This paper examines experiences of gentrification from the perspective of young working class women of color who have grown up on the Lower East Side of New York City in the 1980s and 90s. In a participatory action research project entitled “Makes Me Mad: Stereotypes of young urban womyn of color”, six young women researchers investigate the relationship between the gentrification of their community, public (mis)representations, and their self-understanding. Focusing on how young women negotiate processes of disinvestment and gentrification, this paper offers insights into how globalization is worked out on the ground and in their everyday lives. Bridging the material and psychological, I explore the socio-spatial constitution of young women’s identities as they interpret their experiences growing up on the Lower East Side having to live up both to the grittyness of ghetto life and the glamour of the club, café and boutique life. Drawing connections between the white-washing sweep of gentrification, and socioeconomic disinvestment of their community, the women express a nuanced understanding of neighborhood change. I maintain that we can learn about the contradictions of globalization from these young women’s ambivalent relationship with neighborhood change. [Key words: gentrification, women, race, whiteness, disinvestment, Lower East Side]
playing in the street. Sprinklers on, with the smell of BBQ in the distance. The icy man yelling icy's coco and cherry, the ice cream truck music playing in the distance.

Jasmine¹
Fed Up Honey

Jasmine's description of her neighborhood brings to mind depictions of dynamic working class urban neighborhoods like the Lower East Side. On hot summer days everyone is out on the street; music blasting, ice cream cones melting, older folks watching from park benches. It is an almost nostalgic image of public life whose loss is bemoaned by urban critics, who express concern about the lack of diversity, the erosion of public space, and the widening gap between rich and poor in contemporary cities, already a reality in regenerated neighborhoods and theme park downtowns (Mitchell 2003; Smith 2002; Sorkin 1992). This loss is also expressed by young women growing up in the gentrifying Lower East Side neighborhood of New York City. Their affection for their old neighborhood has grown as they witness its changes, as it becomes an unfamiliar place. Focusing on how young working class women of color make sense of processes of disinvestment and gentrification, this paper will fill “the ethnographic void” (Lees 2003), offering inside perspectives on urban restructuring rarely found in the gentrification literature (Alicea 2001; Muñiz 1998). My analysis will consider how young women negotiate contradictory subjectivities revealing how the personal is political (Cahill 2007a) and “how the intimate and global intertwine” (Pratt and Rosner 2006:15).

What does it mean to witness your neighborhood change while you are still in it? Jasmine explains:

For some reason I liked it better when no one knew our neighborhood. Now that people are trying to make a name for us we have to live up to the grittyness of the ghetto life on one side and the glamour of the club, café and boutique life on the other side.

In the context of neoliberal economic restructuring, gentrification plays a key role in cities (Smith 2002; Newman and Ashton 2004; Hackworth and Smith 2001). If gentrification is the “new urban form of globalization” (Smith 2002), a closer look at the experiences of young women may provide an understanding of how global processes take shape on the ground. My analysis adopts a dynamic interpretative framework to account for the disorientation
between feeling “stuck in place” (Katz 2002) and flows of capital (Sassen 1998; Cox 1997; Castells 1989) associated with processes of globalization. Here this is articulated in the tension between grit and glamour. Foregrounding the anger and pain of young women marginalized and marooned by global capital (Katz 2004), I analyze the emotional geographies of abstract processes of globalization in concrete everyday lives (Mountz and Hyndman 2006). I situate the young women’s experiences in a shifting topography which is global and local, and mutually constitutive. Gibson-Graham argues that one can scratch anything global and find locality-grounded practices in communities (2002:31–2). My examination of young women of color's place-based politics and their experiences of gentrification and disinvestment on the Lower East Side provides an understanding of how the neoliberal restructuring of neighborhoods takes place at the local scale, and how it is accommodated and resisted.

Rewriting the everyday experiences of young women into global analyses foregrounds an embodied and situated geopolitics (Dowler and Sharp 2001; Nagar et al. 2002). Bridging the material and the psychological, I argue that how young women define their relationships to their neighborhood is intimately connected with how they understand their selves. I address the socio-spatial constitution of young women’s identities as they interpret their experiences growing up in the Lower East Side where they have to “live up to the grittyness of the ghetto life” and “the glamour of the club, café and boutique life.” Negotiating contradictory subject positions, the young women grapple with tensions between giving back to their community—what Carol Gilligan identifies as an “ethic of care” (1982)—and wanting to escape its problems, the young women reconfigure their subjectivities in personal narratives that reveal pain, critical insight, and concerns for their community. In conclusion, I consider what we can learn about the contradictions of globalization from young women’s ambivalent relationships with neighborhood change.

First, I discuss young women’s experience of growing up in a neighborhood in transition, focusing in particular on articulations of disinvestment. Next, I consider how they interpret processes of gentrification through the lens of whiteness, placing emphasis upon race and class. I illustrate the feelings of loss young working class women of color express as their neighborhood changes, and traces of their history and culture are erased. What does it mean to grow up in a neighborhood as it is transformed physically, culturally, economically, and socially? Few researchers have looked at what it means to grow up in a gentrifying/still disinvested neighbor-
Negotiating grit and glamour

This study aims to fill in this gap. My research also contributes to the feminist geopolitical project of bridging the interdependent scales of the global and the body to “repopulate” globalization and gentrification discourses (Mountz and Hyndman 2006; Dowler and Sharp 2001). I want to “disrupt grand narratives of global relations by focusing on the specific, the quotidian” (Pratt and Rosner 2006:15) to demonstrate how our subjectivities are inextricably connected with processes of global urban restructuring.

