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Matthew Atencio

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‘CRUNK’, ‘CRACKING’, AND ‘CHOREOGRAPHIES’:

**THE PLACE AND MEANING OF HEALTH AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY IN
THE LIVES OF YOUNG PEOPLE FROM CULTURALLY DIVERSE
URBAN NEIGHBORHOODS**

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the
degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

from

UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

by

MATTHEW ATENCIO

(Bachelor of Arts in Philosophy)

The Faculty of Education

2006

CERTIFICATION

I, Matthew Atencio, declare that this thesis, submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the Department of Education, University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. The document has not been submitted for qualification at any other academic institution.

Signed

Matthew Atencio

Date:

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ABSTRACT

As a number of writers have pointed out (Cole, 1996; Giardina, 2003; Kirk, 1999; McCarthy, Giardina, Harewood, & Park, 2003; Rail, 1998, Silk & Andrews, 2001), in Western societies individuals construct their plural and fluid subjectivities by engaging with broader cultural discourses existing in a ‘larger global frame of reference’ (Giardina, 2003, p.66). From this perspective, this thesis explores the ways young people take up multiple subjectivities by translating and appropriating the ‘texts’ of a multivalent global sport and ‘physical’ culture in subversive, (re)productive, and conformist ways. The primary mode of analysis involved investigating how these ‘mobile subjectivities’ (Rail, 1998, p. xv) reflected the young people’s specific class, gender, and cultural positionings, as well as their biographical histories and geographic backgrounds (Kirk, 1999).

The study in this thesis simultaneously appropriated and critiqued several aspects of ethnographic research. Drawing from postcolonial and poststructural theoretical frameworks, qualitative methods such as semi-structured interviews and observations were used to investigate the place and meaning of health and physical activity in the lives of young people from diverse ‘racial’, ‘ethnic’, and diasporic backgrounds. The young people’s use of their urban neighborhood physical activity spaces was mapped and analyzed using methods informed by cultural geography. The analysis that was conducted paid specific attention to the unstable power relations inherent in the research interactions, and multiple and contradictory narratives were produced.

Results of the study revealed that the young people came to exist as ‘healthy’ subjects by engaging with physical culture discourses concerned with the maintenance, representation, and regulation of the body through dieting and exercise (Kirk, 1999). The young people made moral judgments about health through a cyclical association of appearance, attitude, and behavior. Healthiness was considered to be a desirable state of being that could be achieved through the adoption of specific eating and exercise practices. According to the young people,

adherence to these practices could be read off the body. This belief was crystallized in their descriptions of ‘fat’ people and ‘couch potatoes’ who they considered to be lazy, unmotivated, and poor decision makers. However, in later comments the young people defined health in much more complex and contradictory ways, in relation to their gendered and racialized backgrounds. They eventually took up and contested the available health discourses in very diverse and subtle ways from each other and in comparison to their white counterparts found in other research studies.

Another point of analysis was formulated to address the social impacts of space on the cultures of basketball and dancing. An examination of the young people’s spatial movements through their interview texts indicated that both institutional and ‘informal’ basketball and dance spaces played a significant role in the promulgation of gendered and ‘racial’ power relationships.

In the park basketball courts, the young African-American men with the most talent and physical strength were able to exclude and constrain other young men and women from participating. In so doing, these young men were able to take up positions of power within social hierarchies that privileged and (re)produced their hegemonic ‘black’ masculinities. The social practices which underpinned these unequal power relationships were linked with seductive ‘empowerment through sport’ discourses operating in the young people’s impoverished urban neighborhoods.

Analysis also revealed that the institutional dance spaces within the local high school (re)produced certain bodily practices which served to exclude and marginalize the ‘black’ young women in my study. Particularly in the advanced dance classes and programs, social practices were (re)produced which served to favor the ‘thin’ white young women and their bodies. The ‘black’ young women in my study were positioned as ‘hyper-sexual’ and ‘sloppy’, and thus incapable, because of their devalued forms of ‘physical capital’ (Bourdieu, 1984). Yet, these ‘black’ young women were able to deploy unique performative acts through their

bodies in order to recoup their deficit positioning as the ‘black’ female ‘Other’. The diverse and complex ways that these young women used the dance spaces to refigure their subjectivities illustrates that gender and ‘race’ are experienced differentially, and are not unifying and fixed categories.

From these analyses I suggest that health, sport, and physical activity discourses aligned with power configurations in a variety of institutional, cultural, and geographic contexts profoundly shapes young people’s lives in psychic and corporeal ways. At the same time, young people constitute their multiple and fluid subjectivities by actively appropriating, (re)producing, and contesting these discourses in ways that serve to disrupt ‘normalizing’ practices and knowledge.

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