” programs during out-of-school time hours. After-school programming has been touted as the solution to a whole host of societal ills from juvenile delinquency to declining test scores.¹ Much of this programming is fee-based and narrowly geared towards test prep, as opposed to innovative and holistic activities. This veritable boom in the industry for after-school programming neatly accommodates an education reform agenda that prioritizes high-stakes testing and conservative pedagogical practices.²

Nearly all after-school programming in the Lower East Side is fee-for-service, and the few affordable options available offer little in the way of enrichment and excitement. Young people tend to either be herded into recreational activities such as basketball or narrowly structured “homework help” sessions. They do not have meaningful access to engaging and relevant extracurricular activities. Meanwhile, students in more affluent NYC neighborhoods such as the Upper East/West Side and Park Slope, Brooklyn have access to costly, high quality enrichment and tutoring/ test-prep services.

The academic “achievement gap” in America is created by unequal access to educational resources and opportunities both in and outside of traditional school settings. This disparity falls along lines of race, ethnicity, class and gender and is interrelated with

² Lipman, P. 2011
gaps in access to housing, employment, income, health care, technology and social mobility. Just as the institution of schooling plays a role in social reproduction, after-school programming, as an extension of the school day, also plays a significant role in reproducing social inequality in urban America in the 21st century. And yet, because the Girls Club counters and disrupts traditional models of after-school programming by engaging in critical and experiential pedagogical practices, it serves as an alternative with transformative potential.

**Youthful Transitions to Adulthood Today**

In neoliberal New York many young people have been rendered unskilled and ill-prepared, their possible work futures have been severely circumscribed, and their futures derailed. Victim-blaming ideology routinely blames young people for their limited job prospects, inadequate training, poor work ethic and lack of skills. Yet in truth, the loss of learning, recreational and leisure opportunities among poor and minority youth in the Lower East Side of NYC is a result of public disinvestment, devolution, and privatization. Poor schooling and the policing of public spaces and play, have ultimately led to *deskilling* (Katz 2004) and the loss of social and cultural skills among many urban youth.

Over the past thirty years traditional gender roles have been upended. Young women are now being celebrated as the “winners” of the 21st century benefiting from the advances of the feminist movement and uniquely positioned to succeed in a service economy that demands flexible, self-inventing and enterprising workers. The reality is

---

1 See: Kapor Center (http://kaporcenter.org/the-gap/) for a graphic model of this “leaky pipeline” along the pathway of education and opportunity.

2 For a global perspective on ‘deskilling’ of youth in the neoliberal era see Ruddick 2003.

3 Harris, A. 2004; Harris, A. ed. 2004; Aapola, S. et al. 2005
that by ‘winning out’ in the service economy, young women have wound up with the short end of the stick. The dramatic loss of manufacturing jobs, traditionally a ladder of mobility for less-skilled men, has happened concurrently with the expansion of low-level “pink-collar” service jobs. Sub-contracting, part-time and temporary work, personal services (such as child-care and home health-aid), and working off-the-books are the linchpins of restructured urban labor market for low-skilled workers. As men experience a harder time finding work, women are increasingly relied upon as flexible labor (Harvey 1989, Susser 1997). Growing industries such as finance, law, insurance, and real estate rely heavily on a peripheral support staff composed mostly of women. So while girls are supposedly trailblazing ahead in the 21st century, in reality many end up locked into exploitative, dead-end jobs in the lowest echelons of the service economy.

Jennifer Silva (2013) describes youth coming of age today as isolated and disconnected; she finds that they are all “trying to figure out what it means to be an adult in a world of disappearing jobs, soaring educational costs, and shrinking social support networks.” Under global capitalist economic restructuring, gender and generational distinctions are being redefined. Silva argues that youth today need to be equipped with more skills and support to navigate this tricky and tumultuous transition to adulthood. Just as settlement houses tried to address the emergent needs of young women entering the labor force for the first time en masse, the Girls Club today is trying to equip girls with what they need to navigate the political economic landscape of the 21st century. As Lyn, the Executive Director, asserts:

---

Many of the girls who attend Girls Club programs lack the advantages that children of middle-class families enjoy: namely, a familiarity with the mainstream avenues to social and economic success, a sense of the different ways one can have a say in the community and the ability to navigate the educational system. While it has become common to speak of a “glass ceiling” that impedes women’s advancement at their jobs and within their fields, many Lower East Side girls do not even have the “ground floor” from which to build their futures.

The Girls Club’s alternative model of education strives to meet girls’ immediate survival needs (a job, educational enrichment, healthy meals, counseling,), while simultaneously imparting less tangible knowledge resources such as cultural and social capital. It what follows I assess the Girls Club’s efforts in providing a “ground floor” from which to build their futures.

Social Capital and Mentoring

Through a broad variety of mentoring programs that take place year-round, Girls Club members develop long-term relationships with staff, peers and volunteer mentors who provide a sense of safety, stability, and companionship, in addition to valuable social capital. Pierre Bourdieu (1986) defines social capital as the social relations that increase the ability of an actor to advance her interests. Social capital includes the social relations and connections that can be mobilized to advance. Group membership and involvement in social networks emerging from these groups, can be utilized in an effort to improve one’s social position and sense of agency.¹

The Girls Club offers symbolic resources including social networks, relationships, and connections and it provides girls with the social skills and know-how to feel at ease in new social situations. In doing so, the Girls Club imparts social literacy. Kaya, a Girls Club alumna originally from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, highlights: “The

Girls Club has exposed us to a lot of things such as traveling and meeting other people and always not being afraid of talking to who you meet.” Another member comments: “I have had the chance to meet people and have experiences others don’t have access to. I am less shy now. I know how to talk to people. I know how to approach different types of people.” These girls speak to the importance of exposure to new social circumstances, which forces them to stretch out of their comfort zone.

Henry Giroux (2013) contends that the “new illiteracy” of our times is about “not knowing how to read the world.” The Girls Club supports social literacy by offering options and a different way of thinking. As staffer, Pam, asserts: “if you don’t know it exists how can you dream it up. Just being shown that you have all these options is life changing.” Girls Club members openly acknowledge the skills and experiences they have gained through participation. Edna, Girls Club alumna, points out: “I’m more open-minded now. All the different people you meet along the way, changes your worldview.” Another alumna adds: “I have been introduced to new things I had no idea about. The more you know and see the more you have a feel for what you really want in life.” Girls Club not only offers exposure and connections, but the wherewithal to transform those experiences and contacts into viable resources to be harnessed and mobilized.

Mentors and role modeling is critical in fostering social capital and transforming young women’s worldviews. Mentoring programs at the Girls Club1 build long-term

---

1 The Quinceaños Program1 is an example of the innovative mentoring initiatives of the Girls Club. Through this program girls ages fifteen-sixteen, pass through a yearlong collective ‘Rites of Passage” experience; each girl is paired with a female mentor or “madrina” who commits to raising $1,500 for her college and/or career prep education. The Girls Club manages the money in an LES credit union account, and the money is awarded to the girls following high school graduation. As part of the program the girls participate in several Financial Literacy and College/Career Planning workshops to help manage their funds, plan their education and career path, and envision their future. As one participant conveys: “My
relationships between girls and women who are professional artists, scientists, doctors 
and lawyers. Mary Trigg (2010) argues for the importance of mentoring in advancing 
young women in life. She contends, mentors “may introduce us to potential career paths, 
stages of ambition, and push the envelope of what we believe to be possible, whether it is 
the level of education we can attain, the kinds of personal lives we can create, or the 
amount of social change that can be achieved” (11). By the time a Girls Club member is a 

senior in high school she may have multiple mentors in her life supporting her in various 
capacities. As one teenage member asserts, “here I can find inspiring women who 
genuinely care about me and my future.”

Despite all of these opportunities and social connections, the reality is that there 
are limits to the individualizing advantages social capital garners. Social capital and 
literacy only goes so far. At the end of the day young people need a good education, a 
job, as well as money and resources to survive. Girls Club is helping girls transition to 
adulthood by equipping them with the interpersonal and technical skills and support they 
need. In cultivating cultural and social capital in youth, it is not merely leveling the 
playing field and offering girls a seat at the proverbial table, but it is giving them tools to 
navigate the terrain of a globalized world and find their place in it. In doing so, is the 
Girls Club inadvertently cultivating youthful citizen subjects?

Responsibilitization

Nikolas Rose (1996, 1999) explores, from a Foucaultian perspective, how new 
meanings and practices around personal responsibility serve as self-governing strategies. ¹

¹ madrina and Girls Club staff are not just there to help me with my goals but also to help me deal with 
everyday issues like emotions, family and any other drama or opportunity.”
¹ Foucault (1991) uses the concept of governmentality to refer to the rationalities and mentalities of 
governance or the forms of strategies, tactics, and programs that are deployed to shape the actions of others,
This view holds that (neo)liberal rationalities govern through the behaviors and dispositions of individuals, rather than society, and thus youth are supposedly being “governmentalized” through specific practices, techniques and strategies such as educational institutions that promote empowerment.\(^1\) Peter Kelly (2001), in turn, deploys the term “responsibilitization” in an effort to describe the “diverse forms of regulation seeking to incite, encourage, and provoke certain practices of the self and certain capacities necessary for active, autonomous, responsible citizenship” among youth.\(^2\)

Anita Harris (2004), among others (Harris ed. 2004; Aapola et al. 2005; Gornick 2006), explore how gendered discourses of personal responsibility, self-invention, empowerment and consumption aimed at youth in general, and girls in particular, are constitutive of a global economy that celebrates entrepreneurialism, economic rationalism, and individualization. Indeed, the ideology of personal responsibility and choice dovetail with (certain) feminist notions of opportunity. The popular concept of “Girl Power” operates as a “can do” mentality which lines up nicely with the “lean-in” (Sandberg 2013) culture of corporate feminism. Following this logic, “Girl Power” is a tactic to insight self-cultivation and self-governance among girls (I explore this topic further in Chapter 10). On this point, I would agree, but I also would like to stress that is important to recognize the agency young people have in this process. Girls are not simply...
an empty slate to be “governmentalized” or “responsibilized” as youthful citizen-subjects. In studying Girls Club members, I explore how they are assertive and demonstrate agency in determining their actions and behavior, and in defining their aspirations for their future.

**From At-Risk to Can-Do**

Many Girls Club members appreciate and strategically utilize the organization as a means of upward mobility and self-determinism. Through involvement, girls acquire “soft skills” such as a familiarity with professional demeanor and dress. By the time they graduate high school, many girls have accumulated resumes/ portfolios, references, work experiences, and professional contacts. They have a degree of social capital (Bourdieu 1986). Angela, a high school senior, explains: “I have gained connections, tried new things, learned to be more open. Girls Club means more than a job; it’s having support and help when needed.” While Harris (2004) has critiqued programming and practices that turn “at-risk” girls into “can-do” girls, I would argue that girls are not simply manipulated into becoming self-enterprising subjects. They have agency in the process of creating their lives. The support, guidance and opportunity the Girls Club offers, provides a foundation, but it is the girls who decide the direction they take.

Mona, a Girls Club alumna, exemplifies the “can do” girl who works hard and dreams big. Mona is highly motivated and exhibits a hopeful embrace of the Girls Club as a vehicle of self-cultivation. She is currently working her way through college, studying at Borough of Manhattan Community College, CUNY and pursuing a career in journalism, holding down internships and actively maintaining her own blog. She articulates how her involvement with the Girls Club has impacted her life. “I was born in
Split, Croatia, however I came here with my mom when I was young. Growing up as an immigrant and without a family here has been challenging. It's been difficult for my mother and I to both struggle while striving for our dreams. That’s why the Girls Club especially means so much to me. Girls Club forever changed my life in the best way possible. They have provided extraordinary support, awareness, and education for me. I've learned everything from feminism and human rights, to opportunities in different fields. It has helped me tremendously with opportunities and resources to grow and challenge my mind. It has influenced me so much and has helped me with my self-confidence, knowledge, and belief in myself in order to achieve my dreams. Being that I'm an immigrant, it's been very difficult for me to figure everything out on my own, but luckily I have the Girls Club by my side.”

The Girls Club reflects contradictory intentions that vary along the spectrum of adaptive and transformative change. It reflects an adaptive model of social change through uplift and empowerment, working towards helping women and girls gain access to the “system” in order to change. In practice, the Girls Club sends conflicting messages such as “be successful in (status quo) society” and yet also “fight back against an unjust and exploitative society.” It encourages entrepreneurialism and yet rejects unfettered capitalism and consumer culture. It imparts cultural and social capital, which conveys a message of conformism and simultaneously creates a culture of questioning and exploration. In essence, girls are encouraged to become self-caring, responsible, active citizens, who question everything and support a social change agenda. In this way, the Girls Club is a reflection of the contradictions of life in urban America in the 21st century.

Through all of its programming, mentoring connections, and job opportunities,
the Girls Club works toward fostering resilience.¹ It fosters girls’ empowerment and guides them towards successful careers, while imparting critical awareness of systemic social and economic inequality. Girls develop a sense of confidence and a “can do” attitude, but their aspirations run up against structural limitations. Girls such as Mona, who develop a critical consciousness of socio-economic and environmental injustices, are left confused, trying to make sense of the desire to be a normal teenager interested in popular culture, while resisting misogyny and superficiality of it at the same time.

Securing an internship at Seventeen magazine at age 17 was a dream opportunity for Mona, and at the same time she was critical of the shallow, consumerist culture the magazine promotes.² Mona recognizes the contradiction, and yet as an immigrant youth from a working-class background, she needs internships to move ahead, secure scholarships, and make connections. Ultimately she wants to do socially committed journalism work, but reaching that goal is an uphill road full of compromises. Mona has benefited from a mentoring relationship with journalist and author, Cara Hoffman, who writes fiction from a feminist perspective, and comes from a similar class background.³

In connecting Mona with a writing mentor and a progressive feminist role model, the Girls Club is helping her to navigate these contradictions.

¹ There is a substantive body of literature on resilience studies. Researcher, Michael Ungar and his colleagues in the International Resilience Project, identify seven tensions which resilient youth are able to successfully navigate. Ungar observes that resilient youth generally have access to material resources and basic necessities; positive relationships with peers, family and community members; a strong sense of identity and purpose; a healthy sense of control; are able to navigate cultural practices, values and beliefs; develop a sense of social justice; and learn to balance personal interests with a responsibility to the greater good. Ungar, M. et al. 2007.
² Notably, famous feminist writers such as Sylvia Plath and Ann Patchett got their careers started writing for Seventeen Magazine. For a critique of pop culture of “girlie” magazines see A. McRobbie (1991) “From ‘Jackie’ to ‘Just Seventeen’” in Feminism and Youth Culture.
³ Cara Hoffman dropped out of high-school and had a child a young age before become a successful writer. She has done a number of writing workshops with the Girls Club over the years and has developed a mentoring relationship with some of the girls including Mona. Hoffman is author of So Much Pretty (2010) and Be Safe I Love You (2014). See http://www.carahoffman.com/index.htm
Aspiration Management

Aspirational dreams are common among Girls Club members, including Mona. For many the ideology of equal opportunity and the American dream remains compelling. The neoliberal version of the American dream holds that success and failure is the sole responsibility of individuals who either fail or succeed in the capitalist game of competing markets based on their own skills and character. It denies the persistence of racism, sexism, and class inequality and thus erases the struggles of young people who navigate social structural constraints which include a shrinking labor market, lack of affordable housing, and poor quality schooling.\(^1\)

It is not surprising that many of the girls tend toward individual rather than structural interpretations of their experiences. In an attempt to explain this contradiction, Paul Willis (1977), as noted above, deploys the concepts of ‘penetration’ and ‘limitation’ to describe how youth have partial insight into the social structures that shape their lives, but their potential to transform their social and environmental situations is limited due to their partial understanding. Limitations, such as the belief in equality of opportunity, serve as barriers to understanding, which in turn ensure the stability of the status quo. Limitations are coupled with consuming daily struggles and negotiations—leaving little time or space for collective, critical analysis. Moreover ‘coming of age’ entails significant body changes and puberty, first sexual experiences, the daily struggles with self-presentation, and identity development. It is difficult for young women to move beyond self-focus to a level of analysis that clarifies structural and economic forces on their personal and particular experiences.

Elsa Davidson (2006, 2008) observed that middle class youth in Silicon Valley

---

\(^1\) Cahill 2007
exhibit high aspirations whereas working class youth tend to embrace a more communitarian (as opposed to individualized) outlook. I would argue that girls in the LES aspire towards upward mobility while also exhibiting a concern for their family and community and a desire to give back, a paradox noted by Caitlin Cahill (2007). Many girls carry a heavy burden of care-giving responsibilities and express a deep commitment to their families and their community.¹ Girls aspire for a better life than the one into which they were born, yet an increasing array of obstacles stand in their way. In an age when girls are told they can have it all, many girls take on all the care-giving responsibilities that have traditionally been placed upon women, as well as schoolwork, college prep, employment, and community work. The physical and emotional costs of self-invention weigh heavy in girls’ lives. In striving to balance their aspirations with familial obligations and loyalty, girls may circumscribe their potential to fit within the boundaries of their known world.