The “Makes Me Mad” participatory action research project

Theories and practice of participatory action research (PAR) are particularly relevant to the study of young women’s interpretations of gentrification. Building upon long-standing traditions of asset-based development and grassroots activism (Kretzmann and McKnight 1996), PAR reflects an ethical commitment to building capacity and doing research that will be useful to the community (Freire 1997; Martín-Baró 1994; Lewin 1951). The epistemological framework of PAR projects engages a bottom-up analysis, involving those most affected by the research issues, and challenging social inequalities as they are understood by those subjected to them. As a white young woman who also grew up on the Lower East Side (twenty years earlier), the decision to engage in a participatory research project represents a conscious positionality and ethical commitment to foregrounding the perspectives of young working class women of color. PAR privileges “the understanding that people—especially those who have experienced historic oppression—hold deep knowledge about their lives and experiences, and should help shape the questions, [and] frame the interpretations” of research (Torre and Fine 2006:458).

This paper draws upon a participatory action research project developed in 2002 with six young women (aged 16–22) who grew up on the Lower East Side. This diverse research group of women, the “Fed Up Honeys,” reflected neighborhood demographics, self-identifying as African-American, Puerto Rican, Dominican, Chinese, and Black-Latina. The young women were paid a stipend for their participation and trained in social research methods. I facilitated the participatory action research project and collaborated with them in developing the project. First, we investigated the neighborhood, using methods like mapping, pho-
tography, focus groups, field research, and reflective writing (for more details see Cahill et al. in press; Cahill 2007b). The young researchers were involved in all stages of the research process, from framing the questions, to collecting and analyzing the data, and developing research products. In the process of investigating the contradictions of their everyday lives, the young women came to understand their individual experiences as shared, social, and also political.

Collectively the team developed a project entitled “Makes Me Mad: Stereotypes of young urban womyn of color” which considered the relationship between gentrification, disinvestment, public (mis)representations, and young women’s self-understanding. The project was developed based on personal concerns of the young women. It was a project by and for young women of color and represents a perspective on gentrification missing in the literature. The Fed Up Honeys first identified stereotypes of young women of color such as “burden to society” or “likely to be teen moms” and then worked to untangle the connections between representations that serve to “fix” young women of color in the “ghetto” or “inner city” and the gentrification of their community. One concern that emerged from our project was that as working class neighborhoods are “cleaned up” (that is gentrified), stereotypical profiles of poor communities of color as “lazy and on welfare” serve to justify their displacement. The struggle over representation is not only about the violence of stereotypes, but also about the right to remain in one’s home community (Rios-Moore et al. 2004; Cahill 2006).

The research process was personally transformative for each of us. Since we wanted to make a meaningful contribution with our research, beyond an “armchair revolution” (Freire 1997), action was a critical concern. Therefore, we developed different ways of reaching out to our community, and others, to speak back to stereotypes and present our results. This included a stereotype sticker campaign; two websites: www.fed-up-honeys.org and http://www.fed-up-honeys.org/cn/ (one targets a Chinese audience); and a report distributed to youth organizations and community centers (Rios-Moore et al. 2004). The Fed Up Honey team presented at academic conferences and co-authored book chapters (Cahill et al. in press; Cahill et al. 2004). In this paper, I draw on our collective writings and transcripts from our taped discussions.
The Lower East Side

Centrally located in New York City’s downtown Manhattan, the gentrification of the Lower East Side has proceeded in fits and starts over the past twenty years (Mele 2000; Smith 1996; Abu-Lughod 1994). The neighborhood’s complex overlapping histories of waves of immigration, massive abandonment, reinvestment, and new developments are reflected in its place-identities as the Lower East Side, Alphabet City, Loisaida, The East Village, and Da Sixth Boro. In 1988, at the time of the Tompkins Square “riots,” a historic event in the gentrification literature (Mitchell 2003; Smith 1996), the young women researchers were still children. By the time they went to high school in the 1990s, Avenue A was almost completely gentrified and commercial establishments on Avenue B staked out the “new urban frontier” (Smith 1996). By 2002 much of the Lower East Side was gentrified, yet the area where most of the researchers lived, and that was the focus of our work, was still undergoing dramatic changes. This area, below 14th Street, east of Avenue B, and above the Williamsburg Bridge, has in recent years largely been inhabited by Latino residents, hence its identification as Loisaida, (Nuyorican for the Lower East Side). Not coincidentally, this is also the area of the neighborhood that experienced the most disinvestment and neglect in the 1970s and 80s. Only in the last ten years processes of gentrification visibly started there.

“The system”

I am proud of my neighborhood in front of people never letting someone disrespect us (unless they live there too). But also am angry for the problems we have in our neighborhood. Many things bother me about where I’ve grown up, about the people, about the outcome of the people I grew up with.

The young women researchers were not sentimental about their neighborhood. Growing up on the Lower East Side means to personally experience negotiations of disinvestment. Their neighborhood was identified as a ghetto, slum, or more colloquially as “LES” (Lower East Side), “Lowa” or “Da 6th Boro.” Associated with growing up in the LES is a street smart awareness and sense of pride at having “survived it.” This experience is not, however, monolithic. The LES was also identified positively as “home” and a
significant context for memories and relationships. In their discussions about growing up on the Lower East Side, the Fed Up Honeys expressed a nuanced and deeply personal understanding of disinvestment and neighborhood change. By disinvestment I am referring to a structural context of social and economic transformations that are articulated by the young women as a part of a convergence of deepening inequalities that are understood in racial terms. The geography of gentrification that unfolded parallel to experiences of social/economic disinvestment was discussed by the young women as part of a broader context of racial discrimination and social inequities ranging from slavery to police brutality, the scarcity of jobs, cut-backs in social services, shortage of affordable housing, to the lack of financial security and support.

