

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

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Abstract

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

Introduction

This paper attempts to answer the question, "How do people in diverse situations respond when the present seems incongruent with what they had earlier envisioned as 'the good life'?" Although the combination of personality traits, life experience and family and social network composition differs for each individual, when crafting an account or narrative of their life trajectory, each person draws from narrative structures, themes and images that are more or less shared within the culture at large (Becker 1997). These cultural elements may not be explicitly stated in the narrative. As Cheryl Mattingly (1998) states, "We need not be aware, of course, of the culturally created stories which govern our experiences and actions" (33). Like the themes and images in a novel or poem, the cultural elements in a person's stories are accessible through narrative analysis. The cultural elements a person chooses and how they combine them reflects how they view or wish to view their position in society. Thus narrative analysis can illuminate the process through which culture provides both opportunities to explore and develop meaning from life's events as well as constraining and containing that process. Each

of the four narratives incorporates the theme of arrivals and departures, which are associated with significant decisions in their lives. Arrivals and departures are both literal, for example, in Dice's departure for Mississippi with his family and worldly goods loaded in his van, and metaphorical, as in Jerry's arrival at The Spot to find a place where he could explore his ethnic identity and discover new possibilities for his future.

I seek to answer this question by exploring segments in the lives of four young adults in Denver, Colorado. Two are women, two are men, and by self-identification two are Black, one is Mexican and one is White. All were born and have lived their lives in poor urban neighborhoods, three in Denver, one in Chicago. Their stories engage us because these young adults wrestle with competing sets of expectations and visions of the good life and their accompanying narratives: the one they see depicted in mainstream media and that they are taught in school or "brainwashed with," as one of these young men put it, and the visions they see around them of lives that are narrated through the "shadow values" and "streetcorner mythmaking" that Eliot Liebow (1967) and Ulf Hannerz (1969)

described in their urban ethnographies forty years ago. Both Liebow (1967) and Hannerz (1969) described the stories that poor Black men living in Washington, D.C. in the 1960s and 1970s told of their exploits living on the margins of society. These stories glorified hard drinking, gambling, womanizing and “playing the system” as active resistance to society’s pressures to settle down and conform to middle class lifestyles and values. Both Liebow (1967) and Hannerz (1969) argue that far from rejecting mainstream, middle class values, these men embrace their opposite, shadow values, because they lack the economic and political resources to realize a more middle class lifestyle. Similarly, much of the music and graffiti that these young people listen to embraces the values of drug dealers, gangsters and other countercultural or criminal figures.

I met these four young adults through developing a program evaluation of The Spot, an arts-based recreational youth center in downtown Denver, Colorado. In working with these young adults over several years, I have watched them struggle with their desires for a good life that includes life partners, children and steady work that often contrasts with a reality filled with significant disruption and dislocation. These four young adults each resist embracing shadow values, choosing instead to create life stories from more mainstream patterns and narratives. Nonetheless, each young person frames these mainstream elements in ways they see as true to their ethnic and racial identity and personal history. Their decision to regularly participate in The Spot’s programs over several years reflects their intention to negotiate these different visions of the “good life” in the face of significant disruptions in their lives.

Thus their arrival at The Spot also represents a point of departure for their adult lives. One purpose of the evaluation was to experiment with different ways to document and measure outcomes of The Spot’s programs that could not be easily quantified, for example, the role of relationships among youth in a setting with relatively unstructured adult supervision. In particular, I was concerned with how the arts, specifically the arts of hip hop, might present cultural images and themes that youth could

draw from to provide order and meaning to their life stories without feeling like they had “sold out.” Whereas instruction in and participation in arts programs is often highly valued for affluent youth and those engaged in liberal arts education, it can be difficult to secure funding for arts based programs for poor inner city youth. There is almost no literature that examines the interaction between the arts and narrative in assisting young people to attain their goals in the context of youth centers. This article is an attempt to initiate the process of systematically documenting that process.