For many girls in the LES, the coming of age process entails learning how to differentiate themselves from their families. The Girls Club is integral to this process of self-transformation. As Girls Club alumna, Ariel, conveys: “the Girls Club showed me that I don't have to limit myself just because I don't come from wealth or because I have doubts. They introduced me to amazing people who came from nothing…very inspirational women that made it in life. I’ve realized I may be a poor no-one from the lower [LES] but I know I don’t have to be stuck here all my life; I can get out. I can make something of my life. I don’t have to become what I’ve been surrounded by all my life; I can see there are other ways of living, other options out there.” Ariel believes that through hard work and sound decision-making, she can modestly raise herself up. Her

¹ See also Sharff 1998 and Cahill 2007
account is in many ways illustrative of “aspiration management,” a hyper-vigilant mode of subject formation associated with the confluence of flexible regimes of accumulation, globalization, and neoliberal governance (Davidson 2006, 2008).

Ariel exhibits a ‘can do’ individualistic mentality, yet her optimism is not merely a matter of false consciousness. Her belief in the possibility and promise upward mobility is in part, due to her involvement with the Girls Club and in part, due to familial and institutional influences. Her father, for one, affirms the American dream and preaches the virtues of education, employment and staying on the “right path”. Her mother, meanwhile, is a pragmatist who does not sugarcoat the struggles of life; for her, the only way forward is through hard work and determination. Catholic schooling has also served to reinforce these messages of merit based achievement for Ariel.

Ariel is aware of the limitations of her socio-economic position and recognizes this as unfair, but does not frame these obstacles as a systemic issue nor as a question of justice. As a teen, Ariel was constantly dealing with domestic violence at home and burdened with caring for her little brother. Her daily life was mired with crises, making it difficult to grasp the systemic processes underlying her condition. Yet because of these formative life experiences Ariel recognizes the struggles women face by virtue of their gender more so than struggles for racial and class equality. Her awareness is limited in that she does not yet apprehend the interrelationship among these axes of inequality. It is possible that through her studies at CUNY, Ariel may start broaden her worldview.¹

Girls such as Ariel aspire for stable, respectable careers that offer entry into a middle class lifestyle without ostracizing them from their working-class roots. Elsa

¹ As a Psychology major (3rd semester), Ariel reports that classes are raising challenging questions and seem to be leading her to deeper reflection and critical analysis.
Davidson (2006, 2008) similarly documents how working-class teens in Silicon Valley demonstrate a similar drive towards entering mid-level caring professions as opposed to buying into white-collar careers in finance and technology. Likewise, Ariel is pursuing a “caring” career in the field of psychology and counseling. She is most interested in individuals affected by incarceration or domestic violence, taking on social issues that resonate with her own life experience. A career in social work and psychology appeals to Ariel because it will provide her with a middle class lifestyle while enabling her to give back to society. Moreover it offers the promise of a successful career without having to radically break from her family.

Marco, a male youth in the LES, offers a similar aspirational narrative of resilience and determination. As a young queer teen growing up with his grandmother, Marco found his way to the Girls Club. Today, he is a sophomore at the Fashion Institute of Technology, SUNY. He explains: “I grew up on Ave D in the Lillian Wald Public Housing Projects. I lived with my Grandmother, brother and sister. I remember the challenge for us was limited resources due to lack of money. I felt as though I was stuck in this neighborhood. My dream is that I can find a place in the world doing what I absolutely love and being the one family member who finishes college who is educated, employed, successful, showing his family that they too can do great things, and also giving back to them.” Like Ariel, Marco aspires for upward mobility and affirms a “can-do” mentality, but one that is not merely individualistic. His motivation stems from a keen awareness of how hierarchies of class, race and ethnicity play out in the Lower East Side.

---

1 Ariel’s life experience includes having an incarcerated father for much of your childhood and coming of age in a household deeply affected by domestic violence.
Marco’s critical understanding of gentrification in the LES conveys a conscious awareness of social injustice. In his words: “Everyone knows how different the LES is now compared to 20, 10 even 5 years ago! I hear stories from my uncles, aunts, cousins and even my own siblings. It has become another gentrified neighborhood, with more commercial, expensive real estate being built on every corner, making it even more expensive to live in. This only makes it difficult for people who already cannot afford to live here, remain here. The landlords of buildings in the LES want to pay out tenants to house new tenants who will be willing to pay more rent than the current tenants. All of the shops, grocery stores, and bodegas are changing. The older residents of the neighborhood will not be able to live here much longer. I know that in the years to come my grandparents will not be able to live in the LES. I am concerned about how the neighborhood continues to change and how much more it can take before a lot of people become very upset.” Marco’s social awareness stem from his lived experience of gentrification and feelings of loss as poor people like his family are being pushed to the margins of the LES. Marco aspires towards a successful career in the fashion industries, in part because he wants to “give back” to his grandparents and protect them from displacement. His aspirations of upward mobility are connected with his desire to carve out a space in this city where he can survive and thrive. He feels displaced from the LES because of his class background, as well as his sexual orientation. As a queer male youth growing up in housing projects where machismo is the norm, Marco is keenly aware of unequal power relations related to gender and sexuality. His solution has been to seek out safe communities of acceptance such as the Girls Club and FIT, and charting out a pathway towards a better life. Marco demonstrates awareness of systemic social
inequality, and yet he demonstrates an individualistic, career driven mentality. Rather than changing the system, he strives for social mobility and the ability to materially give back to his family.

Many girls’ aspirations are inflected by parents’ own desires and life experience. Such parental pressure may be worse among immigrant families, where girls are the cultural broker and bridge to American culture. Lucia, a college junior reflects: “I feel like I always had a sense of direction in life. I’ve had to overcome some challenges, learning English for one, and being an immigrant. My mother hasn’t been able to work much here and she gets depressed sometimes. She was a nurse back in Dominican Republic but she doesn’t speak much English and has had a lot to deal with, with us girls. She’s always telling me ‘look at all that I have given up for you to have a better life.’ I feel pressure and guilt to succeed and help my family.” This experience of feeling pressured is common among Girls Club members. Girls narrate stories that depict the struggles and hardships of the immigrant experience. The hardships that their “self-sacrificing” mothers endured, along with other women in their families, serves to bolster their educational and career aspirations, as well as sense of obligation to give back to their families. For Lucia, it has given her direction, purpose and determination to graduate from John Jay College, CUNY and pursue a career in forensic psychology, but it has also been a burden and a source of stress. Lucia chose to stay close to home for school, in part because CUNY was the most affordable option, and in part because she is the eldest daughter in the family and has many care-giving responsibilities. In the following chapter, I explore how traveling to Chiapas, Mexico with the Girls Club has
provided Lucia some relief from familial pressures, while offering a new perspective on life, and strengthening her sense of self and social justice.

As noted in Lucia’s case, it is not uncommon for mothers to project their own hopes and aspirations upon their daughters. Milagros reflects this pattern of familial pride and projected hopes. She explains: “I am proud of my kids. My kids are the first in the family to graduate. Briani is the first to go to college. I tell her education and knowledge is power. I tell her: “get your education and don’t let any one walk over you like they do me.” She tells me that she wants to have a good life; she doesn’t want to have to struggle like I did. She doesn’t want people abusing her. Briani always tells me that she’s going to build me the house I never had one day.” Briani’s motivation to progress in life stems in part from her desire to transcend her life circumstance of having been born into a shelter. She aspires to a life very different from that of her mothers and she sees education as the way to achieve this goal.

The message “get your education” is a common among Girls Club alumnae who are first generation college students. Education is perceived as a magic solution, ensuring upward mobility. Girls are striving so hard to succeed in school and in life, that they rarely question what makes for a good education. Moreover, in the pursuit of an education, girls may take on prohibitive student debt, as has Briani, in choosing to study at a private university in upstate New York.² Briani buys into then narrative of upward mobility and like many of the other girls in the LES, she aspires to succeed so that she may “give back” to her family. She has yet to develop a critical perspective of the

---

¹ The annual tuition and fees for Briani’s university in 2013-2014 was $57,450 (http://syr.edu/financialaid/costofattendance/). Briani has received a lot of financial aid in the form of grants which she does not have to pay back, but has had to cover the gap with government and private loans. Briani choose this private school over the local CUNY schools because she felt it was more prestigious. Girls Club staff advised her otherwise.
American dream, in part because thus far in life her hard work has led her on an upwardly mobile path. Upon graduation from college, however, a sense of disillusionment may set in, as Briani experiences first hand the disciplining nature of debt. Ironically, it is the girls who excel most in school, and manage to escape the LES to attend private colleges outside of the city (which are perceived as more prestigious than SUNY or CUNY schools), who are the ones who are most likely to drop out of college early or graduate with an overwhelming debt-load.¹

Student debt is one of the defining issues for youth coming of age today; first generation college students are particularly vulnerable because of their financial need, combined with a lack of parental guidance in navigating the financial aid process. Youth of the Occupy movement, overburdened with student debt and unable to find stable employment, have mobilized against the punitive system of debt-financed education.² For first generation students pursuing higher education, the college process is daunting. A few Girls Club members who have chosen the private school route have been forced to leave school early (without access to their transcripts) because of their debt burden and inability to cover tuition. Ana for example started out Buffalo State and after running up a high debt in private loans, she was forced to quite her sophomore year and start-over again at BMCC, CUNY. Her credits would not transfer because of unpaid tuition bills.

Ana’s experience is not uncommon; I spoke with other Girls Club alumnae who have had

¹ Notably, a few Girls Club members over they years have received full scholarships to college. However, the majority of high-achieving students, they receive partial scholarships and grants and are forced to cover the resulting tuition gap with government issued and private loans.
² see Occupy Student Debt Campaign (http://www.occupystudentdebtcampaign.org/) and Strike Debt which is an offshoot of the Occupy Movement (www.strikedebt.org). For more information see http://studentdebtcrisis.org/. A petition for “The Student Borrowers’ Bill of Rights” which calls for restoring basic consumer protections—such as bankruptcy protections and a statute of limitations for collection of student loan debt—as well as changes to give student borrowers greater purchasing power and greater peace of mind. The petition has over 50,000 signatures on MoveOn.org
similar experiences with student loan debt. As for Ana, while she decries the injustice of student debt and recognizes it as a systemic issue, she feels paralyzed by its impact on her personal life. Ana is not joining a national mobilization against student loan forgiveness but she is sharing her story and spreading the message. For its part, the Girls Club encourages girls to avoid the perils of student debt by taking advantage of the CUNY system. Alumnae studying at CUNY schools often continue their involvement with the Girls Club through part-time employment, tutoring, mentoring, assisting with programs and ongoing workshops.

**Life After the Girls Club**

The Girls Club walks a fine line both imparting a message of empowerment and warning of the realities of the world; giving girls the tools, resources, knowledge, and connections they need to be “successful” in the world, while simultaneously encouraging them to change the world. In this way, it serves both adaptive and transformative ends. There is no question that the Girls Club is cultivating a generation of young women who are able to find their way in the world, who have a good sense of self, are confident, educated, healthy in a holistic sense, and open minded, but while the organization may be achieving success at the individual level, there is little evidence, as of yet, for a transformative impact in the collective sense.

The Girls Club may be changing lives, but it is not (yet) changing the world. Nevertheless, it is making a big difference in the lives of girls and women in the LES, transforming their world-view and opening new pathways in life. The majority of members successfully transition to adulthood, in that they graduate high school, go on to college or trade schools and develop careers. The Girls Club is just now starting to see an
impact in the form of alumnae ‘success’ stories en masse. Early cohorts started graduating in groups of 5-10 a decade ago, and since then, as momentum has grown, the number of girls attending college and graduating with a degree continues to grow.

Girls have chosen divergent pathways after leaving the Girls Club. Some girls are attending local CUNY schools and the Fashion Institute of Technology (SUNY), others are attending SUNY schools in upstate New York, and still others have won scholarships to attend private colleges such as Swathmore, Skidmore, Howard, and Syracuse. Maria, for example, the eldest of six siblings (living in a two bedroom apartment), left home to attend Occidental College in California on a full scholarship. However, girls like Maria are the exception. The majority of Girls Club alumnae attend a local CUNY school, often starting out at BMCC or LaGuardia Community College. Girls are also choosing to go the trade school route, studying careers in the culinary arts.

The Girls Club does not tie success to being college bound. A few girls stay home, work service or retail industry jobs, and fall into motherhood at a young age. Those that do often remain involved with the organization through community classes and programming. The Girls Club helps these young women and mothers complete their GED, apply to CUNY and/or seek employment. It is difficult to know which path a girl will follow. Even sisters within a single family choose divergent paths. For example, two sisters Juliana and Monica, a year a part in age; Juliana, the elder, stayed at home and had a baby while Monica went on to excel at Syracuse, and now works full-time at the Girls Club as the Human Relations Manager.

Unfortunately, much of the evidence on the career pathways of alumnae remains anecdotal. I have picked up information through word of mouth and social media. Every
cohort of girls keep in close contact with each other, with staff, and with their mentors long after the days of formal membership. Over the holidays and summer breaks, alumnae visit the Girls Club and hold mini-reunions. Through these lines of communication, the Girls Club staff have a general idea about where alumnae are and what they are doing, but there is no monitoring system tracking the women. Looking ahead, the Girls Club plans to establish a more formal record of this data¹, while also providing more programs and volunteer opportunities for alumnae involvement.

Notably, there is a sizable contingent of alumnae who have joined the Girls Club staff over the years. Four alumnae from the early years, are now working full-time at the organization (baker/caterers, HR, and program associate), several more are working part-time both in the kitchen and in programming. Three other alumnae are youth workers and organizers at other organizations in Lower Manhattan. I would surmise that as the Girls Club continues to develop and grow, there will be more examples of alumnae taking over the Girls Club and engaged in careers that are socially meaningful and impactful.

**Transformative Impact, Adaptive Change**

Many alumnae describe their participation in the Girls Club as a transformative experience. The familial bonds that they formed there nourished and sustained them in life. These girls speak of solidarity and women’s empowerment, yet it is less clear how they are applying the lessons of social justice, leadership, activism and advocacy imparted by the Girls Club. The women are more informed, inquisitive and engaged

---

¹ The Girls Club has not had enough money or staffing resources to spare in this sort of data collection. As noted in Chapter Four, as the Girls Club tries to counter the “audit culture” of accountability, within the organization there is push back against data collection and implementing systems of ‘monitoring and evaluation’. It is action oriented, as opposed to research oriented.
citizens, but they are not, as of yet, political activists, organizers, crusaders for transformative change. They do, however, possess what Henry Giroux (2013) calls, civic literacy, or the “ability to narrate oneself in the world from a place of agency.” They speak and act with confidence and assertiveness and are attuned to social issues affecting their community, with an understanding of justice and shared responsibility. In short they have a vision of a just world, but are often too wrapped up coping with the everyday challenges of life to affect change. One could conclude that the Girls Club is succeeding in providing a critical education, which is vital to a functioning democracy, but it is not directly fostering collective action for social transformation. It is however, providing a foundation for future struggles.

Aside from offering encouragement, support, and the practical skills girls need to advance in life, the Girls Club fuels creativity, curiosity, and social change mindedness in girls through innovative pedagogical practices, which I explore in the following chapter. It strives to create an open, interactive environment that “provides stimulation, allows for autonomy, opens possibility for exploration, and promotes independent learning and peer group socialization.” Translating education from the schoolroom to the city streets, the Girls Club embraces critical pedagogy as a means of collective empowerment. In the following chapter I outline in detail the Girls Club’s model of alternative education, highlighting its innovative programming in Arts and Culture and Leadership Development. I argue that in its educational capacity, the Girls Club is laying down the seeds of future social change, cultivating a democratic vision and fostering leadership.

1 Katz, C. 1998. p. 141, 142
2 Nancy Naples’ (1998) notion of collective empowerment includes personal as well as collective recognition of the power to fight for equality and improve the quality of life. She defines empowerment as an “on-going interactive process occurring in dynamic relationship with those who struggled on their own and for others in their communities.” p. 222
Chapter Nine: Critical Education in Arts and Activism

In the era of global capitalism, powerful interests have deployed enormous economic, political and symbolic resources to undermine public education, especially in urban areas. Within the United States, the realm of education has become the new frontier in neoliberal reform initiatives. Neoliberal educational policies have included: closing “failing” public schools or handing them over to corporate-style “turnaround” organizations, expanding school “choice” and charter schools, instituting teacher incentive pay based on student test scores, diminishing the power of teacher unions, enforcing top-down accountability and standards, and imposing market based and mayoral control strategies (Lipman 2011). This represents is a push for economic competitiveness and market discipline on all aspects of schooling, and the field of youth development more broadly. Such reforms will not yield substantial long-lasting educational improvement without a strategy to improve the lives, and life chances of urban youth and their families. Educational policy reform needs a vision for economic and political justice.

In this chapter, I suggest that education, like housing, jobs and health care is one terrain over the “right to the city” (Lefebvre 1968, 1996), and that by constructing alternative models of education the Girls Club is locally engaging in a broader struggle for social justice. The Girls Club’s critical pedagogical practices offer an alternative vision of “that which is not yet imagined, not yet in practice, not yet in site” (Fine 2006, 100). It asks: what should an education accomplish in a democracy? (Giroux 2013)

Jane Addams once remarked that, “A settlement is a protest against a restricted view of education” and an attempt to “socialize democracy” through social and
educational activities at the community level.\textsuperscript{1} And yet, as previously noted, settlement houses in the LES are not the dynamic, innovative, pioneering social service organizations they once were.\textsuperscript{2} In the 1960’s-70’s, Mobilization for Youth, along with other alternative educational initiatives mobilized people’s energy in opposition to schooling institutions, but this momentum was short-lived. The Girls Club builds upon this local history of pioneering initiatives in community education, established by the original settlement houses and MFY.