Identified as “the system” or “the matrix,” reflecting the structural perspective the researchers developed in their collective analyses, the young women engaged a structural racism framework to explain “the ongoing disadvantages associated with being a person of color,” related to the ongoing advantages with being white (Aspen Institute 2004; MacIntosh 1989) and grounded within a particular geopolitical context. Reversing the gaze, the women developed an analysis of whiteness as they struggled to explain and negotiate processes of gentrification, as Janderie writes:

> While engaged in a deep discussion about what has become of the Lower East Side ... suddenly I hear one of girls say the word gentrification. I had never heard the word before in my life, so naturally I asked “what’s that mean?” She explains to me that these yuppie ass, money having, culture seeking, white people are buying us poor people out of our neighborhood in part because they want a taste of our culture rich environment and the more of them who come in, the more of us are forced to leave because we can longer afford to live here.

Constructed as a threat of social and spatial exclusion, “the more of them who come in, the more of us are forced to leave,” whiteness is the face of gentrification. In contrast with its often presumed invisibility, here whiteness is marked and conspicuous. As Jasmine wrote in her journal: “Racial differences in the neighborhood: white vs. everyone else.” From within the neighborhood it was difficult to make sense of changes taking place over their lifetime. Another researcher wrote in her journal: “It’s like unknown people crossing over your territory and taking it for all its worth. They (who remain faceless) come in and destroy what many have tried to build up.”
Gentrification is viewed as an invasion or “civilian occupation” where real estate is deployed as a tactic in the contest over space (Segal and Weizman 2003). The faceless gentrifiers are described as those who claim space “for all its worth.” In their discussions of gentrification, constructions of whiteness reflect concerns of the young women about neighborhood changes (Omi and Winant 2002), as Annissa expresses:

You would think that after 9/11 people would be getting the fuck out of the Lower East Side, and instead I see more and more people coming in. I mean the people—I live in the projects, at Baruch projects—and I see white people going for a run down Baruch drive. Unheard of ten years ago. They go for walks in the projects. There is a certain, like complete oblivion that they have that’s just like—like that frickin movie ‘Living in oblivion.’ It’s like, duh walking around, totally unaware, like doo de doo de. It’s like they feel like they have a right. But they don’t really have a right, you know. I guess they do. But so do we.

Just the presence of white people in her neighborhood is menacing. Anxieties about neighborhood change are projected onto white bodies that represent not only the vanguard of gentrification, but the women’s potential exclusion (This is similar to what Pamela Wridt’s identifies as “place panics,” 2004). Whiteness is constructed as a sign of not belonging, coupled with a taken for granted privilege to cross borders into unfamiliar territories. This brings to mind euphemistic representations of gentrifiers as urban pioneers of the wild wild west (Smith 1996), or what Kristin Koptiuch identified as “third-worlding at home” (1991). Third-worlding is “a name, a representation, not a place” refers to “the effects of a process of exploitative incorporation and hegemonic domination—and its fierce contestation by subjugated peoples—that used to take place at a safe, reassuring distance” (ibid:85).

The parallels with colonialism are evident. Black Panthers identified the ghetto as an “internal colony” to draw attention to its similarities with imperialist practices around the world (Singh 2000). The geopolitical significance of an internal colony is especially pertinent for the Lower East Side’s “colonial citizens,” Puerto Ricans and Dominicans whose diasporic experience has been marked by involuntary resettlement, rupture, conditions of poverty, and border-crossing (Aponte-Parés 1995). White newcomers are often ignorant about the changing status of the neighborhood and its disinvested history, and may not be conscious of the impact of
their presence and related displacements. Long time residents, on the other hand, are very aware of the changes and how the neighborhood is under surveillance through an increased police presence, and quality of life laws which target men in their community. The entitlement of the border-crossers is especially striking in contrast to the hyper-awareness expressed by young people of color in their own neighborhood, not to mention in unfamiliar neighborhoods. Their lack of concern signals an entitlement which endangers their “rights to stay put” in their own neighborhood (Newman and Wyly 2006).

But why are white people moving into our neighborhood? One perspective is articulated in Janderie’s comments above about, “culture seeking, white people […] want a taste of our culture rich environment.” “The lack of culture” is deployed as an explanation for the imperialism associated with whiteness. From this perspective, gentrifiers want to appropriate or participate in Latino or African American culture because they need to fill a cultural void or experience a sense of community (Ramos-Zayas 2001:79). The predominance of popular Black youth culture, in music, fashion, and language in mainstream culture reaffirms this observation, coupled with the perception that white people are taking everything “but the burden” (Tate 2003a). The researchers articulate the paradox Greg Tate identifies as being “seen as the most loathed and the most alluring of creatures, the most co-optable and erasable of cultures” (Tate 2003b:14). Thus gentrification signifies an appropriation of their culture and history and simultaneously its erasure.

The progressive whitening of their community reflects changing demographics in their neighborhood, yet, there have always been white people living on the Lower East Side. The difference is that now other white, that is wealthier people, are moving into parts of the neighborhood that have been identified with working class communities of color, “slumming it” (Mele 2000). While the borderlines between the areas were never so clear, older working class Jewish and Eastern European residents and their younger Puerto Rican, African-American, and Dominican neighbors carved out distinct, yet separate, urban enclaves. In addition, the constructions of whiteness associated with the gentrifiers are not applied to the older white working class residents who are identified instead by their ethnicity. Ramos-Zayas (2001) describes this as “shades of whiteness,” which reveals an implicit understanding of class-based differences.