Theoretical Perspectives

In looking at the lives of these four young people, I draw from three theoretical perspectives on how people seek to create order and continuity in the face of disruptive and unexpected life events and the significant role that narrative plays in that process. First is Dice’s disrupted life, as Hurricane Katrina forces him to take a detour on his route to a more settled life in the mainstream economy. His narrative resembles those of the disrupted lives that Gay Becker (1997) analyzes in her book by that title. Becker (1997) argues that although lives are inherently disordered and filled with disruptions, after an unexpected event we are compelled to create continuity through “narratives of disruption” (15). Next are Jessica’s and Tiffani’s narratives of composed lives. These two young women, who arrived at the Spot as antagonists, set against each other by mutual life histories of racial conflict and mistrust, began telling each other their stories and in the process emerged as friends and allies in weathering life’s changes. As discussed by Mary Catherine Bateson (1990), life may be seen as crafted from the materials we are given by our culture and the vicissitudes of human existence: work, love, home and commitment, much as a musician composes a symphony or writer creates a novel. Finally, there is Jerry’s life in which creating a life’s narrative enabled him to assume a more normative adult life. Cheryl Mattingly (1998), through her analysis of storytelling in therapeutic settings, noticed, “that there was a more complicated, interesting, and interwoven relation between telling stories and making practical decisions than I had initially realized”

(3). For Jerry, the arts of hip hop culture are the media through which he narrates a new vision for his future. Underlying and significantly informing each of these lives are the dominant discourses of what the life course should look like, what constitutes a disruption and how to explain and incorporate disruptions normatively as described by Michel Foucault (1977). As Becker (1997) notes, the culturally and, as Foucault would add, historically specific normative discourse of the life course provides both the compulsion to create continuity after disruption as well as the sentiments, images and metaphors we draw from to accomplish this. Thus all four lives – disrupted, composed, narrated and normative – are cultural products. Ethnography is the method by which we can appreciate their unique beauty and collective strengths and limitations.

Setting and Methods: The Spot²

In response to several summers of increasing gang-related violence culminating in the “summer of violence” in 1994, Dave DeForest-Stalls, a former Director in Denver’s Department of Recreation joined with others working in youth development projects to form the Com’n on Strong Grant-makers. This group created a safe, gang-neutral urban space where adolescents and young adults could gather in the evenings: The Spot. After a slow start recruiting and retaining youth participants, DeForest-Stalls consulted with local hip hop artists, street youth (grunge punks) and gang members to design programs based on the four elements of hip hop culture: b-boyin’/b-girlin’ (break dancing), DJing, emceeing and graff (graffiti). The Spot’s philosophy and mission was to “meet young people where they are,” build trust and supportive relationships with staff over time and, through these relationships, provide encouragement and direction to gain life skills, education and employment. Young men and women ages 14 to 24, from all ethnic, religious, economic, sexual orientations and social backgrounds are welcome to participate in The Spot’s activities on a voluntary basis: there is no formal enrollment or membership required. Participants can participate in designing and managing programs through the Youth Council. The atmosphere at The Spot is based on

mutual trust and respect and an open door policy with only a few basic rules such as not bringing weapons (or turning them over to staff while on the premises)³ and not coming to The Spot high, drunk or carrying drugs or alcohol. One of the central challenges faced by The Spot’s staff members is recognizing and diffusing conflicts and violence and offering young people the opportunity to handle conflict in a respectful, non-violent manner. In 1997, The Spot purchased its current home, a 9,500 square foot two-story building just north of Denver’s central business district in Five Points, the center of Denver’s Black community since the early 20th Century (Hansen 2008). Despite the outmigration of many Black families from this area as a result of gentrification (Robinson 2007), at the time of the evaluation, The Spot continues to draw young people from throughout the Denver metropolitan area.

In 2003, the new executive director of The Spot approached me to design an outcome-based program evaluation that would provide data to support grants to fund The Spot’s programs. Although the director was eager to have these data, she was also reluctant to engage in any project that might make participants feel like they were “being the objects of research” or collect information in way that would violate the trust and respect between staff and participants. Thus we agreed that a participatory approach that involved youth participants in aspects of designing and conducting the evaluation in accordance with their level of interest would be the approach most consistent with The Spot’s philosophy and ethos. For two consecutive weeks, Sunday to Thursday evening from 5:30 to 10:30 p.m., I sat in the lobby of The Spot conducting an unduplicated count of participants in the first week and administering a survey to measure outcome variables the second week. I use the first person here for simplicity: I could not have done this work by myself, and there were no funds to hire research assistants. Throughout the two week period of the evaluation, a core group of youth participants, including Jessica and Tiffani, sat in the lobby with me to ensure that we counted every young person who entered the doors and that everyone was asked to complete a survey. The desk in the lobby

became a center for casual conversations among youth and staff and a place from which I could participate in a variety of conversations and observe activities such as the adjoining dancing and music studios. We repeated these two-week data collection periods every six months for the next two and a half years, over which time I had ample opportunity to get to know many young adults and to talk with them about what was happening in their lives.