The founding of the Girls Club was part of a wave of community organizations that emerged in the 1990’s to “pick up the slack” from government disinvestment and institutional failures. As service provision devolved from the State to the community level, non-profits, as well as private firms, filled the void left by a defunded public sector. Schools may have been failing and even falling apart, but after-school programming became a booming business. Since the 1990’s, “Youth Development” and “out-of-school-time” programming has been touted as the solution to everything from rising juvenile crime, poor test scores, public health concerns, and an inadequate supply of childcare.\textsuperscript{3} The majority of youth development organizations are funded to target “at-risk” youth and offer a limited menu of programmatic options, which aim to improve educational outcomes (i.e. test scores/graduation rates), provide recreation (sports), or prevent delinquency (pregnancy, drug-use, violence). After-school programming today is often little more than a holding pen for young people to keep them off the streets and out

\textsuperscript{1} Addams, J. 2002 (1893).
\textsuperscript{2} Fabricant and Fisher, 2002.
of trouble. The few youth organizations that provide interesting and innovative programs, do so on a on a fee-for-service basis, excluding those youth most in need.\footnote{Nancy Lopez (2003) describes those in need of alternative educational programs as low-income Black and Latino students. She states: “educational opportunity programs that target low-income Latino and Black students can provide the missing link for students who attend schools that lack basic resources, books, quality curriculum and support” (98). To that I add that educational opportunity programs should target all poor and working class youth, in urban as well as rural areas.} Organizations end up serving upwardly mobile families, and neglecting the most alienated youth. The Girls Club, rejects the neoliberal education reform agenda, and offers an alternative, providing a model that offers free, innovative programming to girls and women in the Lower East Side.

Neighborhood women united to form this organization in a modest effort to solve their community’s problems as best they could and to make up for where schools and local settlement houses were failing them. Their efforts were embedded in an appreciation of alternative education, as well as an understanding of the broader social, political, and economic causes of their community’s institutional implosion. Starting out as a grassroots organization, the Girls Club took on a life of its own, reinventing educational and cultural programming for youth. Today the organization strives to connect education with broader struggles for housing, employment, health care, gender and racial equality, as well as environmental and food justice. It also works prevent youth violence and protest mass incarceration of black and Latino men from the LES. Linking education with arts and activism, the Girls Club is creating opportunities for women and girls to evolve and become critically engaged citizens, community activists, producers/creators and leaders. It is cultivating a renewed sense of imagination and an alternative urban vision for the future.
In what follows I describe the innovative thrust of Girls club programming. I highlight two areas of pedagogical practice: programming in the Arts and Activism, which are designed to foster cultural capital, social capital and critical consciousness respectively. I argue that these educational practices offer a model of critical education, which is needed in progressing a social change agenda.

**An Alternative Education Model**

The Girls Club is taking up the challenge of re-imagining civic engagement and education in the era of global capitalism by creating an alternative space for creative expression, social connection, critical thinking, community dialogue and activist organizing. It is cultivating the conditions for girls to see themselves as critical agents capable of making those who exercise authority and power accountable. In order to develop civic literacy (Giroux 2013) young people need exposure to democracy and justice as lived experience. The habit of democratic living and moral action is in the doing, in questioning and engaging the world around you.\(^1\) The Girls Club strives to make this vital connection through critical education. In this chapter I explore how it does so, and with what degree of success? And I question the limitations of this endeavor.

For analytical purposes I distinguish between two core areas of Girls Club programming: arts education and activism and leadership, which correspond with the ideological goals of increasing cultural capital and social capital\(^2\), as well as fostering critical consciousness/praxis.\(^3\) While the organization offers a much wider array of programming outside of these areas, such as in the sciences (environmental biology and planetarium astronomy), technology (physical computing, robotics, sound engineering),

---

1. Ayers, B. 2003 p. 37
health and wellness (nutrition, cooking, gardening, body movement), college and career (internships/employment, financial literacy, tutoring); I argue that the critical core of its programming can be broken down into arts and activism. These educational programs foster personal transformation, cultural and creative expression, social awareness, and critical consciousness, as well as connection with and awareness of the broader world. Programming in the arts allows for the creative processes of self-expression, experimentation, exploration, exposition and the channeling of energy and emotions. Activism and leadership programming, on the other hand, lay the foundation for social change by cultivating curiosity and civic literacy\(^1\), providing international travel opportunities, and raising awareness of alternative visions.

**Arts Education and Cultural Capital**

*Teens need exposure to culture, like plays and museums like what we had with the Girls Club. Exposure to eating different foods, trying ethnic foods, something as simple as that can blow your mind. Talking to different people, exploring the city and traveling, all help expand the mind. Teens need exposure to opportunities and different ways of living. They need perspective, to see that another way of living is possible. Many of these kids never get out of their neighborhood; many never get off their block.*

Ana, Girls Club Alumna and Youth Worker

Girls Club demonstrates the critical liberatory potential of arts education, which highlights girls’ expressive and creative capacities. Bourdieu’s description of cultural capital and habitus offers a useful way of understanding the value and significance of the Girls Club’s dynamic arts programming. He describes the acquisition of cultural competence as the product of upbringing and education, noting that if one inherits cultural competence they have a head start in life, as cultural competence ultimately

\(^1\) Giroux, H. 2013
yields symbolic profit.¹ Familiarity with art and knowledge of its conventions is like learning a second language, much easier to acquire earlier on in life, which is why the privileged classes, who are likely to have internalized this knowledge at a young age, are at an advantage.² In *Distinction* (1984) Bourdieu insists that an understanding of the material reality of consumption is critical to understanding “the miracle of unequal class distribution of the capacity for inspired encounters with works of art and high culture in general” (29).

Arts education opens minds and it opens doors. For girls in the LES, it offers a creative outlet to express themselves and widens life opportunities. Art has the power to help girls think about issues and ideas they otherwise would not be aware of, much less reflect upon and contemplate. The Girls Club, in engaging youth through arts and culture, is disrupting cultural reproduction. Creativity and media arts are valued in the 21st century. Beyond just leveling the playing field, radical programming in the arts, holds the potential to offer girls the tools to comprehend, reassess, and invert the power structure through cultural production.

Cultural reproduction represents the transmission of the culture of the dominant class. The cultural hegemony, or the dominant form of cultural capital, consists of those attitudes, dispositions, tastes, linguistic competencies, and systems of meaning that the ruling class deems as being legitimate.³ Cultural capital assumes an ideological function; a taken-for-granted character that conceals the arbitrary way in which it’s distributed

---

¹ Bourdieu, P. 1984. p. 71
² Crehan, K. 2012 p. 17 Crehan makes a relevant connection to Gramsci’s comment on the advantages of certain children already have over others by the time they enter school: “In a whole series of families, especially in the intellectual strata, the children find in their family life a preparation, a prolongation and a completion of school life; they ‘breath in’, as the expression goes, a whole quantity of notions and attitudes which facilitate the educational process properly speaking” (Gramsci 1971, 31).
among individuals in society. Bourdieu defines cultural capital as socially determined
tastes, certain kinds of prior knowledge, language forms, abilities and modes of knowing
that are unevenly distributed throughout society. Cultural practices (museum visits,
concert going, reading etc.) and preferences in literature, painting or music are closely
linked to educational level and social origin. Bourdieu describes how art and cultural
consumption are predisposed, consciously or not, to fulfill a social function of
legitimating social differences. Individuals’ practical knowledge of the social world is
internalized, ‘embodied’ in social structures. Bourdieu refers to this embodiment as
habitus, a system of schemes of perception and appreciation (taste), as well as the
acts/practices of taste. Different conditions of existence produce different habitus. Taste
thus functions as a marker of class. A work of art or a type of food only has meaning for
someone who possesses the cultural competence or refined taste to recognize it.

Nevertheless, Bourdieu insisted that habitus is “durable but not eternal.”

Bourdieu describes habitus as an “open system of dispositions that is constantly subjected
to experiences, and therefore constantly affected by them in a way that either reinforces
or modifies its structures” (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1996, 133). In other words, through
exposure to new experiences, one’s habitus may be modified over time. Girls Club
indirectly serves to cultivate cultural and social competence among young people through
exposure and experience. As Ana, a Girls Club alumna now in her mid-20’s explains: “I
was offered an alternative lifestyle through the Girls Club and I am grateful. It changed
me. My mom points it out to me all the time; I have more distinguished tastes. I eat

---
1 Bourdieu, P., and J. C. Passeron. 1977
2 ibid p. 1
3 Bourdieu, P. 1984, p. 7
4 ibid. p. 468
5 ibid. p. 171
different food than my brothers. I like hummus and olives and salads. I read books.” Here Ana is suggesting the Girls Club has given her a degree of “distinction” in that her choice in food and leisure habits are more refined. It is as if the Girls Club serves as a kind of finishing school, which in itself is a conservative project. And yet I would suggest that the goal of enhancing girls’ social and cultural capital has a broader aim. An education in arts and culture, serves two purposes: 1) enhance cultural capital, giving girls the ability to become border crossers, and 2) provide an alternative lens from which to view the world and the tools with which to change it, through cultural production, and protest it, through creative expression.

The Girls Club has always offered a rich array of arts and cultural programming, from the early days when it started out by carting around a push-cart of crafting supplies around the neighborhood. Two of the founding mothers, Lyn and Maria were artists in their own right, and placed a great a value on arts as a tool of creative expression and political protest.¹ As an organization, it has been making the argument for the value of an arts education. Arts related programming now includes photography, documentary film, animation, graphic design, mural arts, puppetry, crafting, activist art (activist campaign art/posters), visual arts (painting, drawing, sketching), material/fashion arts, music (drumming, singing, dj’ing, sound design/production), dance (flamenco, hip-hop, step, zumba), writing (poetry, memoir, fiction), performance (poetry) as well as studies in media culture, art history and curation. In this chapter, I focus on photography, film, museum/gallery art studies, and fashion arts, as well as mural arts programming and collaborations with local artists.

¹ Lyn formally studied Art and Architecture student at Cooper Union, has a PhD in Visual Anthropology from Temple University, and is a documentary filmmaker by training. Maria who has a passion for creative crafting with use of recycled materials.
The cultural is a site of struggle and conflict and the dominant class maintains hegemony by setting the cultural order through the arts, media, leisure, and consumption.\(^1\) The Girls Club offers girls the tools to shape culture from below, by providing a thorough education in the arts and culture and an awareness of cultural production. The Girls Club encourages a culture of questioning alongside exposure to the New York art scene. The Art Geo and Curatorial programs deputize girls as journalists documenting cultural institutions and actors in the Lower East Side. Girls visit gallery spaces, meet with and interview artists and curators, and produce a video documenting this exchange. Girls Club also runs a curatorial training and arts management program that introduces girls to the art industry by teaching them how to curate and hang art shows at the Girls Club \textit{Art+Community} gallery space. These classes offer practical skills, such as in digital media production, journalism, as well as knowledge of the business of art, but also social and cultural competence in terms of being able to recognize and talk about different types of art, interview artists, and feel at ease in art galleries and museums. More importantly girls develop an understanding of art as a process of cultural production. As one teen participant observes:

\textit{Before this class I had not visited museums/galleries. In this class I met about four artists and my impression was how many different ways they see things. I now enjoy going to art galleries and seeing the different art works and taking photos of them. I feel more comfortable interviewing people now too, because I’m getting used to it.}

Both Art Geo and Curatorial programs introduce girls to what is seemingly an elitist gallery culture. Art galleries proliferate throughout the neighborhood, but many long term residents, and especially youth, feel alienated by these spaces of high art. Girls Club breaks down these barriers, by bringing girls into these spaces and demanding

\(^1\) Gramsci 1971; Crehan 2002.
recognition, respect, and a conversation. The Girls Club is serving as the bridge between the art gallery world and the longstanding, working-class LES community. It works to ensure that LES teens have access to the formal art world and benefit from the privileges that knowledge and exposure to visual arts brings with it.

Moreover programming in the Arts, such as Museum Club\(^1\) and Art Geo, enable girls to become urban explorers. As girls learn to identify and discuss various forms of art, their confidence and comfort with the arts community and the city itself grows. Most girls tend to live highly localized lives, rarely venturing far from their home and school and spending almost all of their time within their neighborhood.\(^2\) In fact, many girls growing up in the LES rarely have the opportunity to explore the city outside of their zip code. The Girls Club allows girls to engage with and occupy museums, galleries among other venues of high art and in doing so it democratizes cultural consumption\(^3\) and creates new outlets for cultural production.

**Art as Cultural Production**

Educational theorist Henry Giroux argues that a critically engaged pedagogy should incorporate an understanding of the role of digital media, social media and popular culture in cultural production.\(^4\) Media texts- videos, films, the internet, social media and other elements of new technologies serve as tools of social change. Building upon a strong foundation in photography, Girls Club has expanded its programming in

---

\(^1\) Museum Club is the Girls Club’s oldest continuous running program. Girls are paired with mentors and on the first Saturday of every month girls and their mentors meet to have a lunch and travel to galleries and museums throughout New York City.


\(^3\) Through programs such as Museum Club and Art Geo, girls gain an appreciation of the arts, as one participant characteristically expresses: “I’m an art fiend now. I love galleries and museums. Art is awesome, all of it.”

\(^4\) Giroux, H. 2008 p. 121
digital medial arts through a partnership with REEL Lives\(^1\), an organization which runs film and media studies programming in the Center for Community. REEL Lives provides a hands-on, intensive education in film-making, digital media production, media literacy, and human rights. The program targets immigrant, refugee and first generation youth and teaches film as a medium through which these youth can visually share their life stories and concerns. In creating their own documentary film, the youth have the opportunity to comment on social issues, raise important questions, and challenge the status quo. Girls Club member, Christa, for example, created the documentary *Loud Silence*, which takes on the contradictions NYC immigrant youth face as art students who are both openly homosexual, and followers of the Catholic faith. At a moment in time when gay marriage is increasingly accepted in society, but in which gay youth continue to face persistent harassment, Crista’s message is that “stifling your sexuality will only make the silence grow louder.” Girls Club member Lisa, who has also participated in the documentary program, shares her experience:

*The Girls Club is where I was introduced to documentary filmmaking. I was able to edit, direct and write my own film. My father hasn’t been a part of my life and I don’t know other people who have their fathers in their lives. So for my documentary I wanted to interview multiple people and see what they think about their fathers’ absence.*

Crista and Lisa not only created their own documentary films, but they were able to use the process to explore their identity in relation to social norms, and share this story with peers and a broader audience. REEL Lives shares its media collection online, and

---

\(^1\) Reel Lives Core supports youth in developing professional, “hard” skills in digital filmmaking, from cinematography and non-linear editing, to sound design and creating a narrative for non-fiction film blocking, story boarding and basic directing. Reel Lives programming supports youth in engaging with their own lives through media arts, creating a form of informal, group- art-therapy. See: Reel Lives (http://www.reel-lives.org/)
promotes is use among educators, to raise awareness of critical human rights issues and encourage action to promote social change. As Goodman (2003) argues, digital media production allows youth to speak back to institutions that would otherwise make them passive recipients.¹ Media arts projects help unlock girls’ voices. They learn to trust their voice and speak up, ask questions, raise concerns, take a stand, and envision alternatives.

Notably, this documentary film program will open to teenage boys in Fall 2014. This will be one of the first co-ed programs offered at the Girls Club, which gradually plans to expand other select arts programming to young men in the community, including culinary arts. REEL Lives, has also established a sister program in Cape Town, South Africa in 2013, which runs in tandem with programming in NYC, creating opportunities for a global dialogue among youth participants. The aim is to develop an exchange of ideas and sharing of creative processes between the two groups of students (Girls Club participants and those in Cape Town) utilizing technologies such as Skype/Google Chat.

Photography has been an integral part of the Girls Club since the beginning. It has been pivotal to Girls Club success in engaging neighborhood youth and introducing them to the world of art and cultural production. The girls learn how to photograph using digital SLR cameras and edit their work using iPhoto and photoshop software. They learn the different forms of photography including: in-house studio portraiture, street photography, natural landscapes, and abstract. They learn how share their work through online web platforms, as well as print and curate their work in the Girls Club’s gallery space. Over the years the Photography program has utilized the participatory action research methodology of “photovoice” in which girls take photographs related to a given personal or social concern of their community, and then use this photographic evidence

as a springboard for critical dialogue.\(^1\) Using this process, the girls have explored their family and home life, women’s work, city streets, public housing projects, Coney Island, the local ConEdison plant, and the toxins inside their homes. And they have mapped the LES community street by street.

Using the city as a resource the girls are able to learn about the wider field of photography by visiting museums and galleries, attending guest lectures, and by working with working professional photographers.\(^2\) As one recent photography student commented: “The photography class has changed the way I look at things. I don’t have a camera but I would like to have one because I love taking photos now.” For many girls, photography imparts valuable skills, a new lens through which to envision the world and a way to engage with your surroundings. Photography students also have the opportunity to travel to Chiapas, Mexico, to do documentary photography/field-work, and gain access to internships at the International Center of Photography.