When grappling with the complex linkages between neighborhood restructuring, racial hierarchies, and representations, the young women articulate contradictory taxonomies of whiteness which both challenge and reproduce stereotypical constructions.
Sometimes guilty of stereotyping “the other” in reductive characterizations of “cultural void,” unchecked ambition, and greed, they risk reaffirming the very binaries that affix young working class women to the “ghetto.” At times, the researchers conflate class and race in their correlations of whiteness with privilege. This reproduces a normative whiteness and reifies the false dichotomy that all white people are wealthy and people of color poor or working class. But if the researchers essentialize whiteness they do so strategically. If the researchers’ representations of whiteness as power and privilege sometimes reproduce stereotypes, they also challenge and interrogate this relationship. Rather than pretending to represent an accurate portrayal of white culture, their representation of gentrification as whiteness is an interpretation politically situated within the geographies of inequality evident in the neighborhood.

Drawing connections between gentrification and white privilege makes sense based not only on the researchers’ observations of the shifting neighborhood demographics, but also within the broader context of their experiences of structural disparities elsewhere, such as school or work. Indeed, the Fed Up Honeys articulate what Bobo et al. (1997) identify as “laissez-faire racism,” the slippery relationship between global capitalism and structural discrimination, based on their intimate experience negotiating new forms of spatial and social segregation. The disinvested/gentrifying Lower East Side reflects the dichotomy of privilege versus disadvantage, and the disconnect between global and local scales. In this sense, the structural and social inequities experienced by young women at the local scale (try to) keep them stuck in place. In contrast, (white) privilege is articulated as power which is mobile and “jumps scales” (Smith 1993): the neighborhood, the city, and the nation (Pulido 2000).

Framing the disinvestment and gentrification of their neighborhood through the lens of whiteness, the young women articulate a racialized interpretation of globalization that is embodied and grounded in their everyday experiences. Flipping the script, the researchers redefine Du Bois’s “problem of the color line”—or in this case the frontier of gentrification—as white privilege. Thus, they collectively reject stereotypes which blame young working class women of color for social inequities and produce a positive collective identification as young women of color (Cahill 2006).
Disinvesting in young people
and their community

As part of their research the young women considered how material conditions of structural poverty have informed different settings of their everyday lives. In the “Makes Me Mad” report they categorized “community building needs from a young womyn’s perspective” in the areas of health, education, employment, housing, and finance (Rios-Moore et al. 2004). For example, the researchers consider the relationship between housing, school and underemployment for young people. They describe how a lack of employment options coupled with increasing housing costs leads to overcrowded homes where the rent is cobbled together by extended families, including school-aged girls who work after school and on the weekends. They suggest that these pressures increase tensions in apartments, and are not ideal environments for studying. Here the researchers draw connections between education and the housing market. In another example they consider the under-servicing of urban youth in education. They critique the low quality of public education, the lack of basic programs for literacy, attendance, and enrichment, and the under-funding of schools, public libraries and related programs. Taken as a whole they paint a detailed portrait of disinvestment in their daily lives to shed light on the background, struggles, “challenges that young womyn face”, and “the aspects of life that make this more complicated” (Rios-Moore et al. 2004:5). In the process, they underline how stereotypes of young women of color as uneducated, ambitionless, and lazy are produced within their particular disinvested context, as Annissa suggests:

Despite the perception that the projects are full of drug addicts, criminals, and welfare recipients, I have known my home to be full of kind, hard-working, struggling, giving and intelligent people. We have our share of people who have lost their way, but for each one there is a story. That is one aspect of my neighborhood and community that I would like to relay to a visitor or newcomer to my home, which is that like any other place that people decide to create a life in, there are countless stories that belie whatever appearance the Lower East Side gives off.

Drawing attention to the cycle of systemic denial, the young women are well aware of how their community and its residents are
often misconstrued by outsiders, and the deleterious effects this has had on the neighborhood through the under-funding of programs and financial redlining.

Disinvestment is not only associated with violence in terms of the higher crime rates associated with impoverished neighborhoods, but is also experienced as violence against poor and working class communities of color (Solís 2003). The violence perpetrated within underprivileged communities is well documented in the media. But poor and minority neighborhoods are also subject to violence, particularly those on the cusp of gentrification. Social and spatial boundaries are patrolled by stepped up police forces who discipline young men of color constructed as dangerous and criminal (Lipman 2003; Parenti 1999; Fine et al. 2002). For young working class women of color, the violence against and between the men and women in their communities is a critical concern, as is the increase in police brutality and the growing prison industrial complex. These issues were expressed by the young women in the context of growing up in a “bad neighborhood” which is also related to stereotypical representations of communities of color. Violence was articulated by the women as part of neighborhood life which took the shape of physical acts of violence and hostility between residents. Raising the rhetorical question “why aren’t we more considerate in a poor community?” one researcher addressed the trickle down effects of disinvestment which alienate people from each other in a context characterized by socio-economic disenfranchisement.

The violence of poverty was also articulated by the young women as a personal injustice, “the whole spirit of what we don’t have affects our inner being.” They express what Crosby et al. identify as a sense of “relative deprivation” (Crosby et al. 1986 cited in Fine et al. 2004), an inconsistency between what the young women believe they deserve and what they receive, coupled with an awareness that others have what you do not. For women growing up in a gentrifying neighborhood the sense of relative deprivation is heightened when the “other” lives in the new condo across the street. Faced with what you do not have, feelings of deficiency are even more tangible, whether it is the shortage of youth programs, lack of attention, representations of deficit, poor quality of housing, failing public education system, or lack of choice and opportunity. The experience of privation contributes to a sense of not being worthy of public investment. Annissa reflects:

For those of who don’t know the history we just see the results of the disinvestment. We just see the results of the
degradation and all we feel is that crater and that we’re just sinking deeper and deeper into it. And feel incredibly helpless and at the same time. You know, like pissed off, and not that you can’t use your pissed offness in anyway.