Although the young people who go to The Spot are a self-selected group, the four individuals profiled here are similar in age, gender and ethnic background to long-term Spot youth. Thus they represent a purposive sample whose narratives highlight key themes that appear throughout the stories of this group of inner city youth. The Human Subjects Review Committee of the University of Colorado Denver approved the evaluation project, including informal interviews, for 2005 and 2006. The four persons whose stories are told here have been given pseudonyms both for their street names and their real names to protect their privacy and confidentiality. The narratives presented here emerged from one-on-one interviews and casual conversations and observations throughout the period of the evaluation. Data were recorded as written transcripts of one-on-one interviews (audio recording was not convenient in the setting) and field notes of observations and informal conversations. Notes were initially coded for both *in vivo* themes that arose from their content and for codes derived from *a priori* theories of narrative analysis discussed below. Specific themes include disruptions, composition, normative values, shadow values and resistance to normative and shadow values.

A Disrupted Life: Dice

Dice is a solid, muscular Black man of medium height who greets his friends with a broad smile and bear hugs, but who can be very intimidating to anyone who crosses him. I got to know Dice when I met with The Spot's youth council to review the first draft of the survey. He was outspoken and immensely helpful in his critique of the survey, helping us to rewrite poorly worded questions, establishing the right level of language and pointing out our sometime

ridiculous misperceptions with humor. At twenty-three, he was getting old for The Spot when I met him in 2003, and staff members frequently reminded him that in another year he would have to either start working for The Spot or stop coming as a participant. Dice was born in Chicago and had come to Denver at sixteen, fleeing from gang-related threats to his life. An active drug dealer, he had a felony record for assault, so becoming a staff member at The Spot was not a realistic option for him. He had completed his GED and expressed interest in stopping selling drugs, but told me that this was difficult because of how lucrative it was and how difficult it was to secure legitimate, mainstream employment with a felony conviction. During the spring of 2005, Dice began to talk about moving to the South where he had extended family that would help him find work so that he could "get a fresh start. I'm getting too old to be dealing drugs, and I don't have a taste for it anymore. But everybody here knows me as a dealer, and it's hard to convince them I don't want to do that anymore. And it's hard to let go of the money."

By late July that year, Dice had managed to scrounge, save, and raise enough money to repair his aging van, load it with coolers of food and sodas, and say farewell as he drove off with his wife and children to start their new life in coastal Mississippi where a job was waiting for him. Barely four weeks later, shortly after arriving in Mississippi, Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast, and by October he and his family were back in Denver. I saw Dice a few times after he returned to Denver and asked him how things were going. Despite his disappointment in having his plans to resettle derailed by the hurricane and his distress over the financial losses that he and his extended family suffered, he was optimistic and hopeful, determined that this would be, as he said, "a detour and not a roadblock" in his path to securing stable legitimate employment. Each time I saw Dice, though we never had time to speak at length, he told me that he continued to resist the temptation to return to dealing, had a steady job and was making his way slowly toward the life he desired. Staff members corroborated this and the last I heard he has been employed as a bouncer at a bar downtown for several years.

Dice's arrival back in Denver in the fall of 2005, so shortly after his departure for Mississippi, could not have been more unexpected or potentially disruptive to his resolve to start a different life. Becker (1997) asserts that, "[s]tories of disruption are, by definition, stories of difference" (16). Disruption highlights the contrast between normative ideals of what the life course should look like and what a person is able to achieve. Thus they are inherently moral discourses. What cultural images and metaphors did Dice use to give meaning and order to this unexpected return? Throughout my conversations with Dice he relied on the metaphors and narrative line of addiction and recovery to frame his decision. He was leaving his "old life" of drug dealing with its connections to danger and crime, constantly moving from outside normal society to its borders for a life modeled on more normative, middle class values of a job in the legal economy and a lower but stable and legitimate income. He described the old life in terms of danger, violence and risk, but also temptations of quick and abundant cash, reputation and respect reminiscent of the crack dealers Phillipe Bourgois (1996) depicted in *In Search of Respect*. Thus the new life becomes one of sobriety, safety and respect that come from social legitimacy rather than intimidation and money. The recovery metaphor, of course, is based generally in Protestant Christianity, the revival movements of the rural South, and specifically in the story of the Prodigal Son. Framed within a narrative of recovery, Hurricane Katrina is but an expected setback in a road to redemption that is bound to be filled with temptations and challenges. As a disruption created by nature, it is less threatening than a disruption from internal or interpersonal struggle or conflict.