**Art as Apprenticeship**

Arts programming at the Girls Club also has a very pragmatic focus: sharpening creative skills and providing hands-on training in creative industries such as Fashion and Design (graphic or otherwise). Fashion Arts programming for example teaches girls hands on do-it-yourself fashion up-cycling, while introducing them to the fashion industries in the city. Girls learn the basics of fashion arts; from design to construction

---

\(^1\) Photovoice is a participatory action research strategy introduced by Photo novella by Wang & Burris (1994). The idea is that through sharing and discussing the photographs and entering a critical dialogue the girls are able to build upon each other’s concerns, identify needs of the community, which will inspire advocacy and participation in policy change and collective action. see. Wang and Burris 1994, See also: 2002. *The Impact of Welfare Reform on Two Communities in New York City.* W.K. Kellogg Foundation, a study led by Anthropology Scholar Practitioner Team: Dana-Ain Davis, Leith Mullings and then students Ana Aparicio, Audrey Jacobs, Akemi Kochiyama, Andrea Queeley, Beverly Yuen Thompson

\(^2\) Girls have won awards from The Professional Women Photographers Association, displayed their work in art galleries and sold photographs to art collectors. The Girls Club collaborates routinely with the NYU Tisch School of the Arts and the International Center of Photography.
and have the opportunity to work with professional fashion designers to bring new life to old styles. Through the Fashion Arts program girls meet a diverse array of professionals working in all areas of the fashion industry and learn to critically engage with “style”. It imparts an anti-consumerist message that distinguishes cultivating a unique style from media driven fashion trends. Girls learn where their clothing comes from, about commodity chains, and are made aware of the hidden costs of cheap clothing. They also document, through street photography, New Yorkers’ infamous street style and subculture styles. In doing so they are able to develop a critical understanding of the politics of “style” and how oppositional meanings of dress (and music) are created (Hebdige 1976).

The Fashion Arts program not only serves as a creative outlet for artsy teens, but it also provides for an alternative career pathway. One Girls Club alumna, Sera, explains how this program raised her interest and awareness in Fashion Arts as a career.

*I grew up on the LES in the Rutgers housing. I got involved with the Girls Club in 2005 when I was at Seward Park High School. I was a great fan because there aren’t a lot of programs like this. It provided a lot of opportunities you wouldn’t normally get. I met people, did internships, networked. When I was 16 I got a summer internship at a jewelry shop where I learned how to make jewelry. This provoked my interest in fashion management and merchandizing. Now I am studying at FIT, 3rd year.*

Jose, one of the male Girls Club members, likewise found a calling in fashion design through his involvement in organization’s “couture camp”. He eventually won a full

---

1 Hebdige (1976) focuses on the semiotics of style, signaling a refusal, a symbolic violation of the social order. He looks at how young people appropriate and transform standard cultural artifacts, obscurely representing the very contradictions the artifacts are designed to conceal. As an example of subversive up-cycling, in 2011 Girls Club members cut-up100 vintage wedding dresses and refashioned into new designs for everyday wear.

2 Street photography, in the style of Bill Cunningham (of New York Times), is an important part in the Girls Club fashion arts program. Girls document unique styles they find on the city streets and by developing this skill, several Girls Club members had the opportunity to join the press corps in several Fall 2013 NYC Fashion Week runway shows as photojournalists.
scholarship to Parsons School of Design for a pre-college enrichment program during his last two years in high school and has gone on to study at the Fashion Institute of Technology, FIT. As an openly gay man, living in the projects, finding a pathway to Parsons and FIT was a lifeline for Jose. A similar story accounts for Marco, another male alumna who started studying Fashion Arts at the Girls Club and found his way to FIT pursuing a career in fashion merchandising. He is now working his way through school as a make-up artist. Pragmatically speaking, careers in the fashion industries provide an opportunity for many poor urban youth who are artistically inclined yet need a career path and paycheck to survive in the city. While art school remains limited to a privileged few, many of the fashion industries in New York continue to operate on a technical apprenticeship model that provides entry and opportunity for working class creative youth in this city.

Art in Action

Artistic activism can feed the energy and vitality of urban social movements, which certainly has been the case in the Lower East Side. In articulating ‘art and creative expression’ as an urban commons, Susser and Tonnelat (2013) assert the importance of cultural workers in creating alternative urban visions. Girls Club taps into the creative culture of the LES, hosting ongoing community arts workshops led by local artists. These classes enable girls and their mothers to get involved in a collaborative creation process (Crehan 2012). Girls Club works closely with artists whose work speaks to a progressive social agenda. Local artist and activist, FLY, who has been active in the

---

1 For example, the local Cooper Union School for the Advancement of Art and Science is highly selective and now starting to charge tuition ($20,000) for the first time in its 154 year-old history. Kaminer, A. 2013.
squatter movement and MoRUS¹, leads weekly workshops, teaching girls how to illustrate, draw, create zines, as well as collect, record and share personal biographies.

FLY has created the PEOPS collection², which, in her words, documents portrait stories of “LES people doing radical things people should know about”. The Girls Club has showcased this work in its Art+Community gallery space and hosted PEOP’s gatherings.

In her work with girls, FLY imparts a message of solidarity: “People are working towards social change and through radical networking we can make change happen.”

Encouraging girls to create zines and other (online) platforms where they collect and share experiences of teen life and life in the LES serves is a form of cultural production with transformative potential.

Nicolina³ a local artist who specializes in guerrilla street art, vibrant murals, collaborative painting projects and interactive performance-art spectacles, has worked with the Girls Club in the Lower East Side, as well as in New Orleans, and Chiapas, Mexico.⁴ In the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy, which had a devastating impact on the Lower East Side⁵, Nicolina led girls around the neighborhood stenciling the sidewalks

¹ MoRUS is the Museum of Reclaimed Urban Space on Ave. C and 10th St in the LES (http://www.morusnyc.org/)
² Fly arrived in the 1980’s and since then she has been central to the squatting movement. Her forthcoming book, Unrealestate, explores the 20th century history of the squatting movement in the LES. According to Fly “PEOPs is a collection of portraits stories – each page contains a new face surrounded by words – for the most part the words are a story that the person tells about themselves or about something they experienced or about something they heard it’s usually a conversational dialogue – it’s all about my interaction with the person while I’m drawing them… I thought it would make a great zine after that I started going after people making them sit for me tell me stories the format became much more structured refined the important thing for me in doing these portraits is the idea of a documentation of a hidden history of everyday life all the people I have met artists activists writers, travellers, anarchists, poets, cartoonists, pilots, musicians, psychologists, moms, kids, dads, grandparents, punks, dykes, trannies, drug dealers teachers, squatters, you get the idea the categories are endless but the idea is that everyone has an incredible story to tell everyone deserves a voice. Everyone deserves to be listened to.” See PEOPS (http://www.peops.org/)
³ Nicolina Johnson’s Website: http://www.NicolinaART.com/
⁴ Nicolina, in collaboration with the Girls Club, brought her Hearts of the World project to New Orleans and Chiapas. See Hearts of the World (www.nicolinaart.com/page/hearts-world)
⁵ On Oct. 29, 2012 Hurricane Sandy hit low-lying areas of New York City, the Lower East Side, built upon
with inspiring messages, in the style of Nuyorican street artist De La Vega: “Never Stop Dreaming,” “Ave Sea” and “LES One Big Family!”

Another significant project to emerge from the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy is ongoing communication and sharing of experiences among Girls Club members directly impacted by Sandy and youth in New Orleans who survived Hurricane Katrina in 2005. This valuable exchange has been made possible because the Girls Club has a close partnership with Young Artists/Young Aspirations\(^1\) an artisan guild out of New Orleans. Over the years the Girls Club and YAYA’s have collaborated on a number of projects and developed a bond, which made the post-Sandy collaboration a natural development.\(^2\)

The Girls Club participated in the ritual burning of the *Floodwall*, an art installation created by artist and YAYA founder, Jana Napoli in New Orleans.\(^3\)

marshlands, was one of the communities most affected. The Lower East Side is particularly vulnerable to future climate change related flooding. Hurricane storm-surge data from the National Weather Service indicate that the Lower East Side is a flood zone. Most of the area, which makes up the heart of Loisaida (along Ave C and D from Houston to 14\(^{th}\) St) is Zone 1, which is considered the most vulnerable to future flooding. Zones 1 and 2 include the areas closest to the East River, stretching from Alphabet City down to the Two Bridges neighborhood. Zones 3-6 cover a wide area, as far west as Norfolk Street. While this is not surprising given that the area was predominately swampland and shipping docks until the 19\(^{th}\) century, the implications of the LES being lowland are more dire in the 21\(^{st}\) century as climate change is creating more drastic weather patterns. See Gregory, K. 2013. For a map of NYC evacuation zones see WNYC (http://project.wnyc.org/news-maps/hurricane-zones/hurricane-zones.html) and for a map of NY/NJ Storm Surge Flood Zones see http://project.wnyc.org/storm-surge/

\(^1\) YAYA Inc. Young Aspirations/ Young Artists of New Orleans (http://www.yayainc.com/). YAYA teaches art and the business of art through a training program that follows an artisans’ guild model, with artists moving in calibrated steps through a series of apprenticeship and mentorship levels.

\(^2\) The Girls Club has visited New Orleans on an almost annual basis since 2008, after Hurricane Katrina hit the crescent city. Girls have toured the Lower 9\(^{th}\) Ward, several times during which times they spoke directly with Lower 9th residents displaced by Katrina. In 2011, the Girls Club visited New Orleans and painted several murals on a fence in Central City surrounding a superfund site. The murals were painted in collaboration with YAYA artists and Central City residents, with two murals focusing on community uplift (designed by local residents), and one commemorating the 2010 BP Gulf Oil Spill (designed by the Girls Club artist in resident, Nicolina).

\(^3\) For the *Floodwall* Jana Napoli had collected the remnants of people’s lives cast out on the sidewalks after Hurricane Katrina, retrieving 750 drawers from dressers, kitchen cabinets, desks and bureaus. The resulting objects, along with the recorded oral histories, made up the *Floodwall* installation. As part of the Floodwall project youth in New Orleans had been asked to participate by contemplating what they themselves would take if they had to flee their homes, considering what it is that gives them identity, and what gives them comfort. Girls Club video documentation of the ritual burning of the Floodwall project in New Orleans http://vimeo.com/49241990 see artist Jana Napoli: http://www.floodwall.org/
with young people in New Orleans who have been affected by natural disaster and lax governmental response is in part a consciousness raising project. It raises girls’ level of awareness and enables them to make connections between the social inequities they witness in their own community to those experienced in disparate parts of the country. Over the years, Girls Club members have started to develop a sense of interdependence and solidarity with the YAYA’s.

**Art as Curious Exploration and Exchange**

The Girls Club Center for Community space is ripe for creative encounters and innovative, experimental programming in arts and culture. As outlined above, the programming in Film and Media Arts is taking off in new directions. The new Center for Community space has also created opportunity for new artist “residences” to invigorate the arts programming with new energy and ideas. For the 2013-2014 academic year, Bryan Welch, artist, photographer and founder of Guilds, has been in residency at the Girls Club, during which time he has been running a program called “A Bright Dark Room”, which is exemplary of the kind of experimental experiential learning opportunities the Girls Club fosters. Bryan created a room-size camera obscura, in collaboration with Caledonia Curry (otherwise know as the street artist Swoon). This camera obscura is designed to enable girls to explore optics, light as a substance, and the elemental building blocks of the camera. It inspires curiosity and inquiry. Using light, lenses, and various bright and dark rooms of the girls play with light and study the way

---

1 Guilds is a learning center design group led by Bryan Welch which works to create alternative learning environments that honor the creativity and independence of children, inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach to learning. Bryan Welch co-founder of A Curious Summer (www.acurious.org) and Brightworks in San Francisco CA (www.sfbrightworks.org) and Kite's Nest in Hudson, NY (http://kitesnest.org/). See. http://guilds.co/
2 see A Bright Dark Room (http://guilds.co/)
3 Swoon, a street artist, who specializes in life-size wheat-paste prints and paper cutouts of figures, and whose work is political in nature.
light changes their perception of the world and each other. In Winter 2014, Bryan, took this project to the Konbit Shelter Project\(^1\) in the remote village of Cormiers, Haiti and has initiated an online conversation between the youth in Cormiers with Girls Club members.\(^2\)

“A Bright Dark Room” is an example of the way in which, the Girls Club is serving an incubator of innovative educational practices. Artists and educators who are interested in alternative spaces of learning, are seeking out the Girls Club as a place open to experimentation, inquiry and exchange. Bryan likes the Girls Club because of the freedom it allows as an educator. As he explains it, he is interested in exploring how spaces for young people can exist in “between formal and informal learning, institution and community, school and life.” From this perspective, the Girls Club is more than a youth development organization, a women’s organization, or a community based organization, it is a space where new ideas and unique pedagogical practices are tested in a grassroots setting and shared globally.

**Cultivating Creative Expression in Community**

The Girls Club Arts programming reaches beyond the women and girls directly involved in the organization. It engages with LES residents in creative ways, celebrating community and the right to art and creative expression. The Girls Club promotes art and creativity as a means of provoking critical thought, reflection and conversation. It is seen

\(^1\) A project started by small group of artists, including Swoon, interested in “how the creative process might positively impact people’s lives in times of crisis”, Konbit Shelter has collaborated with the village of Cormiers, Haiti, to create a community center that seeds initiatives in sustainability and education. The center was constructed utilizing Super-Adobe, an architectural style developed by Iranian-born architect Nadir Khalili, which uses locally available materials to create structures of incredible strength. http://konbitshelter.org/

\(^2\) Girls Club members have been creating short videos to share with youth in Cormiers via iphone technology. These videos will also be shared with Girls Club’s “sister” programs in Kathmandu, Nepal, Glasgow, Scotland, and Chiapas, Mexico (the technology is not available to share the videos with sister program in the Kono region of Sierra Leone)
as means through which people can develop new understandings and a broader perspective of systemic social problems. Mothers also have opportunities to participate in arts programming. Girls Club engages women in the LES in the cultural production process, fostering their creative skills, through classes in poetry writing, memoir writing, sewing, and cooking. Such classes provide an outlet for creative energy and self-reflection and expression.

The Girls Club embodies the spirit of “community art”² (Crehan 2012) by threading a combination of art and activism through all of its public programming. Community art³ reflects an understanding of art and creative expression as a form of collective urban commons (Susser and Tonnelat 2013). Si Kahn (2010) points to the power of culture and creativity to break through rigid barriers of prejudice, ignorance, and self-centeredness. He asserts that, “one of the most effective ways to create (this) community fabric is through the strategic use of culture in its many modes” (83). Kahn argues that music, visual art, poetry and theater (as well as other forms of artistic practice) are methods of storytelling and sharing which are vital in raising consciousness, as well as forging solidarity and community.

The Center for Community facility is alive with art that everyone has the opportunity to encounter and enjoy. The Girls Club commissioned artists to design and decorate the bathrooms throughout the building. Nicolina, as one of the commissioned artists, worked with girls to create a dreamlike mosaic in the second floor bathroom,

---

¹ Girls Club plans to expand these classes to include drawing, painting and photography.
² Community art is an approach to creative activity that “enjoins both artist and local people with their various communities to use appropriate art forms as a means of communication and expression, in a way that critically develops traditional art forms, adapting them to present day needs and developing new forms” (Kelly 1984, p.1 as cited in Crehan 2011, xiii).
³ Community art is defined as using “art to effect social change and affect social policies and encompasses the expression of political action” (Kelly 1984 p. 2 as cited in Crehan 2012).
while the ground floor women’s room was a collective effort by other local female artists. Chino, artist, activist and founder of CHARAS (described in Chapter Three), completed the mosaic tiling in the men’s bathroom on the ground floor. The YAYA’s youth artist collective from New Orleans have been invited to paint the third floor bathrooms in Summer 2014. The Girls Club also commissioned a female artist to create a wall-sized mosaic map of the Lower East Side, which highlights each of the thirty plus locations where it has run programming over the years. Taken as a whole, the vibrant mosaic art throughout the building reflects the Girls Club’s commitment to supporting local artists, celebrating their artistic skills and political sensibilities and sharing their art with the broader community.

The Girls Club’s Art+Community gallery serves as a communal space of encounter and collective use, and provides opportunities for free public programming. In Spring 2013 the gallery featured Amazing Women of the LES a showcase of women who have been active in the struggle for social justice in the community, including Councilwoman Rosie Mendez, activist Francis Goldin, and author and poet Hettie Jones among others. In the new Center for Community, the Art+Community Gallery offers an even larger space for showcasing art, open community programming, and potential for generating a dialogue around art, culture and creative expression. The opening show features the photography of Marlis Momber, who has documented the social upheaval and transformation of the LES since the 1970’s.