Cumulative experiences of systematic material denial inform young women’s feelings of shame, anger, and a lack of confidence in their capacity to affect change. This is reinforced by representations of young women as “at risk”, of young women of color as “likely to become teen moms,” “lazy and on welfare,” or “high school drop outs.” These stereotypes contribute to feelings of being out of control and living in a hostile territory. The revanchist rhetoric (Smith 1996) is a reminder of young women’s precarious social status and operates as a threat of social and spatial exclusion. Gendered racialized representations reference historical caricatures of the “tangle of pathology” and the underclass that blame young women of color for the poverty of their community (Moynihan 1965; Briggs 2002; Kelly 1997). Neoliberal discourses of personal responsibility and corresponding stereotypes are not coincidental, but constitutive of global economic restructuring (Harris 2004). In this regard, the disinvesting of space is about material resources, but also about the regulation of young women’s agency (Cahill 2006; Wilson 2004). The violence of disinvestment is most insidious when young women internalize the deprivation. In the Makes Me Mad report, the researchers argue that “too often young women take responsibility for failing institutions that underserve and undereducate them, leading to a personal sense of failure” (Rios-Moore et al, 2004:9). While taking responsibility is certainly laudable, feeling that the disinvested material conditions of their neighborhood are their fault, contributes to a sense of shame and inadequacy. Disinvestment creates a downward spiral that one young researcher, Annissa, calls “the cycle”:

Like, when kids have nowhere to go they’re left with the option of staying home and doing nothing… peer pressures for sex and drugs kick in. And they’re forced to make the decisions on their own and sometimes they make the wrong ones. This is when they fall into the stereotype of the pregnant teen—the unemployed pot smoking drop out. All they need is attention! Or a challenge every now and then. The cycle of not having enough.

In their discussions about growing up on the LES, the young women spoke about their experiences of socio-economic disinvestment and how this informed their sense of self. One frequently
Negotiating grit and glamour

The mentioned issue was the lack of support and dearth of places to go for young people, particularly for young women. One researcher lamented “I am an interesting young woman who bores herself to delirium. Because there’s nothing to do. I’m bored. […] It’s like that I’m interesting is going to waste because I have nothing to do with it.” Employing the language of waste, she uses the metaphor of urban decay. Just as her neighborhood is disinvested, so is she. Echoing this perspective, another researcher suggests that young women (that is young working class women of color) are not “getting attention—and what I mean by that is that they’re not thought of […] they’re just not considered. There’s no space made. They’re not considered for anything at all. They’re not prepared for life. They’re just there,” expressing a profound sense of neglect and disregard. Almost invisible, young women are not taken into account. Just as “there’s no space made,” the young women are “just there.” While stereotypical representations of the teenage mom are hypervisible in the public sphere (Cahill 2006), the needs and desires of these young women are invisible. Instead they are figuratively and literally stuck in place or without a place, metaphors which contrast with the mobility associated with success in the global economy. In the Lower East Side, this is made even more obvious by the newcomers who breeze in and out of the community while the young women struggle to leave the neighborhood and access opportunities (education, jobs) and for the right to stay put (Newman and Wyly 2006).

Displacements

Displacement has been acknowledged but seen as an unfortunate corollary of processes that are revitalizing city centres, attracting private investment and securing the physical fabric of architecturally valuable neighbourhoods. This leads us to the question of whether these benefits are justified given the social costs involved. (Atkinson 2003:2345)

The pressure of displacement is not an abstract threat but experienced in material ways: slips under the door offering a buy out in public housing, family members relocating temporarily never to return home, personal experiences of being harassed by landlords, doubling up of families in tiny apartments, and seeing friends displaced. Narratives of deceit, betrayal and loss characterize the “war stories” of displacement, offering an inside
One common tale accounts how some residents “voluntarily” move out due to unprecedented rent increases or landlord harassment. For example, less than six months after Janderie learned the word gentrification in our research project, her family’s rent had increased yet again and they had no choice but to leave. They moved to a neighborhood in Queens where they knew no one. Now “a bus, a train […] from everything and everyone we have ever known. Had we been able to find a decent affordable apartment in the Lower East Side we could have stayed ‘home’." Though not evicted or displaced, this is not a pattern of “normal housing succession” as Freeman and Braconi suggest, but instead a “replacement” (2004:51). In this case, poor and working class folks move into other disinvested neighborhoods where they do not know anyone, and might even experience the same cycle all over (Newman and Wyly 2006; Marcuse 1986). This repeats Frederick Engels’ insight from over 150 years ago that the bourgeoisie do not have any real solution to the so called housing problem, but only shift poor people elsewhere (Engels 1975:71 cited in Smith 1993). This calls into question whether gentrification really does deconcentrate poverty. Some scholars argue that the opposite is true as working class residents are forced into less desirable areas, the “inner suburbs”, in effect “diffusing and defusing their political power” (LeGates and Hartman 1986:194). Newman and Wyly (2006:26) argue that gentrification processes impact those who are displaced, and the ability of working class residents to move into neighborhoods with abundant affordable housing options. In addition to displacement and relocation within the city, a new trend reverses the Great Migration north of African-American communities in the 1950s (Stack 1996). Now, “everybody moves down south […] it’s like a little train,” Ruby explained, who moved to Georgia two years after the project started, to take advantage of more affordable schooling and housing options. Others may move back to Puerto Rico or the Dominican Republic in a reverse migration or shift between two places trying to find work and a place to settle following in the footsteps of previous generations (Aponte-Parés 1995).