Composed Lives: Jessica and Tiffani

I am sitting in the lobby of The Spot on a chilly, windy and snowy night in early April. Two young women sit on the broken down couch to my right, talking about the upcoming GED graduation, the latest news of friends and the best site for ringtones. "Yeah, we're a matched pair," says Tiffani, her arm over Jessica's shoulder, "She be the White girl, I be the Black." Both have just turned twenty and have known each other

for about eighteen months. They tease and challenge each other constantly, answer each other's cell phones and "have each other's backs" should anyone threaten the other. But Tiffani and Jessica were not always friends; in fact, when they first met at The Spot there was active mistrust and dislike, which prompted a staff member they both trusted to suggest they start getting to know one another. "I thought she was just another dirty White street kid," Tiffani told me. "I thought she was just another hot-headed gang bangin' girl I'd have to fight," said Jessica. At this time Tiffani was living with her grandmother who had a steady job working for the government. They lived in a new house in an outer suburb with Tiffani's younger siblings. Tiffani had graduated from high school the previous year and was considering training as a certified childcare worker. She had a reputation as a fighter with a bad temper. Jessica, on the other hand, had left home at sixteen and had been living on the streets for several years. When I first met her, everyone called her by her street name, Blue. She was thin but wiry and very strong, often high on meth. She was also known for her tough attitude that kept people at a distance, backed by a sharp tongue that might lash out if you did reach out. She had dropped out of high school and was afraid that she wouldn't be able to pass the tests for the GED because of a learning disability.

From these different backgrounds, Tiffani and Jessica built a solid, lasting friendship represented for them by their arrival at The Spot. Jessica supported Tiffani in learning to manage and discipline her anger so that she could resolve conflict with the force of her words and passion instead of getting herself into trouble by fighting. She helped her out in caring for her younger siblings when her grandmother was hospitalized. Tiffani helped Jessica relax, give up meth and trust and connect with people at The Spot. She took Jessica over to the GED classroom to sign up for classes and worked with her on her homework. I speak of Jessica and Tiffani together because their growing friendship led them to move outward and work with a few other young people at The Spot to organize a block party in 2005. Although The Spot began as a coalition among street youth who are mostly White, and

hip hop artists and former gang members who are mostly Black and Latino, by 2000 these groups were somewhat polarized, with The Spot serving primarily Black and Latino youth and White street youth hanging out on the streets or in a faith-based youth center nearby. Staff members had been discussing this with participants at The Spot and together they decided to hold a block party to bring these groups together. Tiffani and Jessica devoted themselves to the project with enthusiasm, helping to raise funds for a dunking tank to dunk staff members, organizing activities and publicizing the event. Their friendship continues to be an important part of each of their lives that provides continuity and support through life's unexpected and expected events. In the past few years, both have had children and separated from their children's fathers, Tiffani is in school to become a corrections officer and Jessica has held a job at a coffee shop for almost two years and moved out of her mother's house to an apartment of her own. They are godparents to each other's children and, as Jessica said, "We'll be friends forever."

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

share of fights and days and even weeks when they didn't speak to one another. But those rough periods, too, become part of the life they are composing.

A Narrated Life: Jerry

I have come to know Jerry more recently than Dice, Tiffani, and Jessica, in part because Jerry is a "b-boy." At The Spot, b-boys were a group apart, an elite group focused exclusively on their art with a military like camaraderie, discipline and group ethos. They would usually arrive around 6:00 p.m., well after the doors opened and go directly to the studio without a quick hello or nod to whoever was in the lobby. There is an unstated order in the b-room and almost no discussion or socializing. The b-boys are focused on their moves, on practice, on listening to the beat, on observing each other. Jerry arrived at b-boyin' and The Spot through hip hop culture after having a very clear sense of where he wanted his life to go. He recalls, "At thirteen or fourteen I was going to be a gangster, a gang bangin' fighter who represents my 'hood. I was going to be a drug dealer because my father was a dealer, all my uncles were dealers. It's what I knew."