---

1 Cindy Ruskin, Laurie Sagalyn, and Girls Club staffer Nydia
2 The Girls Club photography program organized the show, photographing and collecting life histories of inspirational women in the LES. The list included: Rev. Adriene Thomas of the progressive, Collegiate Middle Unitarian church, Naomi Bibbins of the Visiting Nurse Service, housing advocate Damaris Reyes of GOLES, musician and artist FLY of C-Squat/MoRUS, poet and author Hettie Jones, Councilwoman Rosie Mendez, and literary agent and social activist Francis Goldin.
3 Marlis Momber: http://www.marlsmomberphoto.com/about.html
The Girls Club serves as an alternative space for cultural consumption. Over the years it has hosted a number of free, public film festivals and the new facility boasts of two screening rooms designed for public use. The Girls Club, hosts monthly public film screenings (and weekly screenings for girls). These open screenings showcase documentaries from around the world focusing on issues of human rights and social justice. The film screenings serve as an opportunity to bring people from the community together and initiate a conversation. For example, a screening of documentary footage from the Lower East Side in the 1970’s, hosted in partnership with the housing advocacy group Good Old Lower East Side (GOLES), lead to a heated discussion of gentrification in the neighborhood. The evident political edge of community programming in both the gallery space and digital media/screening rooms of the new Girls Club facility, is an indication of the organization’s intention of creating an alternative space that encourages community engagement and creative expression. The facility serves as a democratic space, strengthening social ties through conversation and connection.

Murals are an integral and expressive part of the Lower East Side popular culture dating back to the 1960’s and one, which the Girls Club emulates. One of the most inspiring and creative community projects it organized was the Women Who Change the World mural project in August-September 2011. For this project, seventeen female artists

---

1 Festivals have included the Women Who Change the World Film Festival in May of 2012, which showcased a range of documentary films: Granito: How to Nail a Dictator (with talkback from director Pamela Yates), Mothers of Bedford, God is the Bigger Elvis, and Pray the Devil Back to Hell. Spring 2014 the film series is addressing issues of youth violence and mass incarceration. There are also plans to organize a human rights film festival in partnership with Media that Matters in Fall 2014, see http://www.mediathatmattersfest.org/

2 LES documentary film screenings: “Viva Loisaida” by Marlis Momber, “11th Street Movement” by Stuart Leigh El Corazon de Loisaida” by Marci Reaven and Beni Matias and Umbrella House” by Catalina Santamaria

3 Sharff, J. 1998 p. 90 Many of these murals, are highly politicized in nature, and have been destroyed or covered up over the years. Marlis Momber’s photography and film documents these images.
were partnered with Girls Club members to paint women of inspiration. Each artist selected a woman in history, created a design and produced a large square mural. Together the seventeen murals line the walls of the First Street Garden. Women included in the mural are Justice Sonia Sotomayor, Julia Alvarez, Shirley Chisholm, Rosa Parks, Councilwoman Rosie Mendez, Congresswoman Nydia Velazquez (D-NY), Harriet Tubman, Eleanor Roosevelt, Jane Addams, Ella Baker, Ida B. Wells, Grace Paley, Susan B. Anthony, Sojourner Truth, Emma Goldman, Jeanette Rankin, Dorothy Day, and Alice Paul. The resulting mural celebrates the legacy and foundation of women’s leadership upon which the Girls Club stands today.

![Image of mural with portraits of Rosie Mendez, Nydia Velazquez, and Julia Alvarez. The mural for Congresswoman Nydia Velazquez reads Atrevete in Spanish, meaning “I Dare You” (Photo by Jennifer Sugg)](image)

---

The official unveiling of the murals took place on November 25th, 2011, which is the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women\(^1\) at which time Congresswoman Nydia Velazquez gave a powerful speech reminding the girls to act in the spirit of the Mirabal sisters\(^2\), and to “never doubt your ability to speak your minds and change the world.” Since it’s opening, the *Women Who Change the World* murals in First Street Garden have become a destination, inspiring visitors from all over the world.\(^3\) This project is illustrative of how the Girls Club melds art and activism, and brings artists, women and girls together in collective actions of cultural production. It is providing a platform for expressive, exciting and engaging community art.

**Conscientization and Praxis**

*Education, when connected with social change, can help provide the knowledge, tools, and hope necessary to further motivate these young people, many of whom recognize that the world stands at a critical juncture and that they can play a crucial role in changing it.*

*Henry Giroux\(^4\)*

While the Girls Club offers innovative programming in the arts and culture, which have a political edge, it simultaneously offers leadership programming that is overtly political and action-oriented. The Girls Club strives to provide a critical education that is grounded in a social justice pedagogy and aims to foster critical consciousness, which Paolo Freire identifies as the precursor to full participation in movements of social transformation (Freire 1997(1970)). *Conscientization*, defined by Paulo Freire as an awakening of the critical consciousness, is a “coming to terms with the roots of your

---

1. In 1999, the UN General Assembly named November 25th the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women. The day is named in honor of the three Mirabal sisters that were killed on dictator Rafael Trujillo’s orders on November 25th, 1960 in the Dominican Republic.
2. ibid.
3. Numerous travel writing blog posts cite the First Street Garden as a destination and artists utilize the space for performances, for example see. http://untappedcities.com/2013/02/20/lower-east-side-first-street-garden/
oppression as you come into your subjecthood” (Freire 1997(1970), 31). Using what Freire identified as a “problem posing approach” youth engage in a process of critical questioning of issues, similar to the feminist practice of ‘consciousness raising.’ Through an analysis of personal experiences youth begin to develop political understanding.¹

The Girls Club programming builds up a model of social justice youth development (Ginwright and Commarota 2002) that aims to foster praxis among young people. Paulo Feire identifies praxis as “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it.”² Praxis is about translating individuals’ private suffered misery into a source of debate, social concern and collective action.³ Fostering praxis enables the girls to understand the roots of inequality and injustice and encourages them to act collectively to transform their lives. This model builds on the belief that critical consciousness and social action can provide youth with the tools, resources and support they need to question, understand, critique and collectively change their world. As one girl conveys: “Girls Club shows us how to do things, how things get done, how to teach others.” The goal is to teach girls how to interrogate their social realities and examine the root causes of the many crises facing society, explore solutions, build solidarities, and develop a global perspective.

In practice, fostering leadership and critical consciousness takes time- years, even decades. It does not happen with one class or program in civic literacy or leadership development. Girls Club understands that as educators you have to be in it for the long haul and strives to embed critical pedagogy in the ethos of all its programming.

¹ The Girls Club photography programs use of “photovoice” stems is a visual application of Freire’s “problem posing approach” to critical consciousness raising.
² Freire, P. 1993 (1970) p. 33
³ Giroux, H. 2013
Ultimately, it strives to create a culture of questioning. Such critical thinking, dialogue and engagement with the world is just what is missing in the formal education system today.\(^1\) Action-oriented leadership opportunities in combination programming in creative and applied arts (and sciences) encourages exploration and expression along with investigation, contemplation, and potentially action.

Ginwright and Commarota (2002) describe how an effective critical youth pedagogy should reach three levels: self-awareness, social awareness, and global awareness.\(^2\) I would argue that Girls Club programming succeeds in reaching all three. The first level, *self-awareness*—entails an exploration of identity issues related to race, class, gender and sexuality, whereby the youth explore their own and others experiences with oppression and privilege. It also entails, I would argue, a healthy sense of one’s emotional self, combined with a sense of confidence and self-awareness. Girls Club provides a space where girls feel empowered despite the challenges of their everyday lives and feelings of lack of control. It approaches learning through a pedagogical lens that helps raise girls’ awareness beyond the self. Girls are encouraged to speak-up, ask questions, and communicate verbally and physically, which helps them become comfortable in their own bodies and find their own voice. The goal is to learn how to narrate oneself in the world from a position of agency. Girls Club staffer, Stella, describes her view of this pedagogical approach: “We give the girls social capital, the opportunity to express and develop their ideas on how they want to contribute to the world. Girls Club offers access to new ideas (that standardized school culture does not allow) and the time and space to explore oneself. It allows girls to explore the questions:

\(^1\) Henry Giroux (2013) refers to this absence as civic illiteracy.
"How do I want to make a difference?" "What does social change mean?" "What do I love doing more than anything else?" These are all questions that only a privileged few of us on this planet are in a position to ask ourselves.”

The second level, social awareness, places an emphasis on community problem solving through critical thinking, whereby the youth critically analyze and assess their communities and develop a critical understanding of the economic, social and environmental inequities at play. One Girls Club member conveyed her understanding of this principle, stating: “We start locally, make it a community issue and then take it to a national level and then global level.” The Cascading Leadership program (CL) at the Girls Club provides a group-centered model of leadership development, with the aim of imparting social awareness, in combination with extensive personal and professional development opportunities. Geared toward girls in high school, CL creates part-time paid internships within the organization, and involves participants in advocacy and organizing initiatives. The CL program is similar to Mobilization for Youth in many respects, most notably both programs involve employment and job-training in combination with advocacy and organizing work. CL participants develop an understanding of social change, community organizing and desire to effect change. As one teen asserts:

*If we work together, we can make a difference. I learned that by showing people you care, you can change the whole situation around, that you can even give people courage and inspiration to go on with themselves! CL made me want to spread the word and educate those around me! I want to stand up and do something.*

Cascading Leadership, among other Girls Club’s action oriented programming such as GALA (Girls as Advocates, Leaders and Activists), are designed to nurture thoughtfulness, critical agency, and compassion as well as renew a sense of imagination,
vision and hope. Girls learn the basics of community organizing, communications and social media skills, public speaking, and the history of social movements in the U.S. (and beyond), as well as global fair trade and human rights initiatives. Using a curriculum that mixes films, readings, speakers and experiential learning opportunities, the Girls Club aims to foster a new generation of female leadership at the local level. As one CL participant articulates: “Through the Girls Club I’ve found my voice. I’ve been encouraged to open up, speak up, express myself and make things change We are learning how people fight for a just society.”

Collective participation is critical in consciousness-raising; the ritual process of protests and demonstrations allow for emotional connection and commitment to cause. Girls have frequent opportunities to participate in organized demonstrations in NYC, as well as in Washington DC. Over the years the Girls Club has participated in anti-war, anti-drone, anti-gun, anti-youth violence, anti-domestic violence, anti-police violence, anti-consumption protests, as well as environmental, farmworker advocacy, and anti-Monsanto rallies. In 2011 girls participated in multiple Occupy Wall Street protests, delivered food to and conversed with occupiers. Girls also have the opportunity to routinely engage with the social activist and performer “Reverend Billy” (and his choir) who have a permanent office within the Center for Community building. Such opportunities for active participation in and engagement with social struggles open the minds of Girls Club members and alert them to radical politics and the ongoing struggle for social change. While it may not be fomenting social transformation directly, through critical education, the Girls Club is building upon the legacy of alternative education initiatives in the LES and laying the foundation for future struggles.
Generating a Global Vision Through Travel

The third level of a social justice approach to youth development addresses *global awareness* and encourages critical reflection on systemic inequities on a global scale. The youth may develop empathy with struggles of those oppressed around the world and gain a sense of connectedness and mutuality, recognizing common cause with women and girls around the world. The Girls Club fosters awareness through its global partnerships, travel opportunities and fair trade initiatives. It strives to create an global network where knowledge, experience and ideas are exchanged, and women and girls have the opportunity to travel, connect, learn from and inspire each other. By developing global partnerships (in Chiapas, Sierra Leone, Nepal and Scotland) and offering international service and leadership opportunities, the Girls Club is helping girls grow intellectually and emotionally as agents of change in the world.\(^1\) Moreover, the Fair Trade initiative through the Girls Club’s *La Tiendita* gift shop at Essex Market, sells and promotes products from women’s collectives around the world. This exchange serves as a teachable encounter for the public, as well as the girls. Those working at *La Tiendita* undergo training in the philosophy and practice of fair trade and exposure to ethical entrepreneurial business practices. These initiatives help foster a sense of common cause among women and girls in the LES with those in other parts of the world.

Girls Club has collaborated with model youth development programs\(^2\) across the country in an effort to share pedagogical practices, organizational experiences and

---

1 Solomon, S. 2013.
2 The Girls Club participates in on-going exchanges with Young Artists/Young Aspirations (YAYA) of New Orleans, Artists for Humanity (AFH) of Boston, American Visionary Arts Museum of Baltimore and Homeboy/Homegirl Industries of Los Angeles. Other organizations the Girls Club has collaborated with include: Demoiselle to Femme of South Chicago, Perfect Ten Inc., of Hudson, NY, a girls collective in Kibera, Kenya. The Girls Club visits farms in upstate New York to learn first-hand about the environment
programmatic innovations. This exchange invigorates the Girls Club by establishing a connection with socially-conscious youth development practitioners generating creative visions for urban life in other U.S. cities. The organization’s most long-standing domestic partner is YAYA (Young Artists, Young Aspirations) artisan guild of New Orleans, as briefly noted in the previous chapter. YAYA is an after-school arts and professional enrichment program with a two-decade track record of working with New Orleans youth. The Girls Club has visited New Orleans on an almost annual basis since 2008. Each trip has been a service learning opportunity for Girls Club members.

In the 21st century, international experience is invaluable yet internships and travel abroad experiences remain exclusive to a privileged few. For this reason, travel, both foreign and domestic, is one of the most valuable experiences the Girls Club provides girls. Collectively, these opportunities provide a critical foundation for generating awareness and a global vision for a just world. As Brenda, a Girls Club alumna, conveys: “All the inspiration- the people- the places- the opportunities. I’ll remember all of our travels to amazing places, and meeting amazing people wherever we go. My most memorable time with Girls Club was our trips to New Orleans and Boston. It was hands on work and we got to see the change we were making and we could see that other people were working with us, and that we were not alone.” These experiences sparked Brenda’s interest in community work and urban policy, which she has since parlayed into an internship with the NYC Department of Youth and Community Development.

and agricultural production and every summer it brings all of its members (and staff) to an environmental camp (Camp Fowler) in the Adirondack Mountains.
On a global scale, the Girls Club has developed partnerships with community-based organizations for girls in Chiapas, Mexico, Kathmandu, Nepal, the Kono region of Sierra Leone, and Glasgow, Scotland.\footnote{While the Girls Club has partnered with youth in South Africa and Haiti as well, these connections have not developed into “sister” Girls Club programs as of yet.} Of these international partners, Chiapas is the strongest. The Girls Club has been leading girls on annual excursions to San Cristobal de las Casas in the highlands of Chiapas, Mexico since 2000. The partnership emerged because of Lyn’s interest and connections as an anthropologist. She had been traveling to Chiapas since the 1970’s conducting documentary film work. The Girls Club initially developed a partnership with the Indigenous Photography Archive (AFI), a group of Mayan women photographers based in San Cristobal. Utilizing traditional and digital photography, AFI and the Girls Club collectively produced a traveling exhibition and an interactive web blog. They also published photographic book: *Village Voices/Virtual Journey*, which explores the commonalities of two seemingly disparate communities of young women: Lower East Side teens from varied backgrounds and young indigenous Mayan women who had only recently left their natal villages to live on the margins of San Cristobal de las Casas. Each group has been coping with cultural and economic displacement in their respective communities. This annual photography exchange has allowed young women from Mexico and the US to cross borders, figuratively and literally, in order to explore and document each other’s lives. In 2006, women from AFI established their own “Girls Club” in San Cristobal replicating some of the same programmatic ideas as the one in LES: classes in photography and digital media, academic support, and health and wellness initiatives. Since then, Maria Gomez, an
accomplished Mayan photographer and community worker, has recruited for, organized, and run Club Balam.¹

Girls Club trips to Chiapas, Mexico are an immersive experience. Girls are exposed to the history of collective action and made aware of the Zapatista rebellion against globalization. The Girls Club is traveling to the central highlands of Chiapas, an area rich in anthropological lore and fieldwork, having been the field-site for research by Eric Wolf, June Nash and many others. Anthropologist June Nash (2001) has noted that studying the historical experiences and communal goals of the Maya in highland Chiapas offers a unique worldview. Girls Club excursions in Chiapas are rich ethnographic encounters, equally exhausting and illuminating. On a recent trip to Chiapas in 2013, Girls Club participated in the Hemispheric Institute Summer Art and Resistance Program² as well as a photography workshop at the Gimnasio de Arte y Cultura³. Girls extensively documented a four-day festival in the Maya community of Zinacantan (while also visiting other Maya communities in the highlands). They also met with a cooperative of Textile weavers turned educators, attended an anti-Monsanto protest, and prepared a Mole feast with Club Balam “sisters.” Each one of these experiences provides for a fascinating encounter and cultural exchange, made possible by the relationships the Girls Club has cultivated in Chiapas over the years. Girls have the unique opportunity to learn

¹ The girls who are members of Club Balam (a name they chose themselves- it is a combination and feminization of Na Bolom [house of the jaguar] and Girls Club…i.e. Club of little Jaguar girls) live in extreme poverty; their families, representing Tzotzil Maya communities who have been recently pushed out of their natal villages due to religious and economic pressures. Maria takes the girls out on photography “assignments” around town and into the villages. This work is uploaded and shared on the Girls Club Worldwide Web Blog¹ so that girls in the Lower East Side stay informed about their Club Balam sisters. In addition to learning how to use digital cameras and iMac computers (donated by the Girls Club), Club Balam girls are learning how to navigate new cultural terrain. Maria provides weekly lessons in Tzotzil, which is invaluable to the girls as many of them have low levels of literacy, and a few are even English.