One familiar tactic to avoid displacement is for families to double or even triple up in small apartments in order to stay in their neighborhoods. As opposed to the unconvincing interpretation that long time residents stay in their gentrifying neighborhoods to benefit from the “improvements” affluent residents bring to the neighborhood (Freeman and Braconi 2004), my research and others suggest that poor and working class communities stay put
for a variety of reasons (Newman and Wyly 2006; Marcuse 2005; Fullilove 2004). Significantly, there is an overall lack of affordable housing in New York City. Poor residents pay an average of 61 percent of their incomes on rent (Freeman and Braconi 2004) to stay in neighborhoods where they developed connections with people and places. This suggests that gentrification needs to be understood as a comprehensive process of neighborhood change which cannot only be understood in terms of real estate values. Place attachment and the loss of rich networks of social capital, for example, offer another frame to understand the process from residents’ perspectives. The threat of displacement (or replacement) associated with gentrification is expressed as a personal and collective loss of control as expressed by young woman researchers:

Ruby: And I’m not—but it’s sad—it’s like we can never have our own place without someone else coming in and taking over. Now they want to take over and before they were kicking us out of the houses. So we moved into public buildings—

Carmen: She doesn’t want to call them projects, she’s like “public buildings.”

Ruby: Public buildings. But now they trying to kick us out of the public or private or whatever building it is. To where though?

Annissa: We never had a place of our own. To begin with it wasn’t our own. We don’t own it, we never own anything.

Ruby: That’s what I’m saying. We could never have a place of our own because of something that will always happen.

Always being pushed around and having to relocate is destabilizing and articulated as a lack of agency. “They” have the power to kick us out and “we can never have our own place.” Having a place of one’s own is equated with security and stability. Property ownership is identified with feelings of belonging and being in control. This coincides with President Bush’s rhetoric of the “ownership society” that builds on (older) liberal discourses about property ownership as a prerequisite to citizenship, as he introduced it in his 2004 campaign: “I believe our country can and must become an ownership society. When you own something, you care about it. When you own something, you have a vital stake in the future of your country” (The Ownership Society 2004). Problematically, the concept of the ownership society suggests that those who do not own are
marginalized and threatened with spatial and social exclusion as witnessed in the young women's experiences of gentrification and disinvestment. As a new buzzword that dresses privilege up in new clothes, the rhetoric of the ownership society validates the privatization of the public sphere simultaneously producing disenfranchisement. Analyzed in the framework of structural racism, Bush's ownership society is an implicit raced and classed demarcation between the “haves” and the “have nots.” Here the young women articulate a subjectivity informed by discourses of the ownership society, expressing a desire for inclusion (Fine 2004). At the same time, this reveals feelings of shame, anxiety and a sense of bitter resignation: “we don’t own it, we never own it” and “we could never have a place of our own.” Ruby and Annissa know what they are talking about. For long term residents of the LES, particularly those who live in the areas identified with communities of color, the possibility of acquiring property was constrained by their own poverty and the financial redlining of their community. Now as the neighborhood is greenlined, ownership is constrained by an inflated market which outprices everyone but the wealthy. Not surprisingly, much of the recent real estate investment in the Lower East Side is from outside the community, indeed from abroad, which reflects trends in global urban restructuring and capital.

Cultural Displacements

To focus only on those who have to leave the neighborhood loses sight of another dimension of gentrification: cultural displacement. This perspective is missing from the gentrification literature (but see Alicea 2001; Muñiz 1998). The study of cultural displacement involves considerations of what it means to witness the transformation of one's neighborhood. This was the young women's primary shared experience when over the years they watched their neighborhood change. Janderie exclaims:

Oh! My! God! That’s what was happening to me! The trendy bars, the raised rent... the white people! There weren’t this many white people in the ghetto before, then again it’s starting to look less like a ghetto and more like confusion. Cute Italian and Japanese restaurants in one corner and a broke-down project building on the next. Everyday I walked down the same three blocks and I found something else that hadn’t been there before, like the annoying little boutique that sold hand-crafted figurines.
And even more annoying was the tea shop that seemed to never have a customer inside. All I could think to myself as “can’t wait to see how my neighborhood looks in 10 years.” Janderie’s antipathy towards neighborhood change is evident in her sarcasm, “can’t wait to see how my neighborhood looks in ten years.” Theories of place attachment and place identity (Altman and Low 1992; Proshansky et al. 1983) suggest that the relationship to one’s environmental surroundings contribute to the “formation, maintenance, and preservation of the identity of a person, group or culture” (Altman and Low 1992:10). What then, does the cultural transformation of one’s community mean for self and group identifications? Place attachment describes a sense of ongoing security and the significance of place for social connections. This is especially true for places where one is immersed for a long time and where one might learn new social roles, such as when growing up.

Whose neighborhood is this anyway? In terms of cultural transformations, the semantic differences between displacement and replacement are moot. The effect is the same. Atkinson asserts that “an action at the household level appears unsuited to an analysis of strategic neighborhood dominance,” (2003:2346), yet this loses sight of the empirical evidence of the wholesale transformation of the neighborhood, and the experience of it as expressed by long-time residents (Alicea 2001). The neighborhood context is being taken over and changed beyond recognition. Displacement is experienced in this regard as a process of effacement at the neighborhood scale, where the signs personal and cultural heritages are erased. What does it mean when the salon where one’s mother had her hair done every two weeks closes down? Or for the Charas Community Center that was sold at city auction for private development without the community’s permission? One misses the annual block parties which have ceased as many old time residents have left. Now there are only a few Puerto Rican flags which used to be a dominant symbol of the Loisaida community. What happened to the abundance of murals and graffiti walls depicting community’s concerns? Such as the R.I.P memorial walls in honor of community members who have passed, or murals commemorating Puerto Rican and African-American history? For example, the mural depicting Bimbo Rivas on Avenue B, once hailed as the poet of the Loisaida, is gone; the building has been destroyed and replaced with a new condo.