At fifteen, Jerry ran away from his aunt and grandmother, who had been raising him, and lived on the streets for a year and a half. He describes this as a time of great freedom: "I was the freest in my life. I didn't answer to no one; no chores. I wouldn't change it because I wouldn't be who I am if I hadn't been on the streets." Although he had planned on associating with gangs but not becoming a member (because it is hard to leave), he finally joined and then was expelled from a gang when he was seventeen. Throughout this period of his life, unlike most of his peers, Jerry stayed in high school in part because he loved to read and he had some teachers that he greatly admired.

One teacher who asked him about the book he was carrying, *Guerilla Warfare* by Che Guevara, introduced him to a critical view of American history, an alternative narrative to what he had received up to that point – one that took into account racism and social class. "He was the first teacher I met who actually said something negative about Abraham Lincoln." At about the same time, Jerry was chosen for the cast of "Zoot Suit,"

a high school production that received national attention. One of the other cast members, Jason, was a b-boy and introduced Jerry to hip hop culture. His uncle had taken him to The Spot when he was 10 and Jerry remembers loving it: "There was a group of guys in a huddle working on rap and another group in the corner graffin' in black books. It was like a club, there were so many people, alive and hyped with wonderful energy." But his grandmother thought it was a gang hangout so he didn't return. At eighteen, he returned to become a b-boy and also began doing graff and tagging. Jerry says it was the power of hip hop's ideals that grabbed his attention and changed his ideas of where he wanted to go in his life.

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

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

As Jerry told me his story, the power of narrative to envision, rehearse, and create change was evident. Mattingly (1998) identifies several key

aspects of narratives. First, narratives concern human action and interaction. Jerry's uncle taking him to The Spot, a teacher engaging him in conversation about Che Guevara and Jason's introducing him to hip hop are critical events in his narrative that serve as turning points in his life. Second, narratives are "experience-centered. They do not merely describe what someone does in the world but what that world does to someone" (8). Jerry's story of early life is shaped by the world of gangsters and drug dealers that surround him and that put him in conflict with his grandmother who is trying to protect him from this world. Although Mattingly discusses narrative in the context of therapeutic settings, her assertion that "therapeutic plots" help patients move from illness to a new reality is manifest in Jerry's discovery of hip hop arts. Through the idiom of hip hop arts, b-boyin' and graff and their philosophy, he began to hear an alternative critical narrative of American history and his place in that history that provided him with a different vision for his future. This new trajectory provided him with a way to express himself in a way that felt authentic, to serve a project larger than himself and not to become caught up in mainstream American consumerism. As he developed and repeated his narrative, pieces of it were realized and he arrived at a new and unexpected destination.

Conclusion: Normative Lives

As I write about these four young adults it is easy for me, a white woman of comfortable means, to idealize and romanticize their lives and the stories that they tell. There is much to critically evaluate in the narratives they share. As Foucault (1977) argues, social conformity, coercion and oppression underlie the cultural discourse of normality. These young adults, by virtue of their location in the social structure, are most likely to be oppressed and disserved by discourses of a normative life course. So we might ask how well do these cultural narratives serve them? As both Jerry and Dice would acknowledge, they have much less money than they did when selling drugs. They have traded quick money for a greater sense of safety and security. Jerry, for one, was very clear that he wanted to be around to raise his infant son, not

in jail as his own father had been when Jerry was a child. Foucault (1977) also says that social change comes from the epistemic margins, from people like Jessica, Tiffani, Dice, and Jerry who stand far enough apart from the centers of power to recognize that the dominant discourses are a form of "brainwashing," as Jerry would say. Whereas each has found a culturally based framework for making meaning from disruption – recovery for Dice, friendship across diversity for Jessica and Tiffani, and the critical perspective of hip hop for Jerry – they have crafted them to their own needs and desires.

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Notes

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2. Information of the history of The Spot was written by Dave DeForest-Stalls and appeared on The Spot's website until 2007.

3. Youth would get the weapon back at the end of the night based on the understanding that the weapon was a survival tool. Firearms were the exception: they were not returned to the young person. A staff member would drop the firearm at the police station without revealing where it came from.

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