² The Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics is a collaborative, multilingual and interdisciplinary network of institutions, artists, scholars, and activists throughout the Americas. See http://hemisphericinstitute.org/hemi/

³ http://gimnasiodeartechiapas.wordpress.com/
of the complexities of the Zapatista rebellion and the role that women played in this
insurgency, by engaging in conversation with the very people engaged in this ongoing
struggle. Chiapas is a transformative experience for the girls who have the opportunity to
go.¹

Lucia, a Girls Club alumna and now part-time employee with the Girls Club has
traveled to Chiapas three times, and has cultivated close relationships with Maria and her
family, and the girls of Club Balam. She explains: “I feel that the Girls Club has provided
me with many pathways to explore. I’ve had opportunities that I would have never
dreamed of on my own. These trips were very special and touching experiences. In
Chiapas, I was able to see a different way of life and learned to appreciate my own. I also
learned of the indigenous Maya culture, which fascinates me.” With each trip to Chiapas,
Lucia has become more immersed in the Mayan culture, picking up Tzotzil vocabulary,
going to baptisms, observing rituals, wearing Maya textiles, and conversing with
everyone she met along the way. She is interested in living in Chiapas for a summer and
helping Maria run Club Balam, which may happen in 2014. She feels a strong sense of
attachment to the people there and maintains close contact with Club Balamers through
Facebook. This Fall 2013 Lucia had the opportunity to connect with the Beehive Design
Collective²; the ‘bees’ were visiting the Girls Club for a weekend residence and
presenting their epic graphic narrative: Mesoamerica Resiste³. This graphic, nine years in

¹ Girls Club organizes trips to Chiapas on an annual, sometimes bi-annual basis. 5-10 girls go on each trip.
All expenses are paid for by the Girls Club, which fundraises for these trips with parties and special events.
² The Beehive Design Collective is an all-volunteer, activist (and feminist) arts collective dedicated to
“cross-pollinating the grassroots” by creating collaborative, anti-copyright images for use as educational
and organizing tools. The “bees” work as word-to-image translators of complex global stories, shared
through conversations with affected communities. See http://beehivecollective.org
³ The Mesoamérica Resiste graphics campaign is the third and final image in the Beehive’s trilogy about
globalization in the Americas, focusing on resistance to mega-infrastructure projects that are paving the
way for free trade agreements that devastate local economies and communities. The stories in the graphic
the making, narrates stories of “resistance, resilience, and solidarity” collected from Mexico to Colombia. Lucia helped the women of the Beehive Collective share some of the stories with Girls Club members, and added her own account of the people of highland Chiapas, and the stories they have shared with her. Such extended and experiential learning opportunities, in this case, cultural immersion combined with a related opportunity to connect with an action of solidarity, allow girls, such as Lucia, to make connections between their observations and experiences in Chiapas with the broader narrative of resistance to capitalism both in the global North and South.

To build upon these successful exchanges, the Girls Club wants to create additional opportunities for travel in other parts of the world. There are plans for a “gap year” that would entail offering girls the opportunity to spend a year between high school and college interning with Girls Club international partners abroad (in Chiapas, Scotland, Nepal, and Sierra Leone), and in turn, inviting girls and women from our global partnerships to New York. These ambitious plans may take a while to get off the ground, but the Girls Club is committed to making it happen. Meanwhile, it will continue planning annual trips to Chiapas, and now Scotland and it is also extending the invitation for partners to visit New York. For example, the Girls Club is inviting Maria, of Club Balam, as an artist in residence for Fall 2014. In a globalized world, the Girls Club understands that in order to foster socially conscious leadership and cultivate a new generation of change makers, girls need to experience the world in order to transform it.

---

come from current struggles, but are also rooted in the legacies of over 500 years of colonialism in the Americas. The graphic depicts an era of extreme loss of cultural and ecological diversity and rapid climate change. Through the lens of Mesoamerica, the graphic tells the big picture story of what’s at stake across the globe with the neoliberal model of “development.” see. http://beehivecollective.org/beehive_poster/mesoamerica-resiste/

1 In addition to Chiapas, Scotland is the next destination of travel, given the relative ease it takes to travel to Glasgow, which makes it a relatively ‘affordable’ destination. The Girls Club of Glasgow is eager to establish an exchange program during the summer months.
Education as Resistance

At its core, the Girls Club values the role of critical education in a democratic society. In practice it is re-envisioning education as holistic and liberatory, building upon a legacy of progressive educational and socialization initiatives in the Lower East Side. It serves as an alternative model that counters the conservative education reformism of the present historical moment. The question remains what will be the future impact of this initiative within the LES and beyond. Mona, a Girls Club alumna is optimistic; she asserts: “I really hope that the future generation of girls are determined young ladies, who with the help the Girls Club, will create needed change in the world.”

Girls Club offers an emergent pedagogical space, where education is practiced in innovative and exploratory ways. It serves as a liminal space (Turner 1967) between public and private, between school and home. It provides a place where girls can grow, learn, have fun, and develop confidence in themselves and their ability to make a difference in the world. The Girls Club provides girls with the vision to plan - and the tools to build - their future. It bridges arts, science, and activism, reaches across generations, and educates through experience. It has revived the legacy of alternative education in the Lower East Side, building upon this history, and bringing it into the 21st century. As one Girls Club staffer describes this effort: “the vision was to expose the girls to the best, and the provide the best. We’re attracting bright people and together we can create opportunity.” These pedagogical experiments can serve as a model for community youth development programming in other cities.

A study of the Girls Club encourages us to imagine and explore the possibilities of alternative educational opportunities. As a society we need to fundamentally question
what should an education accomplish in a democracy. We must to reinvent education if we are to re-imagine the world. We need new ideas and a new vision that matches the political-economic landscape of the 21st century. In the following chapter I consider the Girls Club’s utopian visions and creative practices that reach beyond community. I explore it’s feminist politics as both liberal and transformative. I consider its efforts to occupy the Lower East Side and take back the city streets; and explore the bartering system the Girls Club is implementing through a Time Bank.
Chapter Ten: Alternative Urban Visions

This chapter takes a critical look at the Girls Club’s feminist politics and its community organizing efforts. It considers the how the Girls Club is recapturing feminism for a new generation, as well as how it is re-envisioning a form of community building and urban planning that is holistic, inclusive and democratic. I examine how these utopian urban visions are put into practice and what this means for broader struggles for social justice. I conclude by highlighting the new alliances and coalitions forming around the Girls Club, which have potential to collectively generate transformative change in the future.

Having laid out the narrative of the Girls Club and assessed its impact on the lives of women and girls in the Lower East Side, the first half of this chapter analyzes the Girls Club from a critical feminist perspective. It raises the question: is the Girls Club a feminist project? And if so, does it reflect a liberal feminist tradition or transformative one? Does it embrace Second Wave, Third Wave or Post-Feminist politics or some combination thereof? In addressing these questions, I suggest that a form of “messy” feminism emerges as feminist politics are put into practice on a daily basis at the Girls Club.

The second half of this chapter explores the collective urban visions of the Girls Club in practice. Through its innovative programming and community initiatives, the Girls Club is reclaiming women and young people’s right to urban life, public space, and creative expression. Susser and Tonnelat (2013) assert that collective action in cities tends to reflect the three urban commons: the right to urban everyday life (labor, consumption, public goods and services), the right to public spaces of encounter (spaces
of collective use, claimed by citizens including virtual communication), and the right to art and creative expression. Therefore, in addition to considering the educational impact and feminist politics of the Girls Club, this chapter addresses how it supports a community development model that is inclusive and democratic. I highlight the ways in which women and girls are placed at the center of efforts to reimagine and revitalize the LES community from the ground up. And yet, I also take a critical look at “community development” initiatives and point out the inherent limitations of community work in the era of global capital.

Thirty years of neoliberal policies have left New York City a divided city, with ever-rising rates of income inequality and widening social disparity. Women and youth have born the brunt of punitive polices criminalizing the poor and dissolving social welfare supports. Countering this status quo, the Girls Club is carving out an alternative path, pushing forth a community-led development model that melds the politics of Jane Addams and Jane Jacobs. It follows a model of urban activism that entails engaging with community residents, calling for participatory urban planning, and celebrating the vitality and diversity of the LES. In this chapter, I document several examples of this grassroots politics in practice including: 1) women and girls reclaiming the city streets in an annual Girls Club walkathon parade and 2) an innovative time bank program which functions as a localized barter economy. I conclude by highlighting two of the newest developments at the Girls Club that hold transformative potential: 1) Tackling the issue of mass incarceration and 2) Supporting right to education initiatives in the LES.
Messy Feminism

The Girls Club is in many ways re-envisioning what it means to be feminist, and more importantly, what it means to put feminist principles into action, on the ground, on a daily basis. For this reason, I consider the Girls Club a feminist organization. Girls coming of age in the 21st century have a conflicted relationship to feminism; and the Girls Club, as an intergenerational organization, draws from a range of feminist politics, defying neat distinctions of Second or Third Wave politics.

The Girls Club rejects Sheryl Sandberg’s corporate feminist vision, which calls upon women to “lean in”, take on more responsibility, embrace global capitalism, and make it work for them.¹ Hester Eisenstein, in Feminism Seduced (2009), documents how corporate feminism, the type espoused by Sandberg, serves to extend the global reach of capitalism negatively impacting women the world over. She argues that liberal feminism in the United States has come to mean “individualism and the right to participate in the market economy as a worker or entrepreneur in one’s own name, separated from one’s role as a wife and/or mother”.² While the Girls Club pragmatically aims to help women find employment (and thus participate in the market economy), it simultaneously works to integrate women’s roles as mothers and community caretakers and change makers.

The Girls Club provides girls, their mothers, grandmothers, aunts and sisters relief from the burdens of care-giving responsibility by collectivizing it. The research indicates that, in the LES girls, in addition to women, have been picking up the slack for cutbacks in social services in a post-welfare America. As noted in Chapter Seven, girls have been taking on care-giving responsibilities for younger siblings and cousins, as well as parents

¹ Sandberg, S. 2013.
² Eisenstein, H. 2005 p. 498
and grandparents. Within this context, the Girls Club has become space where girls can be girls; where they are the receivers of care as opposed to care-givers. In philosophy and practice, the organization embraces a progressive notion of feminism that incorporates a critical understanding of women and girls’ care-giving role in reproducing family and community life in the midst of an ongoing crisis in social reproduction. It has developed a pragmatic solution, one that collectivizes care-work while offering educational and employment opportunities. Moreover, it imparts a holistic vision of women’s empowerment, which calls for social change and environmental justice. As one staff member, Pam, observes: “we don’t want more girls “leaning in” to a system that clearly doesn’t work for women; we want girls to change the system.” It is this dual approach, combining pragmatic programming with a social change agenda, which sets the Girls Club apart from other youth development organizations. Lyn’s notion of “Social change, not social service” is not merely a cliché, it is central to the organization’s mission. A progressive feminist politics informs everyday practice with mixed results.

Stella, a former staffer, offers her perspective on how this feminist vision plays out. She explains: “The Girls Club is messy feminism in action. It takes this notion of empowerment and makes that into programming. And the programming is constant. It is constantly working with girls- some organizations just work with youth a few days a week, but it’s everyday, non-stop with the Girls Club. Not a lot a places do this. It is not a place that is all talk and no action. This was amazing to me, because a lot of the more progressive organizations I found interesting in terms of women's rights seemed to be idea factories. They didn't see how those ideas played out with a diverse, fluid
population. At the Girls Club we had this great feedback loop constantly, putting ideas into practice.”

**Collective Empowerment**

For everyone in the Lower East Side who has campaigned for the Girls Club—mothers, grandmothers, daughters, community activists, and allies— the opening of the Center for Community in 2013 was a significant victory. Many of the women who organized and founded the Girls Club, did so out of traditional gendered concerns, acting in a care-giving capacity and desiring equal educational and recreational opportunities for their daughters and nieces. They drew upon daily life, and life experience, to improve their community for the next generation of girls coming of age in the LES. Over time, women like Nydia and Milagros, recognized the Girls Club as a space of autonomy and possibility and began to question their life circumstances. Working at the Girls Club opened their eyes and raised their awareness.

The Girls Club has become a channel through which women, mothers, grandmothers, aunts and sisters alike, can express their concerns, suggest alternatives, and make demands. It is a space of collective empowerment. Nancy Naples’ (1998) notion of collective empowerment includes personal as well as collective recognition of the power to fight for equality and improve the quality of life. She defines empowerment, not as individualizing, but as an “ongoing interactive process occurring in dynamic relationship with those who struggled on their own and for others in their communities.”

Girls Club is a space where women and girls feel empowered and agentive— despite their personal struggles and feelings of lack of control in daily life. It is a place where they can reflect upon and grapple with different perspectives, share their

---

1 Naples, N. 1998 p. 222
stories and experiences, and in so doing work through contradictions of their everyday lives. It provides an alternative source of support and stability and gives girls and women in the Lower East Side a foundation upon which to learn, grow, rebuild and challenge.

**Second Wave, Third Wave, New Wave**

Girls Club is both a product and a reflection of the contradictions of feminist politics today, blending the lightheartedness of Third Wave feminist tendencies with the more politicized concerns and consciousness raising of Second Wave feminist thought. Girls Club celebrates a dynamic conception of femininity. Girl Club members are adept at playing up normative conceptions of femininity, and challenging them at the same time. They adorn themselves in every shade of pink; bake “girl power” granola bars in the Bake Shop; and sew vintage-style skirts and aprons to sell at *La Tiendita*. Girls’ active play with femininity and embrace of aspects of “girlie” culture is characteristic of Third Wave DIY feminism.¹ Girls may not articulate a feminist identity but they perform feminist acts and embrace feminine solidarity. The kind of Third Wave feminist perspective I have witnessed among Girls Club members, is articulated best by Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards in *Manifesta* (2000). Baumgardner and Richards assert “For anyone born after the early 1960’s the presence of feminism in our lives is taken for granted. For our generation, feminism is like fluoride. We scarcely notice that we have it—simply in the water” (17). Third Wavers have come of age in a world shaped by feminist gains, and they have also been influenced by the forces of backlash, which make many reluctant to self-identify as feminist. They have also come of age in a world shaped by technology, global capitalism, changing demographics, increasing inequality, and a broadening acceptance of multiple modes of sexuality.

Third Wave feminism builds upon the foundation of Second Wave feminism. Third Wavers aim to create conditions of freedom, equality, justice and self-actualization with a focus on gender, sexual politics and cultural production; however, they draw upon a different set of tactics for achieving goals. Third Wavers celebrate multi-perspectival, sex radical versions of feminism. Their writings reflect the lived messiness of contemporary life, embracing hybridity and contradiction. Yet Third Wave feminists are criticized, and I would argue rightly so, for lacking theoretical rigor, substance and focus, as well as for being overly self-absorbed at the expense of developing a structural analysis that is grounded in an understanding of political-economy. Ines Smyth, for example, rejects Third Wave politics as “pop feminism”. Baumgardner and Richards (2000) acknowledge this criticism in their own self-reflection; they concur that “while on a personal level feminism is everywhere, like fluoride, on a political level the movement is more like nitrogen: ubiquitous and inert.”

Girls Club is extending Second Wave feminist advances with a more playful spirit, but is no less serious or political. It embraces femininity, frivolity, and fun. The Girls Club validates a more lighthearted approach to feminism that resonates with teenage girls. A sentiment best captured by the words of Emma Goldman “If I can't dance I don't want to be in your revolution.” Reflecting upon this statement, it is evident

---

2 Snyder, R. C. 2008
3 Smyth (2000) asserts: “Pop feminism both sanitizes its radical roots and demonizes them by offering to global audiences versions of feminism which emphasize alternatively individualism, female supremacism, ‘victimhood’ and an over-preoccupation with sexual matters” (24).
4 Emma Goldman is attributed for stating: “If I can't dance I don't want to be in your revolution,” and yet there is controversy over whether this quote is exact. For the back-story see Shulman, A. K. 1991. In her own words Goldman in Living My Life (1934) states: At the dances I was one of the most untiring
that Third-Wave feminists are not the first to assert that radical politics, feminism and fun
need not be mutually exclusive. The Girls Club transcends all waves and builds upon a
historical legacy of fierce female leadership in the Lower East Side, women who have
fought for social change and gender equality; including Lillian Wald, Emma Goldman,
Girls Club aims for intergenerational connection and collaboration among women of all
ages and class backgrounds in the Lower East Side, with an understanding that authentic
“girl power” comes from the collective. In sum, it offers a creative feminist vision for the
future (Susser and Tonnelat 2013) and yet it does not take itself too seriously.

**Girl’s Studies and Girl Power**

Contemporary “Girl Studies” highlight an emerging dichotomy between male and
female youth whereby male youth are portrayed as the losers of post-industrial economies
and female youth are portrayed as reaping the benefits of women’s liberation struggles
and gaining headway in a service economy that favors flexible feminized labor. While
this research has produced insights into how youth are positioned within the new global
economy and how neoliberal subjects are being produced, the tendency to dichotomize
all youth into winners and losers is limiting; it serves to gloss over the complexities and
differentiations with respect to deepening class, racial, ethnic and gender inequalities.