In short, gentrification is experienced as a loss of self, community and culture. The threat of erasing of “my grandmother’s house,” “my history,” and “my neighborhood” is accompanied by
feelings of anxiety and anger. “I don’t belong here”: this anger expresses a sense of not feeling welcome in one’s own community. From this perspective, Jasmine’s exclamation “They are killing the neighborhood!” referring to the new upscale restaurants on Clinton Street, is understandable. In the place of their not so distant childhood memories are new businesses that symbolize gentrification and their displacement. Psychologist Mindy Fullilove’s definition of “root shock” is relevant to understanding the young women’s potential trauma and diminished sense of agency. Root shock is “a profound emotional upheaval that destroys the working model of the world that […] undermines trust, increases anxiety about letting loved ones out of one’s sight, destabilizes relationships, destroys social, emotional and financial resources” and increases health risks (2004:14). Although Fullilove’s conceptualization of root shock refers to the aftermath of urban renewal where entire communities were displaced overnight, it captures the young women’s psychological experiences of being culturally dislocated from their community while still living there. However, unlike urban renewal, gentrification is a slow process. At first almost imperceptible, slowly the neighborhood changes as indicated in new storefronts that cater to a new clientele and replace familiar bodegas, mom and pop shops, and neighborhood landmarks. This painstaking process has ramifications from a political standpoint. The young women’s ambivalence towards their neighborhood speaks of their confusion, political apathy, and diminished sense of agency in the face of global urban restructuring. This has profound implications for organizing and social change initiatives.

Ambivalence

I complain so much about how the white people are coming and making everything “trendy” but on the other hand, I like being trendy and I want to be able to one day mingle with that crowd but I hate the fact that they are forcing us out. Why can’t it be that we all come together to form a culture rich yet trendy neighborhood? Why does it have to be one or other?

Janderie raises the complex question: Where does she fit in? Janderie’s analysis bridges critique and desire, as she reveals her personal struggles negotiating the material conditions of disinvestment and her desires for upward mobility and personal fulfillment.
She conveys the predicament of negotiating a space of “betweenness” (Nelson 1999; Katz 1994). As one researcher articulates: “Like, I keep thinking about Foucault—like that whole idea of, like, how can you think outside of the box if the box created you? And I think that they (the young women) are living examples that you can think outside and still be in it. Like, to be split.” It was in this space of betweenness that the young researchers articulated the push and pull of being simultaneously inside and outside the box. This inability to rest comfortably in a particular subject position reflects the struggle to discursively make sense of their experience. Du Bois (1989) calls this “double consciousness.” Anzaldúa goes further in her conceptualization of “mestiza consciousness:”

cradled in one culture, sandwiched between two cultures, straddling all three cultures and their value systems, la mestiza undergoes a struggle of the flesh, a struggle of borders, an inner war [...] the coming together of two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of references causes un choque, a cultural collision (1999:100).

Given their challenging experiences growing up on the Lower East Side, it is understandable that the young women’s relationships with their neighborhood are ambivalent. The cumulative experience of socio-economic disinvestment and associated negative outcomes, can transform civic engagement into alienation. At the same time, the young women express a yearning for spaces to connect, aspirations to transform their own personal situations, coupled with a deep commitment to their families, and a desire to give back to their communities. The tensions between these radically different perspectives stake out the contours of their positions. On the one hand, there is the escape narrative which equates leaving the neighborhood with success. The other is characterized by a commitment to stick it out and an ethic of care (Gilligan 1982). Somewhere in between the young women reconfigure their subjectivities revealing the compromises of self-invention, the struggle to make sense of oneself within the stunted discourses available, and critical perspectives on their changing community.

The first story is well known. It is the classic success story where one leaves the old neighborhood for the good life. For young women from the working class LES, dreams of becoming rich and famous involve leaving the neighborhood. From this perspective, leaving equals success and staying equals failure and thus the neighborhood symbolizes failure. Paradoxically, this definition of success is defined in similar terms to selling out. Selling out is described
by one researcher as the “worst thing you can do.” It means moving out of the “hood, leaving your people” behind. Like the term “acting white,” which equates blackness with failure and whiteness with success, selling out is a rhetorical move reinforcing the binaries of black/white, lazy/ambitious. Selling out and acting white function to maintain the social order by threatening exile and the potential of not belonging anywhere.

Navigating the contradictory subject positions involved in selling out can feel like a catch 22. Even though “the worst thing you can do” is leave the community, in fact success is represented and understood as just that: leaving. The embodied geopolitics of progress conflate social and spatial mobility, which within the context of globalization makes sense. But, interestingly, in the gentrifying LES leaving for the good life may be as simple as moving to the condo next door. This is captured in an inflected version of selling out, “brand new,” which refers to someone who acts “like they don’t know where they’re from or who they are,” someone who might act like they are new to the neighborhood, a linguistically more appropriate metaphor in the gentrifying context where long time residents largely do not own property and technically can not “sell out.” The contradictions of leaving are at once obvious and confusing when imagined in one’s own neighborhood. Especially within a neoliberal context where staying put in one’s neighborhood may be equated with success. The lines of demarcation between structural disadvantage (being stuck in place) and privilege are now identified along the lines of public and private, which are racially coded. The public is defined as the institutions regulated by the state like schools, hospitals, public housing developments, or parks. The private is defined by its exclusivity. Privatization may take the shape of the upscale restaurants catering to a minority, or the newer housing developments inhabited by new, wealthier (and whiter) residents. The zig-zagging frontlines of globalization produce a shifting geography that the young women must negotiate gingerly.