---

“Girl Studies” emerged in the early 1990’s as feminist scholars started to explore growing-up and schooling as gendered processes (i.e. paying attention to girlhood in addition to womanhood).\(^1\) Influential girlhood studies such as *Meeting at a Crossroads* (1992) and *Reviving Ophelia* (1994) reflected Stanley Hall’s (1904) perspective of adolescence as a time of crisis, characterized by psychologically damaging gender socialization. This research raised alarm decrying female youth as “in crisis,” stressing the psychological turmoil of the pre-teen and teenage years for white middle-class girls and lamenting statistics pointing to increases in teen pregnancy among poor and minority females.\(^2\)

Many feminists responded to the victimization depicted in this literature by highlighting the power and agency of girls. Studies highlighted startling gender disparities in education, pointing out that girls are outperforming boys as evidence that given opportunities and support girls will excel in school and in life.\(^3\) The notion of “Girl Power” entered popular consciousness in the mid-1990’s.\(^4\) The US Department of Health and Human Services even created a national education program called “Girl Power!” Over the past 20 years youthful, feminine identity has increasingly been seen as something to be embraced and celebrated.\(^5\)

Founded in 1996, the Girls Club in many ways represents this turn towards embracing “Girl Power”. It celebrates girls’ voice and power, yet remains cognizant of the class, racial, and ethnic dynamics inflecting young women’s agency. Meanwhile,

---

\(^1\) These studies, for the most part, ignore the work and theoretical advances of anthropologists such as Margaret Mead who had compiled years or research on girls’ experiences in childhood, coming of age, and transitioning to adulthood. see Mead 1928, 1930.


\(^3\) Lopez, N. 2002


\(^5\) Baumgardner and Richards 2000
much of the media discussion of “girl power” fails to attend to the social and spatial processes and practices of subjectivity, identity and social reproduction. “Girl Power” tells girls they can be anything they want to be, and encourages girls to aspire to great heights, but the political economic circumstances of the global economy narrows the realm of possibility. Only a small percentage of girls are structurally located in ways that make “Girl Power” viable.

“Girl Power” is a term ripe with contradiction, and a source of much debate. It is criticized as a non-political, non-threatening alternative to feminism, a way for girls to identify girl-positive feelings without making a commitment to social justice. Yet “Girl Power” is not merely an example of false consciousness. It is an open conversation, and a signifier to which new meaning can be attached. Engaging in discussions about this messaging is a critical first step raising girls’ consciousness about what it means to be a woman today. Indeed, part of the Girls Club’s embrace of ‘empowerment’ discourse is in part because it is reaching a younger audience, a future generation of feminists and it recognizes that it is not necessarily productive to preach a politics of capitalist patriarchy to a 12-year old girl. “Girl Power” makes feminism accessible to young girls. A message of empowerment is just the beginning of the conversation. It is an opening. Self-awareness is a precursor to critical consciousness.

The notion of “Girl Power” has also been the subject of debate among girls within the Girls Club as is evident in the following incident. In 2011, Courtney Martin, author of *Do It Anyway: The New Generation of Activists* and editor for *Feministing.com*, led a workshop at the Girls Club during which she raised objections to the lyrics of

---

1 Literature that succeeds in addressing the complexities social and spatial processes and practices of resistance, subjectivity, and identity among young women includes: Bettie, 2003 and LeBlanc 1999.
Beyoncé’s song “Run the World”\(^1\). Martin was pointing to feminist critiques of the song, which argued that it exemplified “Girl Power” run amuck. Girls, on the other hand, rejected this feminist interpretation and rallied to Beyoncé’s defense. They offered an impassioned rebuttal, arguing that Beyoncé “just wants girls to know they have power….” and that “Beyoncé’s saying that we have to believe in ourselves, too, and then we can make it [dreams] happen.” In what turned into a stand off, girls refused to see the feminist light that Martin brought to the discussion. In reflecting upon this incident Martin remarks: “It dawned on me that they were really making an argument for Beyoncé’s right to create a utopian narrative. Girls need inspiration. She’s not painting the world as it is; she’s painting the world as it should be.”\(^2\) Here Martin is highlighting a key point; for girls in the Lower East Side, “Girl Power” is a myth, but one that celebrates women’s collective power. It inspires girls to envision alternatives to the world of their daily existence, where they encounter feelings of powerlessness and objectification. As warped and manipulated as this notion might be in popular culture, it still holds power for girls in the LES. Next, I discuss an annual performative event of the Girls Club, which publicly celebrates “Girl Power”.

**Feminism on Parade**

Every Mothers’ Day weekend the Girls Club parades through the streets of the LES for its annual Walk-a-Thon for Girls And Women’s Health. The Walk-a-Thon serves as a powerful spectacle that reflects the rebellious legacy of the Lower East Side.

---

\(^1\) In this song, Beyoncé asserts that girls run the world: “Who runs the world? Girls”. A critique of this song by blogger NineteenPercent on Feministing.org garnered over 881,000 views on YouTube. See the critique “Beyoncé- Run the World (Lies)” (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p72UqyVPj54&feature=share)

\(^2\) I was observing this encounter as a participant. For Courtney Martin’s account of this showdown, see Martin, C. 2011. "The World Is Whose?: Beyoncé, Nas, and the Politics of Utopia," in *Guernica*. 

318
It is an event that conjures up community, by creating shared memories that create a sense of collective unity among the women and girls participating. The parade is an exercise through which women and girls learn to assert their right to the city streets.

Wearing gaudy pink dresses Girls Club teens lead the parade through the Lower East Side, marching alongside the Hungry Marching Band. All along the parade route women and girls cheer and chant songs, such as “Hey Hey Ho Ho We’re the Girls Club on the Go”, “We’re the girls club, the mighty mighty Girls Club,” “Let’s Go Girls Club, Let’s Go.” By wearing of the over-the-top pageantry dresses and marching through the streets shouting the girls are enacting a parody, manipulating the traditional ‘girly’ image. The noise-makers, and banners and puppets are all props to demonstrate the Girls Club’s goal of reclaiming the right to their city streets. The Girls Club is employing a visual metaphor of collective “Girl Power”.

Henry Lefebvre (1968, 2003), Jane Jacobs (1961), as well as Jane Addams (1910), all appreciated the city streets as a source of democratic experience. Susser (2013) observes that, “the city is the commons where rules are broken and new performances [of gender] are explored and created in public.” The Walk-a-Thon allows the Girls Club to announce its presence in the neighborhood and draw people into the spectacle. It visually invokes a sense of legitimacy. Multiple generations of local mothers participate walking alongside volunteers who raise sponsorship funds for the Girls Club in order to participate. In this raucous parade women are emphasizing their roles as

---

1 Kaplan, T. 2004.
2 The parade route goes through the Lower East Side below Houston St., follows up the East River and through NYCHA housing on 6th Street, onward to the Center for Community on Avenue D and 8th Street and then through Tompkins Square Park.
3 Hungry Marching Band is a street brass marching band in NYC with a trademark anarchic style. http://www.hungrymarchband.com
4 Susser, I. 2013. "Gender."
mothers, grandmothers, aunts and sisters, while girls, in their costumes, create a spectacle of curiosity. Together they are forcing others to take notice and pay attention to their presence in the streets. In 2014, the Girls Club is organizing a “stroller brigade” of young mothers to participate in the walk-a-thon in an effort to build grassroots support and momentum for Mayor De Blasio’s “Universal Pre-K” legislation.¹

The women participating in the walk/parade may not self-identify as feminists but they are using gender and generational identities strategically to call attention to the demands of girls and women for the right to a future.² Too often it is easy to overlook and underestimate women’s and young people’s call for an alternative vision of community, but through this parade they are making their voices heard. It serves an empowering and energizing experience for everyone involved, and it’s fun. Such activities of creative expression are a basis for community sustainability. Through spectacles, parades and community art projects the Girls Club offers an outlet for women and girls to announce their belonging and their right not to be socially and spatially excluded from their neighborhood and their city. In doing so, the Girls Club makes its feminist mission visible and puts it into action on the city streets.

A “Girls” Club

Influenced by second as well as third wave feminist politics, the Girls Club invents its own version of feminism and puts it into action on a daily basis. Stella, a Girls Club staffer, explains the Girls Club’s feminist politics best: “This organization is about as feminist and progressive as it comes considering that all of our talk had to be translated

---

¹ The strollers in the “stroller brigade” will be ornately decorated by the women as a form of creative expression and to draw public attention.  
² Cox, A. 2009
into action. There are so many enthusiastic, smart, passionate women who want to get their hands dirty in community work and changing lives so.”

The Girls Club serves as the modern day, female equivalent of an “old boys club”, which has historically provided a ready-made social network for privileged, well-connected young men coming of age. The key distinction being that the “Girls” Club is egalitarian, accessible and intergenerational. In addition to their mentors, Girls Club members look to older staff members as role models, and identify with older members and alumnae. These are women they can trust and turn to for advice, support and direction. In this way, everyone at the Girls Club serves as a mentor in some capacity. As staffer, Pam, exclaims: “Amazing women coming through the doors all year. Girls are constantly meeting women doing great work. We meet the experts. You can feel really connected to amazing women, women active and successful in the art and activist world. And there is camaraderie among the women. It’s a real “girls club” for all of us. The Girls Club creates a circle of amazing women, attracting inspiring women from all walks of life. That, I think, is the most valuable thing for the girls… connecting them with really accomplished women, introducing them to women in history, and giving them the space to dream.”

Girls Club has become an incubator of alternative thought and action in Lower Manhattan. It is a space of convergence for innovative thinkers, outsider artists, activists, and change makers. Women want to be involved with the Girls Club; it has an energy that attracts interesting people into its orbit. One staff member described it as “intoxicating” environment. The space lends itself to social gatherings and conversation and the leadership encourages a free exchange of ideas. In this way, the Girls Club
resembles the early settlement houses in the LES at the turn of the century, where women had space to convene and converse on pressing social issues of the day while addressing the immediate social needs of the community. The difference is that the Girl Club offers a more democratic space and inclusive conversation. Whereas the settlement leaders and social reformers of the day, essentially created a “Girls” Club of privileged, educated white women, the Girls Club today reflects the diversity of the Lower East Side, representing a spectrum of class, racial and ethnic backgrounds, gender identities and sexual preferences.

In addition to its mission to foster women and girls’ empowerment and develop critical pedagogical practices, the Girls Club is engaged in community politics. As an organization grounded in the grassroots, the Girls Club has an extensive web of collaborative partners and agencies in the LES. It works directly with schools, health centers, artist collectives, community-based organizations, government agencies such as NYCHA (public housing), institutions of higher education and faith-based organizations. It strives to overcome the fragmentation of social services and community organizing initiatives by cultivating partnerships. In doing so, it pushes forth an urban vision of community development that puts women and youth at the center. And yet there are limits to community-building efforts in the era of global capital. In the second half of this chapter I take a critical look at “community” and “community development” initiatives in the era of global capital.

The Limits of Community

As a community based organization “filling in the gaps” and responding to assorted crises in social reproduction, the Girls Club is both a product of and a response
to, the contemporary regime of global capital. Community empowerment and “communitarianism”\(^1\) have been celebrated in recent years as the “magic bullet” solution to a range of social problems created by political-economic transformations. And yet, as DeFilippis et al. (2010) argue, community-based social change efforts are insufficient in addressing the broader goal of contesting power and changing society in ways that create more equitable and just cities and communities. Progressive community-based projects, such as the Girls Club, are simultaneously filled with democratic potential and laden with inherent limits.

The notion of community building through strengthening social connections, developing skills sets, and involving women and youth as community leaders is not inherently problematic, but it does not directly affect transformative change. Community organizations, like the Girls Club, ultimately lack the resources and capacity to solve major structural problems such as poverty, education, housing, criminalization/incarceration and so forth. “These problems,” DeFilippis et al. insist, “require broad and systematic state policy and programs, often with the redistribution of resources to low-income communities” (124).

Mobilization for Youth in the 1960’s employed a progressive model of community building, organizing both youth and adult residents and bringing about positive changes in the Lower East Side. Moreover, as noted in Chapter Three, MFY had a broader impact because it served as a prototype for the community based approach in War on Poverty. Today, as the political-economic context has shifted to the right, a

---

\(^1\) Communitarianism is a term used to describe those, such as Robert Putnam (2000), interested in exploring the value of community and local civic initiatives. Putnam argues that by creating a sense of community and bringing people together, civil society is strengthened and community members can solve their own problems.
myopic version of community has emerged. Today’s version of community building tends to ignore the broader political economy and the role of global capital. This depoliticized version emphasizes local participation and leadership development, and ignores the reality that communities ultimately lack the political power, capital and resources to seriously address their own problems.¹ Longer-term goals of economic and social justice have been marginalized, as community organizations have been forced to turn their attention inward in order to survive austerity measures. The Girls Club rejects this narrow model of community building and instead works to harness and strengthen local resources to address local issues with a broader lens and understanding of structural forces. It keeps alive the value of the public good as the fundamental goal of urban life (Susser 2012) and puts the needs of women and young people front and center in community building efforts.

Acting at the local level, the Girls Club cannot resolve the broader social, political, economic and cultural problems affecting the Lower East Side and New York City. Nevertheless, as a community based youth organization, the Girls Club plays a critical role in education, consciousness raising, and laying the foundation for future social change initiatives, as noted in Chapter Nine. In collaboration with other progressive organizations in the LES, the Girls Club acts to mobilize residents and make demands on local resources. In short, the Girls Club does have a role to play in potentially affecting social transformation from the ground up. As De Filippis et al. assert that while “communities may not be able to control the local level manifestations of larger social problems, they can be a central part of changing the larger scale social problems in the first place” (168).

¹ DeFilippis, J. et al, 2010  p. 110-112
Building Community

In a community where “unity has been forged in contest” (Abu-Lughod 1994) the tradition of engagement across difference lives on. As described in Chapter Two, the Lower East Side is home to New Yorkers representing the full spectrum of economic status and class background; there are rich bohemians, young creative types, middle-class professionals, as well as, artists/writers/musicians who dug-in when the neighborhood was more affordable. And because of the high concentration of public and subsidized housing scattered throughout the LES and along the East River, there remains a significant number of working-class and low-income residents. In this environment, the Girls Club strives to build alliances across class, racial and ethnic lines. As one Girls Club staffer, Stella, articulates: “The LES community is divided. It’s complicated because it remains a richly diverse neighborhood. The Girls Club acknowledges this fact and tries it's best to build bridges between various groups of people who often self-organize separately... The Girls Club builds alliances. It does a good job at incorporating all the stakeholders in as many ways as possible. It is unique in that it’s really trying to bring people together. As community organizers its important to bring everyone to the table, even if it makes things messy.”

The Girls Club creates a sense of common cause, by bringing together people and reminding them of their collective self-interest. One positive outcome of the protracted struggles over housing and public space (parks and gardens) in the Lower East Side is that many residents are well versed in advocacy, activism and collective action. Emerging organically from this organized community, the Girls Club builds upon this legacy and provides a common ground for divergent groups to unite in the struggle for local
resources. In so doing, it also helping cultivate local resistance to globally rooted capitalist forces of corporatization and marketization.

**Revaluing Community**

The time bank, an emergent bartering system for goods and services, is one way the Girls Club is bringing community residents together while generating a localized alternative to global capital. A time bank allows people to use their skills to help others by exchanging hours instead of money. It is representative of an emergent system of exchange and bartering with alternative currency, whereby the unit of currency is not a dollar, but an hour. In a time bank, all work has equal value.¹ Time dollars are earned for providing services and spent receiving services and resources. The idea of time banking sprouted in the 1980’s when anti-poverty activist, Edgar Cahn, developed the concept of "Time Dollars" as a new currency to combat disinvestment in social programs during a period of “roll-back” neoliberalism (Peck and Tickell 2002) under Reagan and Thatcher.

Time Banks have been growing in popularity in the United States and the United Kingdom where the State has been shrinking from its responsibility to provide adequate social welfare services.²

The value of time banks goes beyond practical assistance and community service³. It also represents an alternative vision of urban life in the 21st century. The time bank reflects the Girls Club’s grassroots base, and provides girls and their families, as well as the broader LES community, with vital services, programming and resources at

---

¹ Schraven 2001; North, P. 2007, 2010
² See Timebanking UK (http://www.timebanking.org/about/) and Directory of Time Banks (http://community.timebanks.org/)
³ Time banks ideally serve to help young and old, gain confidence, enlarge their social network, acquire skills, forge respect and reciprocity, and become more active and engaged in their community. See Rosenberg, T. 2011. "Where All Work Is Created Equal" See also: L. Snowden (2009) who describes how a time bank in south London has been successful in combating a surge in diabetes. Doctors there reported a direct connection between patients’ self-esteem and their ability to make needed behavior changes.
the Center for Community free of charge. Time bank service applications include: tutoring, teaching, leading workshops, translation services, legal assistance, accounting/tax preparation, garden work and distribution of “fair food” shares. In exchange for services, participants can earn credits to send girls to summer camp in the Adirondacks upstate, receive health screenings/consultations, and enroll in subsidized seasonal “fair food” shares. The women participating also have the opportunity to earn credits to participate in adult education classes, as well as, wellness, arts and culinary workshops at the Center for Community.