The other end of the spectrum is more optimistic about the possibility of social change, and involves a commitment to stay in the neighborhood in order to transform it. This is associated with the discourse of responsibility prevalent in communities of color to uplift the community and give back to it once one attains success (Boyd 2005; Patillo-McCoy 1999). Jasmine describes this position:

Once your settled and grounded go back to either your community […] and educate the people who are there on what’s going on. You know it’s one thing to just go in, and you
know, “let me tell you this and this is going on. Okay bye.” That's one thing. Another thing is to stay there and help them, make a movement about it, you know. So I think that's what could be done to change the whole system.

Here, staying in the neighborhood is associated with progress. Jasmine articulates this as integral to the community, and as a long-term process, “to change the whole system.” Building community thus might be associated with an ethic of care, in which primacy is placed upon attachment and sustaining relationships within a feminist framework of identity development (Day 2000; Gilligan 1982). On the one hand, framing one's relationship to the neighborhood within the context of caring for others resonated for most of the young women who had been socialized to take care of others and who had many care-giving responsibilities in their everyday lives. On the other hand, the discourse of caring for one's community concerned some who were not interested in playing that role when they never had time to care for themselves as it was. If the escape narratives involved leaving the stereotypes behind, staying in the community involved challenging them head-on and continuing to deal with the frustrations of disinvestment and gentrification. It means having to fight to stay in the home community. But for some of the young women, to get involved in community change was asking too much, to actually give back to a context which already had negative associations, as one researcher explains:

That's why we have to teach people, like little kids, their history before the neighborhood screws them over because then their not going to want to know about the neighborhood. Because then they're going to be like why the knife keeps stabbing me? [...] Young women do not feel invested in their community or connected to it if they don't have the positive aspects of their community, their lives and their personal strengths reinforced to them.

The two ends of the spectrum—the escape narrative and the commitment to stick it out—represent different approaches to negotiating complicated subject positions, individually the researchers shifted back and forth, most of the time identifying a position in between. Perhaps, the distance between the positions is not so great. This location is an emotional, cultural, psychological, political, social and geographical crossroad located in the LES. It reflects Anzaldúa’s borderland, a location “created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary” (1999:25):
This my home
this thin edge of
barbwire. (ibid)

It is painful. Standing on the shifting terrain of neighborhood change, the young women face the problem of trying to negotiate structural and individual interpretations of their everyday experiences. Collectively, after much discussion, dissent, and debate, and in the process of the Makes Me Mad project, they created an opening for working through the contradictions of the grit and glamour of their neighborhood and navigating the divide.

Connecting the dots between their individual experiences in schools, housing, jobs, and the neighborhood, the Fed Up Honeys developed what Cindi Katz identifies as a “topography for feminist political engagement,” and “grounded but translocal politics,” that highlight the contours of differently situated experiences (Katz 2001:1231). Through a collaborative process of comparing each others’ personal experiences the women developed a shared social analysis attempting to bridge the differences between the two polar positions. In the Makes Me Mad report, the Fed Up Honeys take this analysis further, offering a holistic and action-oriented vision of community-controlled development and self-representation (Rios-Moore et al. 2004). Their proposal for “Community building needs from a young womyn’s perspective” is in stark contrast to their current experiences of gentrification and socio-economic disinvestment:

The ultimate and most beneficial means to an end of the negative effects of such a stark lack of resources is a community that is self-sufficient and self-concerned. It is a priority to have young womyn who can feel connected and have a desire to contribute and be involved in their community… (our) research has identified several important ways to build a stronger and more positive community, one that is able to stand in the face of the stereotypes that its children have been pegged with. (Ibid:7; emphasis in the original)

Here the young women advocate community participation in the development of their neighborhood, and specifically their own involvement. In the conclusion of the report they included a list of “community building needs,” arguing for their concerns to be taken into account. Their language echoes the discourses of political autonomy and self-determination associated with the Black Power and radical Puerto Rican nationalist movements who assert
a positive affirmation of racial identities and to end economic dependence (Pulido 2006; Aponte-Parés 1998). Calling for their participation, the researchers reaffirm for other young women of color, and young people in general, that they are transformative subjects and not passive victims of global economic restructuring (Nagar et al. 2002). Thus, the Fed Up Honeys challenge dominant constructions of young women of color and of working class poor communities.

One of the most important findings of the Makes Me Mad project was that power lies in controlling how one is defined. While young men are surveilled in public spaces, young women of color are pathologized in representations of risk in the public sphere to justify their socio-spatial displacement and disinvestment (Cahill 2006). As Lipman (in press) suggests, gendered and racialized stereotypes of young working class women of color function as “the ideological lynchpin in packaging dispossession as neighborhood reclamation.” In the Makes Me Mad project, the Fed Up Honeys speak back to deficit constructions of young women and offer an interpretative framework affirming the rights to self-represent and to stay put (Newman and Wyly 2006) as mutually constitutive. The young women developed an analysis which is rooted in both challenging stereotypes and caring for one’s community. This outlines possibilities of a place-based politics of identity as a form of resistance to the homogenization and “white washing” of gentrification.

Notes

Acknowledgements. It has been a complete privilege to work so closely with the Fed Up Honeys research team over many years. Thank you, as always, for your humor, insight, and encouragement. I am grateful to Cindi Katz, Michelle Fine and Roger Hart for their mentorship and ongoing support. Thanks to Jen Tilton for her generous close reading of an earlier draft of this paper. I very much appreciate the editorial guidance of Suzanne Scheld and Petra Kuppinger. I am also grateful for the critical feedback of the four reviewers whose comments were very helpful in revision. This research was supported by a fellowship from the American Association of University Women and a CUNY Writing Fellowship at Medgar Evers College.

1 Names have been changed to protect the identities of the young women involved.
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