The Girls Club aims to create an alternative local economy, specific to the unique needs of the diverse Lower East Side community, and one that values, human labor and meaningful exchange. The Time Bank model places a higher value on “use value” over “exchange value” and reflects Marx’s basic tenet: “From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs.” DeFilipppis et al. (2010) point out that the use value of the basic components of community life are defined by residents, rather than their potential

---

1 “Fair Food” shares are similar to Community Support Agriculture shares, in that participants receive a weekly share of fresh, local produce throughout Summer and Fall. However, instead of procuring the produce directly from a farmer, the Girls Club buys wholesale from the NYC Greenmarket (a collective of local farmers) on a weekly basis. Participants purchase shares on a weekly basis as opposed to a lump sum ahead of the growing season. The advantage of this “buyers-club” method is that participants can purchase the shares using their EBT Benefit cards (food stamps) do so on a weekly basis, which makes it affordable. The Girls Club further subsidizes the shares relative to time-bank credits. For over a decade the Girls Club has run food justice related programming; it ran a community farmers market on Ave D for years, and subsequently ran a Community Support Agriculture program. The “fair food” program is an new model, made possible by Greenmarket’s new wholesale program. The “fair food” program will be rolled out in June 2014. The name, “fair food” share, draws inspiration from the Coalition of Immokalee Workers Fair Food campaign and the struggle for farmworker justice, and food justice more broadly. See. http://ciw-online.org/

2 Marx, K. 1976 (1876). Capital, Volume I. In Chapter One (p.126-131) Marx explains the dual character of the commodity, possessing both use-value and exchange value. Exchange-value is the quantitative aspect of value, which is independent of use-value, which is the qualitative aspect of value (the concrete way in which a thing meets human needs). Marx states: “The utility of a thing makes it a use value” (p. 126-131 Cpt 1).

3 Marx, K. 2008 (1875). Critique of the Gotha Program. Marx argued that in an advanced communist society, each person would be motivated to work for the good of society despite the absence of a social mechanism compelling them to work, because work would have become a pleasurable and creative activity, and each person would best develop her/his particular talents.
exchange value. These are parts of life that are not viewed as commodities or investments by those using and experiencing them. Capitalism, on the other hand, commodifies social life, converting people’s needs into profit.¹

Research has documented that the benefits of time banking radiate outward². In coordinating the time bank exchange, the Girls Club will be facilitating a process that brings people together, bridges divisions, meets needs, and heals old wounds. The time bank model makes sense for a neighborhood so economically diverse. The Girls Club is promoting a broad urban vision for how a community could be organized in a more human way and bringing together residents who may not be materially disadvantaged but culturally alienated and politically disconnected. In giving people a sense of cooperative ownership through the time-bank, the Girls Club may find a way to remain relevant and grounded in the grassroots. As a community-led center, it will be better positioned to survive and thrive as non-profit organization. As staff member, Stella observes: “I hope diverse people see the new Girls Club space as theirs. I want the neighborhood, and I mean entire neighborhood, to take ownership. That is the only way forward.”

Through the time-bank initiative the Girls Club is able to bring local residents into its orbit and build a supportive base. This community buy-in makes it a stronger organization but not necessarily one that is able to affect transformative change. Next, I look at how the Girls Club is extending its reach into the community and partnering with local organizations to push forth a progressive agenda.

¹ DeFilippis, J. et al. 2010  p. 79
² In researching time banks in Glasgow, Scotland, Gill Seyfang (2004) found that they strengthens both community organizations and the broader community. He also found that running the time bank as part of an existing community organization, rather than as a stand alone project, brings many benefits in terms of organizational capacity, community support, synergy, and social connection. He also noted that time banks build momentum and engagement in projects, programs and activities, extending the benefits out into the wider community.
Building Solidarity

The Girls Club is dedicated to supporting social change initiatives as opposed to simply delivering services. Acting alone, the Girls Club ultimately lacks the resources and capacity to solve major structural problems in society, but by acting in solidarity with other organizations and activist collectives the Girls Club is able to have a broader impact. The focal point for an anti-capital resistance today involves questioning how might cities be organized in a more human way, a more just, ecologically sane way. The Girls Club’s Center for Community provides a vital space of encounter where these conversations can unfold and serves an outlet for creative expression. It is a place where divergent groups are collaborating in new ways, forming new coalitions and generating a shared alternative vision. Politically progressive groups partnering with the Girls Club in the new Center for Community include: the housing advocacy organization, GOLES¹, Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping², the Criminal Justice Initiative³ and the Community Education Council (CEC) of District 1 Schools⁴, among others¹. These

¹ GOLES is a progressive housing advocacy organization that has served the Lower East Side since 1977. It provides organizing training and mobilizes around housing rights, working to keep people in their homes and in the neighborhood. It aims to “shift the balance of power towards the people in the LES.” http://www.goles.org/
² Reverend Billy (Bill Talen) and the Church of Stop Shopping is a radical activist performance group based out of the Girls Club. They use street theatre in the form of revival meetings, through which Rev. Billy and his gospel choir call on consumers to boycott large corporations and mass media. Rev. Billy also does direction actions, targeting the financial industry. He targets banks financing environmental hazards such as mountain top removal in West Virginia and fracking. In bank lobbies he performs an “exorcism” of bad loans and toxic assets. He and his choir have protested Starbucks for displacing small businesses. Other targets have included Disneyland (and Disney stores, including Times Square). Rev. Billy was very active in the Occupy Wall Street movement. He and his choir preach a message of social, economic and environmental justice, anti-militarism, and anti-sweatshop. Rev. Billy is the also the author of the satirical book, The End of the World (2012) among others. see http://www.revbilly.com/
³ The Criminal Justice Initiative: Supporting Children, Families and Communities (CJI), was founded 2009 to address the societal impacts of the rising incarceration rates over the past three decades and to address the needs of the recently released (and their family members) facing significant challenges upon returning home. CJI is located at the Columbia University School of Social Work. See http://cjiny.org/
⁴ The Community Education Council (CEC) of District 1 schools is an all-parent board of volunteers that replaced the local community school board when Mayor Bloomberg placed the NYC public schools under
groups are advocating for adaptive changes at the level of policy and services, as well as making demands for the reallocation of social and economic resources in society. Below I briefly highlight two of the newest developments at the Girls Club that have a transformative potential: 1) Tackling the issue of mass incarceration and 2) Supporting right to education initiatives in the LES.

In partnership with Criminal Justice Initiative (CJI) the Girls Club is running public film screenings and discussion groups addressing the issue of the prison industrial complex (Alexander 2012) and its localized impact. It is collaborating with CJI to provide re-entry consultations with recently released inmates who are relatives of Girls Club members and as well as counseling and support to family members dealing with the return of relatives from prison. It is also organizing a support group for girls dealing with the issue of fathers, brothers, cousins, etc. returning home from prison. Community members participated in the planning, development and design of this programming. In addition to the work with CJI, the Girls Club is partnering more with the Andrew Glover Youth Program, the organization highlighted in Chapter Six. The Girls Club offers a weekly yoga/stress relief classes for the mothers of the (mostly male) youth at AGYP and it is planning a co-ed “youth violence” teach-in, in response to a spike in gun-related violence in the community. Much of this programming is connected with broader advocacy campaigns for prison abolition. Towards this end the Girls Club choir is partnering with the performance artist, the Reverend Billy, in creating a public performance piece, “Book Central, Not Central Booking”, which protests the closing and

---

1 Additional partners include: The Lower East Side Ecology Center (www.lesecoloxcenter.org/), 6th Street Community Center (www.sixthstreetcenter.org/), the Low-Line (www.thelowline.org/)
defunding of public libraries across the city. Through these initiatives, the Girls Club is cultivating a vision of society without mass incarceration.¹

Public education has long been a sight of progressive activism and collective action in New York City. While the Girls Club promotes a model of education outside of the traditional school system, it partners with innovative schools in the LES and allies itself with progressive educators and advocates such as the Community Education Council. In January 2014, the CEC led a day-long participatory “Community Engagement Lab” at the Girls Club, in which community residents had the opportunity to create an alternative vision for a proposed new school in the Lower East Side². Over 50 people participated in the “Community Engagement Lab” during which educators and parents collectively addressed the question: “How might we design a school for District 1 so that our kids get what they need to flourish?” It was an opportunity for community members from varied backgrounds, to come together and find common cause in redefining what an education should accomplish in a democratic society. This is a critical question that is representative of “right to city” claims and grassroots demands for right to quality education. Through this gathering, LES residents are calling for the allocation of local resources to construct a new school and demanding a voice in the pedagogical design and practice of that school. The Girls Club is serving as a vital space were these

¹ see Angela Davis, Forward of Creative Community Organizing (2010) p. x
² A parcel of land has been set-aside on Grand Street as part of the Seward Park Urban Renewal Site, but so far the NYC Department of Education has maintained that there’s no need for a new school in the neighborhood. The Community Education Council has been actively organizing a broad base of support for the school, and pressuring Community Board 3 to demand funding from the NYC DOE School Construction Authority. The Seward Park Urban Renewal Site in general as been the subject of heated debate within the Lower East Side Community. Affordable housing advocates managed to force a 50/50 housing development plan on the site, ensuring 50% subsidized housing. Planning for a school on the SPURA site in seen as the next battle. Progressive educators are advocating for the creation of a public school (non-charter) that reflects the community’s input. See Lo-Down NY. 2013. "Op/Ed: SPURA Plan Reflects True and Unprecedented Community Process."
important conversations take place. In the concluding chapter, I extend this analysis, examining the Girls Club’s utopian visions for a more just city in relation to emergent “Right to City” struggles.
CONCLUSION

At the girls club we constantly remind ourselves that we are not simply a social service agency— we are a social change agency. And social change is hard work. It takes vision, skills, determination and leadership— that ineffable quality that allows us to envision a different world and help others see it too.

Lyn Pentecost, Girls Club Executive Director

The story of the Girls Club is a testament to how women in the neighborhood collectively rallied and succeeded in carving out a space of hope (Harvey 2000) in the heart of a global financial capital. Women and mothers in the LES defied a revanchist rhetoric portraying them as lazy, promiscuous, “welfare queens” and fought back, uniting to create educational opportunities and a safe space for their daughters, in a neighborhood where girls historically had been excluded from programming and services such as the Boys Club. Starting with minimal resources and borrowed spaces, the women challenged the status quo and created an alternative. In response to policies restructuring kinship, gender relations and expectations, the Girls Club offered a model of raising youth in community. At a time of crisis in the mid-1990’s the Girls Club emerged to provide for the emotional, educational and general health needs of girls in the Lower East Side, while also collectively sharing the burdens of care work.

Today the Girls Club continues to serve as a parallel family and a second home for women and girls in the Lower East Side. It provides a space of play and open-ended creativity, where girls can live out loud in ways not permitted within a regimented school environment suited for high-stakes testing, or public spaces where hanging-out is increasingly prohibited and policed. The Girls Club is a learning space, where opportunities abound for women and girls to transform themselves and be transformed through programs, classes, meetings and discussions. It is also a safe space where girls
can explore the possibilities of being and becoming through immersive, holistic, experiential, intergenerational opportunities for learning, creating and collective action.

In the struggle against new forms of subjectification and responsibilitzation incited by mass media and traditional schooling, Girls Club has created an alternative space of socialization, which allows for new forms of subjectivity to emerge. Within such a space of alterity, girls can question, explore, and discover themselves and their desires. Young people create their lives out of the circumstances into which they were born; and yet, in one small corner of the world, the Girls Club is improving those circumstances for girls. It is transforming what it means to be born a girl in the Lower East Side today and is establishing a foundation upon which future struggles can be waged.

Grassroots initiatives require intercultural, interracial, as well as intergenerational coalitions.¹ Securing the land for and constructing a “home” for the Girls Club has been a collective struggle led by and on behalf of, women and girls of the Lower East Side. The Girls Club embodies an ethos of community, collaboration and creativity, and offers a model of experiential education. It nurtures, excites and inspires girls and their mothers and brings the entire LES community into its orbit. The stated mission is “to provide a place where girls and young women can grow, learn, have fun, and develop confidence in themselves and their ability to make a difference in the world.” And yet it does much more. The Girls Club is guided by a progressive philosophy of social change. As the Girls Club founder and Executive Director, Lyn, expresses: “we must change the system underlying the nature of how this country operates… the system is setting these kids up for failure.” According to Lyn, Girls Club is “questioning the underlying paradigm and working to change the conversation in this community.”

¹ Boggs, G. L. 2012.
The Girls Club fosters individual, as well as social transformation. Through its educational programming and community initiatives, the Girls Club plants the seeds of social change, building socially conscious leadership among women and girls in the LES. In receiving such focused attention and resources, girls are, in many ways, in an advantageous position when compared with boys in the LES. Many girls are positively transformed through their participation with the Girls Club. And yet, while the Girls Club may be changing lives, it is not (yet) changing the world. It ultimately falls short of radically “reworking” (Katz 2004) normative social, political and economic relations. Transformative social change requires a mass mobilization; the Girls Club is just one piece of a broader movement to collectively achieve social justice.

At its best the Girls Club offers an urban vision that reflects the words of Robert Park, attempting to remake the world we live in after our “heart’s desire” (1967, 3). It does so by envisioning a model for caring for youth in community, cultivating creative expression and critical thinking among youth, and engaging local residents in a collective, participatory process of reimagining the LES. People have the right to participate in making change and act against harmful change in their community. The “right to city” implies not only an entitlement to housing, health care, employment, but also a right to education. The Girls Club is tackling all these issues, working in solidarity with other progressive organizations in the LES; these alliances are strengthening the community and empowering residents to fight for their own urban vision. In order to counter global capitalism and its myriad of localized effects, it is imperative that we find ways to spark consciousness, incite big ideas, and the means to realize them. As a
society, we need an alternative, oppositional, and even revolutionary imagination\(^1\), to envision a different world, and invoke utopian “spaces of hope” (Harvey 2000). Towards this end, Girls Club is creating a space for critical dialogue, exchange and experimentation. It serves as an incubator of social change ideas.

Young people need to be recognized as social change agents and as experts of their own community. We need to invest in developing their leadership capabilities. Young people have a healthy, cynical perspective on public institutions and their representatives and they have mastered the skills necessary to navigate urban space. We need to create opportunities to build upon these strengths and skills, and support venues, such as the Girls Club, that develop social consciousness and critical thinking skills. The new Center for Community offers safe space for critical reflection and open dialogue among youth. It is a space where youth, both male and female, can potentially develop an awareness of the structural roadblocks and start confronting the roots of injustice.

Looking ahead, creating a youth representative community board in the Lower East Side would be one way to formalize youth participation in community-led development.

It may not be transformative, but the Girls Club is guided by a vision of social justice and a just city. It envisions an inclusive and more democratic vision for New York, one that is grounded in racial, gender and class equity. Through critical educational practices the Girls Club is fostering a new generation of leadership. It calls for self-directed community change, and insists upon girls and women’s inclusion in the decision-making processes that affect them and their opportunity to influence the outcome. It supports women and girls as they learn to imagine themselves as empowered agents that can create change. Having the right to the city, means having a say in

---

\(^1\) Katz, C. 2004 p. 257-259
reinventing the city. As David Harvey (2000) articulates, “projects concerning what we want our cities to be are, therefore, projects concerning human possibilities, who we want, or perhaps, more pertinently, who do we want to become. Every single one of us has something to think, say, and do about that” (158).

The Girls Club embodies the mission and politics of Jane Addams and Jane Jacobs and attempts to unify their distinct visions for social justice and a just city, and put this ethos into practice on a daily basis. While the Girls Club inevitably falls short of meeting this ambitious goal, in its attempt to do so, it is serving as a social experiment in education and community building that offers lessons for ‘right to city’ struggles in the 21st century. It offers a model of educational practice and community engagement from which we can learn, replicate, adapt and build upon. The Girls Club is building upon a collective memory of prior struggles for social justice in the Lower East Side, and in so doing it is establishing a base from which future struggles can be waged. In the historical process of social transformation, the Girls Club is opening up pathways and generating future possibilities for reimagining and remaking the city.

I conclude here with the words of Margarita Lopez, former LES Councilwoman and long-time Girls Club supporter:

*I hope that all of us, each and every one of us understand that this is just the beginning. A building doesn’t mean nothing, absolutely nothing, if that building don’t have a purpose. Then each and everyone of you can contribute, can be part of what is coming. The future of these women, because they are going to be women, is in the hands of each and every one of all of us.*

The question of whether of our collective imagination guides us towards social transformation in the future depends upon how we raise, care for, and educate the next generation today.
Appendix I:
Girls Club Programming Locations
1996-2014

1. Marie Valle High School
2. PS 188
3. PS 20
4. Hamilton Fish Parks and Recreation
5. ABC No Rio Gallery
6. La Tendita at Essex Market
7. Bowery Poetry Club
9. Women Who Change the World Mural Garden
10. Horace Mann Yoga studio
11. Cardinal Spellman School - Basketball
12. Restaurant - Workshop Space
13. Cafe - Writing Program
15. Cornelia Connelly Center - Girls Club Office 1999-2004
16. Public Housing Building Basement
17. Cabrini Nursing Home
18. Tompkins Square Middle School
20. Boys and Girls Republic - Drumming
21. Middle Collegiate Church
22. Casa Victoria - Photography
23. Sweet Things Bake Shop
24. Coffee Shop - Book Clubs
25. Odenkirk Library
26. PS 122 Performance Space
27. Tompkins Square Library
28. East Side Community High School
29. PS 34
30. The Lower Eastside Girls Club’s Center for Community

**Map Created by Jennifer Sugg and Ryan Hinkel**
Appendix II:
Lower Eastside Girls Club Center for Community

Source: Lower Eastside Girls Club internal documents
Bibliography


Cahill, C. 2000. Street Literacy: Urban Teenagers' Strategies for Negotiating their


345


Edgington, N. 2012. Kick your non-profit succession plan to the curb. Social Velocity


Gilroy, P. 1981/1982. You Can't Fool the Youths...Race and Class Formation in the


361


Edited by C. Hall. New York: Routledge.


